

# Popularization of the Communist Manifesto in 19th Century Europe

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**Abstract**—“The Communist Manifesto”, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, is one of the most significant documents throughout the whole history which covers across different fields including Economic, Politic, Sociology and Philosophy. Instead of discussing the Communist ideas presented in the Communist Manifesto, the essay focuses on exploring the reasons that contributed to the popularization of the document and its influence on political revolutions in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe by concentrating on the document itself along with other primary and secondary sources and temporal artwork. Combining the details from the Communist Manifesto and other documents, Marx’s writing style and word choice, his convincing notions about a new society dominated by proletariats, and the revolutionary idea of class destruction has led to the popularization of the Communist Manifesto and influenced the latter political revolutions.

**Keywords**—*Communist Manifesto, The Wealth of Nations*, 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, word choice, capitalism, communism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE history of mankind has witnessed the process of exchanging ideas. These countless thoughts have carried the material and spiritual pursuits of humans along with the understanding of the true meaning of life. One of the results from the collision of different ideas throughout history is the revolution. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels put forth in the opening of the *Communist Manifesto*, that “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles,” [4] the greatest class struggle in 19th century Europe was between the proletariats, represented by the communists, and the bourgeoisie, represented by the capitalists. Karl Heinrich Marx was born in Trier, Germany, in 1818, and his collaborator on the *Communist Manifesto*, Friedrich Engels, was born in Barman, Kingdom of Prussia, in 1820. Marx as the primary author and Engels as his co-author, together they developed the Marxist theory, and published the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. In this era dominated by Capitalism, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the proletariat labor force became increasingly cheap. Tens of thousands of working-class people lacked adequate food or a place to sleep. Marx, as a man who experienced political exile for decades, witnessed the impoverished life of ordinary people and was determined to completely change society. Due to this reason, the *Communist Manifesto* was published with the idea of a new society dominated by proletariats, and was soon rapidly popularized in society. The elements that contributed to the popularity of the *Communist Manifesto* and the political

revolutions influenced by its ideas are Marx’s writing style and word choice, his convincing notions about a new society dominated by proletariats, and the revolutionary idea of class destruction.

## II. TEXTUAL EXPLICATION

Workers in the 19th century, under the ruling bourgeoisie, suffered a hard life. Criticism of the bourgeoisie and the new idea of a society dominated by proletariats presented in the *Communist Manifesto* were the main reasons for the book’s popularization and the political revolutions it influenced in the 19th century. Marx and Engels, in the first part of the Manifesto, criticized the bourgeoisie class in different dimensions. They believed that the bourgeoisie, no different from any former ruling classes that had been overthrown, had “established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” [4]. Due to this reason, Marx and Engels suggested that the bourgeoisie was destined to be ousted like previous classes. Marx and Engels severely criticized the adverse influences of the bourgeois: “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 substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” [4]. They described the bourgeois as annihilating the unique feelings possessed by human beings, with a broad and negative impact on human culture. The system caused society to be seriously affected by the concept of pure interest and trade, without any emotions between humans such as sympathy, love, and friendship. Moreover, in responding to questions about Communism, Marx and Engels strongly denounced the lifestyle of the bourgeois and the bad social morality it brought forth, saying that members of the bourgeoisie not only control “wives and daughters of their proletariats” but also “take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other’s wives” [4]. Marx and Engels also pointed out that excessive property and productivity fettered the bourgeoisie and also failed to further its development. They thought that the development of bourgeois had reached a bottleneck, like “[a] sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells,” [4] and would lead its own destruction. Therefore, Marx and Engels introduced the idea of proletariats taking control of society from the bourgeoisie.

In the second part of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels revealed the nature of the proletarian revolution which served the interests of the proletariat, the majority, and promoted the entire society. They thought revolution was necessary as society could “raise itself up” without officials

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being “sprung...into the air.” They strongly believed that the current economic situation had caused society to have no room for development; only breaking all the original patterns and structures would drive towards a rebirth of society. The proletariat was the best choice for this mission, since that “of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry” [4]. Although the proletarians had been constantly “upset” by the competition, it would always “rise up” again and become stronger. Their experiences of struggle and other important qualities made them the best candidates to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels described some future goals and directions of the proletariat. The proletariat “must, first of all, acquire political supremacy” [4]. Only by grasping political rights, the proletarians can truly overthrow the control of bourgeoisie, advance towards the ideal society of the proletariat, and finally achieve the ultimate goal: “Abolition of private property” [4].

### III. LITERARY CRITICISM

Marx and Engels' critiques about the bourgeoisie resonated with ordinary people. Their revolutionary ideas of proletarian political supremacy with the goal of leading a future society contributed to the popularization of the *Communist Manifesto* and political revolutions in 19th century Europe. Literary critics also attribute the style, word choice, and the ideas of proletariat supremacy in the *Communist Manifesto* to be the main factors that helped popularize the book and its political revolutionary ideas at the time. They believe Marx and Engels presented and spread their ideas in a way that convinced their audience to invest in their ideology.

In Hersh and Brun's article, “Globalisation and the Communist Manifesto,” they discuss how “regardless of the anti-Marxism of conventional thinking, the fact that the teaching of Marx and Engels are still capable of showing vitality is no small intellectual and political achievement” [3]. They affirm the historical and political significance of the *Communist Manifesto* and explain its positive effects on later ideas, even on Capitalism. In scholar Egbert Munzer's opinion, “The justification of revolutionary activity” that Marx and Engels used, was their own reasoning combined with “religious sentiments” [6]. In the book, the proletarians are portrayed as the “chosen people,” while the capitalists are the evil people, like Egyptians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, who oppressed the “Selected Race” [6]. Just like many religious stories, the proletarians were described as destined to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie. Such a text with the use of religious propaganda was more influential than all non-Christian philosophies [6]. Moreover, critics believe that the metaphors Marx and Engels use in the book have had a great impact on its popularization. For example, Marx and Engels represented the proletarians as “the bottom layer” of society and the “grave-diggers” of the bourgeoisie, which not only strengthened the importance of the proletarians to society but also revealed the natural advantage that proletarians have against the bourgeoisie [9]. Comparing *the Declaration of*

*Independence* with the *Communist Manifesto*, author Paul Siegel illustrates that the two documents share a similar style, formal but easy to read with heart-stirring and convincing words [9]. This style and word choice have made the document widely accessible to the general public and have inspired many people to become strong believers of Marx and Engels' ideology.

### IV. INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Scholars believe that Marx and Engels successfully popularized the *Communist Manifesto* and the political revolutions in 19th century Europe due to the book's convincing evidence, reasoning, and inspiring wording and style [9]. Seventy-two years before the *Communist Manifesto* was published, a book with nearly the same influence was written by Adam Smith on March 6, 1776: *The Wealth of Nations*. Although it discussed similar influences in society, *The Wealth of Nations* represented the ideology of Capitalism, which was opposite to the ideology of Communism expressed by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* [7]. It can even be argued that the *Communist Manifesto* was a response to *The Wealth of Nations* in a certain sense [4].

Freedom in pursuit of one's own interests is an important thought expressed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. He suggested that people will “frequently promote” the profit of the society by “pursuing [their] own interests,” much more effectively than when people actually intend to promote it [7]. He believed that people's unconscious and free trade could bring a significant improvement to the economy of the entire society. This also made the “competition” [7] between each individual more critical since competition could bring greater benefits to individuals; this in turn would lead to a greater development of the society's economy. Therefore, different from the Communist idea of the abolition [4] of privacy, Adam Smith considered people's absolute freedom to pursue their own interest as their right as long as they did not “violate the law of justice” [7].

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith also objected to governmental control. He explained that governments whose purpose was to promote the society's economy would not be able to achieve this goal. Any attempts by the government to “direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capital” will not only fail to complete the original goal but will also lose trust among the masses [7]. The best solution for this situation, in Smith's opinion, was to develop the economy of the society without interference from the government or at least with very little interference from the government, allowing the economy to develop freely. He argued that “the economic activity unrestricted by the government best serves the individual and society” [7]. The *Communist Manifesto*, on the other hand, expressed an opposite governing means of “centralisation” of the credit, factories, transportation and farms “in the hands of the State” [4].

Marx and Engels' Communist ideas in the *Communist Manifesto* -- trade controlled by the government, collective production, and abolition of private properties -- completely

contradicted the ideas of Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*. In contrast to the popularization of the *Wealth of Nations* among the bourgeoisie in the 18th century, the *Communist Manifesto* became popular among proletarians in the 1800s, serving as a foundational text to launch political revolutions in 19th century Europe. Marx and Engels created the *Communist Manifesto* in this era, during which several social and political revolutions occurred, as well as rapid developments in many aspects. The social background of the Industrial Revolution, widespread poverty, and political depression were the main factors that influenced the ideas in the *Communist Manifesto*.

#### V. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

One of the biggest problems ordinary people faced in the 19th century was poverty. The challenges of poverty were presented in 19th-century paintings (for example: *The Stonebreakers*) through the portrayal of poor working-conditions, hunger, inadequate housing, and death among ordinary people in society. Artists used color and light to depict real social phenomena in their paintings and to arouse people's concerns about poverty. Some paintings also promoted different ideas through the portrayal of the "heroic revolution," which guided more people to participate in the revolution that they chose to believe [8]. The emergence of these paintings in the 19th century provided the best evidence of the severe poverty during that time. The abolition of poverty was also the main goal that Marx and Engels were trying to achieve. They genuinely felt the hardships suffered by working-class people, including farmers and workers. At that time, workers toiled onerously but still bore debts, and were not able to guarantee a basic life with enough food to eat and a place to live [4]. Marx and Engels believed that through Communism's ideology, the problem of poverty would be eventually solved by implementing Communist policies and abolishing private property. Political repression in the 19th century was another reason that influenced Marx and Engels to write the *Communist Manifesto*. In his book *Political Repression in 19th Century Europe*, Robert Justin Goldstein described some conventional techniques of political repression (namely suffrage discrimination and restrictions on freedom) and expressed his concern for the civil and political rights of the people. He deeply believed in the necessity of strikes and revolutions in 19th century Europe [5]. Marx and Engels also observed the political repression that happened in nations and societies ruled by Capitalist politicians. Marx and Engels published the *Communist Manifesto* to appeal to people who resisted Capitalist politicians that oppressed and exploited their political and civil authority. They contradicted the idea of Capitalism to maintain political freedom and civil rights for the working class and to uphold their political ideology. In Marx and Engels' opinion, by issuing the *Communist Manifesto*, more people would be familiar with Communist ideas; and by replacing the Capitalist government with a Communist government, the problems of political repression and civil rights could be fundamentally resolved [4].

The Industrial Revolution that occurred from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century acted as an essential

component to the formation of the structure of society. E.W. Cooney, the writer of *19th-century Building*, illustrated that the effect of the Industrial Revolution was not only "rapid economic growth" and "the rise of factory system," but also started the rise of Capitalism [1]. The capitalists gained great economic benefits during the Industrial Revolution, and their social influence and status were largely promoted. They successfully replaced the princes and nobles and became the ruling class of society. In contrast, the working-class as the group that directly created wealth, had instead become increasingly poor [1]. The capitalists' dominant position in society and poverty among the working-class people caused by the Industrial Revolution led to the emergence of the *Communist Manifesto* written by Marx and Engels. They believed that the working class was the basis of society, the main contributor to the Industrial Revolution, who deserved more benefits, and should become the ruling class of nations. Proletarians, as the largest social class, represented the interests of most people, which made them the only appropriate group that could indeed follow the path of Communism [4]. Marx and Engels saw and experienced the Industrial Revolution, the poverty among regular people, and the political repression that motivated them to create the *Communist Manifesto*. They believed that making the proletarians the ruling class in society, abolishing all private property, and implementing Communist ideology would completely change or solve social problems.

#### VI. ARTWORK ANALYSIS

Artists created works that reflected the social background of 19th century Europe influenced by the *Communist Manifesto*. Gustave Courbet, a 19th-century Realism painter, often reflected on the facts of life and satirized social phenomenon in his artwork. He was deeply influenced by *The Communist Manifesto*, not only by his own admission but also from what can be seen in his painting, *The Stone Breakers* [2]. In this work, Courbet perfectly portrayed two working-class people and expressively reflected the poor situation that the proletarians were facing at the time. The life of *The Stone Breakers* was similar to the core idea that Marx and Engels suggested in *The Communist Manifesto*: the proletarian class, who are the laborers in society, experience the greatest poverty and hardship. The painting was completed in 1849, only one year after *The Communist Manifesto* was published. Influenced by their ideas, Courbet was concerned about the plight of the poor in society [2]. In the painting, he portrayed two typical workers removing stones with their bare hands from the road; by today's standards, this seems like a punishment assigned to prison laborers, but was a very normal form of work for poor people in the 19th century [2]. In addition, the two men have dark skin and slightly curved backs caused by working outside; they are wearing dirty clothes and pants with patches and big holes, weathered and torn yellow hats, and worn and dusty shoes. These factors are all indications that Courbet used to reveal the poor conditions experienced by proletarians. By utilizing shadows and light, he successfully focused all the attention on the two characters

in the painting with the purpose of strengthening the impression of working-class people. In order to show what is real, "Courbet [has] depicted a man that seems too old and a boy seems still too young for such back-breaking labor," meant to be an accurate account of the oppression and deprivation that was a common feature of proletariat life [2]. As an artistic leader of the Realism movement in 19th-century France, Courbet issued a manifesto on Realism by imitating Marx and Engels. It is fair to say that Courbet shared a similar point of view with the two revolutionaries, using visual art as his expressive form rather than the written word.



Fig. 1 Painting of *The Stone Breakers*

*The Stone Breakers* effectively portrayed Courbet's concern for proletarians as well as the shared statement Marx and Engels expressed in *The Communist Manifesto*. The success of this painting and of Courbet is powerful evidence of the popularization of *The Communist Manifesto* and the political and social revolutions brought by the seminal book.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The popularization of the *Communist Manifesto* and the revolutions it inspired in the 19th century are evidence of its impact. A significant example was the revolutions that pervaded Europe in 1848, known as the Springtime of the Peoples, the same year the *Communist Manifesto* was published. The core values and ideas of proletarian supremacy and criticism toward bourgeoisie presented in the *Communist Manifesto* stimulated these revolutions with strikes and parades organized by working-class people in large European countries including Germany, England, and France. Marx's writing style and word choice in the *Communist Manifesto* inspired proletarians, generated a mass appeal, and sparked political revolutions. Moreover, Marx's convincing notion about a new society dominated by the proletariat and his criticism of the bourgeoisie contributed to the popularity of his revolutionary idea of class destruction, continuing into the 20th century. The 1917 October Revolution, led by Marxist Vladimir Lenin, established Communism in the Soviet Union, while it was first introduced to China in the early 1900s and influenced the founding of Mao Zedong's Communist Party of China in 1949 (before the reform and opening-up policy). Although Marx and Engels' ideas have not been fully

interpreted and implemented, as seen in both the Soviet Union and China, they indeed brought forth one of the greatest ideological debates and contrasting economic models, Communism and Capitalism, to all of human society. The words they declared that "[proletarians] have a world to win" [4] played an important role in awakening the consciousness of the working class. The emergence of the *Communist Manifesto* and its great influence on society serves as a precious contribution to social culture, promoting economic self-awareness and the spirit of resistance of all mankind.

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