

A Letter to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Karl Marx

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Dear Comrade Karl and Comrade Friedrich: I write to you in appreciation and admiration. I have just read your *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and I have found it to be an outstanding analysis of industrial society. However, times have changed. And while I found your manifesto to be an incredibly well-written, scathing critique of capitalism, a primer on communism, a new way of looking at history and an incisive sociological study, the manifesto needs to be updated and given a facelift for modern times.

Nevertheless, your work today is just as pertinent as it was in 1848. The collapse of the United States' real estate market and the ensuing global recession of 2008 have engendered renewed interests in your ideas. Communism has a seat at the table of ideas in the modern world if it can to be adapted to the modern problems of capitalism by becoming more democratic, respecting the individual, adapting to a market based economy and readdressing the problems of wealth inequality and quality of life.

I have found the most startling aspect of your manifesto to be its complete disregard for democracy. Your manifesto is a vitriolic attack on the iniquities of capitalism and offers communism as the sole alternative. Yet, the modern era, with its

emphasis on human rights, has obviated the totalitarian nature that your essay suggests. The horrors of starvation and genocide in the Soviet Union, Cambodia, Red China and North Korea have made people wary of anything that reeks of communism. Your pronouncement that a “specter is haunting Europe [and the world]- the specter of communism” is accurate. Yet, the specter of communism has too long been stigmatized by rogue leaders and morally bankrupt actors (Marx 6). Your beloved communism has fallen prey to insupportable injustices in the name of your theories. Communism must be rescued and remolded for the modern era. The antiquated tactic of revolution must be discarded into the waste bin of history. The civil war raging in society cannot be settled by the “violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie...for the sway of the proletariat” (Marx 19). No! Your theories are excellent and their persuasiveness lies in their truthfulness, therefore it is of the utmost importance that communism not be done for the “incoherent mass” but by the people and for the people (Marx 15). Communism must be able to function in a democratic society, where everyone’s opinions from proletariat to bourgeoisie are valued equally, or else communism will never be viewed as a serious political philosophy. Communism must be compatible with the will of the people, not a hollow proclamation in their name.

By studying your writing it is evident that your work is dedicated to improving the lives of the common man. However, I feel as though the ubiquity of your sweeping declarations has deluded you into believing that communism will liberate humanity from the chains of oppression, which you claim are found in capitalism. I commend your

criticism for its novelty and its creativity. But your manifesto reduces people's freedoms in the name of a vague utopian vision. Specifically, your radical proposal for the "abolition of the family" is misguided and threatens to unravel the social fabric of a healthy society, which is most definitely not a capitalistic concept (Marx 24). The family is not a politically charged concept, but the building block of civilization. Even Freud, who criticized families for causing people to be unhappy and repressed, acknowledged that the family is the first step "to the succeeding stage of communal life in the form of bands of brothers" (Freud 55). Family is necessary to the stability of civilization and is not only irrelevant to capitalism but its abolition would be detrimental to communism. Modern communism needs the family not as an example of a capitalist tool of oppression but as an example of what people can achieve when they treat one their fellow workingmen and workingwomen like brothers and sisters. Moreover, your desire for an "equable distribution of the population over the country", the "establishment of industrial armies" and the "abolition of property in land" are all ideas that are incompatible with a respect for the desires, preferences and rights of a communist countries population (Marx 28). Communism is about enhancing people's liberty and sovereignty by freeing them from the degradation and oppression that capitalism exerts. Communism needs a human face, one that exhorts liberty rather than discreetly suppressing it. Let me not be swept away in my criticism of your work for my criticism is solely an expression of my love and desire to improve upon your labor, for I do not wish to be called tall when I am standing on the shoulders of literary giants. Your manifesto is replete with ideas that liberate the common man from enslavement to anonymous laws of economic efficiency with its promises of a better future through a "graduated income tax," "free education for

all children” and an “Equal liability of all to labor” (Marx 28). Yet, I do not believe that your theory of communism offers a panacea to the question of freedom. In fact, I believe that your theory needs to be revised to be compatible with capitalism so as to maximize people’s personal freedoms and their freedom from economic repression.

While I risk excommunication for my apostasy and my suggestion that communism is compatible with capitalism, I dare expand on my theory in hopes that you will at the very least come to understand my views, if not share them. I suggest keeping the broader framework of your communist thought but I believe that it can be augmented by some tenets of capitalistic thought. I find fault in your belief that the eradication of private property is a fundamental principle of communism. Your critique of private property stems from your claim that “Property, in its present form is based on the antagonism of capital and wage labor” (Marx 21). The very idea of property being a product of the commodification of human labor is central to your manifesto. But, property also allows people greater independence, a sense of ownership and is a driver of economic growth. Modern communism needs its archenemy, the market, to flourish. Simply put, markets allow people to make decisions about how to live their lives, and this affords people the most freedom. Nonetheless, I have not deviated too far from Marxist orthodoxy and I am still an ardent believer in the idea that the means of production should be owned publicly. Furthermore, capitalism couples power in the hands of the few while “communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labor of others by means of

such appropriation” (Marx 23). Your manifesto valiantly strives to preserve human rights and you have shown that you are a keen observer of how wealth and power are inextricably intertwined. It is not that communism needs to be reformed to fit capitalism, but that communism must undergo a natural evolution to address the inadequacies of modern capitalism.

Modern capitalism has alienated, impoverished and deprived millions of people of their homes and their occupation. Today globalization, financial chicanery, and income inequality have replaced land ownership as the prime iniquities of capitalism. Globalization, with its promise of a brighter future, has not only failed to deliver on its grandiose promises but has made life worse for millions of working class men and women. Millions of workers have been plunged into the industrial labor force, working for pennies, each as an anonymous “appendage of the machine” that is modern capitalism (Marx 14). Similarly, the financial sector has grown into a caricature of a Marxian nightmare. The financial sector—with its alphabet soup of financial instruments like “CDOs”, “HEls”, and “Abs”—has been likened to “financial weapons of mass destruction” by none other than Warren Buffet. The banking system, with little oversight, and sated with moral hazard, gambled with the future of the American people, and lost. Firms like Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley were complicit in the double dealing that plagued Wall Street, selling toxic mortgages to the American public while secretly betting against the same mortgages that they sold. And when the Banking system collapsed and threatened to take the world’s economy along, it was Main Street that paid

the price as Wall Street continued to thrive and prosper. You would be appalled by the blatant excesses of capitalism and the tornado of damage that it has wrought on the working class. Unlike the golden parachutes of financial executives, the working man has been forced to deal with the consequences of exorbitant mortgage rates and rising unemployment. Your call for the abolition of the banking sector to be replaced by a “national bank with state capital and an exclusive monopoly,” no longer seems far-fetched (Marx 28). The Great Recession of 2008 has revived your idea that capitalism is marred by an “epidemic of overproduction” and constant vicissitudes (Marx 13). Proclaimed dead with the fall of the Soviet Union, your words have come back to haunt us.

In the modern era, the bifurcation of society between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has not been as sharp as your prediction. However, the rising income inequality has threatened to eliminate the middle-class and realize your predictions. The gap between the Joe the plumbers and the Kim Khardashians is increasing and threatening to sweep away the middle class with it. Today, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, ignited by a banking sector run amok and ever-growing income inequality, has shown a willingness to explore alternatives to capitalism. Yet, the incoherence of the Occupy Movement has prevented it from tangible political change. Nevertheless, the political atmosphere is ripe for change, and if the political energy of the Occupy Movement can be harnessed by the communist movement, then results are not far off. The failure of modern capitalism to improve the lives of the everyman has forced us to

grapple with whether capitalism is doomed and “what the bourgeoisie, therefore produce, above all, is its own gravediggers” (Marx 20). The Occupy Movement is only one manifestation of this war for the minds of the American people. However, the Occupy Movement is only a tiny skirmish in the big scheme of things. The real battles are for the evolution of communist theory from your manifesto into a modern-day political, social and economic theory that is democratic, increases personal liberty, has some market based principles and has a minimum quality of life for all.

One of the many passages that stands out in your manifesto is your defense of everyone’s ability to have a minimum standard quality of life. In the face of the vagaries of capitalism your theories are a testament to your dedication to the people. Your stand for compulsory childhood education, graduated taxation, abolition of inheritance and the centralization of credit with the government is a stand for not only communism, but for humanism (Marx 28). Childhood education is at the center of equality, both political and economic, for all people. Education is the great equalizer; it is a social ladder that allows everyone an equal chance of social and economic improvement. Likewise, your emphasis on education might even cause rigid class lines to corrode as people of all walks of life are treated for who they are and not for who their father is. Similarly, graduated taxation and the abolition of inheritance is a bulwark against income inequality, as well as a guarantee of a minimum income. Modern tax theories and practices such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Negative Income Tax do exactly as you dreamed of and help many families escape generations of poverty. Yet, George Bush’s reduction of the Estate

Tax for the wealthiest Americans threatens to undermine democracy as well as make equality of opportunity irrelevant. We are now in a war against the pyramid scheme that our society has come as the wealthiest Americans reap the rewards and preach of a natural meritocracy as millions of Americans are consigned to the ever-shrinking middle class. Likewise, the minimum quality of life that you extoll is constantly under threat as welfare, Social Security as well as Medicare and Medicaid are assailed for their deleterious effect on the American economy. But, we need these social welfare programs more than ever if we are to make the welfare of all human beings a goal of our society. I am in complete agreement that communism needs to ardently defend one's quality of life against the modern epoch and its unhealthy emphasis on material wealth, while outright ignoring abject poverty.

I would like to end my letter by reiterating my appreciation for your manifesto. Though it may be short in length; its ideas have played an integral role in shaping the world since its publication. However, your work is not an infallible bible of communism. Times have changed and so must theory. I can only hope that you interpret my letter as the highest form of adoration, wishing to improve upon your theories because I believe in them. I am forever in ideological debt to your ideas.

Sincerely,

Ephraim S. Margolin