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Home Politics, Law & Government Politics & Political Systems Communism is a political and economic system that seeks to create a classless society in which the major means of production, such as mines and factories, are owned and controlled by the public. There is no government or private property or currency, and the wealth is divided among citizens equally or according to individual need. Many of communism's tenets derive from the works of German revolutionary Karl Marx, who (with Friedrich Engels) wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). However, over the years others have made contributions—or corruptions, depending on one's perspective—to Marxist thought. Perhaps the most influential changes were proposed by Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, who notably supported authoritarianism.Learn about Leninism.At one time about one-third of the world's population lived under communist governments, most notably in the republics of the Soviet Union. Today communism is the official form of government in only five countries: China, North Korea, Laos, Cuba, and Vietnam. However, none of these meet the true definition of communism. Instead, they can be said to be in a transitional stage between the end of capitalism and the establishment of communism. Such a phase was outlined by Karl Marx, and it came to include the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat. While all five countries have authoritarian governments, their commitment to abolishing capitalism is debatable. Read more below: Communism todayExactly how communism differs from socialism has long been a matter of debate. Karl Marx used the terms interchangeably. For many, however, the difference can be seen in the two phases of communism as outlined by Marx. The first is a transitional system in which the working class controls the government and economy yet still pays people according to how long, hard, or well they work. Capitalism and private property exist, though to a limited degree. This phase is widely regarded as socialism. However, in Marx's fully realized communism, society has no class divisions or government or personal property. The production and distribution of goods is based upon the principle "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Read more about socialism.Although the term communism did not come into use until the 1840s, societies that may be considered communist were described as long ago as the 4th century BCE, when Plato wrote the *Republic*. That work described an ideal society in which the governing class devotes itself to serving the interests of the whole community. The first Christians practiced a simple form of communism, and in *Utopia* (1516) the English humanist Thomas More described an imaginary society in which money is abolished and people share meals, houses, and other goods in common. However, communism is most widely identified with Karl Marx, who outlined the system with Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Marx's embrace of communism was motivated in part by the inequities caused by the Industrial Revolution. Read more below: Historical background communism, political and economic doctrine that aims to replace private property and a profit-based economy with public ownership and communal control of at least the major means of production (e.g., mines, mills, and factories) and the natural resources of a society. Communism is thus a form of socialism—a higher and more advanced form, according to its advocates. Exactly how communism differs from socialism has long been a matter of debate, but the distinction rests largely on the communists' adherence to the revolutionary socialism of Karl Marx.Like most writers of the 19th century, Marx tended to use the terms communism and socialism interchangeably. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), however, Marx identified two phases of communism that would follow the predicted overthrow of capitalism: the first would be a transitional system in which the working class would control the government and economy yet still find it necessary to pay people according to how long, hard, or well they worked, and the second would be fully realized communism—a society without class divisions or government, in which the production and distribution of goods would be based upon the principle "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Marx's followers, especially the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilich Lenin, took up this distinction.In *State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin asserted that socialism corresponds to Marx's first phase of communist society and communism proper to the second. Lenin and the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party reinforced this distinction in 1918, the year after they seized power in Russia, by taking the name All-Russian Communist Party. Since then, communism has been largely, if not exclusively, identified with the form of political and economic organization developed in the Soviet Union and adopted subsequently in the People's Republic of China and other countries ruled by communist parties.For much of the 20th century, in fact, about one-third of the world's population lived under communist regimes. These regimes were characterized by the rule of a single party that tolerated no opposition and little dissent. In place of a capitalist economy, in which individuals compete for profits, moreover, party leaders established a command economy in which the state controlled property and its bureaucrats determined wages, prices, and production goals. The inefficiency of these economies played a large part in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the remaining communist countries (excepting North Korea) are now allowing greater economic competition while holding fast to one-party rule. Whether they will succeed in this endeavour remains to be seen. Succeed or fail, however, communism is clearly not the world-shaking force it was in the 20th century. Get a Britannica Premium subscription and gain access to exclusive content. Subscribe Now Although the term communism did not come into use until the 1840s—it is derived from the Latin communis, meaning "shared" or "common"—visions of a society that may be considered communist appeared as long ago as the 4th century bce. In the ideal state described in Plato's *Republic*, the governing class of guardians devotes itself to serving the interests of the whole community. Because private ownership of goods would corrupt their owners by encouraging selfishness, Plato argued, the guardians must live as a large family that shares common ownership not only of material goods but also of spouses and children. Other early visions of communism drew their inspiration from religion. The first Christians practiced a simple kind of communism—as described in Acts 4:32–37, for example—both as a form of solidarity and as a way of renouncing worldly possessions. Similar motives later inspired the formation of monastic orders in which monks took vows of poverty and promised to share their few worldly goods with each other and with the poor. The English humanist Sir Thomas More extended this monastic communism in *Utopia* (1516), which describes an imaginary society in which money is abolished and people share meals, houses, and other goods in common. Other fictional communistic utopias followed, notably *City of the Sun* (1623), by the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella, as did attempts to put communist ideas into practice. Perhaps the most noteworthy (if not notorious) of the latter was the theocracy of the Anabaptists in the Westphalian city of Münster (1534–35), which ended with the military capture of the city and the execution of its leaders. The English Civil Wars (1642–51) prompted the Diggers to advocate a kind of agrarian communism in which the Earth would be "a common treasury," as Gerrard Winstanley envisioned in *The Law of Freedom* (1652) and other works. The vision was not shared by the Protectorate led by Oliver Cromwell, which harshly suppressed the Diggers in 1650. New from Britannica Laughter that comes from tickling is called gargalessis, and aside from primates the only animal known to experience it is the rat. See All Good Facts It was neither a religious upheaval nor a civil war but a technological and economic revolution—the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries—that provided the impetus and inspiration for modern communism. This revolution, which achieved great gains in economic productivity at the expense of an increasingly miserable working class, encouraged Marx to think that the class struggles that dominated history were leading inevitably to a society in which prosperity would be shared by all through common ownership of the means of production. Communism is an economic system where the group owns the factors of production. The factors of production are labor, entrepreneurship, capital, and land. Although the government doesn't legally own the labor force, the central planners tell the people where they should work. Karl Marx outlined 10 key principles in his manifesto, which is distributed as the origin of communism Communism is often set in contrast to capitalism and often compared to socialism, though the two have distinct differences.Communist systems have centrally positioned power structures, which have advantages and disadvantages.The last five remaining Communist countries are China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam, though their politics are in various states of change. German philosopher Karl Marx developed the theory of communism. He said it was, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." In his view, capitalistic owners would no longer siphon off all the profits. Instead, the proceeds would go to the workers. To Marx, this meant that people would work at what they loved and did well. They would happily contribute these skills for the good of all. The economy would prosper because they would work harder than in capitalism. "To each according to his need" meant the community would take care of those who couldn't work. It would distribute goods and services to everyone as they required them. Those who were able to work would be motivated by enlightened self-interest. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and co-author Friedrich Engels outlined the following 10 points. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes A heavy progressive tax or graduated income tax Abolition of all rights of inheritance Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels Centralization of credit in the hands of the state The state would control communication and transportation The state factories and instruments of production would cultivate wastelands and improve the soil Equal liability of all to labor and establishment of industrial armies (especially for agriculture) The gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country Free education for all children in public schools and the abolition of children's factory labor The manifesto mentions state ownership in its last three points, making even this pure vision of communism sound like socialism. But Marx argued that state ownership is a valid stage in the transition to communism. In a true communist economy, the community makes decisions. In most communist countries, the government makes those decisions on their behalf. This system is called a command economy. The leaders create a plan that outlines their choices, and it's executed with laws, regulations, and directives. The goal of the plan is to give to "each according to his need." Communist countries have free health care, education, and other services. The plan also seeks to increase the nation's economic growth, secure national defense, and maintain infrastructure. The state owns businesses on behalf of the workers, which, in effect, means the government owns a monopoly. The government rewards company managers for meeting the targets detailed in the plan. In communism, central planners replace the forces of competition and the laws of supply and demand that operate in a market economy, as well as the customs that guide a traditional economy. Communism is most similar to socialism. In both, the people own the factors of production. The most significant difference is that output is distributed according to need in communism. Communism is most different from capitalism, where private individuals are the owners, but it is similar to fascism in that both use central plans. Fascism allows individuals to retain factors of production, and many countries turned to fascism to ward off communism. Advantages Centrally planned economy creates effectivity Promotes equality on a philosophical level Disadvantages Social goals take precedence over individual self-interest Eliminates free market Centrally planned economy: A communist country with a centralized economy can quickly mobilize economic resources on a large scale, execute massive projects, and create industrial power. Communist command economies can wholly transform societies to conform to the planner's vision. Examples include Stalinist Russia, Maoist China, and Castro's Cuba. Russia's command economy built up the military strength to defeat the Nazis and then quickly rebuilt the economy after World War II. Philosophical equality: Some say communism's advantages mean it is the next obvious step for any capitalistic society. They see income inequality as a sign of late-stage capitalism and believe that capitalism's flaws mean it has evolved past its usefulness to society. They don't realize that capitalism's flaws are endemic to the system, regardless of the phase it is in. America's Founding Fathers included the promotion of the general welfare in the Constitution to balance these flaws. It instructed the government to protect the rights of all to pursue their idea of happiness, as outlined in the American Dream. It's the government's role to create a level playing field to allow that to happen. Devaluation of individual welfare and liberty: One of the reasons a communist system can move so effectively is because it overrides individual self-interest and subjugates the welfare of the general population to achieve critical social goals.No free market: The most significant disadvantage of communism stems from its elimination of the free market. The laws of supply and demand don't set prices—the government does. Planners lose the valuable feedback these prices provide about what the people want. They can't get up-to-date information about consumers' needs, and as a result, there is often a surplus of one thing and shortages of others. To compensate, citizens create a market to trade the things the planners don't provide, which destroys the trust in Marx's pure communism. People no longer feel the government can give "to each according to his needs." The last five remaining Communist countries are China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. They aren't pure communism but are transitioning from socialism, where the state owns the components of supply. According to Marx, that is a necessary midway point between capitalism and the ideal communist economy. Modern communist societies rely on a mixed economy. In October 1949, Mao Tse Tung established the Chinese Communist Party. In the late 1970s, China began moving toward a mixed economy. It phased out collective farms and allowed private businesses, but it still strictly follows a five-year economic plan. The government's policies favor state-owned enterprises in sectors vital to its goals. In 2009, China became the world's largest exporter. In 2014, it became the world's largest economy. In October 1965, the Partido Comunista de Cuba became the country's official ruling party. The Soviet Union gave economic support to the impoverished country, and in return, Cuba supported its patron in the Cold War against its neighbor, the United States. After the fall of the USSR, Cuba suffered, and in April 2011, it began allowing economic reforms. People in Cuba can now buy appliances, cellphones, real estate, and cars, and in 2013 the Cuban government reported that more than 500,000 people are registered as self-employed. However, many experts estimate it to be much higher. In 1949, the nation won independence from France. In 1996, it began decentralizing control and encouraging private businesses. Laos has created tax incentives to encourage foreign direct investment because it wants to expand its economy beyond exporting its natural resources. Laos currently is under a single-party system and is ruled by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). In 1953, North Korea's allies China and Russia helped create North Korea to end the Korean War. The country followed strict central planning with communal farming. It suffered famine and poor living conditions in the 1990s and 2000s, and in 2002, it allowed semi-private markets to sell some goods. In 2016 it used government power to spur two mass mobilizations in producing goods for market. In 1945, communist leader Ho Chi Minh declared his country's independence from France. The French, backed by the United States, seized southern Vietnam. Ho, backed by China, took the northern part. France continued to rule until 1954. In 1975, the communists were successful, and in 1986, Vietnam began transitioning toward a more market-based economy. In 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was established with six communist countries: Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, and the Transcaucasian Federation. In 1936, the Federation became Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. By 1991, when it dissolved, the USSR contained 15 total countries. The additional nine were Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In 1955, the USSR created the Warsaw Pact with other communist military allies. They included Albania, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The USSR had many other communist allies. Many became communists in the 1970s but shifted to another form of government after the USSR collapsed. They included Afghanistan, Angola, Benin, Congo, Ethiopia, and Mongolia. Cambodia was a communist country from 1975 to 1979. Philosophies emphasizing cooperation, equality, and communal ownership of property go back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The modern notion of communism is usually traced back to "The Communist Manifesto." In that 19th-century work, authors Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels defined their idea of communism while noting its historical roots in earlier movements. "Marxism" refers to a theory of the relationship between social classes and the economy. Communism, on the other hand, is a revolutionary political movement that actively seeks to change society. There is plenty of overlap, but not all Marxists would call themselves communists. Economists and sociologists may use Marxist theory as a method of analyzing trends and current events, but that doesn't necessarily mean they advocate for the abolition of private property or for any other communist principles. Theoretically speaking, property ownership is one of the key distinctions between communism and socialism. In a strictly communist system, individuals have no rights to private property, as all property is communally owned, whereas a socialist society allows for individual property rights (though they may be less robust than in a capitalistic society). Practically speaking, strict adherence to the communist theory will vary by country, as some may be more socialist with respect to private property.

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