

HOW TO STUDY MARXISM

RCP Political Education Committee

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Why Study Marxism?

Marxism is first and foremost a philosophical and a scientific outlook. It shows how the capitalist system has reached its limits and needs to be overthrown.

It also leads us to understand that humanity is capable of transforming the world, of ending class divisions and moving to a higher form of society. But to achieve that we need to first understand the nature of capitalist society. And to understand, one needs a scientific method.

The strength of Marxism lies in its method of analysis, in its philosophical outlook, defined as 'dialectical materialism'. Marxists analyse the real world, the real developments in society, in economics, in politics, in world relations and ultimately in the class struggle. Marxism, however, does not limit itself to looking at the surface of phenomena, but looks more deeply at the inner contradictions that drive events.

By looking at phenomena in their development, in their movement, seeing how they are changing and how they can change in the future, we can develop a perspective of where society is going and an understanding of the explosive events that are inevitable in the coming period. And, more importantly, we can prepare to intervene in them.

Karl Marx famously said that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." What Marx meant was that we do not limit ourselves to interpreting and analysing the world, but we engage actively in fighting to change it.

We use the method of Marxism to understand the features of capitalist society, such as the bourgeois state, the exploitation of the workers, or the oppression of women, precisely so we can understand how best to overthrow them. We use Marxist theory as a guide to action.

For Communists, there is no more powerful tool. The study of theory is not optional. However, embarking on this journey can be difficult.

The capitalist system of education does not really teach us how to study ideas as revolutionary and far-reaching as Marxism. In school, you are taught a collection of facts and figures, not how to grasp a problem in depth and to see all sides of it. In university topics like philosophy are approached in such an academic, formalistic way that they alienate and confuse most people who try to approach them.

This short leaflet is intended to help guide you in the process of studying Marxism. It's not a template, by any means, as everyone has a different method of taking in and analysing information. However, there are certain techniques, approaches and starting points which can be of use to anyone. You are encouraged to use only what you find most useful.



Find your reading at Wellred Britain
(wellrebooks.co.uk)

How to Read

The purpose of studying Marxism is not to memorise a collection of facts or figures, but to understand the underlying analysis. To do so, comrades should first aim to read broadly, especially texts that cover the basic pillars of Marxism; dialectical materialism, historical materialism and marxist economics. Texts like *Socialism, Scientific and Utopian* by Engels are excellent starting points, because they cover these topics in a very straightforward and easy to understand way. It's best to get a general grasp of the ideas before 'deep-diving' into a more specific topic.

This is the reason we recommend most comrades start their theoretical education with *What Is Marxism* and *The Classics of Marxism, Volumes I and II*. Texts like these are not like a book you read for an exam, where you would be expected to memorise it. Through applying the methods of analysis you learn, you will come to understand them more, and you will want to re-read the most classic texts many times over. It's okay if you don't understand everything on the first go. The important thing is to make a start.

Once you feel like you have some grasp of the basics, it's time to start applying what you learn to more specific examples. Pick something you are interested in, or something politically important for your branch to discuss, and begin to read more deeply into it. Most reading is best done with some end goal or purpose; so as you read, consider if it could become a lead-off, a contribution, an article, or if there is a specific question coming up in the branch that it could help with.

Take notes that will help you to remember relevant parts, to use them in lead offs or contributions later. This could be as simple as a document with copied and pasted quotes or bookmarking relevant pages, or as involved as summarising chapters in your own words or looking up our reading guides on these texts and trying to an-

swer the study questions at the end of each reading session. You should try out different methods and decide what works for you for each text.

When 'deep-diving', try not to get tunnel-vision, which can lead to a superficial understanding of a topic. Try to understand how ideas in the texts you have already read come through in this or that specific example. Try to think consciously about drawing links between different texts. Think about the context and purpose of the writing of the text you are reading. Try to summarise the general analysis contained in each text or chapter. This is far more helpful than just memorising everything.

The marxist method is not an abstract thing that can be learned in isolation from the real-world topics it analyses. It flows through all of our analysis and so you have to study it by reading both broadly and deeply, building up a better understanding over time.

What do I do if I get stuck?

If at any point you are struggling to understand the ideas in a text, there are plenty of places you can go to help you work through it. In no particular order:

- Head to our education hub (communist.red/education) and look for articles and podcasts on the topic you are trying to get your head around. We have a wealth of material on almost every topic on our website and on marxist.com, the website of the international.
- Also on our education hub, look up a reading guide on the text. If we have one, it usually contains chapter summaries and relevant questions for each chapter. This will give you a good 'jumping off' point for understanding the text, though it should not be used as a substitute for reading the original. It is not Sparknotes.
- Attend a reading group on the text organ-

ised by your branch. Very often, even if there isn't one ongoing, branches will be happy to arrange a reading group if you ask. It might be that other comrades are struggling with the same topics.

- Finally, and most importantly, ask a leading comrade. Ask your branch secretary, a CC comrade, or the comrade that follows you up. If they don't know the answer, they'll know where you should look.

Don't get discouraged. You don't learn anything overnight. Everything takes practice.

EXTRACTS

Trotsky

1923

Dear Comrades:

You complain that you have not been able to read even one-tenth of the books that interest you, and ask how to rationally allot your time. This is a very difficult question, because in the long run each person must make such a decision according to his particular needs and interests. It should be said however, that the extent to which a person is able to keep up with the current literature, whether scientific, political, or otherwise, depends not only on the judicious allotment of one's time but also on the individual's previous training.

In regard to your specific reference to "party youth," I can only advise them not to hurry, not to spread themselves thin, not to skip from one topic to another, and not to pass on to a second book until the first has been properly read, thought over, and mastered. I remember that when I myself belonged to the category of "youth," I too felt that there just wasn't enough time. Even in prison, when I did nothing but read, it seemed that one couldn't get enough done in

a day. In the ideological sphere, just as in the economic arena, the phase of primitive accumulation is the most difficult and troublesome. And only after certain basic elements of knowledge and particularly elements of theoretical skill (method) have been precisely mastered and have become, so to speak, part of the flesh and blood of one's intellectual activity, does it become easier to keep up with the literature not only in areas one is familiar with, but in adjacent and even more remote fields of knowledge, because method, in the final analysis, is universal.

It is better to read one book and read it well; it is better to master a little bit at a time and master it thoroughly. Only in this way will your powers of mental comprehension extend themselves naturally. Thought will gradually gain confidence in itself and grow more productive. With these preliminaries in mind, it will not be difficult to rationally allot your time; and then, the transition from one pursuit to another will be to a certain extent pleasurable.

With comradely greetings,

L. Trotsky
May 29, 1923

RESOURCES

- [Education Hub](#)
- [Reading Guides](#)
- [Marxism 101](#)
- [Wellred Books](#)
- [Marxist Voice Podcast](#)

READING LIST

Elementary Reading (candidacy membership: first 3 months)

- ☐ The Leninist Handbook
- ☐ What is Marxism? (Alan Woods and Rob Sewell)
- ☐ The Classics of Marxism: Volume 1
 - ☐ The Communist Manifesto (Marx & Engels)
 - ☐ Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (Engels)
 - ☐ The State and Revolution (Lenin)
 - ☐ The Transitional Programme (Trotsky)
- ☐ The Classics of Marxism: Volume 2
 - ☐ Wage Labour and Capital (Marx)
 - ☐ Value, Price, and Profit (Marx)
 - ☐ "Left Wing Communism": An Infantile Disorder (Lenin)
 - ☐ In Defence of October (Trotsky)
 - ☐ Stalinism and Bolshevism (Trotsky)
- ☐ Marxism vs Identity Politics (Marxist.com)

Basic works (1-2 years)

- ☐ In Defence of Lenin (Rob Sewell and Alan Woods)
- ☐ Programme of the International (Ted Grant)
- ☐ History of Philosophy (Alan Woods)
- ☐ Fundamental Problems of Marxism (Plekhanov)
- ☐ Understanding Marx's Capital (Adam Booth)
- ☐ Afterword to the Second German Edition of Capital (Marx)
- ☐ Anti-Duhring (Engels)
- ☐ The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man (Engels)
- ☐ The Lessons of October (Trotsky)

Intermediate works (to be read in 2-4 years)

- ☐ Bolshevism – The Road to Revolution (Alan Woods)
- ☐ What is to be Done? (Lenin)
- ☐ The Revolution Betrayed (Trotsky)
- ☐ Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (Lenin)

- ☐ Results and Prospects (Trotsky)
- ☐ Fascism: What is it and how to fight it (Trotsky)
- ☐ The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (Engels)
- ☐ Lenin and Trotsky: What they really stood for (Alan Woods and Ted Grant)
- ☐ Russia – From Revolution to Counter-revolution (Ted Grant)
- ☐ Germany 1918-33: Socialism or Barbarism (Rob Sewell)
- ☐ Chartist Revolution (Rob Sewell)
- ☐ Ireland: Republicanism & Revolution (Alan Woods)
- ☐ Ted Grant: The Permanent Revolutionary (Alan Woods)
- ☐ The History of British Trotskyism (Ted Grant)

Advanced Works (to be read from 4 to 6 years)

- ☐ In Defence of Marxism (Trotsky)
- ☐ Reason in Revolt (Ted Grant & Alan Woods)
- ☐ The Class Struggles in France (Marx)
- ☐ The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Marx)
- ☐ The Civil War in France (Marx)
- ☐ The History of the Russian Revolution (Trotsky)
- ☐ Stalin (Trotsky)
- ☐ My Life (Trotsky)
- ☐ The Unbroken Thread (Ted Grant)
- ☐ Dialectics of Nature (Engels)
- ☐ Trotsky's Writings on Britain (Trotsky)
- ☐ The First Five Years of the Communist International (Trotsky)
- ☐ The Crisis of the French Section (Trotsky)
- ☐ Materialism and Empirio-Criticism (Lenin)
- ☐ The German Ideology (Marx and Engels)
- ☐ The Struggle for a Proletarian Party (Cannon)
- ☐ [China Reading List](#)
- ☐ [Marxism and the National Question](#) (Ted Grant & Alan Woods)

To be read after 6+ years

- ☐ Capital (Marx)
- ☐ Trotsky's Writings 1929 - 1940.