

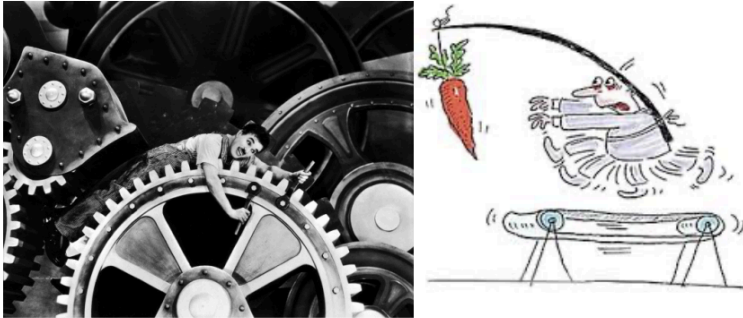
Self, Culture, Society (Rosen) | Fall 2024

Final

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Prompt #: 1

**Consider the images below: 1. a still taken from Charlie Chaplin's movie, *Modern Times* 2. A comic from artist Martin Guhl**



**How can the images presented above be used as visual models of Marx's description of the bourgeois mode of production. Your answer should explore the revolutionary nature of capitalism as a "moving contradiction." Note, while the adjective "revolutionary" is typically used to refer to complete change and upheaval, it comes from the word "revolve" which denotes circularity and return. Are these "contradictory" aspects of revolution (as stasis and change) resolved in Marx's understanding of capitalism? Finally, select or draw a third image that you feel represents a critical aspect of Marx's theory missed by the two images above and explain.**

"Fast Fashion" refers to clothing mass produced by retailers attempting to capitalize on recent trends while selling their products as cheaply as possible. Such business practices allow large companies to maximize consumption in hopes for profit, yet have side effects that include high carbon emissions, pollution, and most notably, poor labor conditions. One company stands out when it comes to fast fashion: Shein. Shein sells clothing for incredibly low prices, sacrificing quality of material and worker conditions to do so. The exploitative tactics used by clothing corporations, such as shein, align similarly to the two images presented in the prompt. Both the still taken from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, and the picture of Martin Guhl's comic showcase

people stuck in some kind of contraption, unable to escape. Charlie Chaplin's character tightens gears despite those same gears sucking him deeper into the contraption, and Martin Guhl's illustration chases after a carrot despite the treadmill he's running on continuing to keep him in place. Like the abuse of factory laborers behind the modern trend of fast fashion, I argue that these images both showcase the mistreatment of workers as described by Marx's bourgeoisie mode of production. They reveal how capitalism does indeed revolutionize production through advancements such as machinery, but at the same time these developments remain mere illusions of progress, instead trapping people within a system of exploitation that cannot stop once it has started. I will expand on this claim by first defining the bourgeoisie mode of production, then explaining how the two images provided further clarify the idea, and finally connecting it back to the exploitation of the labor force through the eyes of fast fashion in modern capitalism.

Before describing how the two images depict capitalism according to the bourgeoisie mode of production, this mode of production must be defined. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx explains the rise of the bourgeoisie/proletariat classes. Unlike previous divisions of social order, the bourgeoisie "simplified the class antagonisms" through a manufacturing system dividing people into one of two groups: worker, or capitalist (474). Marx argues that this change was revolutionary, for unlike feudal lords of the past, "It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade" (475). In short, Marx's description demonstrates

how the bourgeoisie centered everything around trade rather than nobility, allowing for the accumulation of wealth to occur through competition of free trade, for people climbed the social ladder through economic pursuits. At the same time, looking beyond the surface level of these changes, Marx argues that “it has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in the place of old ones” (474). Here, the “new struggles” mentioned elude the bourgeoisie changing the way labor was extracted, separating the family from work to instead rely on a new working class (the proletariats) to make up the labor force (476). Through the new system, family relations, social interactions, and labor all tie back into money and exchange: “it has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers” (476). In other words, by invoking a paid wage, the relations of men remain tied through money, and with all relations revolving around exchange, the ending of it would subsequently end all relations. It cannot stop once it has started. Thus Marx defines the bourgeoisie mode of production as a competitive capitalist system where the merchant class (bourgeoisie) generated their wealth through a new working class (proletariat), and constantly needed to revolutionize production to engage in free trade/exchange. As for why this revolutionary mode of production only alludes to progress while instead trapping people in an unending system of exploitation, I will further elaborate in the paragraph below.

By examining one specific element of advancement in the bourgeois mode of production, the underlying reasoning behind negative effects seen by the working class proletariats can be

understood. A prominent example lies in machinery development, and the resulting extension of the wage-laborer's workday. In earlier works, Marx details how capitalists aim to increase the amount of surplus value<sup>1</sup> extracted from their workers. To take the example of machinery, he describes how the invention of new equipment acts as a contradictory process because, despite their ability to speed up production, they only carry the illusion of benefiting the worker: "the capitalist endeavors to exploit ... by prolonging the working-day as much as possible. The magnitude of the profit whets his appetite for more profit" (405). Here, Marx argues that the advancement of technology does not reduce the working hours of the proletariat because, by prolonging the work day, the capitalist squeezes as much surplus value from his workers as possible while he has an advantage over his competition. Increased profit that the machine provides leads to his "appetite" for more profit, and thus longer working hours for those under him.

The first picture, taken from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, shows a factory worker trapped in heavy machinery. In the scenes leading up to the photo, the character had previously been in charge of tightening gears. By repeating the same motions over and over, he eventually lost his mind, and by the end he got trapped in a the machinery. His predicament demonstrates the struggle of the proletariat factory worker as it relates to machinery because Marx believed the bourgeoisie's introduction of machinery changed the dynamic of the worker to his work: "In

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<sup>1</sup> Surplus value can further be understood as the time a laborer works for the profit of the capitalist compared to the proportion he works for the sustainability of himself (403).

handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him" (409). Simply put, it turned laborers into tools rather than the machine acting as their tool, for unlike the handicrafts, the high division of labor in factories results in very little skill needed to operate a machine. In that way, the contradictory nature of the bourgeoisie's developments once again becomes clear; instead of machinery benefiting the labor by making his work easier, it reduces his value by tying him to the machine, exhausting his body through the constant repetition of simple motions, and his mind through the lack of intellectual power needed to operate it (409). Even further, "the special skill of each individual insignificant factory operative vanishes" (409). In short, not only does the repetitive and exhausting labor cripple the worker over time, his task becomes skill-less and easily replaceable. Fear of losing a job and subsequently the wages of that job, perpetuates the cycle of exploitation as the laborer continues to work despite the negative effects. The still from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* demonstrates these effects in a visual manner, for the man in the photo represents the conditions of the wage-laborer that trap him in the exploitative system of capitalism. The walls of heavy machinery around him render him unable to escape, much like the contradictory nature of its development has an inverse relationship to the worker: the more advanced the machinery, the worse off he becomes.

If the first image can be related to how machinery further exploits the proletariat, the second can provide insight into the reasoning of the bourgeoisie class, and how the constant need to revolutionize technology inadvertently creates a cycle of exploitation. Expanding on the

example of machinery, In *Capital, Volume One* Marx argues that improvements to production speed of a machine (granting one company an edge) over another can not last forever: "As the use of machinery becomes more general in a particular industry, the social value of the product sinks down to its individual value" (405). Here, Marx believes that as capitalism continues, the expansion of material wealth grows, but the value of commodities compared to one another remains the same. To give an example, if a clothing company's factory introduces a machine that can increase production of a t-shirt from 100 to 200 an hour, the production of the t-shirt increases to twice as fast as before. Yet, if *every* clothing company began using that machine, factories still making 100 would have half the production value as their competitors. Making 200 t-shirts would become the expected norm for all t-shirts (406). Thus, even if machinery improves, the value of the commodity once again becomes stagnant, and the bourgeoisie must constantly seek ways to improve production. Through this, the increased working hours of the proletariat can be rationalized in the eye of the capitalist, for the quicker the machine, the more surplus labor can be extracted from the worker. Any edge over competition must be taken advantage of while it still lasts (406). The comic by artist Martin Guhl depicts a similar story. In the drawing, a man runs on a treadmill, and chases after a carrot that always remains just out of reach. The illustrated man attempting to attain an unreachable prize reflects how capitalistic developments continuously follow a circulatory fashion. Despite "revolutionary" development, such as machinery, stagnation inevitably follows, and change occurs again as the need for increased production speed continues

to rise. To summarize, similarly to the cyclical nature of the treadmill showcased in Martin Guhl's depiction, the bourgeoisie's desire to maximize surplus labor remains a un-ending pursuit. As mentioned in paragraphs prior, this cycle only furthers the exploitation of workers as it continues.

In the end, the revolutionary nature of capitalism greatly enhances production capability, and expansion, contributing to a growing amount of wealth and commodities. Yet, behind the veil of change, Marx warns of a revolving system of boundless exploitation, for the bourgeoisie can never stop advancing lest they fall behind competition, and the proletariat can never stop working lest they risk being unable to sustain themselves. Overall, both images further illustrate how capitalism remains a moving contradiction.

One critical aspect of Marx's theory that these images lack, however, ties back into the involvement of the consumer, more specifically the fetishism of commodities. Marx claims that items carry both use and exchange value, with use value being the use of a commodity, and exchange value being how much that item remains worth in comparison to others (303-304). Through the bourgeoisie mode of production though, commodities gain a social quality, and therefore "Use values become a reality only by use or consumption" (303). In short, exchange becomes the only determining factor of value, and everything revolves around producing for that exchange. This, Marx calls commodity fetishism. Additionally, "the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange" (321). By basing value on exchange rather than labor, commodity fetishism separates the production process from the



product. Every commodity has hours of labor that go into making it, yet when it reaches the consumer's hand, the labor is imperceivable beyond its exchange value, its price tag.



Recalling consumerism today, Marx's idea of commodity fetishism ties closely to the concept of fast fashion. The photo above shows the inner workings of a shein factory, littered with fabric, trash, and workers hunched over various scraps of clothing. These mass produced products will eventually go for sale on Shien's website to millions of people eager to buy more for less. So long as the low prices of fast fashion remain in demand, clothing companies will continue to utilize these tactics: the photo reveals the part played by the consumer in a bourgeoisie mode of production. The ethical concerns, worker conditions, and other issues created by fast fashion brands, such as Shein, hide under the guise of exchange, and the fetishism of commodities still exists in a modern setting, demonstrating Marx's notion of capitalism as a "moving contradiction" as embodied by fast fashion. Much like the bougousie's revolutionary developments to machinery

and production, the constant consumption seen through fast fashion creates a system littered with exploitation that has persisted even beyond Marx's time.

Works Cited

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