

COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

Over the course of the past century, the advanced industrialized democracies (represented by Britain in this book) have become the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world. However, these countries have been widely criticized for the degree of economic inequality that they allow among their citizens, as well as the big divide in wealth and power between them and the other countries of the world. Have advanced democracies encouraged and valued freedom at the expense of equality to such a degree that we may see them as basically unjust societies? Communist countries answer this question with a resounding "Yes!" and base their governments on the belief that equality is undervalued in capitalist countries such as Britain and the United States.

During the 20th century two large countries declared themselves to be communist nations – the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Together they were home to billions of people, and the economic and political influence of communism was indisputable. Today the Soviet Union has collapsed, leaving in its wake dozens of fledgling democracies, all struggling for their survival. Among major nations, only China remains under communist rule, although Cuba and North Korea are well-known communist regimes as well.

Communism has taken many forms since its birth in the mid-nineteenth century. The variations are so vast that they often appear to have little in common, although all claim to have roots in Marxism.

MARXISM

The father of communism is generally acknowledged to be Karl Marx, who first wrote about his interpretation of history and vision for the future in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. He saw capitalism – or the free market – as an economic system that exploited workers and increased the gap between the rich and the poor. He believed that conditions in capitalist countries would eventually become so bad that workers would join together in a revolution of the **proletariat** (workers), and overcome the **bourgeoisie**, or owners of factories and other means of production. Marx envisioned a new world after the revolution, one in which social class would disappear because ownership of private property would be banned. According to Marx, communism encourages equality and cooperation, and without property to encourage greed and strife, governments would be unnecessary, and they would wither away.

MARXISM-LENINISM

Russia was the first country to base a political system on Marx's theory. The "revolution of the proletariat" occurred in 1917, but did not follow the steps outlined by Karl Marx. Marx believed that the revolution would first take place in industrialized, capitalist countries. Early 20th century Russia had only begun to industrialize in the late 19th century, and was far behind countries like Britain, Germany, and the United States. However, revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin believed that the dictatorial tsar should be overthrown, and that Russian peasants should be released from oppression. Lenin changed the nature of communism by asserting the importance of the **vanguard of the revolution** – a group of revolutionary leaders who could provoke the revolution in non-capitalist Russia. The government he established in 1917 was based on **democratic centralism**, or rule by a few for the good of the many. He proceeded to direct industrialization and agricultural development from a centralized government, and capitalistic ventures were severely restricted in the Soviet Union.

The system that Lenin set up has been incredibly influential because all communist countries that followed based their systems on the Soviet model. Political power rests with the Communist Party, a relatively small

“vanguard” organization that by its very nature allows no competing ideologies to challenge it. The legitimacy of the state rests squarely on the party as the embodiment of communist ideology. Ironically, this feature of communist systems transformed Marxism, with all of its idealistic beliefs in equality for the common citizen, into authoritarianism. Communist states are often associated with the use of force, but they also rely on **co-optation**, or allocation of power throughout various political, social, and economic institutions. Recruitment of elites takes place through *nomenklatura*, the process of filling influential jobs in the state, society, or the economy with people approved and chosen by the Communist Party. The *nomenklatura* includes not only political jobs, but almost all top positions in other areas as well, such as university presidents, newspaper editors, and military officers. Party approval translates as party membership, so the easiest way for an individual to get ahead is to join the party.

Despite the authoritarian nature of communist states, it is also true that the system does allow for a certain amount of **social mobility**, or the ability for individuals to change their social status over the course of their lifetimes.

MAOISM

China’s version of communism began shortly after Lenin’s revolution in Russia, but China’s government was not controlled by communists until 1949. Almost from the beginning, China’s communist leader was Mao Zedong, whose interpretation of Marxism was very different from that of the Soviet leaders. **Maoism** shares Marx’s vision of equality and cooperation, but Mao believed very strongly in preserving China’s peasant-based society. Although the government sometimes emphasized industrialization during Mao’s long rule, by and large Mao was interested in promoting a revolutionary fervor that strengthened agriculturally-based communities. After Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping instituted **market-based socialism**, which today allows for a significant infusion of capitalism into the system.

GENDER RELATIONS IN COMMUNIST REGIMES

Marxists often see traditional gender relations – with women in subservient roles to men – as resulting from the underlying inequality encouraged by capitalist societies. Men exploit women through the family structure in much the same way that the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat in the workplace. Communism envisions complete economic, social, and political equality between men and women. As we will see in Russia and China, this ideal was not followed in reality in any of the communist countries. However, it almost certainly increased opportunities for women, so that until the late 20th century, women in communist countries were more likely to work outside the home than women in capitalist countries.

COMMUNIST POLITICAL ECONOMY

Communist ideology led to political economies characterized by **central planning**, in which the ownership of private property and the market mechanism were replaced with the allocation of resources by the state bureaucracy. According to the basic tenets of Marxism, neither principle – ownership of private property nor the market economy – is capable of equitably distributing wealth. Countries with communist political economies have experienced these two problems:

1. **Logistical difficulties** – Planning an entire economy is an extremely difficult task. The larger the economy, the more difficult the planning is. In a market economy supply and demand interact spontaneously, so the active management of an economy takes more work and energy.

2. **Lack of worker incentives** – Capitalist countries often repeat this criticism of communist political economies. Workers have no fear of losing their jobs, and factories don't worry about going out of business, so there are few incentives for producing good quality products. In the absence of competition and incentives, innovation and efficiency disappear, and as a result, communist economies generally fall behind market economies.

In the case of the U.S.S.R., these problems were insurmountable, and they led to the dissolution of the Soviet Republics.

NEW ECONOMIC TIES

Since Russia no longer has official ties to communism and China has now integrated capitalism into its economic system, just how important theoretical communism is to either country today is in question. New directions are indicated by both countries as they establish their roles in the global marketplace. In 2001 a chief economist of Goldman Sachs first coined the term "BRIC" for the fast-growing economies of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Goldman Sachs noted that the economies of the four countries are growing so fast that they might overtake the combined economies of the current richest countries of the world by 2050. In June 2009, the leaders of the BRIC countries held their first summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, where they discussed common concerns and demanded more say in global policymaking. At the time of their meeting, the economies of Brazil, India, and China were recovering from the global monetary crisis of September 2008, but the Russian economy was still dragged down by plunging oil prices.

Both China and Russia today have authoritarian governments, although Russia (as we will see) set up democratic structures in the Constitution of 1993. Both have integrated capitalism into their economic systems, although they have taken very different paths to reach that end, and both have become important players in international markets. How these economic changes will impact their political systems is an unfolding drama, as both countries test the western assumption that capitalism and democracy go hand in hand. So far, China and Russia appear to be setting their own rules, and it is far from clear that democratic principles will be a part of their future.

In the pages that follow, we will examine in more detail the influence of communism on Russia and China. For Russia, has communism now been successfully replaced with democracy and capitalism? In China, has the system strayed so far from Marxism that it can hardly be seen as communism today?

IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

bourgeoisie
 BRIC
 central planning
The Communist Manifesto
 co-optation
 democratic centralism
 Maoism
 market-based socialism
 Marxism
 Marxism-Leninism
nomenklatura
 proletariat
 social mobility
 "vanguard of the revolution"