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The “Why” Behind the “What” of the Communist Manifesto

Introduction:

The most well-known work by Marx is undoubtedly the Communist Manifesto co-authored by Friedrich Engels. Engels describes the document in a preface written for the English edition in 1888. Its purpose was to create a unified platform for the forming secret political movement of the International Communist League. “The Manifesto was published as the platform of the Communist League, a working men's association, first exclusively German, later on international, and under the political conditions of the Continent before 1848, unavoidably a secret society.” (Marx/Engels 3) The word communist was chosen quite intentionally when drawing up the manifesto. By the time of writing the word socialist would have been quite inappropriate to refer to Marx's' ideas. Many others at the time referred to themselves as socialists, and Marx wanted to draw a clear line in the sand between himself and other socialists, a topic that is certainly discussed in the manifesto. “By Socialists, in 1847, were understood, on the one hand the adherents of the various Utopian systems: Owenites in England, Fourierists in France, both of them already reduced to the position of mere sects, and gradually dying out; on the other hand, the most multifarious social quacks who, by all manner of tinkering, professed to redress, without any danger to capital and profit, all sorts of social grievances, in both cases men outside the working-class movement, and looking rather to the “educated” classes for support. ... And as our notion, from the very beginning, was that “the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself,” there could be no doubt as to which of the two names we must take.” (Marx/Engels 5).

Other forms of socialism rested on an upper class of educated individuals to advance progressive social policies through what Marx called “political revolutions”. Marx recognized that for a genuine socialist world to come about, revolutions of the social kind must occur from the working and oppressed class itself. The Communist Manifesto was drafted to delineate the Marxian or Communist conception of socialism, and to succinctly communicate this to those who were not educated. Being relatively simple, the manifesto makes very many “**What**” statements; “**What** is the materialist conception of history”, “**What** is the problem with capitalism”, “**What** is the proper course of action”. It

contains very few “**Why**” statements. It is therefore understandable that one would have a dismissive view of Marx from a reading of only the Manifesto. Who is this guy Marx to tell me what I ought to believe for no good reason at all? In this essay, I plan to cover multiple of the **What** statements that Marx discusses in the Manifesto, and back them up with his **Why** statements in works such as *The Theses on Feuerbach*, *The German Ideology*, *On James Mill*, and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

Major “Whats” of the Manifesto.

Engels in the Preface says the fundamental proposition of the Manifesto is, “That in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which it is built up, and from that which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind ... has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; That the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class – the proletariat – cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class – the bourgeoisie – without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles.” (Marx/Engels 6) The Manifesto revolves around two major areas of thought.

The first is the materialist conception of history, an idea that was an expansion upon the work of the Young Hegelians such as Feuerbach. This is what’s referred to in the famous opening sentence, “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.” (Marx/Engels 9) Marx describes the process of history evolving first from feudalism to bourgeois society to socialism and communism. Feudalism and capitalism can be characterized by their class distinctions and subsequent struggles. Communism is characterized as a classless society, and would therefore not include such struggles. It is what history is pointing towards, and what is necessary for history to reach a conclusion. The materialist aspect of the theory refers to the fact that all the changes and mechanisms by which history moves forward are ultimately derived from the material needs of man. This includes the ideas by which he understands the world. This was a major turn from enlightenment theories of history, that the course of history was changed by individuals striving towards ideals. The materialist shift claims that the ideas were a product of their material base. Engels compares it to Darwin’s theory of evolution in biology, a system of change over time according to certain guidelines and ultimately a material base.

The second aspect is an analysis of the specific modes of production and organizations of society that prevailed during his period, the “bourgeois period”. These are the lines and “**What**” statements he makes about where the lines are drawn between the bourgeois and the proletariat. It is a mostly economic analysis of the capitalist mode of production. It is also a claim that the capitalist mode of production is inherently unstable. He describes the bourgeoisie as such, “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.” (Marx/Engels 12) The bourgeois mode of production is characterized by constant expansion as opposed to feudal society which stayed largely static in its economic organization. They are only able to keep this mode of production going through exploitation of the proletariat. Private property is the defining means by which the capitalist mode of production stays alive. Therefore, it is the definition of the next step, and communism is then defined by the abolition of private property. “..the theory of Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property” (Marx/Engels 23).

Why The Materialist Conception of History

The “**Why**” behind the materialist conception of history is most fundamentally laid out in a text called *The German Ideology* written by Marx and Engels to “settle accounts with their former philosophical views.” (McLellan 175) Marx’ former affiliation with Feuerbach was broken as they could not agree on the fact that the world and its conditions changed. Feuerbach reworked Hegel to show that all the spiritual or transcendental ideas were really a product of human projection, of self-alienation due to problems in the secular or human base. Marx expanded on this by showing that those secular conditions could be changed to destroy the apparent need for those ideas to fill the gaps in the base. Feuerbach was thinking materially, but not historically. His analysis allowed for no escape from the alienation that he believed was caused by the world. Marx dramatically states at the end of *Theses on Feuerbach* “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” (McLellan 173)

In the *German Ideology*, it is laid out how Marx’ understanding of the materialist conception of history would work post-Feuerbach. It is important to note that he still is taking from Feuerbach in that everything is a product of humanity, and not receiving from the machinations of Absolute Spirit like in Hegel. “In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend

from earth to heaven.” (McLellan 180) He begins with the premises that for history to exist, human beings must exist. Humans are distinguished from animals by their consciousness, or by their production of their own means of subsistence. This then makes their consciousness determined by their material conditions and their ideas not independently derived tools, but products of their material conditions. It is for this reason that the revolution must take place first in the consciousness of the proletariat.

There are four major moments in listed not in order of importance in the German Ideology which turn the materialist conception of reality into the materialist conception of history.

1. Man has needs which he must satisfy. Thus they must produce the means of their own subsistence. This is as simple as the need to produce food in order to continue one’s life. This precedes all thought, all idealizing, and all other aspects that we might want to presume to human life. It begins with the production of means to subsistence.
2. After some needs are satisfied, other needs naturally spring up. The modes of production themselves presume certain needs. For example, when someone uses a gun to satisfy the need of self-defense, they create the need of gunpowder and bullets to be replenished. Even if the means of production are artificial (such as private property in Marx’s opinion) the needs that are derived from this mode of production become real. Needs are built upon needs, but the means for satisfying these needs are always creations of man. This means that some of the needs may be unnecessary, and essentially deadweight.
3. To create the historical process, there must be an aspect of life that propagates more life. Essentially reproduction or some aspect of family life is necessary to create history.
4. The production of means is both a natural and social relationship. Man must have needs by his own material nature, and he also inherits the means and their derivative needs from society around him and its history. Man cannot pretend that his production is solely dependent on his own production from birth. There is no such thing as a wholly “self-made man”. He must inherit, language, blueprints, culture, and other means of production from society in order to cooperate and live with them. It was this aspect of production that Isaac Newton was referring to when he said that he stood on the shoulders of giants. He could not have created his theories without using the means of the history of scientific inquirers before him.

On these grounds, history becomes a process of human life producing various modes of production to satisfy its means. The needs are determined by the materialist base and history consists

of various modes of production rising and falling in the contexts of various societies. When these modes of production come into conflict with one another, or when the artificial means or unnecessary means of production are consciously realized, revolution occurs. The former means are destroyed and new ones rise to take their place. The new means always arise from the ones that are destroyed. This is why Marx will claim that the bourgeois revolutions are necessary before the socialist ones that will come. "The bourgeoisie has played a most important revolutionary role." (Marx/Engels 11)

Why Is Capitalism Economically Exploitative

Much of the "What" in the manifesto is concerned with what makes the capitalist mode of production unstable, unnecessary, and inhuman. Marx declares the central produced idea of the bourgeois revolution in the Manifesto is that of self-interest. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." (Marx/Engels 11) The focus on the individual adds on the new need of private property. Private property is derived from the supposed need of the individual. Both the capitalist mode of production, and the feudal mode of production before it operate on exploitation. The separation from private property and exchange trade makes this possible.

Private property and commodity exchange give the world a very different non-human character. This world is referred as the world of things opposed to the human world. The process by which the world of things is made is alienation. "We start with a contemporary fact of political economy: The worker becomes poorer the richer is his production, the more it increases in power and scope. The worker becomes a commodity that is all the cheaper the more commodities he creates. The depreciation of the human world progresses in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things. Labor does not only produce commodities; it produces itself and the laborer as a commodity and that to the the extent to which it produces commodities in general." (McLellan 86) He goes on in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* to describe the mechanisms by which alienation happens through private property. These aspects of capitalism show that not only is private property unnecessary, but it alienates us from true human needs as well. The world of things then propagates and multiplies itself with unbounded growth.

In the writings titled, *On James Mill* Marx describes how men have separated and arbitrarily

defined themselves into classes by the nature of private property. "...starts from the relationship of man to man, as that of private property owner to private property owner. IF man as private property owner is presupposed, i.e. man as an exclusive owner who keeps his personality and distinguishes himself from other men by means of this exclusive property..." (McLellan 126) The growth over time of the world of things and the separation of men into classes is what allows for the proletariat to grow as a class and for them to have something to revolt against.

Conclusion

A significant portion of the manifesto not discussed in this essay is the particular strategies and plans by which the proletariat will be organized and the revolution be undergone. These "**Whats**" are elaborated on in most detail in the manifesto clearly reflecting its purpose; to first inform the proletariat of the "**Whats**" and then providing them with the "**Hows**" of reaching the next stage. The proletariat had no need for the "**Whys**" which other intellectuals may have demanded of Marx. They were already at the point where they needed new means to provide for their human needs which capitalism had neglected. The Communist Manifesto and the means which it presented to them were exactly those. As Marx's materialist conception of history showed the idea does not precede the action. All actions are done based on base needs. The proletariat did not need to produce their own theory, Marx had done it for them. All he needed was for them to create these new modes into the world.

Works Cited:

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