The Communist Manifesto

An Outdated Ideology, Dangerous Dogma, or an Insightful Tool?

Abstract:

This paper’s aim is to broaden the experiences and exposures of the reader in order to have a better understanding of the origins and underlying values which brought about the communist system, and which have become so polarizing today. The purpose being to reinvigorate approaches and dialogue around challenges of modern times and, in short, to inspire social innovation and experimentation in the pursuit of social improvement and equality. This is not to say that the desired outcome of this historical analysis has itself succumbed to a political agenda seeking to inspire the revitalization of the Soviet Empire, the truth is rather to the contrary. This analysis will trace divergences occurring from the theoretical outline to their translation into practice, with a short analysis of Eastern Europe’s State-Socialist experience. This paper remains limited in scope with the intent to offer a revision of perceptions towards the works of Marx’ and Engels’ by briefly delving into the singular work of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party.* Considerations for the original intent of the Manifesto allow for a renewed appreciation of the radical ideas the document initially espoused, many of which have become common values around the globe today. The brief comparison of the Manifesto’s message with the historical contextualization and the lived reality, this approach will hopefully reach a conclusion that removes some of the inherent prejudices which have been cultivated through the poisonous “othering” so readily espoused during the Cold War era and lingering within society today regarding socialism. This paper is merely aimed at broadening the experiences and exposures of the reader in order to offer a better understanding of the origins and underlying values of ideas which have become so polarizing today so to reinvigorate approaches and dialogue around challenges of modern times. It is not enough to say that capitalism is acceptable because it is the least abhorrent option.

“Communism” has long been seen as a polarizing ideology with the term itself commonly denoting derogatory connotations which often recall images of the collapsed governments from the Soviet Bloc. The term communism has remained an easy label to level at a broad swath of non-conforming or differing viewpoints regardless of the actual political stance or intent. The term has become a weapon to attack the legitimacy of political opponents or groups, without care or consideration for the accuracy of the term apart from its usage as a slander. This paper will try to uncover where such notions of communism arose and whether they are reflective of the ideals laid out by communism’s most prominent figureheads: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels?

To answer this question, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* will be used to capture some of the founding themes and ideals associated with the communist movement. Although the Manifesto does not offer a comprehensive explanation of the entirety of Marx’ and Engels’ work, it provides a concise summary of their theories and is therefore a valuable tool in this endeavor to discover a less antagonistic image of communist ideals. With such broader themes identified, the historical circumstances cultivated under the Soviet Union’s leadership in the Eastern Bloc can be analyzed and the contradictions and divergences exposed. Reapproaching the Eastern Bloc’s State-Socialist experiences are, therefore, essential to challenging lingering Cold War mentalities. This means underlining the chasm which developed between communist ideals and the socialist experience so to highlight the remaining legitimacy still applicable to Marxist thought. Although the State-Socialist system claimed inspiration from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the experienced reality framed by the Soviet Union’s Stalinist adaptation was, from the start, a malformed biproduct of its origins. Forcefully thrust upon Eastern Europe following the Second World War, it diverged substantially from its founders’ ideological intent as presented in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party.* The result was a system encumbered by an excessive bureaucratization of decision-making alongside an overwhelming centralization of power. Together, these two aspects became pillars of the communist system and came to dictate social and economic policy, all the while their failures tainted Eastern Europe’s experiences. In the end, American-styled capitalism emerged as not just preferable, but superior to, the communist model and such perspectives are accepted as unquestionable truths today. Therefore, the divergences developed during the transition from the theoretical will be juxtaposed with the experiences under Eastern Europe’s State-Socialist systems so to challenge the common derogatory outlook regarding communism and perhaps even reduce the stigmatism associated with the ideas of Marx and Engels.

Communism is a term which has not only been the cause of animosity between nations but is also regularly a source of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Often, what comes to mind are images of the dysfunctional Eastern Bloc states which dissolved alongside the termination of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet, to disqualify Marx’ and Engels’ work because of the failure of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War is not only inaccurate, but incredibly restrictive. Such narratives glorifying capitalism’s superiority over communism are themselves products of their time, locked in a binary worldview. Constructed dichotomies, like those between East and West or opposing ideologies, should not disqualify critical analysis of the differing merits and values still inherent within different approaches to social problems. After all, societies around the world remain far from perfect and continue to struggle with a plethora of issues which capitalism has proven unable to solve.Neither the economic systems, nor their ideologies are wholly good nor bad, yet they have the potential to offer lessons for the present and the future alike. An abandonment of ideological demonizing is the first step in being able to fully appreciate what the failed communist state was originally based upon and what it’s ideas might still have left to offer. Doing this first requires understanding the core messages and meanings of communism’s foundations.

For many, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and communism broadly speaking are reducible to being a harbinger for dictatorship brought forth by violent revolution, adamantly opposed to individuality, private property, and Western notions of freedom.[[1]](#footnote-2) This narrative has remained prevalent up to the present day partly because of its basis in truth, but also because of the delegitimization it offers to the once competing social and economic system. Yet, such definitions are insubstantial and incomplete, often stemming from experiences noted within the Soviet Union or by simply taking the Manifesto’s messages and applying them to present circumstances. This approach can lead to misinterpretations and pays no regard to the authors’ original intent. The alternative to dismissing the Manifesto entirely or embracing it verbatim is to delve into the text and discern the central messages and themes, recognize the context from which it came, and evaluate the results critically, acknowledging shortcomings and values alike. For just as this analysis cannot claim to be the definitive understanding of communism or Marxist ideology, nor was the Manifesto originally meant to be a biblical tome, but a summary and introduction to the values and basis for an alternative societal organization. Marx and Engels both wrote extensively on the pitfalls of capitalism, but to draw on it all would come at the cost of conciseness and accessibility. Just as the Manifesto allows an overview of their theories and the alternative organization which they had the audacity to imagine for society, it also offers a starting point for modern readers to understand the basic overview of the foundations for State-Socialism after the historical circumstances are considered.

It will come as no surprise that the social and political reality within which this document was produced differed greatly from current circumstances which is why it may appear to be an inconsequential work of history. Yet, the ideas of Marx and Engels are not necessarily bankrupt today, for the broader message must simply be discerned from the historical idiosyncrasies. The Manifesto railed against the brutality of the early industrial model and opposed the inhumane treatment of workers. It can be safely stated that twenty-first century working and living conditions in industrial and post-industrial countries are far better off than a century or two ago. People may be nostalgic for the past, but likely no one would wish for the return of child labour, unregulated working conditions, and the detestable living conditions of early urban centres. It was these circumstances which the Manifesto was seeking recompense*.*[[2]](#footnote-3)The nineteenth century economic system caused social turmoil and resentment, and it was this environment that the Manifesto’s message found reception. It should also be acknowledged that by the time of the Manifesto’s publication in 1848, it had barely been half a century since the French Revolution kicked off in 1789 and Enlightenment ideas were still circulating and influencing the generations ideas of how society should be organized. Placing the origins of the Manifesto’s revolutionary call into its historical context allows greater understanding to the revolutionary emphasis it embodies.

Today, capitalism’s globalization has seen the exportation of extreme exploitation to poorer countries where there remain less regulation guaranteeing basic standards of working conditions and worker’s rights. As such, the worst instances of exploitation are far enough out of sight or mind that many individuals never face brutal working conditions or the terrible conditions that such powerlessness brings about. The Manifesto’s espousal of ideas advocating a radical alternative to the horrid historical experiences brought about by early industrialization may be perceived as overly radical today due to the increasing prosperity which capitalism has provided, but this was certainly not the case during the nineteenth century. This is of crucial importance to acknowledge since dismissing communism as the enemy of freedom was quite a common trope during the Cold War, even though its origins were all about freeing the workers from their bonds. Such acknowledgements can help explain the gain in communism’s popularity in the past.

Even when accounting for this historical context, the Manifesto also contains its own biases and agendas which must be addressed. Being a party manifesto, the political nature of the text should be a given, yet the text also sought to convince readers of its argument through educational and emotional appeals. The Manifesto attempted to inform and educate the reader of the economy’s built-in exploitation through a historical overview in its first section. Then, it offers an alternative worldview by arguing for the feasibility of the communist alternative in its second section.

The Manifesto’s first section is largely devoted to explaining a historical theory of progression termed “Class Struggle,” arguing there are intrinsic relations between social conditions and the economic structures of any given society.[[3]](#footnote-4) In this struggle, social relations are built around antagonisms which become exacerbated by economic circumstances eventually resulting in a revolutionary change and the restructuring of social relations into new forms. This s*truggle between classes* reforms social experiences and reorganizes inequality and privilege. The capitalist mode of production merely represents the most recent incarnation of this historical process.[[4]](#footnote-5) Here, the distinguishing factor is capitalism’s efficiency in exploitation and its tendency towards concentrating class dichotomies. Social classes lose their distinctive features and are pushed towards two broad categories, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; those who control the means of production while the latter remain at their mercy with only their labour to sell.[[5]](#footnote-6) The bourgeois used capitalism to concentrate wealth and then used that wealth to influence the state and direct policy to ensure maximum profits.

Another aspect of this economic system is its constant need to improve efficiency and competitiveness, a trait which results in technological innovation and worker concentration. This is predicated on the priority placed on the pursuit of profits which eventually, but inevitably, leads to the crisis of overproduction and then results in further innovation, concentration, and exploitation of the labourers. Noting these trends, Marx and Engels saw the capitalist system as being doomed as it would eventually birth its own “grave-diggers.” As the complexity of production increased, so to did the need for educated workers and the concentration of their labour, which would make them ever more aware of their exploitation and remove their sense of isolation.[[6]](#footnote-7) Although this interpretation presents a rather teleological approach to history, it provides the impetus for the second section where an alternative basis for social and economic organization is offered.

The second section of the Manifesto unpacks the role of the Communist Party. The Class Struggle theory is predicated on the revolutionary economic reorganization which allows the exploited to take power. Marx and Engels saw an intrinsic relation between the economic model of production and the living conditions of those within the system which thereby justifies the “forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.”[[7]](#footnote-8) This meant the next step would be accompanied by the abolition of private property. Still, this overthrow was a *means* of heralding the new basis for social relations which were seeking a redistribution of equality so that the labourers would not be subjected to endless exploitation, but this never represented an end in itself.[[8]](#footnote-9) The change being pursued was geared towards the creation of a more equal society and would stem from the exploited class rejecting the system of relations which perpetuated their poverty in exchange for a new basis. The Communist Party was to be the organizer to unify the exploited members of society to challenge the exploitative system and class.

The Manifesto is not just painting an evocative picture of the inevitability of change coming, it is exclaiming a war cry for the mobilization of the oppressed. The final paragraph of the Manifesto offers a prime example of this emotional incitement, stating: “Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains… Working Men of All Countries, Unite!”[[9]](#footnote-10) Although wrapped in emotional appeals, Engels and Marx intention was based around offering a scientific and scholarly analysis. In the preface to the 1872 German edition, they rejected any claims of infallibility and even clarified their stance on the original Manifesto’s publication:

The practical application of the principles will depend, as the Manifesto itself states, everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing, and, for that reason, *no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II* [emphasis added]*.* That passage would; in many respects, be very differently worded today*.*[[10]](#footnote-11)

The end of Section II mentioned above is the heart of Marx’ and Engels’ prescription for bringing about a communist state, yet, both Marx and Engels are highlighting the lack of importance of the prescribed revolutionary measures. Following this acknowledgement, they also comment on how Section IV’s analysis of the political landscape had become largely “antiquated” as circumstances had changed.[[11]](#footnote-12)

The above quote is incredibly important when working to decipher Marx’ and Engels’ intent. First, it underlines the fact that the document was itself a product of its time, reinforcing how circumstances had changed even within the brief period between the original publishing of 1848 and the 1872 edition. Second, it recognizes that the emphasis was not meant to be on revolution but on bringing forth positive change itself. The role of context is reinforced with the acknowledgment of constant changes. These written admissions by Marx and Engels in the preface are very important to take into consideration when contemplating the intended message of the Manifesto and Communist ideology more broadly. From this, the argument can be made that the document was never meant to be elevated to a holy tome, rather, it was meant as a call for change to the abusive economic system and the politics which supported it.

Failure to acknowledge the fallibility of Marx and Engels work resulted in the predominant negative image of communism today just as it led to the emergence of an orthodoxy and dogmatism within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Eastern Europe’s State-Socialism. This is not to say the USSR was an evil empire, but its implementation of communist ideas resulted in complications for later generations trying to build an advanced communist society. Vladimir Lenin played an immeasurable role in adapting the communist ideals to the Russian situation and advocated that the Communist Party act as vanguard, thereby purposefully separating it from the workers.[[12]](#footnote-13) With time, Marx’ and Engels’ theory of Class Struggle became embraced as an unquestionable law and censorship would come to preserve its monopoly over social thinking. This overemphasis on Marx’ and Engels’ work elevated the Communist Party above the workers the document was originally meant to liberate, and the consequences were severe.

In Eastern Europe following the Second World War, pursuit of a communist society became inseparable from the leading role of the Party. The Soviet model doubtless played a substantial role in shaping the inefficient bureaucratic system, but the works of Marx and Engels had certainly been drawn on for guidance, even elevating the two men alongside Lenin to a near-mythical status. The results, however, were quite contradictory to the Manifesto’s authors’ original intent. Looking back at the 1888 English preface, divergences between the values laid out by Engels and the existing system quickly emerge. Engels states: “…our notion, from the very beginning was that “the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself”.”[[13]](#footnote-14) The Eastern European model represented the opposite of Engels’ notion, being the result of top-down decision making by the Soviet Union. The party became the leading instrument of the entire system, not the workers. Historian Archie Brown explains how this “democratic centralism” saw a stifling of discussion and opinion because once decisions were reached, unity and conformity were expected.[[14]](#footnote-15) The result was the creation of a rigid and hierarchical party system with extremely limited room for opposition or criticism.

In addition, the extensive bureaucracy proved more cumbersome and rigid than the market’s invisible hand.[[15]](#footnote-16) Bureaucracy controlled practically everything, including decisions regarding liquidating or establishing firms, appointing managers and upper-level appointments, determining the breadth and scope of products offered, and even how labour should be allocated.[[16]](#footnote-17) This required massive amounts of informational exchange to the Planning Commission and would see negotiations and renegotiations between state and industry before the “millions of commands finally emerge[d].”[[17]](#footnote-18) Historian Jonas Kornai explains that due to higher authorities regularly interfering and the vast amounts of misrepresentation and miscommunication, this “centrally *managed*” economy was unresponsiveness in the face of change and stifled entrepreneurialism, innovation, and initiative.[[18]](#footnote-19) The intention behind the abolition of private property may have been to centralize the economic strategy towards enriching labourers’ existence, but the reality in Eastern Europe was that the Party apparatus came to act as a new social elite instead of being an extension of the proletariat.[[19]](#footnote-20)

The intention may have been to improve society, but due to the bureaucratic nature of the system, an economy of shortage was perpetuated alongside a culture of corruption. Facing queues and shortages are often emphasized as the proof of the inferiority of this system and, as a result, the failure of communism. Here surfaced the primary difference between capitalism and state-socialism in the economic functioning. Capitalism was based on selling things, while the communist system became focused on acquiring things in order to adequately meet their quotas.[[20]](#footnote-21) Such policies allowed the *centrally managed* economy a monopoly on material distribution, thus forcing cooperation with the state and building the state’s legitimacy every time it provided.[[21]](#footnote-22) This only lasted so long as goods were being provided, however, and this process became negatively impacted by the rigidity of information collecting. Individual managers learned to horde resources to make their quotas easier to meet and regularly passed on misinformation about their capabilities to ensure they would receive advantageous orders, only exasperating shortages.[[22]](#footnote-23) The system’s demands for miraculous resulted in the constant push to overcome the norm and this mentality trickled down into worker culture. Output became prioritized and rewarded over quality while the safety of the workers often became inconsequential.

Apart from the inefficiencies arising from bureaucratic control, many of the criticisms of the State-Socialist model were premised around its stifling of work ethic and motivation, in supposed contrast to the superior capitalist system. Marx and Engels rejected the idea that abolishing private property would lead to “universal laziness,” but Miklos Haraszti’s experience, a young Marxist living and working in Hungary, pointed to something arguably worse, a culture based around shortcuts and dishonesty.[[23]](#footnote-24) From his time working at a factory, employees not only worked, but often were responsible for operating two machines at intense rates, ignoring safety protocols just to meet or exceed the norms.[[24]](#footnote-25) Even though the machines being operated were designed to require an operator’s full attention, the demands of the piece-rate pay-scale required labourers to find a way to produce ever-increasing amounts of product just to achieve a livable wage.[[25]](#footnote-26) Haraszti’s experience do not suggest that the workers were being empowered, nor that they were lazy. Yet the idea of “cheating the norm” suggests something possibly worse than idleness, the tendency to take shortcuts and cut corners, thereby sabotaging the product quality and usefulness.

Haraszti also pointed out that “despite everything it could actually be pleasurable to work with these machines,” but because of the demands of the norms, he found working required him to become like a machine himself.[[26]](#footnote-27) This was exactly what Marx and Engels were arguing against from within the capitalist model. They had denounced the tendency of such mundane lifeless work that the worker was reduced to being merely “an appendage of the machine.”[[27]](#footnote-28) Ironic that this is exactly the situation Haraszti had become faced with. Haraszti’s experience was not representative of the entire state-socialist system, but it does offer an excellent example of how the workers’ state was not working for the workers. Still, there are more encouraging experiences which should also be included here, such as Hungary’s Csepel.

László Kürti analyzed the role of youth in Hungary during both Stalinism and State-Socialism in Hungary, specifically, in Csepel. Red Csepel was “a legend of socialist reconstruction and victory,” not just by establishing thriving industry following the Second World War but, also, by including cultural centres and parks.[[28]](#footnote-29) This aspect of culture was a central tenant of the State-Socialist system. What it failed to offer in regular access to consumer goods, it attempted to make up for in cultural and social benefits.[[29]](#footnote-30) Working families who were actively supporting the rebuilding projects here were granted housing, loans, and access to goods between 1945-1949. These families came to feel that Stalin’s methods offered an acceptable level of comfort, especially in the face of the recent destruction of the war.[[30]](#footnote-31) This level of confidence culminated with the emergence of the Stakhanovite movement in Hungary, the most extreme celebration of workers endeavoring to complete momentous tasks. As a way of celebrating Stalin’s seventieth birthday, some Csepel workers produced 1000% more than the required quota.[[31]](#footnote-32) This was an embodiment of the work culture which placed the utmost emphasis on radical overachievement, an admirable feat, but also a problematic one because of the doubtless shortcuts in quality and/or safety measures required to achieve it. Even so, by the time the New Economic Mechanism was introduced in Hungary in 1968, the needs of the economy had drastically changed and the emphasis on such heroic gestures diminished. Heroic labourers were no longer the ideal, rather, educated workers more capable of competing in the international market were.[[32]](#footnote-33)

Such a shift in workplace culture is captured in the film *Man of Marble,* directed by Andrzej Wajda.[[33]](#footnote-34) Filmed in 1977 Poland, the director was working within the Eastern Bloc to comment on his surroundings and used film as a means of criticizing the superficial nature of the state’s supposed values. He attacks the entire Stakhanovite movement as a propaganda façade by highlighting the political motives which were often involved in orchestrating and manipulating such feats. Corruption is seen as being systemic in the regime, emphasizing the political dealings and rewards that occurred alongside the exceeding of quotas. Wajda uses a fictitious example of a Stakhanovite worker named Mateusz Birkut who lays 30000 bricks in one shift and has a marble statue made of him. In addition to this, he is rewarded with a promotion, a wife, and a new apartment. By the end of the film, however, the worker has been all but forgotten, his statue is locked away in a museum basement and the state had moved on to newer heroic figures after they had squeezed as much as they could out of the man. The director’s critique goes beyond a critique of the Stakhanovite movement and really emphasizes the rot underlying the entire system which constantly espoused claims of grandeur through such feats. The State-Socialist system is presented akin to a social media user, exclaiming the most glamorous achievements only to avoid dealing with or admitting the existence of widespread dissatisfaction in the background.

The issues revealed within Jonas Kornai’s analysis of State-Socialism highlight many of the struggles within the bureaucratic system during its existence. The system continuously rewarded those who cut corners to achieve rapid growth rather than letting the workers take the leading role or putting worker interests and safety first. The dream of building a communist state never came to fruition, nor was it likely to, given the circumstances of the Eastern Europe’s enforced Soviet foundations. When looking at some of the central ideals of Marx and Engels within the Manifesto, there are clearly divergences when compared to the reality experienced in Eastern Europe. The Manifesto emphasized creating a better society for workers, but this was meant to be accomplished under the initiative of the workers, not through some top-down paternalistic approach. Still, the state-socialist regime had other major successes, particularly with how it attempted to make culture and education readily available along with its welfare policies. There remained, however, a strict boundary restricting how far the reforms could ever reach.

Although they differed, the attempt within State-Socialism and the sources of its inspiration both have useful lessons to offer the present. Failures are just as valuable as successes when contemplating the past. The important thing to keep in mind is that neither the text nor the experience holds all the answers. The continued study and consideration of state-socialism’s experiences can be useful, more so when the ideals underlying said systems are not dismissed out of hand. No text should be treated as infallible but approached with a critical mind which considers the origins, biases, and agenda of the information. Dogmatic loyalty to capitalism or communism can only diminish the value of alternative experiences and opinions. The core concepts of the Manifesto, when placed in context, may have been highly ambitious and radical, yet are based on legitimate concerns for worker’s wellbeing. Separating the deformities within Eastern Europe’s experience from the ideological intent is a key to broadening the political options open to aiding in answering the questions posed to society today. After all, it is not the ideological policy towards the economy but the people who live in the system that matters most but who are too often the first ones to be overlooked in the world of business and politics.

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2. See Friedrich Engels, “The Great Towns,” in *The Condition of the Working Class, 79-143,* (London: Electric Book Co., 2001).for a better picture of the conditions Marx and Engels were responding to. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party,* trans by Samuel Moore (Marxist Internet Archive: Marxism.org, 2010) http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf, 8, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Marx, *Manifesto,* 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Marx, 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Marx, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Manifesto,* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Marx, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Marx,34. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Marx, *Manifesto*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Marx. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *State and Revolution,* annotated by Todd Chretien, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 124-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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14. Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism,* (Doubleday Canada), 2009, location 2350-56. Kindle. See Chapter 6, and The Political System section. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Jonas Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Kornai, *The Socialist System,* 115-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Kornai, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Kornai, 117-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Marx, *Manifesto,* 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Verdery, “What Was Socialism,” 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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26. Haraszti, 11, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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30. Kürti, *Youth and the State in Hungary*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Kürti, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Kürti, *Youth and the State in Hungary,* 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Andrzej Wajda, *The Man of Marble,* (Poland: Andre Pepin, 1977), Criterion. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)