

History Research Center

historical materialism

A theory of history developed by [Karl Marx](#) and [Friedrich Engels](#) (and carried on by later [communists](#)) that conceives of historical social change and progress as motivated by technological advances in economic production. Accordingly, all ideas, [law](#), politics, art, education, religion, and philosophy as the "superstructure" reflect the fundamental, materialist "structure" of the economy. So, for example, Marxism sees the organic, hierarchical theology of medieval Christianity (St. Thomas Aquinas) as simply reflecting the social class structure of the European Middle Ages and economic feudalism. Thus, ideas are not autonomous or important by themselves but are determined by economic technology and "relations of production."

This theory further claims to be "scientific [socialism](#)" in discovering universal laws of history that prove that capitalism will inevitably lead to socialism and then to communism. Much like Darwin's theory of biological evolution, of which Marx approved, historical materialism sees human social progress as following natural laws. It rejects any supernatural, spiritual dimension to human history or any possibility of alternative developments in economic progress.

With the fall of communism as a world system (the end of the [Soviet Union](#)) in the 1980s, this philosophy is no longer widely subscribed to, except by certain Western academic philosophers and sociologists.

Further Information

Lichtheim, G. *Marxism*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1961.

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