READING QUESTIONS – KARL MARX – COMMUNIST MANIFESTO (Note: these reading questions are based on the excerpted selection of the Communist Manifesto in the Schumaker anthology. As with any of the reading selections in the Schumaker anthology you should read the texts in their entirety if you find them compelling and/or interesting – Schumaker does omit some fairly important sections in many of these readings and you should know that!).

1. Marx says that history is the history of class struggles. What, specifically, are four examples that he lists of “class struggles”?

2. The struggles are “sometimes open,” “sometimes hidden” – what do you think he means by these? Can you give an example of each?

3. In every given historical epoch there exist “classes.” With respect to the “complexity” of class types what is the main difference between “capitalist-style” class structure versus pre-capitalist style class structures according to Marx?

4. Marx now focuses specifically on capitalism as the “structure” that defines current society. The highest class in capitalism, the capitalists, he calls the Bourgeoisie class. For Marx, is this class an “eternal” class or was it historically conditioned? In other words, have all societies, all peoples, in all historical time periods always have a segment of society that were “capitalists” or is this something that appeared on the scene in a very specific manner? What is Marx’s view here and if it’s an eternal class, what is his argument in support of that? Or, if you think Marx’s view is that this class was historically conditioned, then where did the Bourgeoisie class come from? What conditions led to this class?

5. Classical liberal theorists such as John Locke discuss the various forms that the sovereign government can take – for example legislative, executive, judicial functions. For classical liberal theorists, these functions in a democracy act to perform the will of the people either directly or indirectly. How does Marx view these liberal institutions of government? Do they represent the interests of the people as claimed by liberal theorists? If not, whose interests does government serve in the final analysis?

6. Marx thinks that the bourgeoisie, the new dominant class of the capitalist epoch, is “revolutionary.” For example, capitalism revolutionizes many cultural traditions. Explain how capitalism is revolutionary in a cultural sense for Marx. Specifically mention religion, personal worth, the family, and “honored occupations” or professions.

7. While Marx agrees that capitalism ushers in new freedoms he does not think that there are more freedoms or necessarily better freedoms. What are these new freedoms and what old freedoms do they replace? (Hint: what is a “chartered freedom” (for guilds))?

8. Marx identifies an upside of capitalism – ie, capitalism shows what about humankind? What positive aspect of humankind does capitalism bring forth?

9. “All that is solid melts into air.” What does Marx mean by this? Explain how the following “forces” continually melt social solidity: a) instruments (means) of production, b) relations of production (ie, classes, ways of doing work), c) means of exchange,

10. According to Marx capitalism didn’t just emerge from no where – it emerged from feudalism. Was this emergence the result of individual philosophers who persuaded Kings, Queens, the nobility that “it would be a good idea” to change feudalism? Was the emergence of capitalism a planned event or did it arise out of necessity, on its own? Explain.

11. Sometimes capitalism’s dynamism and power is explained by the G.O.D. hypothesis which stands for Grow Or Die, ie, that the capitalist class, in order to retain its power, must “grow or die.” Would Marx agree with this for capitalism? Has it always been this way for the dominant class of any given historical epoch? Explain.

12. Marx in this section now switches gears and instead of acknowledging the power and “upside” of capitalism, he now points out problems or internal “contradictions” within capitalism. For example, Marx says that too much commerce leads to not enough commerce (or, if you like capitalism then too much of
it will, paradoxically, reduce capitalism). What is Marx’s argument for his view here? Why does he argue that even the bourgeoisie will not be able to control this new form of economic production, capitalism?

13. According to Marx not only does capitalism contain an “internal contradiction”, it also produces an “agent” that will take advantage of this contradiction and lead a revolution against capitalism. What is this “agent” and what are the specific characteristics of this historical “agent”?

At this point Marx discusses a key principle or concept that is central to his philosophy of work: “commodity.” Marx adopts the definition of the “mainstream” economists of his day: the political economists – for example, Adam Smith and David Ricardo. In order to understand “commodity” it’s necessary to understand the difference between use value and exchange value. Use value is simply the value that human beings derive from using a given thing. For example, the use value (a qualitative value) of a coat would be its ability to keep us warm and protect us from bad weather. Exchange value is the value that an object fetches in the marketplace as represented by money. In our coat example, the exchange value of a coat (a quantitative value) would be the amount of money that a given coat fetches on the market, say $90. So two values here – use and exchange – one is given by the use of the thing and the other is measured monetarily – by its price on the market. Now back to commodity – a commodity then is a thing or product that is produced solely for its exchange value. Our coat example fits this quite well – in capitalism those who produce coats using factories, etc, do not produce coats so that they may personally wear thousands of coats! Instead coats are produced for the sole purpose of fetching a given exchange value (as represented by its price). Of course coats must also have a use value if they are to sell – but insofar as they are Commodities they are produced for their exchange value.

14. OK, now to the question. Commodities are usually taken to be non-living things – coffee, coats, gold, cake, cars, bicycles, socks, stop signs, etc. Can living things also be commodities? What specific living commodity does Marx focus on here? What consequences follow for the quality of life of this living commodity according to Marx?

15. These living commodities – as individual living beings, they do have unique, individual characters according to Marx. Do they retain their unique characters as commodities? Why or why not? What is Marx’s argument here?

16. Earlier in the text Marx makes the claim that the class structure in capitalism is simplified into two classes. An easy objection against Marx is that we appear to have many classes – for example a middle class. What response to this objection is made by Marx?

17. In this last section Marx discusses the development of the proletariat as a class. Explain how, according to Marx they are employed as soldiers against two very different “enemies”

Marx lists some commonly repeated objections to communism. For each objection below, give Marx’s response.

18. Communism is repulsive because it destroys private property.

19. Communism is repulsive because it gets rid of high culture.

20. Communism is repulsive because it destroys family values.

21. Communism is repulsive because it destroys education.

22. Communism is repulsive because it is unpatriotic – it subverts nationalism.

23. Marx does not provide much in the way of details as to what communism would “look like” – however he does list some general principles. Provide at least four distinct principles that would govern communism Marx-style.