A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

Late in February, 1848, an octavo pamphlet of thirty pages published by a German printer in London at 46 Liverpool Street, Bishopsgate, appeared for the first time with a title page which read, in part: "Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei . . . . Proletarier aller Laender vereinigt Euch." The ideas expressed in this Manifest had been presented, for the most part, previously in speeches, books, and pamphlets by predecessors and contemporaries of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In fact, Marx and Engels, in their own writings, had previously presented the ideas that finally made up the Communist Manifesto. However, of the many "socialist-communist" tracts written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was the Communist Manifesto which survived to be translated into almost one hundred different languages.

Why has it been the Manifesto which has survived to influence so many people in so many lands during the past one hundred years when other "socialist-communist" works stand undisturbed on dusty library shelves? Certainly a major factor is Marx's ability to present his content in such a form as to make the arguments appear forceful and valid, to arouse the emotions of his audience, and to make the author of the tract worthy of belief. If he were going to influence and move people, Marx realized that he would have to use all available means of persuasion, including what Aristotle called the "good style" in the Rhetoric, parts of which Marx had translated in his university days.¹

There is no doubt that Marx was aware of and thoroughly conscious of various rhetoric devices. He was an avid reader of plays, speeches, poetry, and novels. He did various translations and wrote verse, the latter of questionable literary value. In a letter to his father, Marx wrote in November, 1837, that he had translated Tacitus's Germania, Ovid's Tristium librī, and parts of Aristotle’s Rhetoric. Paul Lafargue, who married Marx's second daughter, Laura, wrote that Marx "had a preference for eighteenth century novels, and was especially fond of Fielding's Tom Jones. The
modern novelists who pleased him best were Paul de Kock, Charles Lever, the elder Dumas, and Sir Walter Scott, whose Old Mortality he considered a masterpiece. Marx looked upon Cervantes and Balzac as "the greatest masters of romance", and Don Quixote was for him "the epic of the decay of chivalry."

Two orators of whom Marx thought highly were John P. Curran and William Cobbett. Of Curran, Marx said in a letter to Engels: "I consider Curran the only great advocate—people's advocate—of the eighteenth century and the noblest nature. . . ." Lafargue tells us that Marx sought out and classified the characteristic expressions in some of the polemical writing of William Cobbett, "for whom he had great esteem." Many of the characteristics of Cobbett's pamphleteering and oratorial style, especially the lucidity, sarcasm, and invective, seemed to appear later in the Manifesto. Upon Cobbett's death in June, 1835, The Times commented on his style: "The first general characteristic of his style is perspicuity, unequalled and inimitable. A second is homely masculine vigor. A third is purity, always simple, and raciness often elegant. His argument is an example of acute, yet apparently natural, nay, involuntary logic, smoothed in its progress and cemented in its parts, by a mingled storm of torturing sarcasm, contemptuous jocularity, and slaughtering invective. . . ."

Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of Marx's "pupils" who was for a time a daily visitor to Marx's home in London, writes in his reminiscences that "Marx attached extraordinary value to pure correct expression and in Goethe, Lessing, Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes, whom he read every day, he had chosen the greatest masters. He showed the most painstaking conscientiousness in regard to purity and correctness of speech." Marx's attitude towards words and language is displayed in his efforts to achieve clarity in his own works. Lafargue wrote that Marx "would not publish anything until he had worked over it again and again, until what he had written obtained a satisfactory form." It may well have been this thoroughness which delayed Marx's completion of the Manifesto, much to the displeasure of the Communist League which had commissioned him and Engels to write a manifesto and which was prompted to send the following message to Marx:

The Central Committee hereby directs the District Committee to notify Citizen Marx that if the Manifesto of the Communist Party, which he consented, at the last Congress, to draw up, does not reach London before Tuesday, February 1, further measures will be taken against him. In case Citizen Marx does not write the Manifesto, the Central Committee requests the immediate return of the documents which were turned over to him by the congress.

In the name of the instruction of the Central Committee,

(Signed) Schapper, Bauer, Moll.
Within a month of the sending of this letter, Marx's draft of the Manifesto was published.

Engels, who had been working on his own draft of a programme, did not use the rhetorical approach, as had Marx, but instead used the form of a catechism: "What is communism? Communism is the teaching of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat. What is the proletariat? The proletariat is that class. . . ." However, later in November, 1847, Engels wrote to Marx saying he had some doubts about the catechism format: "Think over the confession of faith bit. I think it would be better to drop the catechism form and call the thing a communist manifesto. As a certain amount of history will have to be brought in I think the present form is unsuitable. . . ."9 The question-answer format was abandoned. It was Marx's Manifesto which was finally adopted by the Communist League. In the ensuing years, Engels often attributed the authorship of the Manifesto to Marx; in 1884, Engels wrote: "This inconsiderable fighting force, however, possessed a leader to whom all willingly subordinated themselves, a leader of the first rank, in Marx, and thanks to him the programme of principle and tactics that today still has full validity: The Communist Manifesto."

In the preface of the 1883 German edition of the Manifesto Engels wrote that the basic thought running through the Manifesto belonged "solely and exclusively to Marx."11

It is evident that both Marx and Engels had read and written enough to be aware of the effects of language and of the necessity in such a work as the Manifesto for a prose which would hold the audience's attention; hence the extensive use of the various rhetorical devices to get the message to their listeners.

II

From the beginning of the Manifesto, Marx establishes that communism is a powerful force to be reckoned with; in so doing, he establishes at the same time a part of his ethos by identifying himself with a movement opposed by great powers, a movement which is itself powerful and which openly publishes its aims and views for all to see. He does this in the exordium by pointing out that "all the powers of old Europe have entered a holy alliance to exorcise" the spectre of communism and by asserting that "communism is already acknowledged by all European powers to be itself a power."12

The Manifesto's short exordium is followed by a narration which follows Aristotle's advice: "... if there is narration at all [in deliberative speaking], it must be of
the past, and its object to remind your audience of what happened in the past, with a view to better plans for the future. It may be used in condemning people. . . ."12

After stating in his *exordium* that it is about time that the communists openly publish their views, aims, and tendencies “to meet this nursery tale of the spectre of communism with a manifesto of the party itself”, he follows, in the *narration*, not with elaborations of these aims and views, but with a historical description of the growth of the bourgeois with all its evils: new forms of oppression. “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitations”, breakdown of the family relationship, enslavement and pauperization of the labourer. In this process of discrediting his opponents by identifying them with all that is evil, Marx has again added to his *ethos*; he has branded his adversaries as selfish, oppressive, unjust, intemperate, and dishonorable, and in the process of linking his opponents with that which is not virtuous he has focused attention upon the probity of his own character. From the very beginning, he attempts to establish character and good will, not by elaborating on his own cause and its virtues (this will come later), but by condemning his opponents, their cause, and their actions: it is the bourgeois that has “reduced the family relation to a mere money relation”; it is the bourgeois that has forced labourers to sell themselves piece-meal, it is the bourgeois that has reduced poets, priests, and doctors to its paid wage-labourers. It is this bourgeois against which Marx and the communists stand.

Not only does Marx establish his *ethos* by calling his adversaries selfish, oppressive, and dishonorable; he also arouses, in the *narration*, the emotions of anger, hate, and fear. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, has defined anger as “an impulse attended by pain, to a revenge that shall be evident, and caused by an obvious, unjustified, slight with respect to the individual or his friends.” By portraying the bourgeois as contemptuous of and insolent to the proletariat, Marx arouses the workers’ anger towards the bourgeois. Has not the bourgeois, after taking all that it can from the labourer, handed him over to “other portions of the bourgeois, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker?” Has not bourgeois industry benefited only the ruling class and sent the labourer “deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class?” Has not the bourgeois transformed the proletarian children “into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labor?” Has not the bourgeois taken for its own pleasures the wives and daughters of the workers? The bourgeois has shown only indifference and insolence to the plight of the labourer and his family, and as Aristotle explained, just as a sick man is angered by indifference to his illness, so too is the poor man angered by indifference to his poverty.

Marx not only attempts to arouse anger, which is always attended by a certain pleasure arising from the expectation of revenge against a particular person or per-
sons, but he also attempts to arouse hatred which is directed not only against an individual, but also against a class. Marx obviously was interested in more than arousing his audience to anger which would induce them to wish the object of their anger to suffer; his goal was to arouse his listeners to that state in which they would wish the bourgeois eradicated. As Aristotle put it, "the angry man wishes the object of his anger to suffer in return; hatred wishes its object not to exist."

In his narration, Marx also seems to be trying to arouse fear, which is caused by whatever seems to have a great power of destroying us or of working injuries that are likely to bring us great pain. One way of arousing fear is to argue that others greater than the listener have suffered. "Have not men of science, lawyers, doctors become the paid wage-labourers of the bourgeois?", asks Marx. Another way of arousing fear is to portray injustice coupled with power. "Has not the bourgeois organized the workers like soldiers and placed them under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants?" asks Marx. However, at the same time, he is careful not to arouse so much fear as to create in his listeners the feeling that there is no hope of deliverance. The proletariat may be ruled, enslaved, and oppressed by the bourgeois, but still there is hope that things will change for the better; in fact, it is inevitable that things will get better. "Fear sets men deliberating", said Aristotle, "... but no one deliberates about things that are hopeless." And things are not hopeless, Marx tells the proletariat in his narration, which he ends with the logical conclusion to all the historical evidence he has compiled up to that point: the bourgeois is unfit to rule; society no longer can live under the bourgeois; the fall of the bourgeois and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. It is on this note that the narration ends, a narration in which the word communism never once appears.

If the evils of the bourgeois predominate in Part I of the Manifesto, the virtues of communism pervade Part II. This is not to say that Marx ceases his attacks against the bourgeois; the attacks continue, but the perspective is different. The evils of the bourgeois, as they appear in Part II, are juxtaposed with the virtues of communism: "In bourgeois society, living labor is but a means to increase accumulated labor. In Communist society, accumulated labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborers." In bourgeois society "the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past."

Section II takes on the characteristics of a debate in which logic and rhetoric are blended. Marx's character, the character of his adversaries, argument, and the arousing of emotion are all fused, thus making the whole more forceful and more moving. By using the refutative process to present his case for communism, Marx
places side by side the evils of the bourgeois and the virtues of communism; he places side by side the weak objections of the bourgeois and the sensible answers of the communists: “You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population...” “Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty.” This type of presentation is effective, for as Aristotle has explained, “the refutative process always makes the conclusion more striking, for setting opposites side by side renders their opposition more distinct.” Marx seems to further take Aristotle’s advice when the latter suggests: “You should... make room in the minds of the audience for the argument you are going to offer; and this will be done if you demolish the one that pleased them. So combat it—every point of it, or the chief, or the successful, or the vulnerable points, and thus establish credit for your own arguments.” Through this process Marx builds his case for the acceptance of the various measures the communists will put into effect once they gain control; the presentation of the positive measures comes late in Section II.

In answering bourgeois objections, Marx often takes the line that the communists cannot take from the masses that which they never had in the first place while living under bourgeois rule. The communists, he asserts, cannot take from the masses private property they never possessed; they cannot take from the masses a happy family relationship never possessed by the masses while living under bourgeois rule; they cannot abolish nationality, for “the workingmen have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.” After answering bourgeois questions and objections with communist answers, Marx says, “let us have done with the bourgeois objections to communism”, and it is only then that he presents, for the first time, the specific measures which the communists advocate.

Whereas Marx focused attention upon the probity of his character in Part I by linking his opponents and their cause with what is not virtuous, in Part II he establishes his *ethos* by associating his message with what is virtuous and desirable to his audience. Further, he minimizes unfavorable impressions of his cause previously presented by his opponents. It is his cause which wants to create a world in which children will be educated and women will be respected; it is his cause which wants to see the workers given their just rewards for their labour; it is his cause which wants a world where there will be no exploitation of one individual by another, no hostility of one nation to another. It is his cause which will be inevitably successful. Just as he added to his *ethos* early in the *Manifesto* by attributing injustice...
coupled with power to his adversaries, so too has he added to his ethos by joining justice and the inevitability of its success to his own cause.

Marx concludes Section II with a sentence which sets side by side “the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonism”, and the communist society which will be “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” But he cannot conclude the Manifesto on this note.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were too many other “socialists” and “communists” who asserted that their movements and their philosophies were the ones that would bring to the labourers what they deserved. Marx could not ignore these other movements. He may have persuasively argued early in the Manifesto that the bourgeois was not fit to rule, but there were others who had said or were saying the same thing. He may have shown that the private property of the bourgeois should be abolished, but there were others preaching much the same doctrine. So Marx had to go on in his Manifesto to tell the world that these other “socialists” and “communists” were false prophets. In Section III, he proceeds to point out the absurdities and falsities of Feudal Socialism, Petty Bourgeois Socialism, “True” Socialism, Conservative Socialism, and Critical-Utopian Socialism. The representatives of these movements, said Marx, only appeared to have the answers; in some cases their analyses were incorrect; in others, their tactics were inappropriate. Some of these false prophets, Marx contended, want only to restore the old means of production and the old society; others reject the class struggle; still others, “the philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organizers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics,” want the proletariat to remain within the bounds of existing society and “cast away all its hateful ideas concerning the bourgeois.” The representatives of these other movements, Marx attempted to demonstrate, were either deceitful, self-deceived, impractical pedants, innocent reformers, or starry-eyed experimenters.

Marx’s peroration is as trenchant as is his exordium. After stating that the communists “everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things” and that they “labor everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries”, he reaches the climax toward which he has been building. “Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite!”
From "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism" to "Working-
men of all countries, unite!" Marx has clothed his message in a rhetorical style per-
meated with tropes and figures of speech. Through the use of numerous different
rhetorical tropes and figures, the author of the Manifesto has emphasized, clarified,
and elaborated through sheer repetition, through exaggeration and comparison.
Marx's style is that of controversial speaking, not that of written prose. Aristotle has
pointed out in his Rhetoric that "such devices as asyndeta and repetition of the same
word, which are rightly enough censured in the literary style, have their place in
the controversial style when a speaker uses them for their dramatic effect." To a
very great extent Marx uses rhetorical stylistic devices which rely for their effective-
ness not so much on silent reading as on oral presentation.

Marx was very conscious of style; in his evaluations of various personages
whom he admired and some he did not admire, he would comment on their style.
For instance, concerning Pierre Joseph Proudhon's What is Property?, Marx wrote:
"This book of Proudhon's has also, if I may be allowed, a strong muscular style.
And its style is in my opinion its chief merit. . . . The provocative defiance, laying
the ordinary bourgeois mind, the withering criticism, the bitter irony, and, revealed
hands on the economic 'holy of holies', the brilliant paradox which made a mock of
here and there behind these, a deep and genuine feeling of indignation at the infamy
of the existing order, a revolutionary earnestness—all these electrified the readers of
What is Property? and produced a great sensation on its first appearance."14 Again
his concern for style is reflected in his criticism of Proudhon's The Philosophy of
Poverty: "The style is often what the French call ampoule [bombastic]. High-
sounding speculative jargon, supposed to be German-philosophical, appears regularly
on the scene when his Gallic acuteness of understanding fails him. A self-advertising,
self-glorifying, boastful tone and especially the twaddle about 'science' and sham dis-
play of it which are always so unedifying, are constantly screaming in one's ears.
Instead of the genuine warmth which glowed in his first attempt [What is Prop-
erty?], here certain passages are systematically worked up into a momentary heat by
rhetoric."15 From these comments, and comments on the style of Cobbett and others,
it appears that Marx favored the style which avoids the abstract and displays the con-
crete, which is lucid, ironic, and trenchant. His appreciation for this kind of style is
reflected in the Manifesto.

Marx did not hesitate to pile trope and figure one upon another in succession.
Perhaps he had read Longinus, who wrote: "Nothing so effectively moves, as a
heap of figures combined together.” In the following four-sentence paragraph Marx has combined his rhetorical questions with metaphor, irony, personification, antithesis, and anaphora (beginning a series of clauses with the same word):

Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the state? Has it not preached in the place of these charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church? Christian socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat.

Into the two sentences preceding this paragraph, Marx incorporates balance, metonymy (use of the name of one thing for that of another associated with or suggested by it), metaphor, synecdoche (a trope which heightens meaning by substituting the part for the whole or the whole for the part), and antithesis: “In political practice, therefore, they join in all coercive measures against the working class; and in ordinary life, despite their high-falutin phrases, they stoop to pick up the golden apples dropped from the tree of industry, and to barter truth, love, and honor for traffic in wool, beetroot-sugar, and potato spirits. As the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord, so has Clerical Socialism with Feudal Socialism.” It is important to note that the foregoing translated lines do not have the same overall flavor and effect that the original German text has; the sentence beginning “In political practice, therefore, they join”, for instance, has lost much of its impact in translation. An underlying irony in the entire sentence is lost. That particular sentence reads, in Marx’s German, “In der politischen Praxis nehmen sie daher an allen Gewaltmassregeln gegen die Arbeiterklasse teil, und im gewöhnlichen Leben bequemen sie sich, allen ihren aufgeblähten Redensarten zum Trotz, die goldenen Aepfel aufzulesen und Treue, Liebe, Ehre mit dem Schacher in Schafswolle, Runkelrueben und Schnaps zu vertauschen.” Obviously, the “golden apples” referred to in the English translation are not the same “golden apples” of the original German text. However, it is the English version of the Manifesto with which I am concerned here, and my purpose is not to examine the discrepancies between the German and English versions of the Communist Manifesto; but it must be remembered that some of Marx’s impact and irony is lost in the translation.

To give his presentation force and clarity, Marx has made extensive use of various figures which rely for their effect on repetition of one type or another; hence we find him using accumulation, anaphora, epistrophe (ending a series of clauses or sentences with the same word), and anadiplosis (repetition of the word
ending one clause or sentence at the beginning of the next). He precedes an anadiplosis with a rhetorical question: "What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs." Of the many figures, Marx is particularly fond of using anaphora and asyndeton (omission of conjunctions); he uses them singly, he uses them combined with other tropes and figures. In the following sentence he combines anaphora and asyndeton with personification and antithesis: "In this way arose feudal socialism: half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty, and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core, but always ludicrous in its effect through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history."

Another figure which adds to the speech-like quality of the Manifesto is Marx's use of correctio. In the first instance below correctio is used alone; in the second instance it is combined with the periodic sentence; in the third, it appears with antithesis and metaphor: (1) "Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class." (2) "Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the united action of all members of society, can it be set in motion." (3) "They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history."

As one would expect of a person who thought in terms of class conflict and thesis-antithesis-synthesis, Marx incorporated into the Manifesto many phrases, sentences, and paragraphs which rely heavily for their effectiveness on balance and antithesis. "This kind of style [antithesis] is pleasing", said Aristotle, "because things are best known by opposition, and are all the better known when the opposites are put side by side; and is pleasing also because of its resemblances to logic—for the method of refutation is the juxtaposition of contrary conclusions." One simply cannot escape the antitheses in the following sentence, which appears at the beginning of Section I to support Marx's contention that the "history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles": "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." Then, at other times, the antitheses appear sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph:

In bourgeois society, living labor is but a means to increase accumulated labor.
In Communist society, accumulated labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer.

In bourgeois society, therefore, the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.

To emphasize and clarify, Marx not only uses antithesis, but he also sets similarities side by side; sometimes the balance and antithesis are combined: "Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semibarbharian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West."

Marx uses the device of disputation to display the thoughts of his opponents, to anticipate objections, and to answer those objections. He uses the figure synchonosis, whereby the speaker, trusting strongly in his own cause, freely gives his questioner leave to judge him. This particular device reappears often in Section II of the Manifesto combined with irony. His procedure here is to present the adversary's contentions and then to answer them; for the first time he begins to refer to his opponents as "you". Edmund Wilson has pointed out that Marx's opinions "seem always to have been arrived at through a close criticism of the opinions of others, as if the sharpness and force of his mind could only really exert themselves in attacks on the minds of others, as if he could only find out what he thought by making distinctions that excluded the thoughts of others."17 By using this procedure in Section II, Marx cuts into his adversary's contentions with a savage irony, discrediting them and at the same time pointing out the positive features of communism:

You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population . . . . You reproach us, therefore, with intending . . . .

In a word, you reproach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so; that is just what we intend.

"Undoubtedly", it will be said, "religion, moral, philosophical and judicial ideas have been modified in the course of historical development. But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this change."

"There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes . . . ."

What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs.

Just as the Manifesto begins with "the specter of communism" and "this nursery tale of the specter of communism", so too does it end with the proletarians
having nothing to lose but “their chains” and with “a world to win.” Excellence of style, wrote the author of On the Sublime, comes from five sources, the third of which consists “in a skilful application of figures, which are twofold, of sentiment and language.” These figures, continued Longinus, “when judiciously used, conduce not a little to Greatness.” The proof that Marx has “judiciously used” his rhetorical tropes and figures is in his ability to disguise the means he has employed, so that he seems to be speaking “not with artifice, but naturally.”

NOTES

2. Ibid.
4. Marx, Selected Works, p. 84.
7. Ibid., p. 91.
9. Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, p. 20.
13. All the quotations from Aristotle are taken from Aristotle, The Rhetoric of Aristotle, trans. Lane Cooper (New York, 1932).
15. Ibid., p. 173.
17. Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station (New York, 1940), pp. 152-153.
19. Ibid., p. 85.