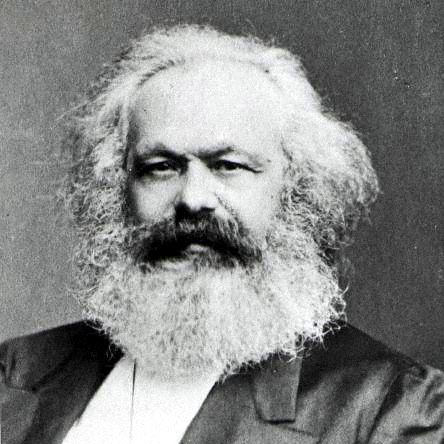
**MONEY AND POWER**

Whether it’s your parents who didn’t let you go out for a late-night movie or your boss who expects you to work every evening and weekend, all of us have experienced times in our lives when we felt that the actions of others were unfair to us. This same type of conflict between what people feel they deserve and what they receive can be seen in the *distribution of wealth and power in a society.*

**Conflict** occurs due to differences of opinion or, as you will learn, because of social inequalities. In the mid-1800s, the social theorist **Karl** **Marx** began examining the inequalities between the classes as a way of understanding who we are and the facets of our social situation. Marx wrote extensively on social class and how it was shaped by conflict. He concluded that to understand ourselves we need to understand where we ‘fit’ in society.

**The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat**

According to Marx, society is split into two major social groups: the property-owning ***bourgeoisie*** and the working-class ***proletariat***. There is also the middle class, the ***petty bourgeoisie***, who are made up of the small shop owners and small-scale producers. Where a person fits in these groups defines her or his social status, and therefore his or her opportunities within the society.

The bourgeoisie derives its power from controlling and owning the **means of production**. That is, they own and/or run the large-scale operations and corporations that produce the goods that people within the society consume. The working class includes the people who work for the ruling class and consume the products of the big companies. Marx believed that the bourgeoisie exploited the working class and oppressed them through the mechanism of **capitalism**.

Marx argued that social institutions like governments or legal systems are tools used by the ruling class to keep the subject class under control while members of the bourgeoisie further their personal agendas. This creates conflict between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’

|  |
| --- |
| ***Bourgeoisie:***  Members of the property-owning class; people who own the means of production.  ***Capitalism***:  An economic system where the means of production is privately owned and profit is earned in competitive conditions.  ***Petty bourgeoisie:***  The lower middle class including trades people, shop owners, and craftspeople.  ***Proletariat:***  The poorest class of people; the lower working-class wage-earners who sell their skills for money. |

Marx sought to understand how poverty, unemployment, and other economic crises were created. When a country’s economy is troubled, so are its inhabitants. Worries about job security, saving for the future, and providing the basic necessities for one’s family become popular topics of discussion and shape how we view our environment. From Twitter to the dinner table at home, conversations relate to the state of the economy and its impact on a personal level.

Under Marx’s theory, the bourgeoisie do not want to yield control over the means of production so they endeavor to control the proletariat through alienating them from their work. **Alienation** in this context refers to separating the worker from the final product of his or her work. As workers become alienated from the product, they may take less pride in the final creation and may not see themselves reflected in the economic system.

***Think!***

(i) Is Marx’s theory still applicable in today’s society … but on a global scale?

(ii) What determines how much we earn or the value of our skills?

**Gramsci on Cultural Hegemony**

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was a Marxist theorist who sought to challenge the ruling class. Gramsci believed that the capitalist state controlled society. He supported the idea of a quiet revolution. This is different from Marx’s notion of overthrowing the bourgeoisie. Gramsci believed that early education is the key to changing the future. Instilling children with these ideas, values, and morals ensures that the next generation has the revolutionary principles and a drive for change. To reach the masses, media needs to be harnessed to spread the ideas for change. Technology and social media accelerate the speed at which this information can spread across a population.

***Think!***

Is Gramsci’s idea of a quiet revolution an effective way to cause change in society? More so than Marx’s? Why, or why not?

How do people come into power in a particular society? Do they possess exceptional skills? Are they physically larger? Mentally stronger? Or is it something completely different? Can people simply be powerful because they say they are and we choose to believe them? Gramsci believed that a culturally diverse society can be dominated by one ruling class. This is accomplished by securing the consent of certain ideas by persuading other groups to accept the dominant group’s values, which become the **social norm**. Universally, the ideology is considered the status quo and a benefit to society, while truthfully it only benefits the ruling class.

**Cultural hegemony** is not exclusively created and maintained by the ruling class. The working class interest groups also have the ability to secure power by having the masses accept the interest group’s ideas and values – the proletariat often perpetuates the power of the elites.

|  |
| --- |
| **Cultural hegemony** - Gramsci’s theory that society is dominated by one ruling class and the ruling class’s ideas and beliefs are considered to be the cultural norm. |

The idea of **consumption** is a strong example of cultural hegemony. People are taught to want the newest products. Reinforcement through television, internet, radio, and newsprint advertising promotes the idea that we need the newest products. Promises of an easier life, more attention, youth, and other desirable results bombard our society. Members of the ruling class want consumption to increase to earn more money.

Take, for example, a cream that claims to hide aging. The product’s owner, a member of the ruling class, promotes the idea that, culturally, staying young is important and associated with beauty and that showing signs of aging is to be avoided. An ad for the anti-aging cream might suggest that using this product will keep you attractive for a longer period of time. The process of seeking youthful looks is normalized through its endorsement using recognized figures in society such as actresses, sports figures, etc. The celebrity endorsements proclaim that using the product will make social interaction easier because you will resemble the expected cultural norm. Celebrities are used for their social credibility to not only promote a product’s use but also to subconsciously ingrain the idea that using the product will make you desirable to others in the same way as the celebrity. The ad might also imply that not using the product and having skin that appears aged could lead others to interpret that you are someone who does not take care of your appearance, which may be seen as a character flaw. Therefore, to keep up with the demands of consumption placed on us by our society, more income is necessary, and thus society becomes a slave to its own ideals.

***Reflect and Respond***

1. How has capitalism benefitted Canadian society? What are some of the negative aspects of a capitalist society? How has capitalism benefitted you? What system is an alternative to capitalism?

2. Explain how Marx’s explanation of the classes fits into Canadian society.

3. Explain what will happen when there is not enough money to purchase goods as the polarization between the have and have-not classes grows.

**\*\* View the CBC documentary “Made in Bangladesh.”**

*Apply the language of Marxism (proletariat, bourgeoisie, means of production, class struggle) and Gramsci’s cultural hegemony to the context of the global garment industry.*

