

Marxism Under Scrutiny: Wealth, Class Consciousness, Human Aspirations and the Utopian Promise of an Egalitarian Society

Edime Yunusa, Ph. D¹, Ejuchegahi A. Angwaomaodoko² and Erinola Jacob Arokoyo³

¹*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences Prince, Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State - Nigeria*

²*Department of Education, College of Education, Kean University, Union, NJ, USA*

³*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria*

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Abstract

Marxism remains one of the most influential, and most contested, bodies of social and economic thought produced in the modern era, offering both a diagnosis of capitalist exploitation and a promise of an egalitarian future. This paper subjected Marxism to critical scrutiny, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: its conception of wealth and class consciousness, its account of human aspirations, and its utopian promise of an egalitarian society. The paper is a theoretical appraisal relying on recent secondary scholarly evidence, and achieved three specific objectives: to examine the Marxist conception of wealth and its relationship to class consciousness within capitalist society; to assess the extent to which Marxist theory accommodates human aspirations and individual motivation; and to critically evaluate the utopian promise of an egalitarian society advanced by Marxism and its practical realisability. Drawing on recent scholarly work in social theory and political philosophy, and employing the Marxist perspective as its theoretical framework, the paper found that while Marx's analysis of surplus value and exploitation retains diagnostic power for understanding contemporary wealth concentration, Marxist theory has persistently struggled to account for the incentive-sensitive dimensions of human motivation, and that historical attempts to realise its egalitarian promise have consistently generated new hierarchies, coercive levelling mechanisms, and economic stagnation. The paper concluded that Marxism offers a powerful critical vocabulary for interrogating capitalist wealth relations, but that its utopian promise of a classless, egalitarian society remains empirically unrealised and theoretically underdetermined, and therefore recommended a more chastened, empirically grounded engagement with Marxist categories going forward.

Keywords: Marxism, Wealth, Class Consciousness, Human Aspirations, Egalitarianism, Utopia

1. Introduction

Few school of thoughts have exercised as profound and as lasting an influence on modern political, economic and social theory as Marxism. Emerging from Karl Marx's critique of nineteenth-century

industrial capitalism, Marxist theory advanced a distinctive analysis of wealth, according to which the accumulation of capital by a propertied bourgeoisie rest upon the systematic appropriation of surplus value produced by a labouring proletariat (Pham, 2025). This analysis was never intended as a purely descriptive exercise; it was conceived as the theoretical foundation for a revolutionary project aimed at abolishing class society altogether and establishing, in its place, an egalitarian order in which the means of production would be held in common and human beings would be freed from the alienating compulsions of wage labour (Øversveen & Kelly, 2025).

Central to this revolutionary project was the concept of class consciousness, understood as the process by which members of the proletariat come to recognise their shared position within the capitalist mode of production and their common interest in its overthrow (Øversveen & Kelly, 2025). Marx and his successors regarded the development of class consciousness as a precondition for successful revolutionary transformation, distinguishing between a merely objective class position, defined by one's relationship to the means of production, and a subjective class consciousness, defined by active political awareness and solidarity. This distinction has generated more than a century of scholarly debate concerning why, in many advanced capitalist societies, working-class populations have not developed the revolutionary consciousness that classical Marxist theory predicted, and concerning what other factors, whether ideological, institutional or psychological, might account for this apparent discrepancy between theory and historical experience.

The promise animating this entire theoretical edifice was fundamentally utopian in character: the vision of a future, classless society in which exploitation, alienation and material scarcity would be overcome, and in which human beings would be free to develop their capacities without the distorting pressures of capitalist competition. This vision has proved extraordinarily durable, continuing to animate political movements, academic research programmes and popular imagination well into the twenty-first century, even as the historical record of states that have explicitly pursued Marxist revolutionary transformation has generated profound and continuing scholarly controversy regarding whether, and to what extent, this egalitarian promise is capable of practical realisation.

This paper takes as its subject, the critical appraisal of Marxism across precisely these three dimensions: wealth and class consciousness, human aspirations, and the utopian promise of an egalitarian society. In doing so, it does not seek merely to rehearse familiar ideological positions for or against Marxism, but to engage seriously and critically with recent scholarship examining the internal coherence, explanatory power, and practical consequences of Marxist theory, in order to arrive at a balanced, evidence-informed appraisal of what remains defensible within the Marxist tradition and what does not.

2. Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed by this paper concerns the persistent gap between Marxism's diagnostic claims about capitalist wealth and class relations, on the one hand, and its prescriptive promise of an achievable egalitarian society, on the other. Marx's analysis of surplus value offers a coherent account of how capitalist production generates wealth concentration, one that recent Marxist political economy continues to find explanatory purchase in analysing contemporary patterns of capital accumulation and labour's declining bargaining position relative to capital (Desai, 2025; Pham, 2025). Yet the practical political project that Marxism derived from this diagnosis, namely the

revolutionary abolition of class society and the establishment of an egalitarian order administered without recourse to market incentives or private property, has, wherever attempted at scale, produced outcomes markedly different from those envisaged in Marxist theory.

Several practical illustrations bring this problem into sharp relief. For instance, The Soviet Union's attempt to collectivise agriculture in the late 1920s and early 1930s, intended to eliminate the kulak class and establish egalitarian collective ownership, instead produced catastrophic famine in Ukraine and other grain-producing regions, alongside the creation of a new privileged stratum of party officials whose access to goods, housing and services diverged sharply from that of ordinary citizens, a phenomenon subsequently documented extensively in the literature on Soviet nomenklatura privilege.

Maoist China's Great Leap Forward and subsequent Cultural Revolution, likewise undertaken in pursuit of accelerated egalitarian transformation, produced mass famine and social disruption on an enormous scale before China's post-1978 economic reforms explicitly reintroduced market mechanisms and material incentives, a policy shift that itself constitutes a significant practical repudiation of the egalitarian command-economy model by the very state that had most ambitiously pursued it. Smaller-scale voluntary experiments in egalitarian living, such as the Israeli kibbutz movement, provide a further illustrative case: kibbutzim founded on principles of collective ownership and equal distribution of resources irrespective of individual contribution experienced significant difficulties with free-riding and reduced work effort over time, prompting many kibbutzim to abandon strict income equalisation in favour of differentiated, contribution-linked compensation from the 1990s onward.

These practical illustrations raise a fundamental theoretical question that this paper was designed to address: does the persistent divergence between Marxism's egalitarian promise and its practical historical outcomes reflect merely the corruption or mismanagement of otherwise sound theoretical principles by particular political actors, as many contemporary Marxist scholars maintain, or does it reflect a more fundamental theoretical deficiency in Marxism's account of human aspiration, motivation and the conditions under which class consciousness can be sustained absent coercive enforcement? This paper interrogated this question through a systematic and critical review of recent literature addressing Marxist conceptions of wealth, class consciousness, human aspiration, and the feasibility of egalitarian social transformation.

3. Aim and Objectives of the Paper

The aim of this paper was to critically appraise Marxism in relation to wealth, class consciousness, human aspirations, and the utopian promise of an egalitarian society. In furtherance of this aim, the paper achieved the following specific objectives:

- i. to examine the Marxist conception of wealth and its relationship to class consciousness within capitalist society;
- ii. to assess the extent to which Marxist theory accommodates human aspirations and individual motivation; and
- iii. to critically evaluate the utopian promise of an egalitarian society advanced by Marxism and its practical realisability.

4. Methodology

This paper adopted theoretical and literature-based methodology appropriate to a critical appraisal of this kind. It relies entirely on secondary scholarly sources, drawing principally on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2024 and 2025 in the fields of social theory, political philosophy and political economy. Sources were identified through a targeted review of recent scholarship addressing Marxist class analysis, the labour theory of value and surplus value, egalitarian political philosophy, and the practical and theoretical limitations of utopian social transformation.

Priority was given to material that engages directly and critically with Marxist categories, whether from within the Marxist tradition itself or from perspectives external to it, in order to ensure that the paper's appraisal reflects the current state of scholarly debate rather than dated or superseded controversies. The material so gathered was subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, organised around the paper's three specific objectives, and supplemented with illustrative historical examples drawn from documented cases of Marxist-inspired social transformation, in order to test the theoretical claims examined against observable historical experience.

As a theoretical and desk-based enquiry, the paper does not generate new primary data; its contribution lies in the critical synthesis and evaluation of existing scholarly material in relation to a coherent analytical framework.

5. Conceptual Clarifications

5.1 Marxism

Marxism refers to the body of social, economic and political theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and subsequently elaborated by successive generations of theorists, according to which historical development is driven by conflict between social classes defined by their relationship to the means of production, and according to which capitalism, as a historically specific mode of production, generates internal contradictions that will ultimately precipitate its transformation into socialism and, eventually, communism (Øversveen & Kelly, 2025).

5.2 Wealth and Surplus Value

Within Marxist theory, wealth under capitalism is understood to derive fundamentally from the appropriation of surplus value, defined as the difference between the value that workers produce through their labour and the wages they receive in exchange for that labour (Pham, 2025). Capitalists, as owners of the means of production, are held to accumulate wealth precisely through this appropriation, rather than through any productive contribution of their own, a claim that has remained central to Marxist critiques of capitalist wealth accumulation from Marx's own writing through to contemporary Marxist political economy.

5.3 Class Consciousness

Class consciousness denotes the subjective awareness, on the part of members of a given social class, of their shared structural position and common interests, as distinct from the merely objective fact of occupying that position (Øversveen & Kelly, 2025). Marxist theory distinguishes between a class "in itself," constituted by an objective, structurally defined relationship to the means of production, and a class "for itself," constituted by the subjective recognition of that shared position and the political solidarity to which it is expected to give rise.

5.4 Human Aspirations

For the purposes of this paper, human aspirations refer to the individual desires, ambitions and motivational orientations, including the pursuit of personal advancement, recognition, and material reward, that shape human economic and social behaviour. The relationship between human aspirations, so understood, and the collective, class-based motivations posited by Marxist theory constitutes a central point of contention addressed in this paper.

5.5 Egalitarianism and Utopia

Egalitarianism refers to the normative commitment to reducing, or eliminating, unjustified inequalities among persons, typically understood as a family of positions rather than a single unified doctrine, encompassing luck egalitarianism, relational egalitarianism, and Marxist conceptions of classless equality (Zaluski, 2025). Utopia, in the sense relevant to this paper, refers to an envisaged ideal social order, understood by its proponents as both normatively desirable and, in principle, practically achievable, in contrast to a merely aspirational ideal acknowledged to be unattainable in practice.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Wealth and Class Consciousness in Marxist Theory

Recent scholarly evidence continues to grapple with the interpretive ambiguities in Marx's own writing on class and wealth. Øversveen and Kelly (2025) contend that there exists no scholarly consensus on how Marx's theory of class ought to be interpreted, and propose a critical reconstruction identifying three distinct modes of class analysis within Marx's corpus: a structural mode concerned with identifying fundamental class locations within the capitalist mode of production; a sociological mode concerned with the effects of class on socio-economic phenomena; and a political mode concerned with the relationship between class and political action.

Rather than treating class as an index of social privilege, Øversveen and Kelly (2025) argue that class in the Marxist sense is best understood as a category of compulsion, explaining why individuals engage in the social practices necessary for reproducing the capitalist mode of production, irrespective of their subjective awareness of exploitation.

This reconstruction has direct implications for understanding the relationship between wealth and class consciousness, since it suggests that the compulsion binding workers to capitalist production relations operates independently of, and may in some respects be more fundamental than, the development of subjective class consciousness that classical Marxist theory anticipated. Complementing this structural analysis, Pham (2025) revisits Marx's core theses in *Capital*, including surplus value, capital accumulation, and the alienation of labour, arguing that these concepts retain explanatory value for understanding contemporary economic inequality and globalisation, notwithstanding the substantially changed economic landscape since Marx's own time.

Desai (2025), writing from within the Marxist tradition, extends this analysis to the international dimension, arguing that the pursuit of profit under capitalism generates not only domestic class exploitation but also imperialist competition among capitalist states, a dimension of wealth accumulation that she contends much Western Marxism has either neglected or misunderstood.

6.2 Human Aspirations and Marxist Theory

This addresses the relationship between Marxist and egalitarian theory, on the one hand, and human motivational structures, on the other, principally through renewed engagement with the philosopher G. A. Cohen's critique of incentive-based inequality. Buckland (2024) examines Cohen's argument that the demand made by talented individuals for special material incentives, as a condition for deploying their talents productively, is itself a form of exploitation of the less advantaged, since a genuinely egalitarian ethos would lead talented individuals to work as productively without such incentives as with them.

Buckland (2024) demonstrates that Cohen's own acceptance of a "personal prerogative," permitting individuals to give some priority to their own interests, generates significant tensions within his broader critique, since it is unclear on what principled basis a personal prerogative to prioritise one's own interests can be distinguished from precisely the incentive-seeking behaviour that Cohen condemns as exploitative when exhibited by the talented.

This tension identified by Buckland (2024) speaks directly to a longstanding difficulty confronting Marxist and egalitarian theory more broadly: the question of whether human beings can be expected to contribute according to their capacity, and consume according to their need, absent differentiated material incentives, or whether such an arrangement systematically underestimates the role that aspiration, ambition and the desire for personal advancement play in motivating productive human behaviour.

Related scholarly evidence on anomie in capitalist societies further illuminates this terrain from a different angle, examining how the structural and normative conditions of capitalist society generate both conformist and non-conformist orientations toward socially prescribed goals, with significant political consequences for the kinds of collective mobilisation that Marxist theory anticipates (Nickel, 2025).

6.3 The Utopian Promise of an Egalitarian Society

Recent literature interrogates the feasibility and coherence of the egalitarian, utopian vision that Marxism promises. Załuski (2025) offers a wide-ranging critique of contemporary egalitarianism, arguing that much of what now passes for egalitarian politics has drifted away from its traditional core concerns, such as wealth concentration, global poverty and the decline of the middle class, toward more culturally salient but less materially demanding causes, a shift Załuski (2025) characterises as a metamorphosis of egalitarianism into an "easy morality" that permits its adherents to claim ethical credit without incurring substantial personal cost.

Although Załuski's (2025) critique is directed at contemporary egalitarian politics broadly rather than at Marxism specifically, its central argument, that egalitarian movements face a persistent risk of prioritising symbolic over substantive redistribution, bears directly on the historical trajectory of Marxist political movements, many of which have similarly been observed to generate new privileged strata even while proclaiming egalitarian aims.

Möller (2025) addresses this problem of egalitarian and transformative politics from a further angle, examining the difficulties confronting any political project, including Marxism, that seeks fundamental social transformation under conditions of social complexity, in which the sheer diversity

of interests, values and circumstances across a modern society renders any single, comprehensive vision of the good difficult to implement without significant coercion or unintended consequence.

Bayliss et al. (2024), meanwhile, provide indirect but significant empirical evidence bearing on Marxism's utopian promise, demonstrating that neoliberal capitalism in Britain has proved considerably more resilient and persistent than either its critics or, implicitly, Marxist theories anticipating capitalism's terminal crisis, have historically supposed, a finding that complicates any straightforward narrative of capitalism's inevitable supersession by a socialist or communist successor order.

7. Empirical Review

7.1 Empirical Evidence on Wealth and Class Consciousness

Empirical engagement with the Marxist account of wealth accumulation found support in recent Marxist political economy's continued application of the surplus value framework to contemporary capitalism. Pham's (2025) re-examination of Marx's *Capital* argues that the core theses of surplus value, capital accumulation and the alienation of labour retain explanatory value for understanding contemporary economic inequality and globalisation, notwithstanding the substantially changed economic landscape since Marx's own time, while Desai's (2025) extension of Marxist wealth analysis to the international arena documents how the pursuit of profit generates competitive pressure among capitalist states that reproduces exploitative relations at a global, rather than merely domestic, scale. This body of scholarly evidence lends credibility to the diagnostic dimension of Marxist wealth theory reviewed above.

However, empirical evidence on the subjective dimension of class consciousness presents a more complicated picture. Notwithstanding measurable wealth concentration, sustained cross-national evidence of the kind of revolutionary class consciousness anticipated by classical Marxist theory remains elusive in most advanced capitalist societies; Øversveen and Kelly's (2025) reconstruction of Marx's three modes of class analysis is itself, in part, a scholarly response to this empirical puzzle, since it seeks to explain continued capitalist reproduction through structural compulsion rather than through the mobilisation of subjective class consciousness that earlier Marxist theory had anticipated as the primary mechanism of revolutionary transformation.

7.2 Empirical Evidence on Human Aspirations

Empirical and analytical evidence on human aspirations and motivation similarly complicates core Marxist and egalitarian assumptions. Buckland's (2024) analysis of the internal tensions in Cohen's incentives critique provides analytical, rather than directly quantitative, evidence that even philosophically sophisticated defenders of strict egalitarian distribution struggle to construct a fully coherent account of how talented individuals can be motivated to exercise their talents productively absent some accommodation of self-interested aspiration. This analytical finding is consistent with the broader historical record of centrally planned economies explicitly organised around Marxist principles, in which the absence of differentiated material incentives was repeatedly found to generate reduced productive effort, prompting periodic reintroduction of incentive-based reforms, as most consequentially illustrated by China's post-1978 economic liberalisation under Deng Xiaoping, which explicitly reintroduced material incentives and market mechanisms after the demonstrable productive failures of the preceding collectivist period.

7.3 Empirical Evidence on the Utopian Promise of Egalitarian Society

Empirical evidence bearing on the practical realisability of Marxism's egalitarian promise is most directly addressed in Bayliss et al.'s (2024) documentation of neoliberal capitalism's persistence in Britain, notwithstanding repeated predictions of its terminal crisis. This empirical finding is significant because it directly tests one of Marxism's central historical predictions, namely that capitalism's internal contradictions would generate conditions conducive to its revolutionary supersession; the continued resilience of capitalist economic arrangements across advanced economies, decades after such predictions were first advanced, constitutes empirical evidence against the deterministic dimension of Marxist historical theory, whatever residual diagnostic value its analysis of wealth concentration may retain.

Complementing this finding, the historical record of states that have explicitly pursued Marxist-inspired egalitarian transformation, including the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and smaller voluntary experiments such as the Israeli kibbutz movement, provides further empirical evidence that egalitarian arrangements pursued at scale have tended either to generate new forms of hierarchy and privilege, as documented extensively in the historical literature on Soviet nomenklatura privilege, or to be abandoned in favour of differentiated, incentive-based arrangements once the productive costs of strict equalisation became apparent, as occurred in numerous kibbutzim from the 1990s onward.

8. Theoretical Framework: The Marxist Perspective

This paper adopted the Marxist perspective itself as its theoretical framework, in order to ensure that its critical appraisal engages with Marxism on its own analytical terms before subjecting those terms to critical scrutiny. The Marxist perspective holds that the fundamental unit of social analysis is the mode of production, understood as the combination of the forces of production, comprising labour, technology and resources, and the relations of production, comprising the social and property relations governing who controls those forces (Øversveen & Kelly, 2025).

Under capitalism, the relations of production are structured by the private ownership of the means of production by a capitalist class, and the sale of labour power by a propertyless working class compelled to sell that labour power in order to secure its subsistence. From this structural arrangement, Marxist theory derives its account of surplus value, according to which the value produced by workers exceeds the value of the wages paid to them, with the difference appropriated by capitalists as profit (Pham, 2025).

The Marxist perspective further holds that this exploitative relationship generates class conflict, since the interests of capital, in maximising the extraction of surplus value, and the interests of labour, in securing improved wages and working conditions, are structurally opposed. Over time, Marxist theory anticipates that the contradictions internal to capitalist production, including the tendency toward capital concentration, periodic crises of overproduction, and the progressive proletarianisation of intermediate social strata, will generate the material conditions for the development of revolutionary class consciousness among the proletariat, culminating in the overthrow of capitalist relations of production and their replacement by collective ownership of the means of production.

Desai's (2025) extension of this framework to the international level, emphasising the role of imperialist competition among capitalist states in sustaining the capitalist mode of production globally, represents a significant contemporary elaboration of this theoretical perspective, suggesting

that capitalism's contradictions may be displaced onto the international arena even where they are, to some degree, managed domestically within particular capitalist states.

Applying this theoretical framework to the paper's three objectives yields a coherent, internally consistent account of wealth, class consciousness, and the promise of egalitarian transformation, entirely on Marxism's own terms: wealth derives from the appropriation of surplus value; class consciousness is the necessary subjective correlate of the objective class conflict generated by that appropriation; and the egalitarian, classless society represents the determinate historical outcome of the resolution of this conflict through proletarian revolution. It is precisely because this framework possesses such internal coherence that its empirical and practical adequacy, examined critically in the discussion that follows, becomes the decisive question for any serious appraisal of Marxism's contemporary relevance.

9. Discussion

The literature and empirical evidence reviewed in relation to the first objective indicate that Marx's analysis of wealth accumulation through the appropriation of surplus value retains meaningful diagnostic power, a conclusion supported by contemporary Marxist political economy's continued application of the concept to patterns of capital accumulation and labour's weakening bargaining position under globalised capitalism (Desai, 2025; Pham, 2025). This paper's critical scrutiny, however, identifies a significant explanatory gap between this diagnostic account of wealth accumulation and the theory's further claim that such accumulation generates revolutionary class consciousness.

Øversveen and Kelly's (2025) reconstruction of class as a category of compulsion, rather than of subjectively experienced solidarity, is itself an implicit acknowledgement of this gap: if capitalist reproduction can be adequately explained by structural compulsion alone, then the absence of widespread revolutionary consciousness in most advanced capitalist societies, despite persistent and in some respects worsening wealth concentration, ceases to constitute a puzzle requiring further Marxist theoretical elaboration, but instead calls into question whether the concept of class consciousness, as classically formulated, was ever an accurate predictive claim rather than a normative aspiration retrospectively read into Marx's structural analysis.

This paper's critical position is that Marxism's wealth analysis and its class consciousness thesis, while presented by Marx and subsequent theorists as two aspects of a single coherent theory, in fact rest on substantially different evidentiary foundations, with the former considerably better supported by available evidence than the latter.

In relation to the second objective, the discussion indicates that Marxist and cognate egalitarian theory has persistently struggled to provide a fully coherent account of human motivation that does not, in practice, require some accommodation of the very aspirational, self-interested behaviour that its normative vision seeks to transcend. Buckland's (2024) demonstration that Cohen's own incentives critique cannot be sustained without recourse to a personal prerogative that reintroduces precisely the self-interested calculation Cohen elsewhere condemns illustrates, at the level of rigorous analytical philosophy, a difficulty that has repeatedly manifested at the level of practical policy in states pursuing Marxist-inspired economic organisation: absent differentiated incentives linked to individual

contribution, productive effort has repeatedly proved difficult to sustain, a pattern observable across contexts as varied as Soviet collective farms, Maoist communes, and voluntary kibbutzim.

This paper takes the critical position that this is not a merely contingent implementation failure attributable to poor leadership or unfavourable circumstances, as much sympathetic Marxist commentary maintains, but a predictable consequence of a theoretical framework that systematically underweights the role of individual aspiration, ambition and desire for personal advancement in shaping human economic behaviour. Where Marxist theory treats such aspirations as ideological artefacts of capitalist socialisation, destined to wither once capitalist relations of production are abolished, the recurrent historical evidence of their persistence under explicitly post-capitalist arrangements suggests instead that they reflect a more deeply rooted feature of human motivational psychology that egalitarian social engineering has consistently underestimated.

In relation to the third objective, this paper's critical scrutiny finds substantial grounds for scepticism regarding the practical realisability of Marxism's egalitarian promise, notwithstanding the continued normative appeal of that promise. Bayliss, Fine, Robertson, et al.'s (2024) documentation of neoliberal capitalism's persistence directly undermines the deterministic historical prediction, central to classical Marxist theory, that capitalism's internal contradictions would generate the material conditions for its own revolutionary supersession; four decades after neoliberal capitalism's consolidation, and considerably longer after Marx's original predictions, no such supersession has occurred in any advanced capitalist economy through the mechanism Marxist theory specifies.

More damningly, the historical record of states that have explicitly attempted to realise Marxism's egalitarian vision at scale, including the Soviet Union and Maoist China, demonstrates not the classless, harmonious order envisaged in Marxist theory, but the emergence of new privileged strata, defined by proximity to political power rather than by ownership of capital, alongside catastrophic human costs including engineered famine and political purges that dwarf, in scale and severity, the exploitative relations these regimes were established to abolish.

Zaluski's (2025) and Möller's (2025) analyses, though directed at contemporary egalitarian politics more broadly rather than at historical Marxist regimes specifically, together suggest a structural explanation for this recurrent pattern: the sheer complexity and diversity of human society renders any comprehensive, centrally administered egalitarian order difficult to sustain without either coercive enforcement or a retreat into symbolic rather than substantive equalisation.

This paper's critical conclusion is that Marxism's utopian promise, however normatively compelling in its critique of capitalist exploitation, has not been demonstrated to be practically achievable by any society that has attempted its realisation, and that the burden of proof accordingly rests on contemporary Marxist scholarship to explain why renewed attempts at egalitarian transformation would avoid the outcomes that have consistently attended previous ones.

10. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a critical appraisal of Marxism across three dimensions directly drawn from its title: wealth and class consciousness, human aspirations, and the utopian promise of an egalitarian society. The evidence and argument reviewed indicate that Marxism's diagnostic analysis of capitalist wealth accumulation, grounded in the concept of surplus value, retains genuine

explanatory power and finds meaningful, if partial, corroboration in contemporary evidence of wealth concentration.

However, the paper's critical scrutiny finds that Marxism's further claims, that such wealth concentration reliably generates revolutionary class consciousness, that human beings can be motivated to contribute productively absent differentiated material incentives, and that a classless, egalitarian society is practically achievable at scale, are considerably less well supported by available theoretical argument and historical evidence.

The persistent gap between Marxism's utopian promise and the historical record of its practical attempted realisation is not, this paper concludes, adequately explained by contingent implementation failures alone, but reflects a more fundamental underestimation, within Marxist theory itself, of the role that individual aspiration and incentive-sensitive motivation play in human economic and social behaviour. Marxism accordingly retains value as a critical lens for interrogating the mechanisms of capitalist wealth accumulation, but its prescriptive vision of an achievable egalitarian utopia must, on the evidence reviewed in this paper, be regarded as unproven at best and, at worst, as a recurrent source of the very hierarchies and coercive arrangements it was designed to abolish.

11. Recommendations

Arising from the foregoing discussion and conclusion, this paper makes the following recommendations for scholarship and policy engagement with Marxist theory.

1. Scholars and policymakers engaging with Marxist theory should explicitly distinguish between its diagnostic analysis of wealth concentration, which retains empirical credibility, and its prescriptive claims regarding revolutionary transformation and egalitarian social organisation, which require considerably more cautious treatment.
2. Where egalitarian policy objectives are pursued, whether within capitalist welfare states or in alternative economic arrangements, policymakers should incorporate institutional mechanisms that accommodate rather than deny the role of individual aspiration and material incentive in sustaining productive effort, drawing on the analytical lessons of the incentives debate examined in this paper.
3. Contemporary egalitarian and left-wing political movements should critically examine the extent to which their programmatic priorities address substantive material inequality, as opposed to symbolically salient but less materially consequential causes, in light of the critique of egalitarianism's potential drift toward "easy morality".
4. Given the persistence of unresolved debates concerning class consciousness, human motivation, and egalitarian feasibility, academic institutions should continue to support critical, cross-traditions dialogue between Marxist and non-Marxist scholarship, of the kind exemplified in recent social theory journals, as a means of testing and refining both traditions against the strongest available counter-arguments.
5. Given the severity of the historical costs documented in this paper's empirical review, this paper recommends particular caution before translating even well-founded theoretical critiques of capitalist wealth accumulation into large-scale, centrally administered programmes of social transformation, in favour of incremental,

empirically monitored reform that preserves mechanisms for correcting unintended consequences.

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