

communist manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state text

The Communist Manifesto, a foundational text in political philosophy, famously outlines a vision of societal transformation driven by class struggle. Central to this vision is the concept of the eventual "withering away of the state," a pivotal, albeit often debated, idea within Marxist thought. This article delves deeply into the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state, exploring its origins, implications, and the theoretical underpinnings that support this radical transformation of political power. We will examine how Marx and Engels envisioned the proletariat, through revolution and the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat, ultimately paving the way for a stateless society. Understanding this specific aspect of the Manifesto is crucial for grasping the ultimate goals of communism and the envisioned end-state of historical development according to Marxist theory.

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Understanding the Communist Manifesto Text on the Eventual Withering Away of the State

The Communist Manifesto, penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, is a seminal work that has profoundly influenced political and economic thought for over a century. While much of the focus often lands on its analysis of class struggle and the call for proletarian revolution, a crucial, yet sometimes less understood, element is the vision for the ultimate abolition of the state. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state is not a mere footnote but a cornerstone of the proposed communist future, representing the ultimate liberation of humanity

from coercive political structures. This section will lay the groundwork for understanding this complex concept by examining the Manifesto's broader arguments regarding the nature of the state and its historical role.

The State as an Instrument of Class Oppression

Central to the Marxist understanding of the state, as articulated in the Communist Manifesto, is its function as an instrument of class oppression. Marx and Engels argued that in all historical epochs where distinct social classes existed, the state was not a neutral arbiter but rather an entity that served the interests of the dominant economic class. In capitalist societies, the state apparatus – including the government, police, military, and legal system – is seen as primarily existing to protect the property rights and privileges of the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state directly confronts this fundamental role, proposing that once class antagonisms are eliminated, the need for such an oppressive apparatus will cease to exist.

The Manifesto states, "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." This powerful assertion highlights the perceived subservience of state power to the interests of capital. The laws enacted, the enforcement mechanisms employed, and even the ideologies promoted by the state are viewed through the lens of their contribution to maintaining the existing power structures and preventing the rise of the proletariat. Therefore, the abolition of class society is intrinsically linked to the abolition of the state that perpetuates it.

The Communist Revolution as the Catalyst for State Abolition

According to the Communist Manifesto, the transition from capitalism to communism is not a peaceful or gradual process but one that necessitates a revolutionary overthrow of the existing social and political order. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state presupposes this revolutionary act. The proletariat, driven by its own inherent contradictions with the capitalist system, is positioned as the agent of this revolution. By seizing political power and dismantling the existing bourgeois state machinery, the working class initiates the process that will eventually lead to its own obsolescence.

The Manifesto famously declares, "The proletarians, by depriving the bourgeoisie of all its powers, will deprive it of the means by which it can oppress labour and produce its own form of society. The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class." This passage is critical, as it introduces the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," a temporary phase where the working class exercises state power to suppress counter-revolutionary forces and consolidate its revolutionary gains.

Marx and Engels' Theoretical Framework for State Abolition

The concept of the state "withering away" is a complex theoretical construct developed by Marx and Engels, building upon their analysis of history and their critique of capitalism. It is not a spontaneous occurrence but a deliberate consequence of specific historical and social transformations. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state is intricately linked to their broader theory of historical materialism, which posits that economic and social structures are the primary drivers of historical change.

Historical Materialism and the Evolution of the State

Marx and Engels viewed history as a progression through different modes of production, each characterized by specific class relations and corresponding state structures. From primitive communism, through slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, the state has evolved in tandem with the development of private property and class divisions. In each class-divided society, the state has served to maintain the dominance of the ruling class. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state proposes that communism represents the final stage of this historical evolution, where class divisions are finally overcome, and consequently, the state, as an instrument of class rule, becomes superfluous.

The theoretical lineage of this idea can be traced to earlier thinkers, but Marx and Engels provided a systematic and dialectical understanding. They argued that the contradictions inherent within each mode of production would eventually lead to its collapse and the emergence of a new one. Capitalism, with its inherent exploitation of labor, creates the conditions for its own demise by fostering a conscious and organized proletariat capable of challenging bourgeois dominance. The ultimate goal of this process, as outlined in the Manifesto, is a society where such antagonisms are absent.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat as a Transitional Phase

A crucial, and often misunderstood, element of the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state is the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." This is not a totalitarian regime in the modern sense, but rather the exercise of state power by the organized working class to suppress the remnants of the old order and to reorganize society along communist lines. Marx and Engels envisioned this as a necessary, albeit temporary, phase to prevent the bourgeoisie from regaining power and to facilitate the transition to a truly classless society.

During this period, the proletariat, acting as the ruling class, would centralize the means of production, expropriate capitalist property, and dismantle the institutions of the bourgeois state. The Manifesto does not detail the precise mechanisms of this dictatorship, but it clearly posits it as a means to an end - the eventual eradication of class rule and, consequently, the need for any ruling class or state apparatus. The state, in this transitional phase, is still a tool, but one wielded by the oppressed majority to achieve their liberation.

The State's Role Diminishes as Class Society Dissolves

The core of the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state lies in the idea that as class distinctions erode, so too does the necessity and the function of the state. Once the means of production are collectively owned and controlled, and the remnants of bourgeois ideology are overcome, the original basis for state coercion disappears. In a communist society, where production is organized for the benefit of all, and social relations are based on cooperation rather than competition, there would be no inherent need for an entity to enforce the will of one class over another.

Engels, in his later work "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," further elaborated on this idea. He argued that the state arose precisely with the division of society into classes and with the need to manage class conflict. When these divisions cease to exist, the state, having fulfilled its historical purpose, would no longer be necessary. It would not be violently destroyed in a final act of warfare but would gradually "wither away" as its functions became obsolete in a self-governing, cooperative society.

The Role of the Proletariat in the Transition to a Stateless Society

The Communist Manifesto places the proletariat, the industrial working class, at the center of the historical process that leads to the abolition of the state. Their unique position within the capitalist system, exploited yet organized, makes them the revolutionary force capable of transforming society. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state is inextricably linked to the agency and ultimate victory of the proletariat.

The Proletariat as the Revolutionary Class

Marx and Engels identified the proletariat as the class that possesses nothing to lose but its chains. Unlike previous oppressed classes, such as slaves or serfs, the proletariat in industrial capitalist societies is concentrated, organized by the very nature of factory production, and increasingly aware of its collective power. The Manifesto argues that the proletariat is not merely a victim of capitalism but its inherent antagonist, destined to overthrow it. This revolutionary role is the prerequisite for the subsequent withering away of the state.

The Communist Manifesto states that "the modern industrial wage labourer, without a property in the soil, or the means of producing his own subsistence, is scarcely able to draw a living from the soil and is reduced to a number of the most miserable branches of labour." This alienation and exploitation, paradoxically, foster a class consciousness that is essential for revolution. The proletariat's struggle against capitalist exploitation is, by extension, a struggle against the state that upholds that exploitation.

Abolishing the State Through Revolution and Transformation

The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state does not advocate for a sudden, immediate disappearance of the state upon the victory of the proletariat. Instead, it posits a process of transformation. The initial act of revolution involves seizing state power, but this is to be followed by a period of consolidating power and restructuring society. The state, under proletarian control, would then gradually become unnecessary as the conditions that gave rise to it are dismantled.

The Manifesto's call for the proletariat to "wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie" and to "centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state" signifies this transitional role. The state, in this phase, is used to eliminate private property, establish collective ownership, and suppress any attempts at capitalist restoration. As these objectives are achieved, and as society moves towards a communal existence, the coercive functions of the state would diminish.

The End of Class Antagonism and State Obsolescence

The ultimate condition for the withering away of the state, according to the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state, is the complete abolition of class antagonism. Once private property is abolished and the means of production are communally owned, the economic basis for class divisions disappears. Without classes, there is no longer a need for a state to manage or suppress class conflict. Society would then be organized on the principles of cooperation and mutual aid.

This envisioned future society is often referred to as "communism proper." In this stage, the state, as a repressive apparatus, would cease to exist. Instead, administrative functions, which Marx and Engels viewed as distinct from political power, would be carried out by society itself, perhaps through organized communities or councils, without the need for a separate, coercive political body. The very concept of political power, as the domination of one group over another, would become obsolete.

The Concept of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"

The "dictatorship of the proletariat" is a term often associated with the Communist Manifesto and is central to understanding the transition toward a stateless society. It is a crucial intermediary step, and its interpretation has been a subject of significant debate and historical contention. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state is predicated on the successful implementation and eventual supersession of this phase.

Defining the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

In the context of the Communist Manifesto, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" refers to a phase

where the working class, having seized state power from the bourgeoisie, exercises this power to fundamentally transform society. It is a political system where the proletariat is the dominant class, not in terms of oppressive rule over others (as there would be no other dominant class), but in terms of its political authority to dismantle the old order and build a new one. Marx and Engels saw it as a necessary counter-measure to the violent resistance expected from the defeated bourgeoisie.

The Manifesto's mention of the proletariat becoming "the ruling class" signifies this transitional period. It's important to distinguish this from a perpetual state of dictatorial rule. The very aim of the dictatorship of the proletariat, according to Marxist theory, is to create the conditions under which such a dictatorship, and indeed any state, becomes unnecessary.

The State's Role in Suppressing Counter-Revolution

A primary function of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as implied in the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state, is to prevent the bourgeoisie from re-establishing its dominance. The Manifesto suggests that the capitalist class will not easily relinquish its power and will likely attempt to resist the revolution through various means, including political sabotage and armed conflict. The proletarian state would employ its power to suppress these counter-revolutionary efforts.

This might involve measures such as expropriating capitalist property, controlling the means of communication and publication, and disarming the remnants of the bourgeois military and police forces. The goal is to secure the revolution and create a stable environment for the transition to communism, where the very foundations of capitalist power have been eliminated.

Transforming the State Apparatus for a New Society

Beyond suppression, the dictatorship of the proletariat is also envisioned as a period for transforming the state itself, along with the broader social and economic structures. The instruments of the old, bourgeois state would be repurposed or dismantled and replaced with new institutions that reflect the interests and collective will of the working class. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state implies that this transformation is an ongoing process during the dictatorship phase.

For example, the Manifesto's call for the centralization of production in the hands of the state (i.e., the proletariat as the ruling class) suggests a shift from private ownership to collective, state-managed control of the economy. This economic transformation is seen as intrinsically linked to the eventual obsolescence of the state itself, as the economic basis for class conflict is removed.

The Characteristics of a Communist Society Without a State

The ultimate aim described in the Communist Manifesto is a society free from the state, a condition that arises only after the complete abolition of class distinctions and the establishment of communal ownership. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state paints a picture of a transformed social existence, characterized by cooperation, abundance, and the absence of coercive authority.

Communal Ownership and the End of Exploitation

In a stateless communist society, the means of production – factories, land, resources – would be owned collectively by the community as a whole, rather than by private individuals or the state. This communal ownership would eliminate the exploitation of labor, as the fruits of labor would no longer be appropriated by a capitalist class. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state envisions this economic foundation as the bedrock of a non-coercive society.

The Manifesto articulates this by stating that communism "deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive each of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation." This suggests a system of distribution based on need and contribution, rather than on ownership of the means of production.

Absence of Coercion and Political Power

The defining characteristic of a society where the state has withered away is the absence of coercive political power. Without classes, there are no inherent antagonisms that require a state apparatus to manage or suppress. The Manifesto implies that in such a society, social order would be maintained through collective agreement, habit, and a shared understanding of common interests, rather than through laws enforced by a specialized body of armed men. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state suggests a radical shift in human relationships and social organization.

Functions that the state currently performs, such as administration and dispute resolution, would be handled by communal bodies or through voluntary cooperation. The concept of "government of persons" would be replaced by the "administration of things," as Engels put it, meaning the management of resources and processes without any inherent power over individuals.

Self-Governance and Collective Responsibility

In a stateless communist society, self-governance would be the norm. Individuals would participate directly in the decision-making processes that affect their communities. This would be a society characterized by cooperation, mutual aid, and a heightened sense of collective responsibility. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state points towards a society where individuals are no longer alienated from their labor or from each other, fostering a sense of shared purpose.

The emphasis would be on creating a society where individuals are free to develop their full potential, unhindered by the constraints of class society and the coercive power of the state. This freedom is understood not as individual license but as the ability to participate fully in a cooperative community.

Interpretations and Criticisms of the Withering Away of the State

The concept of the state withering away, as presented in the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state, has been a subject of extensive interpretation, debate, and criticism since its inception. While proponents see it as the ultimate liberation of humanity, critics often point to its perceived utopian nature and the practical challenges of its implementation.

Divergent Interpretations within Marxism

Even within Marxist thought, there have been varying interpretations of the "withering away" process. Some, like Lenin, emphasized the necessity of a strong revolutionary state to guide the transition, while others have focused more on the gradual obsolescence of state functions as communal self-governance develops. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state leaves room for these interpretive differences, as it outlines the general direction rather than a precise, prescriptive roadmap.

The practical application of Marxist ideas in the 20th century, particularly in states that identified as socialist or communist, often resulted in highly centralized and powerful states, which critics argue contradicted the very idea of the state withering away. This has led to questions about whether the Manifesto's vision is an achievable historical outcome or a theoretical ideal.

Critiques of Utopianism and Feasibility

One of the most persistent criticisms of the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state is that it presents a utopian vision that is ultimately unachievable. Critics argue that human nature, with its inherent desires for power and self-interest, makes a completely stateless and cooperative society impossible. They contend that the state, in some form, is a necessary mechanism for maintaining order and resolving disputes in any complex society.

Furthermore, the practical challenges of dismantling existing state structures and establishing a truly stateless, self-governing society are immense. The transition period, envisioned as the dictatorship of the proletariat, has historically proven to be fraught with difficulties, often leading to the consolidation of authoritarian power rather than its dissolution.

The Role of State Power in Socialist Transitions

A significant point of contention revolves around the role of state power in achieving communist society. Critics of the Marxist concept argue that the very act of concentrating power in a "dictatorship of the proletariat" creates a new form of oppression, making the eventual withering away of the state an unlikely outcome. They suggest that a state, once created, tends to perpetuate itself and expand its powers, rather than diminish them.

Conversely, proponents argue that the state is a tool that can be used by the working class to achieve its emancipation. They maintain that the withering away is not an immediate consequence of revolution but a historical process that requires the prior elimination of class society. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state, they contend, is a description of the ultimate destination, not an immediate prescription for the nature of the transitional state.

Historical Attempts and the Relevance of the Concept Today

While the Communist Manifesto provides a theoretical framework for the withering away of the state, historical attempts to implement its principles have yielded complex and often contradictory results. Understanding these historical experiences is crucial for assessing the ongoing relevance of the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state.

Experiences of 20th-Century Socialist States

Many states in the 20th century, inspired by Marxism-Leninism, claimed to be building socialist societies with the eventual goal of communism. However, these states typically developed highly centralized and powerful bureaucracies, often characterized by authoritarian rule rather than the withering away of state power. The mechanisms intended to facilitate the transition to communism often resulted in the entrenchment of state control and suppression of dissent.

The theoretical emphasis on the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in these contexts often translated into a single-party dictatorship, leading to widespread criticism that these states failed to achieve the emancipatory goals outlined in the Communist Manifesto. The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state appears to have been largely sidelined or reinterpreted in these historical experiments.

Contemporary Debates and Interpretations

The relevance of the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state continues to be debated in contemporary political and philosophical circles. For some, it remains a powerful critique of state power and a utopian aspiration for a more just and liberated society. For

others, it is seen as a historical artifact whose core tenets have been disproven by the failures of 20th-century socialist experiments.

Modern discussions often focus on the underlying critique of state power and the potential for non-hierarchical forms of organization. While direct state abolition might be viewed as impractical by many, the Manifesto's core ideas about reducing state coercion and fostering genuine community continue to resonate in certain anarchist and socialist currents of thought.

Lessons Learned and Future Considerations

The historical attempts to realize the vision of a stateless society, as outlined in the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state, offer valuable lessons. The challenges of transitioning from a class-divided society to a classless one, and the potential pitfalls of concentrating power, even in the name of revolution, are significant. The theoretical ideal of the state withering away highlights the potential for human societies to evolve beyond existing structures of domination.

Ultimately, the Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state remains a provocative and influential idea, prompting critical reflection on the nature of political power, social organization, and the ultimate goals of societal transformation.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of the Communist Manifesto Text on the Eventual Withering Away of the State

The Communist Manifesto text on the eventual withering away of the state represents one of the most radical and enduring visions within Marxist political theory. It posits a future society liberated from the coercive apparatus of the state, a condition achieved through the abolition of class antagonisms and the establishment of communal ownership. While the practical implementation of this vision has been fraught with historical challenges and interpretive debates, the core idea of transcending state power continues to provoke critical thought about governance, social organization, and human emancipation. The Manifesto's profound critique of the state as an instrument of class oppression, and its hopeful projection of a stateless communist future, ensure its continued relevance in discussions about political philosophy and the aspirations for a more just world.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does Marx and Engels mean by the 'eventual withering

away of the state' in the Communist Manifesto?

In the Communist Manifesto, the 'withering away of the state' refers to the eventual obsolescence of the state apparatus as a tool of class oppression. As class distinctions disappear under communism, the need for a state to enforce one class's dominance over another will cease to exist, leading to its gradual dissolution.

Is the 'withering away of the state' a sudden event or a gradual process according to the Communist Manifesto?

The Manifesto suggests it's a gradual process. Following the proletarian revolution and the establishment of a transitional phase (often referred to as the dictatorship of the proletariat), as the remnants of class society are dismantled and a communist society emerges, the state's functions will diminish until it is no longer necessary.

What will replace the state once it has 'withered away'?

The Manifesto doesn't explicitly detail a 'replacement' for the state in the traditional sense. Instead, it envisions a stateless, classless society where public administration and the management of common affairs will be handled by the people themselves, without a distinct, coercive political power.

How does the concept of 'abolishing the state' differ from its 'withering away'?

While both suggest the end of the state, 'abolishing the state' might imply a more immediate or forceful dismantling. The 'withering away' emphasizes a more organic, evolutionary process where the state's functions become unnecessary and it consequently fades out of existence as society transforms.

What is the relationship between the abolition of private property and the eventual withering away of the state, according to the Manifesto?

The Manifesto posits that the state, as it exists under capitalism, is fundamentally an instrument of the bourgeoisie to protect private property and maintain class rule. By abolishing private property and eliminating class distinctions, the primary basis for the state's existence is removed, paving the way for its eventual dissolution.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the concept of the "withering away of the state" as discussed in the Communist Manifesto, with short descriptions:

- 1.

The Anarchist Utopia: A Society Without Masters

This book explores the historical development of anarchist thought, focusing on thinkers who envisioned a stateless society achieved through voluntary cooperation and mutual aid. It delves into the philosophical underpinnings of anarchism, explaining how it seeks to dismantle hierarchical power structures. The text highlights different models of stateless organization, from individualist communes to collectivist federations, arguing for their viability.

2.

Post-Scarcity Communism: The Economic Basis for Statelessness

This work examines the theoretical economic conditions necessary for the state to become obsolete. It posits that in a society where resources are abundant and production is automated, the traditional functions of the state—like managing scarcity and enforcing property rights—would naturally dissolve. The book discusses how advanced technology and communal ownership could lead to a distribution system that eliminates the need for coercive governance.

3.

The Administrative Neutrality of the Future

This title investigates the concept of "administrative neutrality," where societal functions are carried out by impartial, technical bodies rather than a politically motivated state apparatus. It explores how essential services could be managed through scientific organization and expertise, free from the pressures of partisan politics or class struggle. The book considers the gradual transition towards such a system, where administration serves the collective good without wielding coercive power.

4.

The Great Transformation: From State Control to Collective Self-Governance

This book chronicles historical attempts and theoretical proposals for transitioning away from state-dominated societies. It examines revolutions, social movements, and philosophical shifts that have aimed at empowering communities and individuals to manage their own affairs. The narrative focuses on the challenges and potential successes of decentralized decision-making and the gradual erosion of centralized authority.

5.

The End of Ideology: Reaching a Post-Political Epoch

This work argues that as class antagonisms fade and societal needs are met, the need for overarching political ideologies and the state that enforces them will diminish. It envisions a future where governance is less about ideological conflict and more about practical problem-solving and consensus. The book explores the potential for a more pragmatic and less adversarial approach to societal organization as the state's *raison d'être* recedes.

6.

The Commune as the Ultimate Social Unit

This book champions the commune as the ideal organizational structure in a stateless society, emphasizing local autonomy and direct democracy. It analyzes how communal living and collective decision-making can replace the functions traditionally performed by the state. The text highlights the importance of solidarity and shared responsibility in building a society free from external coercion.

7.

The Withering Hand: A Sociological Study of State Decline

This academic study examines historical and sociological trends that indicate a potential decline in the power and necessity of the state. It analyzes how social movements, technological advancements, and evolving economic structures can contribute to the decentralization of power. The book offers a critical perspective on the state's historical role and speculates on its future irrelevance in a more equitable world.

8.

Abolishing the Monopolies of Violence: Towards a Peaceful Society

This title directly addresses the Marxist concept of the state's monopoly on violence and proposes how this monopoly can be dismantled without descending into chaos. It explores alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution and social order, focusing on community-based justice and restorative practices. The book outlines a path towards a society where violence is no longer a tool of governance but is effectively managed through cooperative means.

9.

From Nation to Network: The Dissolution of State Boundaries

This book explores the idea that in a future communist society, the rigid boundaries and nationalistic fervor promoted by states will dissolve. It envisions a global network of interconnected communities and individuals, where collaboration and shared humanity transcend national allegiances. The text argues that the obsolescence of the state is tied to the breakdown of national divisions and the rise of a truly global, cooperative social fabric.

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