

Charles Hwang

Professor Hoppe

PHIL 182-002

5 April 2017

Paper 2

In the work *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels discuss the implementation of communism and its benefits for society. In my paper, I intend to analyze these benefits that Marx and Engels mention as well as the distinction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Based on his writings in *The Republic*, Plato would likely hold mixed views on the points made by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. For example, Plato was opposed to the idea of private property, instead advocating for the concept of communal property, like under communism. On the other hand, Plato's city had a systematic hierarchy in the gold, silver, and bronze tiers, similar to the "classes" that Marx and Engels observe in capitalism, while communism is a classless society. I will show that Marx and Engels hold and defend well-reasoned views in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Marx and Engels begin by arguing that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has had a long history beginning with "the feudal system of industry" during the medieval era (Marx and Engels 15). Since then, they contend, markets have grown exponentially and the bourgeoisie revolutionized from guilds to machinery to industry while increasingly seeing workers only as the value of their labor and quantifying them in a ruthless quest for profit and domination. This oppresses the workers by effectively "forcing" them to work and be dependent on their paycheck, worth only their labor value. They view these as problems with capitalism where the bourgeoisie, the elite minority, oppresses the proletariat, the vast majority.

Marx and Engels paint a stark contrast and a fierce struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They view the bourgeoisie as greedy and all-powerful: "It has agglomerated population, centralised the means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralisation. Independent, or but loosely

connected provinces ... became lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class-interest, one frontier, and one customs-tariff" (17). The bourgeoisie, as defined by Marx and Engels, asserts total control over their workers and thus society. On the other hand, the proletariat's condition has worsened over time: "The work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. ... as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases" (18). The proletariat is, in essence, enslaved to the bourgeoisie.

Marx and Engels maintain that the bourgeoisie oppresses the proletariat because those in the proletariat can only survive by working for the bourgeoisie that value them only for their labor: "The proletariat, the modern working class, developed — a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed ... to all the fluctuations of the market" (18). They view this as exploitation by the bourgeoisie of the proletariat because of the bourgeoisie monopolizing modern industry.

Marx and Engels view communism as the most just form of government for several reasons. They see communists as the strongest, most unequivocal advocates for the modern working class being oppressed by the bourgeoisie (22). They also note that communists support the abolition of private property owned by the bourgeoisie, including their industries and machines to which the proletariat is enslaved. They also forecast, address, and refute several potential objections to communism: "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" (23). The abolition of private property, they claim, only affects the bourgeoisie because a person who owns private property is, by definition, part of the bourgeoisie. They write: "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 labour of others by means of such appropriations” (24). In theory, by abolishing private property, no person or group of people can oppress or enslave any other person or group of people.

Plato, based on his writings in *The Republic*, would not fully agree with Marx and Engels’s view of communism. However, regarding the abolition of private property, Plato has stated his opposition to private property and would likely agree with their point to only allow communal property in society. On the other hand, Plato’s city in *The Republic* made the societal hierarchy a main point, where people are “born into” and raised in gold, silver, and bronze tiers. These tiers would make society unequal and would go against Marx and Engels’s goal of communism. The gold and silver tiers are similar to the bourgeoisie, while the bronze tier is similar to the proletariat. Consequently, Plato advocates for a communal environment *within each tier* of society, which, by Marx and Engels’s line of reasoning, means that the gold and silver tiers own private property and assert power over the bronze tier because they are considered part of the bourgeoisie.

I find Marx and Engels’s account of communism to be misleading. For example, when they discuss the revolutionizing of industry, they imply that they are referring to companies that own factories for production. They then continue their line of reasoning from there, assuming all bourgeoisie are connected to such companies, when the reality is a vast majority of businesses at any point in time did not operate factories or even machinery. The end goal of communism that they discuss is also misguided; they claim that the proletariat is liberated from the bourgeoisie, where instead many become enslaved under a new master—the State. Also, by declaring that everyone who owns property is part of the bourgeoisie is inaccurate, especially when they demand such harsh punishments against them (“The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at” (23)). Furthermore, they sometimes bring up objections to their writings but fail to counter them: “In one word, you reproach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so; that is just what we intend” (23). Although the case they make for communism is well-reasoned, they appear to never

cite any sources for almost all of their assertions, essentially making *The Communist Manifesto* an opinion piece. The visions of communism of Marx and Engels were evidently very different from actual communism implemented in countries as they fail to address the ultimate problem: the State, which oversees so much wealth redistribution and accumulates so much power that they become a bourgeoisie of their own. They list several measures of communism, including the “confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels,” “centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly,” and “centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State” (26). They fail to see that this transfer of power from the bourgeoisie to the State does not get rid of said power over the people.