

Communism

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1. Core Definition

Communism represents a multifaceted socio-political, philosophical, and economic ideology and movement that fundamentally advocates for the establishment of a society characterized by common ownership of the means of production and the complete absence of social classes. At its theoretical core, it envisions a society where private property, particularly in the sense of productive assets, is abolished, leading to a system where resources and wealth are collectively held and managed for the benefit of all members. This overarching goal seeks to eliminate economic exploitation and social inequality, which are perceived as inherent flaws of capitalist systems.

The philosophical underpinnings of communism suggest a historical progression through various economic stages, culminating in a classless society. This final stage would see the withering away of the state, as its primary function of maintaining class distinctions would become obsolete. The ideological framework encompasses a radical transformation of social relations, economic organization, and political governance, aiming to create a truly egalitarian society where collective welfare takes precedence over individual accumulation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "communism" itself is derived from the Latin word "communis," meaning "**common**" or "**universal**." This etymological root directly reflects the ideology's central tenet of common ownership and shared resources. While the modern articulation of communism is largely attributed to the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the mid-19th century, the concept of communal living and shared property has much older antecedents, appearing in various utopian and philosophical traditions throughout history. Early forms of communal societies existed in different parts of the world, often driven by religious or philosophical beliefs emphasizing collective well-being over individual gain.

However, it was Karl Marx who systematically developed communism into a comprehensive political and economic theory, transforming it from a utopian ideal into a purportedly scientific analysis of historical development and social revolution. Marx's critique of capitalism, articulated primarily in *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, provided a framework for understanding class struggle and posited communism as the inevitable outcome of historical materialism. His writings provided the intellectual foundation for revolutionary movements across the globe, fundamentally reshaping political discourse and global geopolitics throughout the 20th century.

3. Theoretical Foundations

As a distinct political theory, the core tenets of communism are predominantly attributed to **Karl Marx**, whose analytical framework posited an inevitable trajectory from capitalism to communism through a revolutionary process. Marx envisioned a societal transformation that would fundamentally alter the existing power structures, leading to the dissolution of social classes. Central to this vision was the public ownership of all productive properties, including land, factories, and other means of production, thereby eliminating private control over the economy. This collective ownership was intended to ensure that resources and wealth generated by society would serve the common good rather than accumulating in the hands of a select few.

Furthermore, Marx's ideal communist society stipulated an innovative approach to labor and compensation, wherein individuals would contribute their work according to their inherent abilities and receive remuneration or provisions based on their genuine needs. This principle, often summarized as **"from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,"** stands in stark contrast to capitalist systems where compensation is typically linked to market value or property ownership. The ultimate goal was to foster a society where labor is no longer alienated and individuals are free to pursue their full potential without the constraints of economic exploitation. Indeed, one of Marx's most resonant declarations encapsulating this ambition states: **"The theory of Communism may be summed up in one sentence: Abolish all private property"** .

4. Key Characteristics

The defining characteristic of communism is its unwavering commitment to the **abolition of private property**, particularly concerning the means of production. This principle dictates that essential industries, agricultural land, and other productive assets should be collectively owned by the community or state, rather than by individuals or corporations. The intention behind this is to eliminate economic disparity and ensure that wealth generated benefits society as a whole, rather than enriching a private few. This systemic change is designed to remove the root causes of class struggle and exploitation inherent in capitalist systems.

Another fundamental characteristic is the aspiration for a **classless society**. Communism theorizes that historical development is driven by class conflict, and that the ultimate goal is to transcend these divisions, leading to a society where distinctions based on economic status or ownership of capital no longer exist. In practice, this often translates into efforts to equalize income and social standing, often through centralized planning and state control over economic activities. Furthermore, communism, in its theoretical ideal, posits the eventual **withering away of the state**, believing that once class antagonisms are eliminated, the coercive apparatus of government would become redundant, paving the way for a self-governing community of free individuals. However,

historical implementations have often resulted in highly centralized and powerful state apparatuses.

5. Practical Implementations and Case Studies

Throughout the past century, various nations have embarked on experiments with communism, each presenting distinct manifestations and encountering varying degrees of success and challenges. A seminal instance is the former **Soviet Union**, where communism arose following a tumultuous revolution that captivated the masses with the compelling slogan, "**Peace, bread, and land.**" This powerful appeal resonated deeply with several societal demands: the lower class's urgent need for comprehensive agrarian reform, the widespread public desire to extricate the nation from its costly involvement in World War I, and a popular groundswell of support for greater unity and empowerment among the soviets, or workers' councils. The subsequent establishment of the Soviet state marked a monumental effort to implement communist principles on a vast scale, significantly altering global political dynamics.

Other notable examples illustrate different facets of communist implementation. In **North Korea**, for instance, the government exercises stringent and centralized control over critical sectors such as agriculture and food distribution, reflecting a command economy structure where the state dictates economic activity. Similarly, in **China** during the 1950s, a period of significant land reform saw the government systematically abolish private ownership of land. This policy involved the extensive seizure of farmers' lands, subsequently compelling them to work for the state in collective agricultural endeavors, aiming to consolidate economic power and restructure rural society.

Beyond these prominent cases, numerous **third-world nations** also experimented with communist or socialist models, particularly during the decolonization era and the Cold War. These ventures were often driven by anti-imperialist sentiments and the promise of rapid industrialization and social equality. However, the outcomes of these experiments varied considerably, ranging from periods of significant social welfare improvements and economic growth to severe economic stagnation, famines, and authoritarian rule. The diverse experiences across these nations underscore the complex interplay of ideological aspirations, local conditions, and international pressures in the practical application of communist theories.

6. Significance and Impact

Communism has wielded an unparalleled influence on global history, particularly throughout the 20th century, fundamentally reshaping political landscapes, economic systems, and international relations. Its emergence as a potent ideological force catalyzed numerous revolutions and liberation movements, inspiring millions to challenge existing capitalist orders and colonial powers.

The establishment of communist states, most notably the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, created a bipolar world order during the Cold War, characterized by ideological rivalry, proxy conflicts, and an arms race that defined an entire era.

Beyond state-level implementations, communist ideas have significantly impacted labor movements, civil rights struggles, and anti-colonial movements worldwide. Its emphasis on social justice, equality, and the critique of exploitation resonated with oppressed populations and intellectuals alike, fostering debates on economic fairness, human rights, and the role of the state in society. Even in nations that did not adopt communism, its existence prompted reforms in capitalist systems, such as the expansion of welfare states and labor protections, as a means to counter its appeal. The legacy of communism continues to be debated and re-evaluated, remaining a critical lens through which to understand modern political thought and global socio-economic structures.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its utopian aspirations, communism has been the subject of intense debates and severe criticisms, often stemming from the practical outcomes of its implementation in various states. While the source content briefly mentions that many nations experimented with communism "with varying degrees of success," a deeper examination reveals widespread critiques regarding its economic efficacy, political freedoms, and human rights records. Critics frequently point to the historical record of centrally planned economies, which often struggled with inefficiencies, lack of innovation, and chronic shortages of goods, contrasting sharply with the dynamism of market-driven systems.

From a political and social standpoint, many communist regimes have been criticized for their tendency towards authoritarianism and totalitarian control. The theoretical "withering away of the state" rarely materialized; instead, powerful, centralized governments emerged, often suppressing dissent, limiting individual liberties, and controlling all aspects of public and private life. Historical events such as the Great Purge in the Soviet Union, the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution in China, and the famines and political repression in North Korea are frequently cited as examples of the devastating human cost associated with these implementations, leading to millions of deaths and widespread suffering.

Furthermore, the very concept of a classless society and common ownership has faced philosophical challenges. Critics argue that abolishing private property removes essential incentives for innovation, productivity, and individual initiative, leading to apathy and economic stagnation. The absence of economic and political pluralism, coupled with the concentration of power in the hands of a ruling party, has also been a persistent point of contention, leading to widespread accusations of human rights abuses, including restrictions on freedom of speech,

assembly, and movement.

8. Modern Interpretations and Adaptations

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ideology of communism has undergone significant reinterpretation and adaptation in the contemporary world. While traditional Marxist-Leninist states are fewer, the underlying critiques of capitalism and aspirations for social justice continue to influence various political and economic movements. Modern interpretations often distance themselves from the authoritarian practices of 20th-century communist regimes, focusing instead on democratic and humanistic approaches to achieving greater equality and collective well-being.

Contemporary discussions around communism often intersect with other leftist ideologies, such as democratic socialism, eco-socialism, and various anti-capitalist movements. These adaptations frequently emphasize principles like workers' rights, environmental sustainability, wealth redistribution through progressive taxation, and strengthening public services, rather than advocating for a complete state takeover of all means of production or a one-party state. Nations like China and Vietnam, while still nominally communist and governed by communist parties, have integrated significant market reforms and private enterprise into their economies, representing hybrid models that depart substantially from classical communist economic theory. This evolution highlights the dynamic nature of ideological thought in response to changing global realities and past experiences.

Further Reading

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