

The Injustice of a Modern Society

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We as a collective population tend to consider ourselves “modern”. Modern is, on a basic level, defined as “relative to the present as opposed to the past”. On the other hand, there seems to be more to that definition. Many of us associate specific ideologies with the idea of what it means to be modern. Progression is the first concept that comes to mind. Many hold the belief that what separates us as a society from the past is the fact that we are not as harsh, foreboding, cruel, or savage as we were in times before us. We have advancements in technology, new philosophies introduced, scientific discoveries, and plenty more provided as evidence that we have truly changed. What if this was wrong? What if we genuinely haven’t advanced as much as we would like to believe? What if we have still barely scratched the surface in terms of progression? In truth, equality has been a concept pushed for centuries. Theorists and philosophers have drawn out blueprints for what it may look like, novels and stories pushed commentaries advocating for it, and first-hand accounts of individuals touch upon injustices felt at the lack of equality within their lives. Equality is the basis of a society intent on progress, and we can hardly call ourselves progressive if we do nothing about it. Five works that specifically address the idea of equality are the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, *The Republic* by Plato, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Manifesto for the Communist Party* by Karl Marx, and *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich. The *Tao Te Ching* provides a poetic commentary on rejection of materialism and rivalry in order to create an equal and prosperous society, *The Republic* stresses the importance of equality through care of the community, *The Canterbury*

Tales by speaks of hope for an equal society within the laments and narratives of several characters, Marx's *Manifesto for the Communist Party* establishes a form of government based on the notion of equality, and *Of Woman Born* addresses gender inequalities in society. In looking deeper at these texts, it is noticeable how little they have had an impact on change in society, all while addressing the issues of it.

The *Tao Te Ching* was written by Lao Tzu in the 6th century BC, during the Zhou dynasty. The Tao is the central text of Taoism, a belief based on the ideas of nature that Lao Tzu presents. While Lao Tzu takes a naturalistic approach to society, many of the statements he makes about an ideal world are still applicable to the modern day.

“Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.” (Lao Tzu, pp. 3)

Here, Tzu specifically addresses materialism, or the tendency to embrace physical objects and possessions rather than value spiritualism. Our current world is filled with materialism in the form of advertisements. We are bombarded daily with flashy photos of new clothing, trends that involve spending money on goods and services, and videos of people referred to as “influencers” that gain popularity by selling products for companies. Looking through the lens of Lao Tzu, these advertisements could be linked to temptations that “excite desires”. Large brands such as Nike, Sephora, and Hollister will prey on middle and low class individuals, pricing their items high to make them seem valuable while low enough to ensure they are able to pay for them.¹ In this same passage, Tzu also mentions valuing and employing men of “superior ability”. This

could be compared to how businesses today may operate with as few employees as possible, which then prevents others from being hired. Most companies during the pandemic sought out people who had far more skills than required for the job, but still insisted on paying a minimal amount. Larger industries will move their business overseas, where people will accept even less payment for the work.² The inequality expressed by Lao Tzu is that of class inequality. The Tao uses water as an example for how we should act in an equal and just society.

“The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike. Hence (its way) is near to (that of) the Tao.” (Lao Tzu, pp. 8)

Water is excellent in Tzu’s case because of its flexibility and fluidity. We all rely on water and water occupies our lives, but it does not overburden us and we should not overburden it.

Unfortunately, looking at the world now, we have significantly overburdened water.

Microplastics and pollution fill the water that we rely on, which has, in turn, transferred it to us.

We have disgraced the water surrounding us through dumping garbage into it, thus doing the water an injustice and retreating from the positive progression that Tzu promotes.

The Republic was a dialogue between the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates and several of his students. Written by Plato, the dialogue depicts Socrates’ idea of a picturesque society.

Within his philosophy, Plato implicitly hints at ideas of equality among people and collectivism.

“I suppose, then, that when one of its citizens suffers anything at all, either good or bad, such a city will most of all say that the affected part is its own, and all will share in the joy or the pain.” (Plato, Book V 462 e)

Socrates describes the ideal society as one where every person contributes equally to it, and that the city is reliant on everyone within. If a single citizen feels out of place, every person in the society also feels such. This idea is particularly relevant today when it comes to the United States and its stance on public healthcare. Our government seems to do the direct opposite of what Socrates suggests creates an ideal society. When someone is injured or sick, they are expected to have insurance to pay for basic medical care. Those that are poor and cannot afford it either struggle to pay lasting bills, continue on with their lives while ignoring serious medical or health issues, or accept some of the government funded insurance. Unfortunately, many individuals who fall under the latter category are looked down upon by those that have their own insurance. People who object to the idea of medical care for everyone in the nation often dislike the idea of having to pay themselves for it, which stems from a mindset of individualism. In an individualistic society, everyone must fend for themselves to get by. However, a system such as that undeniably leads to inequality among the masses. Plato touches further on the whole of society when indicating what should be acknowledged and loved.

"Or do you remember that when we say a man loves something, if it is rightly said of him, he mustn't show a love for one part of it and not for another, but must cherish all of it?"
(Plato, Book VI 4 c)

This analogy also heavily applies to the idea of collectivism that modern America does not possess. In our society, we are heavily blinded by the idea of an “other”. More often than not, that label is applied to a minority group. In contradiction, nationalism is a heavily pursued belief within the country. America is considered a melting pot of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities, but it isn’t seen in that way. Instead, those that are not productive, rich, or suit a specific standard are cast out of society. When Socrates tells his students to love something for

the whole of it, this application should be applied to how we view the American people. We fail to embrace those ideas and instead show disdain for diversity, treat minority groups with disrespect, and set the grounds for inequality and injustice. We directly oppose Socrates' conception of an ideal society, thus setting us back from the idealized "modern" world we wish to identify with.

This same idea of collectivism is touched upon in Karl Marx's infamous *Manifesto for the Communist Party*, where he defines the proletariat (the working class) and the bourgeois (those that are wealthy and own land). Marx especially hints at equality when he discusses how there should be a classless system implemented in society, one that cares for each individual equally.

"In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." (Marx, Book II, pp. 49)

In Marx's time, it was especially difficult for workers, who often toiled away in factory jobs and had little time for themselves. Marx pinpoints an "us versus them" concept, advocating for the elimination of titles and classes to allow for equal care and community. When reading this, the idea of corporatism came to mind. Most of us go into work out of school, where we are expected to possess far more skills than a job qualifies. We are overwhelmingly worked to the point of exhaustion, or not paid enough and given enough hours until we have to get a second job to pay bills. What is further convincing about Marx's theory is the equality pertaining to nationality, ethnicity, etc.

“The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.” (Marx, Book II, pp. 41)

Marx’s argument is similar to Plato to an extent, where he emphasizes how important the part is to the whole. According to Marx, as long as the proletarian prioritizes the common interests of the rest, they are welcome regardless of any differentiating factors. While we can argue that labor unions in the United States may represent this to an extent, they don’t do nearly enough to protect citizens. That is, if workers can organize themselves in the first place. Recent news reports depict workers being fired or left on paid leave for attempting to unionize.³ Companies will often use sneaky tactics such as manipulation through social media bot accounts or posters in workplaces to convince workers that unions wouldn’t be necessary or beneficial. Many people today that adopt the ideas depicted in Marx’s manifesto are labeled as bad or as threats to America, further proving the nationalistic regime over the benefit of all within the nation.

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer offers a social commentary on the desires of people in the 14th century through entertaining narratives from the characters depicted. One of the characters in question is the Wife of Bath, who discusses gender inequality within her tale.

“To every wight commanded was silence, And that the knight should tell in audience, What thing that worldly women love the best. This knight he stood not still, as doth a beast, But to this question anon answer'd With manly voice, that all the court it heard, "My liege lady, generally," quoth he, "Women desire to have the sovereignty As well over their husband as their love And for to be in mast'ry him above. This is your most desire, though ye me kill, Do as you list, I am here at your will.”” (Chaucer, p 165)

Through the knight's speech, we can see the truth behind what women advocate for. Sovereignty is not typically found in association with women, even today. When the Wife of Bath speaks of sovereignty to the other people within the group, the most surprising result is how none of the other characters truly interject it. In our world today, there still exists a push for feminist principles, though we have gotten much better with speaking out about them. Now, with more men and women entering the job market, women are faced with issues pertaining to wage gaps, with women only earning 83 cents to every dollar a man earns.⁴ In addition, only 26 women are serving as heads of state or government in 24 countries, with most women ministers operating under family, youth, environmental, labor, and women affairs or gender equality positions.⁵ In weighing the roles of women in society, I do not expect equality for women to be achieved any time soon.

In a different format, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* also addresses inequality in association with women. In her journal, she touches on the societal pressures placed on women to have children and raise them. One particular quote in the beginning of her writing perfectly addresses this situation.

"I became a mother in the family-centered, consumer-oriented, Freudian-American world of the 1950s. My husband spoke eagerly of the children we would have; my parents in-law awaited the birth of their grandchild. I had no idea of what I wanted, what I could or could not choose. I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be like 'other women'" (Rich, pp. 25).

Personal experiences reflect this thought, that women achieve "womanhood" by having and raising children. When entering college, it was surprising to find out that there existed a shared experience of young women being told by their parents that they would go on to

marry someday and become a mother. Many agreed that the economic instability and the pandemic in the United States was unfit for the introduction of a child to the world, and that heavily contributed to the lower birth rates.⁶ Still, older generations still stress the need to have a family and raise children. Tying into Marxist principles and Plato's idea of a community-driven society, Rich addresses the problems with a lack of child-care for the average woman in the 1950s.

“Without free universal child-care any woman who has ever had to contrive and improvise in order to leave her children daily and earn a living can imagine the weight of anxiety, guilt, uncertainty, the financial burden, the actual emergencies which these statistics apply” (Rich, pp. 52).

Child care in America right now takes up 17.1% of household income at \$216 per week.⁷ As of 2021, the lack of child care is the third reason most reported for leaving work.⁸ The United States' policies on maternity leave are no better. Currently, the U.S. is behind several countries when it comes to what is offered of paid maternity leave. For instance, only 23% of women working in private industries can take maternity leave. In Europe and Asia, 52 or more weeks of paid maternity leave are offered; the United States offers none.⁹ The same issues that Rich brings up in her journal from seventy years ago are still applicable to society now, which is an unfortunate truth for those that may consider our world to be “modern” in the sense that it has progressed in any way. Women are stressed from balancing child care and work life, which both hinders their ability to maintain an income and a family.

With the way that our world has been changing and developing technologically, it is unfortunate that few comparisons can be made between what philosophers, theorists, novelists,

and journalists have presented regarding the ideal society and how reality currently looks. It is our responsibility to address these issues, but many of us are so encompassed by our own personal problems that we fail to take a step back and attempt to advocate for change. It is vital that we take these theories and thoughts into consideration when continuing to develop our government. We should listen to Lao Tzu's teachings about rejection of materialism and Plato's emphasis on community. Marx's ideology pertaining to equality and care for workers serve as blueprints for a more caring and inclusive society, if carried out properly. We should address feminism in America and how women may stand a chance in a patriarchal society, or at least live easier lives instead of worrying about their children. Society cannot change for the better if it does not address the whole of it. Once we become aware of the inequalities and injustices, and make progress towards changing those, we can truly and confidently call ourselves "modern".

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