



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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PART I
MARX AND ENGELS

I. Principles of Communism

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“Communism is the doctrine of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This is a short description of the principles of communism written by Engels in 1847 (probably for the workers involved with the League of the Just) and first widely published in 1914 for the German Social Democratic Party.¹

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

It is recommended that you read this passage before tackling the Communist Manifesto. Engels wrote this short piece as an explanation and description of the aims and goals of communism. To do this well, he also had to describe and explain capitalism, and why it was important to do away with it. Pay attention to the role (and definition) of private property. You might also compare this vision of communism with contemporary expectations of the role of the state in a democracy.

Principles of Communism

What is Communism? Communism is the doctrine of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat.

What is the Proletariat? The proletariat is that class in society which lives entirely from the sale of its labor and does not draw profit from any kind of capital; whose weal and woe, whose life and death, whose sole existence depends on the demand for labor – hence, on the changing state of business, on the vagaries of unbridled competition. The proletariat, or the class of proletarians, is, in a word, the working class of the 19th century.

Proletarians, then, have not always existed? No. There have always been poor and working classes; and the working class have mostly been poor. But there have not always been workers and poor people living under conditions as they are today; in other words, there have not always been proletarians, any more than there has always been free unbridled competitions.

1. The entire document can be found here, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm>.

How did the proletariat originate? The Proletariat originated in the industrial revolution, which took place in England in the last half of the last (18th) century, and which has since then been repeated in all the civilized countries of the world. It has come about that in civilized countries at the present time nearly all kinds of labor are performed in factories – and, in nearly all branches of work, handicrafts and manufacture have been superseded. This process has ruined the old middle class, especially the small handicraftsmen; it has entirely transformed the condition of the workers; and two new classes have been created which are gradually swallowing up all the others. These are:

(i) The class of big capitalists, who, in all civilized countries, are already in almost exclusive possession of all the means of subsistence and of the instruments (machines, factories) and materials necessary for the production of the means of subsistence. This is the bourgeois class, or the bourgeoisie

(ii) The class of the wholly property less, who are obliged to sell their labor to the bourgeoisie in order to get, in exchange, the means of subsistence for their support. This is called the class of proletarians, or the proletariat

What working classes were there before the industrial revolution? The working classes have always, according to the different stages of development of society, lived in different circumstances and had different relations to the owning and ruling classes. In antiquity, the workers were the slaves of the owners, just as they still are in many backward countries and even in the southern part of the United States.² In the Middle Ages, they were the serfs of the land-owning nobility, as they still are in Hungary, Poland, and Russia. In the Middle Ages, and indeed right up to the industrial revolution, there were also journeymen in the cities who worked in the service of petty-bourgeois masters. Gradually, as manufacture developed, these journeymen became manufacturing workers who were even then employed by larger capitalists.

In what way do proletarians differ from slaves? The slave is sold once and for all; the proletarian must sell himself daily and hourly... The slave frees himself when he abolishes only the relation of slavery and thereby becomes a proletarian; the proletarian can free himself only by abolishing private property in general.

In what way do proletarians differ from serfs? The serf possesses and uses an instrument of production, a piece of land, in exchange for which he gives up a part of his product or part of the services of his labor. The proletarian works with the instruments of production of another, for the account of this other, in exchange for a part of the product. The serf gives up, the proletarian receives. The serf has an assured existence, the proletarian has not. The serf is outside competition, the proletarian is in it. The serf liberates himself in one of three ways: either he runs away to the city and there becomes a handicraftsman; or, instead of products and services, he gives money to his lord and thereby becomes a free tenant; or he overthrows his feudal lord and himself becomes a property owner. In short, by one route or another, he gets into the owning class and enters into competition. The proletarian liberates herself by abolishing competition, private property, and all class differences.

2. Note that this passage was written before the Civil War in the United States and the Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery.

What will communism (“this new social order”) be like? Above all, it will have to take the control of industry and of all branches of production out of the hands of mutually competing individuals, and instead institute a system in which all these branches of production are operated by society as a whole – that is, for the common account, according to a common plan, and with the participation of all members of society. It will, in other words, abolish competition and replace it with association. The abolition of private property is, doubtless, the shortest and most significant way to characterize the revolution

Was not the abolition of private property possible at an earlier time? No, private property has not always existed.

Will the peaceful abolition of private property be possible? It would be desirable if this could happen, and the communists would certainly be the last to oppose it. But they also see that the development of the proletariat in nearly all civilized countries has been violently suppressed. If the oppressed proletariat is finally driven to revolution, then we communists will defend the interests of the proletarians with deeds as we now defend them with words.

What will be the course of this revolution? Above all, it will establish a democratic constitution, and through this, the direct or indirect dominance of the proletariat. The main measures called for, in order to prevent/abolish private property include:

- Limitation of private property through progressive taxation, heavy inheritance taxes
- Gradual expropriation of landowners, industrialists, railroad magnates
- Organization of labor or employment of proletarians on publicly owned land, in factories and workshops, with competition among the workers being abolished and with the factory owners, in so far as they still exist, being obliged to pay the same high wages as those paid by the state
- An equal obligation on all members of society to work until such time as private property has been completely abolished
- Centralization of money and credit in the hands of the state through a national bank with state capital, and the suppression of all private banks and bankers.
- Education of all children in national establishments at national cost
- Destruction of all unhealthy and poorly-built dwellings in urban districts
- Concentration of all means of transportation in the hands of the nation.

Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone? No. It is a universal revolution and will, accordingly, have a universal range.

What will be the consequences of the ultimate disappearance of private property? Society will take all forces of production and means of commerce, as well as the exchange and distribution of products, out of the hands of private capitalists and will manage them in accordance with a plan based on the availability of resources and the needs of the whole society. There will be no more crises. The division of society into different, mutually hostile classes will then become unnecessary. Indeed, it will be not only unnecessary but intolerable in the new social order. The existence of classes originated in the division of labor, and the division of labor, as it has been known up to the present, will completely disappear. Education will enable young people quickly to familiarize themselves with the whole system of production and to pass from one branch of production to another in response to the needs of society or their own inclinations. It will, therefore, free them from the

one-sided character which the present-day division of labor impresses upon every individual. The general co-operation of all members of society for the purpose of planned exploitation of the forces of production, the expansion of production to the point where it will satisfy the needs of all, the abolition of a situation in which the needs of some are satisfied at the expense of the needs of others, the complete liquidation of classes and their conflicts, the rounded development of the capacities of all members of society through the elimination of the present division of labor, through industrial education, through engaging in varying activities, through the participation by all in the enjoyments produced by all, through the combination of city and country – these are the main consequences of the abolition of private property.

Questions

1. What is the difference Engels is making between “proletariat” and “working class”? Which one is unique to our times? What is the source of this uniqueness?
2. How does Engels’ depiction of Communism and the Communist Revolution differ from what you have heard about communism elsewhere (including the history of the Soviet Union, Cuba, and China)? Did anything in the program surprise you?
3. What is the relationship between classes, private property, and the division of labor?
4. Try to imagine a world in which each person could “pass from one branch of production to another in response to the needs of society or their own inclinations.” How could this work (not a rhetorical question – try to come up with a plan!)?

Concepts

Private Property

Revolution

Communism

Proletarian

Means of Production

Class Struggle

Division of Labor