Cultural Hegemony in Orwell’s *1984*

Marxism, a literary criticism that examines a society’s economic and social structure, has often been used to study literary works that deal primarily with class conflicts, problems of the poor, and even the effects of capitalism. Once such piece of literature that is very compatible with the Marxist criticism is George Orwell’s *1984*. *1984* is a frightening tale of a mindless people and a mind-controlling government. Orwell explores the communist society in his novel through what appears to be a utopian civilization, but is, in reality, a dystopic totalitarian society. Approached through a Marxist lens, *1984* addresses the issue of cultural hegemony that is experienced by the people of Oceania—though they are not aware of this. Through the four core principles of Marxist thought (outlined in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* by Charles Bressler), it is easy to see just how the people of Oceania were unaware of Big Brother’s domination.

In the first principle, Marxist thought believes that “reality itself can be defined and understood” (Bressler 211). Throughout the novel *1984*, the government of Big Brother and the Inner Party are often defining reality, which in this case means they are redefining reality. Many people of the Outer Party work for the government as history changers, so to speak. They know that they are changing what was written, but that does not necessarily mean they are aware they are rewriting history. Big Brother has such an influence over these people that they accept what they are told blindly—they do what they are asked without question.

Winston Smith, however, is not necessarily one of those people. A clerk for the Record Department of the Ministry of Truth, Winston experiences the lies and changes of the government first-hand. Rather than taking everything given to him without question, he wonders at the changes, wonders if anyone else notices...or remembers. Though he does not question the
government, the Inner Party, and their motives out loud—he does question them. Because of his continual questioning, the Inner Party physically dominates him in the end—into submission. He accepts the concept of *doublethink* and believes in Big Brother and the Inner Party.

The second principle of Marxist thought believes “society shapes our consciousness” (Bressler 211). Society does shape consciousness. This can be seen even today. People are conscious of what others think of them, how others perceive them; society even shapes how people think and how they act. In 1984, the government shapes the people’s consciousness by creating new words, such as “newspeak,” “oldspeak,” “crimestop,” “crimethink,” “doublethink,” and “INGSOC,” etc.

The society of 1984 is full of leagues and organizations that are meant to keep the people of Oceania in line. Some of these organizations are the “Youth League,” “Junior Anti-Sex League,” the “Thought Police,” and most obviously Big Brother—who is always watching. These systems put into place by the Inner Party control and dominate the society of 1984 and in turn control and dominate the perception and consciousness of the people within the society. While some people are fearful and paranoid (like Winston’s neighbor Mrs. Parsons, who fears her children), many people are supportive of these leagues and organizations. They suffer from a psychological condition called groupthink, which is something employed and fueled by the Inner Party’s extreme control of reality and social and economic conditions. This groupthink phenomenon shapes the people’s belief that the Inner Party is always right, that Big Brother is always watching over them, taking care of them—and anyone who dares say otherwise is a criminal.

The third principle of Marxist thought states that “social and economic conditions directly influence how and what we believe and value” (Bressler 211). In conjunction with
principle two, the government of Oceania controls the social and economic welfare of the people and is able to shape and change the people’s beliefs and values to be what the Inner Party deems appropriate.

The Inner Party makes people believe that everyone is essentially the same; they create this façade, in part, in the required dress and presentation of people. Everyone wears overalls, with subtle differences to distinguish different jobs. This causes a neutralization of gender, which is further enhanced by the fact that the women do not wear make-up, making them even less feminine and more like the men. Winston mentions this when he sees his lover, Julia, with her face painted: “The improvement in her appearance was startling. With just a few dabs of color in the right places she had become not only much prettier, but, above all, far more feminine” (Orwell 142). This subtle change undermines the government in trying to make everyone the same; it highlights the (physical) differences between Winston and Julia.

The government of the Inner Party also gives out statements that they are wealthy and providing for Oceania, making the people successful and wealthy as well. However, Winston knows that this is not true. Again, he questions the truth and motives of Big Brother and the Inner party. For example, when Winston is clerking in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, he notes the Ministry of Plenty’s original forecasted estimate of boots put out for the quarter at a hundred and forty-five million pairs. Yet there was Winston, changing the forecast to read fifty-seven million pairs as there was only sixty-two million put out (Orwell 41). In this new history, the government appears generous and wealthy. The people believe this; they also believe that they are at war with Eurasia and allied with Eastasia; and they believe they are war with Eastasia and allied with Eurasia. They are able to think these things, believe these things
due to *doublethink*—a process created by the Inner Party that makes it possible for the people of Oceania to believe whatever the government declares.

And lastly, the fourth Marxist principle of thought claims “Marxism details a plan for changing the world from a place of bigotry, hatred, and conflict due to class struggle to a classless society where wealth, opportunity, and education are accessible for all people” (Bressler 211). In all outside appearances, the government of Oceania strives to eradicate bigotry and hatred and societal classes. This, however, is not the case. This is not the truth. In all reality, the Inner party uses bigotry and hatred towards the rebel Brotherhood and their Leader, Emmanuel Goldstein—and even class division between the Inner Party and the Outer Party—to keep the people of Oceania loyal to them. They use a lack of education, a lack of *knowledge*, to keep the people from thinking for themselves; they create new, shortened words and destroy pieces of art and literature that generate ideas of real freedom and independence. They keep the people simple—simple in thought, in action, in appearance.

The government divisions themselves are not what they say they are! The Ministry of Plenty controls Oceania’s economy and provides the rations, which appear to be shortening though they claim otherwise. The Ministry of Peace deals with war, whether it’s with Eurasia or Eastasia. The Ministry of Love, which is the most frightening of the ministries, assesses and maintains the law and order of Oceania. And the Ministry of Truth is the Department of Fiction, which makes all of the other ministries possible: this ministry spends its time rewriting history and putting out lies and propaganda, maintaining the concept of *doublethink*.

Through all the Inner party’s extreme scrutiny and monitoring of the Outer Party, they are able to closely regulate the actions and thoughts of the people. They are able to dominate the people of Oceania in such a way that the people are unaware. Those who are aware are taken to
the Ministry of Love where they are shown their greatest fear. Some, like Winston, return to society. Others are vaporized—their very existence is wiped out, out of history and eventually out of thought. In the end, Big Brother wins. He dominates Oceania and the people within, including Winston. Oceania looks to be a Utopia: everyone is the same; everyone gets along; everyone works together. But underneath it all, this is not the truth. It is a dystopian society suffering cultural hegemony. Winston Smith knew this—he knew the truth—he experienced it. But still, through domination, pain, and fear, he succumbed to the lies of the Inner Party. He understood that 2+2=5. He loved Big Brother.
Works Cited

Bressler, Charles E. "Marxism." *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice.*
