

Brief History of Communist Thought

- Societies in which property is owned in common have existed from time to time at least since early Christian days – usually small communities, of limited duration.
- This concept was an important theme in Thomas More's Utopia (1516), and used in Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1825).
- Some factions supporting Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War wanted to abolish private ownership of land, and espoused a belief that this had one of the attributes of the "golden age" that they thought had existed in England before the Norman Conquest. One group, the Diggers, established several communities along these lines, each of which lasted only briefly (1649-1651).
- During the period of the French revolution, many questioned existing concepts of private property, although no major faction was convinced that property rights reasonably could be dispensed with. Theories of common ownership of all property gained popular prominence, particularly in the writings of François-Nöel Babeuf, a/k/a Gracchus Babeuf.
- "Socialism," variously defined but including at a minimum some mechanism for social leveling and common or public ownership of at least some categories of property, described by Utopian writers such as Pierre Leroux in France (1834) and Robert Owen in England (1835). Anarchism became popular at the same time.
- Owen's approach was largely based on the labor movement; he first founded a "Friendly Association of the Unionists of All Classes of All Nations" and then an "Association of All Classes of All Nations," in which the term "socialism" may have first been used.
- Experiments in communal living were tried at New Harmony, Indiana (1825-29) and Brook Farm (1841-46) and Fruitlands (1843-44), both in Massachusetts; they did not do well.
- Marxist theory is often explained in terms of the "Hegelian Dialectic." This is misleading. Hegel (1770-1831) was an abstract and Christian philosopher whose "dialectic" approach described a process of development of thought, in which an idea is corrected through *dialogue* with a different or opposing idea. (This was a popular theme in philosophy since Socrates.) The so-called "Hegelian Dialectic" is described in terms of the "triad" of (1) a *thesis* meeting (2) its *antithesis* and resulting in (3) a new *synthesis*; but this was not actually a major part of Hegel's thought, and he said he borrowed it from Immanuel Kant. Some Marxists – after Marx – adapted this idea into what they called *dialectical materialism*, in which the *thesis* and *antithesis* might be social classes or movements, rather than abstract ideas. Neither Hegel nor Marx actually stated this concept, and the term "dialectical materialism" was not even used during Marx's life.