Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Lesson Plan

Modern Civilization Through the Eyes of Marx and Gandhi

By Nick Molander

Grade level/Subject: 9-12 History/Social Studies; Any size
Suggested Time: Two 90 minute classes

Guiding Questions

- How did Karl Marx and Mohandas Gandhi view the foundation of modern Western Civilization? What shaped their beliefs, and what were their visions of change?
- Do the ends always justify the means to reach a goal?
- What constitutes a change for the better in a society, community, or in one’s life?

Lesson Abstract

This lesson looks at how power in a society is tied to technological, economic, and social factors. Students critique Marx and Gandhi’s opinions on modern Western civilization, and the suggested means that each advocate to instigate change. Students examine the impact of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and colonialism, and develop their own views of modern civilization and the role nonviolence can play in shaping it.

Vermont Vital Results Standards

1.3 Students read for meaning, demonstrating both initial understanding and personal response to what is read.

6.3 Students analyze knowledge as a collection of selected facts and interpretations based on a particular historical or social setting.

6.4 Students identify major historical eras and analyze periods of transition in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide, to interpret the influence of the past on the present.

Lesson Content

The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and 19th century colonialism transformed modern Western civilization. Two thinkers, traditionally seen as opposites, held common apprehensions about the modern world. Karl Marx believed workers were denied the fruits of their labor by the oppressive bourgeoisie, or business owners. This meant a lack of any real voice or power in controlling the direction and rules that governed people’s lives. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi saw how materialism and rationality corrupted society and sought to challenge the notions of what constituted civilization both in his native India, South Africa, and abroad. Both thinkers inspired broad social movements. Of the two, it was Gandhi’s gift of nonviolence that shaped many of the most successful movements for political, social, and economic justice.
While their methods for cultivating changed differed, both Marx and Gandhi profoundly impacted people around the world. Each crafted criticisms of modern Western civilization and offered alternatives to reshape their society’s trajectory. Marx’s vision sought to restore to the workers the fruits of labor. In certain ways he was in-synch with Gandhi’s view on civilization articulated, in the 1909 book *Hind Swaraj*, where Gandhi wrote about the loss of dignity and respect for work. Both thinkers believed the problems that plagued their societies could be solved if people changed their perception of what was valued in their societies. At the root of the modern Western civilization that inspired these two thinkers were changes brought on by The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and 19th century colonialism.

Looking back on the 1700’s, Western civilization went through a massive shift in how people imagined and interacted with the natural world, relationships between governments and citizens, and the role of the individual. The Age of Enlightenment, as it was called, generally supported a rational, fact-based structuring of knowledge and perception. It erased a dependency on organized religion to provide answers. Philosophies stressed that all aspect of the natural world, and by extension cultural constructs, could be understood, and rationalized by human intellect. The knowledge and pursuit of truth lead to a harnessing of intelligence that fostered a sense of curiosity. John Locke’s view of natural rights surmised a Creator (an ambiguous being in Locke’s spiritual worldview) endowing people with life, liberty, and the pursuit of property.

Growth in technical knowledge, along with economic, geographic, and political factors helped usher in the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain during the 1700’s. From there, industrialism spread to many parts of Europe and the United States. As the need for raw materials and markets to sell goods increased, many of these industrialized countries looked to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East as sought to gain clear control of natural resources necessary to keep their factories alive. Additionally, the drive to sell their manufactured products motivated the countries of Europe and the United States to dominate the economy of far off lands. To accomplish both goals, most countries in Africa and throughout Asia and the Middle East became colonies during what became known as the Age of Imperialism. In order to successfully meet their industrial needs, imperial powers superimposed a colonial structure shaped all aspects of a country or region.

One such power was Great Britain. It controlled an empire that included much of Africa and India. The drive for markets and resources, fueled by the textile factories of places in England like Manchester, propelled Britain to mass a global empire that included parts of Africa and India. It soon found itself acting as a moral agent charged with bringing its version of civilization to all parts of the Empire. The German-born Marx made his way to Great Britain in the 1830’s. It is there that he and Fredrick Engels formulated a critique of capitalism in their famous book *The Communist Manifesto*. Gandhi would begin his life as an activist and critic of modern Western civilization in South Africa fighting British policies that oppressed Indian immigrants. Both Marx and Gandhi saw the tension and oppression the Industrial Revolution and the rise of colonialism fostered, and made revolutionizing the foundations of modern civilization their core goals.

The material world took precedence, leading to the rise of factory-based societies that needed to control and dominant foreign lands to feed the growing desire for material wealth.
Marx believed no one would willingly relinquish power. For Marx, change would likely occur through organized, violent revolutionary action. He made an exception for Great Britain and the United States, but only because he acknowledged their democratic political traditions may instigate the massive changes needed to restructure society. He argued capitalism would end through the organized actions of an international working class, led by a Communist Party that would facilitate the necessary conditions for all people to share in the wealth produced in an industrialized state. The Russian, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions of the 20th century are examples of his prediction that only through a violent struggle would change be allowed to occur. Gandhi, writing in the *Hind Swaraj*, agreed that the forces of modern capitalism could not sustain itself if true change were to occur in places like India. This change is summed up when he writes, in 1909, that “under it (modern Western civilization) the nations of Europe are becoming degraded and ruined day by day.” (Parel, 1997, p.33) In his book *Gandhi, Freedom and Self Rule*, Anthony Parel points out that while Marx and Bolshevik leaders like Leon Trotsky rationalized that the end justifies the means, Gandhi did not subscribe to this doctrine. Instead, he believed in *satyagraha*, or soul-force, as the means to truly liberate not just a country, but the individual. This term was derived by merging the duty to Truth (satya) with action. For Gandhi, nonviolence became the means by which soul-force could be harnessed to challenge the injustices of modern Western society.

Gandhi developed his doctrine of nonviolence in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century, and reasoned that only by not attacking and demonizing your enemy could one truly control their own lives. Influenced by the Victorian philosopher and writer John Ruskin, Gandhi postulated the highest reward people could get from their own labor was a personal version of *Swaraj*, or self-rule. Rather than only seeking to end uneven distributions of wealth, Gandhi questioned the very foundations of modern Western civilization. He saw “that people living in it (the material-defined world) make bodily welfare the object of life” (Parel, 1997, p.35) rather than seeking to imbue an ethical and spiritual balance within civilization. In Gandhi’s mind, true liberation from the British in colonial South Africa and India could come only if people exercised a deeper and more holistic understanding of themselves. In the final section of *Hind Swaraj*, he wrote “real home-rule is self-rule or self-control.” (Parel, 1997, p. 118) In this way, Gandhi sought to emphasize the spiritual (*moksha*) as well as the material (*atta*) in developing self-rule for the nation of India and the people of India. While Marx and Gandhi both sought to elevate the average worker and peasant by showing the dignity one could feel from being a productive member of society, Gandhi’s belief in soul-force rejected Marx’s adherence to a violent revolution to usher in change.

Inherent in *satyagraha* or soul-force was a belief in the use of nonviolent actions to change society. The definition of nonviolence is multifaceted, and sought to create, promote, and sustain a new relationship between the individual and their society. Coupled with a rejection of what he calls “brute force”, Gandhi sought an embrace of soul-force grounded in one’s commitment to withstand violence and suffer the consequences without reacting violently. Nonviolence, originally termed passive resistance, “is an all-sided sword; it can be used anyhow; it blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used.” (Parel, 1997, p.94). The communities that Gandhi founded in South Africa and India (*ashrams*), like the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, were styled around a vision of self-sufficiency and connection to non-industrial labor. Additionally, these communities prepared people physically and spiritually for
nonviolence, rather than utopian-fueled rejections of urban life or modernization. Through nonviolence, Gandhi hoped to liberate not just Indians oppressed in South Africa and India, but the British as well. He made clear that while they were welcome to stay in India, the British must accept the culture and values of India (Parel, 1997, p. 113-114).

On the role of religion, Marx drew a skeptical line around its place in changing society. He sought to banish it from the public and private sphere, because it had no place in helping to wrestle control from those in power. Gandhi too addressed the role of religion but sought to elevate its status in changing the function of society. For Gandhi, modern civilization had disregarded the wisdom religion provided and believed instead that modern civilization “has taken such a hold on the people of Europe that those who are in it appear half mad” (Parel, 1997, p.37). He saw people were without dharma, or ethical relationships, and suffered from a lack of self-discipline. This in turn led people, both Indian and British, to miss opportunities to evolve civilization to a higher level where oppression and violence would be rejected as means of control. The message of nonviolence found in the Hind Swaraj speaks of a “religion behind religion”, while Marx’s revolutionary zeal viewed religion as a hindrance to change, and was in fact working to keep people oppressed. Marx saw religion as a distraction leveled upon an ignorant population by the upper classes that kept people from challenging those in power. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church, for example, comforted people to suffer an earthly existence with a promise of a Kingdom of God upon death. Conversely, Gandhi sought and read the major texts of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. His perception of religion stressed the universal embrace of justice and peace found in all religions. To Gandhi, embracing nonviolence meant connecting with a power greater than the individual. (Fischer, 1982, p. 35) This respect and desire for spirituality permeates all aspects of nonviolence, and fostered in Gandhi a deep desire to label the Enlightenment’s division between body and soul a corrupting force. Marx’s rejection and Gandhi’s emphatic embrace of religion helped define each other’s restructuring of civilization and establishment of a new social order.

According to Marx, capitalism would inevitably produce internal tensions which would lead to its destruction. Just as capitalism had taken the place of feudalism, so to would a system that refined wealth replace capitalism. This would usher in a stateless, classless society called pure communism, in which all property and wealth would be shared by the community. The new classless society would emerge after a transitional period (the "dictatorship of the proletariat"). This "workers state" or "workers' democracy" and would eventually lead to an industrial society without classes or stratification of wealth. The end of imperialism would be at hand, and each society would be run by the people who provided the labor, rather than a minority that controlled the wealth and access to political power. While simplicity and self-restraint were dominant aspects of Gandhi’s life, he never turns his back on the world, and accepts that certain professions (such as lawyers and doctors) should exist as far as they serve the interests of all people. Inspired by Ruskin, Gandhi made clear that all labor is equal.

While much is known about Gandhi’s leadership as a political revolutionary in creating nonviolent social movements in South Africa and in India, his indictment of modern Western civilization is often lesser known. By comparing Marxist and Gandhian theories of challenging power in a society, students are able to question what constitutes power, civilization and the methods to achieve freedom and liberation from oppression. Gandhi offered a response to
Marx’s utopian workers paradise and rejected that means can be separate from the end goal. Gandhi calibrates his means to in-act revolutionary change through nonviolence as the only rational and permissive basis means to fully address the oppression of modern Western civilization.

Bibliography:


Suggested Teaching Activities: (use some or all of these in connection to one another)

- Show the video storybook *Civilization: Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi Style* as an overview to the topic. Ask students to write a short reflection on what stood out to them, and to formulate three questions about the video. At least one question should be a content/fact-related question.

- Have students read about the history of The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and 19th century colonialism, specifically in Africa and India. In a T-graph, list positive and negative outcomes of each topic.

- Select portions of the *Communist Manifesto* and *Hind Swaraj* for students. Have them write a short reflection on main ideas.

- Ask them to draw a Venn-Diagram comparing Gandhi and Marx, using information from a textbook or the Content Essay.

- Lead a Socratic discussion on the Guiding Questions, paying attention to how current world problems could be applied to the history and ideologies of Marx and Gandhi.

- Ask students why nonviolence was a choice for Gandhi and not for Marx in promoting social and political change. What about their views about the world supported their methods for changing civilization?

Materials Needed: (optional)

- Reading selections from *Communist Manifesto*, *Hind Swaraj*
- Background readings on Marx and Gandhi- basic biographical information
- Modern world history textbooks
- Copies of the Content Essay, video storybook *Civilization: Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi Style*