

communist manifesto primary arguments for proletariat

The Communist Manifesto, authored by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, remains a foundational text for understanding socialist and communist thought. At its core, the Manifesto presents a powerful critique of capitalist society and outlines the historical trajectory leading towards a communist revolution. This article will delve into the primary arguments for the proletariat, the working class, as presented in this seminal work. We will explore the inherent contradictions within capitalism, the concept of class struggle as the engine of history, the role of the proletariat in overthrowing bourgeois dominance, and the proposed transition to a classless society. Understanding these core tenets is crucial for grasping the Manifesto's enduring influence and its articulation of the proletariat's historical mission.

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The Inevitable Conflict: Class Struggle as the Driving Force of History

One of the most fundamental arguments presented in The Communist Manifesto is the concept of class struggle as the primary engine of historical development. Marx and Engels famously state, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This assertion posits that throughout different historical epochs, societies have been characterized by inherent antagonisms between dominant and subordinate classes. These antagonisms arise from the unequal distribution of the means of production and the resulting power imbalances.

The Manifesto identifies specific historical examples to illustrate this point, moving from ancient societies with masters and slaves to feudal societies with lords and serfs. In each instance, the ruling class extracts surplus labor from the exploited class, leading to inherent tension and eventual transformation. The transition from one mode of production to another, and thus from one dominant class to another, is driven by these internal contradictions and the ensuing struggles.

For the proletariat, this historical analysis is crucial because it frames their current condition not as an immutable state but as a stage in a larger, evolving historical process. The Manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class, has, despite its revolutionary role in dismantling feudalism, created a new system with its own inherent class division: the proletariat, or the working class. This dynamic sets the stage for the next, and according to the Manifesto, the final, stage of class struggle.

The Bourgeoisie's Paradoxical Role and the Rise of the Proletariat

The Manifesto acknowledges the transformative power of the bourgeoisie. It recognizes that capitalism, driven by the pursuit of profit, has revolutionized production on an unprecedented scale. The bourgeoisie has "conquered the Crown for the feudal squire, for the peasant refugee for the monk in shining armour." This period of bourgeois ascendancy brought about immense technological advancements, global markets, and a concentration of wealth and power.

However, this very success contains the seeds of its own destruction. In creating a vast global market and concentrating production in large factories, the bourgeoisie simultaneously creates and cultivates the proletariat. The industrial revolution, a hallmark of bourgeois dominance, requires a large, concentrated workforce. These workers, stripped of their independent means of production, are forced to sell their labor-power to the capitalists in order to survive.

The Manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie, in its relentless drive for profit and expansion, inevitably creates a class that is increasingly unified and organized by the very system it serves. The concentration of workers in factories, their shared experiences of exploitation, and their common interests foster a collective consciousness. This burgeoning solidarity is what empowers the proletariat to become a revolutionary force, capable of challenging and ultimately overthrowing the bourgeoisie.

The Concentration of Capital and the Growing Proletariat

As capitalism develops, the Manifesto suggests that there is a tendency for capital to become more concentrated in fewer hands, while the proletariat grows in numbers. Small businesses are absorbed by larger corporations, and independent artisans are forced into wage labor. This process further exacerbates the class divide, making the distinction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat sharper and more pronounced. The vast majority of society increasingly finds itself in the position of selling its labor.

The Proletariat as the "Grave-Digger" of the Bourgeoisie

A key argument is that the proletariat is not merely a subordinate class but is, by its very nature and position within capitalism, destined to be the "grave-digger" of the bourgeoisie. This is because the internal contradictions of capitalism, such as recurring economic crises and the ever-increasing productivity of labor without a corresponding increase in workers' wages, will intensify the proletariat's grievances. The system that creates the proletariat also generates the conditions for its revolutionary awakening and eventual triumph.

Alienation and Exploitation: The Proletariat's Condition Under Capitalism

The Manifesto details the oppressive conditions faced by the proletariat under capitalism, arguing that the system is inherently exploitative and alienating. The primary mechanism of exploitation is the extraction of surplus value. Capitalists, by owning the means of production (factories, machines, raw materials), are able to pay workers only a fraction of the value their labor creates.

The remaining value, the surplus value, is appropriated by the capitalist as profit. This profit motive drives the relentless pursuit of greater efficiency and cost reduction, often at the expense of the worker's well-being. Workers are reduced to mere cogs in the machinery of production, their skills often devalued by the specialization and mechanization of labor.

The Concept of Surplus Value

Surplus value, in Marxist theory, is the difference between the value a worker produces and the wage they receive. The Manifesto argues that capitalists are driven by the imperative to maximize this surplus value, leading to practices such as long working hours, low wages, and dangerous working conditions. The worker's labor is a commodity, and like any commodity, its price (the wage) is determined by the cost of its production and reproduction, not by the full value it generates.

Alienation from Labor and Product

Beyond economic exploitation, the Manifesto highlights the psychological and social impact of capitalism on the proletariat through the concept of alienation. Workers become alienated from the product of their labor, as they have no ownership or control over what they produce. The factory system often breaks down complex tasks into repetitive, meaningless actions, leading to alienation from the act of labor itself.

Furthermore, workers are alienated from their fellow human beings. Competition between workers for jobs, and the class division that separates them from the capitalists, hinder genuine social solidarity. This alienation contributes to a sense of powerlessness and dehumanization, as the worker's life is dictated by the demands of capital rather than their own creative potential and social needs.

The Destabilizing Effects of Crises

The Manifesto points out that capitalism is prone to cyclical crises of overproduction. The very success of capitalist production, its ability to generate vast quantities of goods, leads to periods where demand cannot absorb supply. These crises result in widespread unemployment, bankruptcies, and further hardship for the proletariat, demonstrating the inherent instability and irrationality of the capitalist system.

The Proletariat's Revolutionary Mission

The Communist Manifesto argues that the proletariat is uniquely positioned to carry out a revolution that will fundamentally transform society. This is not simply a matter of class resentment, but a historical necessity driven by the internal contradictions of capitalism and the growing consciousness of the working class.

The proletariat, unlike previous revolutionary classes, does not seek to establish a new form of private property ownership or to simply replace one

ruling class with another. Its aim is to abolish class distinctions altogether, thereby ending the system of exploitation and alienation that defines capitalist society. This makes the proletariat the most radical and truly revolutionary class.

The Proletariat's Lack of Property

A crucial aspect of the proletariat's revolutionary potential, as articulated in the Manifesto, is its lack of significant private property. While the bourgeoisie relies on its ownership of capital, the proletariat has "nothing of their own to secure and to fortify." This lack of vested interest in the existing property relations means the proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains, and a world to win.

This absence of property means the proletariat is not fighting for the preservation of existing structures but for their complete dismantling. Their revolution is not about gaining control of the means of production in order to become new owners, but about collectivizing them for the benefit of all society. This distinguishes their struggle from that of previous classes.

The International Nature of the Proletariat

The Manifesto emphasizes the international character of the proletariat. The expansion of capitalism has created a global market and a global working class. Workers in different nations face similar conditions of exploitation and alienation. Therefore, the struggle of the proletariat is inherently international, leading to the famous call to action: "Working Men of All Countries, Unite!"

The bourgeoisie, through its global trade and industrialization, has already forged international ties among workers. The Manifesto argues that the proletariat must build upon this foundation and recognize their shared interests across national borders. The national divisions exploited by the ruling class must be overcome by the solidarity of the international working class.

The Development of Class Consciousness

The process of industrialization and the concentration of workers in urban centers facilitate the development of class consciousness. Through shared experiences, organized labor movements, and the dissemination of ideas, workers begin to recognize their collective power and their common enemy. The Manifesto sees this growing awareness as a vital precursor to revolutionary

action.

This consciousness is not an automatic outcome of capitalist exploitation but is actively fostered through political organization and education. The role of communists, as described in the Manifesto, is to help awaken and guide this class consciousness, to articulate the proletariat's interests and its historical mission.

The Communist Program: Abolishing Private Property and the State

The Manifesto then outlines a series of measures that the proletariat, once in power, would implement to transition towards a communist society. These proposals are designed to dismantle the foundations of bourgeois society and establish a new order based on collective ownership and social equality.

Abolition of Private Property in the Means of Production

The central plank of the communist program is the abolition of bourgeois private property. This does not mean the abolition of all personal property, such as household goods or personal belongings. Instead, it refers specifically to the private ownership of the means of production – factories, land, machinery, and capital – which are used to exploit the labor of others.

The Manifesto argues that this private ownership is the root cause of class division, exploitation, and alienation. By transferring the means of production into common ownership, the proletariat aims to eliminate the basis for bourgeois rule and to organize production for the benefit of society as a whole, rather than for the profit of a few.

Establishment of Collective Ownership and Planning

Following the abolition of private property, the Manifesto envisions the establishment of collective ownership and, implicitly, social planning of production. The vast productive forces unleashed by capitalism would then be directed to meet the needs of the population, rather than to generate private profit. This would theoretically lead to the end of economic crises and a more rational and equitable distribution of resources.

The Withering Away of the State

The Manifesto also addresses the role of the state. It argues that the state, in bourgeois society, is not a neutral arbiter but an instrument of the ruling class, used to maintain its dominance and to suppress the proletariat. Once the class basis of society is abolished through the collectivization of the means of production, the need for a state as an instrument of class oppression would diminish.

Consequently, the Manifesto predicts that the state would eventually "wither away." This does not imply an immediate abolition of all forms of organization, but rather a transformation of its function from an apparatus of coercion and control into a body that administers the common affairs of society. In a classless society, the need for a repressive state apparatus would cease to exist.

Specific Transitional Measures

The Manifesto lists several specific transitional measures that would be implemented by the victorious proletariat. These include:

- Abolition of the right of inheritance.
- 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 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, gradually bringing about the elimination of the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the population over the country.
- Public and free education for all children. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, &c., &c.

These measures are presented as steps towards building a society free from exploitation and inequality, paving the way for the eventual emergence of

communism.

Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of the Proletariat's Arguments

The Communist Manifesto's primary arguments for the proletariat offer a profound critique of capitalist society and a compelling vision for its revolutionary transformation. By highlighting the inherent class struggle, the exploitative nature of surplus value extraction, and the alienating conditions faced by workers, Marx and Engels provided a powerful framework for understanding the historical position and revolutionary potential of the working class.

The Manifesto's emphasis on the proletariat's lack of property and its international solidarity underpins its claim that this class is uniquely positioned to usher in a new era. The proposed program, centered on the abolition of private property in the means of production and the eventual withering away of the state, aims to create a society free from exploitation and class division.

While the historical trajectory and the specific outcomes of attempts to implement its proposals have been complex and debated, the core arguments of The Communist Manifesto concerning the proletariat continue to resonate. They raise enduring questions about economic inequality, the nature of work, and the distribution of power in modern societies, making the Manifesto a vital text for anyone seeking to understand the historical and ongoing struggles for social and economic justice.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central argument of The Communist Manifesto regarding the proletariat?

The central argument is that the proletariat, the industrial working class, is the revolutionary force destined to overthrow the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class) and establish a communist society.

How does The Communist Manifesto describe the condition of the proletariat under capitalism?

It describes the proletariat as alienated from their labor, exploited for profit, reduced to a commodity, and subject to the whims of the market and their employers, leading to immense social and economic inequality.

What is the 'specter of communism' mentioned in the Manifesto, and how does it relate to the proletariat?

The 'specter of communism' refers to the growing fear and awareness among the ruling classes of the potential for proletarian revolution. It signifies the rising power and organization of the working class.

According to the Manifesto, why is the proletariat uniquely positioned to carry out a revolution?

The proletariat is seen as unique because it has nothing to lose but its chains, its interests are international, and its very existence under capitalism creates the conditions for its own emancipation and the abolition of class society.

What role does class struggle play in the Manifesto's arguments for the proletariat?

Class struggle is presented as the driving force of history. The Manifesto argues that the inherent antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat will inevitably escalate, leading to the proletariat's triumph.

What does The Communist Manifesto propose as the ultimate goal for the proletariat?

The ultimate goal is the abolition of private property (specifically, the means of production), the elimination of class distinctions, and the establishment of a classless, communist society where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

How does the Manifesto argue that the proletariat will achieve its goals?

The Manifesto advocates for the proletariat to organize itself as a political class, seize state power, and use it to gradually expropriate the bourgeoisie and centralize the means of production, ultimately leading to the withering away of the state.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles and descriptions related to the Communist Manifesto's primary arguments for the proletariat:

- 1.

The Chains of Capital

This book delves into Marx and Engels' core argument that capitalism inherently creates a class of wage laborers, the proletariat, who are alienated from the fruits of their labor. It explores how the bourgeoisie, the owning class, extracts surplus value from the proletariat's work, leading to inherent exploitation. The text illuminates how this economic structure perpetuates inequality and compels the proletariat to sell their labor power simply to survive.

2.

The Specter of Revolution

Focusing on the Manifesto's prediction of inevitable societal upheaval, this book examines the growing discontent and revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat. It analyzes how the contradictions of capitalism, such as recurrent economic crises and increasing immiseration, lay the groundwork for the proletariat to overthrow their oppressors. The book discusses the historical context that fostered this "specter" and its potential to reshape society.

3.

Class Struggle: The Engine of History

This title explores the Manifesto's assertion that history is fundamentally a narrative of class struggles, particularly the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It unpacks how this conflict drives historical development, leading to societal transformations and the eventual rise of the proletariat. The book highlights the cyclical nature of oppression and rebellion as the proletariat seeks to break free from capitalist domination.

4.

The Globalization of Labor

This book investigates the Manifesto's observation that capitalism, by its very nature, expands globally and thus unites the proletariat across national boundaries. It examines how the international nature of industrial production and trade creates a shared experience of exploitation for workers worldwide. The text discusses how this globalized proletariat becomes a powerful force capable of international solidarity and revolutionary action.

5.

From Serf to Wage Slave

This title traces the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism, as described in the Manifesto, and its impact on the formation of the proletariat. It contrasts the relative autonomy of feudal serfs with the

dependence of the modern wage laborer on the capitalist market. The book details how the proletariat is systematically dispossessed of the means of production, forcing them into wage labor.

6.

The Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie

This book analyzes the Manifesto's critique of bourgeois political power, arguing that the state ultimately serves the interests of the capitalist class. It explores how legal and political structures are designed to maintain bourgeois property relations and suppress proletarian dissent. The text examines how the proletariat must first seize political power to dismantle this bourgeois state.

7.

Abolishing Private Property

Central to the Manifesto's arguments, this title discusses the call for the abolition of private property in the means of production. It clarifies that this refers not to personal possessions but to the capitalist ownership of factories, land, and resources. The book explains how this abolition is seen as the necessary step to end exploitation and create a classless society.

8.

The Proletariat as Revolutionary Agent

This work focuses on the unique role the proletariat is assigned in the Manifesto as the class destined to bring about historical change. It explores the arguments for why the proletariat, having nothing to lose but their chains, is the most revolutionary force. The book details how their concentrated numbers in industrial centers and their shared experience of oppression make them capable of overcoming the bourgeoisie.

9.

The Dawn of Communism

This title examines the Manifesto's vision of a communist society, which is presented as the ultimate outcome of the proletariat's revolutionary struggle. It discusses the characteristics of this post-capitalist society, including the absence of class, exploitation, and the state. The book explores how the proletariat's victory leads to the emancipation of all humanity and the realization of a truly free and equitable social order.

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