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Research Article

The Concept of Class in Marx and Engels: A Study of the German Ideology and the Communist Manifesto

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Abstract

The concept of class occupies a central place in the social and historical thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Yet their understanding of class is not presented as a single, fixed definition in either *The German Ideology* or *The Communist Manifesto*. Instead, it arises from their examination of material production, labour division, property dynamics, social conflict, and historical evolution. This article explores how the idea of class is reflected in these two significant texts through a qualitative analysis of the content and concepts presented. It contends that *The German Ideology* lays the groundwork for understanding class emergence by linking social relations to production development, labour division, and ownership rights. Conversely, *The Communist Manifesto* offers this understanding in a more immediate and historically specific manner by analysing the bourgeoisie, proletariat, and class conflict. The study highlights a notable consistency between both works. In both works, class is not merely defined as a group based on income or profession but as a social relation shaped by historically established production and property relations. Moreover, *The Communist Manifesto* sharpens this concept politically by framing class struggle as a pivotal agent of historical change. Thus, a comparative analysis of the two texts reveals both continuity and evolution in Marx and Engels' views on class.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of class is among the ideas most closely associated with the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Class, class conflict and the historical development of society are so closely connected in Marxist thought that it is difficult to discuss one without the others. According to Guddle¹, Marx and Engels have not provided a single, systematic definition of class that can be applied to every historical situation. This has led to continuing discussion regarding what constitutes a class and how the concept should be understood within their broader theory of society.

A useful way of approaching this issue is to study the writings in which the concept develops in relation to concrete historical

and social questions. *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto* are particularly important in this respect. The two works were written within a relatively short period, but they differ considerably in purpose and style. *The German Ideology*, originally written in 1845–1846, develops a materialist approach to history and examines the relationship between material life, production, division of labour, property and social relations. *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848, gives these ideas a more direct political and historical expression through its analysis of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and the struggle between classes.

The relationship between these two works is therefore significant. If *The German Ideology* explains the material and

historical conditions through which social divisions emerge, *The Communist Manifesto* brings these conditions into sharper focus by examining the class structure of capitalist society. The movement from one text to the other is not simply a movement from theory to politics. Rather, the second work develops and applies several of the assumptions already visible in the first.

This inquiry investigates the conceptualisation of class as presented in *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*. Through a qualitative textual analysis, the study explores how these texts link class to material production, the division of labour, property frameworks, social structures, and historical evolution. While secondary literature is utilised to establish scholarly context and conceptual clarity, the study intentionally restricts its scope to these two seminal works rather than providing an exhaustive overview of Marxist class theory. Consequently, the findings are delimited by the specific historical and textual parameters of the primary sources and represent a grounded interpretation of these complex philosophical and political arguments.

2. The Concept of Class in The German Ideology:

A discussion of class in *The German Ideology* must begin with the method through which Marx and Engels approach history. Their point of departure is not an abstract idea of humanity or a purely philosophical conception of society. They begin with real individuals, their activity and the material conditions within which they live. Human beings must first produce the means necessary for their existence, and the manner in which they produce these means is connected with the wider form of their social life.²

This approach is important for understanding class. Class is not treated as an isolated political category or as a simple division based on social status. It is connected with the organisation of material life. Marx and Engels argue that the way individuals produce their means of subsistence is also a definite way of organising their lives. What individuals produce and how they produce it are therefore connected with the social relations into which they enter.

The development of productive forces and the division of labour occupy an important place in this analysis. The degree of division of labour, according to the text, is closely connected with the development of production and with the internal organisation of society. This suggests that social divisions cannot be understood independently of the organisation of productive activity. As production becomes more complex, the division of labour also develops, producing differentiated forms of social activity and increasingly distinct social relationships.

Marx and Engels trace these developments historically. Their discussion of forms of property shows that different forms of social organisation correspond to different conditions of production. In their account of feudal society, the authors stated that landed property was connected with serf labour, while urban life involved guild organisation and relations between masters, journeymen and apprentices. These distinctions were not merely occupational differences. They were connected with historically specific forms of property and production².

This historical approach is significant because it prevents class from appearing as a permanent or unchanging feature of human society. Social divisions change as the material organisation of society changes. The relationship between nobility and serfs, for instance, belongs to a different historical organisation from that between capitalists and wage labourers. Marx and Engels therefore link the changing structure of classes to changing forms of property and production.

The connection between division of labour and private property is especially important. In *The German Ideology*, the division of labour is associated with the unequal distribution of labour and its products. Marx and Engels describe division of labour and private property as closely related expressions of the same historical process, while one concerns activity and the other concerns the product of that activity. The significance of this argument is that class divisions cannot be separated from relations of control over productive activity and its results.

The division of labour also produces a separation between the particular interests of individuals and the wider social interest. Individuals become connected to specific forms of activity that they do not freely determine. Their own collective activity can consequently appear as a power external to them. Marx and Engels describe this as a condition in which social power, although produced through human cooperation, confronts individuals as something beyond their control.

This point deepens their conception of class. Class is not simply a collection of individuals who happen to share a similar economic position. It is connected with the way social relations become organised independently of the will of particular individuals. People are placed within historically developed relations that shape their possibilities, interests and conditions of life.

The discussion of the town and country provides another illustration of this process. Marx and Engels describe the separation of town and country as an important form of the division of labour. It involves a concentration of population, productive instruments and capital in one sphere and relative isolation in another. They directly connect this division with the emergence of large social classes and with the conditions of private property. The argument again points to the material basis of social division.

The analysis also moves beyond the relation between production and property to consider the relationship between class and political or ideological life. Marx and Engels insist that social and political structures must be understood in relation to the actual life-process of individuals and their material activity. Political institutions and forms of consciousness cannot simply be treated as independent causes of historical development. They are connected with the conditions under which people live and produce.

This is particularly visible in their discussion of the ruling class and ruling ideas. The class that possesses dominant material power also occupies a dominant position in the production and circulation of ideas. Marx and Engels therefore reject an interpretation of history that separates dominant ideas from the social groups and material conditions that produce them. Class,

in this sense, has both a material and a political-ideological dimension. A class is situated within a particular set of productive relations, but its historical position is also expressed through institutions, political power and forms of consciousness. Another important aspect of *The German Ideology* is the distinction between the individual and the class position occupied by the individual. Marx and Engels argue that people always act within historically given conditions and relationships. With the development of the division of labour, individuals increasingly find themselves situated within social relations that have an independent existence. The capitalist or the proletarian remains an individual person, but that person is also shaped by definite class relationships. This distinction helps to avoid a purely individualistic understanding of class. Class is not primarily a matter of personal characteristics, intentions or moral qualities. The capitalist and the worker occupy different positions within a set of social relations that neither individual has created alone. Their relationship must therefore be analysed structurally and historically.

The position of the proletariat receives particular attention in the later sections of the work. The development of modern industry produces a class of propertyless workers whose conditions of existence are increasingly shaped by labour and competition. The proletarian condition is connected with a situation in which individuals have little control over the social and economic forces governing their lives. At the same time, Marx and Engels see the proletariat as historically distinct from earlier oppressed groups because its position is connected with the development of modern productive forces.

Thus, the concept of class in *The German Ideology* is embedded within a broader explanation of historical development. Production creates social relations; the development of the division of labour produces differentiated positions; property relations consolidate these differences; and the resulting classes enter into relationships of dominance, dependence and conflict. Therefore, class appears as a historically developed form of social organisation.

3. The Concept of Class in The Communist Manifesto:

While *The German Ideology* provides the conceptual and material foundations for understanding class, *The Communist Manifesto*³ presents the issue in a more direct historical and political form. Its famous opening proposition that the history of existing society is the history of class struggles immediately places conflict at the centre of historical development. Marx and Engels identify a succession of opposed social groups, including masters and slaves, patricians and plebeians, and lords and serfs. In the modern period, however, they argue that social antagonism has taken a particularly clear form in the opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

This formulation does not abandon the material analysis developed in *The German Ideology*. On the contrary, the classes described in the *Manifesto* are still understood through their relationship to production and property. The bourgeoisie emerges through the development of modern industry, commerce and the world market. Its historical rise is connected

with its role in transforming the instruments and organisation of production. The *Manifesto* recognises the historically revolutionary role played by the bourgeoisie in destroying older forms of production and social relations, even while strongly criticising the exploitative character of capitalist society.

This is an important feature of the text. Marx and Engels do not describe the bourgeoisie simply as a morally corrupt group. They analyse it historically. The bourgeoisie becomes a dominant class because it is associated with the development of new productive forces and a new form of property. Its rise is therefore connected with a transformation in the material organisation of society.

At the same time, the development of the bourgeoisie produces its opposite: the proletariat. The modern working class emerges as a class that does not possess the means of production and must sell its labour in order to live. The *Manifesto* describes workers as dependent on employment and subject to the fluctuations of competition and the market. The development of machinery and the division of labour further transform the character of work, reducing the worker's control over the labour process and making labour increasingly subordinate to the requirements of capital.

The relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is therefore not simply a relationship between rich and poor. It is a relationship between two classes whose positions arise from the capitalist organisation of production. The existence of capital depends upon wage labour, and the development of the bourgeoisie is accompanied by the development of the proletariat. Das⁴ emphasises this relational aspect of the *Manifesto*, noting that capital and wage labour are internally connected and that the expansion of one is linked to the development of the other.

This relational understanding is central to the concept of class. The bourgeoisie and the proletariat are not independent categories that happen to come into conflict. Their opposition is produced by the same system of social relations. Capitalist property requires the separation of workers from the productive resources necessary for independent production, while the owners of capital depend on wage labour for the accumulation of capital.

The *Manifesto* also connects class with the increasing concentration and centralisation of economic power. The development of capitalism tends to bring productive resources and property under increasingly concentrated forms of control. This economic centralisation is associated with broader processes of political centralisation. The significance of this argument is that class is not treated as an exclusively economic phenomenon. Economic power has political consequences, and the development of a dominant class is related to the organisation of political authority.

The relationship between class and historical change becomes especially clear in the discussion of class struggle. Earlier societies also contained social conflicts, but Marx and Engels argue that capitalism simplifies and intensifies the opposition between dominant and subordinate classes. The bourgeoisie creates the conditions for the formation of a large proletariat, while simultaneously producing the contradictions that make its own continued dominance unstable.

The proletariat is consequently given a distinctive historical role. Other social groups may suffer under capitalism, but their interests do not necessarily lead them beyond the existing structure of society. The *Manifesto* distinguishes the proletariat from sections of the lower middle class and other groups whose struggles may seek to preserve or restore an earlier social position. The proletariat, by contrast, is presented as a class whose emancipation requires a transformation of the existing relations of production.

This is where the concept of class acquires a more explicit political meaning. A class is not only located within a particular relation of production; it may also become conscious of its common position and act collectively. The *Manifesto* therefore links the objective conditions of class existence with the possibility of collective political action.

The discussion of private property further clarifies this point. The critique of communism in the *Manifesto* does not simply call for the abolition of all forms of personal possession. Its central concern is bourgeois property as a historically specific form of property connected with capitalist production and class antagonism. Das⁴ explains this distinction by emphasising that the text is concerned with the abolition of the capitalist form of property that rests upon the separation between those who control productive resources and those who must sell their labour.

This argument shows continuity with *The German Ideology*. In both works, class is connected with property, but property itself is understood historically. Different forms of property belong to different forms of production and generate different social relationships. The capitalist class is therefore not simply defined by wealth; its distinctive position arises from its control over the means through which social production is organised.

The historical context of the *Manifesto* is also relevant to its sharper emphasis on the proletariat and class conflict. Boyer⁵ situates the text within the economic and political conditions of the 1840s and shows the importance of early industrial capitalism and working-class conditions in shaping the analysis developed by Marx and Engels. The experiences of industrialisation, economic crisis and political agitation formed part of the historical setting in which the *Manifesto* was written.

However, the *Manifesto* should not be reduced entirely to its immediate context. Its analysis attempts to identify a broader

historical pattern: classes emerge and change with the transformation of material conditions, and class antagonisms become important forces in periods of social transition. While critically reassessing the *Manifesto* in relation to contemporary globalisation, Sassen⁶ also treats it as a work containing significant analytical insights into the structural dynamics of capitalism.

The central point remains that class struggle in the *Manifesto* is not an accidental conflict between groups. It is rooted in the organisation of capitalist society itself. The bourgeoisie and proletariat occupy opposing positions because the same system that concentrates productive resources and property in the hands of one class requires another class to depend upon the sale of its labour. Historical conflict arises from this structured opposition.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A comparative reading of *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto* shows an important continuity in Marx and Engels' understanding of class. In both works, class is rooted in material conditions and relations of production rather than simply in differences of income, occupation or social status

However, the two texts approach this idea differently. *The German Ideology* provides the broader material and historical framework by explaining how social relations develop through production, division of labour and property. *The Communist Manifesto* takes this understanding into the context of capitalist society and focuses more directly on the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The difference between the two texts, however, should not be seen as a break. The *Manifesto* builds upon the materialist understanding already developed in *The German Ideology*. What becomes more prominent in the later work is the idea that class relations can also become relations of conflict and struggle. Therefore, class is connected not only with the organisation of society but also with the possibility of historical change.

Taken together, the two works show that Marx and Engels understood class as a historically developed social relationship. The form of class may change with changing conditions of production and property, but its analysis must always begin with the material relations through which society is organised.

5. CONCLUSION

The study shows that *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto* offer closely related perspectives on the concept of class. *The German Ideology* helps explain the material and historical conditions through which social divisions and class relations emerge. *The Communist Manifesto* develops this understanding through a more direct examination of capitalist society and the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The two works should therefore be understood as closely connected. The earlier work provides an important foundation

for understanding the material basis of class, while the later work develops this understanding through the analysis of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and class struggle. Together, they show that class is not merely a social category but a historically developed relationship connected with production, property and historical change.

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