

# MARXISM

Authored by  
**Mohammed looti**

November 25, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mohammed looti (2025). *MARXISM*. Encyclopedia of psychology. Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=19938>

## The Foundations of Marxist Thought

Marxism stands as a profound and influential philosophical and economic framework rooted in the comprehensive theories of the German social theorist, **Karl Marx** (1818-1883), and his collaborator, **Friedrich Engels** (1820-1895). It is not merely a political ideology but a systematic method of socio-economic analysis, aimed at understanding the inherent contradictions within capitalist societies and predicting the trajectory of historical development. At its core, Marxism posits that the driving force behind historical change and social structure is the material conditions of existence, specifically the means by which societies organize production. This foundational concept, known as **Historical Materialism**, asserts that the economic structure--the base--determines the cultural, legal, and political institutions--the superstructure--of any given society. Therefore, to understand human behavior, societal norms, or political conflict, one must first analyze the underlying economic relationships, particularly those relating to property ownership and labor organization. This focus on economic determinism distinguishes Marxist analysis sharply from frameworks that prioritize individual psychology, political institutions, or religious beliefs as primary movers of history.

The initial formulation of Marxist theory emerged during the tumultuous period of the 19th century, characterized by rapid industrialization and escalating social inequality across Europe. Marx witnessed firsthand the profound human cost associated with burgeoning industrial capitalism: urbanization, poverty, precarious working conditions, and the consolidation of wealth into the hands of a few capitalists. These observations fueled his critical analysis, particularly detailed in his monumental work, **Das Kapital**, where he meticulously dissected the internal logic and operational mechanics of the capitalist mode of production. Marx argued that capitalism, while historically necessary for generating vast productive capabilities, contained self-destructive contradictions that would inevitably lead to its demise. The inherent conflict between the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and the working class who must sell their labor to survive (the proletariat) forms the central axis of Marxist sociological inquiry, laying the groundwork for understanding all social phenomena through the lens of **class struggle**.

Furthermore, Marxism provides a complete worldview, utilizing the philosophical tool of **Dialectical Materialism**, adapted from Hegel's dialectics but firmly grounded in material reality rather than abstract idealism. This methodology suggests that change occurs through the clash of opposing forces, where a thesis encounters an antithesis, resulting in a new synthesis. Applied to history, this means that societal development proceeds not smoothly, but through revolutionary ruptures caused by contradictions in the material base. For instance, the feudal mode of production contained contradictions that led to the rise of capitalism, and capitalism, in turn, harbors contradictions that Marx believed would lead inevitably to socialism and eventually, to **communism**--a classless, stateless society where the means of production are communally owned. The enduring power of Marxism lies in its comprehensive scope, integrating philosophy,

economics, history, and political theory into a unified critical framework designed not merely to interpret the world, but fundamentally to change it.

## Historical Materialism and Economic Determinism

The core theoretical innovation of Karl Marx is the doctrine of **Historical Materialism**, which serves as the methodological backbone for all subsequent Marxist analysis. This theory proposes a specific understanding of historical progression, asserting that the fundamental determinant of social structure and historical transformation is the manner in which human beings collectively produce the necessities of life. Every society, according to Marx, is composed of a **base** and a **superstructure**. The base, or economic structure, encompasses the forces of production (technology, labor, resources) and the relations of production (the social organization governing property ownership and labor distribution). It is this base that dictates the character of the superstructure, which includes law, politics, religion, philosophy, art, and even psychological understanding of self. In this view, consciousness and ideology are not independently generated but are rather reflections of the material conditions of the economic base; as Marx famously stated, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

This principle of **economic determinism** emphasizes the overriding importance of the economy as the most significant institution within any government or society. Changes in the forces of production--for example, the invention of the steam engine or the rise of digital technology--eventually come into conflict with the existing relations of production. When the existing social and legal framework (the relations) begins to fetter or impede the development of new productive capabilities (the forces), an era of social revolution begins. The transition from slave society to feudalism, and then from feudalism to capitalism, are interpreted by Marxists as necessary stages driven by the inevitable conflict between developing forces of production and static relations of production. The implications of this framework for psychology and sociology are profound, suggesting that individual motivation, societal norms, and even mental well-being are inextricably linked to, and ultimately shaped by, one's position within the economic structure.

Furthermore, Historical Materialism provides the mechanism for understanding ideological formation. The superstructure, especially political and legal institutions, function primarily to legitimize and protect the existing relations of production. The dominant ideas of any epoch are, therefore, the ideas of the ruling class. This concept of **ideology** is crucial; it refers to the set of beliefs and values that obscure the true nature of exploitation and economic inequality, thereby helping to maintain social stability and the power of the ruling class. For the proletariat to achieve revolutionary consciousness, they must overcome this ideological obfuscation and recognize their true material interests. Marxism argues that the economy is not merely an institutional compartment but the very bedrock upon which all human social reality is constructed, necessitating

a materialist analysis for genuine understanding.

## The Dynamics of Class Struggle

If Historical Materialism is the method, then **class struggle** is the engine of history. Marx and Engels famously opened *The Communist Manifesto* by declaring that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. This concept describes the inherent antagonism that exists between social classes whose economic interests are fundamentally incompatible. In the capitalist system, the primary conflict exists between the **bourgeoisie**, who own and control the means of production (factories, land, capital), and the **proletariat**, who own only their capacity to labor and must sell that labor power to the bourgeoisie in order to survive. This adversarial relationship is not accidental or temporary; it is built into the fundamental structure of capitalism, making conflict inevitable.

The exploitation central to this dynamic stems from the Marxist **Labor Theory of Value**. According to this theory, the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time required to produce it. However, the capitalist pays the worker only for the value of their labor power (the cost of their subsistence), which is typically less than the total value the worker creates during the workday. The difference between the value created by the worker and the wages they receive is termed **surplus value**, which is appropriated by the capitalist as profit. This appropriation of surplus value is the defining characteristic of capitalist exploitation. Crucially, Marx argued that competition among capitalists forces them constantly to seek greater surplus value, either by extending the working day or by increasing productivity through technological investment, leading to cycles of economic crisis and intensifying the struggle between classes.

Marxism emphasizes that class is not defined by income or prestige, but strictly by one's relationship to the means of production. A key objective of the revolutionary process is the transformation of the proletariat from a "class in itself" (a group sharing a common economic situation) into a "class for itself" (a group consciously organized and acting collectively to advance its interests). This process requires the development of **revolutionary consciousness**, which is the psychological and sociological realization by the workers that their interests are fundamentally opposed to those of the ruling class and that only collective, revolutionary action can emancipate them. The mobilization and organization of the working class are thus central to Marxist political theory, viewing the proletariat as the only class capable of leading the transition to a communist society free from exploitation.

## The Concept of Alienation in Modern Labor

One of Marx's most important contributions, particularly relevant to psychological inquiry, is his detailed analysis of **alienation** (or estrangement) under capitalism. Marx argued that capitalist

production fundamentally distorts and degrades the human essence, turning productive activity, which should be a source of fulfillment and self-expression, into a painful and dehumanizing experience. This concept moves beyond mere dissatisfaction or unhappiness, describing a systematic separation of the worker from the products of their labor, the act of production itself, their human essence, and their fellow human beings. Marx identified four distinct but interrelated forms of alienation inherent in the wage-labor system.

The first form is the **alienation from the product of labor**. The objects produced by the worker do not belong to them; they become external, hostile forces owned by the capitalist. The more value the worker creates, the richer the capitalist becomes, and the poorer and more powerless the worker feels in relation to the vast wealth they help generate. The second form is the **alienation from the act of labor** itself. Work under capitalism is external to the worker, meaning it is not freely chosen or fulfilling, but is rather a coerced means of survival. The detailed division of labor, characterized by repetitive, fragmented tasks, prevents the worker from exercising creativity or control over the production process, leading to profound psychological detachment and exhaustion rather than self-realization.

The third form, **alienation from species-being** (human essence), highlights the philosophical depth of Marx's critique. Marx believed that humans, unlike animals, possess a unique capacity for conscious, creative, and social labor--the ability to plan and transform the environment according to universal laws. When labor is reduced to a means of mere existence and forced repetition, this essential human capacity is suppressed. The worker is thus estranged from what makes them fundamentally human. Finally, the fourth form is the **alienation from other human beings**. The competitive structure of capitalism sets workers against each other in the marketplace, competing for scarce jobs and wages, and sets workers against the capitalists in an antagonistic relationship, thus fragmenting social cohesion and replacing genuine community with instrumental relationships rooted in economic necessity. Marx viewed the overcoming of alienation through revolutionary social change as a precondition for achieving true human freedom and psychological wholeness.

## Critique of Capitalism and Economic Crisis

Marxism offers a powerful and comprehensive critique of the capitalist system, viewing it not as a natural or eternal state, but as a historically specific, transient stage of development characterized by inherent instability. Central to this critique is the understanding that capitalism relies on ceaseless expansion and accumulation of capital, leading inevitably to structural contradictions and recurrent crises. Marx detailed several "laws of motion" within capitalism, particularly the **Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall**. As capitalists invest more in machinery and technology (constant capital) relative to human labor (variable capital), the rate of surplus value extraction decreases across the system, because only living labor creates new value. This inherent tendency compels capitalists to seek new markets, suppress wages, and intensify exploitation, but

ultimately pushes the economy toward stagnation and collapse.

Furthermore, capitalism suffers from chronic issues of **overproduction and underconsumption**. The drive for profit necessitates lowering the cost of production, which often means suppressing workers' wages. If wages are kept low, however, the working class lacks the purchasing power necessary to consume the vast quantity of goods produced by the highly efficient capitalist machine. This structural imbalance leads to crises where inventories pile up, production slows, and mass unemployment ensues. These cyclical crises are not external accidents but are intrinsic features of the capitalist system, demonstrating its irrationality and inefficiency in meeting genuine human needs, despite its enormous productive capacity.

Marx saw the ultimate failure of capitalism residing in its inability to manage its own productivity. The system creates the material conditions for abundance--the "forces of production"--but the private ownership structure--the "relations of production"--prevents this abundance from being rationally distributed for the benefit of all. The solution, according to Marxist theory, is the revolutionary abolition of private ownership of the means of production, replacing it with collective or social ownership, thereby aligning the relations of production with the advanced forces of production. This transition, moving through socialism as a necessary transitional phase, aims to resolve the fundamental contradictions that plague capitalist society, leading to a planned economy focused on satisfying societal needs rather than generating private profit.

## The Transition to Socialism and Communism

Marxism outlines a necessary historical trajectory leading away from capitalism towards two successive stages of post-capitalist society: **socialism** and ultimately, **communism**. The transition is inaugurated by the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois state by the organized proletariat, leading to the establishment of the **dictatorship of the proletariat**. This phase is intended not as a permanent authoritarian regime, but as a temporary state structure necessary to dismantle the remnants of the old ruling class, secure the revolution against counter-revolutionary forces, and transition the means of production from private to collective ownership. During this period, the state acts as the instrument of the majority working class, securing democratic control over economic planning.

**Socialism** represents the first stage of communist society. Key characteristics of socialism include the social ownership of the means of production (factories, land, banks), economic planning, and the principle of distribution based on contribution: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution." While class divisions are largely eliminated, inequalities still persist under socialism because individuals differ in their abilities and needs, and labor is still measured and compensated. The state apparatus remains necessary during this phase to coordinate complex economic activity and manage the transition away from capitalist habits and thinking. This

stage requires significant social engineering to overcome the ideological remnants of bourgeois society and foster a new, collective psychology.

The final stage is **Communism**, which Marx describes as the fully developed, classless, and stateless society. In this utopian vision, the forces of production have reached such a level of abundance that scarcity is eliminated, and the need for coercive governmental structures disappears. Crucially, the principle of distribution shifts to: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Labor is no longer alienated but becomes a voluntary, fulfilling expression of human creativity. Private property, money, and the market mechanism vanish, replaced by rational, communal management of resources. This final phase represents the complete liberation of humanity from economic necessity and alienation, allowing for the full realization of individual potential within a harmonious social whole.

## Marxism in Political Practice: Rise and Fall

While the foundation of Marxism rests on the academic theories of Karl Marx, its historical impact is most often associated with political movements that adapted, interpreted, and often radically modified these theories to seize state power. The most prominent example is **Communism**, particularly the forms developed in Russia following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, led by **Vladimir Lenin**, and subsequently in China under **Mao Zedong**. These movements, often termed **Marxism-Leninism**, emphasized the role of a vanguard party--a highly disciplined, professional revolutionary elite--as necessary to lead the proletariat to consciousness and revolution, particularly in societies, like early 20th-century Russia, that had not yet fully developed industrial capitalism as Marx had predicted.

The various forms of Marxism that rose to power often experienced a trajectory of rapid ascent followed by equally rapid decline. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, which operated under centrally planned economies and one-party rule justified by Marxist-Leninist ideology, demonstrated exceptional stability for decades but ultimately failed to sustain economic growth, political legitimacy, or human rights standards in the long term. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 signaled a monumental defeat for state-sponsored communism, demonstrating the inherent difficulties in translating Marx's philosophical vision of a stateless, democratic, and non-alienated society into a functioning, centralized authoritarian state apparatus. Critics argue that these regimes were not true realizations of Marx's ideals but rather distorted, totalitarian experiments that used Marxist rhetoric to justify extreme political control.

Beyond the major communist states, Marxist influence permeated democratic socialist parties (social democracy) in Western Europe, which sought gradual reform within capitalist structures rather than violent revolution, and various anti-colonial movements across the Global South. The

failures of the Soviet model, however, led to widespread re-evaluation of Marxist methodology. Today, while few countries adhere to centralized Marxist state structures, the philosophical and critical tools developed by Marx--especially the concepts of alienation, ideology, and historical materialism--remain vibrant and highly influential in academic disciplines such as sociology, history, economics, and critical theory.

## Contemporary Influence and Critical Legacy

Despite the dramatic political setbacks faced by 20th-century communist states, Marxism retains a powerful and enduring influence on contemporary thought, serving primarily as a critical lens through which to analyze persistent issues of inequality, globalization, and power. The discipline of critical theory, particularly the **Frankfurt School** (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse), utilized Marxist insights--especially the critique of commodity fetishism and alienation--to analyze culture, mass media, and the psychological mechanisms of social control in advanced capitalist societies, demonstrating the adaptability of Marx's framework beyond purely economic analysis. These theorists integrated Freudian psychoanalysis with Marxist sociology to explore how the capitalist superstructure shapes individual desire and consciousness, giving Marxism relevance to psychological studies.

Contemporary Marxist analysis addresses new forms of labor and technology, such as the rise of precarious gig work, digital platforms, and the extraction of data as a new form of surplus value. Modern scholars use Marx's framework to critique **neoliberal globalization**, analyzing how transnational corporations utilize global supply chains to intensify exploitation across different nations, exacerbating global wealth disparities. The focus remains on the structural processes of capital accumulation, arguing that the fundamental contradictions identified by Marx--the conflict between socialized production and private appropriation--have intensified rather than diminished in the 21st century, despite technological advances.

In conclusion, Marxism is far more than a failed political experiment; it is a complex, integrated philosophical system that provided a revolutionary way of understanding the world. Its insistence that the economy is the primary driver of human history, its rigorous methodology of dialectical materialism, and its profound critique of human alienation under capitalism ensure its continued relevance. While the ideal of immediate, violent revolution has largely faded in many parts of the world, Marx's meticulous analysis of power, exploitation, and structural inequality continues to serve as a vital tool for scholars and activists seeking to understand and challenge the inherent dynamics of global capitalism. The debate over how best to achieve a more equitable society ensures that the legacy of **Karl Marx** remains central to political and social thought.