

# The Communist Manifesto



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KARL MARX

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were both born in Prussia, now Germany. They had markedly different upbringings: Marx's father supported his academic pursuits (albeit insisting his son studied law rather than philosophy), while Engels was pushed into joining his father's business. At a young age, both men found an affinity with the works of German philosopher Georg Hegel, whose theory that societal progress is the result of conflicting elements had a strong influence over their political writings. Each of them found a community of like-minded individuals in the Young Hegelians, a group of intellectuals that reacted to and wrote about Hegel's legacy. In 1842, Engels moved to Manchester, England, to work in the office of his father's cotton mill, giving the young man unparalleled insight into the conditions of the working class and the effects of the capitalist system. Around the same time, Marx edited a German newspaper, advocating for the rights of the masses and pushing its editorial line in a more revolutionary direction. Under threat of censorship, Marx left Prussia with his wife, Jenny von Westphalen, to live in France. In 1844, Marx and Engels met in Paris, becoming close friends and collaborators. Not long after, with the Prussian government exerting pressure on France, Marx was forced to move to Belgium. Engels also moved to Belgium and soon after published a book called *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, heavily critical of capitalism. In 1848, Marx and Engels were commissioned by The Communist League to write *The Communist Manifesto*, arguably the most influential political tract ever written. After this, both men continued to write political works and be involved in the revolutionary activity on the rise across Europe. Political pressure on Marx forced him to permanently resettle in London, England. Engels actively funded Marx's work, periodically returning to work in business in order to raise finances. In 1870, Engels joined Marx to live in London, eventually dying of cancer in 1895. During the years between the manifesto's publication and his death, Marx edited the *New York Tribune* and produced his magnum opus on capitalism, *Das Kapital*. He died in London in 1883, technically "stateless," fifteen months after the death of his wife.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Marx and Engels were writing in a century that had seen the rapid and wide-ranging development of industrialization. The Communist League formed in order to provide a political retaliation against capitalism, and it was this group that commissioned Marx and Engels to write the manifesto. It was

not until the 1870s that the Marx and Engels' ideas started to gain a major foothold in Europe. As the years went by, the ideas spread further, and countries as far afield as Russia, China, and Cuba made attempts at implementing communism. Though some of these communist societies produced some of humanity's worst atrocities, Marx and Engels' manifesto remains an extremely relevant critique of capitalism, inequality, and exploitation.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In its declaration that "all history" is the history class struggles, *The Communist Manifesto* has much in common with Hegel's theory that progress is made when two conflicting elements come to a head. Both Marx and Engels' previous publications exert considerable influence on the manifesto too, such as Engels' *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*. The manifesto has inspired huge amounts of writing since; Marxism itself represents an entire world of scholarship. Further afield, Charles Dickens' works present a fictional preoccupation with the same issues that concern Marx and Engels: the lives and environments of the working class, and the inequalities of society brought about by the capitalist class system.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Communist Manifesto*
- **When Written:** January 1848
- **Where Written:** Brussels
- **When Published:** February 21, 1848
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, political science
- **Setting:** Europe
- **Climax:** Marx and Engels declare that all people in the working class must band together.
- **Antagonist:** The Bourgeoisie
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Procrastination.** Marx procrastinated massively in the writing of the manifesto, and it was only the imposition of a tight deadline that inspired the work to be finished quickly.

**Translations.** Since its publication, *The Communist Manifesto* has been published in over 200 different languages.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Communist Manifesto* is a political text by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, aimed at both developing the theory of communism and engaging readers to take up its cause. First published in 1848, the book offers a detailed critique of capitalism, a spirited defense of communism, and practical suggestions for bringing about a communist society.

Marx and Engels suggest there is “a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism.” Of course, it’s not Marx and Engels who think of communism as a fearsome “spectre,” but those who misunderstand its motives or wish to halt its progress. This sets the manifesto up as a response to those who misrepresent communism.

One of Marx and Engels’ most important ideas is that class struggle is the driving force behind all historical development. The authors argue that all societies in history have been divided between the oppressors and the oppressed. Whereas in previous societies this might play out in a more complex form, capitalism simplifies class division, splitting society into the bourgeoisie—those with all the wealth and private property—and the proletariat, the majority of the population that has no choice but to work for the bourgeoisie.

In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie owns the “means of production,” which encompasses everything that is needed to make sellable products apart from the labor itself: materials, machinery, and infrastructure are all included. The proletariat are paid a wage to work with the means of production in order to create things the bourgeoisie can sell—which then generates profit, kept by the bourgeoisie. This allows the bourgeoisie to accumulate wealth, private property, and dominance over society.

Because capitalism is a competition-based economy, technological innovation can give one enterprise a competitive advantage over another. This has brought about rapid developments in technology across transport, communications, and distribution, hand in hand with the bourgeoisie’s emergence as the dominant class. The thirst for profit also spread capitalism further and further around the world, eroding national identities and forcing nations to choose between capitalism and economic exclusion. Capitalism also results in greater “division of labor,” driving down the skill level of work and splitting it up into more menial, repetitive tasks. Marx and Engels argue that, ironically, the improvements in technology and better worldwide connections create the opportunity for the proletariat to realize its potential collective strength—and, ultimately, overcome its oppression by the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, then, is “its own grave-digger.”

Marx and Engels outline the relationship of communism to the empowerment of the working classes (which, in their definition, includes anyone who exchanges their labor for wages from the

bourgeoisie). Communism, they say, will support all working class parties who seek to improve the position of the proletariat. Furthermore, it will aim to unify the proletariat in different countries and aid them in harnessing their potential collective power.

Marx and Engels also defend communism against its critics. For example, they say communism has been charged with wanting to “abolish private property.” The authors counter that private property (which includes money and land) has already been abolished for the majority of the population—the proletariat—and only really exists for the bourgeoisie. Accordingly, communism only seeks to abolish the *specifically bourgeois* form of private property. They make similar defenses against other criticisms, including that communism wishes to do away with family life. Finally, they end the section with practical steps for the implementation of communism, including a high and progressive income tax, free education, the abolition of child labor, and the centralization of the means of transport, education, and financial institutions. They intend this centralization to be both in the hands and for the benefit of the proletariat.

Marx and Engels contextualize their ideas about communism with similar writing that has come before. Overall, Marx and Engels have few positives to say about these other works; they identify various types of socialist and communist literature, finding fatal flaws in each. “Reactionary Socialism,” they say, seeks only to preserve old ways of society and fails to acknowledge the way in which class struggle propels history. “Bourgeois Socialism” is insincere and wishes to trick the proletariat into being grateful for the bourgeoisie’s existence (through charity and education, for example). “Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism” is literature that, though useful in identifying the way class antagonism changes society, is too crude, idealistic, and ultimately lacking in practicality. Marx and Engels are interested in ideas only insofar as they can bring about action and empower the proletariat.

Marx and Engels declare an alliance with those parties in Europe most closely aligned with the communist project. The manifesto ends with a rallying call, imploring the proletariat to fight against its bourgeoisie oppressors and start a revolution: “the proletarians have nothing to lose but their **chains**. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!”



## CHARACTERS

**Bourgeoisie** – The bourgeoisie is the dominant social class within capitalist society that has risen to power in line with industrialization. They are driven by profit and use free trade to accumulate wealth, property, and power. Because a capitalist economy is inherently competitive, members of the

bourgeoisie are driven to make rapid innovations in communication, transport, and industrial technology. The bourgeoisie own what Marx and Engels call the means of production, essentially everything that is needed to make sellable products apart from the labor itself: materials, machinery and infrastructure are all included. The bourgeoisie employs members of the proletariat—the majority of the population—but only pays them enough to survive, prohibiting the proletariat from acquiring its own means of production. According to Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie is inherently exploitative and oppresses the proletariat class. However, the bourgeoisie is unwittingly bringing about its own destruction in doing so—the volatile combination of technological innovation with increased inequality will, in Marx and Engels’ theory, eventually provide the proletariat with the means and motive to rise up and revolt against the bourgeoisie.

**Proletariat** – The proletariat is the class of people that consists of anyone who the bourgeoisie suppresses and exploits—in short, anyone that is forced to work for the bourgeoisie because of their economic circumstances. The proletariat differs from earlier oppressed classes by virtue of its sheer size; as capitalism has simplified the class system, people are either part of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. The division of labor forces the proletariat to work jobs that involve increasingly repetitive and menial tasks; furthermore, as they depend upon their wages to survive, their working conditions are continually diminished by the profiteering of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels’ manifesto is a call to arms for the proletariat, imploring them to realize their collective power and organize themselves into a revolution. Because members of the proletariat are poorer than the bourgeoisie, they are more at risk in the times of crises, which, Marx and Engels argue, are likely under a capitalist system. This means the proletariat is greatly disadvantaged by its oppressed position—its members do not receive a fair share of the profits of their substantial labor, and they are disproportionately vulnerable to poverty. Marx and Engels envision a society run by and for the proletariat, in which resources are divided according to need rather than economic advantage.

**Communists** – Communists are members of communist parties and, more generally, people who support communism. Communists strive for the empowerment of the proletariat and the destruction of the bourgeoisie. In order to bring about this change, communists take the fight to bourgeoisie on political and intellectual grounds—Marx and Engels even call on them to “forcefully” bring about revolution. Communists call for the abolition of private property, meaning an end to the accumulation of wealth and land that entrenches the bourgeoisie’s advantage over the proletariat.

**Aristocracy** – The aristocracy is a ruling class that has seen its power diminish and, in some countries, disappear entirely under the bourgeois capitalist system. Like the bourgeoisie,

they hold great wealth and private property, typically passed down from generation to generation by inheritance. Marx and Engels believe that any attempt to by the aristocracy to limit the rise of the bourgeoisie is done in their own interests—not the proletariat’s.

**Peasants** – Peasants were one of the earlier oppressed classes that Marx and Engels discuss in their historical analysis of the rise of the bourgeoisie. The peasants that the authors are thinking of are those who existed within the medieval feudalist system. They had the slight advantage when compared with proletariat of being granted small plots of land in exchange for their labor, on which they could grow their own produce and thereby survive with a slightly greater degree of independence than those oppressed under the bourgeois capitalist system.

**Artisans** – Artisans are skilled laborers. Marx and Engels refer to them in relation to those economic systems that preceded capitalism. Under some previous systems, artisans of a given craft were members of a guild, allowing them a greater degree of control over the means of production working conditions than the proletariat. They are threatened by the bourgeoisie’s industrial innovations, which reduce work into more and more mechanical, repetitive and low-skilled tasks.

## TERMS

**Capital** – To Marx and Engels, capital is the defining element of capitalism. Essentially, it’s money and assets under the control of the **bourgeoisie**. More than that, though, capital is the power that comes with an accumulation of wealth—the power to make purchases and significantly affect the world. In keeping this financial clout to itself, the bourgeoisie is able to oppress the **proletariat** through wage labor.

**Capitalism** – Capitalism is a dominant economic and political system based on the ownership of private property and the ability to accumulate wealth. In a capitalist system, trade and industry exist for the pursuit of profit by private owners, rather than being owned by the government (or as Marx and Engels would call it, “the State”). Marx and Engels believe capitalism is a fundamentally unfair “mode of production” (their phrase for an economic and political system) that creates inequality in society and oppresses the majority of the population. Only a small section at the top of society, the **bourgeoisie**, experience capitalism’s benefits. However, Marx and Engels see capitalism as a necessary stage in humanity’s historical development. Its insatiable hunger for profit means quick advances in transport and communication technology, making it easier for the emerging **proletariat** to organize its revolution.

**Commodity** – A commodity is anything that can be traded, bought and sold. While most commodities are physical goods, Marx and Engels argue that under a capitalist system, work itself becomes a kind of commodity. At least, it does for the

**proletariat**—having no wealth or property, they have to sell their labor to the **bourgeoisie** in exchange for wages that allow them to survive. Marx and Engels see this as patently unfair because members of the proletariat are devalued: workers first, humans second. Furthermore, the labor of the proletariat actively creates the products that the bourgeoisie then sell for profit—without their work, these commodities would not exist.

**Communism** – Communism is the opposite of capitalism—an economic and political system in which the resources of society are collectively owned and distributed fairly amongst society. In Marx and Engels’ definition, communism outlaws any accumulation of private property that creates unfairness and facilitates oppression of one part of the population by another. In communism, government is meant to be run by the people and for the people, meaning that state-owned resources are in the hands of the entire population, rather than a select few. Since Marx and Engels’ manifesto, various countries and leaders have tried to implement communism. Communism has many offshoots and competing ideas.

**Division of labor** – The division of labor is a consequence of capitalism and industrialization that breaks work up into smaller and more repetitive tasks. Marx and Engels argue that this division of labor drives down the skill level required for such work, and therefore widens the available pool of workers for the **bourgeoisie** to choose from. Because the work gets more boring and arduous—and the working hours become more punishing—workers become alienated from their jobs, only remaining in the work because they need money to survive. The division of labor can be contrasted with guilds.

**Feudalism** – Feudalism is an economic and political system from the medieval period that had a different class set-up than capitalism. In a feudalist society, the king owns all of the land. He then gives some of this land, as “manors,” to noblemen, who in turn provide land to the **peasantry** in exchange for their labor. There was also a class of serfs, who had no prospect of land ownership and were essentially slaves. Taxes were paid primarily in produce. Marx and Engels see this type of society as being the precursor of the rise of the **bourgeoisie**, and they characterize both feudalism and capitalism as oppressor vs. oppressed.

**Free trade** – Technically, free trade is international trade without restrictions or duties, such as import taxes or quantity limits. For Marx and Engels, it represents the method by which the **bourgeoisie** accumulates wealth. By trading, they are able to exploit the increased interconnectivity of society by buying or producing goods at a lower price than what they can sell them for later; this process then leads to greater interconnectedness. The bourgeoisie’s accumulated wealth increases their social, economic and political power, entrenching their dominance over the **proletariat**.

**Guilds** – A guild is an association comprised of people on the

basis of a particular skill or trade. They were especially prevalent in the Middle Ages, which is why Marx and Engels mention them. Some of the proposed benefits of guilds were improved organization, the ability to provide good training for new craftsmen, and high quality standards. Examples of guilds include weavers, cobblers, bakers, and painters.

**Instruments of production** – Instruments of production refers to things like the tools, machinery, and infrastructure that are required for work. People use the instruments of labor in order to create products. Together with the subjects of labor—the natural resources and raw materials needed for production—the instruments of production form the means of production.

**Means of production** – The means of production represents everything involved in work apart from the people themselves. This includes the instruments of production (such as tools, machinery, and infrastructure) and the raw materials and natural resource that workers operate on in order to make products. For example, the means of production for baking would include the baker’s tools, the bakery itself, and the wheat used in the baking. Marx and Engels believe that it is fundamentally unfair that workers do not own the means of production. They argue that the means of production is only made useful by workers’ labor—yet all the benefits of that work are accumulated by the **bourgeoisie**.

**Productive forces** – Productive forces is part of Marx and Engels’ terminology to describe the way in which society changes when technological and work-related advances are made. It also relates to the effectiveness of work in terms of production and overall benefit to society. Marx and Engels view the productive forces of capitalism as extremely strong, because the capitalist system brings about rapid advances in technology (like the steam engine or the telegraph). These forces increase in power until they eventually bring about a change—or the need for change—in the overall economic system. For Marx and Engels, communism is in part a result of the productive forces of capitalism, which through relentless (and profit-driven) technological development has enabled members of the **proletariat** to harness their collective power



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### CAPITALISM AND PROGRESS

Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* aims to do nothing less than direct humanity in how to be

better. It takes a sweeping look at historical development, arguing that some societal shifts were better than others; essentially, there is a “good” type of development and a “bad.” The manifesto specifically looks at changes in society linked to capitalism in order to determine which of these represent genuine progress—that is, which are good for humanity—and which push humanity in the wrong direction. Overall, the argument they make is a call to arms for progress that empowers the working classes (the proletariat) to have control over the way society is run.

In the first chapter, Marx and Engels set the context for communism by looking at the way society has developed thus far. They argue that capitalism, based on free market ideas, has been necessary to bring about certain elements of progress that, in turn, are needed to make communism possible. The authors believe that capitalism has swept away old ways of living, such as feudalism (in which, put simply, people worked for land rather than money). This is in part because there are really just two classes under a capitalist system: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, which has all the money and owns all the property.

Capitalism has further changed society because the bourgeoisie is driven by the desire for ever-increasing profit, meaning it’s constantly concerned with innovation—whether that be developing new machinery to create products, or tinkering with the system used for distributing those products. And because members of the bourgeoisie are in competition with each other, they must innovate—“progress”—or be left behind. Though it promises profit, however, the progress of capitalism carries two threats to the bourgeoisie: firstly, the increased efficiency of production (symbolized by the modern industrial factory) creates the conditions for the proletariat to exist as a formidable class of its own; whereas before the working class was fragmented, under capitalism its members are so numerous that their collective power increases. (While Marx and Engels were observing these processes in 1848, much of their analysis of capitalism can still be applied over 150 years later.) Secondly, the “constant revolutionising of production” puts both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie under the strain of “everlasting uncertainty and agitation”—in other words, it creates a society in which things are always changing. However, because the proletariat doesn’t have the means to survive any sudden crises as a result of these changes—it lacks the financial cushion of accumulated wealth that insulates the bourgeoisie from “uncertainty and agitation”—it’s at risk of impoverishment when things go wrong and workers lose their wages. The authors believe this means the proletariat is therefore likely to want to galvanize together and rise up against the bourgeoisie. So, while capitalism can be thanked for the creation of the proletariat and its collective power in the first place, capitalism’s insatiable thirst for progress in the name of profit is what will bring about its

downfall and the destruction of the bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels use examples from the past to highlight shortcomings of mid-19th century “progressive” industrialization—with remarkable accuracy for 21st-century life too. The manifesto argues that the capitalist system has made *everything* about profit, reducing everything to “a mere money relation.” It’s stripped certain professions of their previous dignity, turning “the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science” into “paid wage-labourers.” Marx and Engels believe these professions are just some of the examples of work that wasn’t previously governed by having to turn a profit for the ruling classes—they were respected in their own right as worthy pursuits for the general benefit of society at large. Even family life has been torn of its “sentimental veil.” Marx and Engels argue that necessity of survival has meant that families in the proletariat have had their ties “torn asunder,” and that children are often forced to work. The communist project, then, is largely concerned with restoring dignity to people.

Capitalism has encroached on life to such an extent that only its overthrow can bring about a better, more progressive society. Marx and Engels’ view of history is not easy to simplify, but essentially they believe that “change” and “progress” are not one and the same. It takes the empowerment of the proletariat to turn the former into the latter; otherwise, “change” is just the way that the bourgeoisie innovates in order to maintain the status quo.



## CLASS AND HIERARCHY

Marx and Engels’ mission is to revolutionize class and hierarchy. They see people as stratified into distinct categories fundamentally based on economics. Yet they see class not just as a way of categorizing people, but also as a force that *itself* shapes history. It is this force, they argue, rather than actions by individual “great men,” that defines the world. History, in turn, is inseparable from class struggle—and any chance of a more equal society depends on acknowledging this. According to the manifesto, every about an individual’s life is governed by economic class.

Marx and Engels argue that *all* history is the “history of class struggles.” These struggles used to be smaller as populations were lower and people were dispersed more widely. The authors provide numerous examples of these early conflicts, including those in Ancient Rome between patricians, knights, plebeians, and slaves. But all of these conflicts, including that between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, are essentially battles of an “oppressor” versus the “oppressed.” Class struggle, then, propels humanity. Even the bourgeoisie itself struggled against other dominant classes, such as the aristocracy, to win its sweeping dominance over society. Now, however, this dominance cements and deepens divisions between the capitalist class and the workers who maintain it—that is, the

industrial “army” of workers that constitutes the proletariat. They are oppressed by the bourgeoisie, which pays them just enough for them to survive and continue to generate products (and therefore profit) for their oppressors.

Marx and Engels go into great detail about how they see the bourgeoisie oppressing the proletariat. Because the bourgeoisie depends upon the competition of the market, it requires never-ending growth and innovation: “the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe,” the authors write, “It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” The bourgeoisie’s dominance of the social hierarchy, then, depends upon its ability to consistently revolutionize the “instruments of production”—that is, to make manufacturing and distribution processes as cheap and efficient as possible. That means driving down the cost of labor—in other words, the wages of the working class.

Furthermore, the bourgeoisie is the first class capable of bringing about overproduction (when more product is made than the market demands). This relentless expansion means that the capitalist system is exposed to risks—if it overproduces, the subsequent readjustment can lead to economic crises. (The 2008 credit crash is exactly the kind of crisis Marx and Engels had in mind.) Those most exposed to the fallout of crises are the members of the proletariat; without the wealth needed to ride out moments of crisis, they are exposed to unemployment, recession, and impoverishment. Capitalist society, Marx and Engels thus argue, both drives down quality of life and brings about economic crises, with graver consequences for the proletariat than the bourgeoisie—underscoring the authors’ point that people’s lives are inherently linked to their place within the social hierarchy.

Marx and Engels believe that only by abolishing the class hierarchy altogether will the proletariat be empowered and the collective lot of society be vastly improved. The sweeping dominance of the bourgeoisie class over the proletariat means that nothing less than a revolution can bring about progress. Crucially, by creating an “army” of industrial workers, the bourgeoisie unwittingly sows the seeds of its own destruction. When the proletariat realizes the power it holds by being so numerous, it will realize the unfairness of the capitalist system and mobilize to destroy the oppressive bourgeoisie. If the proletariat can successfully rise up, they will take control of society and no longer be oppressed—they “have nothing to lose but their **chains**.” Class and hierarchy, then, are inseparable from Marx and Engel’s argument for communism. In order to create a more just and equal society, the class system *itself* has to be destroyed by the collective uprising of the proletariat. With a communist system, the authors argue, resources will be more fairly distributed, and everyone will feel the benefits—otherwise the market will continue to lurch from one

crisis to another, disproportionately exposing those at the bottom of the hierarchy to the worst of these crises’ effects.



## INEQUALITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH

Marx and Engels see society dominated by the capitalist class—the bourgeoisie—as fundamentally unequal. To them, it is patently unfair that those at the top of society have so much more power and wealth than those at the bottom—especially given that the proletariat greatly outnumbers the bourgeoisie. That power and money give the bourgeoisie disproportionate control over society’s laws, social authorities, and media, allowing it to accumulate ever greater wealth and resources—in other words, the unequal distribution of wealth goes hand in hand with societal inequality. What’s more, because capitalists seek to maximize their profits, it would be contradictory for them to increase the proletariat’s share. In fact, say Marx and Engels, it is in the capitalist class’ interest to maximize *inequality*; by giving members of the proletariat only the bare minimum required for their survival and continuing labor, the bourgeoisie prevents the working class from accumulating any wealth of its own, making it impossible in turn for workers to acquire any genuine power or proper say in society. Addressing inequality fueled by wealth distribution, then, is one of the main motivations behind the manifesto.

Capitalism, in the authors’ view, amounts to exploitation. The bourgeoisie own what Marx and Engels call the “means of production.” In essence, this can be thought of everything—apart from the people—required to create things to sell. The means of production includes materials, facilities, and machinery needed to make sellable products. However, the means of production only become productive because of the work put in by the proletariat. The manifesto, then, argues that it’s the proletariat’s work and this work alone that generates wealth in society; the bourgeoisie effectively steal this profit from its rightful recipients, the proletariat. An example from Marx and Engel’s time would be workers using the machines in a factory to produce goods for the bourgeoisie to sell; a more contemporary example might be computers in an office used for services work. Because the bourgeoisie wants to increase its wealth and power, it would never pay the proletariat enough to own the means of production for itself. Furthermore, because the members of the bourgeoisie are in direct competition with one another, workers’ wages are kept at the optimum level to maximize profit.

Of course, inequality is not just about how much money people have relative to one another. It also hugely affects education, living standards, and general quality of life. The reason Marx and Engels are so preoccupied with *economic* inequality is that it skews the power structure of society, placing control in the hands of a wealthy few and disenfranchising the masses. They

see the modern government as fundamentally controlled by the bourgeoisie, giving them power over law, politics, and enforcement of order. As the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, the bourgeoisie's influence and control over society increase too. The bourgeoisie, then, moves to create a more centralized society that further favors profit-making: "Independent, or but loosely connected provinces, with separate interests, laws, governments and systems of taxation, became lumped together into one nation," the authors write, "with one government, one code of laws, one national class-interest, one frontier and one customs-tariff." It's not the *centralization* of power that Marx and Engels object to—in fact, they see centralization as necessary to the proletariat's revolution—but the way in this particular form of centralization fundamentally entrenches the unequal power dynamic by ensuring all the wealth filters up to the bourgeoisie ruling class.

Inequality, then, breeds inequality, becoming only further entrenched as the structure of society is increasingly made to favor the conditions that allow the bourgeoisie to increase their share of wealth. While others have argued that the bourgeoisie-proletariat relationship is a kind of mutually agreed upon contract, Marx and Engels maintain that members of the proletariat have *no choice* in accepting these conditions—they either accept the bourgeoisie's demands or face impoverishment. That's why the manifesto argues that the proletariat has to summon its collective power and overthrow the bourgeoisie; the capitalist class will never willingly make concessions to the proletariat in order to address inequality, and it therefore falls to the proletariat itself to take action through revolution.



## WORK

Marx and Engels view the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as engaged in two very different types of work. In fact, they don't really consider what the

bourgeoisie does as work at all, but as profiteering. It is members of the proletariat who do all the actual work in society, while the only "work" the bourgeoisie engages in is ensuring it maintains profit and power. Whereas previous models of work offered dignity and self-worth, the bourgeoisie has turned work into a transaction itself, in which the proletariat sells the one thing it has—labor power—to the bourgeoisie simply in order to survive. This fundamentally devalues work; under a capitalist system, work is just a commodity for sale like anything else. Under a communist system, however, Marx and Engels believe people will feel pride in their work and be rewarded fairly.

The bourgeoisie isn't interested in the proletariat's experience of work—it doesn't matter to them whether individuals enjoy their job or not, as long as the work gets done. To the bourgeoisie, labor power is something to be bought and sold just like any other product. According to Marx and Engels, members of the

proletariat have to sell their labor power—their work—in order to get by. As that's all they have to make enough money to survive, proletarians are turned into sellable commodities. This means the very nature of individuals' existence is devalued; they are means for work, not human beings. Further devaluing the proletariat is the fact that any value generated by this work belongs to the bourgeoisie. The workers of the proletariat only ever get paid what the bourgeoisie decides to pay them. Marx and Engels feel that workers need to take control of their own conditions and harness their own means of production; if they can, they will restore pride and dignity to work because they will no longer have to think of themselves as sellable commodities.

Not only does the bourgeoisie disregard the self-worth of the workers—it's in its interest to reduce the skill required for work to the minimum possible in order to maximize the potential amount of workers it can draw from society and to make individual members of the proletariat more disposable. The move towards Modern Industry as dominated by the bourgeoisie has made society less based on craft and artisanal skill. Once there were workshops with masters and apprentices in which skills were highly prized; now the capitalist class seeks to do away with these slower methods of manufacture. A lower skill level is advantageous for the capitalist class because it both widens the pool of available workers and, in doing so, devalues that work. The more people that can perform a given menial task the less the bourgeoisie needs to offer them to get the work done. Marx and Engels see a strong link between the bourgeoisie's efforts to revolutionize technology and the exploitation of the proletariat: "As the repulsiveness of the work increases, wage decreases," they write. "Nay more, in proportion as the use of machinery and division of labor increases, in the same proportion the burden of toil increases, whether by prolongation of working hours, by increase of the work extracted in a given time or by increased speed, etc." Not only does the wage get suppressed when the skill level is lowered, but the working conditions deteriorate too. Again, Marx and Engels feel that the proletariat doesn't need to put up with this—they have the real power because they are so much more numerous than the bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels ultimately want to change the very nature of work. In a communist society, they say, everyone who can work will do so, but it will be in order to serve the *communal* good of society. It will also reward everyone justly, and, most importantly, make work more dignified because it will be in the service of a good greater than mere profit. While some argue that the abolition of private property will make everyone in society lazy and remove the incentive to work, Marx and Engels counter that the majority of work done by the proletariat can never give them sufficient means to acquire property under capitalism either—the bourgeoisie makes sure it is so. In fact, it's the bourgeoisie who are genuinely lazy; they sit back and let

the proletariat do the work for them. By removing the profit motivation from work, Marx and Engels further believe that people will ultimately be able to share out the products of their work in a way that they can all agree is fair.

Most accounts of the 20th century, for example, tell the story of a general improvement in people's living conditions in capitalist countries. But, Marx and Engels would argue, this does not mean that they aren't still oppressed—they have no choice but to settle for their lives because they do not own their own means of production. In order to set its own terms for what work actually means to individuals, the proletariat must unite and seize control from the capitalist classes: "WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!"



## INTELLECTUAL SUPPRESSION VS. EMPOWERMENT

*The Communist Manifesto* isn't just a work of theory and history—it's very reason for existence is a call

to arms, intended to empower the proletariat with the intellectual motivation and means to overthrow the oppression of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels believe that the ruling classes of society are always the ones that set the agenda in terms of dominant ideas. Accordingly, their project is to make people see that society doesn't have to be governed by bourgeois ideology. The manifesto challenges the status quo on intellectual grounds by both showing that "the way things are" is not inevitable, but the result of bourgeois dominance, and by setting out the intellectual alternative.

The authors want their text to be of practical use. That's why, although it can be difficult to read in places, it is generally set out in simple and immediate terms. They see the manifesto as a tool to be used in the fight to overthrow capitalism. In order to empower the proletariat intellectually, they shine a light on the way the bourgeoisie seeks to suppress the proletariat through ideology.

In controlling society, the bourgeoisie also has great influence over the specific ideas encountered by the proletariat, through government, education, and the media. Meanwhile the division of labor—in which the proletariat is given ever more menial and repetitive tasks as "work"—further aids the bourgeoisie by reducing the level of education required to fulfill the requirements of their jobs. Through education and the media, the bourgeoisie can disseminate its own ideology and make it seem as if society's status quo is simply how things are *meant to be*. For example, Marx and Engels outline how the idea of "freedom" in bourgeois society has no greater meaning other than the freedom to trade. Communism can be critiqued as less "free" than capitalism because it does—or would—limit certain freedoms. But, say Marx and Engels, it's only bourgeois ideas of freedom (that is, the freedom to accumulate immense wealth at the expense of others) that communism would seek to limit. In

fact, say Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie only has one main governing intellectual idea: "capital." All relations have been reduced to money and property, in all contexts. By spelling out what they see as bourgeois ideology, Marx and Engels hope that the injustices of bourgeois society will become obvious to the proletariat, and therefore more likely to be revolted against. For Marx and Engels, then, one of the great tricks of the bourgeoisie is to suppress the class consciousness of the proletariat in order to prevent it from rising up against them. That's why they see it as the proletariat's own responsibility to "cast off the **chains**" of exploitation and inequality. This is at the very heart of the manifesto's project: to intellectually awaken the proletariat so that its members can see their own oppression by the bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels' attempt to awaken the proletariat consists of more than just a critique of capitalism. As the opening of the manifesto acknowledges, communism in 1848 is becoming a stronger force across Europe, and accordingly its ideas are under greater intellectual attack and misrepresentation. As such, the other way that the manifesto seeks to empower the proletariat is by answering external criticisms of communism and offering coherent ideas of what communism actually stands for. In their introduction, Marx and Engels specifically frame the manifesto as in part a response to unfair suspicions of communism. These, they say, represent an active attempt on behalf the bourgeoisie to prevent the rise of a challenge to capitalism. They then devote much of the "Proletarians and Communists" section to answering these attacks. For example, Marx and Engels say that they have been charged with wanting to abolish all property; they counter that the bourgeoisie system already abolishes property by preventing most of the population from having any. Marx and Engels only wish to abolish the *bourgeois* ability to accumulate more and more property at others' expense. Another important defense Marx and Engels make is against the idea that communism is anti-national and anti-culture. They say that industrialization is already making nations more and more similar, and that, again, the only culture they wish to do away with is specifically bourgeois.

Finally, Marx and Engels point out that the ruling ideas throughout history have been those belonging to the ruling class. These ruling classes portray their self-serving ideas as being logical, eternal truths; Marx and Engels argue that they are merely ways of manipulating society to maintain the dominance of the ruling class. Accordingly, for Marx and Engels, one of the most exciting prospects of the proletariat seizing power is that they will no longer be dominated by a ruling class' intellectual ideas. Everyone will be free from oppression and able to engage in the "free development of all." *The Communist Manifesto*, then, is both intended as an intellectual *and* a practical document. By presenting intellectual ideas to the proletariat—championing those of communism and criticizing

those of capitalism—the authors can empower the most oppressed in society both to see the conditions of their oppression and the ways in which they can fight back. That’s why, at the manifesto’s close, Marx and Engels end in capital letters and with an exclamation mark: “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” They intend their ideas to have tangible and practical use in inspiring and empowering the proletariat to take control of their lives.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## CHAINS

At the end of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels declare that the proletariat must free themselves of their “chains,” referring to the oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie under the capitalist system. The use of the word “chains” illustrates that the dominance of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat represents a form of enslavement. This aligns with the authors’ argument that, as the bourgeoisie owns everything in society, the only resource the proletariat has is its labor power, which it must sell to the bourgeoisie in exchange for a wage. With no wealth of their own, members of the proletariat depend upon this wage for mere survival, putting their lives completely at the mercy of the bourgeoisie. Chains, then, represent the restriction that the class system imposes on the majority of society; because the proletariat has no property or wealth of its own, the only thing it has to lose in bringing about revolution is its enslavement. Finally, one of the actual uses of chains is to restrict movement—Marx and Engels are thus implying that the metaphorical chains of the proletariat prevent its own movement out of oppression. Communism, argue Marx and Engels, represents the proletariat’s opportunity to cast off its chains and “win” the world.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *The Communist Manifesto* published in 2011.

### Introduction Quotes

●● A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.

**Related Characters:** Communists

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 61

### Explanation and Analysis

In these opening lines, Marx and Engels address what they see as the paranoia surrounding communism. Evidently, those in positions of power are afraid of communism and see it as a threat to their dominance of society. Marx and Engels don’t view communism as a “spectre” themselves; rather, they use the image to suggest that the fears are unfounded and based on fiction, just like ghosts. The quote sets up the manifesto as an effort to literally “flesh out” the concept of communism—to make it real and bring it to life. This also serves to suggest that communism itself is a force growing in power—if it wasn’t, those who currently have the power in society wouldn’t be trying to prevent its rise and misrepresent its ideas.

## I. Bourgeois and Proletarians Quotes

●● The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

**Related Characters:** Peasants, Aristocracy, Proletariat, Bourgeoisie, Communists

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 62-63

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote opens up the first full section of the manifesto and is a key representation of Marx and Engels thinking. Firstly, they view society as divided into different classes defined by people’s economic situation. Humanity is propelled by the conflicts between different classes, and each conflict either ends in the restructuring of society or in the destruction of both classes. Prior to capitalism, there were many different classes and conflicts—but all of them can be summed up as a battle between “oppressor” and

“oppressed.” To Marx and Engels, capitalism has simplified the class system, leaving only two main classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. However, the age-old struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed still exists. Marx and Engels argue that if the proletariat can overcome the bourgeoisie, it will be the final stage in the “history of class struggles”; it will be the first time in history the majority of the population has held power over society. To bring about such a situation is the goal of communism.

Modern Industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America has paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 64-65

### Explanation and Analysis

Marx and Engels spend much of the first chapter outlining the historical development of capitalism and the bourgeoisie class. This passage gives a sense of the incredibly fast-paced world development brought about by capitalism, and to its list of innovations could now be added things like air travel, contemporary financial systems, and computing. Marx and Engels’ overall point here is to show that technological innovation and global expansion have gone hand in hand with the growing power of the bourgeoisie, and that they each enable each other. With ever-increasing wealth, the bourgeoisie is able to exert an ever-greater hold on society and change it in ways that reinforces bourgeois dominance. In 1848, Marx and Engels were primarily thinking of the Industrial Revolution, but the trends they highlight have only increased in momentum since the manifesto’s publication.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

Continuing their historical analyses of the rise of the bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels argue that capitalism has reduced everything to being about money. It’s been relentless in doing so, tearing down the old ways of society (including former modes of oppression). Particularly interesting is how unimportant the authors view religion to be. For Marx and Engels, religion was just a veil for exploitation, and capitalism has removed that veil. This a reminder that, according to the authors, nothing defines an individual’s life as much as their economic class position. The exploitative design of society, in which a small minority holds a majority of the resources, is now evident for all to see.

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

Following on from their statement that the bourgeoisie has reduced all relations to money, Marx and Engels point out that this has changed the nature of work in society.

Capitalism has flattened out the “point” of work—it’s all in service to profit. The professions listed are linked by their previous idealism: the lawyer is meant to bring about justice, the priest is a link between humanity and God, the poet holds a mirror up to the world, and the scientist teaches humanity about the way the world works. Now, however, these are no longer the overall purposes of these dignified professions. Even if the work looks and feels the same, its only end goal in bourgeois capitalist society is profit.

☞ The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society [...] Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones [...] All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 67

### Explanation and Analysis

One of the defining features of capitalism is that it is inherently competitive, with different members of the bourgeoisie competing against one another for market dominance. This means that competitive advantage is gained when the way of making a product (or distributing it) is made faster, cheaper, and generally more efficient. Specifically, Marx and Engels are talking about the means of production, which can generally be thought as everything required to make and distribute commodities other than the actual labor, such as machinery, tools, and factories. This makes society fundamentally unstable—nothing stays the same for very long. As the authors discuss later in the manifesto, this makes the capitalist system particularly prone to crises, disproportionately putting the livelihoods of the proletariat at risk (rather than the bourgeoisie themselves). The “all that is solid melts into air” is a quote from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, meaning that what may appear to be certain and stable is actually thinly veiled chaos.

☞ The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into its midst, *i.e.*, to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 68-69

### Explanation and Analysis

Continuing their analysis of capitalism’s rise to dominance, Marx and Engels argue that commodities are not as innocent as they might seem to the average consumer. In fact, they constitute a form of weaponry used by the bourgeoisie in a kind of hidden warfare that nations have no defense against. Nations are defenseless because this isn’t a war they can fight with a military response—commodities do the work of the bourgeoisie by appealing directly to people’s desires, making them want products that previously they didn’t even realize they wanted. This forces nations into a choice between three options: either allow for the internal growth of their own bourgeoisie, risk the dominance of an external bourgeoisie from other countries, or be economically left behind altogether.

☞ Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.

**Related Characters:** Proletariat, Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 70

### Explanation and Analysis

Marx and Engels view no end to industrial growth under the bourgeois capitalist system. They argue that it has reached such strength of momentum that it is becoming impossible to control, making it more likely that unleashed “powers” could have serious negative impacts on the world. This passage also gives the sense that capitalist transformation

has been a kind of magic, which nobody would have imagined possible under previous economic systems. Specifically, they link the idea of magic—or fantasy and fiction—with the role money occupies in modern industrial society. Money, which is the “exchange” Marx and Engel refer to, represents a kind of conjuring trick that allows the bourgeoisie to accumulate wealth and power disproportionate to the work that they do. The creation of products and thereby value comes from the proletariat’s labor; by a similar magic trick, the bourgeoisie makes this value disappear right in front of the proletariat’s eyes.

☞ In these crises there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity—the epidemic of overproduction. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilization, too much commerce.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 71

### Explanation and Analysis

Marx and Engels offer further critique of the dangers of capitalism. The sheer size and power of the capitalist system puts society at risk of crises. They point out that capitalism is the only economic system that has resulted in the bizarre problem of overproduction. When too much of a particular commodity, or group of commodities, is produced, these commodities are potentially devalued, causing a serious domino effect throughout the economy. Because of the inherent inequality folded into capitalism, members of the proletariat are disproportionately exposed to the fallout of such crises because they depend upon the bourgeoisie for wages. The bourgeoisie itself is not exposed to these crises other than that it will temporarily have to rein its capitalist growth—meaning job losses for the proletariat and, accordingly, possible destitution and impoverishment. When Marx and Engels say there is too much “civilization,” they are referring to the specific changes brought about by bourgeois capitalist system in the name of “civilizing” the world.

☞ The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called in to existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletariat.

**Related Characters:** Proletariat, Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 72

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Marx and Engels expand on their view that capitalism contains the elements needed to bring about its own destruction. The bourgeoisie did away with the feudalist system by its ability to innovate and expand, and in doing so brought about an immense growth to society in general. That growth applies to communication and transport technologies *and* to the general reach of the capitalist system, driven by the never-ending search for greater profits. This has simplified the class system into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—the oppressor and the oppressed. By virtue of this simplification and advances in technology, the proletariat will grow in size and become better organized as time goes on. Eventually, if Marx and Engels are correct, the proletariat will realize its collective power is stronger than the bourgeoisie’s and revolt against the status quo.

☞ Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrialist capitalist. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. As privates of the individual army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.

**Related Characters:** Artisans, Proletariat, Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 73

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage offers further explanation as to the way in which the bourgeoisie unwittingly empowers the proletariat, and gives a general sense of poor working conditions during industrialization. The military imagery deliberately conjures the sense of the proletariat's potential collective power, but equally applies to the rigid and unrewarding working lives of those the bourgeoisie employs. In fact, such is the bourgeoisie's dominance that it has forced parts of the proletariat to willingly oppress others in exchange for their wage—these are the “officers” and “sergeants” Marx and Engels refer to. This also speaks to the specific kind of labor that became much more widespread during industrialization: factory work consisting of dull, repetitive, and menial tasks. As a result of the division of labor, the rhythms of a factory become like the rhythms of a military march, strict and disciplined, designed to promote loyalty and obedience to authority. Marx and Engels, then, are arguing for a kind of coup, in which the “military” might of the proletariat is turned against the oppressive bourgeoisie. On that note, it's worth acknowledging here that Marx and Engels condone the violent overthrow of the status quo if other means are not effective.

second stage is the overthrow of the bourgeois, which Marx and Engels later admit may have to be accomplished by “forceful” means, mostly because the bourgeoisie would never agree to societal changes that threaten its dominance. The third step is for the proletariat—the masses—to seize this political power.

☝ You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths.

**Related Characters:** Communists, Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

This is a common response to criticism throughout this section. In general, Marx and Engels say that anything they are accused of wanting “do away with” is specifically bourgeois. The authors claim they don't want to get rid of private property altogether, but the type of private property that allows the bourgeoisie to accumulate such immense wealth and power that they can oppress the proletariat. In this passage, they also make the point that most members of the proletariat can't afford to accumulate private property anyway, meaning that private property is already as good as abolished for most people. In general, they are saying that they don't wish to diminish society's collective resources, but to prevent those collective resources from being distributed unequally.

## II. Proletarians and Communists Quotes

☝ The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.

**Related Characters:** Communists, Proletariat, Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 82

### Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Marx and Engels set out the specific ways they envision communism furthering the proletariat cause. They also answer specific criticisms of communism leveled at them by external forces. There are three stages to their proposed revolution. Firstly, the proletariat needs to realize its collective power. This means they need to be empowered intellectually in order to recognize the injustices of their economic position, and be brought together across different nations into one great mass of strength. The

☝ All objections urged against the Communistic mode of producing and appropriating material products, have, in the same way, been urged against the Communistic modes of producing and appropriating intellectual products. Just as, to the bourgeois, the disappearance of class property is the disappearance of production itself, so the disappearance of class culture is to him identical with the disappearance of all culture. That culture, the loss of which he laments, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training act as a machine.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie, Communists

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 86

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Marx and Engels apply their overall defense against external criticism to intellectual matters. This sets out that a significant part of the communist battle against the bourgeoisie takes place on an intellectual battleground. The communists have to fight the ideology of the bourgeoisie, which has the upper hand in being able to disseminate its ideas through education, politics, and religion. Marx and Engels view these ideas of the bourgeoisie as deliberately designed to suppress the proletariat intellectually and prevent its members from realizing its collective strength.

Marx and Engels also address the issue of “culture,” setting out the accusation that culture in a bourgeois society only serves to disorientate and distract the proletariat from its oppression. Communism, then, won’t do away with culture, but specifically disarm the bourgeoisie’s ability to use culture as a means of suppression. The other important point here is that Marx and Engels believe the proletariat’s rise to power will also represent the end of “class culture.” That is, the proletariat’s empowerment is the final stage in the “history of class antagonisms” outlined at the beginning of the manifesto. According to the authors, communism will be the last stage of class struggle because it will be the first revolution to empower the *majority* of society, removing the need for further class conflict by creating a fairer world.

☛ The charges against Communism made from a religious, a philosophical, and, generally, from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination.

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?

What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is change? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.

**Related Characters:** Communists

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 90

### Explanation and Analysis

Marx and Engels believe communism to be an objective way to bring about fairness in society—they don’t see it as theory or philosophy, nor do they feel any need to address religion in the manifesto. The authors see these types of objections to communism as mere expression of the bourgeois capitalist system, unsurprising in their logic because they are coming from a perspective that sees capitalism as the only effective world system. This also neatly summarizes Marx and Engels worldview that they began to explain earlier on in the manifesto: everything about people’s lives is defined by their economic situation. Individuals’ ideas and beliefs are mere symptoms of the class position they find themselves in. Furthermore, those ideas are governed by the ruling class, which makes ideology sympathetic to its dominant position seem like logical, common sense. However, this is intended to prevent the oppressed in society from questioning the terms of their oppression.

☛ The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, *i.e.*, of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production.

**Related Characters:** Bourgeoisie, Proletariat

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of this section of the manifesto, Marx and Engels begin to outline the practical steps needed to bring about the proletariat revolution. They show that seizing the instruments of production—that is, the tools, machinery, and infrastructure owned by the bourgeoisie—is vital to placing the proletariat into a position of power. Ironically, they argue for centralization even though this was one of their criticisms of bourgeois capitalist society. They want a

specific kind of centralization that is done by and for the proletariat, but it's difficult to see how this would be practically implemented effectively. If, as Marx and Engels claim, the proletariat represents such a large majority of the world's population, it's arguably naïve to think that it can act with simplicity and unity when it comes to the quite specific issues involved with the way a government is run.

This passage is also important in that it explicitly states that, as the old order is overturned, society will appear to get worse before it gets better, bringing about "measures" that will seem economically counterproductive. This is especially interesting because, according to Marx and Engels' logic, communism requires an almost religious leap of faith, with which people in society are expected to put up with a worsening of conditions as a necessary stage to a better future. This places a considerable psychological burden on the people and makes it difficult to address anything that might not be going to plan—all negative effects following the implementation of communism can be dismissed as part of the necessary readjustments of society.

### III. Socialist and Communist Literature Quotes

☛ A part of the bourgeoisie is desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society.

To this section belong economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organizers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, hole-and-corner reformers of every imaginable kind.

**Related Characters:** Proletariat, Bourgeoisie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 103

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this section of the book, Marx and Engels survey different viewpoints that might be said to have similar substance to communism. In this quote, they are talking about a specifically bourgeois form of socialism. "Bourgeois socialism" might sound like a kind of contradiction, and to Marx and Engels, it is. It's a fundamentally dishonest attempt by the bourgeoisie to address the symptoms of their dominance over the proletariat by providing help to

the poorest in society. This is accompanied by bourgeois moralizing, necessarily founded on the wider bourgeois ideology and belief in the capitalist system. So while "improvers of the condition of the working class" appear to be doing a good service for society, Marx and Engels believe that they are simply trying to dampen any desire in the proletariat for revolution. If the proletariat sees the bourgeoisie trying to offer assistance, it will cease to think of the bourgeoisie as the enemy and instead view its oppression as nothing more than the unfortunate way the world happens to work.

### IV. Position of the Communists... Quotes

☛ Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

**Related Characters:** Proletariat, Bourgeoisie, Communists

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 111

#### Explanation and Analysis

These famous closing words of the manifesto remind the reader that this isn't intended to be a work of theory or academia—the authors want their words to be a call to arms. The evocative image of the chains suggests that proletarians are in a position of enslavement, and that the only thing they have to lose in revolution is this oppressed condition. Of course, following Marx and Engels' earlier logic, members of the proletariat are in a precarious position given that they depend on the bourgeoisie for their very survival (through wage-labor). That's why the revolution depends upon the widespread unity of the working class—in a word, solidarity. If they realize their collective power and reject the bourgeoisie in unison, the bourgeoisie will lose any ability to make profit and, in turn, to hold onto its dominant position. The imperative tone, the capital letters, the exclamation mark—all of these are meant to inspire the reader to put the book down and take up the revolutionary cause.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Marx and Engels, the European powers are scared of the “spectre” of communism; the term is used to tarnish parties that seek to challenge those in power.

Marx and Engels believe that this fear of communism makes two things clear: firstly, that communism is already a growing power. Secondly, it is time for the communists of various nationalities to explain, in the following manifesto, what they actually believe.

*Marx and Engels view communism as unfairly feared and mischaracterized by those in power. One of the manifesto’s main aims is to fight back against this misrepresentation.*



*The manifesto is not a technical, academic text; it’s meant to be readable for the general public. Furthermore, it’s supposed to empower the public by telling them what communism actually is—and show them just why communism is growing (and why it should continue to do so).*



## I. BOURGEOIS AND PROLETARIANS

Marx and Engels open with the claim that all history of society is the “history of class struggles.” They sketch out struggles between “oppressor and oppressed” that have taken place through the ages. Sometimes the fight is hidden, and sometimes it’s out in the open. These conflicts always ended either in the restructuring of society or the “common ruin” of the fighting classes.

The modern bourgeois society has grown from the old feudal system, simplifying class in the process. Whereas before there were several gradations of class (for instance, in Ancient Rome with “patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves”), society is becoming increasingly split into two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Marx and Engels trace the historical development of the bourgeoisie. It begins with the Middle Ages with the burgesses, a group of people with local political power, before picking up speed during the Age of Discovery. The discovery of America and the ventures into Africa, East India and China brought increased trade and hastened rapid development in commerce, navigation, and industry.

*This passage shows two crucial elements of Marx and Engel’s thinking. Firstly, that people in society can be neatly divided into class according to their economic circumstances. Secondly, that this has always been the case, and all history reflects the antagonism between the oppressor class and the oppressed class.*



*Each society has its own specific economic structure, but the overall battle is always between the oppressor and the oppressed. Whereas before these battles might have been more complex and less overt, the particular success of the bourgeoisie has brought about a simplification of class. Because the bourgeois are so dominant, they have extinguished every class in their path—all except for the proletariat, which grows larger the more people the bourgeoisie oppresses.*



*The bourgeoisie’s expansion is directly linked to the widening of trade networks and an increased global market. When business was a more local activity, the class systems were more nuanced, varying from area to area. Increased trade, too, developed financial, communication, and transport infrastructure in order to facilitate easier and bigger profits.*



Following this increased trade, the manufacturing system replaced the old feudal system of industry governed by guilds. The division of work into different guilds turned into the division of different tasks within a single workshop.

As markets grew with increasing demand, “Modern Industry” replaced the manufacturing system. Marx and Engels liken modern industry to a giant, and argue that it brought into existence the modern bourgeois—replacing the “industrial middle class” with “industrial millionaires,” who are like “leaders of whole industrial armies.” This modern industry established the global market.

With each step in the development of the working class came a political development to match. Over time, the bourgeoisie has attained political dominance through the modern government, which, Marx and Engels say, is set up to serve the bourgeoisie’s interests.

Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeoisie has reduced all relations between “man and man” to “naked self-interest” and money. Free trade has come to dominate society and has made exploitation more open and “shameless,” whereas before it might have been veiled by religion and political “illusions.”

The bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels claim, has removed the dignity from work. Even physicians, lawyers, priests and poets are just “paid wage-labourers” now. Family, too, has lost its sentimental value and become another money-based relationship.

*The point Marx and Engels are making is that new systems come about whenever the productive forces become too strong for the status quo. In this instance, greater and wider demand for products led from a more artisanal, local type of work to the manufacturing system, in which production is divided into smaller and more menial tasks.*



*Marx and Engels are referring to the Industrial Revolution, which saw the rise of machination and factories take production to unprecedented levels. The bourgeoisie developed alongside industrialization—as industry became more like a “giant,” the group of people keeping most of the profit grew smaller. This shift also created the modern working class—the majority of the population that has no choice but to work for the bourgeois.*



*Government is not a separate entity from the bourgeoisie—it’s one of the ways they exert power over society. This gives them the power to ensure all aspects of society further their aims, through the use of law, education, and authority (for example, the police).*



*Marx and Engels are generally dismissive of religion, deeming it nothing more than a “veil” that hides the exploitation between oppressor and oppressed. Now that the bourgeoisie is the dominant class in society, this “veil” has been lifted, and nothing is important except for money. This applies both to the bourgeoisie, who seek to accumulate ever-increasing wealth, and the proletariat, whose oppressed position means they have sell their labor in order to make enough money to survive.*



*Work is no longer meaningful except in terms of its profitability. Even science, for example, is only useful insofar as its innovations can further the bourgeoisie’s profiteering. By reducing all relations to “self-interest and money,” the bourgeoisie has removed the meaning from work—and, by extension, people’s lives.*



The bourgeoisie has to constantly revolutionize the “instruments of production” in order to maintain its dominance. But in doing so, it changes everything about society too. Marx and Engels suggest that this keeps society in a constant state of “uncertainty and agitation.” And the need for a constantly expanding market means the bourgeoisie spreads over the whole surface of the globe.

*In order to keep making profit, the bourgeoisie has to look for ways to do things bigger, better and faster. The instruments of production—things like tools, factories and infrastructure—are in a constant process of renewal. The bourgeoisie capitalist system is based on competition, and even the slightest improvement can give one business the edge over another. Competition also drives the bourgeoisie to conquer markets far and wide, both to maximize profit and to prevent any competitive advantage for someone else.*



This global expansion destroys “national industries,” and has meant that nations no longer use their own materials but instead draw them from the “remotest zones.” The bourgeoisie’s products have spread all over the world and created “new wants” that can no longer be satisfied by what is contained within a given nation. Instead, there is a move towards “universal inter-dependence of nation,” both with materials and intellectual creations.

*Instead of individual nations with individual cultures and systems, the bourgeoisie makes this individuality increasingly meaningless and impossible. This creates a precarious connection between nations, with one depending on another for a given material. Here, capitalism is also explicitly linked with desire—it’s changed the way people see themselves, and made them long for bourgeois products.*



Furthermore, this expansion means all nations get drawn into “civilization”—on the bourgeoisie’s terms. The cheapness of bourgeois goods makes them irresistible; Marx and Engels liken these “commodities” to “heavy artillery,” forcing nations to comply or face extinction—become bourgeois, or cease to exist.

*Marx and Engels use the word “civilization” lightly. They don’t necessarily think capitalism is more civilized, but that it presents itself in that way in order to make its dominance seem logical and inevitable. Because the bourgeoisie is so good at bringing down the costs of its desirable goods, nations face the choice of joining the system or being excluded. Part of the bourgeoisie’s skill is to make exclusion seem like a terrible fate.*



Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeoisie has brought about greater urbanization and an increase in population. This has meant a shift in society towards cities rather than the countryside. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, it’s almost made less “civilized” nations dependent on the bourgeois nations.

*The industrialization brought about by the bourgeoisie concentrates jobs in urban environments, where the factories are built. This leads to a move away from agricultural society to an industrial one dependent on larger and larger cities. The inequality doesn’t just play out on a city/country level—it plays out across different countries too. The more “successfully” bourgeois nations dominate those that are yet to catch up, entrenching inequality around the world.*



Marx and Engels point towards the bourgeoisie's revolutionary "productive forces." These range from the "application of chemistry to industry and agriculture" to technological advancements in transport and communications.

*The bourgeoisie doesn't do away with agriculture—in fact, it doesn't do with anything that can help turn a profit. Instead, it takes something like agriculture, which used to be a way of life, and makes profit its sole purpose. Agriculture will continue to grow as long as there is more profit to generate—whether or not that's at the expense of land, animal, or human welfare. Capitalism is undoubtedly productive, but Marx and Engels fundamentally disagree with its motives.*



Bourgeois society had its foundations in feudal society, in terms of the means of production and exchange. At some stage, say Marx and Engels, the feudal way of doing things—especially in relation to property—became restrictive. The feudal system's fetters had to be "burst asunder."

*This passage restates that Marx and Engels see history as a series of class struggles. The bourgeoisie grew out of feudal society—or outgrew feudal society, to be more accurate.*



In place of the restrictions of the feudal system came free market competition, bringing its own social political changes to match. Marx and Engels believe that a similar process of change is starting to bear down on the bourgeoisie itself—its gigantic means of production and of money-based exchange have grown beyond its control, like a "sorcerer no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."

*The bourgeoisie has become too successful for its own good, and it has laid the foundations for its own destruction. Capitalist bourgeois society is likened to a magician because, seemingly out of nowhere, it has completely changed the world in a way that has never been seen before.*



Marx and Engels argue that the capitalist system periodically brings about a state of crisis, threatening the very existence of the bourgeoisie itself. To them, these crises often have the absurd effect of "overproduction," and push society back into a state of "barbarism" and "devastation." In capitalist society, there is too much so-called "civilization," "industry" and "commerce."

*Capitalism is inherently unstable because of its size and the interconnectedness of its different elements; it's so complex that, when things go wrong, things go very wrong. Furthermore, it's the first system that's ever had the problem of "overproducing," or making too much. When goods are overproduced, they become devalued, catastrophically affecting the whole system involved in their creation and distribution. Those most affected by these crises are those at the bottom of the economic class system—the bourgeoisie are better protected because of their wealth.*



According to Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie copes with these crises by destroying society's "productive forces," seeking new markets, and by further exploiting existing markets. This approach only leads to more and worse crises in the long run.

*Bourgeoisie solutions to crises only make these catastrophes more likely in the long run. Marx and Engels feel that the capitalist model is fatally flawed.*



However, according to Marx and Engels, change is coming. Those same “weapons” that the bourgeoisie used to defeat feudalism are now being turned against the bourgeoisie itself. The bourgeoisie has unwittingly brought into existence the class that will wield those weapons: the proletariat.

The size of the proletariat increases in proportion to the expansion of capitalism. The modern working class needs work to survive, and it can only find said work if it increases the bourgeoisie’s profits. Laborers, then, become like a commodity themselves, exposed to all the risks of competition and changes in the market.

The use of machinery and the division of labor into smaller task have spoiled the “individual character” of work—there’s no “charm” left for the workmen, as the worker is just a part of the machine. As the work becomes less skilled and less enjoyable, the bourgeoisie drives wages down, paying the proletariat just enough for them to survive. That work becomes more arduous, repetitive, and time-pressured.

To Marx and Engels, the nature of work for the proletariat in the capitalist system means more and more people are crammed into factories, “organized like soldiers.” They are “slaves” to the machines, to the factory overseers and, ultimately, to the bourgeoisie. The driving down of skill level has meant differences of age and sex no longer mean anything—women and children are put to work in the factories too.

The capitalist system draws more and more people into the proletariat. People more generally thought of as middle- rather than working-class get pulled down, partly because they can’t compete with the bourgeoisie and also because their specialized skills are rendered worthless by the bourgeoisie’s innovation of methods of production. The proletariat, then, doesn’t come exclusively from the working class.

Another crucial element of Marx and Engels’ argument emerges: the success of the bourgeoisie has brought about the existence of the proletariat. The proletariat can loosely defined as “working-class,” but more broadly it includes anyone who is oppressed by the bourgeoisie (and so might include people more traditionally thought of as middle class). According to Marx and Engels, this new proletariat class will bring about the destruction of the bourgeoisie.



In a capitalist system, the proletariat only has one asset: its labor. Members of the proletariat have to sell their labor to the bourgeoisie in exchange for a wage—this is their only means of survival in a capitalist system. These workers, then, become like products themselves—they are sellable commodities first, human beings second.



The bourgeoisie has systematically devalued work, making a wage packet its sole aim. Marx and Engels think work should be about more than money—it should enrich individuals in a spiritual rather than financial way and foster a sense of community. The bourgeoisie has streamlined work, breaking it into a series of smaller, low-skilled tasks. This makes the work boring, but serves the bourgeoisie by widening the pool of laborers to choose from (if a task is easy, then more people can perform it).



Marx and Engels’ military metaphor here suggests their belief that the proletariat can become a revolutionary force if properly organized. This, ultimately, will be the fault of the bourgeoisie—by cramming people into factories, they unwittingly give the people the opportunity to form a powerful mass. The other point here is that the industrialization, lack of empathy and driving down of skills built into the capitalist system bring about a rise in child labor.



Capitalism flattens the class system, reducing it to the ultimate conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Anyone not in the bourgeoisie is at risk of falling into the proletariat if bourgeois innovations can render their skills meaningless. The proletariat, then, encompasses anyone who depends upon selling their labor to the bourgeoisie in exchange for a wage.



Marx and Engels state that the proletariat has occasionally fought back against the bourgeoisie, but such instances are generally confined to local disputes. These rebels might attack their own “instruments of production”—by angrily destroying factory machinery, for example—but haven’t yet sought to overthrow the entire system that enslaves them.

*The proletariat exacts revenge by targeting the most immediately available representation of their suppression—the machinery. By destroying machinery, they destroy the bourgeois-owned “instruments of production” that facilitate the proletariat’s oppression. However, because these are local incidents, the bourgeoisie can handle them easily (by replacing anything that’s broken and firing rebellious workers). In order to truly fight back, the proletariat needs to become more aware of the actual system that enslaves them, and attack that, rather than attacking its symptoms.*



Where the proletariat has been grouped together into greater number, it is usually on the orders of the bourgeoisie to help the latter achieve its own political aims. The bourgeoisie maintains control, even when it comes to acts of rebellion.

*Ironically, the bourgeoisie is aware of the proletariat’s strength in numbers but has managed to use it to their advantage to further their own power. It’s this power over the workers that allows the bourgeoisie to coerce them into supporting bourgeois aims. Marx and Engels want that people power to be detached from the bourgeoisie’s exploitation.*



Crucially, say Marx and Engels, the proletariat is growing larger and larger and will gradually begin to feel its collective strength. The localized struggles between individual members of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are looking more like direct representations of a wider class struggle. As conditions for the workers get worse in terms of pay, job security, and self-worth, they are getting better organized and grouping into trade unions.

*Unions help to empower the proletariat by giving them a collective voice. Ultimately, Marx and Engels are arguing for a union across all trades and nations in the form of communism. Because the bourgeoisie cannot produce anything without the collective efforts of the proletariat, the threat to withhold this collective labor allows the proletariat to redress the imbalance of power.*



Marx and Engels point out that advances in the means of communications and transport, brought about by bourgeois innovation, help the proletariat to be better organized, allowing workers from different places to galvanize together.

*Here, Marx and Engels present further evidence that the increasing network of the bourgeoisie has the unintended consequence of simplifying proletariat organization.*



Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie is still fighting battles with other elements of society. These are the aristocracy, portions of the bourgeoisie that go against the idea of “progress,” and the bourgeoisie of rival countries. In fighting these battles, the bourgeoisie try to enlist the support of the proletariat; however, by empowering the proletariat with political and general education, they are actually providing the weapons that the proletariat will eventually use to overthrow them.

*Members of the bourgeoisie try to use politics and education to make the proletariat loyal to them. They play a dangerous game, because in improving the intellectual understanding of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie also make an uprising more likely. Marx and Engels believe that the proletariat will become wise to its oppression and refuse to maintain the status quo.*



The proletariat pulls small numbers of the bourgeoisie's members into its orbit—those who feel they have a great comprehension of historical movements and want to be part of the “class that holds the future in its hand.” The proletariat attracts conservative elements of the middle class who want to protect their old ways of existence. It also attracts what Marx and Engels call the “dangerous class”—those already rejected by society.

The proletariat's conditions mean its members have skewed family relations, no property, and no “trace of national character.” In the proletariat's eyes, “Law, morality, [and] religion” are infected with bourgeois prejudices and are beholden to bourgeois interests.

Since the proletariat has nothing of its own, it must destroy all “previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.” Marx and Engels see the potential uprising of the proletariat as the first movement of a majority, and believe that each nation's proletariat must individual “settle matters” with its own bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels argue that if the proletariat doesn't resist its conditions, its members will continue to grow poorer as the bourgeoisie get richer. Because the bourgeoisie can't be relied upon to provide the proletariat with a decent existence, society has to change completely. The bourgeoisie's existence is no longer “compatible” with society.

*Marx and Engels expand on their idea of the proletariat. Though it is still mainly comprised of the working class, others fall into it too. According to Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie that want to join the proletariat are disingenuous—true members of the proletariat have no say over their class position. Marx and Engels also distrust the “conservative” middle class that fears change brought about by both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—these people just want society to stay the same, and so they are not revolutionary.*



*For Marx and Engels, nothing about the way society is run favors the proletariat. That's why they are so dismissive of conventional standards of law, morality, and religion—they see these three as being both distractions and tools of oppression used by the bourgeoisie. For example, if a member of the proletariat wanted to sue his or her boss for poor working conditions, the law would always be on the bourgeois' side, because it's written, adjudged and enforced by them.*



*Another key element of Marx and Engels' argument emerges: because the proletariat is denied any private property, the system that allows for private property has to be destroyed. Private property—meaning anything that one person can claim as their own, be it money, land, or anything else—produces inequality that is fundamentally unfair to the majority of society. Another important point to acknowledge here is that Marx and Engels believe that the rise of the proletariat represents the final and ultimate class struggle. Because it is the uprising of the majority—not a privileged few—it will result in a fairer, equal society, removing the need for class antagonism.*



*Unless the proletariat rises up, inequality will only become more entrenched over time. To Marx and Engels, there is no compromise—the only solution is the destruction of the bourgeoisie. Crucially, they never really spell out what should happen with those people already members of the bourgeoisie—presumably they become part of the proletariat too.*



Because the bourgeoisie has exploited so many workers, it has laid the foundations of its own destruction. It has become, in Marx and Engel's phrase, "its own grave-digger." Marx and Engels see the downfall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat as inevitable.

*This passage sums up what Marx and Engels have been arguing in this chapter: the bourgeoisie, by creating the proletariat class, has mistakenly put in place the forces that will bring about its own destruction. Once the proletariat takes charge of its collective power, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie is inevitable.*



## II. PROLETARIANS AND COMMUNISTS

Marx and Engels explain that the purpose of communism is to support the proletariat. The Communist political party differs from other working-class parties only in that it seeks to unify proletarians of different countries independent of nationality, concentrating on the movement "as a whole."

*Marx and Engels shift to talking about the specific relationship they foresee between communism and the proletariat. Communism seeks to take advantage of the increased connections between different nations (brought about by bourgeois advancements) to galvanize proletariats from around the world into a single, powerful force.*



The chief goals of communism are the "formation of the proletariat into a class," the overthrow of the bourgeoisie's supremacy, and the political empowerment of the proletariat. Communism, according to Marx and Engels, is not based on invented ideas or principles; it merely describes the factual class struggle going on in society.

*Marx and Engels are essentially arguing that what is presented in the manifesto is based on objective, rather than subjective, reality.*



Marx and Engels call for the "abolition of private property." They explain that they are not against property generally, but are opposed to "bourgeois property," characterized as "the exploitation of the many by the few."

*Marx and Engels consider the crux of their argument to be about fairness—how can it be fair, they ask, that a minority of the population holds the majority of the wealth and power? Marx and Engels aren't saying that people won't be allowed to own anything in a communist society, but that resources will be distributed more evenly.*



Marx and Engels defend communism against accusations that it wants to stop people acquiring property through their own labor. They say that the bourgeoisie have themselves already destroyed old forms of property, like those of peasants or artisans.

*To further emphasize the previous point, Marx and Engels argue that private property rights have already been abolished for the majority of people. Previous working classes did have some private property (for example, peasants often owned a small amount of land on which to farm their own food).*



Modern industry, claim Marx and Engels, doesn't create any property for the laborer. Their work generates "capital," which only enables further oppression by the bourgeoisie.

*Workers don't own the products they make or earn the money generated by their sale. The money accumulates in the hands of the wealthy bourgeoisie, only increasing their power and, accordingly, their ability to keep the proletariat oppressed.*



Breaking down bourgeois capitalism doesn't mean an end to property, but an end to property used for exploitation. Capital is generated by the proletariat, yet it does not become their property. Marx and Engels say communism simply wants to address this inequality; in communist society, accumulated labor will "widen, enrich and promote" the existence of the workers.

The bourgeoisie paint communism as the "abolition of individuality and freedom," but Marx and Engels counter that it is only the abolition of *bourgeois* individuality and freedom. To the bourgeoisie, "freedom" means only the freedom to buy and sell—free trade.

In society as it already exists, private property is already done away with for most of the population. It's only because those people don't have any private property that the bourgeoisie is allowed to accumulate so much. The bourgeoisie, then, is hypocritical in criticizing the abolition of private property—it already imposes the non-existence of any property for the majority of society.

Communism, to Marx and Engels, is not about depriving anyone of the "power to appropriate the products of society"; instead, communism is about preventing people from using that power to exploit others.

Marx and Engels' critics argue that the abolition of private property will make everyone in society lazy. Marx and Engels counter that the bourgeoisie is lazy and gets unfairly rewarded.

Another criticism Marx and Engels hear about communism is that it will destroy all intellectual products and class culture. To them, however, communism only seeks to destroy specifically bourgeois intellectual notions of "freedom, culture and law." Furthermore, communism only wants to abolish hierarchical class culture, not all culture generally.

*Marx and Engels want work to be a positive force in society, not just a means of generating profit and entrenching inequality. In a capitalist society, work is a necessity for survival for the proletariat, but work doesn't serve them beyond mere survival. Marx and Engels want workers to have ownership over both the products of their work and the nature of that work itself.*



*Marx and Engels imply that the ruling class in society has power over the meaning of concepts and words. "Freedom" to communism and "freedom" to capitalism mean two very different things—and ultimately, the bourgeoisie's idea of freedom enables them to hoard wealth and maintain their dominant position.*



*This continues Marx and Engels' line of defense on the abolition of private property. As with most responses to criticism outlined in this chapter, they argue that they are only seeking to abolish the bourgeoisie's ways of doing things.*



*One of the main difficulties with Marx and Engels' position is that even a system that equalizes everyone's appropriation of the products of society will require a means of distribution. That distribution will require some kind of concentration of power, opening up the risks that this power will be abused.*



*From Marx and Engels' perspective, the proletariat does all the hard work in society, and the bourgeoisie has little to do except manage its exploitation of the proletariat and reap the rewards. This is a slight contradiction, given that in the previous chapter they talked about the immense productive force of the bourgeoisie when it comes to innovations in technology, communication, and interconnectivity.*



*Marx and Engels turn communism's criticisms on their head by consistently pointing out that it's just the bourgeois ideas of culture that they seek to abolish.*



Marx and Engels point out that the bourgeoisie has something fundamental in common with previous ruling classes: it sees its own ideas about how society should be as “eternal laws of nature and reason.”

*It's not surprising to Marx and Engels that the bourgeoisie sees their ideas as threatening—the ruling class always thinks its ideas are the most self-evidently true. By presenting its ideology as merely “how things are,” the bourgeoisie can quell rebellion amongst the proletariat. Although Marx and Engels later advocate for violent revolution, they consider one of the main battles against the bourgeoisie as being an intellectual one. The role of communism is to equip the proletariat with the intellectual “weaponry” needed to combat the received (and false) ideas of the status quo.*



Communism has also been criticized as wanting to abolish the family, say Marx and Engels. They argue that the bourgeoisie has already ruined family relations for the proletariat, and that bourgeois families are based on “capital” and “private gain.” Marx and Engels say that communism will prevent parents exploiting their children.

*Marx and Engels don't go into too much detail about one of the more seemingly controversial aims of communism—to abolish the family. Their point, if perhaps a little exaggerated, is that bourgeois family relations are not about any of things normally associated with family, like love and support. Instead, they are about money. In a sense, Marx and Engels are obliged to argue this line because they have earlier set out that everything in society is governed by economic status. Their other main point here is that communism would not allow children to be put to work, unlike capitalism.*



Marx and Engels address the question of education. They want to rescue education from the ideology and influence of the ruling bourgeoisie. They attack the bourgeoisie's sanctimonious defense of family and education; in practice, bourgeois society breaks the family ties of the proletariat and forces young children to work.

*This passage fleshes out the “abolition of family”—Marx and Engels are arguing that bourgeoisie exploitation has denied the proletariat the chance to have a happy and healthy family life. So it's immaterial if some bourgeois families have such a thing, because the bourgeoisie has shown money to be more important than family in general.*



The bourgeoisie, continue Marx and Engels, even sees women as “mere instruments of production.” Communism is criticized for wanting to establish a “community of women,” which Marx and Engels say has existed since the society began. The bourgeoisie is immoral, indulging in prostitution and adultery. Communism, they say, wishes to create an “openly legalized community of women” and do away with prostitution.

*Marx and Engels see the bourgeoisie as hypocritical when it comes to moral issues. Furthermore, they use morality as a tool to oppress the proletariat when in fact “immorality” is largely a symptom of unfavorable economic conditions.*



Another criticism Marx and Engels often hear is that communism wishes to abolish countries and national identity. Their defense is that working men don't have those things anyway. Besides, as industrialism increasingly makes different countries the same, national identities lose significance. The success of the proletariat depends on united action across borders.

*Any national identity that the proletariat feels is based on bourgeois propaganda. To Marx and Engels, members of the proletariat have no reason to feel a sense of pride in their respective countries when those societies are designed to exploit them. Marx and Engels also believe that the bourgeoisie itself is guilty of undermining national identities—they drive down working conditions across the world in service of their increased industrialization.*



Marx and Engels do not consider the criticisms of communism from a religious or philosophical standpoint worth addressing. They say that all “ideas, views and concepts” change in accordance with any changes to people’s material existence. The ruling ideas throughout history have therefore been the ideas of the ruling classes.

Marx and Engels say that revolutionary ideas in society are inevitable—elements of new societies form as structural tensions develop in the old. As evidence, they point to the overthrow of ancient religions by Christianity, Christianity by rationalism, and feudal society by the bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels say they have spoken enough about the bourgeoisie’s objections to communism. Instead, they want to point the way forward. They say the first step in the revolution is to raise the proletariat into the position of power. Then, the proletariat must seize all capital from the bourgeoisie and centralize all instruments of production. Marx and Engels admit that in the beginning, some of these actions will seem harsh and “despotic,” but they’re unavoidable.

Different countries will need different measures, but Marx and Engels present ten changes to society that will be “generally applicable.” In summary, these are the abolition of property (including land-ownership), high but progressive income tax, the centralization of money, communication and transport in the hands of the proletariat government, cultivation of unused land, compulsory work for all who can work, the abolition of the town/country division by more equal population distribution and, finally, free education for children and the outlaw of their underage labor.

Over time, the proletariat’s public power will no longer resemble the politics of old. In fact, if successful, the empowerment of the proletariat will bring about the end of the requirement for class struggle and make a society that is truly equal. Instead of bourgeois society, there will be the “free development of all.”

*Marx and Engels see economic circumstances as being the most defining factor of people’s lives. In fact, this implies that the kind of ideas found in religion are a kind of remedy to economic and social hardship, perhaps as the promise of a better life (or afterlife). This is less the case with philosophy because it tends to be the domain of the wealthier and more educated classes.*



*This idea is indebted to the German philosopher Hegel, who had a big influence on Marx. It is a development of the idea that history is a series of class struggles, and that the proletariat’s revolution will the next—and final—structural overthrow.*



*At this stage in the manifesto, Marx and Engels feel they have provided the necessary intellectual responses to the criticisms of communism. Now, they look to the future, setting out how the proletariat should seize power and subsequently change society. The obvious difficulty with their suggestion here, which they do not address in the manifesto, is that there is no guarantee the proletariat will use power wisely—or even that its members will share power equally.*



*These are the specific measures that Marx and Engels think will make society fairer. By any standards, they represent a total overhaul of society. Each suggestion is designed to remove the possibility of one section of society getting an edge over another—they want to remove the competitive element from daily life.*



*Although the changes Marx and Engels outline are drastic, they believe that the empowerment of the proletariat will represent the final stage in humanity’s series of class struggles.*



### III. SOCIALIST AND COMMUNIST LITERATURE

In this chapter, Marx and Engels survey three types of socialist and communist literature. The first section is on “Reactionary Socialism,” which is itself made up of Feudal Socialism, Petty-Bourgeois Socialism, and “True” German Socialism.

Feudal Socialist literature comes after the French Revolution of 1830 and was written by the French and English aristocracy in an effort to resist the increasing domination of the bourgeoisie. However, according to Marx and Engels, they were only interested in stopping the bourgeoisie in order to preserve their own dominance. Their chief objection to bourgeoisie society was that it would bring about a revolutionary proletariat class, ultimately threatening their way of life.

Petty-Bourgeois Socialists are descended from the class of medieval burgesses and peasant proprietors who are now at risk of slipping into the proletariat. These writings, according to Marx and Engels, successfully point out that the petty-bourgeois class will cease to exist, and that its members will join the proletariat.

Petty-Bourgeois Socialists were also right to point in the “contradictions in the conditions of modern production,” say Marx and Engels. These petty-bourgeois writers proved the negative effects of machinery and the division of labor, and showed that the bourgeois capitalist system would lead to inequality, financial crises, and war. However, Marx and Engels ultimately see their solutions as flawed: they either seek to return to the old ways of society, or to limit progress.

German, or “True,” Socialism refers to the adoption of French ideas by German thinkers. Marx and Engels accuse these thinkers of failing to recognize that France and Germany had completely different social conditions. These German thinkers were naively romantic and were not thinking practically about society in their own country.

Most importantly, say Marx and Engels, these German Socialists didn't realize that the rise of the bourgeoisie is a necessary step in the evolution of an equal society. The “True” Socialists supported the petty-bourgeois and thus only served to defend the status quo—they weren't calling for true revolution or equality.

*This section is primarily concerned with differentiating Marx and Engels' manifesto from similar texts. It's a kind of literature review of other thinkers who have something in common with Marx and Engels.*



*To Marx and Engels, feudal socialism is inferior to what they're proposing for two reasons: firstly, it's a “socialism” of a once-dominant class, the aristocracy; communism will empower those that have never been the dominant class. Secondly, it actively seeks to prevent the emergence of a powerful proletariat—essentially, it's just the death throes of a dying oppressor.*



*This literature is slightly more successful in Marx and Engels' opinion. They at least identify both the significance of class struggle as a historical force, and that the class system is being simplified into bourgeoisie and proletariat.*



*The petty-bourgeois were good at diagnosing the problem with capitalist society but incapable of prescribing the correct solutions. The petty-bourgeois, according to Marx and Engels, are essentially not revolutionary enough.*



*The “True” here is meant sarcastically, poking fun at the way these German thinkers felt they were uncovering essential truths about mankind. The charge against this literature is that it is entirely impractical—what works in France might not make sense in Germany. By implication, then, communism is presented as pragmatic and responsive to the actual needs of the proletariat in any given country.*



*This is an important reminder of part of the argument in the first section of the manifesto—that bourgeois capitalism is necessary in order to both bring about the existence of the proletariat and the advances needed for the proletariat to organize its revolution.*



The second main section of this chapter concerns “Conservative, or Bourgeois, Socialism.” This socialism is offered by those elements of the bourgeoisie that say they want to address “social grievances.” Marx and Engels believe this type of socialism is dishonest—what bourgeois socialists want above all is bourgeois dominance over the proletariat.

This group includes all sorts of moral reformers who might appear to have good intentions: “economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of condition of the working class, organisers of charity, members [...] hole-and-corner reformers of every imaginable kind.”

Marx and Engels argue that this bourgeois socialism aims to maintain the status quo, allowing the bourgeoisie to enjoy their dominant status while removing the revolutionary potential from the proletariat. They do this, say Marx and Engels, by trying to address the proletariat’s social problems and minimizing any ill-will the proletariat holds towards them. Their overall aim, then, is to keep the proletariat oppressed while doing just enough to pacify any potential animosity from their inferiors.

A second type of bourgeois socialism attempts to show the proletariat that revolutions are dangerous and doomed to fail. It argues that reforms have to take place within the system (rather than there being a total destruction of the system). Marx and Engels sum up this type of socialism by stating that “the bourgeois is a bourgeois—for the benefit of the working class.”

The third and final section of this chapter is “Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism.” Marx and Engels say that these writings came about during the proletariat’s first attempts to improve its status in society. However, as the proletariat was too undeveloped, so too was the corresponding literature. It had a “reactionary character” and a “crude” form.

*Bourgeois socialists are almost like double agents, pretending to champion the proletariat while in fact serving the interests of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels see them as part of the intellectual battle—this brand of socialism essentially tries to trick the proletariat by appearing to be caring and generous. However, their overall aims, according to the authors, are no different from the bourgeoisie itself.*



*This relates to the authors’ idea that the dominant class has control of the dominant ideas. They are imploring their readers not to be naïve when it comes to seemingly good intentions on the part of the bourgeoisie.*



*Bourgeois socialism is fundamentally deceptive according to Marx and Engels. It is the bourgeoisie’s attempt to trick the proletariat by pretending to be on their side. The intention is to make the proletariat see its oppression not as the fault of the bourgeoisie, but as simply an unfortunate symptom of “the way things are.” This type of socialism completely and deliberately ignores the way the proletariat is denied any ownership over the means of production. Bourgeois socialism is no different from the bourgeois status quo in that it keeps the proletariat dependent on money from the bourgeoisie for survival.*



*This passage contains another example of intellectual suppression by the bourgeoisie. They aim not only to oppress the proletariat but also to make the proletariat grateful for the bourgeoisie’s very existence.*



*This type of literature had genuine intentions, but lacked the know-how to create something genuinely useful.*



These writers, say Marx and Engels, did well to recognize the way in which class antagonisms change society. But they were too “utopian,” or idealistic. Their other problem was that, because the proletariat was not yet ready, the utopian writers looked for new social sciences and laws to aid the working classes. These constitute a “new social Gospel” of little practical use.

Despite their criticism, Marx and Engels do think that these utopian writers provide useful material for the “enlightenment” of the proletariat because they focus on the unfair principles that govern society. Their analysis is good and valuable, but their proposed solutions are unrealistic and premature.

As the conditions required for a proletariat revolution materialize, these idealistic writings “lose all practical value and all theoretical justification.” Marx and Engels argue that, while the originators of these works were in some sense “revolutionary,” their followers are only *reactionary*. Their lack of realism means they do not prioritize genuine class struggle; instead they are fantasists dreaming of impossible, perfect societies: “castles in the air.” Over time, they become more like “conservative Socialists.”

*Critical-utopian literature was unrealistic and, like the German, “True,” Socialism, not practically applicable. It was also a victim of circumstance, arising too early in the development of the proletariat.*



*For Marx and Engels, these writers have at least served the purpose in providing useful intellectual analysis for the proletariat, aiding their empowerment.*



*Marx and Engels use “reactionary” as a criticism throughout the manifesto. In this context, “reactionary” doesn’t mean a “speedy response,” but a desire to return society to the way it used to be. This is the “status quo ante,” as opposed to the “status quo.” So while critical-utopian literature was once revolutionary in its analyses (if not solutions), its later followers misguidedly want to take society backwards, rather than bring about revolution. That’s why the conservative and critical-utopian socialists are said to be similar.*



## IV. POSITION OF THE COMMUNISTS IN RELATION TO THE VARIOUS EXISTING OPPOSITION PARTIES

Marx and Engels contextualize the Communist party with other working-class parties existing at the time, like the Chartists in England and the Agrarian Reformers in America.

Marx and Engels set out which national parties in various countries might align with the interests of the Communist party. They also offer examples of when they might disagree with these parties. Generally, the Communist parties aim to both fight for the immediate needs of the proletariat and to empower them with the recognition of their oppression by the bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels say their primary focus (in 1848) is Germany, as it is about to undergo a bourgeois revolution that will ultimately result in a more developed proletariat; this proletariat will immediately retaliate with their own revolution. Marx and Engels state that communists support “every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.”

*This short chapter Marx and Engels’ attempt to make their manifesto practically useful. Here, they seek to build bridges between the communists and working-class parties worldwide that mostly share their commitments.*



*Marx and Engels firmly believe that, if communism is to succeed in empowering the proletariat, it must fight the bourgeoisie on both intellectual and practical ground. The proletariat needs to see that it is oppressed before it can summon the collective power to rise up against its oppressor.*



*In light of Marx and Engels’ criticisms of certain literature in the previous chapter for being too idealistic, here they try to show that they are thinking on a country-specific level. At the same time, they seek to broaden the applicability of communism by offering this wide definition of what the political group supports.*



Marx and Engels are unafraid to admit that what they are calling for can only come about by the “forcible overthrow of existing social conditions.” They say, “let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution,” and declare that the proletarians have “nothing to lose but their **chains.**” The manifesto ends with Marx and Engels imploring the “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES” to “UNITE!”

*Marx and Engels have no faith in the capitalist system to offer the proletariat a route to empowerment. Therefore, they believe, “forcible overthrow” is necessary. The bourgeoisie will never willingly give up its dominant position or its accumulation of wealth and property. This final line, written in all caps, is intended to excite the reader, to make them feel that change is possible, and to urge them to start fighting for that change.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Howard, James. "The Communist Manifesto." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Oct 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "The Communist Manifesto." LitCharts LLC, October 20, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020.  
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-communist-manifesto>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Communist Manifesto* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto*. Signet. 2011.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Signet. 2011.