

# An Examination of Marx's Critique of Early Communism in Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844

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## Abstract

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx delves into the intrinsic logical connections among private property, alienated labor, and communism, revealing the essence of private property and showing why the three forms of early communism lapsed into utopianism due to their failure to accurately grasp the nature of private property. These three forms of communism have specific references and are distinct from early utopian socialism.

## Keywords

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Communism, Private Property, Alienated Labor

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## 1. Introduction

Marxist academics continue to disagree over the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, sometimes known as the *Manuscripts*. Marx divides the early forms of communism into three categories in this text: “political communism,” which can be either authoritarian or democratic; “crude communism”; and “communism that abolishes the state.” Although these forms have been studied by domestic Marxist scholars, there is still disagreement over whom Marx specifically mentioned in his criticism. According to Huang Xuesheng, “crude communism” alludes to the theories of Cabet, Blanc, and other thinkers who, while yearning for humanity’s primitive state, exhibit a harsh criticism of private property and call for more forceful revolutionary uprisings. Meanwhile, Hess’s “philosophical communism” is referred to as “political communism” and “communism that abolishes the state.” (Huang, 2022). According

to Zhou Jiaxin, the term “crude communism” refers to the utopian ideas of French intellectuals such as Étienne Cabet, Théodore Dezamy, and Gracchus Babeuf, as well as Englishman Robert Owen and German scientist Wilhelm Weitling. “Communist that abolishes the state and political communism, either democratic or authoritarian” alludes to Cabet’s communist beliefs and methods (Zhou, 2021). In Liu Xiuping’s written collection *Rereading Marx: Texts and Their Thoughts*, volume four, the author speculates that the term “crude communism” probably originally referred to the “perfectly equal” society that Babeuf and his followers imagined as a result of the French Revolution of 1789-1794, as well as the utopian socialist ideas realized through the exclusion of private economy in the framework of “national communes.” (Liu, 2018). The perspective from footnote 100 of the *Marx-Engels Collected Works*’ first volume is adopted here. Regarding “democratic communism,” the author suggests that it most likely refers to the political beliefs found in Le Roux and Cabet’s doctrines, whereas “authoritarian communism” may be associated with Blanc and Weitling’s revolutionary theories as well as Dezamy opinions. In conclusion, “communism that abolishes the state” probably refers to a variety of ideologies, including Dezamy and Proudhon (Liu, 2018). While some domestic scholars also cast doubt on the specific references, most scholars concur that Proudhon’s socialist ideas are the main target of “communism that abolishes the state.” When comparing the theories of the early communists with the *Manuscripts*, I find that Professor Liu Xiuping correctly interprets the first two forms. However, I disagree that Proudhon’s theory belongs in “communism that abolishes the state,” preferring the perspectives of Dezamy and Blanc.

But before getting into the detailed examination of these three types of communism, it is important to understand private property, which is central to Marx’s classification of communism. Private property is a recurring theme in the *Manuscripts*, appearing frequently throughout the text. The fundamental question of private property is closely tied to Marx’s categorization and critique of different kinds of communism.

## 2. Private Property Is the Cornerstone and Starting Point of Criticism

Marx had already come across the concepts of material interests, or private property, and communism before he wrote the *Manuscripts*, but he had not yet explored how they related to one another. Under the influence of Hegel during his tenure at the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx came to hold the view that the state represented the pinnacle of rationality and ought to protect the interests of the entire population by treating them fairly and impartially. However, he discovered that all human thoughts and deeds were dictated by material interests, and that the state and the law had become instruments used by the privileged classes to pursue illicit goals. Marx considered the theories of French socialism and communism to be unrealistic and inadequately scientific, despite the fact that

these disparities were denounced by these ideologies. After quitting the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx delved into economic literature to find answers to his “troubling questions,” looking into the connections between ownership, private property, and the government. He had already come to the conclusion that the relationship between politics and economy held the key to unlocking the mystery of capitalist society in the Preface to the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Marx focused on exposing the concealed internal relationship between private property and social institutions in the *Manuscripts*, where he continued his political and economic indictment of civil society.

Marx first established the logical relationship between private property and communism in the *Manuscripts* by dissecting the fundamentals of private property. Under the capitalist system, labor and capital have always been two opposing forces concealed within private property, which have grown more intense and explosive as private property has grown. The proletariat will inevitably bring about a revolution against capitalist society and establish a communist one that actively subverts private property. Without understanding the true nature of private property and its power over people, the early communist states either merely subjugated the material form of private property or simply possessed wealth in the form of goods produced through human labor. Marx noted that we cannot achieve human nature and true human liberation unless we fundamentally sublate the rule of private property over people, that is, if we do not give up the alienated state of people under private ownership. Thus, in order to establish a communist society, we must first comprehend what private property really is.

The object essence of private property and the subject essence of private property make up the two parts of the essence of private property. First off, capital—the tangible form of private property—is referred to as the object essence of private property. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx claims that

This is the dynamic relationship of private property as the opposition develops into a contradictory relationship, thus promoting the resolution of contradictions. As the exclusion of labor from property, that is, the subject essence of private property, and as the exclusion of capital from labor, that is, the objectification of labor (Marx & Engels, 2009).

As a result, “objectified labor,” or capital, is primarily referred to as the object essence of private property. According to this assertion, laborers’ labor, or the accumulation of laborers’ labor, is the source of capital and serves as the material force governing labor. Second, alienated labor is the fundamental component of private property. Smith believed that labor was the fundamental component of private property even before Marx, and Engels even dubbed Smith “the Luther of national economics.” Marx believed that when Smith saw labor as the core of national economics, he was transforming the material essence of private property from an external object into the subject essence of human beings just as Luther re-rooted the externalized God in people’s hearts (Zhang, 2021). The subject essence of private property as the labor of alienation, however, was fundamen-

tally obscured by Ricardo. Building on Smith's thesis, Marx articulated the essence of private property as follows: "Labor is the subject essence of private property, as an activity that exists for itself, as a subject, and as an individual." (Marx & Engels, 2009). But the labor Marx refers to here is alienated labor, not the labor done by workers to satisfy material needs.

Labor under the capitalist system is alienated labor as opposed to the objectification of human essential power. Marx noted that through objectified labor, humans alter the natural world. In this process,

Humans use nature as the object of labor, and the fundamental content of labor is objectification, in which the laborer imprints the mark of human activity on nature and transforms their effective abilities into the attributes of natural objects, condensing and embodies their essential power in the natural object as the product of labor (Nie, 2013).

Thus, also in this process, human life activities are embodied in objectified labor, which is the result of the concentration of essential human power, and human raw materials for production and existence are provided by nature. Workers become hostile and opposed to labor products under the capitalist system, which causes them to become alienated from others as well as from their own fundamental nature. This is because labor that was previously objectified becomes alienated labor. Marx stated that "labor is opposed to the object produced by labor, that is, the product of labor, as an alien existence, as a force independent of the producer." (Marx & Engels, 2009). In the real world, people are always alienated from nature, from themselves, and from others, as Marx demonstrated by dissecting the four characteristics that characterize workers' alienated labor. Consequently, the poverty of workers is not a coincidental but rather an inevitable phenomenon; national economists have not asserted that the poverty of workers is predestined.

It is evident that Marx differs greatly from national economists in his understanding of the universality of private property. He considers both the subjective and objective aspects of private property, as well as the perspectives of both workers and non-workers. He thinks that as private property relations develop dialectically, contradictions will inevitably get more intense and result in a communist society where human nature is restored and private property is subjugated. Even though early communism also expressed a desire for a communist society, their interpretation of private property was largely one-sided, which made their subversion of private property passive and helpless. They were also unable to free people from alienated labor and restore them to their basic human nature. From this vantage point, Marx started to thoroughly examine and critique the three types of early communism.

### 3. Marx's Evaluation of Early Communism's Forms

As previously indicated, there is debate in scholarly circles about the precise allusions to the three varieties of communism that Marx makes in his manu-

scripts. Here I argue that the concepts of “authoritarian communism” refer to the revolutionary doctrines of Blanqui, De Samy, and Weitling; “democratic communism” to those of Leroux and Cabet; and “state-abolishing communism” to the views of De Samy and Weitling regarding the formation of a family alliance to replace the state upon the achievement of communism.

### 3.1. Criticism of “Crude Communism”

“Crude communism” is the term used to describe the utopian socialist beliefs of Babeuf and his followers. It is the first type of early communism. Marx had previously read *The Conspiracy for Equality*, a memoir about Babeuf’s leadership of the egalitarian conspiracy and related theories, written in 1844 by Babeuf’s friend Philippe Buonarroti. According to Marx and Engels, who greatly praised the communist ideas presented in the book,

The revolutionary movement that started in the Cercle Social in 1789, with Leclerc and Roux as its principal representatives in the middle, and ultimately ended in the temporary failure of Babeuf’s conspiracy, gave birth to the idea of communism,” This notion was promoted in France following the Revolution of 1830 by Babeuf’s friend Buonarroti. Following careful deliberation, this notion germinated into a new global framework (Marx & Engels, 2005).

Marx, however, also attacked Babeuf’s idea of “absolute equality” in communist society, contending that it is merely “the universalization and completion of the relation of private property” and will therefore always remain a “crude form of communism.” (Marx & Engels, 2009). First of all, this communism is fundamentally an egalitarianism born out of jealousy over the unequal distribution of wealth. In essence, it continues to affirm that the relationship between private property and “the relation of the community to the world of things,” i.e., the attempt is to replace the possession of a few with universal private property ownership. e. it only perceives private property in its material form. Second, this communism places a strong emphasis on equality, “seeking to abolish everything that cannot be possessed as private property by all” (Marx & Engels, 2009). It ignores the benefits of private property and its capacity to meet needs for humankind, which amounts to a return to feudalism and an earlier way of life. Finally, it promotes a “community of wives,” minimizing interpersonal relationships to simple sexual interactions, treating individuals as merely classified entities, and downplaying the importance of intricate social interactions. Thus, this communism is completely uncivilized and unthinking. Even though it succeeds in the initial positive abandonment of private property, it ultimately descends into utopian socialism because it is unable to eradicate the alienation of labor due to its failure to acknowledge the subjective nature of private property.

### 3.2. Analysis of Two Political Types of Communism

In an attempt to create a democratic or authoritarian state, the second type of

early communism sought to achieve communism through changes to political institutions. The political beliefs expressed in Leroux and Cabet's doctrines are most likely what is meant by "democratic communism," whereas Blanqui and Weitling's revolutionary doctrines and De Samy's opinions are most likely what is meant by "authoritarian communism." (Liu, 2018). This type of communism aims to spread communist ideas in order to support the creation of an egalitarian state, primarily attributing social inequality to the archaic and corrupt nature of political institutions.

Democrats Leroux and Cabet supported the creation of a democratic, egalitarian, and fraternal state. Throughout the first part of the 1800s, Leroux—a well-known Saint-Simon disciple—had a big impact on authors and laborers. According to Zhang Bai Rong and Dong Xiaoyan, "Leroux received more votes than Hugo and Louis Blanc in the Constituent Assembly election that followed the February Revolution. He was chosen by Marx to serve on the International Workingmen's Association's Central Council in 1864." (Zhang, 2021). It's clear that Marx acknowledged the worth of Leroux's theories to some degree. Leroux promoted a comparatively moderate and democratic socialist ideology based on the republican tradition upheld by the French Revolution, never straying from it. He saw socialism as an embodiment of a republican political ideal: "Socialism is the negation of authority in the sense of obedience and the recognition of union in the sense of freedom, equality, and fraternity. This is socialism, and the republican and republican ideal in this sense." (Zhang, 2021). Leroux further maintained that private property ownership is unalienable. Cabet's democratic political ideas were infused with communist ideas. His masterwork *Voyage en Icarie*, which succinctly expresses his communist philosophy, was finished during his wanderings. In Cabet's view, the underlying cause of the wealth disparity between individuals and nations, along with all other ugly phenomena like greed, jealousy, hatred, and various conflicts and wars, is an unequal system. So long as property sharing is implemented and society is structured around the ideals of equality and fraternity, conflicts, chaos, and suffering can be resolved. Cabet went on to discuss his dream of using Christian principles to create a "communist society."

All people led by Jesus Christ acknowledge and declare that the only social system that can accomplish equality and fraternity, avoid various forms of greed and selfishness, eradicate all forms of competition and confrontation, overcome jealousy and hatred, make evil deeds and sins impossible, ensure harmony and peace, and ultimately bring happiness to the reborn human race is a communist society based on persuasion, education, public interest, or common interest (Cabet, 2011).

Cabet was adamant that everyone could achieve "equality of prosperity" since productivity would rise more quickly as a result of the development of modern industry and the use of various machines. Whether it was a presidential republic, a constitutional monarchy, or another form of government, he thought that as

long as the nation was built on the principles of “public interest,” everything would be OK. Additionally, he dreamed of eradicating poverty without taking anything away from the landowners because he thought that hard work could bring happiness to people. It is evident that the democratic ideals of the petty bourgeoisie are still present in Leroux and Cabell’s theories. They both supported the super-class fraternity and thought that peaceful methods could bring about communism. This further demonstrates their ignorance of the inevitable conflict that results from capitalist private ownership between labor and capital. Their communism would not actually lead to human freedom and liberation; instead, it would only result in humanitarianism.

As proxies for “authoritarian” communism, Blanqui, Dessallemi, and Weitling have a great deal in common with one another’s political and military opinions. First and foremost, they are all in favor of using revolutionary violence to topple bourgeois rule. Although Blanqui was greatly influenced by the theories of Kabe and the three main utopian socialist thinkers, he was also aware of their flaws, such as the fact that hoping for the peaceful realization of communism in the face of escalating class tensions is an unrealistic utopia. Because of this, he thinks that “communism itself is a revolution” and supports the creation of workers’ armed forces and cohesive revolutionary groups in order to take control through the planning of armed uprisings and insurrections. According to Dessallemi and Weitling, a new society should be founded after the bourgeois government is toppled via revolution. Additionally, Dessallemi was a member of Blanqui’s covert revolutionary group, Four Seasons. Furthermore, they all support the establishment of a dictatorship regime as a temporary political measure following the revolution, to be used to quell any counterrevolutionary attacks and control social order violators, prior to the establishment of a communist society. Thus, all three of them are generally associated with “authoritarian” communism.

### **3.3. Critique of the Communist Theory of “Abolishing the State”**

The “abolition of the state,” which is still partially dependent on private property and thus subject to human alienation, is the third manifestation of communism. In actuality, this type of communism alludes to the communist society that Weitling, Desamites, and other proponents eventually intend to establish. As Desamites noted, “Under communist conditions, people of all races, colors, and past and present national affiliations will live as brothers.” According to his vision, communism will dismantle all international barriers and unite all people into one single nation. Institutions involved in social affairs management, education, and scientific research will take the place of the state as a political entity (Liu, 2018). Establishing a communist family alliance devoid of a legal system, private property, government, and monetary systems is Weitling’s ultimate goal. Because of this, they both believe that the communist society has destroyed the state, but private property still has some influence in such a society. Although Weitling’s communism is “a crude, unrefined, purely instinctive communism,”

Engels thinks it has “touched on the main point” and grown sufficiently among the working class to form utopian communism (Marx & Engels, 2009). Weitling has made some observations about the phenomenon of alienation in the workplace and has touched on the subjective nature of private property. He recognized the subjective nature of private property—alienated labor—as well as its material manifestation, such as money, real estate, and movable property. For instance, the capitalist or landlord determines the value of labor products based on their own interests rather than the laborer. But his comprehension of this is still very limited; neither did he see that this is a contradiction concealed within private property nor that the proletarian revolution was bound to happen. Rather than the proletariat acting in accordance with scientific theory, he even pinned his hopes for revolution on the rogue proletariat, considering the proletarian revolution to be the spontaneous action of a group of people who have become hopeless because of poverty.

Marx stated in the *Manuscripts* that the second and third stages of communism were “still under the influence of private property, that is, human alienation,” and as such, they were “not yet complete.” According to these two varieties of communism, “they have acknowledged themselves as the subversion of human self-alienation and the restoration or return of man to himself,” (Marx & Engels, 2009). This is where it differs from crude communism, which is said to be more advanced because it only acknowledges the objective nature of private property and places more emphasis on possessing the material form of it. This leads to the ultimate goal of universalizing private property without actually subverting it and eradicating human alienation. People who adhere to the latter two varieties of communism must overcome human self-alienation and come home to themselves, demonstrating that they understand the arbitrary nature of private property. However, their shortcoming is that “it has not yet understood the positive nature of private property, nor has it understood the human nature that is necessary, so it is still bound and infected by private property.” (Marx & Engels, 2009). In this context, it alludes to the objectification of private property as humankind’s fundamental power and labor production as a significant source of employment. As a result, despite the fact that the latter two forms of communism have acknowledged that private property is the self-alienation of human nature, their comprehension is still very limited. They have failed to see the hidden contradiction between labor and capital as well as the inevitable coming to pass of a proletarian revolution.

To sum up, the early manifestations of communism failed to appreciate the paradoxical relationship between labor and capital and the inherent necessity of a proletarian revolution due to a shallow grasp of the nature of private property. Consequently, to some extent their communism remained an idealistic utopia.

#### **4. The Exclusion of Proudhon’s Theory in the Communist Perspective of “Eliminating Political Authority”**

The academic community views Proudhon’s “abolition of the state” communism

as a doctrine, despite the fact that Proudhon's ideas are obviously anarchist. But if one follows the logic of Marx's writing in the third note of the *Manuscripts*, one finds that before criticizing various forms of early communism, Marx had already excluded Proudhon; in fact, from Proudhon's own perspective, he was hostile to communism.

From a logical standpoint, Marx thought that "the path of self-alienation and the sublation of self-alienation are the same," (Marx & Engels, 2009). as stated at the start of the third note in the manuscript. Private property was originally only seen as an object. Next, Marx quoted Proudhon, Fourier, and Saint-Simon's opinions. While acknowledging that private property was a result of labor, Proudhon failed to recognize that this labor was already alienated and went against the inherent freedom and nature of humans. Therefore, he aimed to use unified management, average wages, and collective production to lessen the wealth gap in capitalism. On the other hand, Fourier recognized the alienation of labor, but he thought that this phenomenon was unique to the industrial sector. As a solution, he suggested giving up on industry and going back to farming. However, Saint-Simon believed that industrial labor that is productive is real labor, and he therefore thought that the discovery of capitalists' self-conscience would solve the issue. Marx presented his own interpretation of communism after evaluating the three socialist theorists previously mentioned. According to Marx, communism actively sublates private property rather than outright banning it. Marx then concluded from his analysis that the three versions of early communism fell short of this objective, and on the basis of this he put forth his own communist ideology. It is evident that Marx disregarded Proudhon's theory from the outset of early communism.

Marx and Engels considered Proudhon, Fourier, and Saint-Simon as socialist utopians, in actuality. Marx separated the communist doctrine from the socialist doctrine of Proudhon, Fourier, and others as early as September 1843:

But I am talking about the real communism that Kabe, Dessalle, Weitling, and others taught, not some hypothetical or fictitious kind of communism. Only this particular form of communism—which is impacted by private ownership, its antithesis—is a unique expression of humanitarian ideals. As a result, communism and the abolition of private ownership are not synonymous; further socialist doctrines, like those of Fourier and Proudhon, are not coincidental but rather inevitable, exist in addition to this type of communism (Marx & Engels, 2004).

Proudhon's doctrine was also categorized by Engels as socialist theory:

The whole content of this "socialism" is a little talk about property, a little lament for the proletariat, a little talk about labor organization, and a few poor groups that improve the situation of the lower classes, while actually being ignorant of political economy and real society. This is according to Proudhon's approach, which comes from third-hand or fourth-hand mate-

rials (Marx & Engels, 1979).

Because of its theory's lack of "absolute calmness of thought" and party spirit, this type of socialism lost all of its strength, blood, and spirit.

Marx and Engels implicitly recognized that socialism and communism refer to different doctrines and have different meanings, despite the fact that they did not expressly state this distinction in the *Manuscript* or in their earlier discussions. A critical attitude toward the capitalist economy, politics, and society was reflected in the connotations of "socialism" and "communism" in the first half of the 19th century, with a focus on the necessity of establishing an equitable social order. But when it came to private ownership, socialism and communism differed greatly. Private property was typically supported by "socialism" while it was supported by "communism" to abolish private property. In spite of their criticism of private property, socialists did not support its total elimination; rather, they thought that private property could be retained while the distribution of wealth could be changed to curb inequality. For instance, Fourier's theory and Saint-Simon's "Industrial System" both recognized the possibility of private property and private ownership. Nonetheless, the main thrust of communism was to replace private ownership with public ownership, as demonstrated by Cabot, Dessalle, and Weitling. Marx also held the view that "man's essence can be truly possessed through man and for man, for communism is the positive sublation of private property, that is, the self-alienation of human beings." (Marx & Engels, 2009). Proudhon, on the other hand, rejected the large private ownership system of capitalism and essentially supported the petty bourgeoisie, thinking that small private ownership could be protected from capitalism's many negative effects. Given his belief that violence was not always necessary to win, Proudhon opposed the revolutionary tactics that Marx had espoused in order to defend the interests of workers. Social problems could only be resolved by the government providing workers with the right to equal exchange and the ability to work. Essentially, Proudhon never gave up his vision of private property, and he supported reformism, even if he thought Guizot would help him realize his political ideal. Sophisticated classes were the ones who socialists "all stood on the side of the working class movement and preferred to seek support from," as Engels stated in the introduction of the 1888 edition. Victory was limited to those who publicly declared that a fundamental transformation of society, encompassing the working class, was imperative, and that mere political change alone was insufficient. Social problems could be resolved as long as the government guaranteed workers' rights to equal exchange and to labor (Marx & Engels, 1979). For example, the existence of private property and private ownership was permitted by both Fourier's theory and Saint-Simon's "Industrial System." As opposed to this, the majority of "communists," including Kabe, Desamae, Weitling, and others, supported public ownership. Marx further held the following views: "The true possession of human nature through and for human beings is communism; it is the positive sublation of private property, that is, the

self-alienation of human beings.” (Marx & Engels, 2009). However, Proudhon opposed large private ownership of capitalism and essentially supported the petty bourgeoisie, contending that small private ownership could prevent many of capitalism’s abuses. Marx had described revolutionary methods for fighting for workers’ interests, but Proudhon believed that these methods were not necessary to achieve victory and that a more peaceful and nonviolent approach to social revolution was preferable. Solving social problems would be possible as long as the government granted workers the freedom to work and the right to equal exchange. In essence, Proudhon never gave up on his vision of private property. He supported reformism and even hoped that Guizot would help him realize his political dream. As Engels noted in the preface to the English edition in 1888, socialists

All stood on the side of the working class movement and preferred to seek support from “educated” classes. Communists could only be defined as segments of the working class who publicly declared that fundamental changes to society as a whole were necessary and were persuaded that only political change would suffice (Marx & Engels, 2012).

Socialists like Proudhon, Saint-Simon, Fourier, and others were generally against violent revolution. communists, like Blanqui, Desamae, Weitling, and others, primarily supported using revolutionary force to topple the existing order. Marx therefore regarded Proudhon as a member of the “socialist” school in the *Manuscripts*, and therefore Proudhon’s doctrine could not be included in “abolishing the state” communism.

Marx presented his own definition of communism in the *Manuscripts*, analyzing different communist theories and basing it on the genuine situation, as well as the critical absorption of earlier theories.

Communism is the positive sublation of private property, that is, the self-alienation of human beings. As such, it is the authentic embodiment of human nature via and for humans. In keeping with human nature, it is therefore the return of humans to themselves, or to society. This is a full, conscious, and comprehensive return that takes into account all of the wealth that has been accrued over the years (Marx & Engels, 2009).

The positive sublation of private property is communism. In order to subvert this subversion and restore people to their fundamental nature, they must abandon alienated labor, which calls for adjustments to interpersonal relationships and, eventually, to the current social structure. As a result, the historical movement to create a communist society and overthrow capitalism is unavoidable, and the contradictions of private property itself contribute to this inevitable outcome. The movement of private property, or more specifically, the movement of the economy, must provide the entire revolutionary movement with an empirical and theoretical basis (Marx & Engels, 2009). Marx therefore concluded that the objective contradictions of a private ownership society inevitably lead to

the establishment of a communist society, which is a potent refutation of those theorists who maintain that communism is a utopia.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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