Economic Systems - Communism

What is Communism?

Communism is a political and economic system in which the major productive resources in a society—such as mines, factories, and farms—are owned by the public or the state, and wealth is divided among citizens equally or according to individual need. In its most common usage, the term communism refers to the type of ideal society envisioned by the 19th-century German revolutionary Karl Marx (pictured to the right) or to forms of government based on Marx’s ideas that were established in Russia, China, and other countries in the 20th century. Communism is one form of socialism, which is a system in which the productive resources of a society are publicly rather than privately controlled. Communism was a major force in world politics for most of the 20th century: at one time, about one-third of the world’s population lived under communist governments. Today communism is the official form of government in only a handful of countries.

Origins

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, many philosophers and political scientists have tried to imagine what a genuinely ideal society would be like. Several of these thinkers advocated a form of government based on communist principles (though the word communism itself was not used until the 1840s). The Greek philosopher Plato, for example, argued that in the best state the ruling class of philosophically trained “guardians” would live together communally, sharing not only property but even spouses and children. Nearly 1,000 years later the English humanist scholar Thomas More described an imaginary communist city-state called Utopia in which money was abolished and citizens shared all property. The word utopia has since come to mean a perfect or ideal (and thus imaginary) society.

The early Christians practiced a simple form of communism, in part to express their contempt for worldly possessions. The later monastic orders of the Roman Catholic church required their members to take a vow of poverty and to share their meager possessions with each other. In 1534 the radical Anabaptists established a communist government in the German city of Münster, where they practiced polygamy as well as the common ownership of property. In 1649 a group known as the Diggers founded a short-lived communist agricultural community on an
unoccupied hillside in southern England. Communist or socialist colonies were also established in the United States; the best-known were New Harmony (1825–28), in the state of Indiana, and Brook Farm (1841–47), in Massachusetts.

**Marxist Communism**

Like many 19th-century reformers, Karl Marx was a witness to the profound changes in European society brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The invention of new technologies and the development of the factory system of manufacturing made both agriculture and industry more efficient and created great wealth for factory owners. But this prosperity was built on the misery of the industrial workers, the great majority of whom lived and died in dire poverty in growing urban slums.

The philosophical theory of communism that Marx developed with his colleague Friedrich Engels was based on what they believed was a scientific understanding of human history. In their book, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), they argued that history is a series of struggles between economic classes. In the last stage of history—the one in which Marx and Engels thought they were living—the proletariat, or working class, is pitted against the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class. As the bourgeoisie continues to accumulate wealth by exploiting the proletariat, the disparity between the two classes increases, eventually making the condition of the proletariat so desperate that it must resort to violent revolution. The result will be the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship. Eventually the proletarian state will “wither away” because it will be unnecessary, and a fully communist society, in which there are no class divisions, will emerge.