

## TM3 – Marxism and Neo Marxism

Marxism originates from the work of Karl Marx, a polymath who was a lawyer, philosopher, economist, sociologist, and political speaker. Born in Germany, Marx moved frequently, living in Paris in 1843 and then in London in 1849, where he spent much of his life in poverty. Frederick Engels, born in Prussia (modern-day Belgium/France area), met Marx in Paris in 1844. Engels, who moved around Europe largely due to his atheist beliefs, which were unwelcome in religious Europe at that time, supported Marx both financially and intellectually. Together, they collaborated on several projects, including the seminal work *Das Kapital*.

Marxism, similar to functionalism, is a structural theory that examines the structures and institutions of society and how they shape societal functions and individual behaviours. It is a macro approach, focusing on society as a whole rather than individual experiences and reactions. Like functionalism, Marxism uses the scientific method and a positivist approach to research, following natural science paradigms. However, unlike functionalism, Marxism views society as being in conflict rather than in consensus, particularly highlighting the conflict between classes. Marxists believe there is a constant struggle between societal classes, contrasting with the harmonious view proposed by functionalists. They also believe social change is rapid, violent, and shocking, requiring revolution rather than gradual evolution.

### Key Concepts in Marxism

Marxism introduces key concepts to explain society's structure and dynamics. One crucial concept is historical materialism. Marx refers to material needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, which we must create to survive. "Historical" signifies the struggle between the haves and the have-nots, a class-based conflict inherent in every society. This historical materialism is also economically determined, a concept known as economic determinism. Thus, the economy is seen as the driving force in society, inextricably linked to social change.

Another key concept in Marxism is the economic base and superstructure. Every society comprises these two elements, though they differ in form and interrelationship. The economic base is the material economic infrastructure, which includes the means of production (tools, machinery, technology, land) and the relations of production (the relationship between workers and owners). The superstructure consists of ideological, cultural, and political institutions and practices that arise from the economic base. This includes societal norms, values, and ideologies, which are transferred from social institutions to individuals. Marxism employs a top-down approach, meaning social institutions dictate societal norms and values. According to Marx, the superstructure exists to maintain and legitimize the interests of the ruling class—the bourgeoisie—and ensure their economic dominance.

### Historical Modes of Production

Marx identified several historical modes of production, each with distinct economic relationships:

1. **Primitive Communism:** Characterized by hunter-gatherer communities where people lived communally, sharing resources and labour collectively for survival. There was no private property or class distinctions.
2. **Slave Society:** Developed with agriculture and settled communities, leading to surplus production and the emergence of social classes. Examples include ancient Greece and Rome, where the ruling class exploited slave labour. Citizens had rights and property, while slaves did not.
3. **Feudalism:** Characterized by a hierarchical structure with land-owning nobles and peasant workers. Peasants, bound to the land rather than the landowners, provided agricultural labour in exchange for protection and the right to live on the land. This system saw the emergence of the nobility and serfdom in medieval Europe.
4. **Capitalism:** Emerged during the Industrial Revolution, marked by private ownership of the means of production. The bourgeoisie owned factories and machinery, while the proletariat provided labour, leading to significant wealth disparities and worker exploitation. Workers became alienated from the products they created, having to buy them at marked-up prices, with profits benefiting the owners rather than the workers. This system is characterized by the pursuit of profit and capital accumulation.
5. **Socialism:** According to Marx, the proletariat would eventually recognize their exploitation, leading to a revolution that would overthrow capitalism and transition to socialism. In the socialist stage, the means of production are owned by the government rather than individuals. While the monetary system and labor persist, there is minimal private ownership, with the government controlling most resources. Examples include the USSR, Cuba, and China, where socialism replaced capitalism but did not achieve pure communism.
6. **Communism:** Marx envisioned that socialism would eventually evolve into communism, a classless and moneyless society where resources are collectively owned by the whole of society, and individuals work for the common good rather than personal gain. However, Marx acknowledged that pure communism would be challenging to achieve due to human nature and the ingrained selfishness from capitalist societies. While there have been small-scale examples of communist communes, such as kibbutzim in Israel, implementing such a system on a large, global scale remains uncertain.

## Capitalism and Exploitation

According to Marx, the current societal system is capitalist, characterized by a division between two classes: the bourgeoisie (owners) and the proletariat (workers). This creates a

two-class system of "haves" and "have-nots." Marx identified three distinct features of capitalism:

1. **Alienation:** Workers are separated from the products of their labour, creating a disconnect between the worker and their work.
2. **Concentration of the Means of Production:** The bourgeoisie controls the means of production—factories, raw materials, and technology—selfishly guarding these assets.
3. **Low Wages with High Profits:** The proletariat is paid the minimum necessary to maximize the bourgeoisie's profits, thereby increasing their wealth and power.

Marx addresses the concept of false class consciousness to explain why the proletariat does not act against their exploitation. He argues that the proletariat lives in a state of false class consciousness, meaning they do not recognize their oppression because it is so ingrained in their daily lives. This oppression is not always extreme but rather the routine experience of low wages and alienation, perceived as normal. The bourgeoisie, through the superstructure, propagates the belief that hard work can elevate someone to the ruling class. The proletariat internalizes this belief, failing to recognize the structural barriers preventing such upward mobility. Marx also identifies the role of repressive state apparatuses—such as the military, police, and criminal justice system—in protecting the ruling class's power. While these institutions appear to protect everyone, their primary function is to maintain the bourgeoisie's wealth and power and to prevent the proletariat from revolting and overthrowing the capitalist system.

### **Evaluation of Traditional Marxism**

Marxism faces several criticisms:

1. **Oversimplification:** Marx describes a two-class system of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but modern society is far more complex. For instance, the British Social Attitudes Survey identifies seven different classes within society.
2. **Economic Determinism:** Marx's view that everything in society is driven by economic factors and the capitalist system is considered too narrow, as it overlooks other significant influences on society, such as cultural, social, and political factors.
3. **Outdated Approach:** Marxism is often considered outdated, being a structural approach and a meta-narrative. Postmodernists argue that it no longer applies to contemporary society, which offers more choices and individual autonomy.
4. **Absence of Revolution:** Despite Marx's prediction of an inevitable proletarian revolution, no such revolution has occurred. This raises questions about the accuracy and applicability of Marx's theories in the current context.

## Neo-Marxism

### Structural Neo-Marxism

Structural Neo-Marxism originates from the work of Louis Althusser. Althusser sought to address the criticism that Marx's superstructure and economic base model was overly simplistic, breaking societal systems down too much. He argued that society is more complex than Marx suggested, which is a point many can agree on. Althusser expanded the model from two levels to three: the economic level, the political level, and the ideological level.

1. **Economic Level:** Involves the production of goods and the satisfaction of needs, essentially the means of production.
2. **Political Level:** Encompasses all forms of organization within society, including hierarchies, political systems, and social systems. It also includes the state repressive apparatus, which maintains and protects these structures.
3. **Ideological Level:** Consists of norms and values, and the ideological state apparatus, which socializes individuals within society and shapes their worldview.

To illustrate Althusser's model, Craib introduced the three-story building analogy. According to this analogy, the economic level is the ground floor, representing the shop where production and sales occur, and where money is generated. The political level is the second floor, analogous to the office where contracts, timesheets, shift patterns, orders, and advertising are managed. The ideological level is the top floor, the living quarters, where norms, values, and ideals are lived out.

### Evaluation of Structural Neo-Marxism

While this model aimed to provide a more comprehensive and understandable version of society, it has been critiqued for overcomplicating Marx's original theory. Additionally, this approach might discourage political activism by suggesting that individuals have limited ability to change society, as the structure is seen as fixed. This perspective ignores instances where working-class struggles have successfully changed society. Althusser himself has faced criticism for being elitist, implying that people should accept societal structures without question and simply follow along.

### Humanistic Neo-Marxism

Humanistic Neo-Marxism, developed by Antonio Gramsci, introduces the concept of hegemony, which refers to the dominance of a particular ideology in society, specifically the ruling class ideology, and the acceptance of this ideology by the rest of society. Gramsci aimed to address the criticism that Marxism portrays individuals as passive puppets by showing that there is an element of voluntarism in the current system. He identified three mechanisms that sustain this system: coercion, consent, and the role of organic intellectuals.

1. **Coercion and Consent:** Gramsci discusses how the ruling class maintains power through both coercion and consent. Coercion involves the use of repressive state apparatuses—such as the military, police, and other government agencies—to force compliance with ruling class ideology. Consent involves persuading the working class that the ruling class's ideas and values are legitimate, creating a situation of dual consciousness where the working class recognizes their exploitation but accepts it as the natural order.
2. **Organic Intellectuals:** Gramsci emphasizes the need for organic intellectuals—individuals who give voice to the oppressed and inspire social action. Examples of organic intellectuals throughout history include Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Greta Thunberg. However, these figures have typically focused on specific issues rather than a broad, class-based revolution to overthrow capitalism.

### **Evaluation of Humanistic Neo-Marxism**

The main criticism of humanistic Neo-Marxism is its underemphasis on the coercive political and economic forces that prevent the formation of a counter-hegemonic bloc. The ruling class's power to maintain social inequality and suppress revolutionary movements is significant, and the threat of state violence deters the rise of class-based organic intellectuals who could lead a proletarian revolution. This perspective underestimates the power of the ruling class to maintain its dominance and prevent the working class from achieving significant societal change.