

Back to the future? sustainability and futurism in the communist manifesto



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.

“ Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economical and political sway of the bourgeois class.”

—Karl Marx, Manifesto of the Communist Party, pg. 477-478 (transl. Robert C. Tucker)

Written in 1848 as a way to aid the Communist Party in outlining and defining a specific social vision, the Communist Manifesto explores the ways that the bourgeois institutionalization of free trade has become detrimental to human civilization. Before delineating how free trade has become a burden to societies everywhere, Marx and Engels explore the reasons why, and delve into the origins of this socioeconomic regime. In telling their own history of the world—even asserting that “ The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”—Marx and Engels attempt reason through their current socioeconomic environment. However, by appealing to an unsustainable past to justify their ideals of a stable future, Marx and

Engels point to an irreconcilable irony in their own work, which casts early doubts on Communism being fully viable at all.

“ We see then,” write Marx and Engels, “[that] the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society.” Within this section, the theorists have been describing, with copious anaphora, the qualities of the bourgeoisie. Now, having addressed who the members of the bourgeoisie are, what they do, and who they are not, Marx and Engels turn to discuss their origins. This marks a shift into the passages which follow and which explain class distinction is still relevant, and this shift is clearly emphasized by stylistic devices, too. The passage begins with a conclusive “ We see then” as opposed to the repetitive opening of “ The bourgeoisie” featured in nearly all the paragraphs up to this point.

The origins of bourgeois societal relations are important to Marx, as the Communist Manifesto is, at its heart, addressing the origins of a new set of societal relations—those of the proletariat. It is therefore important for the writers to understand how and from where the current state of society and commerce emerged. (For the sake of expediency, only Marx’s name will be used from now on. This is done respectfully; after Marx’s death, Engels wrote in the Preface to the German Edition of 1883 that “ The basic thought running through the Manifesto—...this basic thought belongs solely and exclusively to Marx. I have already stated this many times, but precisely now it is necessary that it also stand in front of the Manifesto itself” (472).)

Specifically, Marx looks at “ the means of production and of exchange,” since this group of factors is what he claims to be the “ foundation” on which “ the <https://assignbuster.com/back-to-the-future-sustainability-and-futurism-in-the-communist-manifesto/>

bourgeoisie built itself up." Earlier, he asserts that the bourgeoisie " played a most revolutionary part" and " put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations." A strange irony plagues the reading of the origins of the bourgeoisie, which Marx believes to have " pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ' natural superiors' and have left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than ' cash payment'" (475). While not incorrect in their characterization, these passages seem to reflect almost a sort of nostalgia for feudal times.

Nevertheless, feudal conceptions and practices of trade and commerce prepared the way for capitalism to rise to prominence. Marx offers his explanation of what these conceptions and practices were, designating " a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word the feudal relations of property". He does not further explicate what this " certain stage" is that he is referring to, or what was so unique about such a stage that it brought about an abrupt change into bourgeois capitalism. Furthermore, Marx states this conception of societal relations in several different ways, calling it, in layers: " These means of production and of exchange" or " The conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged" or " The feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry" or " The feudal relations of property." Clearly these descriptions are all referring to one conception, yet Marx uses four layers or definitions to fully pin down what he means to convey. But even as he presents these four descriptions, Marx does not give any concrete examples

(at least not in this passage; perhaps he believes that the text around this passage is specific enough). There are subtle differences between these four descriptions; in translation the words “ means”, “ conditions”, “ organization”, and “ relations” are all used. These different word choices overlap minimally, and add together present a larger picture than any one of them could present alone. It was not only feudal society that crumbled, but also all of its economic systems, as well as all of its means to sustain itself.

Sustainability is key. According to this passage, the “ development of these means of production and of exchange” were not always prone to falling apart. There came a certain point when this development was no longer sustainable, came into conflict with that Marx calls already “ developed productive forces” and then proceeded to break down. The European feudal system consisted of serfdom and the keeping of large manors or estates. Serfs were peasants who worked for the seigneurs who owned the manors, and formed the largest population group in feudal society. In many ways, the bourgeoisie-proletariat divide at the heart of Marx’s entire argument is very similar to the seigneur-serf situation found despicable by many at the end of feudalism. Marx himself criticizes this the seigneur-serf divide, denouncing various epochs of history and the oppression of one class by another: “ in the Middle Ages,” he says, “[we have] feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters-journeymen, apprentices, serfs” (474). He acknowledges this constant theme throughout history, but believes that there can be an ultimate progression towards socialism and communism, which would break this chain of unsustainable class relationships. The final state of proletarian rule would

then, of course, be sustainable, in a clear departure from all of its oppressive predecessors.

At this crucial stage with which Marx is concerned, the feudal relations of property became “so many fetters.” This sudden restrictiveness and internal tension led necessarily to these “relations of property” being “burst asunder.” Marx’s word choice of “burst asunder” here is interesting, too, as it provides imagery vastly different from relationships “crumbling” or “fading away.” Rather, the movements of social upheaval are explosive and singular, leaving clear spaces for future reconstruction.

After the annihilation of the old system of property, trade, commerce, and production, “into their place stepped free competition,” which is what Marx’s society currently finds itself acting out, together with the accompaniment of “a social and political constitution adapted to it.” This accompanying constitution naturally leads to the “economical and political sway of the bourgeois class.” This simple statement—that with an economic system (in this case, free competition), inevitably comes a social and political constitution—becomes troubling when its implied universality is applied to other possible economic revolutions. This entire passage from its beginning of “We see, then...” is troubling because it opens up the possibilities of problems concerning Marx’s entire theory. The question of sustainability—of each subsequently adopted social and political constitution—again emerges.

Earlier, Marx uses wording such as “the bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part” and “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the

relations of production and with them the whole relations of society.” While Marx’s antagonism towards the bourgeoisie is foundation of his entire argument, and is clear from the opening sentence of his work, his own usage of the previously-quoted wording brings echoes of doubt into his theories of historical progress. The way the bourgeoisie achieved its rise to power was through revolution, and through the unsustainable development of social property relations. This seems to be the same means which Marx now advocates for the proletariat. “ At a certain stage in the development of... production and of exchange,” conditions will be ripe for the proletariat to begin a worldwide revolution. The possibility that the proletarian revolution—which Marx will endeavor at length to distinguish from other class upheavals—could be analogous to its predecessor, the bourgeois revolution, is unsettling.

This possibility would lead to later literature exploring that reality of all class upheavals being a continuous cycle, as in 1984 by George Orwell. Orwell views the rise and fall of class conflicts as a constant shift from low class to middle, middle class to high, and the subsequent adaptation of humans to whatever social class they find themselves in. At some point—similar to Marx’s own conception of “ at a certain stage”—the discontent of the lower class bubbles over, revolution occurs, and the cycle begins again. “ He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past,” Orwell once wrote, concerned with the usage of propaganda and historical reporting in a dystopian society. Yet these words can be applied to Marx’s attempts to harness futurism in the Communist Manifesto. By appealing to the past, he attempts to control the future, putting forth a

vision of a human society which has finally reached its zenith. Yet he is unable to control this past which he so desperately attempts to form into his own concentrated history. The history of class struggles refuses to be molded to his teleological assertions. It slips away from the rhetorical grasp of the Communist party, liquid and flexible in its historical repetitions.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978. Print.