



# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE RELEVANCE OF KARL MARX'S THOUGHT IN INTERPRETING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

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## Abstract :

*This article offers a critical review of Karl Marx's contribution to understanding contemporary social realities in Indonesia, particularly in relation to structural inequality generated by global capitalism. The author examines key Marxian concepts such as class conflict, alienation, ideology, and false consciousness, while critically assessing both their limitations and their practical applicability within the local context. Employing a qualitative approach and thematic analysis of recent literature, the article emphasizes the importance of rereading Marx in order to develop a theoretical framework that is not only critical but also context-sensitive. It argues that Marx's thought remains relevant, yet requires reinterpretation that is attentive to Indonesia's socio-political dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Karl Marx, inequality, capitalism, alienation, ideological critique, Indonesia

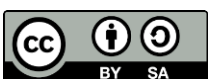
## INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a revolutionary thinker whose work made a foundational contribution to the emergence of critical sociology (Salem & Islam, 2022; Gan & Bai, 2023; Goto, 2013). Through his historical materialist approach, Marx argued that social change is driven by conflicts between social classes arising from unequal economic structures. His ideas not only laid the groundwork for conflict theory but also inspired extensive scholarship on class domination, economic power, and ideological consciousness.

A central concept in Marx's thought is class conflict, understood as the antagonism between the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (the working class) as the driving force of history. Marx maintained that economic exploitation produces structural inequality and institutionalized social suffering (Calvert, 2025; Arsel, 2023; Gray, 2022). This perspective has become a cornerstone of modern social analysis that views injustice not as an anomaly, but as a systemic outcome of capitalist structures.

In the Indonesian context, the concept of class conflict has been employed to examine various forms of inequality, including disparities in access to education, land ownership, and wealth distribution. Hidayati's study on the privatization of education demonstrates how the liberalization of the education sector intensifies class inequality (Hidayati et al., 2022), resonating with Marx's critique of the commodification of basic human needs.

Moreover, Marx developed the notion of false consciousness, referring to



a condition in which oppressed classes fail to recognize their class position and interests due to the dominance of ruling ideologies (Salem & Islam, 2022; Gante, 2025; Iannone et al., 2025). In Indonesia, dominant development narratives often obscure the realities of social inequality, as illustrated by Mutamakin (2023) in his analysis of social structures and power relations within Islamic studies. This article seeks to provide a conceptual reflection on Marx's thought while demonstrating its continued relevance for understanding contemporary Indonesian realities through a literature-based analysis grounded in current social dynamics.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative approach employing a critical literature review method. Sources were selected from open-access academic publications indexed in Dimensions and the Scopus database, including both theoretical articles and empirical studies that apply Marxian frameworks. The analysis is conducted thematically and dialectically, highlighting both the strengths and the limitations of applying Marx's theory within the Indonesian context.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Capitalism and Structural Inequality**

In neoliberal societies such as Indonesia, capitalism extends beyond the economic sphere and penetrates social and cultural structures. Commodification applies not only to goods and services but also to human relations, including education, healthcare, and even social solidarity. Marx anticipated this expansive logic of capitalism as inherently destructive, insofar as it subordinates all values to exchange value alone (Dolph, 2025; Cogliano & Foley, 2024).

Marx's critique of labor exploitation remains highly relevant when observing how informal workers and digital laborers face new, often invisible, forms of exploitation. They work without protection, social security, or bargaining power, as documented in studies of Indonesia's gig economy. Marx warned that capitalism continually invents new mechanisms to exploit labor, even in technologically advanced eras (Salem & Islam, 2022).

For Marx, capitalism is a system that perpetuates exploitation and inequality because production is oriented toward capital accumulation (Januardi et al., 2019; Muslih & Indallah, 2023; Rupita & Niko, 2020; Poletti, 2025; Kustin et al., 2025). In Indonesia, global capitalism manifests in market dominance over public sectors. Januardi et al. (2019) demonstrate how Industry 4.0-era capitalism strengthens capital's dominance over labor and generates new forms of digital oppression.

Rupita and Niko (2020) apply Marxist theory to the structural poverty experienced by Dayak women in West Kalimantan, showing that poverty is not merely cultural but a product of political-economic systems that restrict access to education, healthcare, and resources. In Indonesia more broadly, the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, peasants, and informal workers reflects capitalist domination over subordinate classes. When land and education are

privatized, public access narrows, trapping lower classes in cycles of systemic poverty.

These inequalities are reinforced by weak state institutions in regulating wealth distribution and protecting the rights of oppressed groups. Marx thus offers a sharp structural framework to expose economic power relations concealed behind the rhetoric of development. Capitalism emerges not merely as an economic system but as an ideology organizing social and political relations. In Indonesia, its effects are evident in regional disparities, educational inequality, and unjust wage structures.

In the post-truth era and under social media dominance, capitalist ideology takes new forms through digital algorithms (Kalpokas, 2019; Tebaldi, 2021; Hyvönen, 2022) that filter information according to market interests and political elites. Class consciousness becomes increasingly blurred as oppressed groups are fed narratives that obscure structural inequality. As Marx emphasized, the means of ideological production are controlled by the ruling class. Populist policies that appear “pro-people” often function to preserve the status quo. Social assistance, for example, can operate as a co-optive mechanism that masks class conflict. From a Marxist perspective, class conflict cannot be resolved through symbolic redistribution alone, but requires structural transformation involving changes in relations of production.

### **Class Conflict and Ideology**

Marx asserted that the history of all societies is the history of class struggle. Hidayati et al. (2022) demonstrate how conflicts between elites and lower classes are evident in education policies that discriminate against the poor. Dominant classes control not only the means of production but also ideological apparatuses such as media, education, and law, rendering inequality “normal.” Mutamakin (2023) shows that even religious discourse can be mobilized to reinforce unequal social structures.

Alienation is further intensified by pseudo-meritocratic systems prevalent in modern institutions. Individuals who perceive themselves as “successful” often fail to recognize that their success results from structurally unequal social selection. This constitutes alienation from social structures themselves, where individuals support systems that generate collective estrangement.

Within academia, lecturers and researchers experience intellectual alienation when knowledge production becomes trapped in publication metrics and performance indicators. They are reduced to “intellectual laborers,” working not for public enlightenment but to meet institutional targets. Marx described this as the reduction of human value to a mere instrument of production. In Indonesia, class conflict often remains latent, concealed within bureaucratic practices, resource access, and dominant development narratives. Farmers dispossessed by national projects exemplify latent conflicts unrecognized by the state.

Ideological domination also obscures social positioning, producing what Marx termed false consciousness. Transforming this condition requires class consciousness (Fantasia, 1995; Vucinich et al., 1972; Wright, 1989; Gal-Jacob &

Shoshana, 2025; Kirsten & Biyase, 2025), enabling people to perceive structures of inequality. Thus, Marx's conflict theory remains highly relevant for understanding Indonesia's social realities marked by class inequality and ideological manipulation.

### **Alienation in the World of Work**

Agrarian conflicts and land dispossession in Indonesia exemplify the ongoing process of primitive accumulation. The state often actively facilitates this through regulatory policies favoring corporations and political elites. Marx argued that the capitalist state serves bourgeois interests rather than acting as a neutral institution, contrary to liberal ideology. Digital resource inequality is also emerging as a new form of structural inequality. Access to the internet, technology, and digital literacy increasingly defines new class divisions. Platform privatization and data commodification represent new forms of control over the means of production within a Marxist analytical framework.

Alienation refers to human estrangement from the labor process, the product of labor, fellow humans, and oneself. Under capitalism, workers sell their labor power and lose control over both process and outcomes. Muslih and Indallah (2023) extend Marx's critique to show how capitalist systems reduce humans to mere production instruments. In Indonesia, alienation is visible among contract workers lacking security, factory laborers detached from the products they create, and bureaucratic employees confined to routine tasks.

The gig economy and digital labor exacerbate alienation. Ride-hailing drivers, for instance, work without social protection, are governed by algorithms, and lack community ties or income control. Alienation also affects education, where teachers and lecturers are trapped by administrative and bureaucratic targets that distance them from education's humanistic and emancipatory essence.

Class-based social movements remain fragmented and uncoordinated around a unified vision of structural change. This fragmentation is compounded by identity politics that often displace class struggle. Marx stressed the importance of cross-identity class solidarity as the foundation of social transformation. Nevertheless, emerging phenomena such as digital labor movements and grassroots solidarity indicate potential resurgence of class consciousness (Djana et al., 2025). Digital technology can facilitate resistance networks, disseminate awareness, and organize collective action. A careful rereading of Marx enables society to rearticulate agendas for structural justice. Understanding Marx's concept of alienation reveals that contemporary labor problems concern not only unemployment but also profound estrangement from meaning, control, and social relations.

### **Ownership and Access to Resources**

For Marx, the central issue is ownership of the means of production. When these are controlled by a small elite, wealth distribution inevitably becomes unequal. Recent studies (et al., 2023) examine how land ownership regimes vary according to state ideology, including communism's proposal to abolish private property. In Indonesia, land ownership is highly unequal, and agrarian reform

frequently stagnates due to elite political and corporate interests. Here, Marx's approach is crucial in advocating equitable redistribution of resources grounded in class justice.

Access to education, water, forests, and even air (through carbon taxation) is increasingly governed by market logic. Privatization turns basic needs into commodities accessible only to those who can pay. Marx's concept of primitive accumulation explains how land and natural resources are stripped from Indigenous communities through legal and political mechanisms, as seen in land grabs for mining or infrastructure projects across Indonesia. Marx's critique of private property thus emerges not as utopianism, but as a sharp indictment of systems prioritizing profit accumulation over human needs.

### **Class Consciousness and Social Transformation**

believed social change occurs only when the proletariat becomes aware of its position and power. Class consciousness underpins struggles for structural transformation. Without it, systems perpetuate inequality through economic and ideological domination. In Indonesia, a major challenge is low levels of class consciousness, with many citizens accepting injustice as fate rather than as a consequence of unjust systems. Critical political education remains limited.

Liddle (2013) argues that democratic development requires collective action grounded in awareness of power inequalities, aligning with Marx's thesis that oppressed classes must become subjects of change rather than mere policy objects (Fatah et al., 2023). Labor unions, peasant communities, and student movements play vital roles in cultivating class consciousness, yet face repression, political co-optation, and social fragmentation that hinder consolidation. Consequently, Marx's thought must be reread as an emancipatory tool – not only as theory, but as praxis aimed at building a more just, egalitarian, and humane society.

## **CONCLUSION**

The thought of Karl Marx remains a foundational framework for understanding social inequality and the dynamics of modern capitalism. Through his analyses of class conflict, alienation, ownership of the means of production, and ideological consciousness, Marx provides a rigorous critical lens for interpreting Indonesia's contemporary social realities. These concepts are particularly relevant in contexts marked by the privatization of education, structural poverty, the marginalization of Indigenous communities, and entrenched political-economic inequalities. A contextual rereading of Marx enables the formulation of strategies for social transformation that are more firmly grounded in principles of justice and equality, while remaining attentive to the specific socio-historical conditions of Indonesia.

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