

## **The Enduring Influence of Economic Structures on Political Systems: A Marxist Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The political economy approach, particularly through the lens of Marxist theory, posits a fundamental interconnectedness between economic and political spheres. This paper examines the core tenets of Marx's political economy, emphasising his argument that the mode of production serves as the base upon which the political superstructure is built. It analyses key Marxist concepts such as historical materialism, class struggle, the theory of surplus value, and alienation to elucidate how economic relations shape political institutions, ideologies, and social conflicts. The paper further explores Marx's critique of capitalism, his prediction of its eventual collapse due to inherent contradictions, and his vision of a communist society. While acknowledging critiques of Marxist thought, this research argues for the enduring relevance of his analysis in understanding the profound influence of economic factors on the dynamics of political systems across various historical periods and in the contemporary global landscape.

**Key Words :** Political Economy, Marxism, Historical Materialism, Class Struggle, Surplus Value, Alienation, Capitalism, Communism, Mode of Production, Political Superstructure

### **INTRODUCTION**

The study of political phenomena has traditionally encompassed various approaches, each offering unique insights into the complexities of decision-making, governance, individual rights, and the relationship between individuals and the state. Among these, the political economy approach distinguishes itself by focusing on the intricate interplay between economics and political science, recognising that these domains are not mutually exclusive but rather deeply intertwined (Gaub, 2013). While traditional economics often concentrated on production, distribution, exchange, revenue, and expenditure, its evolution now encompasses the broader impact of these processes on human behaviour. Political economy, building upon this expanded understanding, seeks to analyse the factors that contribute to the development of economically viable and politically workable theories, providing a framework for

policymakers to integrate economic realities into political decision-making for the collective welfare (Volkov, 1985).

The term "political economy" itself has its roots in Greek, combining "politikos" (pertaining to the state and society) with "oikonomia" (the management of household economy, derived from "oikos" meaning "house" and "nomos" meaning "law"). At its core, political economy can be defined as "a science which studies the social relations that evolve between people in the process of production, distribution, exchange and consumption of the material benefits" (Volkov, 1985, p. 275). It extends beyond this to examine the reciprocal influence between economic factors and the political system, including public attitudes. Proponents of this approach argue that the prevailing modes of production are fundamental in shaping the social structures within a society, underscoring the necessity of analysing economic factors to understand and maintain a stable political system. Societal conflicts, they contend, often stem from the economic demands

and disparities among different groups. Only by addressing these economic needs and inequalities can a political system hope to achieve stability and legitimacy (Gaub, 2013).

The historical development of political economy saw various schools of thought emerge. Mercantilism, an early approach, focused on economic factors but primarily served the interests of the burgeoning bourgeoisie. This was later challenged by what Marxists termed the “*vulgar bourgeois political economy*,” which purported to defend the interests of the petty bourgeoisie, emphasising the exploitation of smaller businesses by larger corporations (Volkov, 1985). However, it was Karl Marx, along with Friedrich Engels, who fundamentally revolutionised political economy, offering a critical and transformative perspective that continues to resonate in social and political thought.

### **Marx’s Revolutionary Perspective on Political Economy:**

Karl Marx’s contribution to political economy was profound and far-reaching. He critiqued the capitalist system, arguing that private property and genuine democracy were incompatible and highlighting the “commodification” of all aspects of society (Krieger, 2014). As a key figure in the development of “*scientific communism*,” Marx sought to uncover the material forces driving social development, with his concepts of “*surplus value*” and “*dialectical materialism*” becoming cornerstones of his analysis. Marx and Engels posited that the economic system forms the base of society, with the political superstructure rising above it. They argued that the interaction between the forces of production (technology, resources) and the relations of production (social organisation of labour, ownership) constitutes the hidden foundation of historical development in any society, including bourgeois society (Volkov, 1985).

Marx’s lifelong inquiry into political economy was deeply rooted in his observations of the oppressive conditions faced by the working class under capitalism. He witnessed the stark contrast between the increasing wealth of speculators and the growing poverty, malnutrition, and insecurity of the proletariat. In his seminal work, *Capital* (1867), Marx famously described capital as entering the world “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt,” highlighting the exploitative nature he perceived at the heart of capitalist accumulation (Krieger, 2014, p. 54). He believed that

“true democracy” could only be achieved when the working class, the proletariat, gained political power. While acknowledging capitalism’s creation of immense productive forces, Marx argued that the system contained the seeds of its own destruction, citing overproduction leading to crises as an inherent flaw. For Marx, communism was synonymous with achieving “political democracy” through the unification of workers across national boundaries—“The Workingmen have no country” and the formation of a broad alliance with peasants and the urban middle class to overthrow capitalism (Krieger, 2014, p. 56).

Marx’s theory of political economy was fundamentally shaped by the oppressive conditions he observed within the working class. Amidst the enrichment of a few, the majority suffered from poverty, inadequate nutrition, and job insecurity. Marx and Engels viewed history as a continuous struggle between antagonistic classes, the rich and the poor, a conflict stemming from the mode of production where one class gains ownership and control over the means of social production, compelling the other to work under dictated terms (Gaub, 2013). This conflict, according to Marx, reaches its zenith under capitalism, resolvable only through a revolutionary overthrow that places all means of social production under social ownership and control, enforcing universal labour and ensuring the full development of productive forces (Gaub, 2013).

His theory serves as an economic critique of the bourgeoisie and capitalist society. Marx argued that workers experience alienation from their labour and feel detached because they are excluded from the ownership and control of the production process. The means of production are owned by the bourgeoisie, who accumulate wealth at the expense of the proletariat. Marx contended that class struggle has been a constant throughout history, with one class invariably exploiting another, whether it be slaves in ancient Rome, serfs in the Middle Ages, or the proletariat in modern bourgeois society. This class antagonism persists because the system of production is not organised for the collective good. In a capitalist system, production is monopolised by a few, leading to the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Marx believed that a revolution was inevitable, through which the proletariat would liberate themselves and become masters of their own destiny. His political economy approach was grounded in a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social

transformation, emphasising facts over abstract principles.

Marx emphasised the role of class struggle as the engine of systemic economic change, using economic and socio-political inquiry to trace the development of capitalism. He argued that while the proletariat is responsible for producing highly productive, mechanised, and socialised production, they do not receive the commensurate rewards. The bourgeoisie appropriates the profit, leading to a fundamental contradiction between the two classes. For Marx, society is not merely an aggregation of individuals but a complex web of interrelations, with all societal features ultimately stemming from economic activities. Exploitation is the defining characteristic that distinguishes social classes, as the control of the means of production by one class inevitably leads to inequality, forcing workers into exploitative labour relationships with the bourgeoisie. Unlike pre-capitalist societies, where labour was often coerced physically, capitalist exploitation is more subtle but equally pervasive. Exploitation is inherent because the labourer's "labour power" is perishable; they must work to earn a living and are thus subject to exploitation in the process. The bourgeoisie, owning the means of production, are positioned to buy labour at their own will and price, making them a profit-seeking class, while the prices of the goods produced by the workers are dictated by market forces.

In *Das Kapital*, Marx meticulously scrutinised the market economy, asserting that human beings are inherently productive and add value through their labour. However, unequal exchanges within society lead to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few. The labourer creates value in a commodity, but the profit accrues to the capitalist, not the worker. This widening gap intensifies the contradictions within society, ultimately leading to the collapse of the capitalist system.

The class struggle, according to Marx, gradually intensifies. As the proletariat becomes aware of their exploitation and loss, they will rise in revolt, fighting for emancipation and an end to institutionalised violence. Workers are encouraged to struggle collectively, recognising that capitalism is not an immutable reality. They will come to understand that their interests are fundamentally opposed to those of their employers, the bourgeoisie. The state, in this analysis, is viewed as an instrument of exploitation, serving the interests of the bourgeoisie, who have created state apparatuses like the police, judiciary, and law as a facade to maintain their

dominance.

### **Core Concepts in Marxist Political Economy:**

Several key concepts underpin Marx's analysis of political economy: **Historical Materialism:** This is the foundational principle that material conditions, particularly the mode of production, determine the social, political, and intellectual life processes in general (Misra, 2012). Marx argued that history progresses through different modes of production, each characterised by specific class relations and inherent contradictions that eventually lead to their transformation. The "total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (Appadorai, 2017, p. 117). **Class Struggle:** Marx viewed history as a series of struggles between different social classes with conflicting economic interests. In capitalist society, the primary struggle is between the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (wage labourers who must sell their labour power to survive). This antagonism arises from the exploitative nature of the capitalist mode of production. **Theory of Surplus Value:** This is a central concept in Marx's critique of capitalism. He argued that the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labour time required to produce it. Workers create more value during their working day than they receive in wages. This difference, the "surplus value," is appropriated by the capitalist as profit, representing unpaid labour and the essence of capitalist exploitation (Axford *et al.*, 2002).

Marx described the alienation of workers under capitalism in several dimensions: alienation from the product of their labour (which they do not own), from the process of labour (which is often monotonous and controlled), from their fellow workers (due to competition), and from their human potential (as labour becomes a means of mere survival rather than self-expression) (Axford *et al.*, 2002). He believed that in a system where "ownership is divorced from the act of production and objects are produced for profit in distant markets; those engaged in production neither flourish nor enhance their capacities" (Axford *et al.*, 2002, p. 244).

Marx argued that the modern state, far from being a neutral arbiter, is a tool of the bourgeoisie, designed to maintain the existing economic order and suppress any long-term rebellion by the working class. While this

suppression may last for extended periods, the inherent contradictions within capitalism would ultimately lead to a proletarian revolution. For Marx, material conditions were the primary drivers of social change, with the economic base shaping the political and ideological superstructure. “Economic determinism,” in this context, encompasses not only the processes of production, distribution, and exchange but also how human beings respond to the material challenges of their existence (Misra, 2012). Even institutions like the family, according to Marx, are influenced by the economic system, serving to safeguard and perpetuate property rights. This is why he advocated for the elimination of private property and its placement under communal ownership in a classless and stateless society, believing that private property is the root cause of social division.

### **The Inevitability of Revolution and the Vision of Communism:**

Marx’s analysis led him to conclude that the inherent contradictions within capitalism, such as overproduction, cyclical crises, and the increasing immiseration of the proletariat, would inevitably lead to its downfall. The theory of surplus value explains how profit represents the surplus value extracted from labour power, while the tendency towards a declining rate of profit and periodic crises are seen as intrinsic flaws of the capitalist system (Axford *et al.*, 2002). The bourgeoisie’s appropriation of surplus value, created by the labour of the proletariat, leads to a growing disparity that fuels social contradictions.

As the proletariat becomes increasingly aware of their exploitation, they would develop class consciousness and rise in revolt, seeking emancipation and an end to all forms of institutionalised violence. Marx and Engels encouraged workers to unite and recognise their shared interests, which were fundamentally opposed to those of the bourgeoisie. They viewed the state as an instrument of exploitation, serving the ruling class. The revolution would ultimately lead to the proletariat seizing the means of production and placing them under the control of society as a whole, to be utilised for the welfare of all. Engels envisioned a future communist society where the state, having served its purpose in maintaining class rule, would “be banished the whole State-machine to a place which will then be the most proper one for it – the museum of antiquities – side by side with the spinning wheel and the bronze axe” (Appadorai, 2017, p. 118).

In this post-revolutionary society, guided by the

principle of “from each according to his capacity, to each according to his work,” private property would be abolished, and the means of production would be collectively owned. The state, as an instrument of class oppression, would gradually wither away as social divisions based on economic inequality disappeared. Marx’s approach did not view the political system as an autonomous entity but rather as a superstructure built upon the economic base. Changes in the mode of production (the economic base) would inevitably lead to corresponding changes in the political system and other aspects of the superstructure (Gauba, 2013).

### **Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of Marxist Political Economy**

Through his “scientific socialism,” Marx illuminated the crucial role that economic factors play in shaping any society. While his theories have been subject to extensive debate and critique, the fundamental insight that economic relations are powerful determinants of social and political structures remains highly influential. The lack of harmony in economic relationships can undoubtedly lead to social discord, frustration, and ultimately, upheaval, as basic human needs go unmet. The political economy approach, as articulated by Marx, effectively linked economics with politics and philosophy. His theories of surplus value and alienation continue to highlight the potential for inherent conflict between the “haves” and the “have-nots” within capitalist systems. The concept of alienation underscores how labour can become dehumanising, leading workers to feel detached from the products they create. Marx viewed capitalism as a significant impediment to the formation of a truly humane society, emphasising how economic factors shape social relations, individual interactions, and societal institutions. His contention that the economic structure, encompassing labour, the forces of production, and the relations of production, forms the real basis of society suggests that fundamental changes in this base are necessary for meaningful societal transformation. Marx viewed communism not as a mere doctrine but as a dynamic movement aimed at changing the ownership of the means of production, firmly believing in the centrality of property relations in social revolutions (Krieger, 2014). He argued that only through a transformation of the mode of production could the ideal of “true democracy,” grounded in equality, be achieved. While recognising the proletariat as a revolutionary class, he stressed the need

for conscious and disciplined leadership to organise and mobilise workers. The global spread of capitalism, as Marx and Engels anticipated, has indeed led to widespread wage labour and the inherent destabilising forces within its mode of production (Krieger, 2014). Marx's emphasis on the determining role of material production in the development of social, political, religious, and cultural systems underscores his belief that history is fundamentally shaped by the interplay of economic factors and the value created by labour.

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