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What Does a Communist Do?

The definition of what it means to be a communist found in the *Communist Manifesto* is surprising and somewhat paradoxical.

It surprises, above all, for saying almost nothing about what a communist is, and rather focusing on what a communist is not: communists “do not form a separate party,” they “do not set up any sectarian principles of their own,” their immediate aims “are the same as those of all other proletarian parties,” and in theory, they “merely express, in general terms, the actual relations springing from an existing class struggle.” That is: they do not organize separately, do not defend principles different from others, nor do they focus on distinct political agendas — and their theory serves to express ideas that are already present in struggles carried out by other political forces and organizations.

The only unique feature Marx and Engels attribute to communists is a special concern with articulating the different fronts of proletarian struggle into a whole: communists “point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat,” and they “always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.” Even the communist horizon of the abolition of private property is not presented as a goal that would only be pursued by communists — rather, the abolition of private property is understood as the expression “of a historical movement going on before our eyes,” that is, as the explicitation of a political orientation already at play across the field of proletarian struggles. The abolition of private property would also be an attempt to express the common interest underlying the various existing fronts of struggle.

This definition is also surprising because it suggests that the radical “common” in “communism” does not primarily refer to a future society — it is not the shape of the society to come after the abolition of private property — but rather to a political position in the present. This insight is

important, for without it we might easily and mistakenly conclude that the vocation of communists is to form a historical vanguard uniquely capable of directing struggles due to a more advanced theoretical understanding of the society to come.

Without attention to the fact that communists seek, above all, to investigate the common interests across the different fronts of proletarian struggle, it is impossible to understand in what sense they constitute “the most resolute section of the working-class parties of every country.” Their decisiveness does not come from the individual morality of militants or from some superhuman commitment, but from the conviction, derived from their practice, that proletarian struggles — even when centered on particular interests — can be connected, potentially forming a broad international movement. Without understanding that the goals of communists “are the same as those of the other proletarian parties,” it is also impossible to grasp in what sense the communist fraction “pushes them forward,” as Marx and Engels write in the *Manifesto*.

Communists would not necessarily be better leaders, since they possess no special quality that distinguishes them in the collective effort to achieve the goals of each struggle. Their particular attribute, as we have seen, is their concern with “the movement as a whole,” and therefore their ability to push a struggle forward could only come from this simultaneous attention to other fronts of struggle, from which each part of the proletarian movement may effectively draw additional strength. Even the statement that in theory, communists “have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement” must be understood in this context; otherwise, it leads to contradiction. As stated earlier, in their theory, communists only “express, in general terms, the actual relations springing from an existing class struggle” — and therefore their “clear understanding” of reality and of the aims of the movement could not stem from an intellectual capacity to see farther than other proletarian militants, based on a future that does not yet exist. The communists’ clearer theoretical understanding could only come, in fact, from their ability to look *sideways* — that is, to test any analysis of social reality by considering the various political experiences of the proletariat.

Where, then, does the idea come from that communists form a group that is essentially ahead of the others, defined by their ability to anticipate the fate of capitalism and direct proletarian struggles? This is where we encounter the paradoxical aspect of the definition presented in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Before discussing the relationship between the proletariat and the communists, which we have followed above, Marx and Engels describe the relationship between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie — the theme of the first chapter. It is a very complex analysis that assesses multiple dimensions of the formation of capitalism and the modern bourgeoisie. For our purposes, we can focus on just one aspect of this analysis, encapsulated in the following phrase: “the advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the laborers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association.”

This statement is supported by two arguments. The first is the observation that the bourgeoisie could not become a ruling class without “constantly revolutionizing” the productive forces, the relations of production, and all other social relations — a transformation that cannot be limited to one country or region. The bourgeoisie must “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” If this process was already remarkable in Marx’s time, it is even more visible and consolidated today. But the quote above adds a second element. Observing class struggle in the mid-19th century, especially in Europe, Marx and Engels conclude that this process would not only favor the consolidation of the bourgeoisie and the organization of modern capitalism, but also the self-organization of the workers themselves. They claim that “the weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.” That is, the same process of capitalist expansion and consolidation — the use of machines, the division and militarization of labor, the concentration of workers in factories, the destruction of community and family ties, etc. — would also prepare the ground for the expansion and consolidation of the working class as an international and organized political force. The *Manifesto* describes, for example, how “the interests and conditions of existence of the proletariat are made more and more equal, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labor.”

There lies the paradox: it is as if one could count on capitalism itself to create the “common interests” of the various proletarian forces, since the transformations in the capitalist economic base would necessarily lead to increasing unification and homogenization among workers. But if this process is a side effect of the “constant revolutionizing” of industrial progress, then what role would communists serve? Their practical role would be small, in fact, since it would fall to capitalism itself to materially reorganize social life, drawing the realities of different groups of workers closer together and thus producing the necessary conditions for proletarian association and political awareness. The communists would be left with an essentially theoretical task: to understand, better than anyone else, the inherent tendencies of capitalism, deciphering the revolutionary future already embedded in the fabric of capitalist production and mobilizing this horizon to better guide the strategy of every radical struggle.

This is an even deeper paradox: the subservience of the communist orientation to capitalism’s leveling devastation would ultimately justify a strange political arrogance — the militant who knows how to hear the rumors of capital would no longer need to listen to anyone else. But are communists truly doomed to prospect in the ruins of capitalism for clues to the future?