The significance of communism in the time of Marx and Engels

Synonym for socialism, human dream or 'spectre'?

Joshua Graf

Introduction

Hardly any political term evokes such strong reactions from people as 'communism'. Whether a supporter or a convinced opponent, when this term is discussed, it is usually emotionally charged. However, this emotional charge is rarely backed by the conceptual precision necessary for any serious discussion.[1] There is a discrepancy between the often positively-perceived, emancipatory, theoretical content and the authoritarian practice, although both are subsumed under the same title. Some seek to protect the ideal, while criticising the practices of communist-ruled states.[2] To this day, the question of whether the Soviet Union and its allies should be regarded as 'communist' or 'real socialist' remains disputed. 'Communism' produces these reactions even in the absence of any agreed and precise definition of the term.[3]

When we look at the constitutive phase of Marx's communism, Ahlrich Meyer's conclusion from 1977 still applies: 'The terms socialism and communism [...] as they emerged in the 1830s and 1840s and were used politically and journalistically, are considered unclear or indistinguishable, uncritical'.[4]

This article does not seek to provide a 'correct' definition of the term 'communism'. The ongoing change in meaning that the term has experienced over the years stands in the way of this. Instead, I hope to achieve two things. Firstly, I want to give a brief recapitulation of the different stages of subaltern history, to show why it makes sense to apply the label 'communist', at least as Marx himself understood it, only to certain practical movements since the French Revolution of 1789. Secondly, I want to draw attention to a perhaps slight, but existing and important historical difference between the terms 'socialism' and 'communism', as they were understood in the early years of Marx and Engels. At that time 'socialism' simply denoted a broader political movement, of which 'communism' was a part. Communism, therefore, was a form of socialism, but socialist politics were not necessarily communist. The 'Marxist-Leninist' framework, which designates 'socialism' as an earlier stage on the way to 'communism', belongs to a later era.

This article seeks primarily to address the following questions:
Is 'communism' a modern phenomenon or a timeless ideal?
(How) did the meanings of 'socialism' and 'communism' differ?
What connotations did the term 'communism' have at that time for both its supporters and its opponents?

The History: Humanity's Dream or Modern Movement?

Is communism something which has existed for thousands of years, or is it a phenomenon of the modern world? Undoubtedly, various examples of small egalitarian-structured communities can be found in history. As Ernest Mandel observed, the 'dream of a classless society is as old as class society itself'.[5] Often, these were religious minorities living in small groups and propagating an ascetic lifestyle. For example, a communal group in present-day Palestine is documented even before our current era.[6] The militarily-organised 'communism' of Plato is well known.[7] Egalitarian approaches have also been documented among indigenous peoples. As Michael Brie put it:

> Recent research points to the largely egalitarian-communal character of early societies of hunters and gatherers. They were manageable groups with intense direct communication and cooperation. They exercised intense control over their members to ward off dangers from individuals as well as from the group as a whole and to socially align individual behavior. Access to subsistence goods was largely egalitarian.[8]

Thus, there were numerous movements and groups that sought a non-hierarchical, community-oriented economy and implemented it on a small scale.[9] Considering this broad history, Michael Brie has gone so far as to call communism 'a suppressed tradition of Europe'.[10]

In addition to these small practical implementations of communal property, the first fictional utopias began to appear in the fifteenth century. Herman Duncker calls the most famous utopian Thomas More the 'forefather of modern communism'.[11] It was from the sixteenth century, starting with More's 'Utopia' in 1526, followed by Tommasso Campanella's 'City of the Sun' in 1602 and Francis Bacon's 'New Atlantis' in 1627 that the genre of utopian novels, where authors described their ideal society as a form of common property, became quite popular. One could also trace this line even further up to the French philosophers of the radical Enlightenment, Morelly and Mably, who both argued for the abolition of private property on philosophical and moral grounds. Scholars like Duncker, who date the origins of communism from that period, see the central aspect of

communism in its shared economy. In this reading a theoretical critique of private property and the depiction of alternative utopias, seem to be enough to characterise something as 'communist'.

Another take on the origins of communism is provided by André Tosel in his well-known German handbook on Marxism. He locates the beginning of modern communism in the religious movements of the 'True-Levellers' and 'Diggers',[12] considering the aspect of communism as an active movement to be the decisive element. I consider both these historical localisations premature.

For my argumentation I follow Marx's notion from *The German Ideology* (1846) that communism is the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things'.[13] In accordance with this very brief description I argue that one should grasp communism as a 'real movement' that intends to overcome class society in a struggle for a use value-based economy, by seizing power to 'actually change' the world. Communism is, then, both the fulfilled classless society and/or the subaltern struggle towards it. As Ernest Mandel put it:

> Communism, from then on, would designate both a classless society without property, without ownership – either private or nationalised – of the means of production, without commodity production, money or a state apparatus separate and apart from the members of the community, and the social-political movement to arrive at that society.[14]

The category of subaltern struggle is central for this reading. However it does not necessarily involve the use of revolutionary violence. Struggle can also be understood in a peaceful way. Nevertheless, this characterises communism as an inherently political, and therefore social issue. Individual opt-outs are not seen as communist in this definition.

I agree with Tosel's position that the central point about communism is that it is a movement which seeks to actually change the world, by practically achieving radical social change towards a form of use-value based economy. Nevertheless, it seems incongruous to locate the beginning of communism in the religious movements of the 'True-Levellers'. They were a puritan religious sect, who believed they had a God-given right to harness currently unused land for the sake of God. In that respect they were an actual, practical movement, aiming at establishing a community-based economy. But their movement was not seeking to abolish the existing class system. They were happy with the few liberties they were granted by the English crown and did not seek to form a broad political movement to challenge the existing system. Instead, they tried to live their religious life in the little niches of society conceded to them.[15] That is not really enough as to denote a movement as communist, as communists do not seek to drop out of the system individually, but rather to end class rule completely. Communism comes

from a subaltern and rebellious tradition, for which the notion of 'class struggle' is central. The True-Levellers were not a movement which aspired to grow radically in order to overthrow society, but a little religious group, open to converts, seeking to live peaceably under feudal monarchy. They did not seek to abolish the status quo, but to coexist with it, and not be bothered by it.

There is no question that there was an extensive tradition of egalitarian-organised communities in history. It is also true that modern communist movements were influenced by this tradition of ideas. But should they all be subsumed under the term 'communism'? Some theorists consciously place themselves in this tradition and advocate a concept of communism that fits into a broad and diverse tradition of subaltern egalitarianism.[16] Politically and strategically, by referring to this long tradition they sought to legitimise their own contemporary communist concerns. This transhistorical argumentation found its form among the French materialist early communists, especially in the form of an appeal to a supposed 'natural law'.[17] The radicalisation of the value of universalism inherent in bourgeois emancipation efforts served to justify their own concerns and political programme, as it directly, albeit in a more radical form, connected to the common values of the emerging bourgeoisie.

In the light of all this, it makes sense to locate the starting point of communism in the left-wing radicalism of the French Revolution of 1789. That was the moment when a movement came into the world, that actively sought to change society as a whole and radically overcome the status quo. For Gracchus Babeuf, whose movement Marx called the 'first manifestation of a truly active communist party',[18] struggling for a classless society was no longer a utopian dream, but an active political programme. Babeuf and his supporters insisted on a clandestine and insurrectionist approach, and envisaged seizing state power through a coup d'état rather than through any kind of subaltern mass party. However, the essential difference is that their aim was to reorganise society as a whole along communal lines, and that they all acted with the sincere conviction to do so, in the name of the poor masses. In numerical terms their circles might not have been much bigger than the True-Levellers' communities, but their aim was different – to build communism on the scale of the whole society. This is the central innovation which represents the origins of communism.

The Babouvist conspiracy was the predecessor of another, more significant movement – 'workers' communism'. This term denoted the little collectives of communists which emerged in the early to mid-nineteenth century, in which communist ideas were broadly discussed by wandering and proletarianised artisans.[19] The term 'workers' communism', although widely used, is misleading because its agents were not workers in the industrial sense, but mainly artisans.[20] As Joachim Höppner and Waltraud Seidel-Höppner explain:

> Workers' communism is the theoretical and political current of the early proletariat, which emerged in France, England and Germany in the second half of the 1830s and generalised the experiences of the first struggles of the Western European proletariat in order to form the workers' movement as an ideologically and politically-organisationally independent force.[21]

As such workers' communism was the practical expression of the rebellious, proletarianised masses. It did not attach too much importance to constructing communist utopias, but focused on the direct struggle for a classless society.[22] The workers' communists ascribed a central role to class antagonism,[23] although they mainly conceived it in a moralistic fashion as poor versus rich, and denounced the rich not for exploiting, but for idleness. In Germany it was highly religious, while its French version was strictly atheist. It was this movement of workers' communism that spread communist principles and shaped the concrete political practice of communists. This was the movement which Marx and Engels sought to address, criticise and transform.

To sum up my brief historical walkthrough: I have provided a sketch of important historical egalitarian movements and ideas, and argued why one should not designate them as 'communist' too easily. If we accept Marx's notion that communism should be seen as the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things',[24] then it would be inaccurate to date the beginning of communism before the French Revolution of 1789. If such different, even contradictory, projects are subsumed under one term, it loses all meaning. Therefore, I argue we should consider communism, as Wolfgang Schieder has already suggested for socialism, to be a 'future-oriented movement concept'.[25] As such, it is closely linked to modern political thought. Moreover, the '-ism' implies that it is a political movement, not an isolated utopia of a few outsiders. It makes no sense to speak of 'communism' before the French Revolution of 1789, and even then, it was not until the 1830s that this movement acquired any practical relevance. With the emergence in that decade of workers' communism, it became a highly debated social phenomenon and Marx and Engels needed to address both their criticism and their sympathies to the discursive field shaped by that new movement. This rapid growth in its social importance is also reflected in its etymological history.

The etymology of 'communism'

It was only through the French Revolution that the idea of the influence of the subject on politics and society could prevail.[26] The emerging materialist communism, shaped by the repressive conditions, relied on clandestine organisation and conspiratorial practice. The emergence of workers' communism in different

European countries in the 1830s stemmed directly from the altered conception of the relation between the individual and the political sphere that developed after 1789.[27]

If communism is understood as a political movement, this assessment is largely undisputed. Historical-etymological research also suggests considering communism as a phenomenon which first appeared with the Enlightenment. Schieder comes to the following assessment:

> The German words 'communist' and 'communism' were adopted as neologistic formations from French in the early 1840s. The plural form 'communistes' is first documented in French at the end of the Ancien Régime. [...] The system term 'communisme' was formed in France during the revolutionary period at the end of the 18th century.[28]

Exact details are difficult, but Jacques Grandjonc states that after 1797, the term was not used again until 1835.[29] Jean-Luc Nancy,[30] on the other hand, dates the use of the term to 1785. But there is no question that the term only gained real relevance from the 1830s onwards. Alexandre Zévaés states:

> Communism and 'communist' emerged around 1834, without it being possible to determine who first used these expressions. But from 1834 to 1848, they are constantly found in newspapers, pamphlets, books, in discussions and polemics.[31]

J. R. Bestor suggests that the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' emerged as modern terms around this time, while the egalitarian utopias of earlier periods were usually denoted by the terms 'community', 'communauté', or 'Gemeinschaft'.[32] The term gained popularity through the 'Communist Banquet of 1840', held in Paris. This event was the first major gathering of communists and radicals from different political movements, who met in Paris to discuss their ideas and to connect with each other for the greater cause of communism. In the neo-Babouvist tradition, natural law reflections mingled with plebeian-egalitarian elements.[33]

The spectre of communism

What did the early communist movement, with which Marx and Engels came into contact, look like? The communists were almost exclusively proletarianised craftsmen, and especially journeymen. Their obligatory time as a journeyman was marked by poverty.[34] As travellers, they were particularly open to radical ideas. Certain professions, such as tailors, were especially open to agitation.[35] At that time, communist agitators could connect to a backward-looking and often

religiously justified 'moral economy', basing their arguments on the obvious inequalities and their glaring discrepancy with the lofty promises of the French Revolution. Paris, in particular, was a highly politicised city.[36] Heinrich Heine estimated the number of 'raw fists, waiting only for the password to realise the idea of absolute equality' at about 400,000.[37] The young Friedrich Engels even assumed about 500,000 communists in France at that time.[38]

Such estimates were almost certainly massively exaggerated, but they also provide an insight into how seriously the rulers took the problem.[39] From 1841 onwards, warnings about 'the communist danger', primarily in France, appeared ever more frequently in the German press. Lorenz von Stein, a Prussian spy and a convinced conservative, warned as early as 1842: 'It is in vain to deceive oneself that communism is approaching our fatherland daily'.[40] Marx and Engels's well-known phrase, 'A spectre is haunting Europe',[41] thus connects to a common metaphor of the time.[42] The repression meant that communist, and sometimes merely radical-democratic, societies were organised in clandestinity.[43] Their elusiveness made them appear particularly unpredictable and thus 'spectral' to the repressive authorities. As Karl Birker points out: 'The danger of an extensive communist movement existed more in the minds of the officials than in reality'.[44]

Lorenz von Stein's 1842 report on current socialist and communist activities in France identified communism as a modern phenomenon and advocated social reforms to head off social unrest.[45] The liberal observer of current political trends Theodor Oelckers also considered the emerging movements of 'socialism' and 'communism', condemning the latter much more than socialism.[46] In Switzerland, the jurist Johann Caspar Bluntschli published an exposé of the communist agitator Wilhelm Weitling in 1843. His report *The communists in Switzerland according to the papers found with Weitling* testifies to the seriousness with which the ruling powers faced the emerging and elusive security problem of communism.[47] Ironically, Bluntschli's report significantly contributed to the spread of communist ideas. He provided such long quotations in his report that readers could learn a lot from these passages, even without owning the original communist writings.[48] As it was an official state document, it was legal to possess it in Switzerland. There were other reports which also testified to the official fear of this 'spectre', including a work from 1851 on secret societies of the revolution by the ex-revolutionary Lucien de la Hodde, who had defected to the police service,[49] and a two-volume report by the German police agents Wermuth and Stieber, published in 1853-1854.[50]

While Parisian politics was generally a mixture of radical political actors, mainstream opinion was mainly concerned with the 'threat' posed by the communists. Heine wrote: 'I speak again of the communists, the only party in France that deserves serious attention'.[51] Although a radical himself, he was worried about the

growth of communist influence. To Heine, it meant the dominant Babouvist tradition, which proclaimed ascetism, self-denial and rigorous moralism, rather than the value of self-fulfilment. He attributed the rapid success of communist agitation to its accessible language:

> The propaganda of communism possesses a language that every people understands, the elements of a universal language are as simple as hunger, as envy, as death. It is learned so easily.[52]

Clearly, communist ideas frightened not only convinced conservatives or Prussian state agents, but also politically liberal social reformists like Heinrich Heine. These ideas, along with all forms of communist agitation, were widely denigrated as being against all commonly shared moral values. Then as now, this was enough for some people to denounce anything supposedly 'communist', without having any clear understanding of its essence.

Socialism and communism in Marx and Engels

Today the usage of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' is still confused. The Marxist-Leninist tradition has strongly influenced the way both terms are now understood, deriving from the distinction made by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, in which 'socialism' denotes a less developed social phase, to be incrementally replaced by the higher form, 'communism'.[53] In this reading socialism and communism are different stages of the same project, in which communism is the more advanced social system, which can only come after a socialist transitional stage.[54] But, as Peter Hudis has pointed out, this is not the way Marx and Engels understood the terms.[55] In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, where Marx roughly differentiates between different stages of maturity, socialism does not stand for the first and communism for the second stage. In contrast, Marx speaks of the 'first' and 'a higher stage of communist society'.[56]

Engels, too, had no great difficulty using the terms synonymously later in his life. However, this does not mean that this was also the case during the constitutive phase in the 1840s of what Marx subsequently called 'critical communism'.[57] Marx used this term to distinguish his ideas from the already established and allegedly uncritical French materialist communism.[58] Therefore, Hudis's claim that Marx and Engels considered the two terms interchangeable is too crude.[59] Certainly, both Marx and Engels used both terms, and we cannot prove a clear conscious distinction in every single mention. In some of Engels's early writings, before about 1845, a very diverse assortment of characters was labelled 'communist'. For example, in his articles from 1844 and 1845 for the English socialist newspaper

The New Moral World, titled 'Rapid Progress of Communism in Germany', he listed many figures later known under the derogatory term 'true socialists'. In his first article, he wrote:

> The most active literary characters among the German Socialists are: — Dr. Charles Marx, at Paris; Dr. M. Hess, at present at Cologne; Dr. Ch. Grün, at Paris; Frederick Engels, at Barmen (Rhenan Prussia); Dr. O. Lüning, Rheda, Westphalia; Dr. H. Püttmann, Cologne; and several others. Besides those, Henry Heine, the most eminent of all living German poets, has joined our ranks, and published a volume of political poetry, which contains also some pieces preaching Socialism.[60]

A subsequent article in that paper listed most of the same people, but this time as 'communists'.[61] Engels' usage also seems ambiguous when he wrote to Marx in 1844, 'In Barmen the police inspector is a communist'.[62] In his early years, unlike Marx, Engels was highly interested in the experiments to establish communist colonies, in the hope that they could demonstrate the feasibility of communal property. In this light, the broad definition of the term communist can be understood. Similarly, Weitling had already labelled almost every socially-engaged person as a communist.[63] The aim was presumably neither to provide a precise definition of the term, nor to structure the discursive field within a communist movement, but rather to consolidate the communist movement and reduce the prejudices against it.

In his manuscripts of 1844, Marx still referred negatively to the communism of his time, which he dismissed as 'as yet completely crude and thoughtless'.[64] At that time he had a positive view of what he understood as socialism, noting:

> Atheism, as the denial of this unreality, has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a negation of God, and postulates the existence of man through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation. It proceeds from the theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as the essence. Socialism is man's positive self-consciousness, no longer mediated through the abolition of religion, just as real life is man's positive reality, no longer mediated through the abolition of private property, through communism. Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the actual phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society.[65]

Here, socialism functions as a society of positive, unmediated life activity, while Marx assigned communism a more historical, yet largely negative role. The higher valuation of what he understood as 'socialism' is central here, as in the manuscripts he contended that the development of material productive forces in history was a necessary objective condition for a liberated society which would not merely generalise poverty. Because he associated contemporary communism with ascetic-natural law efforts, Marx could not fully embrace the term here. Nevertheless, he conceded that it was playing a historically progressive role in negating the old, and did not consider the term 'communism' itself to be ahistorical. When he said it was still 'raw and thoughtless', he identified a potential in the real movement of communism which, when realised, would justify a fully positive appraisal. However, before this could happen, Marx and Engels first needed gradually to develop the historical-materialist perspective.[66]

It is both possible and necessary to determine more clearly the meanings of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' in this period, even though contemporaries did not always find it easy to do so. Precisely because communism as a real movement was a new phenomenon and remained a 'spectral' entity in response to repression, some of its enemies were also unable to really grasp it. The liberal Oelckers wrote in 1844:

> One has still not been able to give a proper definition of the concept of communism, which is natural, as it is a completely contentless, indefinite concept. One could call it the negation of everything existing, without regard to something new to be built, and in general, this designation should suffice.[67]

In this respect, Jan Gerber is right to observe that the terms were often used diffusely at that time, although they certainly dealt with distinguishable objects.[68] Looking back in 1894, Engels wrote:

> It will be noted that in all these essays, and particularly in the aforementioned one, I consistently do not call myself a Social Democrat, but a Communist. This is because at that time in various countries people called themselves Social Democrats who had certainly not inscribed upon their banners the taking over by society of all the means of production. […] For Marx and myself it was therefore quite impossible to choose a name of such elasticity to describe our special standpoint. Today the situation is different, and the word can be allowed to pass, unfitting as it remains for a party whose economic programme is not just generally socialist, but directly communist, and whose ultimate political aim is to surpass the entire State, and thus democracy too. The names of real political parties never fit exactly; the party develops, but the name stays.[69]

This is insightful in two ways. First, Engels confirmed that a clear distinction between communism and social democracy could no longer be maintained in everyday language even then. Secondly, he emphasised the necessity of using the term 'communist' in his early years. This was also reinforced in the following retrospective statement by Engels, which is worth quoting extensively:

> Yet, when it was written, we could not have called it a Socialist 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 manners 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. Whatever portion of the working class had become convinced of the insufficiency of mere political revolutions, and had proclaimed the necessity of a total social change, that portion, then, called itself Communist. It was a crude, rough-hewn, purely instinctive sort of Communism; still, it touched the cardinal point and was powerful enough amongst the working class to produce the Utopian Communism, in France, of Cabet, and in Germany, of Weitling. Thus, Socialism was, in 1847, a middle-class movement, Communism a working-class movement. Socialism was, on the Continent at least, 'respectable'; Communism was the very opposite. And as our notion, from the very beginning, was that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself', there could be no doubt as to which of the two names we must take. Moreover, we have, ever since, been far from repudiating it.[70]

How far are Engels's claims empirically tenable? We have seen how unacceptable communism was in 'polite society' at that time, so Engels's account seems to me to be sustainable. The historian P. H. Noyes, however, doubted whether the distinction of the class basis between socialism and communism is historically correct.[71] He argued that there were no relevant differences in terms of the class basis of socialist and communist movements. I consider this criticism to be incorrect in two ways. First, their leading figures did indeed come from different social strata and classes. Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen all had privileged backgrounds. They also affirmed the idea of a representative elite. They were emphatically trying to attract patrons and wealthy benefactors for their philanthropic efforts.[72] Hal Draper used the term 'socialism from above' for the tradition of socialist surrogate politics based on them.[73] Petra Weber described the technocratic systems of Fourier and Saint-Simon as 'intellectual socialism'.[74]

In contrast, the main communist actors, such as Babeuf, Buonarotti, and Blanqui in the French context, and Weitling in the German-speaking context, came from significantly poorer circles and were self-taught. Accordingly, they were often 'men of action'. They came from the people and sought to lead them, usually with recourse to long-standing ideals of justice, to the justice they deserved. The driving force for them was the misery of the masses and the moral contempt for wealthy idlers.

Secondly and more importantly, Noyes misunderstood Engels's (and Marx's) concept of class. It was not so much about the backgrounds of the representatives of this or that movement, but about the political content of the programmes they put forward. This 'petit-bourgeois' socialism was content with establishing a 'just' society without too great differences in living conditions,[75] taking an anti-revolutionary and class-reconciliatory stance. This can be seen in Marx's polemic against Proudhon's project of a 'just' society of commodity production. Marx accused Proudhon of seeking not to overcome capitalism but to organise bourgeois society according to eternal laws of justice, and criticised this idea as reflecting the class position of the petty bourgeois. To Marx and Engels, socialist attempts to reorganise society in a 'fair' way were an expression of a petty-bourgeois class consciousness, whereas the complete revolutionary abolition of bourgeois society expressed a proletarian view of the world. Compare the socialist 'scientific' credo of Fourier, which is cited below, to the critique that Marx directed against the anarchist Proudhon and it becomes clear that the position of reconciling class conflicts, rather than overcoming them, is classified as a typical petty-bourgeois ideology. Marx writes against Proudhon's system: 'He wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeois and the proletarians; he is merely the petty bourgeois.'[76] For Marx and Engels, ideologies expressed certain world views reflecting the outlook of certain social classes – which did not mean that they imagined all 'communists' were proletarians, or that all 'socialists' were petty-bourgeois.

'Socialism' at that time was primarily a response to the 'social question' in Germany and especially to the challenge of the 'organisation du travail' in France. It was a reaction to the changes in society being brought about by industrialisation sought to shape these changes through planning and organisational measures for the benefit of all members of society. Fourier summed it up when he wrote, 'This peculiarity of the socialist system to satisfy all classes, all parties, is important because it guarantees success.'[77] Weitling therefore referred to socialism as a 'new science.'[78] Even in 1890, socialism was defined in *Meyers Arbeiterlexikon* as 'the designation for a specific direction, a specific system for solving the workers' question'.[79] As a solution to the workers' question, its focus was on regulatory concerns, rather than the pressing misery of the poor, and its supporters intended to

distribute wealth fairly among 'capital', 'labour', and 'talent', affirming a hierarchy based on differences in competence.[80]

Fourier's follower Victor Considerant openly formulated the central distinction between socialism and communism for him:

> Communism is based on the complete equality of all its members; whoever brings in a considerable capital, works a lot, or stands out for their talent is not better rewarded than someone who has brought in nothing, is lazy or incapable. The association, on the other hand, takes into account a hierarchy based on inequality and differences in skill and ability; it rewards everyone according to what they contribute to the common work. Communism recognises no superiority and seeks to bring such to a low level; it undermines all competition. The association, on the other hand, promotes the free development of the individual and their striving for advancement; instead of suppressing distinctions and privileges, it develops them in unlimited variety and makes them accessible to all. Communism resembles a piece of music, constantly repeating the same note. The association resembles a score that combines all notes into a harmonious melody.[81]

Accordingly, conservative and liberal representatives treated socialism relatively respectfully. It was quite different with communism, which stood for a radically egalitarian social formation. Oelckers denounced it as 'the idea of absolute equality pursued to the extreme',[82] and the Prussian state agent von Stein wrote: 'Communism is therefore in all its forms the first, rawest system of the social idea of equality.'[83] It constantly grows but possesses no 'peculiar doctrine' of its own.[84] Instead, von Stein notes in 1842: 'The word itself has no fixed technical meaning yet'.[85]

It was this narrative of a freedom-hostile primitive egalitarianism that brought communism into disrepute even with Heine, even though he was a harsh critic of the existing conditions.[86]

The positions the workers' communists themselves held were considerably more sophisticated. For example, the workers' communist August Becker wrote:

> In communism, the principle applies: 'From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.' Please note: It does not say: To each according to their abilities, as it should actually be called according to the opinion of the great crowd and even a certain large socialist party. They believe that different abilities should also be rewarded differently in quantity. According to them, abilities and their performance should be the measure for the wage that society owes the individual. The communists think the opposite. According to our thinking, the abilities of the individual indicate what this individual owes

> to society, and not what society owes to the individual in material terms. All abilities of the individual belong to society and are equally necessary and equally valuable to it.[87]

Wilhelm Weitling wrote in the same vein:

> When we speak of equality of all according to natural law, we do not mean a fixed equal distribution of work and needs according to number, measure, and weight – for this would be against natural laws, because often one needs more of these, the other more of those needs than the other, but a distribution that corresponds to the needs and abilities of each in a way that is equal for all. If of two individuals working in the same business, one is only able to deliver half as much work per day as the other, it does not follow that they should be given only half as much to eat, for their stomach may demand at least as much as the other's.[88]

And further declared:

> Nature has not made us all equal, just as it has not made everything as we wish, but it has given us the means to remedy the imperfections.[89]

It is clear that the narrative of a crude, equalising communism was a caricature. In the 1840s, workers' communists had already undergone important steps in their theory formation.[90] The goal was not indiscriminate equal treatment of every person and the obliteration of the individual. The communists were aware of the objective differences between people. What they demanded was not completely equal treatment, but the equal validity of the interests of every person and the equal participation in the social community project according to their own abilities and strengths. However, for Marx and Engels, this communism remained 'raw' and 'thoughtless' in that it did not go beyond the stage of a Babouvist distributive communism.[91] The communists still lacked an understanding of a comprehensive, industrialised production, and were less positive about the developing industrialisation process than the utopian socialists, for whom Saint-Simon's slogan 'since everything is done through industry, everything should be done for it' applied.[92]

'Communism' as a term emphasised the plebeian-egalitarian tradition more strongly. It aimed at emancipation from below, although this did not necessarily preclude a conspiracy of a small minority with a revolutionary transitional dictatorship in the Babouvist and Blanquist tradition. But the central point is that for the communists, hierarchy could only be a necessary temporary evil, while for the socialists it could be legitimised over time by differences in performance or talent.

But communism was associated with a crude 'equalisation' and a lack of insight into the material advantages of the development of productive forces, which meant that Marx did not come round to the idea straight away. Engels, with his early interest in communal property settlement projects, was less deterred by this connotation and generally somewhat less strict in how he used the term. But Marx and Engels were also dissatisfied with the indefinite self-designation 'communist', as it did not allow for an adequate distinction from other varieties of communist thought. They therefore sought to distinguish their own ideas, primarily by labelling other representatives as 'utopian'. This was a necessary part of their endeavour to establish an accepted and hegemonic 'order of truth' in this complex situation.[93]

Doctrinally, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was often celebrated as a fusion of utopian socialism and communism. The origin of this sacralisation comes from no one less than Engels himself, writing in 1892:

> German socialism made its appearance well before 1848. At that time there were two independent tendencies. Firstly, a workers' movement, a branch of French working-class communism, a movement which, as one of its phases, produced the Utopian communism of Weitling. Secondly, a theoretical movement, emerging from the collapse of the Hegelian philosophy; this movement, from its origins, was dominated by the name of Marx. The Communist Manifesto of January 1848 marks the fusion of these two tendencies, a fusion made complete and irrevocable in the furnace of revolution, in which everyone, workers and philosophers alike, shared equally the personal cost.'[94]

Whatever the flaws in this account, there is a certain truth in it. Marx and Engels were partly positively influenced by socialist and communist ideas, and partly developed their position through deliberately rejecting aspects of existing theory. Marx and Engels certainly derived their prioritisation of material production and the development of productive forces from the socialist theoretical tradition. The three well-known so-called 'utopian socialists' all advocated a 'progressive industrialism',[95] while the communist theoretical tradition often drew on the backward-looking ideologies of pauperised craftsmen. A recognition of the material development of the productive forces as a necessary condition of social liberation was not to be found in communism before Marx and Engels. Hal Draper's formulation seems appropriate: 'For Marx, communism is proletarian socialism'.[96] It captures the immanently proletarian character of communism, which clearly distinguished it from the socialism of that time, while recognising that Marx and Engels, unlike other contemporary communists, shared the socialists' great confidence in the liberating possibilities of the emerging bourgeois society and its industry. In this sense, it is true that Marx and Engels led communism and socialism to a unity,

but this process itself only took place through fierce struggles for hegemony within the League of Communists, which culminated in and through the *Manifesto*.[97]

Accordingly, I concur with Bruno Leipold's assessment: 'it is clear that Marx did not so much convert to communism as fashion a new form of it'.[98] However, in refashioning the understanding of communism, Marx had to deal with the pre-existing connotations of the concept of communism. Throughout his life, Marx was concerned with political struggle. To understand him, we need to consider not only which political opponents and positions he fought against, but also which rhetorical moves were necessary to, on the one hand, build on an existing communist theoretical tradition with its valid legitimisation patterns and, on the other, develop these further to win the necessary support for a mass movement.

Résumé

The meanings of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' shifted, especially in the twentieth century under the influence of Marxism-Leninism. Historically they had not denoted different stages of the same political project, but related, albeit different, political approaches. Both socialism and communism are modern phenomena that only gained relevance with the slow emergence of bourgeois society. Both are 'future-orientated concepts of movement',[99] but they have different connotations. The distinction between the two terms which was current in the 1840s, denoted real differences in political systems, ideas and movements. One could say that socialism was the broader term, advocating a planned response to the chaos of the emerging industrial society. In this understanding, every form of communism is socialist, but not vice versa, because communism had some specific characteristics which were not necessarily present in all varieties of socialism.

There is a long history of plebeian-egalitarian social formations, or attempts at them, but before the nineteenth century they had not been conceived as political (mass) movements. With the emergence of industrial society, both socialist and communist movements arose in response to the anarchy of production, impoverishment and the destruction of long-standing feudal patterns. Even before Marx, 'socialism' was clearly more industry- and production-friendly. It was by no means revolutionary and affirmed the inequality of people and its translation into unequal wealth and opportunities for participation. It was also mostly designed to collaborate with philanthropic elites. Socialism recognised the class divide, even in its emergent industrial capitalist form, but understood class society not as an irreconcilable antagonism, but as a scientific and organisational question of good planning and fair distribution. In contrast, communism at the time was often backward-looking and even religiously charged. It usually condemned the idleness of

the rich on the basis of natural law (Babeuf, Buonarotti, Blanqui) or Christian motives (Weitling, Becker, Laponneraye, etc.) and aimed at the complete abolition of class distinctions. It was recruited from proletarianised craftsmen and not from a homogeneous industrial proletariat. Whilst the communists upheld the principle of equality, it is inaccurate to impute a 'crude' communism to all of them. Equality, at least for some, did not mean complete egalitarianism, but equal consideration of individual needs and interests. Even if the common image of egalitarianism and total asceticism is historically unfair on the communists, it should be noted that communism was historically much more suspicious of the opportunities and risks of emerging industrialisation. This lost conceptual differentiation seems to me to be valuable; it provides a clearer distinction between political programmes. It deserves to be revived.

Notes

1 Wolfgang Eichwede, 'Kommunismus Eine kleine Begriffsgeschichte' In *Osteuropa* 63 (5/6), 2013, pp.79-91, p.79.
2 John Roberts, 'The two names of Communism', in *Radical Philosophy* 177, 2013, pp.9-18, p.9.
3 Étienne Balibar, 'Occasional notes on Communism', in *Krisis: Journal for contemporary philosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2011, pp.4-13, p.4.
4 Ahlrich Meyer, *Frühsozialismus. Theorien der sozialen Bewegung 1789-1848*, Freiburg, 1977, p.7.
5 Ernest Mandel, 'Klassenlose Gesellschaft', in Wolfgang Fritz Haug et al, eds, *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, [henceforth *HKWM*] 7/I. Hamburg, 2008, pp.894-896.
6 Karsten Struhl, 'Communism', in Gary L. Anderson & Kathryn G. Herr, eds, *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, Sage, 2007, pp.78–82.
7 David Priestland, *The Red Flag. A History of Communism*. New York, 2009, p.2.
8 Michael Brie, 'Urkommunismus und menschliche Natur', in Michael Brie/ Lutz Brangsch, *Das Kommunistische*, Hamburg, 2016, pp.12-30, p. 29.
9 André Tosel, 'Kommunismus', in *HKWM*, 7/II, 2009, pp.1298–1332.
10 Brie, 'Urkommunismus', pp.12–30.
11 Hermann Duncker, *Wegbereiter des Kommunismus*, Cologne, 1998, p.16.
12 Tosel, 'Kommunismus', pp.1298–1332.
13 Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* [1846], in MECW, Vol. 5, pp.15-581, p.49
14 Ernest Mandel, 'Communism', in John Eatwell, Murray Milgate & Peter Newman, eds, *Marxian economics*, London, 1990, pp.87-90, p.87.

15 See: Gerard Winstanley, *Gleichheit im Reiche der Freiheit – Sozialphilosophische Traktate*, 1988, Frankfurt am Main, p.21.
16 Wolfgang Beutin, Hermann Klenner & Eckart Spoo, *Lob des Kommunismus. Alte und neue Weckrufe für eine Gesellschaft der Freien und Gleichen*, Hannover, 2013, p.1.
17 Alexander Brandenburg, *Theoriebildungsprozesse in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung 1835-1850*, Hannover, 1977, p.60.
18 Karl Marx, *Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality* [1847], in MECW Vol. 6, pp.312-340, p.321.
19 Eric Hobsbawm, *Europäische Revolutionen*, Cologne, 2004, p.415.
20 Ernst Schraepler, *Handwerkerbünde und Arbeitervereine 1830-1853 - Die politische Tätigkeit deutscher Sozialisten von Wilhelm Weitling bis Karl Marx*, Berlin/ New York, 1972, p.31.
21 Joachim Höppner & Waltraud Seidel-Höppner, *Theorien des vormarxistischen Sozialismus*, Cologne, 1987, p.108.
22 Brandenburg, *Theoriebildungsprozesse*, p.43.
23 Höppner & Seidel-Höppner *Theorien des vormarxistischen Sozialismus*, p.108.
24 Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW Vol. 5, p.49
25 Wolfgang Schieder, 'Sozialismus', in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. 5, Stuttgart 1984, pp.923-996.
26 Karl Griewank, *Der neuzeitliche Revolutionsbegriff. Entstehung und Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, 1973, p.203
27 Frank Deppe, *Verschwörung, Aufstand und Revolution - Blanqui und das Problem der sozialen Revolution*, Frankfurt, 1970, p.15.
28 Wolfgang Schieder, 'Kommunismus', in Brunner, Conze, Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Bd. 3, Stuttgart 1982, pp.454-529.
29 Jacques Grandjonc, *Communisme/Kommunismus/Communism*, Trier, 1989, p.149.
30 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Communism, the word', in Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas, eds, *The Idea of Communism*, London, 2010, p.145.
31 Alexandre Zévaés, 'Über den Ursprung der Wörter "Sozialismus", "Kommunismus", "Kollektivismus"', *Rote Revue: sozialistische Monatszeitschrift* 27 (5), 1948, pp.192-195., p.193.
32 E. Arthur & J. R. Bestor, 'The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (3), 1948, pp.259-302, p.260.
33 See: Joachim Höppner & Waltraud Seidel-Höppner, eds, *Von Babeuf bis Blanqui. Band II: Texte*, Leipzig, 1975.
34 Lena Christovola, *Vom Bund der Geächteten (1834-1836) zum Bund der Gerechten (1836-1847)*, Bielefeld, 2014, pp.215-236, p.225.
35 Christine Lattek, *Revolutionary refugees. German socialism in Britain, 1840-1860*, London & New York, 2006, p.11.

36 Arnold Ruge, *Zwei Jahre in Paris. Studien und Erinnerungen. Band 1*. Leipzig, 1846, p.49.
37 Heinrich Heine, *Die parlamentarische Periode des Bürgerkönigthums*, Zürich, 1841-1843, p.10.
38 Frederick Engels, *Progress of Social Reform on the Continent* [1843], MECW Vol. 3, pp.392-408, p.392.
39 Joachim Höppner & Waltraud Seidel-Höppner, eds, *Von Babeuf bis Blanqui. Band I: Einführung*, Leipzig, 1975, p.305.
40 Lorenz von Stein, *Der Socialismus und Communismus des heutigen Frankreichs*. Leipzig, 1842, p.442.
41 Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848], MECW Vol. 6, pp.477-506, p.481.
42 Schieder, 'Kommunismus', p.487.
43 Carol Poore, 'Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa. Geheimgesellschaften und die Anfänge der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung', in Jost Hermand und Sabine Mödersheim, eds, *Deutsche Geheimgesellschaften. Von der frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, Cologne, 2013, pp.93-120, p.99.
44 Karl Birker, *Die deutschen Arbeiterbildungsvereine 1840-1870,* Berlin, 1973, p.42.
45 Stein, *Der Socialismus und Communismus des heutigen Frankreichs*.
46 Theodor Oelckers, *Die Bewegung des Socialismus und Communismus*, Leipzig, 1844.
47 Johann Caspar Bluntschli, *Die Kommunisten in der Schweiz nach den bei Weitling vorgefundenen Papieren*, Zürich, 1843.
48 Schieder, 'Kommunismus', p.480.
49 Lucien de La Hodde, *Geschichte der geheimen Gesellschaften und der republikanischen Partei in Frankreich*, Basel, 1851.
50 Wermuth and Stieber, *Die Communisten-Verschwörungen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1853-1854.
51 Heinrich Heine, *Lutetia Teil 2*, 1843, p.213.
52 Heine *Die parlamentarische Periode*, pp.10f.
53 Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *State and Revolution*, [1917] in *Collected Works* Vol. 25, pp.385-498, p.461.
54 *A Dictionary of Scientific Communism*, Moscow, 1984, p.36.
55 Peter Hudis, 'Engels über die postkapitalistische Gesellschaft: Kontinuität oder Diskontinuität zu Marx' Konzeption der Alternative zum Kapitalismus', in Smail Rapic, ed., *Naturphilosophie, Gesellschaftstheorie, Sozialismus. Zur Aktualität von Friedrich Engels*, Frankfurt am Main, 2022, pp.349-368, p.365.
56 Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* [1871], in MECW Vol. 24, pp.75-99, pp.87f.
57 Karl Marx *Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne* [1853], in MECW Vol. 11, pp.395-457, p.455.

58 Lutz Brangsch, 'Das Kommunistische als Erzählung der Sozialdemokratie des 19. Jahrhunderts - Der »deutsche kritische Kommunismus«', in Brangsch & Brie, *Das Kommunistische*, pp.63-80, p.63.
59 Hudis, 'Engels über die postkapitalistische Gesellschaft', p.351.
60 Frederick Engels, *Rapid Progress of Communism in Germany* [1845], in MECW Vol. 4, pp.229-242, p.232.
61 Ibid., p.235.
62 Frederick Engels, *Letter to Marx* [1844] in MECW Vol. 38, pp.3-6, p.4.
63 See: Wilhelm Weitling, *Der Hülferuf der Deutschen Jugend*, [1841, republished Leipzig, 1972], p.39.
64 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in MECW Vol. 3, pp.229-348, p.294.
65 Ibid., p.306.
66 Renate Merkel, *Marx und Engels über Sozialismus und Kommunismus*, Ost-Berlin, 1974, pp.87f.
67 Oelckers, *Die Bewegung des Socialismus und Communismus*, p.12.
67 Bluntschli, *Die Kommunisten in der Schweiz*, p.12.
68 Jan Gerber, *Karl Marx in Paris. Die Entdeckung des Kommunismus*, München, p.67.
69 Frederick Engels, *Preface to the Pamphlet Internationales aus dem 'Volksstaat'* [1894], i: MECW Vol. 27, pp.414-418, pp.417f.
70 Frederick Engels, *Preface to the 1888 English Ed. of the Manifesto*, in MECW Vol. 26, pp.512-518, pp. 516f.
71 P. H. Noyes, *Organization and Revolution. Working Class Associations in the German Revolutions of 1848-1849*, Princeton, NJ, 1966, p.42.
72 Schraepler, *Handwerkerbünde,* p.25.; see e.g.: Charles Fourier, *Die neue sozialistische Welt der Arbeit oder Entdeckung des Verfahrens einer nach Leidenschaftsserien eingeteilten, anziehenden, naturgemäßen Produktionsweise*, in Höppner & Seidel-Höppner, eds, *Von Babeuf bis Blanqui. Band II: Texte*. Leipzig, 1975, pp.179-208, p.196.
73 Hal Draper, *Socialism from below*, Alameda, 2001, p.2.
74 Petra Weber, *Sozialismus als Kulturbewegung. Frühsozialistische Arbeiterbewegung und das Entstehen zweier feindlicher Brüder. Marxismus und Anarchismus*, Düsseldorf, 1989, p.104.
75 Karl Marx, *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction* [1843], in MECW Vol. 3, pp.175-189, p.182.
76 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], in MECW Vol. 6, pp.105-212, p.178.
77 Fourier, *Die neue sozialistische Welt*, p.196.
78 See: Brandenburg, *Theoriebildungsprozesse*, p.81.
79 See: Brangsch, 'Das Kommunistische als Erzählung der Sozialdemokratie' pp.63-80, p.64.
80 Fourier, *Die neue sozialistische Welt*, p.187.

81 Victor Considerant, 'Kurzer Abriß von Fouriers Phalanxsystem', in Höppner & Seidel-Höppner, eds, *Von Babeuf bis Blanqui. Band II*, pp.212-249, pp. 225-226.
82 Oelckers, *Die Bewegung des Socialismus und Communismus*, p.11.
83 Lorenz von Stein, *Geschichte der sozialen Bewegungen in Frankreich von 1789 bis auf unsere Tage. Band 1,* Berlin, 2016 [1849], p.129.
84 Stein, *Der Socialismus und Communismus des heutigen Frankreichs*, p.344.
85 Ibid., p.130.
86 Alexandros Chrysis, *The Marx of Communism. Setting Limits in the Realm of Communism*, London, 2022, pp.47-49.
87 August Becker, *Was wollen die Kommunisten?* Lausanne, 1844, pp.34-35.
88 Weitling, *Der Hülferuf der Deutschen Jugend,* p.192.
89 Ibid., p.262.
90 Brandenburg, *Theoriebildungsprozesse*, p.12.
91 Ibid., p.65.
92 Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, *Catechisme des Industriels*. Paris, 1823, p.2.
93 Matthias Bohlender, *Marx und die „Kritik im Handgemenge". Die Geburt des „kritischen Kommunismus"*. Berlin, 2016, pp.137-159, p.141.
94 Frederick Engels, 'Socialism in Germany' [1892], MECW Vol. 27, pp.237-238.
95 Weber, *Sozialismus als Kulturbewegung*, p.153.
96 Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of revolution. Volume IV: Critique of other socialisms*, New York, 1990, p.181.
97 See: Matthias Bohlender, *Zwischen Wahrheitspolitik und Wahrheitsmanifestation. Zur Genealogie des Kommunistischen Manifests*, Wiesbaden, 2019, pp.257-280.
98 Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx. Republicanism and the formation of Karl Marx's social and political thought*, Princeton, NJ, 2024, p.125.
99 Schieder, 'Kommunismus', p.480.