

Political Ideologies Class—Handout # 2—Marxism

Dr. John W. Ray

Marxism, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, is a socioeconomic theory and political ideology analyzing history through the lens of economics and class struggle, specifically the conflict between the bourgeois owners of production and the exploited working-class proletariat. Major ideas include historical materialism, the abolition of private property, and the necessity of a revolution to replace capitalism with an eventually classless, society.

Key elements of Marxism include:

- **Historical Materialism**: History is driven by changes in material production and economic structures, rather than ideas. Ideas originate from life's material conditions.
- **Class Struggle**: Society is fundamentally divided into the bourgeoisie (who own the means of production) and the proletariat (who sell their labor) who clash.
- **Surplus Value & Exploitation**: Capitalists profit by paying workers less than the value their labor creates, known as surplus value.
- **Alienation**: Under capitalism, workers are alienated from the products of their labor, the process of production, their fellow workers, and themselves.
- **Revolution & Communism**: Capitalism is inherently unstable and will be overthrown by a proletarian revolution, leading to a temporary "dictatorship of the proletariat" and ultimately a classless, stateless communist society.
- **Base and Superstructure**: The economic base (means of production) determines the social superstructure (culture, law, religion, politics).

Marxism advocates for the collective ownership of the means of production, replacing private ownership to end the exploitation of the working class.

In more detail,

Marxism is a social, political, and economic philosophy that critiques capitalism and views history through the lens of economic conflict between social classes. Developed primarily by **Karl Marx** and **Friedrich Engels** in the 19th century, it asserts that the struggle between the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat) is the central driving force of historical change.

1. Historical Materialism

This is the central concept that human history is determined by material conditions and the way a society organizes its economic activity, known as the **mode of production**. The argument is that human beings are primarily biological entities that seek to maximize their chances for survival. Economic systems develop to do this task. Upon economics all society institutions rest.

- **Base and Superstructure:** The economic "base"—which includes the **means of production** (factories, machines) and **relations of production** (social wisdom)—determines the "superstructure" of society, such as laws, religion, culture, and government. Our technological know how (the forces of production or means of production) outstrip our social wisdom. It is this tension that moves history along.
- **Historical Stages:** Marx argued that history moves through distinct stages based on economic organization: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, and currently, capitalism.

2. Class Struggle and Capitalism

Marxist theory views society as fundamentally divided into two antagonistic classes based on their relationship to property. These classes are based on the division of labor:

- **Bourgeoisie (The Owners):** A small minority that owns the means of production and lives off the profits generated by others.
- **Proletariat (The Workers):** The vast majority who do not own tools or factories and must sell their labor power to survive. Their due is stolen by the capitalists.
- **Conflict:** These classes have inherently opposing interests: owners seek to maximize profit by lowering costs, while workers seek better wages and conditions.

3. Theory of Surplus Value and Exploitation

A core pillar of Marxian economics is the **Labor Theory of Value**, which argues that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor time required to produce it.

- **Exploitation:** Workers create more value in a day than they receive in wages. The capitalist doesn't perform any labor so creates no wealth. Yet the capitalist steals the wealth created by workers and sells it on the market. .
- **Surplus Value:** The difference between the value a worker produces and their actual wage is "surplus value," which the capitalist appropriates as profit. Marxism views this as a structural form of theft or exploitation.

4. Alienation

Marx believed that under capitalism, workers become **alienated**—estranged or separated—from four things:

- **The product of their labor:** Marx believed that we see ourselves in the product of our labor. Yet, the capitalists steal the product of a person's labor, returning only enough to keep them alive. Under capitalism, the workers create items they do not own or control.
- **The process of labor:** Work becomes repetitive, mindless, and dictated by someone else. See Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*.
- **Other people:** Capitalist society encourages individuals to view others as competition or merely means to an end.
- **Human nature (Species-being):** The system prevents humans from engaging in the free, creative work that defines their humanity. Capitalism is dehumanizing.

5. Revolution and the Transition to Communism

Marx predicted that capitalism contains internal contradictions—such as periodic economic crises and rising inequality—that would eventually lead to its self-destruction.

- **Class Consciousness:** As workers realize their exploitation, they develop an awareness of their collective power.
- **Revolution:** The proletariat will eventually rise up in a revolution to seize the means of production.
- **Socialism (Transition):** A temporary phase where the state is controlled by the working class (the "dictatorship of the proletariat") and private property is abolished.
- **Communism (Final Goal):** A theoretical stateless and classless society based on the principle: "**From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.**" In this stage, private property and the profit motive are eliminated in favor of collective ownership. This stage of history, the final stage of history, has these characteristics:
 - **A.** The state disappears and classes disappear
 - **B.** Class conflict ceases
 - **C.** There is a new principle for the distribution of goods and services: from each according to ability and to each according to need.
- Internationalism prevails.

- There is a cultural revolution where people come to see their person good and the general welfare as inseparable.

Core Principles Summary

Principle	Definition
Dialectical Materialism	A method of understanding society through the conflict of physical, economic forces rather than abstract ideas.
Means of Production	The resources (land, factories, tools) needed to produce goods.
Surplus Value	The profit kept by owners that is generated by unpaid worker labor.
Communal Ownership	Replacing private business ownership with social or worker-led management.

PRESENT DAY RELEVANCE OF MARXISM

Marxism remains a highly relevant, albeit controversial, framework for analyzing the structural mechanics of modern global society. While the revolutionary predictions of the 19th century have not unfolded as Marx envisioned, his analytical tools continue to be widely applied to understand contemporary economic and social issues.

1. Critique of Modern Capitalism

Marx's core analysis of how capitalism functions—and its inherent contradictions—is frequently cited by even mainstream economists.

- **Economic Inequality:** Marxism provides a lens for the staggering concentration of wealth. Modern reports show the **top 1% owning more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people combined**, echoing Marx's predictions on capital centralization.
- **Financial Instability:** The **2008 global financial crisis** sparked a massive resurgence in Marxist study because it accurately diagnosed the tendency of capitalism to experience cyclical, systemic crashes.

- **Monopolization:** Marx predicted that free competition would lead to **monopoly**. Today, a handful of transnational corporations dominate global sectors like tech, oil, and finance.

2. Evolved Marxist Perspectives

Contemporary Marxism has adapted to address issues that were not primary focuses in the 1800s.

- **Eco-Socialism:** Scholars use Marxist theory to argue that the relentless pursuit of profit is the root cause of **climate change** and environmental destruction.
- **Intersectional Struggles:** Modern Marxist analysis often intersects with **feminist and anti-racist movements**, examining how race and gender oppression are tied to material economic conditions. Some profit from racism and sexism.
- **Digital Economy:** "Digital Marxism" analyzes how tech giants like **Google and Amazon** extract value from user data and gig-economy labor, treating these as new forms of exploitation.

3. Sociological and Cultural Influence

Marx's impact extends far beyond politics into academic disciplines through **Critical Theory which has had wide impact on literary criticism and media criticism** and **Conflict Theory which has had wide impact in sociology and political science**.

- **Base and Superstructure:** This model remains essential for understanding how a society's **economic base** (production/technology) shapes its **superstructure** (laws, education, and media).
- **Hegemony:** Building on Marxist thought, Antonio Gramsci's theory of **hegemony** explains how ruling classes maintain power not just through force, but by shaping "common sense" and cultural values.

4. Arguments Against Relevance

Critics point to several factors to argue that Marxism is outdated or fundamentally flawed:

- **Authoritarian Legacy:** The collapse of the **Soviet Union** and the human rights abuses of 20th-century Marxist regimes are frequently cited as proof that the ideology is impractical and leads to totalitarianism.
- **Resilience of Capitalism:** Contrary to Marx's prediction of an inevitable proletarian revolution, capitalism has proven highly adaptable, expanding into new markets and significantly improving standards of living for many.

- **Individualism:** Modern critics argue Marxism focuses too heavily on **group identity (class)** and ignores the nuances of individual agency and personal liberty.

SOCIALISM

- A. State, if controlled by the workers/people, can be an instrument of good.
- B. Socialists organized political parties, ran candidates for office and joined in coalitions.
- C. More evolutionary than revolutionary compared to Marxism.
- D. Willing to accept social progress on the “installment plan” rather than all at once.
- E. Focus is on society and social welfare for all.
- F. Seek to provide equality of outcome as well as equality of opportunity.
- G. Support social welfare programs such as single payer, universal health care.
- H. Often support strong government regulations rather than outright public ownership.
- I. Do not seek abolition of private property

Modern-day socialism focuses on reducing extreme inequality, promoting, and expanding public control over essential services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. It serves as a critique of unfettered capitalism, aiming to ensure basic living standards through wealth redistribution, labor rights, and social safety nets.

Key aspects of modern socialism's importance include:

- **Addressing Economic Inequality:** Socialist policies, such as progressive taxation and wealth redistribution, are utilized to counteract income disparities and provide a safety net for workers.
- **Fundamental Rights:** It advocates for treating healthcare, education, and housing as human rights rather than commodities.
- **Public Services and Stability:** Support for public ownership or management of key industries (energy, transportation) can lead to more stable, equitable access and reduced exploitation.
- **Labor Protections:** Emphasis on worker rights, higher minimum wages, and paid leave to improve quality of life.
- **Environmental Regulation:** Increased advocacy for government-led initiatives to address climate change and environmental protection.
- **Broad Public Support:** Many policies associated with social democracy (a form of socialism) are popular, such as universal healthcare, paid leave, and public education.