

# Ram Lal Anand College

## University of Delhi

### Department of Political Science

- ▶ Faculty:

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# Elements of Marxism

Source: 'Politics' by Andrew Heywood, pp 52 & 53

BA Hons Political Science

1<sup>st</sup> year

1<sup>st</sup> Semester

Understanding Political Theory

# Historical Materialism

- ▶ The cornerstone of Marxist philosophy is what Engels called 'the materialist conception of history'. This highlighted the importance of economic life and the conditions under which people produce and reproduce their means of subsistence. Marx held that the economic 'base', consisting essentially of the 'mode of production', or economic system, conditions or determines the ideological and political 'superstructure'. This suggests that social and historical development can be explained in terms of economic and class factors. Later Marxists portrayed this as a mechanical relationship, implying that immutable economic 'laws' drive history forwards regardless of the human agent.

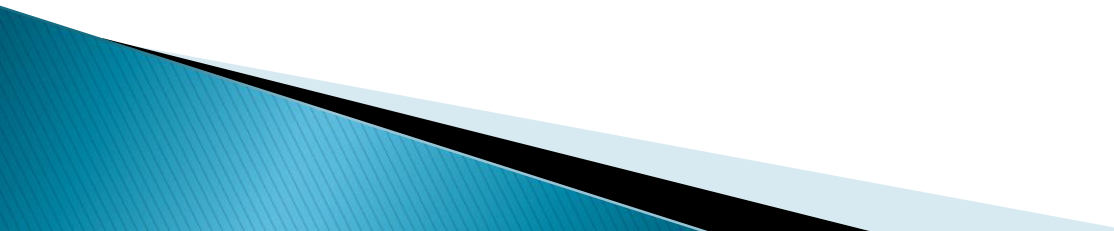
# Dialectical Change

- ▶ Following Hegel, Marx believed that the driving force of historical change was the dialectic, a process of interaction between competing forces that results in a higher stage of development. In its materialist version, this model implies that historical change is a consequence of internal contradictions within a 'mode of production' reflected in class antagonism. Orthodox Marxism ('dialectical materialism') portrayed the dialectic as an impersonal force shaping both natural and human processes.

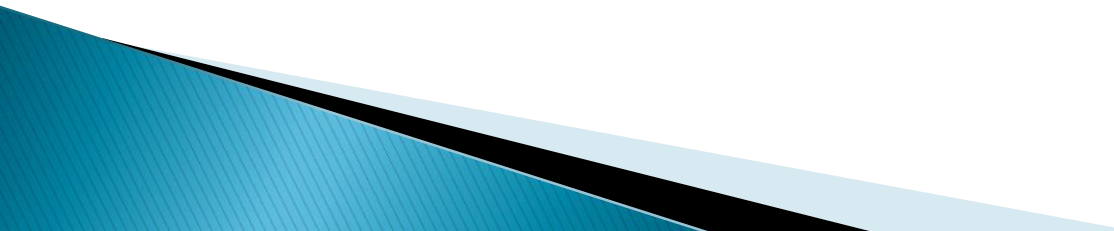
# Alienation

- ▶ Alienation was a central principle of Marx's early writings. It is the process whereby, under capitalism, labour is reduced to being a mere commodity, and work becomes a depersonalized activity. In this view, workers are alienated from the product of their labour, from the process of labour, from fellow workers, and, ultimately, from themselves as creative and social beings. Unalienated labour is thus an essential source of human fulfilment and self-realization.

# Class Struggle

- ▶ The central contradiction within a capitalist society arises from the existence of private property. This creates a division between the bourgeoisie or capitalist class, the owners of the 'means of production', and the proletariat, who do not own property and thus subsist through selling their labour (literally 'wage slaves'). The bourgeoisie is a 'ruling class'. It not only has economic power through the ownership of wealth, but also exercises political power through the agency of the state and possesses ideological power because its ideas are the 'ruling ideas' of the age.
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# Surplus Value

- ▶ The relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is one of irreconcilable conflict, reflecting the fact that the proletariat is necessarily and systematically exploited under capitalism. Marx believed that all value derives from the labour expended in the production of goods. This means that the quest for profit forces capitalist enterprises to extract 'surplus value' from their workers by paying them less than the value of their labour. Capitalism is therefore inherently unstable, because the proletariat cannot be permanently reconciled to exploitation and oppression.
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# Proletarian Revolution

- ▶ Marx believed that capitalism was doomed, and that the proletariat was its 'grave digger'. According to his analysis, capitalism would pass through a series of increasingly serious crises of overproduction. This would bring the proletariat to revolutionary **class consciousness**. Marx proclaimed that proletarian revolution was inevitable, and predicted that it would occur through a spontaneous uprising aimed at seizing control of the means of production. In his later years, however, he speculated about the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism.



# Communism

- ▶ Marx predicted that proletarian revolution would usher in a transitional 'socialist' period during which a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' would be required to contain a counter-revolution mounted by the dispossessed bourgeoisie. However, as class antagonism faded and a fully communist society came into existence, this proletarian state would simply 'wither away'. A communist society would be classless in the sense that wealth would be owned in common by all, and the system of 'commodity production' would be replaced by one of 'production for use' geared to the satisfaction of genuine human needs. With this, the 'prehistory of man' would come to an end, allowing human beings for the first time to shape their own destinies and realize their full potential ('the free development of each : the precondition for the free development of all' (Marx).