

COMMUNISM AND COMMUNISM IN CHINA (2009)

The experience of modern China was dramatically altered by the establishment in 1921 of the Chinese Communist Party. The initial membership of the Party was little more than a handful of Beijing University professors and librarians, but today the Party numbers over 65,000,000 members and it has controlled China for over half a century. It is impossible to understand modern China without having a clear picture of what “communism” means and the way in which European communism was adapted in China between 1921 and 1949, the year that the Chinese Communist Revolution finally prevailed. This reading will present you with a simple portrait of the origins of communist ideology worldwide, and the manner in which communism was tailored to suit the needs of its Chinese advocates.

There are a number of key names and terms that you will need to be familiar with:

Karl Marx (1818-1883), the founder (along with Frederick Engels) of **Marxism**, the “classical” form of communism.

Vladimir Ilyitch Lenin (original surname Ulyanov, 1870-1924), leader of the Russian Revolution who adapted Marx’s ideas to suit the needs of his revolution and his goal of world revolution; his system is called **Leninism**.

Mao Zedong (1893-1976), leader of the Chinese Communist Revolution who adapted **Marxism-Leninism** to suit Chinese circumstances in his ideology of **Maoism**.

Other important terms that you will encounter below include:

dialectic – a term describing the “motion” of history for Marx

materialism – the theory that all existence can be reduced to material components

consciousness – for Marx, a person’s experientially-derived perspective on the world

class – for Marx, a social group sharing common economic and political constraints

bourgeoisie – the capitalist social class dominant in 19th century Europe

proletariat – the class of factory workers created by the Industrial Revolution

What is Communism?

Communism is a highly optimistic nineteenth century European political theory. When Marx first published his theory it offered the most comprehensive portrait of the past ever developed and, on the basis of that portrait, predicted dramatic changes coming in the future – changes that would benefit all but the wealthiest layer of European society and would, Marx believed, lead to a virtually perfect and lasting world order.

When communism was adopted as a revolutionary ideology by leaders first in Russia and then in China and elsewhere, Marx's ideas were reworked to serve the interest of the governing leadership groups of those countries. Because Marxism envisioned both a revolutionary stage and an adjustment period when government would have extraordinary dictatorial powers, these leadership groups were able to manipulate Marx's ideas to strengthen their powers in arbitrary ways – communist ideas became powerful tools for sustaining totalitarian control by a ruling elite. When people refer to communism today, they usually mean the oppressive regimes that have exploited Marx's ideas, rather than the ideas themselves.

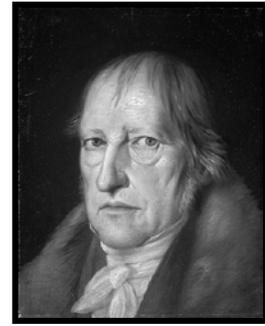
We will have ample opportunity in this course to see the way in which communism has been employed as an oppressive force in China since 1949. This reading is intended to help you understand in a little more depth the original nature of Marx's communism and how the nature of communism changed as it was adapted to the needs of the Soviet government by Lenin, and to the needs of the Chinese party by Mao Zedong. *Chinese communism is based upon a three-stage progression of communist ideas from Marx to Lenin to Mao. To understand Maoism and the distinctiveness of Chinese communism, you need to understand the European communism from which it evolved.*

Marxism

Marx was a highly educated man and he drew his ideas from many sources. Two of these sources were most important: one was the ideas of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), and the other was a group of political movements, known as "socialism," that spread over Western Europe in the wake of the French Revolution.

Hegel was a brilliant thinker who lived in Prussia, a forerunner state of modern Germany. Hegel was an academic philosopher at a time when academics could be superstars. In the early 19th century, when Marx was a young man, hundreds of students crowded Hegel's classes at the University of Berlin to hear his exciting new ideas. Hegel was famous for mumbling inaudibly during his lectures and writing books in prose that no one could understand. This enhanced his influence.

Other philosophers of Hegel's era analyzed human powers of Reason and tried to explain how our rational minds were able to gain knowledge about the chaotic world of experience. These thinkers generally saw the mind's powers as something that all people had possessed equally since human beings had first been placed upon the earth. But Hegel believed the human mind had *evolved* through history, and his philosophy traced the stages of that evolution in order to predict the form that the human spirit would take when it reached the perfect final form that he felt God had destined for man. (On close reading of Hegel's books, we can see that this ideal person was actually Hegel.)



Hegel had many ideas, but two in particular influenced Marx:

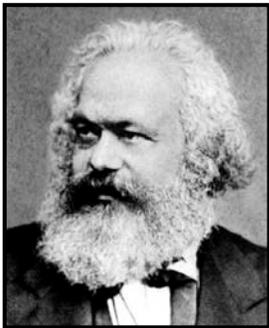
- 1) In describing the way in which the human mind had evolved from primitive to civilized stages in history, Hegel claimed that **the process of creative labor was the engine that nurtured the growth of increasingly complex structures of “consciousness,” or mental perspectives on the world.** That is, the sophisticated structures of understanding that we possess as individuals and that the species now possesses as a whole have been created through millennia of our creative interaction with the world around us; they were not originally present in the species.

- 2) If we view the history of the human world as the dynamic of this growth of “consciousness” through labor, then we can see that historical evolution progresses according to certain laws. At each stage of history, an original balance of human consciousness comes gradually to be challenged by a reactive set of contradictory forces. These sets of intellectual forces clash with increasing tension until, in a violent process, an entirely new type of human consciousness emerges that moves history to a new stage. **The structure of this process – balance; counter-force; explosive creation of new balance – Hegel called a *dialectic*** (the three stages of this dynamic are usually referred to by these special terms: *thesis* / *antithesis* / *synthesis*). For Hegel, the motion of human history was “dialectical.”

Hegel's project was to write a history of the human mind. He pictured history as a struggle of minds, of ideas, with each historical era most essentially viewed as a unique array of ideas, sentiments, arts, and culture. Because Hegel believed that ideas were what counted most and that history was a collision of ideas progressing towards a divine Ideal, he is usually called an *idealist* philosopher.

Marx was deeply influenced by Hegel but said that Hegel had made a fundamental error. Hegel had believed that the key to human history was the changing mind, but Marx pointed to Hegel's own view that our "consciousness" is the product of labor in the world. For Marx, the material world is what comes first – **matter comes before mind**. It is only by interacting with the material world through labor that the human mind arises and evolves. The root theory of Marx's communism (Marxism) is that **productive labor is the source of consciousness – of our understanding of the world and of ourselves**. Because Marx saw human ideas as simply reflections of humanity's encounter with the material environment, he called himself a *materialist*.

Using the idea that the material environment in which labor is undertaken determines the shape of the mind, Marx adapted Hegel's view of the dynamic of historical progression. He called his version of history "**dialectical materialism**" (a term that only a few years ago was basic to many forms of historical and social research).



Unlike Hegel, Marx was not simply a philosopher. During his youth, all Europe was caught up in the dramatic political aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era of conquest. The unsettled character of early 19th century Europe politicized Marx's generation much as the events of the 1960s politicized a much later generation, and Marx grew up at a time when many young people were captivated by new ways of thinking called "socialism." **Socialism** refers to a wide variety of political ideologies which tend to share certain characteristics. These include beliefs that the best societies are those that privilege collective decision making and action over uncoordinated decision making by individuals, that collective ownership of social goods is superior to private ownership, and that in a healthy society, its members care for one another without coercion. Socialisms generally aspire to create a broad community of people in which values and norms of behavior are held by consensus. One strong point of socialistic movements is the impulse to try and create a society that represents and serves all its members equally; one weak point is that the demand for consensus – overwhelming agreement among society's members – often moves from a "democratic" stage which allows majority rule, to a coercive stage where the majority demands value and action conformity of all its members.

Marx viewed himself as a socialist and a political activist, but he was skeptical about the fuzzy and romantic ideas of many of the socialisms of his day. His goal was to employ Hegel's models of mankind and history to create a new "scientific socialism,"

which could form the practical basis for world revolution and the creation of an ideal world community.

Marx wrote many books and essays, but aspects of his thought relevant here can be summarized through a few key concepts:

Concepts of labor

Productive Labor. Like Hegel, Marx had a very romantic notion of creative labor. He pictured people engaged in labor as artists and celebrated the way in which labor was the medium for self-realization. His ideal society was one where every person was free to choose his or her own form of labor and was free to guide him or herself in work.

Alienated Labor. Marx believed that when people are not free to design their own labor and when their time and work are devoted to the service of another, who takes from them the products of their labor, their labor no longer serves to nurture their minds. Marx called this “alienated labor,” and claimed that such labor stunted human growth.

The Means of Production. Marx believed that because labor is the source of human consciousness and identity, throughout history the way that people have most effectively exercised control over one another has been through control over the tools people need to labor. If one group of people can possess the land, the plows, the factories, and so forth, that are needed to labor productively, then that group has power not only over the livelihood of all others, but over the shape of others’ minds and identities.

Marx wrote his mature works in the England of the Industrial Revolution, when factory owners made great fortunes and built great cultural monuments through an unchecked exploitation of grossly overworked and underpaid workers, whose lives and characters seemed to Marx debased. Marx generalized on the social inequities he saw around him and pictured all history as a process through which a minority of people, by monopolizing the economic tools of society, coerced and debased a powerless minority.

Concepts of class

Social Classes. Because Marx saw all societies as divided between those who controlled the means of production and those who did not, he pictured all societies in terms of classes of people. Those who have the means to determine their own labor are not only free and prosperous – they have the means to shape their own “consciousness”: their minds grew

as their creative labor progresses, though ultimately even the consciousness of the master class will atrophy as its members increasingly give up productive labor altogether. Those who do not have such liberty engage only in alienated labor. Their consciousness stagnates. So distant do the members of different classes grow over time, that Marx viewed social classes almost as different species.

Class Consciousness. Because people are differentiated according to the types of labor they can undertake and the conditions of that labor, they are equally differentiated into groups with similar structures of consciousness. Marx felt it was obvious that members of distinct social classes in Europe possessed very different world views and ways of being human, and that communication between members of different classes was hard. He believed this was the product of their different labor histories. He also believed that people within a single social class *share* similar perspectives and understandings because they share labor backgrounds.

Types of Classes. In his account of history, Marx labeled a wide variety of classes: slaves, peasants (farmers who did not own their land), artisans, merchants, and aristocrats were classes with long histories. Two classes that he viewed as more recent products of history's dialectic were the **bourgeoisie** (the city-based merchant class of post-medieval Europe) and the **proletariat** (the class of factory workers produced by the Industrial Revolution). These two most modern classes were, for Marx, the key to the future.

Concepts of history

Historical Stages. Marx's model of history pictures a succession of societies, each based on the increasing tension between contending social classes that results in a revolution, moving history dialectically to a new stage. In Marx's account:

An original, classless, stone age, **Primitive Communism**, which has no specialized means of production, develops into an agricultural **Slave Society**, in which a small master class, led by a powerful king, controls the labor of a slave class. As the master class becomes wealthier, non-royal segments of that class compete with the royalty for control of the means of production. This eventually produces a revolt against autocratic monarchical power by a new "aristocratic" class, which becomes the dominant class of **Feudal Society**, with whom kings must share power. In time, the structures of feudal society lead to spreading economic growth, nodes of urban economic activity, and technological breakthroughs for

new forms of labor. These conditions enlarge and empower the urban “merchant class,” whose interests challenge the aristocracy. Eventually this new class, the “bourgeoisie,” revolt and establish the structures of **Capitalist Society**.

Communist Society. Marx believed that the end of the historical dialectic was near. In his view, the bourgeois revolutions in 18th and 19th century Europe, which overthrew aristocratic privilege, had also created a very different type of new class – the proletariat – by consolidating power in the hands of those who controlled capital concentrations and means to deploy technologically advanced methods of production (factories). Because the proletariat’s needs were so dramatically in conflict with those of their capitalist, bourgeois oppressors, Marx believed that the proletariat would inevitably be the source of the next dialectical revolution. However, he saw the coming proletarian revolution as unique for two reasons:

- 1) The proletariat would revolt as a majority class.
- 2) The background labor history of the factory-working proletariat would have molded them into a unified class in which each member recognized that all members of the class shared interests and understanding in common – this would be the first ruling class whose members saw themselves as *members of a group* first and as individuals only incidentally. Thus the proletariat would have unique *class solidarity*.

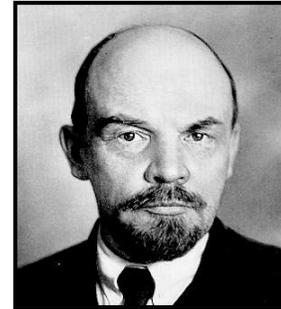
Under these conditions, after a brief post-revolutionary generation when the proletarian class would have to serve as the “dictator” of the minority classes (peasants or farmers, bourgeoisie, etc.), the proletariat would become the *only* social class, characterized by shared ownership of the means of production and high valuation of creative labor for the common good. History would come to an end in a perpetual harmony of shared creativity.

Marx anticipated that his communist future would emerge first in those countries where the capitalist system had generated the largest proletarian classes and the starkest conflict between the interests of capitalist (bourgeois) owners and proletarian workers. For Marx, that meant England and Germany. Marx never anticipated early communist revolutions in places like Russia – a very backward place during Marx’s lifetime – or China. Those countries, in Marx’s view, were still in the feudal stage of society. \There existed virtually no bourgeois class in these countries, much less a proletariat, and therefore no communist class consciousness could emerge there. Revolution in those

countries, according to Marx's model, would have to begin with the revolt of a new bourgeoisie against the aristocracy. Only then could a proletarian class grow from a long process of industrialization. Without factories forcing masses of people together into the degradation of alienated labor, there was no way for the consciousness of the proletarian revolution to arise.

Leninism

Marx died without seeing a communist revolution, but the first of these came only 34 years after his death, and in a place where he would not have allowed that a proletarian revolution was possible. In 1917, V. I. Lenin led an uprising in Russia that toppled a newly established liberal government, led by members of Russia's small capitalist class, which had itself ousted the aristocratic government of the Czar only months earlier that same year.



Lenin had devoted his entire life to the overthrow of the Czarist government, and had for many years lived as an exile in Western Europe. Initially, his revolutionary aims had not been guided by Marxism, but after the turn of the century he adopted Marx's model and became a leading theorist of European Marxism.

Lenin's original contributions to Marxism stem from one key problem that he faced as a Russian Marxist: Classical Marxism held that a proletarian revolution could occur *only* in an advanced industrialized state where the bourgeois class had long held power – how could Marxism apply to Lenin's Russia? Lenin responded to this with two key theories, both of which became central to the Chinese communist revolution.

Leninist theories

Party Consciousness. Russia possessed only tiny classes of factory owners and factory workers. Russia lacked the social structures that could generate proletarian consciousness – there was no place for the key ingredient of revolution to come from. In response, Lenin claimed that Marx was not entirely correct, *productive labor was not the only source of consciousness*. Consciousness could also be instilled by *education* – a person could adopt a class world view through a process of persuasion and understanding. Lenin pointed out that all revolutions are led by some members of a class whose consciousness is more advanced than others. After the revolution, the vanguard simply educates those whose consciousness is less developed. Marx himself had anticipated this in his

idea of a post-revolutionary “dictatorship of the proletariat,” during which the new ruling majority class would “re-educate” the members of the other classes to mold them into the emerging communist society. Carrying this one step further, Lenin said that what Russia needed was a “vanguard political party” that would disseminate Marx’s ideas and educate both the small, backward proletariat in Russia and its natural allies in society (such as urban shop workers, street peddlers, beggars, and so forth). **The vanguard Communist Party could serve as the source of class consciousness for the revolution.** This would allow almost *any* country to have a communist revolution.

Imperialism and Revolution. Lenin also identified a second agent that could hasten the spread of revolutionary consciousness: **Imperialism.** Throughout the 19th century, European countries had taken possession of non-industrialized regions of the world and transplanted to these African, Asian, and American societies features of European bourgeois culture and a small quantity of industrial enterprise. Lenin claimed that when the seeds of capitalism were sown into “feudal” foreign environments through a process of coercion and conquest, they spontaneously generated two new types of conflict. First, a new class of native capitalists would emerge and challenge the native “aristocratic” class, and second, anti-imperialist class conflict between alien factory owners and exploited workers would make the new proletarian class “revolutionary” from its very beginnings. Under these conditions the entire process of history would be radically accelerated. The emerging native bourgeoisie, becoming aware of earlier European examples, would soon seek to take control of power in the state by overthrowing the old elite class. And then, as society was in a state of general disruption, a vanguard Communist Party could seize the moment to energize a small but revolutionary proletariat and “*piggyback*” a communist revolution on the bourgeois revolution. The result would be a lightning-fast succession from feudal to bourgeois to communist state. *This is, in fact, very close to what happened in Russia in 1917.*

Lenin’s theories were supported by the example of the Russian Revolution and as premier of the Soviet Union until his death in 1924, Lenin became the leader of the world communist movement. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Communist Party, claiming the powers appropriate to the period of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” engineered an economic transformation of Russian society and the Soviet economy by means of emergency measures, which sometimes had positive economic results, but involved such measures as the sweeping persecution of political opponents, the murder of landowners and wealthy farmers, and the starvation of millions of recalcitrant peasants.

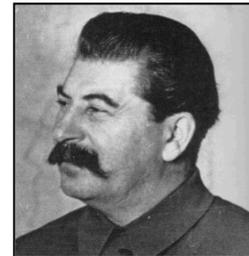
Despite the harshness of these policies, the overall success of the Soviet Union's economic rise gave Lenin's revisions of Marxism unparalleled influence throughout the world, and in many countries, particularly those which had been subject to the pressures of imperialism, communism was increasingly referred to as Marxism-Leninism.

Maoism

When the Chinese Communist Party (or CCP) was established in Beijing in 1921, the Party was devoted to the principles of Marxism-Leninism. Party doctrine held that China, long subject to imperialist coercion, had actually already been through its bourgeois revolution in 1911, and that what was needed now was to build a strong Party to educate China's tiny proletariat. If this were done, China could look forward to a rapid communist revolution because, as Lenin had made clear, its imperialist history made its proletariat innately radical and a vanguard Party could immeasurably accelerate the spread of revolutionary proletarian consciousness.

The founders of the CCP looked to Moscow for guidance, as did all other communist movements worldwide. During its early years, it received assistance from Moscow's organ of world revolution: the Communist International, or "Comintern." The Comintern sent advisors to China to help the Party. On issues of particular importance, first Lenin and then his successor Josef Stalin shaped the directives that were sent to the CCP leadership. Communism was a stridently anti-nationalistic ideology. It believed that humanity was shared by similar classes, not those of similar ethnic backgrounds. The CCP leaders assumed that their proletarian advisors in the Comintern cared deeply about their Chinese comrades. They followed orders.

But Stalin's warm support of the Chinese communists should not be misunderstood as altruistic. Stalin was not a sentimental man (his name, Stalin, means "Man-of-Steel" – it was his own invention: he was born Josef Dzhugashvili); he used the CCP entirely to forward Soviet foreign policy aims in China. He clearly believed that no proletarian revolution was possible in China, and so he



hoped to manipulate the CCP to improve his standing with the Nationalist government which, during the 1920s, was finally capturing effective power in China. At a later point, we will explore the ways in which Moscow's policy undercut the CCP. Here, it is sufficient to say that in 1927, as a result of Stalin's guidance, the CCP was all but exterminated by the Nationalists in a surprise coup. Those communist leaders who were not killed outright had to flee their base territories in China's cities, where they had been

trying to mobilize factory workers. The safe haven where the Chinese communist leaders fled in 1927 was the mountain fastnesses of the province of Jiangxi.

One member of the leadership was already based in Jiangxi, having convinced the Party to allow him to go there to test out a new theory about how communism should be adapted to the Chinese case. That leader was Mao Zedong, and the theory he was testing eventually became the most basic distinctive feature of Chinese communism: the theory of the **Revolutionary Peasantry**.



Mao Zedong, who had been among the founders of the CCP, was one of the few Party members willing to address a central fact about China's prospects for revolution: in a land of a half-billion people, the proletarian class probably numbered no more than a million and was concentrated in only one or two eastern cities. There was no realistic prospect that such a class could gain control over China – Leninism was simply inadequate for China.

Mao proposed an alternative model of a distinctively Chinese form of communist revolution. Mao's idea was that the peasant class in China had for so many centuries endured the oppression of a parasitic landlord class, and possessed such a rich store of hatred and anger towards the wealthy landowners of China, that it was a potentially revolutionary class. (Mao was himself from a wealthy peasant family.) Mao's analysis of China's class structure did not conform to Marx's model of history, which was based on European precedents. For Mao, the two contending classes whose conflict would give birth to the next stage of history were not the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, they were **the peasant and landlord classes**. Mao believed the Party should be serving as the vanguard of a revolutionary peasantry, and should be instilling revolutionary consciousness not in the minds of city factory workers, but in the minds of rural peasants.

Prior to 1927, the CCP had viewed Mao as an eccentric among its founders. Marx and Lenin had said that the peasants, who worked individually rather than collectively in factories, were invariably a reactionary class which could never be politically mobilized prior to a revolution. Mao's arguments that the Chinese peasant was a uniquely "blank slate" upon which the outline of revolutionary consciousness could be inscribed with relative ease seemed idealistic and naive to the other founders of the Party. However, Mao had been allowed to experiment with his theories and was dispatched by the Party to the remote hinterlands of Jiangxi to see whether he could mobilize the peasantry.

Once in Jiangxi, Mao's method for this was to recruit village peasants into the Party and its military corps until he had sufficient manpower to coerce local landlords –

generally wealthy families who owned vast tracts of land that they leased to peasants for generations on cruel terms – into giving up ownership of their lands to the peasants who actually farmed the fields. This process of seizing the lands of the idle landlords and giving it to the peasants was called **land reform**. It was through his program of land reform – from which peasants benefited directly – that Mao wished to recruit peasant support and build a revolutionary peasant army that would ultimately overthrow the oppressive national “landlord” governments of the Nationalists and the local warlords.

Mao’s efforts in Jiangxi had not been particularly successful. It was not until later that he mastered the art of conducting land reform campaigns that would yield solid peasant support for the Party. But when the other leaders of the CCP were forced to flee to Mao’s base territory in 1927, Mao’s tactics and his charismatic personality were far more forcefully impressed upon the Party membership than had been the case before.

This reading will not trace the events that ultimately led to the triumph of Mao’s vision and his ascent to CCP leadership – we will read about that later. But in the end, Mao Zedong did prevail, Soviet Leninist advisors returned to Russia, and the communist revolution that proceeded under Mao’s guidance came to possess the distinctive character of a “communist peasant revolution,” which for Marx would have been a contradiction in terms. It is this aspect of Chinese communist ideology and practice that distinguishes it from Marxism-Leninism, and this is why Chinese communist ideology is called “**Maoist.**”