

# Today's ISMS

COMMUNISM  
FASCISM  
CAPITALISM  
SOCIALISM

**eighth  
edition**

William Ebenstein  
Edwin Fogelman

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Capitalism  
Socialism

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# Preface

This eighth edition is dedicated to the original author of *Today's Isms*, William Ebenstein. Untimely death prevented Bill from preparing the new edition himself.

In revising the text I have deleted sections that are no longer topical, updated the factual information, and added a number of new topics, including sections on Chinese communism, Eurocommunism, Spain after Franco, and detente. The basic structure of previous editions has been retained, although the chapters have been reorganized for greater coherence. I have tried to preserve the direct style, specific examples, and broad perspective that have marked the book from the beginning.

During the quarter century since *Today's Isms* first appeared profound changes have taken place within and among the nations of the world. The mid 1950s were a time of economic expansion and international tension; the late 1970s are a time of economic uncertainty and increased international interdependence. The clear-cut confrontations of the Cold War years have given way to a more complex world with a number of competing and diverse centers of power. The growing

strength of Western Europe and Japan and the emergence as major international forces of China and the OPEC countries have greatly altered the issues confronting us as well as the context in which these issues must be settled. In some ways it is a safer world, although the nuclear arms race, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the instabilities of the international economy pose clear new dangers.

Despite these far-reaching changes, the alternatives discussed in this book—not simply of ideologies but of differing ways of life—are no less pertinent today than they were 25 years ago. Although circumstances and policies have changed, the contrasting ideals and practices of communism, fascism, capitalism, and socialism still dominate our world. Predictions of an end to ideologies and of an impending convergence between opposing systems have proved somewhat premature. Judgments and choices among alternative ideologies and societies must still be made. For this reason clarification of what is at issue among these alternatives is a continuing necessity.

The underlying purpose of *Today's Isms* remains what it has been since the first edition: to aid in this task of clarification. What are the main doctrines of communism, fascism, capitalism, and socialism, and how do societies based on these doctrines actually work? These are the questions the book seeks to answer. Only on the basis of thoughtful answers to these questions can responsible decisions be reached about the great political choices of our time.

Edwin Fogelman

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# 1

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# Communism

## Marxist Theory

### THE ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

Before Marx, history was interpreted in several typical fashions. Religious interpreters saw history as the working of divine providence and human development as but part of the unfolding of God's design of the whole universe. The main difficulties with this interpretation of history are that divine will is unknown and unknowable to man's direct experience and that there are many contrasting human conceptions of God and divine plans for mankind.

A second dominant pre-Marxist approach to the understanding of human history was *political*: Great emperors, kings, legislators, and soldiers were viewed as the decisive forces in history; and historical writing was largely the record of kings, parliaments, wars, and peace treaties. This political emphasis tends to exaggerate the relative role that most people assign to government and politics in the total setting

of their lives. It is natural that statesmen, politicians, and political philosophers consider politics the most important single element in human relations, and political remedies the most important solution to human problems. But human nature and human problems are more intricate than politics; politics is only one approach—and not always the most penetrating one—among many others.

A third major approach, the *hero* interpretation of history (popularized by Carlyle), is closely related to the political viewpoint: Most heroes are conventionally chosen from great emperors, kings, generals, legislators, founders of new states, pioneering reformers, and revolutionaries. The hero interpretation, however, overstates the role of the individual at the expense of the larger cultural, religious, social, and economic circumstances that form the background without which there can be no meaningful exercise of leadership. Although it is undoubtedly true that leaders mold events, it is no less true that events mold leaders.

The fourth pre-Marxist approach to the understanding of history was through the impact of *ideas*: Ideas were conceived (by Hegel, for example) to be the principal causes of the historical process. The material conditions (social, economic, technological, military) of society were thought of as essentially derived from, and caused by, the great motivating ideas. This emphasis on ideas often also implied that history was evolving toward the realization of key ideas, such as freedom and democracy. While this theory undoubtedly contains much that is valid, the exclusive emphasis on ideas as the main driving force in history overlooks the fact that ideas not only generate events but also reflect them. Therefore, to isolate ideas as the chief agent of human action is to neglect the framework of circumstances; circumstances, after all, make some ideas possible and others not, and it is circumstances from which ideas derive their vitality and practical impact.

The study of history may also be focused on war: The phenomenon of conflict is present in all phases of human development, and the birth, rise, and decline of states are often directly connected with warfare. The shortcoming of the *military* interpretation of history lies in its failure to recognize war as the result, rather than the cause, of events. There is no doubt that war often marks a turning point in the life of nations and civilizations; yet the dramatic swiftness and decisiveness of war should not draw attention from the multitude of psychological, ideological, and material factors that lead to war and contribute to its complexity.

Marx's analysis of society was set forth through his *economic* interpretation of history: The production of the goods and services that support human life, and the exchange of those goods and services, are

the bases of all social processes and institutions. Marx does not claim that the economic factor is the only one that goes into the making of history; he does claim that it is the most important one, the *foundation* upon which is erected the *superstructure* of culture, law, and government, buttressed by corresponding political, social, religious, literary, and artistic ideologies.

Marx describes the relations between men's material conditions of life and their ideas by saying that "*it is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence which determines their consciousness.*" In a nomadic society, for example, horses might be considered the principal means of acquiring and accumulating wealth. From Marx's viewpoint, this foundation of nomadic life is the clue to its superstructure of law, government, and dominant ideas. Thus, those who own the greatest number of horses in such a nomadic society would also be the political chieftains who make and interpret the law; they are also likely to receive the highest respect and deference from those tribe members who own no horses. The predominant social and cultural concepts would reflect the dominant economic position of the owners of the horses. Even in religion the impact would not be missing: God might be represented in the image of a swift and powerful rider, and the concept of divine justice and rule would be, in a sense, an extension and magnification of human justice as determined by the horse-owning chiefs.

In a settled agricultural society, the ownership of land would provide the clue to the political, social, legal, and cultural institutions and conceptions. In such a society, according to Marx, the landowning class rules state and society even if another formal organization of authority exists. Similarly, the landowning class would also set the predominant social standards and values.

Finally, according to Marx, *in the modern industrial society of the last two hundred years the ownership of the means of industrial production is the master key*: The capitalists not only determine the economic destiny of society, but also rule it politically (regardless of formal and legal façades to the contrary) and set its social standards and values. The ultimate purpose of the law, education, the press, and artistic and literary creation is to maintain an ideology that is imbued with the sanctity and justice of capitalist property ownership.

Our understanding of history has gained immensely from Marx's economic interpretation. It is virtually impossible to write history today without relating economic forces and conflicts to political, military, and international issues. In pointing out Marx's overemphasis on economics we must not go to the other extreme of denying the importance of economic interests in human affairs. The Marxian theory reduces man

to an earthbound beast with no spark of the lofty and divine; some anti-Marxian theories, on the other hand, have raised human beings to the angelic level, having no contact with the earth, nearly divine in goodness. Humans are only too often inclined to dress up their selfish and material aims and actions in high-sounding moral or religious phrases.

Marx's economic interpretation suffers from the same defect that afflicts all theories that pretend to supply the master key to history: *excessive generalization and simplification*. Whenever a single factor (be it the hero, war, religion, climate, race, geography, and so forth ad infinitum) is required to do the work of explanation and illumination that can only be properly done by several factors, its burden proves too heavy. No single factor has been predominant throughout history, and which factor is the most important in a particular situation is a question of empirical inquiry.

In any event or series of events there is always a complicated pattern of many factors, and it is none too easy to disentangle them. It is difficult enough to identify precisely the component motivations of an action of one person, because these actions are often mutually contradictory and logically inconsistent. It is even more difficult to isolate the determinant components in a single action of a small group. And it is virtually impossible to generalize about large-scale collective actions and processes throughout the whole of history.

To take a practical illustration: the Marxist interpretation holds that *imperialism* is caused primarily by economic interests and rivalries, that it is an essential aspect of capitalism, and that war in the capitalist era is the inevitable result of such imperialist rivalries among capitalist states. There have undoubtedly been examples of imperialism in history, ancient as well as modern, whose origins can be traced to economic factors—some of the colonial acquisitions of advanced capitalist nations like the Netherlands, Britain, and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be attributed chiefly to economic forces. On the other hand, contemporary Western Europe and Japan provide examples of flourishing capitalist societies without empires or imperial ambitions.

Conversely, the Soviet Union and (to a lesser extent) China show that there can be imperialism without capitalism. The Soviet Union annexed three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) in 1940, and helped itself to portions of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Finland, Germany, and Japan during or after World War II. More recently, Soviet imperialism has become firmly entrenched in the Near and Middle East. Russia has followed a policy of imperial expansion before the coming of capitalism, during the capitalist era, and now in her postcap-

talist stage of development. Thus communist imperialism cannot be explained in Marxian economic terms, according to which imperialism is the last phase of an advanced capitalist economy with an abundance of capital that it seeks to invest in less-developed areas. The Soviet Union, and even more so China, suffers from scarcity of capital rather than its abundance. Their imperial ambitions are motivated, as the imperial ambitions of other nations in the past and present, by a mixture of economic goals and noneconomic forces of national interest and expanding spheres of influence.

Similarly, the Marxian economic explanation of *war* is neither wholly true nor wholly false, and can account for only part of the historical reality. There have undoubtedly been some wars that have been primarily caused by economic interests and conflicts. The economic interpretation, nevertheless, misses the core of the great and vital conflicts of history.

The Greeks fought the Persians 2500 years ago not primarily to protect Athenian investments and trade interests in Asia Minor, but because they knew that a Persian victory would mean the end of Greek civilization. Although a Persian victory would undoubtedly have entailed serious economic and financial losses for the Greeks, the main effect would have been the destruction of the Greek way of life, its devotion to the search for truth and its appreciation of human values.

To take more recent illustrations, the core of the conflict in the two world wars was not the protection of British investments in Africa or of American loans to Britain and France, but the more fundamental issue of whether totalitarian militarism was to rule the world. Again, there is no doubt that a German victory in either war would have entailed profound economic losses for the vanquished, but the economic effects would have been relatively minor compared with the effects of forced reversion to a way of life based on a denial of the Western liberal tradition.

What the Marxist-communist interpretation misses in the analyses of major conflicts is, first, the element of *power* (which is often the cause rather than the effect of economic advantage) and, second, the clash of *value systems*, which are frequently more important to people than economic interests, whether the values concerned are specifically political, religious, intellectual, or—in a wider sense—the symbolic expression of a whole way of life.

In fact, when conflicts of interest are primarily economic, compromise will usually be relatively easy. It is when more deeply felt values—individual liberty, freedom of religion, or national independence—are at stake that compromise becomes more difficult.

Before Marx, basic social change was thought to result from the work of great political leaders, legislators, and pioneering reformers. Marx rejects the traditional emphasis on the force of personality as the principal agent of important social change and looks instead for an explanation in impersonal economic causes. The two key concepts that he uses in approaching the problem of basic social change are, first, the *forces of production* and, second, the *relations of production*. The clash between these two is the deeper cause of basic social change:

At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing productive relationships, or, what is but a legal expression for these, with the property relationships within which they have moved before. From forms of development of the productive forces these relationships are transformed into their fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution opens. With the change in the economic foundation the whole vast superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. (Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, 1859)

The Marxist conception of the forces of production expresses man's relation to nature and is essentially what we would call today technological and scientific know-how. Marx's notion of the relations of production expresses man's relation to man and encompasses all that we would include today under the term *social institutions*. Seen in these more modern terms, what Marx roughly suggests is that in every social-economic system there is at first a balance between knowledge and social organization, but gradually a disequilibrium or lag develops between available scientific knowledge and existent social institutions. *Our scientific knowledge grows faster than our social wisdom.*

This lag is the more modern, and broader, version of Marx's imbalance between the forces of production and the relations of production. Since the economic aspects of society are, for Marx, its chief determining factor, it is not surprising that he reduces the general phenomenon of the lag between knowledge and wisdom to the more specific lag between forces of production and relations of production.

Thus, when new productive forces developed within the productive relations of the feudal system, social revolution was, according to Marx, inevitable because the productive relations of feudalism (property relations, market controls, internal customs and tariffs, monetary instability) did not permit the utilization of the newly developing productive forces of industrial capitalism.



The capitalist system, having run its cycle, now shows the same tendency to rigidity, Marx holds, and it is due to meet the same fate when its productive forces (the capacity to produce) have outstripped its productive relations (law of private property, production for private profit). Like the social systems preceding it, capitalism will eventually stand in the way of scientific knowledge and will not permit technological resources to be fully employed.

What has doomed all historically known forms of economic organization, according to Marx, is the fact that when new productive forces develop, the existing productive relations—that is, the existing social institutions—stand in the way of their proper utilization. Each system thus eventually becomes wasteful in terms of the creative potentialities that have developed in its womb but are not permitted to be born and to grow. Only public ownership of the means of production can, according to Marx, bring into existence a new system of productive relations based on production for common use rather than for private profit that will match the tremendous forces of production actually or potentially known to man. In other words, man's capacity to produce will find full expression only in a social system in which production is only limited by scarce resources and incomplete knowledge, and not by such faulty social institutions as production for private profit based on the private ownership of the means of production.

Marx's insight that man's knowledge of physical nature ("forces of production") grows faster than his wisdom in creating social institutions ("relations of production") is highly important in understanding a vital source of tension and conflict both between and within nations. In international affairs, our capacity to produce hydrogen bombs is far ahead of our institutional arrangements for harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Within advanced industrial nations, poverty testifies to the fact that our capacity to produce goods and services surpasses our wisdom to create institutions through which wealth can be more equitably distributed.

What distinguishes Marx from non-Marxists is his insistence that basic social change—caused by the excessive lag between advanced scientific knowledge and retrograde social institutions—can be brought about only by *violent revolution*; non-Marxists, on the other hand, affirm that the necessary changes can be effected by peaceful means.

#### REVOLUTION: THE ONLY WAY OUT

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx explains why violent revolution is the only method of basic social transformation. When technological know-how ("forces of production") begins to outstrip the existing social,



legal, and political institutions ("relations of production"), the owners of the means of production do not politely step aside to allow history to run its inevitable course. Since the ideology of the ruling class reflects the existing economic system, the owners of the means of production sincerely believe that the existing system is economically the most efficient, socially the most equitable, and philosophically the most harmonious with the laws of nature and the will of God.

Marx penetratingly denies that the individual feudal landowner or industrial capitalist obstructs social change out of selfish greed: The resistance of the ruling class to change is so obstinate—making revolution finally inevitable—precisely because it identifies its own values with universally valid ones. The ruling class will, therefore, mobilize all the instruments of the legal, political, and ideological superstructure to block the growth of the forces that represent the potentially more progressive economic system. For this reason, Marx states early in the *Communist Manifesto*, the "history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

Marx could find no instance in history in which a major social and economic system freely abdicated to its successor. On the assumption that the future will resemble the past, the communists, as the *Communist Manifesto* says, "openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."

This is a crucial tenet of Marxism-Leninism and the one that most clearly distinguishes it from democracy.

Marx had no clear-cut notion of how the political transformation from capitalism to communism would come about. Though in the *Communist Manifesto*, as throughout most of his other statements on the problem, he believed in the need for revolution, he was occasionally less dogmatic. Speaking in 1872 at a public meeting in Amsterdam, Marx conceded that the working class can travel on different roads in its quest for power: "We know that we must take into consideration the institutions, the habits and customs of different regions, and we do not deny that there are countries like America, England, and—if I knew your institutions better I would perhaps add Holland—where the workers can attain their objective by peaceful means. But such is not the case in all other countries."

Marx never fully pursued the implications of this distinction, and the orthodox opinion of Marxism-communism has remained that fundamental social and economic change is impossible except by class war, violence, and revolution.

In the early 1830s there occurred two major revolutions that Marx failed to appraise properly. In 1832, the passage of the Reform Act in England meant that the government of the nation would thenceforth

be shared by the aristocracy and the middle classes, with the weight shifting in favor of the latter.

At about the same time, the Jacksonian revolution in the United States effected a similar peaceful shift in class power by bringing the men from the backwoods into American politics and successfully challenging the supremacy of the gentlemen from Virginia and New England who had treated the government of the United States as their political preserve.

These changes in Britain and the United States were more than just political victories: They inaugurated a permanent shift in the distribution of social and economic power in both nations, the kind of basic change that Marx had in mind. When revolution swept over Europe in 1848, England was spared because the aims of the revolution of 1848—winning for the middle class its proper share of social and political power—had already been peacefully obtained by the British middle class in 1832.

If Marx had given the political factor its due weight, if he had fully grasped the importance of the Reform Act in England and the Jacksonian revolution in the United States, he might have realized that socialism, too, might be accomplished without violence in countries that possessed democratic traditions strong enough to absorb far-reaching social and economic changes without resorting to civil war. A recognition of the cultural and political factors in the equation of social change, however, would have amounted to a virtual abandonment of the central position of Marx: History is the arena of class wars, and ruling classes always defend their positions to the bitter end.

When Marx allowed, occasionally, that in countries like England, the United States, or the Netherlands violent revolution would be unnecessary in transforming capitalism into the classless proletarian society, it was obvious that what the three countries had in common was *political democracy*, providing the means for peaceful social change. Whether the range of Marx's exceptions should now be enlarged thus depends on whether democracy has spread in the world since his death.

In any case, Marx's concession that in a few politically advanced countries revolution might be unnecessary has always caused communists a good deal of headache. Lenin took up the question in *State and Revolution* (1918), his best known and most influential political tract, claiming that by 1917 "this exception made by Marx is no longer valid" because England and the United States had developed bureaucratic institutions "to which everything is subordinated and which trample everything under foot." Between 1872 and 1917, both England and the United States broadened the suffrage and moved steadily in the direction of more political and social reform. In 1884, only one year after