

Communist Manifesto Summary and Analysis of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary: Bourgeois and Proletarians

The [Communist Manifesto](#) begins with Marx's famous generalization that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (79). Marx describes these classes in terms of binary oppositions, with one party as oppressor, the other as oppressed. While human societies have traditionally been organized according to complex, multi-membered class hierarchies, the demise of feudalism effected by the French Revolution has brought about a simplification of class antagonism. Rather than many classes fighting amongst themselves (e.g. ancient Rome with its patricians, knights, plebeians, and slaves), society is increasingly splitting into only two classes: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

This state of affairs is the result of a long historical process. The discovery and colonization of the New World in the 16th and 17th centuries required new methods of production and exchange. Because of the demand for more efficient, larger scale production, the medieval guild system gave way to new methods of manufacturing, defined by the widespread use of division of labor and, with the advent of industrialization, by steam and machinery. It was the bourgeoisie "modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and the employers of wage labor" (79) who were the agents of these economic revolutions.

The new economic powers of the bourgeoisie led to their political empowerment. While the bourgeoisie had originally served the nobility or the monarchy, they had come in the middle of the 19th century to control the representative states of Europe. In fact, as Marx famously notes, "the executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (82). With this political empowerment came the destruction of the social fictions on which previous societies were based. Instead of focusing on the relationship of men to 'natural' superiors and inferiors, both in this life and the next, or even the indistinct Rights of Man championed in the first half of the 19th century, the bourgeoisie introduced an ethic based on the absolute right to free trade and the rational, egoistic pursuit of profit.

It was not enough, though, for the bourgeoisie to radically change all that has preceded it; it must constantly change in the present in order to expand and exploit its markets. As Marx says, "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish

the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones" (83). This economic and social dynamism unsettles the boundaries of nations and creates pressure toward globalization, amounting to an economic imperialism which demands that other nations assimilate to bourgeois practice or be cosigned to the economic backwater. In this way, the bourgeoisie "create the world after their own image" (84).

Marx uses the above story of the bourgeoisie's evolution to substantiate his central contention that the forces of production develop faster than the sociopolitical order in which those forces of production arise. The result of this disparity is a radical alteration of the sociopolitical order that allows it to catch up with the forces of production. Marx claims that this is what occurred in the shift from feudalism to bourgeois capitalism. This process, though, has not stopped. The conditions for the existence of the bourgeois order are being undermined by the new forces of production which the bourgeoisie themselves have ushered in. This is evidenced by the many economic crises—results of an epidemic of overproduction, which Marx

sees as a consequence of bourgeois economic development—that rocked Europe in the 1830's and 40's. In response to these crises, the bourgeoisie either scale back their production, find new markets, or more thoroughly exploit old ones. According to Marx, though, all this is for naught as it does not treat the underlying problems which will create more acute crises in the future. Indeed, the underlying problems cannot be suitably treated as capitalism contains within it the seeds of its own demise, seeds which it itself nurtures through the necessary creation and ultimate exploitation of a new class, the proletariat.

The proletariat are the workforce of bourgeois enterprise, "a class of laborers who live only so long as they can find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital" (87). The proletarians are themselves commodities and are likewise subject to the vicissitudes of the market. And as with any other commodity, businesses want to minimize their cost of production, in this case, the wage that must be paid in order to make use of the worker's labor power. According to Marx, this wage is the cost of bare subsistence for the proletariat and his family. Because of the division of labor, the work of the proletariat is assimilated to the great industrial machinery, of which they are no more than cogs. As the division of labor and the mechanization of industry increases—necessary conditions of efficient production—so does the drudgery of the proletariat's work.

As slaves to their bourgeois masters, the proletariat is in a constant state of antagonism with the bourgeoisie. This antagonism, though, leads to the mass mobilization—helped by ever improving communication technologies—of the

proletariat, increasingly aware of their collective power to effect changes in wages and working conditions. Indeed, the proletariat is helped in this by the bourgeoisie, who educate the proletariat in order to mobilize the masses of workers in favor of their own political goals. As the proletariat become more numerous and organized, though, members of the bourgeoisie begin to realize that their class will fall and the proletariat will triumph. These foresighted bourgeoisie, of which Marx is a member, increase class consciousness among the proletariat and hurry their historically ordained victory.

Eventually, the proletariat erupt into rebellion, casting off the shackles which bound them to the bourgeoisie. They condemn all the bourgeois laws, morality, and religions as facades for bourgeois economic interests. They rend society apart, destroying the most fundamental condition of their own bondage, the institution of private property. All this is the necessary result of the rapacious bourgeois appetite for profit which brought the proletariat into existence and continually diminished his welfare. Thus, the bourgeoisie undermine the conditions of their own existence. As Marx concludes, "What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (94).

Chapter 1 Analysis: Bourgeois and Proletarians

The Communist Manifesto was first published on the eve of the revolutions which rocked Europe in 1848. It was meant as a statement of purpose for Marx's newly formed Communist League and its straightforward, even prophetic, tone is that of a man confidently explaining to a confused world the reasons for a tumult which had not yet begun. Why this confidence? The answer to this depends on Marx's deterministic view of history.

Marx inherited from Hegel, his philosophical father, the idea of historical progress. Like Hegel, Marx believed that human history unfolds according to a distinct series of historical stages, each necessarily following the other. These stages ultimately lead to a prescribed Utopian endpoint, after which there will be no more change, an end to history. Unlike Hegel, though, Marx thought that these stages can be foretold. This is because there are scientific laws, discoverable by empirical methods, which govern the progress of history. In such a universe, people are but midwives, facilitating or frustrating the birth of a new historical period, unable to alter the nature of the eventual result. Marx believed that he had discovered these laws and with the certainty of a physicist predicting the trajectory of a projectile, Marx predicted the demise of capitalism and the triumph of communism.

According to Marx, the course of human history takes a very specific form, class struggle. The engine of change in history is class antagonism. Historical epochs are

defined by the relationship between different classes at different points in time. It is this model that Marx fleshes out in his account of feudalism's passing in favor of bourgeois capitalism and his prognostication of bourgeois capitalism's passing in favor of proletarian rule. These changes are not the contingent results of random social, economic, and political events; each follows the other in predictable succession. When he wrote *The Manifesto*, Marx thought he was sounding the death knell for capitalism months before its demise.

It is crucial to note, though, that this antagonism also takes a very specific form, that of the dialectic. According to Marx's dialectical account of history, which he adapts from Hegel, every class is unstable, fated for ultimate destruction due to its internal contradictions. Out of its ashes rises a new class which has resolved the contradictions of its predecessor but retains it own, which will cause its eventual passing. In more specific terms, the bourgeoisie must create the proletariat as a condition of their own development, i.e., in order to labor in their burgeoning industries. In doing this, they must treat the proletariat ever worse (by minimizing their production costs) while providing them the means to associate through politics. The necessary consequence of this is that the proletariat gain power and overthrow their oppressors. The inner contradiction is the bourgeois need for proletariat labor, a need which when met creates the conditions of the bourgeoisie's eradication.

The proletariat's moment in history is unique, though, as the proletariat's vanquishing of capitalism leads to a classless society. If there are no more classes, there cannot be any class antagonism; and if there is no class antagonism, then on account of Marx's view of history, there will be no more history. The triumph of the proletariat and the creation of a classless society is, then, the Utopian end of history toward which all previous historical events are directed.

More specifically, it is crucial to note the central role that economics plays in Marx's view. While we might be inclined to view the progress of history-if we believe in progress at all-in terms of revolutionary ideas, i.e. Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, etc., Marx viewed the progress of history in decidedly materialistic terms. The grand ideas by which we characterize societies are always the reflection of underlying economic realities. In Marxist language, the superstructure (laws, morality, religion, politics, aesthetics: in short, culture) is always determined by the infrastructure (the methods of economic production and exchange); people's thoughts and behaviors are always determined by their social environments. What we think of as cultural revolutions, even great political ones such as the French Revolution, are really the product of deeper economic issues expressed through class antagonism. This may not be immediately apparent as infrastructure always develops faster than superstructure. Every so

often, though, the superstructure has to slingshot forward in order to catch up with the infrastructure. It is these great leaps forwards that we commonly misperceive as revolutions in ideas.

This, then, sets up Marx's theory of human history. Needless to say, it has been the target of much criticism. There seems to be three central questions here which need to be evaluated separately: 1) Is history governed by immutable laws? 2) If so, does history have an end? 3) What is the moral value of this end? Marx clearly thought that the answer to the first question is yes. One might corroborate this idea with a metaphysical story about Providence or natural ends. Marx, though, claimed a scientific, empirical status for his views, so he could rely on such abstract justifications. Patterns of historical movement must be inferred from historical data. It is apparent that Marx, at least at this point in his career, has not assembled enough data to warrant the strength of his conclusions. His view of capitalism as a self-defeating enterprise was based almost solely on his exposure to the textile industry in Lancashire, England. For Marx Lancashire was capitalism teetering on the edge of the abyss, on the verge of full proletariat revolt. The fact that there were few other areas of such industrial sophistication elsewhere in Europe did not bother Marx. He was certain that Lancashire was the future and end of capitalism. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Lancashire was not in anyway the end of capitalism. It was merely an early stage of capitalism, not representative of other industries and quite primitive by today's industrial standards. Indeed, the revolutions Marx foresaw never happened until the 20th century, in countries, contrary to Marx's expectation, with capitalist economies in their infancy. Marx greatly underestimated the capacity for human innovation in constructing new, more efficient methods of production which, rather than burdening the worker, eased his labor.

This does not demonstrate conclusively that there are not recurring historical patterns or laws, but it does impugn Marx's claim to scientific objectivity with respect to his own theory. Indeed, it is noteworthy that many later Marxists and other thinkers with Marxist sympathies (many so-called postmodernists, such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida) advanced theories emphasizing the social construction of all ideologies, Marx's included, and called into questions any so-called Grand Narrative theory which sought to reduce human history to a linear progression governed by simply explicable laws.

The question of an end to history is centrally related to the question of determinism. It is not, however, clear that determinism requires an end. There is nothing inherent even in Marx's dialectical history that makes a final resolution of contradictions necessary. One could easily imagine an interminable sequence of conflicts, in which the engine of change is, for instance, biological fitness and not the conflict of

classes. In a sense, Marx stacks the deck in favor of an end, declaring that the proletariat, the truly universal class, will abolish all distinctions of class by destroying public property. A classless society cannot be ruled by the rules of class conflict. But why should class be the only engine of change? And is the possession of property the only indicator of social class? Perhaps strength of personality or certain ideologies (religious, political, or otherwise) move people to action against each other more than the possession of goods. In fact this seems borne out, at least in part, by Marx's theory, for how else could any bourgeoisie, e.g. Marx himself, ever side against his class and with the proletariat? And in the revolutions of 1848 in which Marx predicted proletariat victory, nationalism was a much more powerful force than class conflict.

Even if there is an end, though, it does not seem obvious that this end is one of which we should approve. We could be spiraling ineluctably to a fate which we'd rather avoid if we could. Marx does stress that the capitalist is not being particularly selfish when he exploits the proletariat, nor is the proletariat particularly altruistic when he and his brethren rebel against their oppressors. Each party is just responding to the laws of history. In these circumstances, attributions of vice and virtue are not entirely appropriate. Why, then, does Marx welcome the end of history and indeed work to hasten its arrival? From what perspective is Marx's moral judgment made if not from the perspective of any class? This is an important question, but one which Marx does not address explicitly in *The Manifesto*.

Ultimately, Marx's answer to this question relies on his theories about human nature and his explication of the moral consequences of capitalism, specifically, his theory of alienation. Without an elaboration of these theories, Marx's willingness to incite violence in favor of the proletariat is without clear justification.