

COMMUNISM

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are widely accepted as having founded both Communism as an ideology and as a movement. Communism was derived out of Marxist thought, inspired by *The Communist Manifesto*, and operationalised after the Russian Revolution under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin. Simply put, theoretically, Communism postulates a society in which property is communally owned and hierarchies based on status or birth are eradicated. But of course, practically, Communism has had many iterations on the theme.

Pre-Marxian conceptions of Communism have been entertained since the fourteenth century according to some and drew legitimacy from the life of Christ and the Bible. However, Thomas More's *Utopia* is a more direct progenitor of Communist thought as it advocated that "you'll never get a fair distribution of goods, or a satisfactory organisation of human life, until you abolish private property altogether." The French Revolution of 1789 in which citizens grabbed power from the monarch was a watershed moment for Engels and Marx who penned the most authoritative text of what became known as Marxism, *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

In it, Marx and Engels advanced the central premise that historically, since the disintegration of tribal society in which the concept of private ownership did not reside, humans have been involved in a class struggle between those who labour, the proletariat, and those who merely enjoy the fruits of that labour, the bourgeoisie. They contended further that all history is the history of class confrontation and now the time had arrived for the proletariat to seize the means of production and affect their emancipation as well as the emancipation of society at large from those who would look to exploit, oppress and hence, entrench class distinctions. *The Manifesto* provided a materialist view of history where people's condition was seen in terms of their economic situation and how that situation positioned them politically.

The places most ready for revolution and the proletarian takeover of capitalism, Marxist theory proposed, were countries at the peak of industrialisation, which at the time were Germany and Britain. However, revolution failed to materialise in both countries. The Russian Revolution in 1917 spearheaded by Vladimir Lenin was Communism's first great triumph. Later other Communist states emerged with China and Yugoslavia noteworthy among them for their organic revolutions, not brought about by direct Soviet intervention.

The Tenets of Communism

Communist ideology consisted of a number of tenets that separated it from democratic socialism which are as follows:

- Communism held firmly to the belief that the Communist party must have the monopoly of power.
 - While in some Communist countries, there were other parties, they had no power at all to function as such. The Communist party derived its legitimacy from

its claim to have the sole ownership of the theoretical and practical wherewithal to build a socialist and then communist society. What resulted was a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat and all others rather than a dictatorship of the proletariat.

- Democratic centralism was another defining feature of Communism.
 - Theoretically, democratic centralism entailed electing party bodies on all fronts, giving primacy to majorities, the right to discuss any issue till a settlement had been reached, and then the unwavering adoption of the decision once made. In reality, all party elections were generally co-operations or appointments. As such democratic centralism was more synonymous with bureaucratic centralism with its rigid centralisation, hierarchies, and lack of tolerance for disagreement.
- Communist ideology espoused as one of its fundamental tenets the opinion that to extinguish capitalism, it is necessary to have public ownership of property and the means of production. This generally translated to the state owning the means of production.
- Communists also believed that an economy that was centrally designed and controlled was more likely to be fair and effective.
 - Countries like Yugoslavia, however, began to experiment with 'market socialism' and China subsequently not only marketised but also began to privatise.
- The fifth feature was the sense of connection towards an International Communist Movement which conjoined people from across the world in a unified cause.
- The sixth feature was a commitment to building a society free of class or state as envisioned by Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

The internationalism of Communism is doubtlessly one of its great draws. In practice, Soviet leaders were more concerned with national interests and showed little allegiance to Communist internationalism. In time, proletarian or socialist internationalism were words that became code to indicate allegiance to the Soviet agenda. In fact, Stalin was distinctly against cosmopolitanism as he fostered a cult of personality and a sense of the Russian fatherland in contradistinction to internationalism. His contention was that capitalism was a product of cosmopolitanism and hence, in a convoluted way he could still marry his non-cosmopolitanism to the communist cosmology where capitalism is to be defeated.

Adapted from Archie Brown, 'Communism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)