

# communist manifesto origins of socialist thought

The Communist Manifesto, a seminal work penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, stands as a cornerstone in the development of socialist thought. Its powerful critique of capitalism and articulation of a classless society have resonated through history, influencing political movements and intellectual discourse worldwide. Understanding the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought requires delving into the socio-economic conditions of the 19th century, the philosophical underpinnings of Marx and Engels' ideas, and the specific historical context that gave rise to this influential document. This article will explore these origins, examining the intellectual heritage that informed the Manifesto and its subsequent impact on the trajectory of socialism as a global ideology.

- The 19th Century Context: Seeds of Discontent
- Philosophical Roots of Socialist Thought
- The Communist Manifesto: A Synthesis of Ideas
- Key Concepts and Their Origins
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## The 19th Century Context: Seeds of Discontent and the Communist Manifesto Origins of Socialist Thought

The 19th century was a period of profound transformation, marked by the Industrial Revolution and the ascendant power of industrial capitalism. This era witnessed unprecedented technological advancement and economic growth, but it also created stark social inequalities. The burgeoning industrial cities became sites of immense poverty, squalor, and exploitation, particularly for the working class, the proletariat. Factory owners, the bourgeoisie, amassed considerable wealth and power, while the laborers toiled under harsh conditions for meager wages, often facing job insecurity and a lack of basic rights. This widening chasm between the haves and have-nots fueled widespread discontent and a growing desire for a more equitable social and economic system. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are deeply rooted in this context of palpable injustice and the yearning for a radical societal restructuring.

The conditions of the working class were a central concern for early socialist thinkers. They observed the dehumanizing effects of factory labor, the alienation of workers from their own produce, and the cyclical nature of economic crises that disproportionately affected the poor. The concept of "wage slavery" became a potent metaphor to describe the perceived unfreedom of laborers who were compelled to sell their labor power to survive. This exploitation, they argued, was inherent to the capitalist system, which prioritized profit accumulation over human well-being. The widespread adoption of new machinery, while increasing productivity, also led to unemployment and further depressed wages, exacerbating the social tensions.

# **The Rise of Industrial Capitalism and Class Struggle**

Industrial capitalism, with its emphasis on private ownership of the means of production, free markets, and the pursuit of profit, fundamentally reshaped societal structures. It gave rise to distinct social classes: the bourgeoisie, who owned the factories, land, and capital, and the proletariat, who possessed only their labor power and were thus dependent on the bourgeoisie for their livelihood. This division was not merely economic; it was also social and political, with the bourgeoisie wielding significant influence over government policies and societal norms. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought directly addressed this power imbalance and the inherent conflict it generated.

The dynamics of class struggle became a central theme in the analysis of capitalist society. Marx and Engels argued that history itself was a history of class struggles, with each epoch characterized by the dominance of one class over another. In the capitalist era, the primary conflict was seen as being between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This struggle was not simply about economic competition but about the fundamental control over the means of production and the distribution of wealth. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought posited that this inherent antagonism would inevitably lead to a revolutionary upheaval.

## **Early Utopian Socialism and its Criticisms**

Before the advent of Marx and Engels' scientific socialism, various thinkers articulated utopian visions of ideal societies that sought to address the ills of industrial capitalism. Figures like Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon proposed cooperative communities and the redistribution of wealth and resources. These "utopian socialists" believed that by demonstrating the benefits of their proposed systems, they could persuade society to adopt them voluntarily. They envisioned a future free from exploitation and inequality, where individuals could flourish and live in harmony.

However, Marx and Engels were critical of these early socialist ideas, deeming them idealistic and impractical. They argued that utopian socialism failed to grasp the fundamental historical forces driving social change and the material conditions that gave rise to capitalism and its inherent contradictions. While acknowledging the sincerity of the utopian socialists' desire for a better world, Marx and Engels contended that their proposals lacked a concrete, scientifically grounded strategy for achieving systemic transformation. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought, therefore, also represent a departure from these earlier, more idealistic approaches.

## **Philosophical Roots of Socialist Thought: Hegelian Dialectics and Materialism**

The intellectual foundation of the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought is deeply indebted to German philosophy, particularly the dialectical method of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel's philosophy posits that history progresses through a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, where opposing ideas and forces clash and are resolved into a higher, more complex understanding. Marx and Engels adopted this dialectical framework but inverted it, shifting the focus from ideas to material conditions and economic relations. This philosophical grounding provided them with a powerful analytical tool to understand the dynamics of historical change and the inevitable development of capitalism towards its own dissolution.

Furthermore, the materialist philosophy championed by Marx and Engels, often referred to as

dialectical materialism, emphasized the primacy of economic and material factors in shaping society, culture, and consciousness. They argued that the "base" of society, which comprises the economic structure and the relations of production, determines the "superstructure" of institutions, laws, politics, religion, and ideology. This perspective was crucial in their analysis of capitalism, as it allowed them to identify the inherent economic contradictions within the system as the primary drivers of social conflict and revolutionary change. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are thus inextricably linked to this materialist interpretation of history.

## **Hegelian Dialectics and the Inversion of Idealism**

Hegel's dialectic, while influential, was rooted in idealism, meaning he believed that ideas and consciousness were the primary drivers of historical development. Marx, while admiring Hegel's method, rejected this idealism, arguing that it was the material conditions of existence that shaped human consciousness and historical progression. He famously stated that he had "turned Hegel's dialectic on its head." This philosophical inversion was fundamental to the development of Marxism and, consequently, the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought.

By focusing on the material realities of production and class relations, Marx and Engels sought to provide a more grounded and scientific explanation for social phenomena. They believed that understanding the economic base of society was key to understanding its history and predicting its future. This materialistic approach allowed them to analyze the specific historical circumstances that gave rise to capitalism and to identify the internal contradictions that they believed would ultimately lead to its demise, paving the way for a socialist future.

## **The Influence of Ludwig Feuerbach and Materialist Philosophy**

Another significant philosophical influence on Marx and Engels was Ludwig Feuerbach, whose work critically examined religion and championed a humanistic materialism. Feuerbach argued that traditional religious doctrines were projections of human desires and aspirations, essentially alienating humanity from its own essence. He advocated for a return to material, earthly existence and the recognition of human beings as the source of all value and meaning. This emphasis on human agency and the critique of abstract, otherworldly concepts resonated deeply with Marx and Engels.

Feuerbach's materialist critique provided a philosophical basis for questioning established institutions and ideologies, including those that supported capitalist property relations. By grounding human existence and social development in material realities, Feuerbach's ideas contributed to the intellectual climate that fostered radical social critique. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are, in part, a development of this materialist tradition, applying it to a rigorous analysis of economic systems and class power.

## **The Communist Manifesto: A Synthesis of Ideas and a Call to Action**

Published in 1848, The Communist Manifesto was not a spontaneous outburst of revolutionary fervor but rather a carefully crafted document that synthesized a wide range of existing socialist, communist, and radical ideas, filtered through the unique analytical framework of Marx and Engels.

It was commissioned by the Communist League, a workers' organization, and was intended to articulate the League's principles and objectives. The Manifesto provided a powerful and accessible explanation of their historical materialism, their critique of capitalism, and their vision for a communist society, serving as a foundational text for the communist movement and illuminating the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought.

The document is structured into four main sections, each addressing different aspects of their theory and program. It begins with a historical overview of class struggle, moves to a critique of bourgeois society, outlines the role of the communists, and concludes with a revolutionary program and a famous call to arms. The clarity and forcefulness of its language, combined with its compelling arguments, made it an incredibly influential piece of political literature, capable of mobilizing workers and intellectuals alike. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to articulate fundamental critiques of economic inequality and power dynamics that continue to resonate today.

## **Historical Materialism as the Driving Force**

The core of The Communist Manifesto is its application of historical materialism. The famous opening line, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," immediately establishes this framework. Marx and Engels argued that throughout history, societies have been defined by the conflict between the oppressor class and the oppressed class, whether it was slave owners and slaves, patricians and plebeians, or lords and serfs. In the capitalist era, this struggle was between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

This perspective allowed them to see capitalism not as a static or natural system, but as a historical stage of development, destined to be superseded by a more advanced form of social organization. The internal contradictions of capitalism, such as the tendency for the rate of profit to fall and the increasing immiseration of the working class, were seen as the engines of historical change. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are therefore firmly rooted in this materialist conception of history, which provided a rationale for revolutionary action.

## **Critique of Bourgeois Society and its Contradictions**

The Manifesto launches a scathing critique of bourgeois society, highlighting its inherent contradictions and exploitative nature. It argues that the bourgeoisie, in its relentless pursuit of profit, has transformed all social relations into mere "cash payment." The family, honor, and even scientific and artistic pursuits are reduced to exchange values in the marketplace. This alienation of human beings from their labor, their products, and each other is a central theme in the critique of capitalism.

Moreover, the Manifesto points out that capitalism creates its own gravediggers - the proletariat. As capitalism expands, it concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few, while simultaneously creating a large, organized, and increasingly class-conscious working class. The very success of industrial capitalism, with its mass production and global reach, generates the conditions for its own overthrow. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are deeply tied to this analysis of capitalism's self-destructive tendencies.

## **The Role and Program of the Communists**

The Manifesto clarifies the role of communists within the broader working-class movement. They are

not a separate party opposed to other working-class parties, but rather the most advanced and resolute section, always pushing forward. Their immediate aim is the conquest of political power by the proletariat, the establishment of democracy, and the abolition of private property in the means of production. They do not aim to abolish property in general, but specifically bourgeois private property, which is the basis of class oppression.

The Manifesto outlines a program of transitional measures, which include the abolition of the right of inheritance, a heavy progressive or graduated income tax, centralization of credit and transport in the hands of the state, and the eventual abolition of all classes. These measures were intended to dismantle the foundations of bourgeois society and pave the way for a classless, communist future. This program is a direct manifestation of the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought, outlining a practical path towards a socialist transformation.

## **Key Concepts and Their Origins: From Early Socialists to Marx and Engels**

The Communist Manifesto did not invent socialist ideas out of thin air. It drew upon and critically engaged with a rich intellectual tradition that had been developing for decades. Key concepts such as class struggle, the critique of private property, and the vision of a more egalitarian society were present in earlier socialist thought, but Marx and Engels provided them with a rigorous theoretical framework and a distinct historical analysis. Understanding these precursors is vital to grasping the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought.

Central to their analysis was the concept of "alienation," which had been explored by earlier thinkers, including Hegel and Feuerbach. However, Marx and Engels applied this concept specifically to the conditions of labor under capitalism, arguing that workers are alienated from the product of their labor, the process of labor, their fellow workers, and their own human potential. This concept of alienation provided a powerful critique of the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism.

## **Class Struggle as a Historical Constant**

The notion of class struggle as a driving force of history was not entirely new. Thinkers like François-Auguste Mignet, in his "History of the French Revolution," had noted that "the history of all nations is the history of class struggles." However, Marx and Engels elevated this observation into a central tenet of their historical materialism, arguing that class conflict was not just a feature of specific historical periods but an inherent and fundamental dynamic of all class-based societies.

They systematically analyzed how class structures and the nature of class struggle evolved with different modes of production. From the ancient world's slave economy to feudalism, each system was characterized by a particular set of antagonistic classes. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought lie in their assertion that the inherent conflict within capitalism, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, was the most advanced and significant class struggle, one that would ultimately lead to the abolition of all classes.

## **Critique of Private Property and the Vision of Common**

## Ownership

The critique of private property, particularly private ownership of the means of production, was a cornerstone of early socialist thought. Thinkers like Thomas More in his "Utopia" had imagined societies without private property. Later, utopian socialists like Charles Fourier envisioned phalanxes, self-sufficient communities where property was held in common. However, Marx and Engels provided a more systematic and historical critique, arguing that private property was not a natural right but a historical product of specific economic relations that led to exploitation.

They argued that the abolition of bourgeois private property was a necessary step towards a classless society. This did not mean confiscating personal possessions but rather ending the private ownership of factories, land, and other means of production, which allowed a minority to exploit the labor of the majority. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are deeply intertwined with this call for the collectivization of the means of production and the creation of a society based on common ownership and democratic control.

## The Concept of Surplus Value and Exploitation

While the term "surplus value" is not explicitly used in the Manifesto, the concept of exploitation it describes is central to its critique of capitalism. The Manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie "produces its own grave-diggers" by creating a vast proletariat. This proletariat, while creating all the wealth, receives only enough to subsist and reproduce itself. The surplus value generated by their labor is appropriated by the capitalists as profit.

This understanding of exploitation, rooted in Marx's later detailed analysis in "Das Kapital," was already present in nascent form in the Manifesto. It provided a theoretical explanation for the poverty of the working class amidst the accumulation of wealth by the bourgeoisie, reinforcing the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought as a movement aimed at ending this systemic exploitation.

## The Legacy and Evolution of Socialist Thought Beyond the Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto, by articulating a powerful critique of capitalism and a vision for a socialist future, profoundly shaped the subsequent development of socialist and communist movements worldwide. Its influence extended far beyond the 19th century, inspiring revolutions, shaping political parties, and fostering intellectual debates about economic justice and social organization. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought marked a turning point, shifting the discourse from utopian ideals to a more materialist and revolutionary approach.

Following the publication of the Manifesto, socialist thought continued to evolve, branching into various schools and interpretations. While the core ideas of class struggle and the critique of capitalism remained central, different thinkers and movements emphasized different aspects of Marxian theory and proposed varied strategies for achieving socialism. The practical implementation of socialist ideas also led to diverse outcomes, with some states adopting authoritarian models and others striving for more democratic forms of socialism.

# **The Formation of Socialist and Communist Parties**

The Communist Manifesto served as a foundational document for the organization of socialist and communist parties across Europe and beyond. These parties aimed to mobilize the working class, advocate for their rights, and ultimately challenge the power of the bourgeoisie. The Manifesto's call for international working-class solidarity, "Workers of all countries, unite!", resonated deeply, fostering a sense of shared struggle and common purpose among laborers in different nations.

These parties engaged in a variety of activities, from electoral politics and trade union organizing to revolutionary agitation. The ideological debates within these parties often revolved around the interpretation of Marx and Engels' theories, leading to divergences between social democrats, who advocated for gradual reform through democratic means, and revolutionary communists, who adhered more strictly to the Manifesto's call for a proletarian revolution. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are evident in the very formation and early platforms of these influential political organizations.

## **Variations and Divergences in Socialist Ideology**

As socialist thought matured and spread, it encountered diverse national contexts and faced new challenges, leading to significant variations and divergences. While the core tenets of the Manifesto remained influential, different thinkers and movements emphasized different aspects or offered alternative interpretations. For instance, revisionist socialists, like Eduard Bernstein, began to question the inevitability of capitalist collapse and advocated for a more gradualist approach to achieving socialism through democratic reforms within the existing capitalist framework.

Conversely, other currents of socialist thought emerged, such as anarchism, which, while also critical of capitalism and the state, rejected the Marxist emphasis on a transitional state and advocated for immediate abolition of all forms of hierarchical authority. The enduring legacy of the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought lies not only in its direct influence but also in the debates and critical responses it generated, which continuously shaped and reshaped socialist ideology over time.

## **The Impact on 20th and 21st Century Political Movements**

The ideas articulated in The Communist Manifesto had a profound and lasting impact on 20th and 21st-century political movements. It provided the ideological framework for socialist revolutions in Russia, China, and many other countries, fundamentally altering the global geopolitical landscape. Even in countries where socialist revolutions did not occur, the Manifesto's critique of capitalism influenced social democratic policies, labor movements, and the development of welfare states.

In the 21st century, the core concerns raised by the Manifesto regarding economic inequality, the exploitation of labor, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few continue to be relevant. While the specific historical circumstances of the 19th century have changed, the underlying dynamics of capitalist accumulation and its social consequences remain subjects of intense debate. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought continue to inform contemporary discussions about social justice, economic fairness, and alternative models of social and economic organization.

# **Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of the Communist Manifesto Origins of Socialist Thought**

In conclusion, the communist manifesto origins of socialist thought are a complex tapestry woven from the harsh realities of 19th-century industrial capitalism, the philosophical insights of German idealism and materialism, and the direct observations and revolutionary zeal of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The Manifesto emerged as a powerful synthesis of existing critiques of exploitation and inequality, providing a comprehensive theoretical framework grounded in historical materialism and a compelling call to action for the proletariat. Its enduring legacy lies in its incisive analysis of class struggle, its critique of private property, and its vision for a society free from oppression, which continues to resonate in contemporary debates about economic justice and social transformation.

The document not only outlined the fundamental principles of communism but also served as a catalyst for the formation of organized labor movements and political parties dedicated to challenging capitalist structures. While socialist thought has evolved and diversified over time, the foundational ideas laid out in the Manifesto remain a critical reference point for understanding the historical trajectory of movements advocating for social and economic equality. The communist manifesto origins of socialist thought offer a vital lens through which to examine the persistent challenges of capitalism and the ongoing pursuit of a more equitable world.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What specific historical events are considered the primary catalysts for the ideas presented in the Communist Manifesto?**

The Industrial Revolution, with its stark class divisions, worker exploitation, and economic instability, along with the lingering impact of the French Revolution's ideals of liberty and equality, served as crucial catalysts for the ideas in the Communist Manifesto.

### **Beyond Marx and Engels, which earlier thinkers significantly influenced the development of socialist thought that culminated in the Communist Manifesto?**

Earlier thinkers like Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen, often termed 'utopian socialists,' significantly influenced socialist thought by critiquing capitalism and proposing alternative, more equitable societal structures, though Marx and Engels later differentiated their approach as 'scientific socialism'.

### **How did the socio-economic conditions of 19th-century Europe directly inform the critique of capitalism in the Communist Manifesto?**

The extreme poverty and harsh working conditions of the proletariat, coupled with the immense wealth accumulation by the bourgeoisie, directly informed the Manifesto's critique of capitalism as

an inherently exploitative system that creates and perpetuates class struggle.

## **What was the role of worker uprisings and early labor movements in shaping the arguments for proletarian revolution?**

Early worker uprisings and the formation of nascent labor movements demonstrated the growing collective power and dissatisfaction of the working class, providing empirical evidence and a practical basis for the Manifesto's call for organized proletarian revolution.

## **In what ways did the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and human rights contribute to the socialist ideas outlined in the Manifesto?**

The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, secularism, and universal human rights provided a philosophical foundation for socialist thinkers to challenge traditional hierarchies and advocate for societal structures that promoted equality, justice, and the well-being of all individuals, not just the privileged.

## **How did the concept of 'historical materialism' evolve from earlier philosophical traditions and become central to the Communist Manifesto?**

Historical materialism, as developed by Marx and Engels, built upon Hegelian dialectics but shifted the focus from abstract ideas to material conditions and economic relations as the primary drivers of historical change, becoming central to their analysis of class struggle and revolution.

## **What was the immediate context of the Communist League and its commission of the Communist Manifesto?**

The Communist League, a Paris-based international workers' organization, commissioned Marx and Engels to write the Communist Manifesto in 1847 as a clear articulation of their shared beliefs and a program for the League.

## **How did the failures and criticisms of earlier socialist experiments (e.g., Owenite communities) influence the Manifesto's strategy?**

While not explicitly detailing failures of specific experiments, the Manifesto's emphasis on broad, systemic class struggle and revolution reflected a growing awareness that isolated utopian communities might not be sufficient to dismantle capitalism, advocating instead for a more comprehensive political and economic transformation.

## **What specific critiques of classical liberalism are embedded within the origins of socialist thought that led to the Manifesto?**

The Manifesto critiques classical liberalism's focus on individual rights and free markets for failing to address the systemic inequalities and exploitation inherent in capitalism, arguing that these liberal ideals often masked the dominance of the bourgeoisie.

## **How did the philosophical ideas of German idealism, particularly Hegel's dialectics, get reinterpreted and adapted in the Communist Manifesto to form a basis for socialist theory?**

Hegel's concept of dialectics – the idea that history progresses through conflict and resolution of opposing forces (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) – was adapted by Marx and Engels into historical materialism, where the conflict is primarily between economic classes, leading to revolutionary change rather than purely ideological development.

## **Additional Resources**

Here are 9 book titles related to the origins of socialist thought and the Communist Manifesto, each starting with

:

1.

### **The Enlightenment and the Roots of Socialism**

**This book traces the intellectual lineage of socialist ideas back to the Enlightenment thinkers. It explores how concepts like reason, equality, and the social contract laid the groundwork for later socialist critiques of existing power structures. The author examines how Enlightenment ideals, when applied to social and economic disparities, began to foster nascent socialist sentiments.**

2.

## **Utopian Socialism: Early Visions of a New Society**

**This work delves into the lives and writings of the early "utopian socialists" like Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon. It analyzes their attempts to design ideal communities and their critiques of industrial capitalism. The book highlights how their visionary, though often impractical, ideas provided an important early articulation of socialist goals.**

**3.**

## **The Industrial Revolution and the Birth of Class Consciousness**

**This title focuses on the profound social and economic transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution. It examines how the rise of factories and the burgeoning working class created new social divisions and fostered a sense of collective identity and grievance. The book argues that this emerging class consciousness was a critical precursor to organized socialist movements.**

**4.**

## **Hegel's Dialectic: Philosophy's Influence on Marx**

**This book explores the philosophical underpinnings of Marx's thought, particularly the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. It explains Hegel's concept of dialectic - the idea of historical progress through conflict and synthesis - and how Marx adapted and reoriented this philosophy towards material conditions. The work clarifies how this intellectual framework**

**helped shape the analytical tools used in the Communist Manifesto.**

**5.**

### **The French Revolution and the Egalitarian Impulse**

**This volume investigates the impact of the French Revolution on the development of socialist thought, focusing on its emphasis on liberty, equality, and fraternity. It analyzes how revolutionary ideals of popular sovereignty and the redistribution of wealth inspired later socialist thinkers. The book connects the revolutionary fervor for social justice to the broader socialist project.**

**6.**

### **Early Socialist Journals and Pamphlets: Voices of Dissent**

**This collection or study examines the crucial role of early socialist publications in disseminating ideas and building movements. It highlights how pamphlets, newspapers, and journals provided a platform for nascent socialist critiques of capitalism and articulated alternative visions for society. The book showcases the power of accessible media in shaping public opinion and fostering collective action.**

**7.**

### **The Political Economy of Adam Smith and its Critics**

**This book examines the foundational ideas of classical political economy, particularly Adam Smith's concept of the**

**free market. It then explores how early socialists engaged with and critiqued Smith's theories, identifying inherent contradictions and exploitative tendencies within capitalism. The work demonstrates how socialist thought emerged partly as a direct response to and reinterpretation of classical economic thought.**

**8.**

### **The Development of Marx and Engels' Partnership**

**This title focuses on the intellectual collaboration between Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the co-authors of the Communist Manifesto. It details how their shared experiences and complementary ideas shaped their theories of historical materialism and class struggle. The book highlights the critical synthesis of their individual insights that led to their seminal work.**

**9.**

### **Anarchist Precursors to Revolutionary Socialism**

**This book explores the connections and distinctions between early anarchist thinkers and the developing socialist movement. It examines how thinkers like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon contributed ideas about mutualism and critiques of state power that influenced socialist discourse. The work clarifies how these overlapping but sometimes divergent revolutionary philosophies shaped the broader landscape of radical thought leading up to the Manifesto.**

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