

MARXISM

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October 31, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *MARXISM*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=63565>

Marxism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Political Economy, Sociology

Proponents: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels

1. Core Principles

Marxism is a comprehensive philosophical, economic, and socio-political approach rooted in the ideas of the German social theorist, **Karl Marx** (1818-1883), and his collaborator, **Friedrich Engels**. It fundamentally operates on the principle that the economic system--specifically the organization of production and exchange--is the most influential and foundational institution within any society. This perspective, known as **economic determinism**, posits that the economic base (the forces and relations of production) dictates the structure of the societal superstructure, which encompasses the political system, legal framework, religion, morality, and culture.

The central thesis of Marxism is the critique of **capitalism**. Marx argued that capitalism is inherently unstable and exploitative, built upon the systemic extraction of **surplus value** from the working class (the proletariat) by the owning class (the bourgeoisie). Therefore, the history of human society is understood as a history of **class struggle**, driven by the contradictions arising from the material organization of production. The ultimate aim of the Marxist project is to achieve a revolutionary transition from capitalism through a temporary dictatorship of the proletariat, culminating in a classless, stateless, and communal society, often termed **communism**.

2. Dialectical and Historical Materialism

The analytical method employed by Marxism is known as **Historical Materialism**, which serves as the methodological framework for understanding social change. It rejects idealism, arguing instead that material conditions--the ways humans produce their means of existence--are the primary movers of history, rather than abstract ideas or divine intervention. Historical Materialism examines the succession of "modes of production," such as primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, explaining that each transition occurs when the existing relations of production become a fetter on the further development of the productive forces.

Complementing this historical approach is **Dialectical Materialism**, a concept largely systematized by Engels and later thinkers, though derived from Marx's adaptation of Hegelian dialectics. This principle asserts that change occurs through the conflict of internal contradictions: a thesis gives rise to its antithesis, and their conflict results in a new synthesis. In socio-political terms, this translates into the idea that inherent contradictions within a system, such as the fundamental antagonism between capital and labor under capitalism, inevitably lead to revolutionary transformation. This dialectical process ensures that systems are always in flux, moving toward a

new, higher form of societal organization.

3. Key Concepts and Components

Marxism is defined by several interlinked conceptual tools used to analyze capitalist society and its consequences for human experience. These concepts explain the dynamics of power, production, and psychological estrangement under wage labor.

Class Struggle: This is the engine of history. Society is divided into two primary antagonistic classes: the **Bourgeoisie**, who own the means of production (factories, land, machinery), and the **Proletariat**, who own only their labor power and must sell it to survive. The struggle over the distribution of wealth and power is continuous and irreconcilable under capitalism.

Alienation (Estrangement): Under capitalism, the worker is systematically separated or alienated from four aspects of their productive existence: 1) the product of their labor (which belongs to the capitalist); 2) the act of production itself (the work process is coercive and repetitive); 3) their species-being or human essence (creativity is stifled); and 4) from fellow workers (competition replaces cooperation).

Mode of Production: This structural concept combines the **Forces of Production** (technology, raw materials, labor power) and the **Relations of Production** (the social structure governing the ownership of the means of production). The current Mode of Production, **capitalism**, is defined by private ownership and wage labor.

Ideology and False Consciousness: Marxism argues that the dominant ideas of any society are the ideas of its ruling class. Ideology serves to maintain the existing power structure by disguising exploitation and preventing the proletariat from recognizing their true collective interests, leading to **false consciousness**.

4. Marxist Economics and Critique of Capitalism

The economic backbone of Marxism, most thoroughly detailed in Marx's magnum opus, *Das Kapital*, centers on the **Labor Theory of Value (LTV)** and the concept of exploitation. According to LTV, the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time required to produce it.

Exploitation occurs because the capitalist purchases the worker's labor power (the ability to work) for a wage that covers only the cost of the worker's subsistence (the cost of reproducing their labor). However, the worker is required to work longer than necessary to produce the value equivalent to their wage. The extra value created during this unpaid time is **surplus value**, which the capitalist appropriates as profit. This extraction is the core mechanism of exploitation and the source of capital accumulation. The system, therefore, is not a fair exchange, but one built on inherent inequality, where the capitalist accumulates wealth directly at the expense of the worker.

Furthermore, Marx analyzed the inherent cyclical crises within capitalism. He argued that the system is plagued by recurring contradictions, such as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (as capitalists replace labor with machinery) and the tendency toward **overproduction** (because workers, paid only subsistence wages, cannot afford to buy back all the goods they produce). These cyclical crises generate increasing instability, ultimately paving the way for revolutionary overthrow.

5. Historical Development and Manifestations

Marxism was initially developed during the 19th century in Western Europe, primarily as a theoretical critique of industrial capitalism. Following Marx's death, the movement fractured into several distinct schools of thought. The first major political application came in the early 20th century, particularly through **Vladimir Lenin's** interpretation (Leninism), which argued that a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries was necessary to lead the proletariat in countries lacking a fully developed industrial base, such as Russia.

The establishment of the **Soviet Union** in 1922 marked the first major state claiming adherence to Marxist principles, albeit heavily modified into Marxist-Leninist doctrines that prioritized state control and centralized planning. Other significant adaptations include **Maoism** in China, which focused on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry rather than the urban proletariat, and various forms of Eurocommunism and critical theory in the West. As noted in the source material, various forms of Marxism, such as communism, rose to power, often falling quickly. The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the shift of China toward market socialism in the late 20th century led to profound re-evaluations of the practical implementation of state-led Marxism.

6. Significance and Impact

The impact of Marxism across academic, political, and social spheres is undeniable. Politically, it fueled labor movements, inspired socialist parties, and led to the establishment of numerous states attempting to implement centralized economic planning. Even where Marxist governments failed or became authoritarian, the theory fundamentally shifted global political discourse regarding economic justice, inequality, and imperialism.

Academically, Marxism remains a central pillar of sociological and political thought. It serves as the foundation for **Conflict Theory** in sociology, which views society as being in constant conflict over resources. It also spawned influential schools of thought like the **Frankfurt School** (Critical Theory), which synthesized Marx's critique of economic structures with sociological analysis of culture and ideology, profoundly influencing fields ranging from media studies to post-colonial theory. Regardless of the fate of specific Marxist states, the analytical tools provided by Marx remain essential for examining global inequalities and the power dynamics inherent in capitalist

systems.

7. Criticisms and Limitations

Marxism has faced extensive criticism, both from liberal, capitalist defenders and from within the socialist movement itself. A primary academic criticism is **economic determinism**--the charge that Marxism oversimplifies the complexity of human motivation and societal structure by reducing all cultural, political, and historical phenomena to economic causation. Critics argue that this neglects the autonomous role of factors like religion, nationalism, or individual agency.

Furthermore, the real-world application of Marxist-Leninist principles in the 20th century faced severe practical and ethical failures. Critics point to the widespread human rights abuses, the lack of political freedoms, and the economic inefficiencies, shortages, and famines that plagued centrally planned economies in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. The concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" often devolved into authoritarian single-party rule, fundamentally failing to deliver the promised stateless, classless society. Economists also challenge the **Labor Theory of Value**, arguing that value is determined by utility and supply/demand rather than solely by embedded labor time.

Further Reading

[Marxism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Karl Marx \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Marx's Philosophy \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Historical Materialism \(Wikipedia\)](#)