

Communism

Marxism

The political roots of Marxism can be traced back to the writings of one man, Karl Marx (1818–83) – or two men, if Marx’s close collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–95) is included. The writings of Marx were based on the materialist conception of history that he developed, and on his theory that human history was largely determined by the ‘history of class struggles’ between ruling and oppressed classes. Marx believed that if the workers were successful in overthrowing capitalism, they would be able to construct a socialist society. This would still be a class-based society but one in which, for the first time in human history, the ruling class would be the majority of the population (i.e. the working class).

From this new form of human society, Marx believed it would eventually be possible to move to an even better one: a communist society. This would be a classless society, and a society of plenty rather than scarcity because it would be based on the economic advances of industrial capitalism. However, Marx did not write much about the political forms that would be adopted under socialism and communism, other than to say that it would be more democratic and less repressive than previous societies, as the majority of the population would be in control.

Marxist theory of stages

Marx believed in the idea of ‘permanent revolution’ or ‘uninterrupted revolution’ – a series of revolutionary stages in which, after one stage had been achieved, the next class struggle would begin almost immediately. He did not believe that ‘progression’ through the stages of society was inevitable. He also argued that, in special circumstances, a relatively backward society could ‘jump’ a stage. However, this would only happen if that state was aided by sympathetic advanced societies. He certainly did not believe that a poor agricultural society could move to socialism on its own, as socialism required an advanced industrial base.

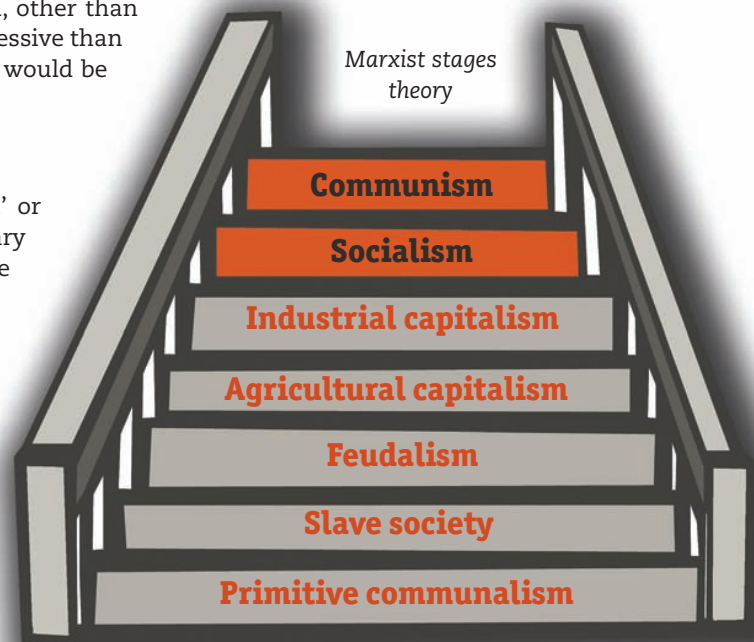
Leninism

Marx did not refer to himself as a ‘Marxist’. He preferred the term ‘communist’, as in the title of the book he and Engels wrote in 1847, *The Communist Manifesto*. However, many of Marx’s followers preferred to call themselves Marxists as well as communists. In this way, they distinguished themselves from other groups that claimed to be communist, and emphasised that Marxism and its methods formed a distinct philosophy.

One such Marxist was the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924). Lenin developed some of Marx’s economic ideas but his most important contribution to Marxist theory related to political organisation. His main ideas, based on the extremely undemocratic political system operating in tsarist Russia, were ‘democratic centralism’ (see page 27) and the need for a small ‘vanguard’ party (a leading group) of fully committed revolutionaries.

Fact

The materialist conception of history was set out by Marx in his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Essentially he argued that the economic structure, based on the relations of production in any society (i.e. which class owns the important parts of an economy, such as land, factories, mines and banks) is the real foundation of any society, and on this are built the legal, political and intellectual superstructures of society. He went on to say that it was social existence that largely determines people’s consciousness or beliefs, rather than the other way round.



However, Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), a leading Russian Marxist, disagreed with Lenin. From 1903 to 1917, Trotsky argued that Lenin’s system would allow an unscrupulous leader to become a dictator over the party. Nevertheless, both Lenin and Trotsky believed in the possibility of a society moving through the revolutionary stages quickly to the socialist phase. This idea was similar to Marx’s idea of ‘permanent revolution’, which argued that, as soon as one stage had been achieved, the struggle for the next would begin almost immediately.

Like Marx, Lenin and Trotsky both believed that Russia could not succeed in carrying through any ‘uninterrupted revolution’ without outside economic and technical assistance. When this assistance failed to materialise, despite their earlier hopes of successful workers’ revolutions in other European states after 1918, Lenin proved to be an extremely pragmatic – or opportunistic – ruler. He was quite prepared to adopt policies that seemed to be in total conflict with communist goals and even with those of the ‘lower’ socialist stage: these policies were seen as adaptations to the prevailing circumstances.

Marxism–Leninism

The term Marxism–Leninism, invented by Stalin, was not used until after Lenin’s death in 1924. It soon came to be used in Stalin’s Soviet Union to refer to what he described as ‘orthodox Marxism’, which increasingly came to mean what Stalin himself had to say about political and economic issues. Essentially, Marxism–Leninism was the ‘official’ ideology of the Soviet state and of all communist parties loyal to Stalin and his successors. Many Marxists – and even members of the Communist Party itself – believed that Stalin’s ideas and practices (such as ‘socialism in one country’ and the purges – see [Chapter 2](#)) were in fact almost total distortions of what Marx and Lenin had said and done.

Stalinism

The term Stalinism is used both by historians and those politically opposed to Stalin to describe the views and practices associated with Stalin and his supporters. Historians and political scientists use it to mean a set of beliefs and a type of rule that are essentially deeply undemocratic and even dictatorial.

Marxist opponents of Stalin and post-Stalin rulers were determined to show that Stalinism was not an adaptation of Marxism but, on the contrary, a qualitative and fundamental aberration from both Leninism and Marxism, and from revolutionary communism in general. In particular, they stress the way in which Stalin and his supporters – and later Mao in China – rejected the goal of **socialist democracy** in favour of a permanent one-party state. They also emphasise how Stalinism in practice and in theory placed the national interests of the Soviet Union above the struggle to achieve world revolution.

Fascism

Attempts by historians to agree on a definition of ‘fascism’ have proved even more difficult. Stanley Payne defined fascism as ‘a form of revolutionary **ultra-nationalism** for national rebirth’. However, this definition says nothing about fascism being a movement committed to the destruction of all independent working-class organisations – especially socialist and communist parties and trade unions. Also absent is any reference to anti-Semitism or racism in general. Other historians stress these aspects as being core elements of fascism.

Fascism is certainly one of the most controversial and misused terms in the history of the modern world. For example, it is often used loosely as a term of

socialist democracy This term refers to a form of democracy advocated by revolutionary socialists, in which government is in the hands of the people, who have the right of immediate recall of elected representatives who break their promises. In this system, all parties that accept the goal of ending capitalist exploitation should be allowed to exist, and the state makes newspaper facilities available to all groups with sufficient support.

ultra-nationalism This is an extremely strong belief in the superiority of one’s own country and a desire to advance that country at the expense of others – including by waging wars.