

# Lecture 2

## Class inequality and exploitation

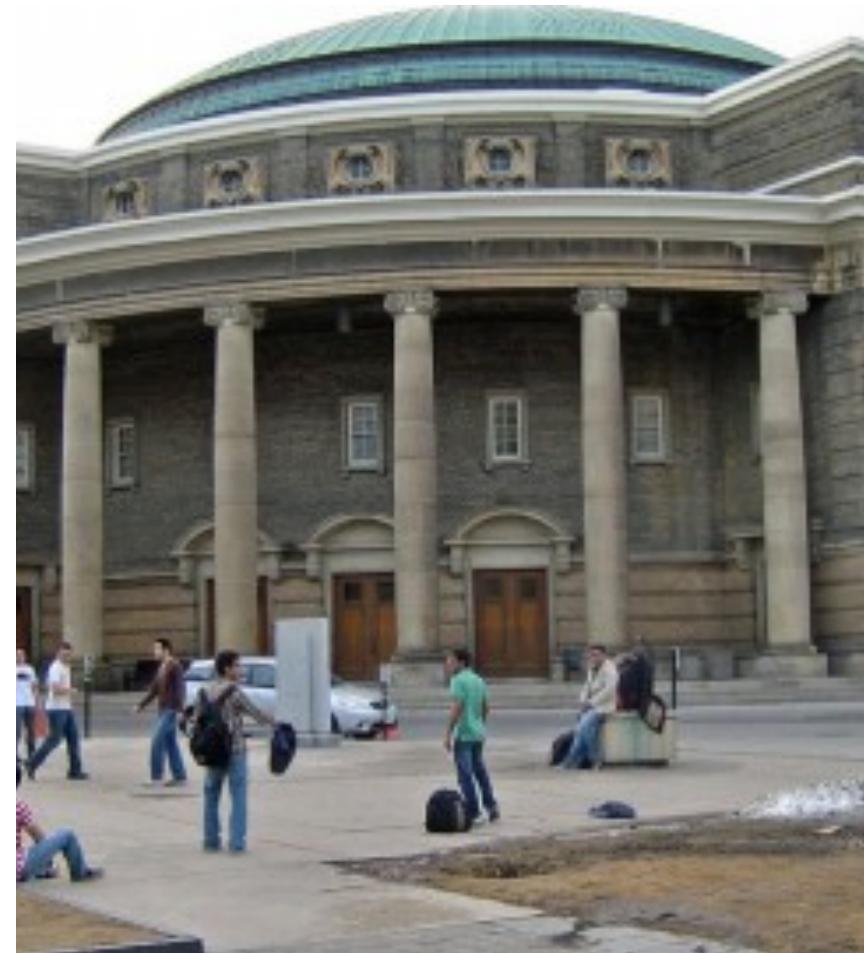


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# Class inequality



- This lecture is about the unequal distribution of *economic wealth*
- Economic inequality produces “classes” – sets of people with different life chances
- “Class inequality” has important links to other kinds of inequality (e.g., racial inequality, gender inequality)
  - It also has important effects on people’s health, on crime, and on intergroup conflict

# Class is an elusive concept

- Most people, if asked, would say they are “middle class”
  - By this they would mean, “not poor and not rich”
- Some who belong to unions might say they are “working class”
  - By this they would mean, “employed by someone for wages”
- Few would say that they are “upper class” or “lower class”



# Class is an economic relationship

- In sociology, *social class* usually refers to a relationship, not an attribute
- Max Weber defined “class situation” as
  - resulting from his location in property and market relations
  - i.e., it is an economic position in relation to other people
- Marxists call this a “class position” or “class location”
  - It reflects bargaining power relative to other people



# Marketability and dominance



British sociologist David Lockwood further distinguished between

- “market situation” – **a person’s (relative) economic position** consisting of the source and size of income, degree of job security, and opportunity for upward mobility,” and
- “work situation” – the set of social relations in which a person is involved at work by virtue of his **(relative) position in the division of labour** (i.e., dominance versus subordination)

# How related to class consciousness

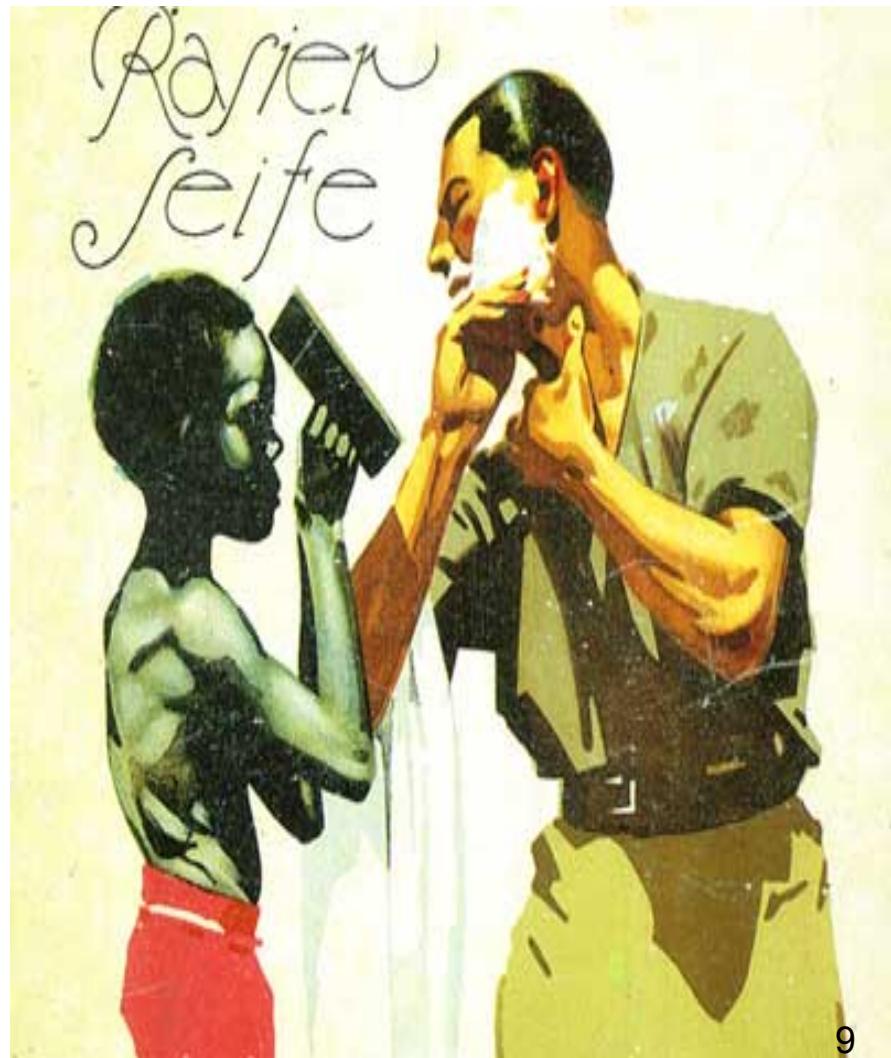
- Lockwood also distinguished these from “status situation”
  - the (relative) position of an individual in the **hierarchy of prestige** in the society at large
- It is the particular combination of class, work, and status situations that, according to Lockwood, shapes *class consciousness*, without which there is no mobilization



# Class inequality is **different** from other inequalities we will discuss....

- Unlike *racial* groups and *age* groups, which have distinguishing *physical* features
- Unlike *ethnic* groups, which have distinguishing *cultural* features
- Unlike *gender* groups, which have distinguishing *physiological* features...

**Social classes have no  
easy-to-spot distinguishing  
features**



# Implications

- Therefore, “class differentiation” requires a lot of cultural inventiveness: i.e.,
  - The invention of a “culture of wealth”
  - The invention of a “culture of poverty”
- Awareness of class differences – class consciousness –is hard to establish
  - People have to learn class distinctions
- Therefore, strategies of resistance will be hard to establish and maintain

# Reminder: Habits of Inequality Theory...

- All societies display social inequality of varying kinds
- These social inequalities are socially constructed
- “Class differentiation” is unique because there are few if any visible physical differences



# Societies vary in Social Inequality

- Societies vary in the degree and kinds of social inequality they display.
  - The Scandinavian countries show least inequality
  - Canada falls somewhere near the middle of the pack
- Societies with the widest variety and intensity of inequality are most likely to display clear and long-lasting patterns we call “habits of inequality”

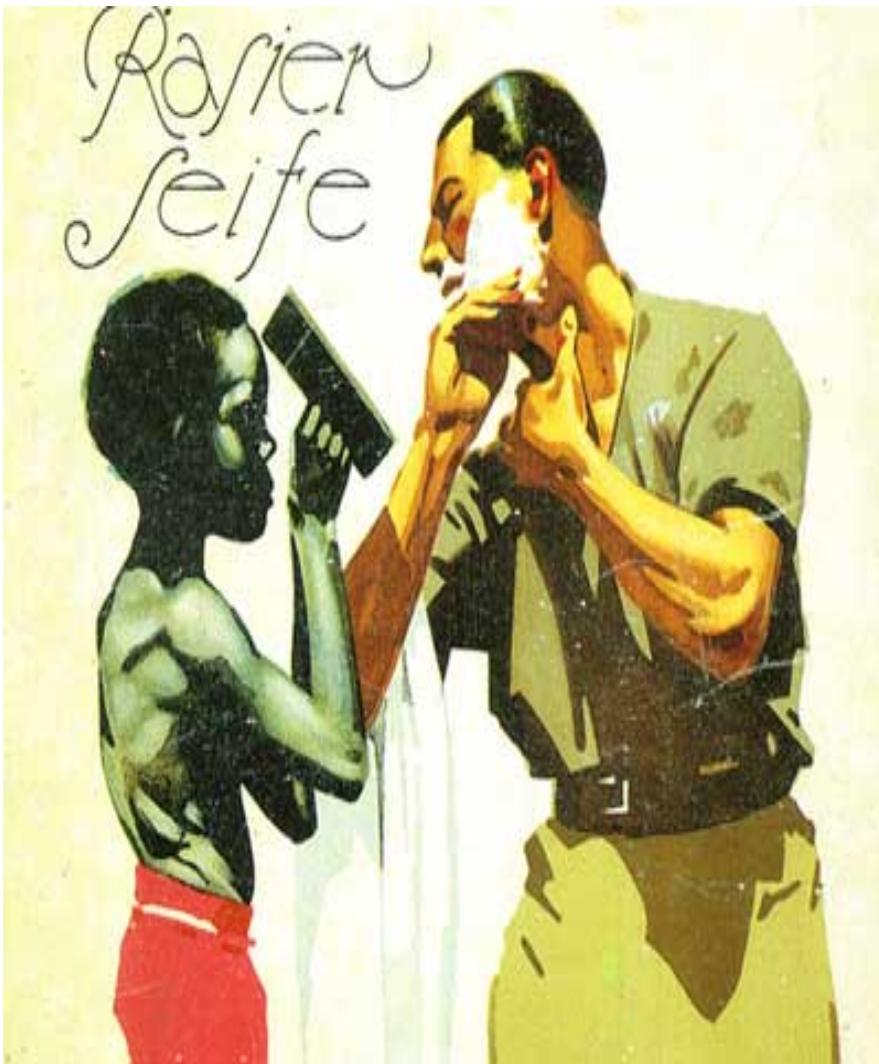


# The Cultural Habits: S-N-P-N-S

- All types of social inequality display similar patterns or cultural “habits” that include the following (S-N-P-N-S):
  - Social differentiation
  - Narratives of blame
  - Practices of oppression
  - Narratives of validation
  - Strategies of resistance



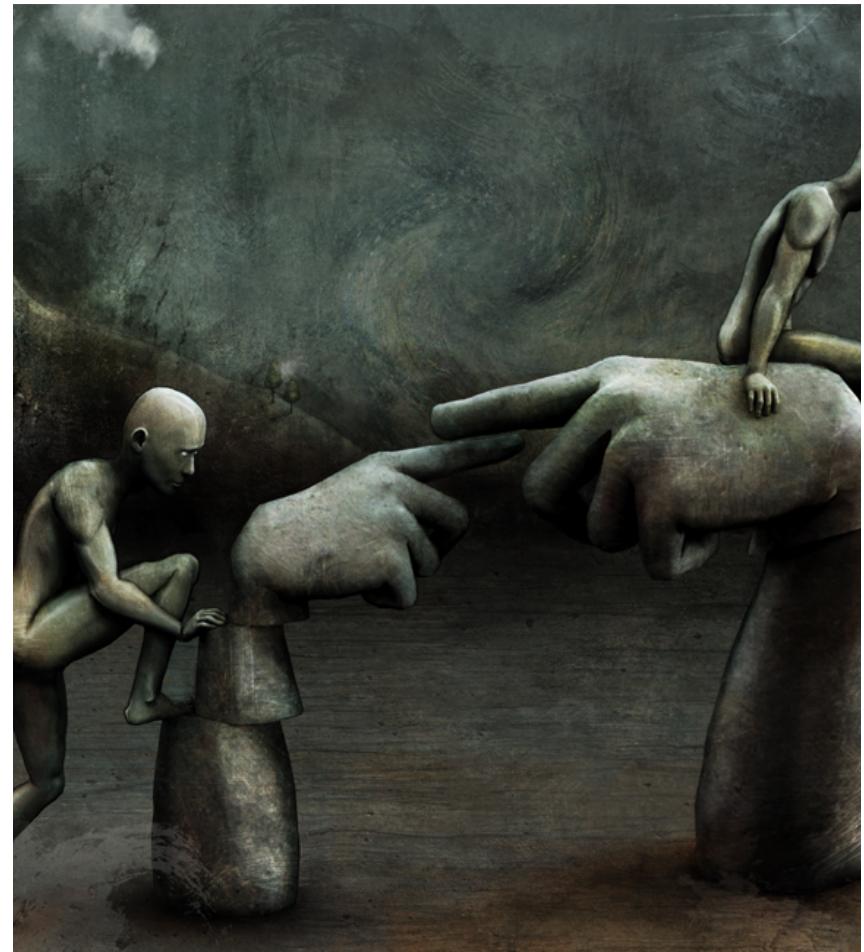
# S = Social Differentiation



- *Social differentiation* is the practice of identifying different “kinds” of people who are assumed to be essentially and unchangeably different
- How is this achieved with “social class”?

# N = Narratives of Blame

- *Narratives of blame* are socially constructed accounts that attach social or moral qualities to different groups
- These narratives derive from a belief that the world is just in its distribution of rewards and punishments



# P = Practices of Oppression



- *Practices of oppression* comprise a variety of economic and non-economic behaviors
- These practices of oppression may follow the creation of narratives of blame, or may precede them
- Then, the narratives serve to justify pre-existing oppression.

# N = Narratives of Validation

- *Narratives of validation* are socially constructed accounts that attach different, even opposite, social and moral qualities to groups in society, as a response to narratives of blame.
- They may take various forms: e.g.,
  - hold advantaged people responsible for creating conditions that are blameworthy



# S = Strategies of Resistance



Strategies of resistance include collective (social) actions that combat practices of oppression, reduce inequality, or ameliorate the effects of inequality.

- They may take various forms:
  - consciousness raising activities
  - social movement formation to achieve – e.g., unions
  - legal challenges through the courts

# Continuing Struggle

There will be a continuing struggle between

- narratives of blame and narratives of validation
- practices of oppression and strategies of resistance

Under certain circumstances, the struggle over one form of inequality (e.g., class) will influence and energize other struggles (e.g., race)



George Esiri

# Signifying Class Distinctions

- Classes are created by economic relations
- However, to be performed, class positions must be signified by cultural (non-economic) means
- Patterns of fashion and consumption help to do this



# The Leisure Class



- The leisure class highlights differences in various ways – e.g., through private schooling, private clubs, and educational credentialing, for example.
- Two sociologists who have written at length about this are Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu.

# The role of conspicuous consumption

- Veblen's book *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1912) critiques modern Western society
  - the 'conspicuous consumption' of the wealthy
- wasteful consumption demonstrates the status of those groups that can afford to live in such a manner
  - i.e. provides a group boundary



# Pierre Bourdieu's book, *Distinction*



- Argues that *cultural capital* (learned expertise and competence) reproduce social domination from one generation to the next
- *Cultural capital* includes all cultural symbols and practices that function to enhance social distinctions
- E.g., tastes in art, style in dress, eating habits, beliefs—even language itself

# Gaining cultural capital

- members of the ruling class teach their children taste preferences in order to pass along class-based *cultural capital*
  - A process that transfers class position across generations.
- *Cultural capital* includes ‘symbolic goods regarded as the attributes of excellence, . . . [as] the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction’



# Teaching and learning the Culture of Poverty

Anthropologist Oscar Lewis says, at the other end of the class system....

- a poor urban underclass perpetuates itself by practicing and teaching its children self-defeating values



# People in the culture of poverty



- Have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, dependency, not belonging
- They believe that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs
- widespread feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, and personal unworthiness

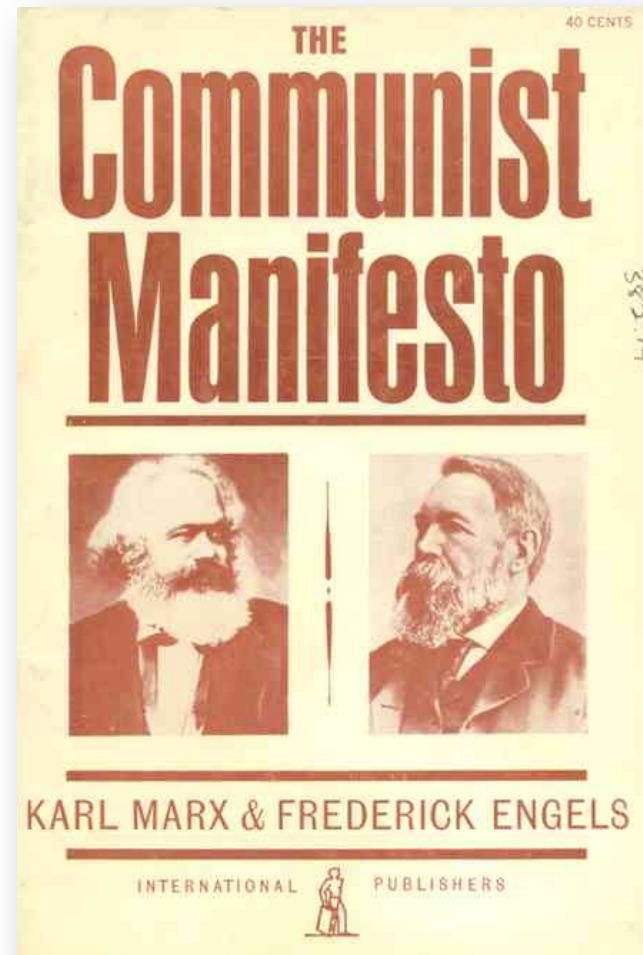
# They lack historical perspective

- The chronically poor have little sense of history.
  - know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own way of life.
- Have neither the knowledge nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves elsewhere in the world
- In other words, they are not *class conscious* (Oscar Lewis)



# Bringing a historical perspective to the problem

- The sociological study of class inequality begins with Karl Marx
- Shows that class inequalities are always linked to differentiation and exploitation
  - Under capitalism, the bourgeoisie (capitalists) exploit the proletariat (workers)
- By *bourgeoisie* he means the owners of the means of production and employers of wage labor
- By *proletariat*, he means the wage laborers who are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live



# Then there's the “lumpenproletariat”

- Below the working class is a poor underclass, a *lumpenproletariat* with...
  - No regular relation to the means of production
  - No regular source of income
- They pose organizational problems for radical protest



# Classes are self-perpetuating

- Differences in social position result from differences in people's relations to the means of production
- At both ends of the class ladder, class stability over time is maintained by inheritance
- Both poverty and wealth are self-perpetuating from one generation to the next



# Opposing classes under capitalism



- In industrial societies, capitalism divides the population into two main opposing classes
  - A third class, the landowners, tend to become part of the capitalist class
- The working class has only three alternatives:
  - to cooperate with the capitalists
  - to form unions and try to modify social conditions
  - to make revolution

# Building a class *for itself*



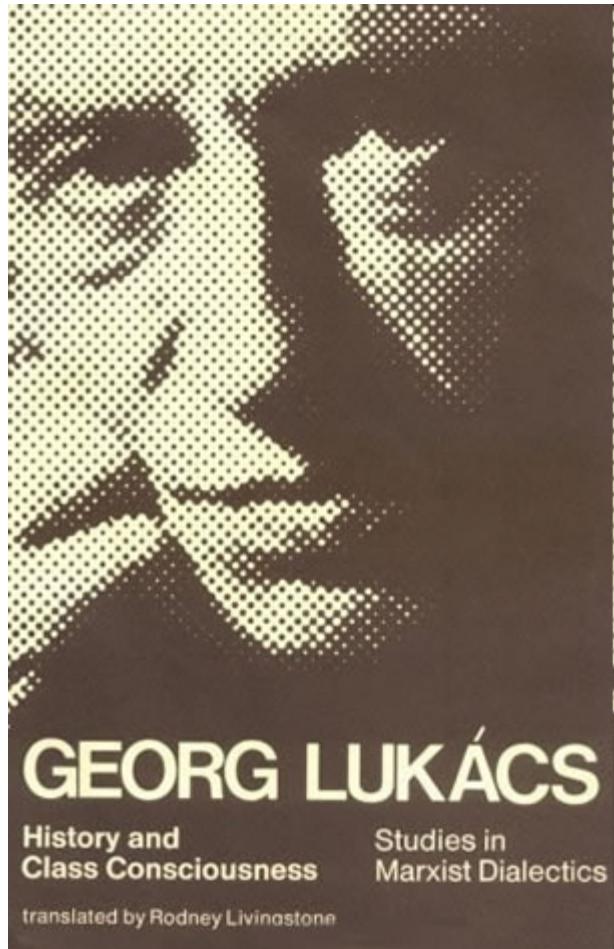
- The main social institutions of society – including law and even education – ensure that the poor stay poor
- For Marx, a key question is how members of a working class can gain class awareness
- Specifically, how does a class *in itself* become a class *for itself*?

# The development of class consciousness

- The development of class-consciousness requires a transition from a ‘class in itself’ (a mere category) to a ‘class for itself’ (a mobilized group)
- Marx does not put much faith in significant change through peaceful methods – for example, through unionization and the ballot box

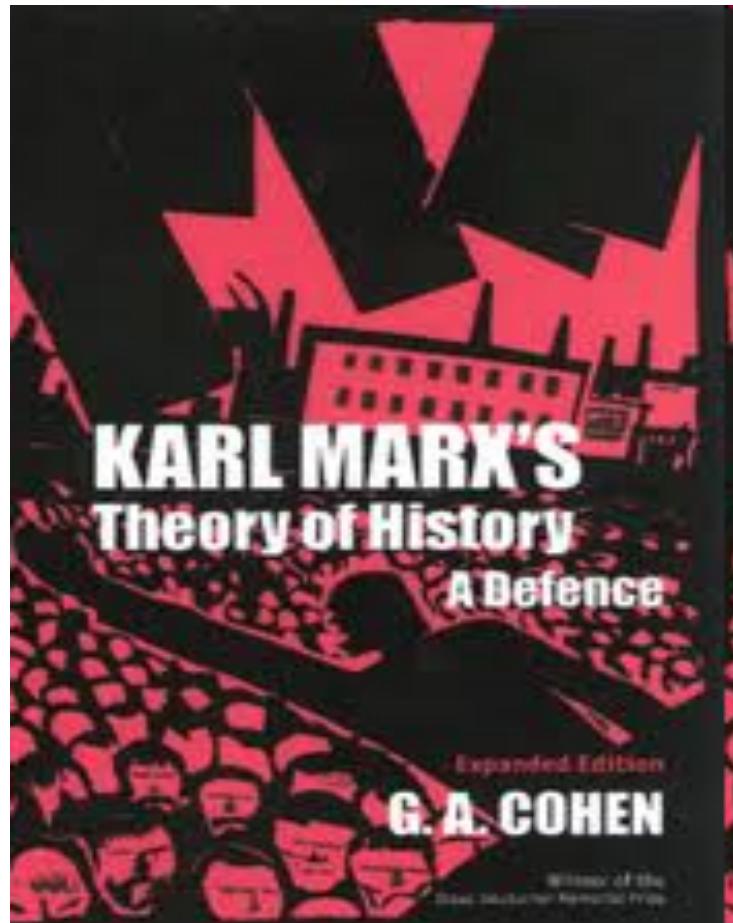


# Interaction and communication breed consciousness



- However, Marx argues that industrial capitalism carries the seeds of its own destruction
- Working and living conditions bring people together with others of the same class and separate them from people of the opposite class
- In these shared living and working conditions, workers will develop a consciousness of common interests rooted in relations to the means of production

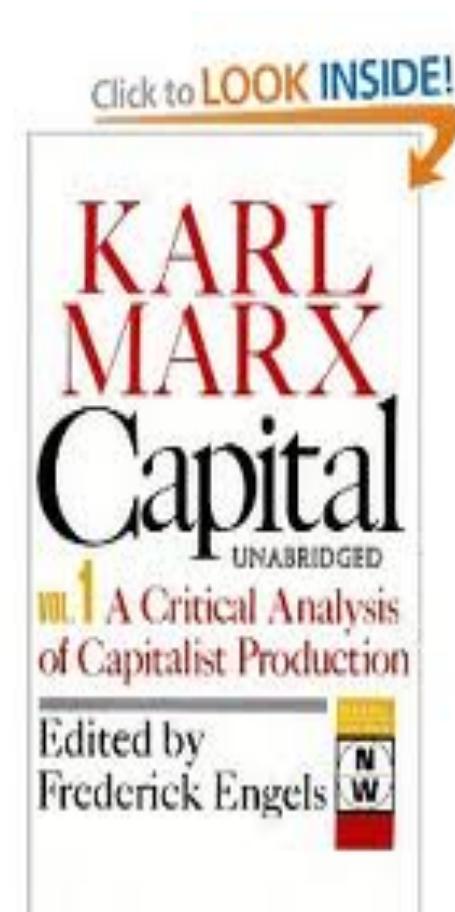
# What's right with the theory?



- Under capitalism, the workplace becomes what economist Richard Edwards calls a “contested terrain”
- When the worker owns nothing and workers can scarcely survive from one day to the next, then workers have *nothing to lose* from revolution
- The theory was correct in predicting
  - Economic globalization
  - Global exploitation
  - Global economic crises

# What's wrong with the theory?

- However, critics have focused on several weak points:
  - the book's materialist conception of history
  - the book's errors in prediction
  - anomalous classes that do not fit a simple Marxian model
- Critics have often challenged the materialist conception of history because it
  - Ignores ideas and values
  - Ignores the role of state
- Perhaps because of its theoretical shortcomings, the Communist Manifesto has failed to predict:
  - A lack of working class revolution
  - Despotism in communist-ruled societies

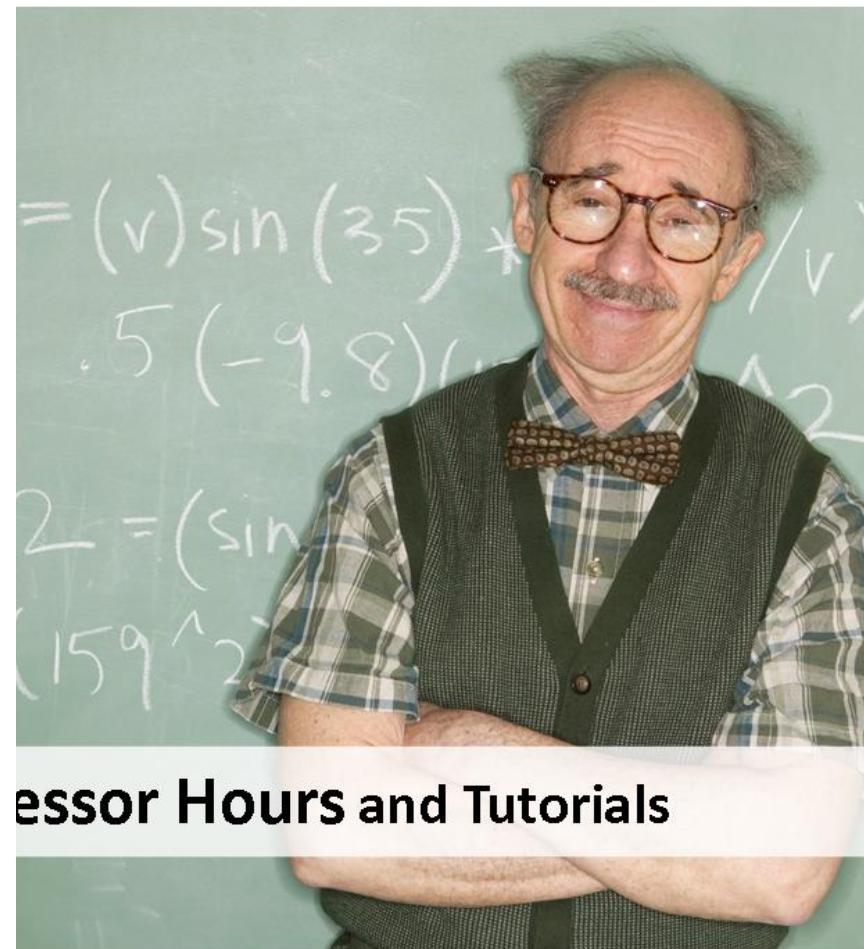


# The anomalous classes – neither bourgeoisie nor proletariat

Erik Olin Wright calls attention to three anomalous classes that are increasingly important in modern capitalist societies:

- Managers and supervisors
- Semi-autonomous employees
- Small employers

They occupy “contradictory locations”: Not quite workers and not quite capitalists!



essor Hours and Tutorials

# The degradation of work



- Marxist theory predicted that the degradation of work under capitalism would continue and worsen
- Some would agree, saying that the quality of work life has worsened under capitalism
- Consider the work of Marxist theorist Harry Braverman in his classic book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* [1958]

# Head workers and hand workers

- Harry Braverman began his working life as a coppersmith
- *Labor and Monopoly Capital* explores the evolution of capitalist production over the last two centuries
- Braverman argues that work today, while demanding ever-higher levels of education and expertise, is becoming ever more mindless, bureaucratic, and alienating.
- One class of people (workers) are robots, there to service the machinery; while another class of people are experts and managers.



# The proletarianization of work

- In the prosperous 1950s, many believed the world was getting better and better
- However, this optimism was unjustified, according to Braverman
- Management may try to hide this truth from workers, but they cannot deny it
- Managerial strategies often disguised as “job enlargement” or “reorganization” involve lay-offs and salary cuts
- *Separating skill from knowledge, or handwork from headwork, degrades the meaning of work under modern capitalism*

# The problem of *exploitation*

- Exploitation means taking unfair economic advantage
- The chance for *exploitation* is the reason why investors put their money at risk for profits.
- Overthrowing capitalism means class organizations (such as trade unions) being able to mobilize their members behind strong leaders acting in the class interest



# Surplus value defined

- By “exploitation,” we mean the control and use of an economic resource – typically, ownership of the means of production – to extort profits at the expense of workers
- *Surplus value* is the difference between the value of what a worker receives in wages and what he produces
- The idea that labour is the supreme source of all wealth is not new to Marx.



# However, measuring surplus value and exploitation poses problems



- There are many kinds of employers: small and large, public and private, and so on.
- Each poses problems for the calculation of *surplus value*, and therefore, the measure of exploitation
- In Marxist theory today, *exploitation* means any unfair practices that use power, trickery, and greed to dehumanize work and produce economic advantage

# Another class problem: alienation



- According to Marx, class inequality also increases *alienation*
- Marx identifies four types of *alienation* under capitalism:
  1. alienation of the worker from his or her essence as a human being
  2. alienation between workers
  3. alienation of the worker from the product, and
  4. alienation from the act of production

# The full picture of alienation

- In 1959, sociologist Melvin Seeman used the concept of “alienation” to unify a variety of social, psychological, and political discussions
- Seeman’s six dimensions of alienation:
  1. Powerlessness
  2. Meaninglessness
  3. Normlessness
  4. Cultural estrangement
  5. Isolation
  6. Self-estrangement.



# Are people alienated at work?

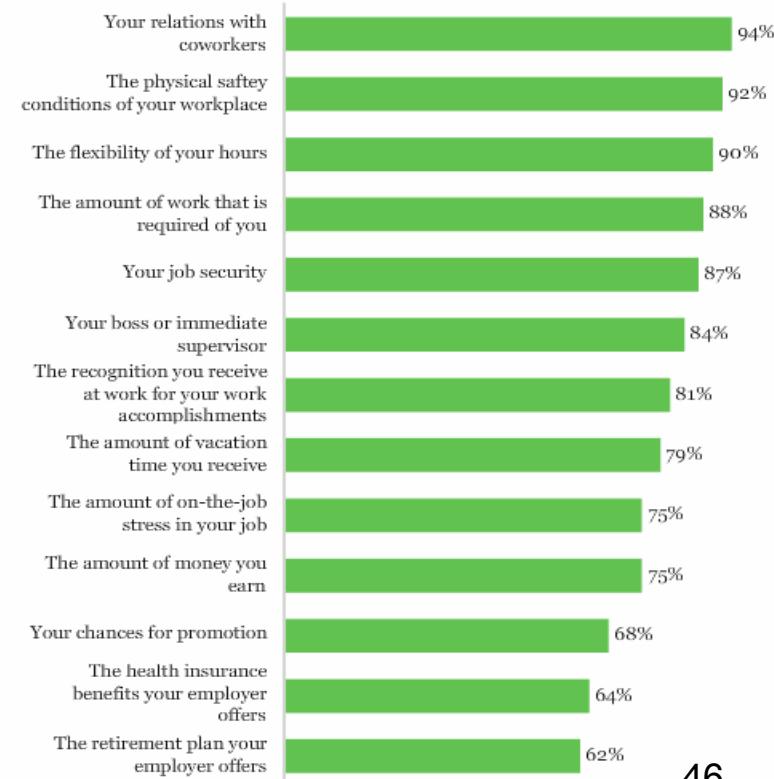
- Today many people seem to think that work is not so bad
- Most people today say they like working
- Work continues to be a social activity that most people find rewarding, because
  - They need the income
  - They are used to it
  - It is social

*Now, I'll read you a list of job characteristics. For each, please tell me how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with your current job in this regard. First, are you completely satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or completely dissatisfied with ... ?*

Based on adults employed full- or part-time

Aug. 13-16, 2007

■ % Completely/Somewhat satisfied



# The continuing evolution of work

- Work remains important for most people
- Over history, work has been repeatedly re-imagined and re-organized.
- It is hard to defend the Marxian argument that all workers under capitalism are alienated
- Perhaps people are suffering from *false consciousness* – a lack of understanding of their own situation

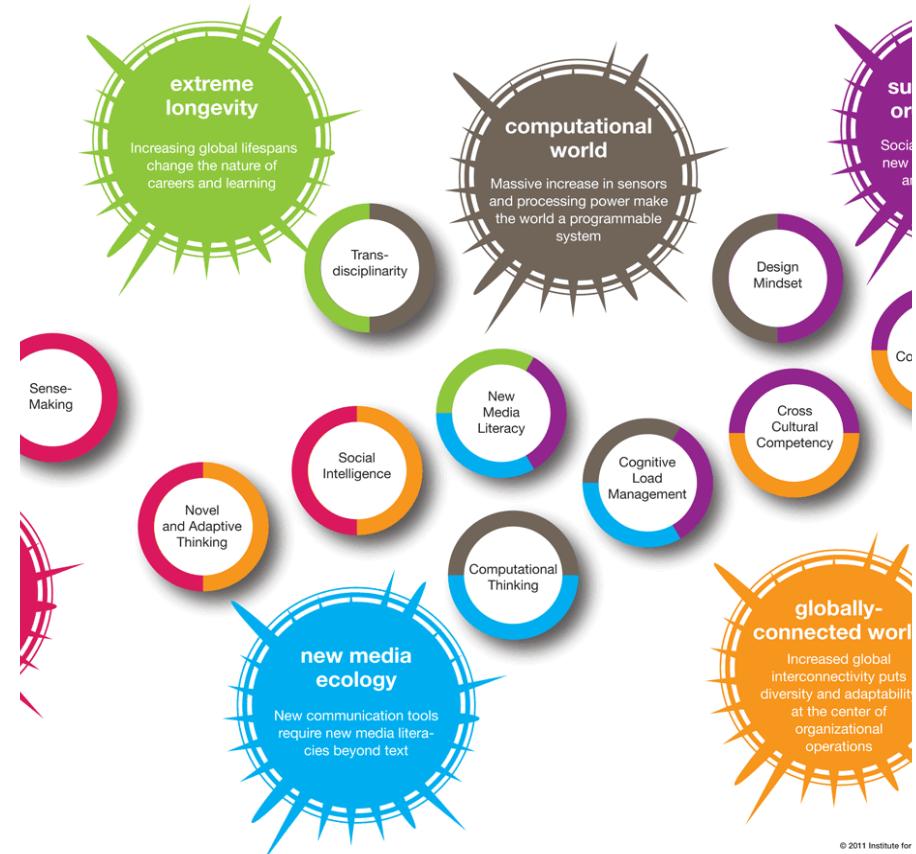


# Key trends in work in the past 50 years

- Globalization
- The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy.
- The increasing demand for formal credentials.
- The increase in non-standard work forms.
- The decline in industrial unions

## Skills 2020

While all six drivers are important in shaping the landscape in which each skill emerges, the color-coding and placement here indicate which drivers have particular relevance to the development of each of the skills.



# A short history of work in Canada



- Canadian society began as a series of primary-sector settlements: fishing villages, logging towns, mining camps, and the like
- Rex Lucas's book, *Minetown, Milltown, Railtown* points out that merchants and bankers built Canadian wealth on single-industry towns.

# Work on the frontiers

- Political economist Harold Innis described Canadian history as the opening up of new staples industries
- S.D. Clark described the kinds of communities that typically grow up on society's "frontiers" where new staples industries are transforming the wilderness
- Today, the tar sands in northern Alberta represent a new frontier, with traditional frontier conditions



# Manufacturing: localized versus globalized



- Manufacturing came to Canada in the 19th century, to capitalize on the wealth of raw materials that were readily available
- In the last 40 years, manufacturing has changed dramatically in Canada
- Mainly due to technological change (i.e., robotics) and the relocation of production to low- wage areas, through “globalization”

# The (vast) service sector



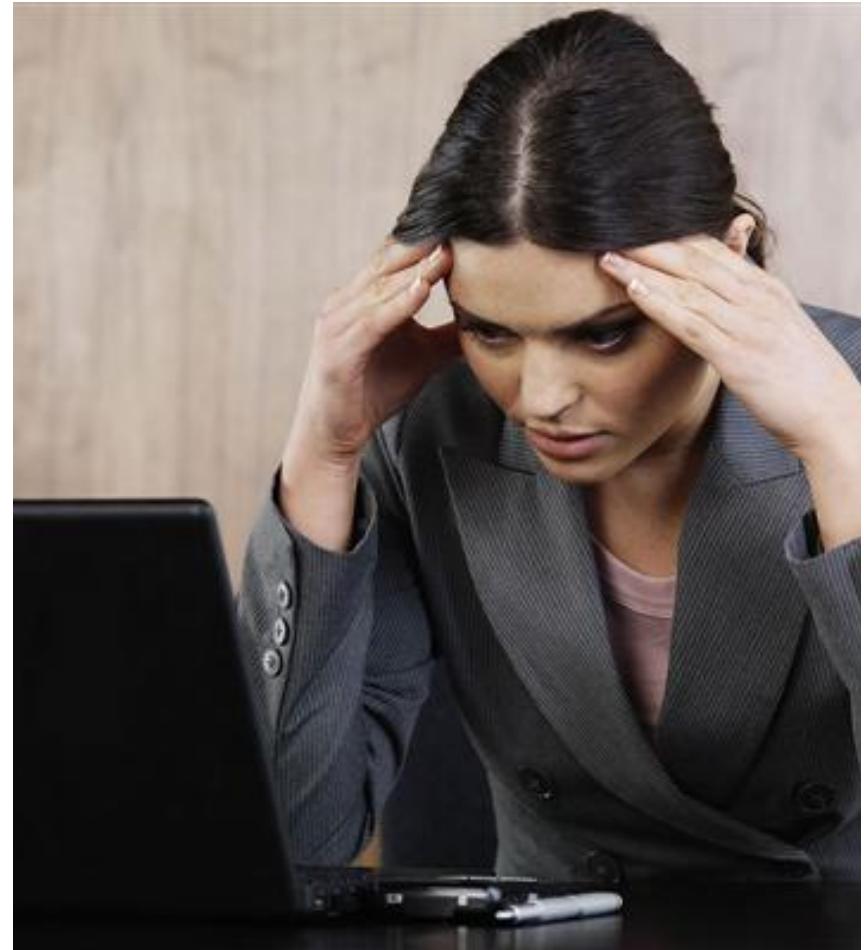
- Incomes and lifestyles are quite diverse in the service sector
- ranging from high pay (for professionals like doctors and lawyers) to minimum wage pay (for salespeople and burger flippers)
- Low-end service work features a variety of *precarious* jobs which are poorly paid, insecure, and stressful.

# Increasingly, service work is precarious work

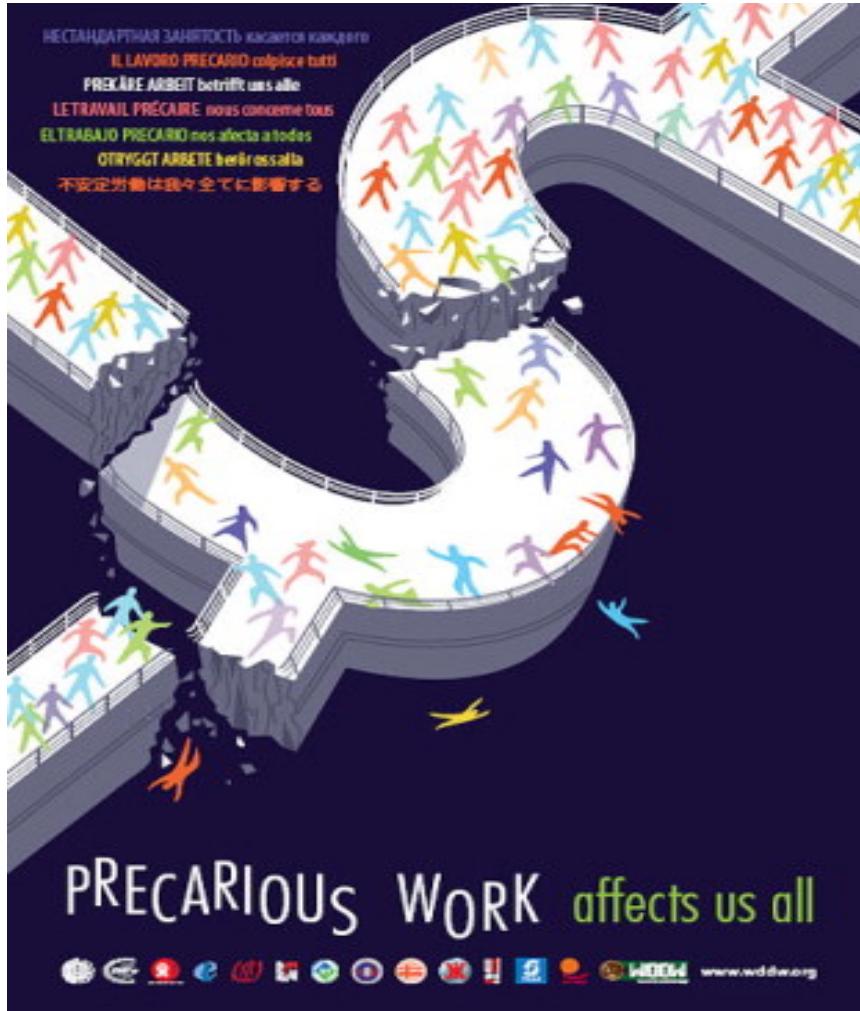
The notion of “precarious work” is often associated with:

- Part time work
- Fixed term work
- Self-employed work
- Temporary work
- On-call work work
- Homeworking
- Telecommuting

Typical of service and sales jobs



# How is this different from standard work?



All of these precarious forms of work differ from the standard employment relationship, i.e.,

- full-time work
- continuous work with one employer

All precarious work is characterized by

- low wages
- few benefits
- lack of collective representation
- little or no job security

# Precarious work is most often women's work

- In the last two decades, the standard employment relationship has declined across the board
- More men are taking jobs that were previously associated with women.
- Yet women continue to make up the majority of precarious workers
- This has led to the growth of precarious employment being referred to as the "feminization of work."



# The “feminization” of work



- In Canada, an estimated 40 percent of employed women hold precarious jobs
- “Feminization” refers to not only the increase of women in the workforce but also the increase of precarious work that was previously assigned only to women
- women have higher rates of part-time employment, earn less than men do for the same work, and face a glass ceiling that prevents upward mobility (more later)

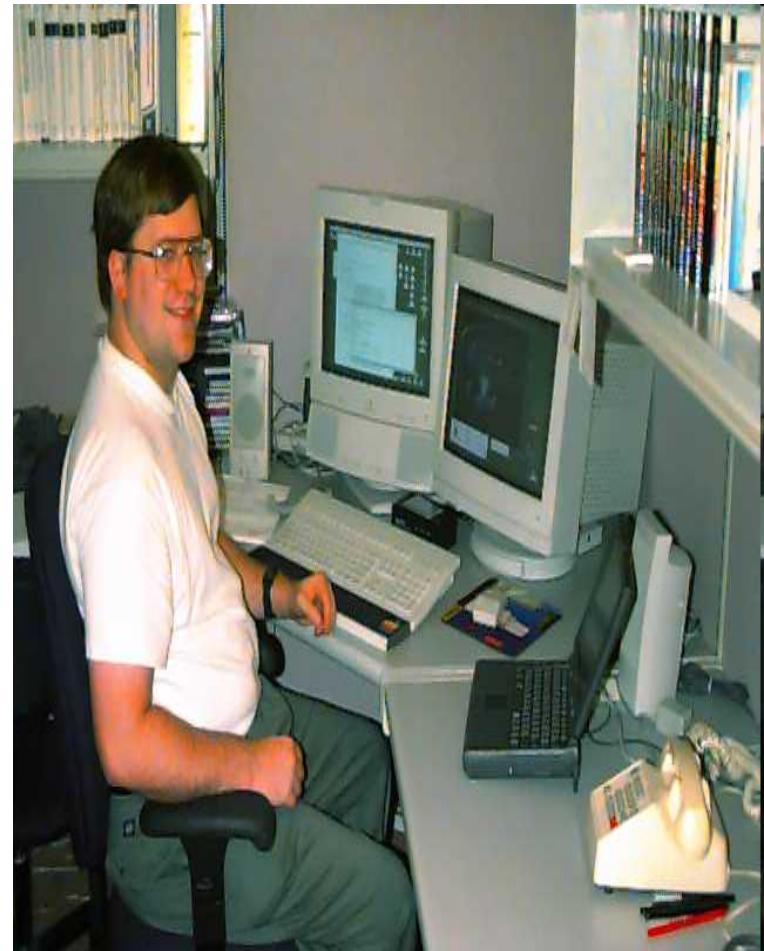
# The social reproduction sector

- Another strongly female domain of work is the social reproduction sector that includes caregiving, family, and community service
- social reproduction contributes to the survival of the capitalist system, which benefits from this *unpaid* labour
- Though women play a central role in paid workplaces today, they also continue to fulfill an important role as unpaid caregivers and housekeepers



# The growth in “self-employment”

- There has also been a drastic increase in overtime work to compensate for reduced staff sizes
- There has also been an increase in self-employment
- This means that many people are working longer hours for the same money people used to earn in a normal workday
- One consequence is a marked increase in the blurring of work and family time = more stress

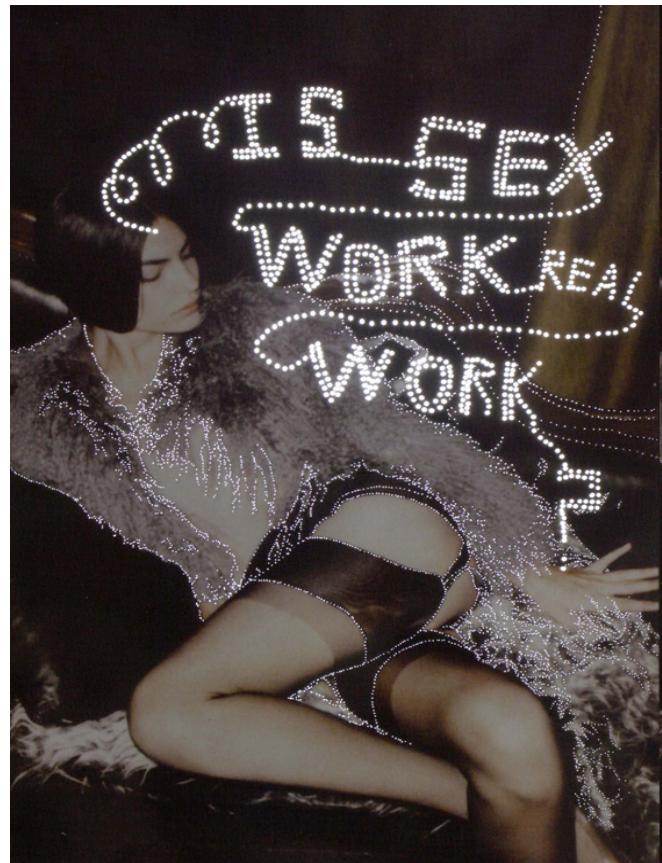


# Non-standard work

- In response to new technology and globalization, work is changing quickly these days
- More people are doing what we might call “non-standard” work

One example of non-standard work is sex work:

- The work is precarious, dangerous, and exploitative.
- It also draws on the need for “emotion work” – a trained skill of disadvantaged women



# The so-called flexible work-force



- The growth of non-standard work has required the growth of a so-called “flexible” work force
- marked by a shrinking number of permanent, full-time workers and the rapid increase of non-standard workers
- Often, more “flexible” workers are imported from abroad, whether to serve as sex workers, nannies and caregivers, or agricultural laborers (for example)

# The so-called informal economy



- This sector includes undocumented work and untaxed earnings
- E.g., it includes black-market transactions and crime
- This kind of work is particularly common in distressed economies and chaotic societies

# The absence of class consciousness today

- Marx could have predicted this
- Yet, in North America today, we see little class awareness and little class-consciousness
- Class is *still important*, but people are less aware of its importance in their lives

