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Principles of Communism as a Basis for Social Democracy

Craig P. Moorhead

Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels Principles of Communism are instrumental in modern understanding of capitalism across multiple fields of social science. I will argue that as an extension of the Principles of Communism, the call for a proletarian revolution is ultimately fruitless and unnecessary. The real value of Marx and Engels' work is as a critique of capitalism. I will demonstrate this by showing the flaws of communist theory and that corrections made to capitalism in the interim have brought about an improved social order approaching Marx' ultimate vision for mankind.

Marx and Engels wrote that the history of man is the history of class struggle. What he meant by this is that in all ages mankind has always been organized and divided into two social groups with one dominating the other, and this pattern has replicated and repeated itself throughout history. From the patricians and plebeians of Ancient Rome to the lords and serfs of Feudal Britain, the format of oppressor and oppressed has always been prevalent, regardless of any revolution or change in political structure. In Marx and Engels' time this was manifested in the French Revolution, where the bourgeoisie monarchy was merely replaced with a bourgeoisie republic. Based on this pattern they observed, Marx and Engels characterised the new capitalist economic system as a social order of two classes, those who buy labour, the bourgeoisie, and those who sell their labour, the proletariat (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 96). Marx and Engels argued that the rise and spread of capitalism was enhanced and facilitated by the industrial revolution, specifically the increased mechanization of methods of producing goods. The success of these methods created a world market and all societies had to convert to capitalism or be left behind by the inexpensive goods that industrial societies brought to market (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 99). Economically this was an enormously viable system but morally, Marx argued, it was doomed to fail. Marx and Engels saw capitalism as entirely exploitive to the proletarian

workers who fuelled it; the individual factory worker is confronted with the results of his work as a dominating power causing what they termed alienation. The worker is in a sense becoming a slave to his work, never reaping the fruits of his labour; only the benefit of the minimum wage provided him in return for his time and effort. This alienation was the basis for Marx and Engels' belief that capitalism was unjust and would ultimately fail. They said that under capitalism, creative work is equated with wage labour, severely limiting the creative capacity that defines what it is to be human. As a consequence of being estranged from his humanity he is also estranged from his fellow man (Marx & Engels, 1844, p. 91). In response to capitalism, Marx and Engels proposed a new economic social order, communism. They felt this could surpass capitalism by eliminating the class structure of oppressed and oppressor that plagued history, allowing all mankind to flourish equally. Marx and Engels said this would occur by bringing all of humanity into a single social class, the proletarians. With mankind united in one social grouping there would be no more class conflict, eliminating the exploitive worker-owner relationship. The first step in achieving this is the elimination of the present-day conceptions about property relations (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 105).

The way private property works under capitalism, it only benefits the bourgeoisie. Wage labour produces property but not for the ones actually performing the labour, the proletarians. This is a problem because the bourgeoisie end up collecting all the property and repurposing it into increased capital while the proletariat remains impoverished (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 105). Given this situation, there is a need for a proletarian revolution, which distinguishes itself from a bourgeoisie revolution in that the latter only replaces the existing upper class with members of the lower class rather than eliminating the class structure all together (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 105). Marx and Engels offer that the reason this occurs is because there is an inability to

conceptualize the future without referencing the past. People cannot imagine any system vastly different from the one they were born in, which is why their views were and still are viewed as so radical. While Marx and Engels never explicitly state what form the proletarian revolution would take, they do lay out a framework of what it must achieve in order to be successful.

The foundation of the communist social order must be a new democratic constitution, namely the abolition of private property, replacing competition with association and where the proletariat is the dominant class which encompasses all members of society (Engels, 1847, p. 11-14). Marx and Engels say this would be the pinnacle of human existence, where all man has equal rights, and where all individuals give all that they are capable of to society and in return society meets their individual needs. Therefore the arbitrary values placed on certain skills by the oppressing class are eliminated. For example, in the new social order a teacher and a gravedigger's contributions to society would be valued equally and their respective needs would be met by society instead of one being richer or poorer than the other. A man can pursue his natural creativity and not suffer a life of menial and alienating labour. (Marx, 1875, p. 531)

Marx and Engels' thinking is uniquely sociological in that for them the focus of sociology should be entirely class based. The individuals' perception of themselves with regard to how they fit into social classes or groups is monumental in impacting their social relations. The function of institutions is then equally paramount in that relationship. Marx and Engels epistemological position is that human beings are the result of what they do and the only conception of human nature is man's activities in the modes of production. Social formation, which for Marx and Engels was the class structure of capitalism, underpins all of this. They argued that our perception of everything is passed down by the dominant class. The institution,

in this case capitalism manifested in the worker-owner relationship, determines everything in the individual's life, what we know and how we know it.

Marx and Engels failed to recognize that the capitalism they experienced was in its infancy; it would progress and evolve over time into a system that was not only economically viable but morally as well. Today this can in part be attributed to the re-emergence of the middle class. There is a strong middle class despite their claim that it had died out as a result of the industrial revolution (Engels, 1847, p. 3). Marx and Engels did not fully take into account social advances resulting in the widespread availability of education in the present day. There are many more avenues today to sell one's labour than in a factory and vertical mobility between classes is more possible than ever. Marx and Engels state that the industrial revolution would deprive millions of Chinese of their livelihood, yet today we see billions of Chinese operating under capitalism and industrialism, albeit not in the best work conditions. But the Chinese are not unemployed; they have found a niche in the market and are in a sense thriving as jobs are now frequently shifting from the Western world to China (Engels, 1847, p. 7). The proletarian revolution could never happen the way Marx and Engels envisioned it. The lines between proletarian and bourgeoisie have become very blurred. Most people now occupy both classes, buying and selling labour. For example, a proletarian may hire a contractor to perform home renovations, temporarily occupying the role of bourgeoisie. People are not interested in a revolution as the conditions of capitalism have changed such that the motivations for a new social order are no longer present in a form that motivates a proletarian revolution. In effect, bourgeoisie socialism referenced by Marx and Engels has taken hold in our society, solidifying capitalism far more than they accounted for in their works. There have been reforms and concessions offered to today's proletariat eliminating some of the evils which Marx and Engels

believed were inherent to capitalism (Engels, 1847, p. 20) and I would argue that capitalism adapted at least in part as a response to the issues they raised. Today there are many different degrees of being proletarian, such as the relationship between the doctor and the garbage man. Both sell their labour but imagine trying to convince them they are of the same class and share a common good and are commonly exploited by bourgeoisie. I do not believe this could happen in modern capitalist society, the two see themselves far too differently. Competition is a cause of this and an obstacle to the revolution Marx and Engels were looking for; you cannot find commonality among your fellow proletarians when they are trying to undercut you and take your share of wage labour for themselves. Capitalism has more fully adapted to the needs of the proletarian than Marx and Engels ever anticipated. The varying degrees of being middle class now make up the majority of Western society and we are content to operate in the social order in which we were born. The proletariat of today has become what Marx and Engels termed a Class in itself, in that they are unaware of their common class position (Hewitt, White, & Teevan, 2010, p. 126).

Look at the recent Occupy Movement. In my opinion it totally failed and has been marginalized because the so-called ninety-nine percent do not recognize themselves as such. People identify with social groupings derived from their position in today's classes; middle, upper-middle, lower –middle and lower class. Trying to get each group to all identify as the same is impossible; the proletarian consciousness has become diluted over time, compounded by the fact that Marx and Engels insisted the revolution in social order must happen on a global scale due to the world market (Engels, 1847, p. 15). Getting people to agree on a new democratic constitution on a global scale is simply not possible, there are too many variables. Never in history have all the peoples of the world been able to reach a consensus on any issue, let

alone one as earth-shattering and significant as a new social order. Another obstacle is nationalism, one of the strongest elements driving political formations today. Marx and Engels insisted these must disappear along with class distinctions (Engels, 1847, p. 19). I would argue that this is highly unlikely. Even in their time it was apparent that the political challenges facing communism varied across the nations of the world and consequently the approach communists must take was different in each country (Engels, 1847, p. 21). It is hard to imagine even then the level of unity required to enact a global proletarian revolution as envisioned by Marx and Engels.

In summary, Marx and Engels' advocating for the abolishment of private property and consequently the elimination of capitalism as the dominant social order was fatally weakened by the lack of an audience for their work, or more specifically the lack of an audience that could fully comprehend it. This resulted in a failure to act and the chance of a proletarian-led social order that Marx dreamed of has become impossible and impractical. Marx never offered any precise prediction of how or when this revolution would come about, but he did believe the circumstances required for its success would eventually occur. Since Marx's death capitalism and bourgeoisie have become deeply entrenched in today's social order. The big business bourgeoisie control the political arena, making it near impossible to effect policy change that would negatively impact their capitalist interests (Engels, 1847, p. 8). Ultimately, I believe this suggests that communism was not the next step in man's social evolution and that in fact capitalism, or some facsimile thereof, could be the ideal social formation and will continue to evolve to represent the principles for which Marx and Engels stood.

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