**HISTORICAL MATERIALISM** Karl Marx used this term to describe his theory of social evolution. It was materialistic in the sense that, in contrast to G.W.F. Hegel’s idealism (freedom, reason, self-consciousness, it stressed the primacy of the economy (and the social relations created in that realm) over culture and the development of new ideas. As an approach in the social sciences, materialism gives little or no place to ideas or culture, and insists that what really matters is the economy and the world of production. Idealism was popularized by Georg Hegel who believed that history progressed through a series of clashes between ideas. Karl Marx replaced ideas in Hegel’s model by material forces.

Materialism, therefore, may be defined as a theoretical perspective which takes as its starting place the view that, before anything else, human beings must satisfy their everyday economic needs through their physical labor and practical productive activity

we can derive four fundamental concepts that are central to the materialist theory of history. These are: (i) the means of production; (ii) the relations of production; (iii) the mode of production; and (iv) the forces of production. Taken together, these concepts make up the core of the materialist theory of history and, in order to see how they relate theoretically, let us look at the concept of the means of production.

**FEUDAL MODE OF PRODUCTION** In Marxist models of economic evolution, feudalism is the mode of production that precedes the rise of capitalism and its relations of production are characterised not by exchange in a market but by landlords using their political and legal power to extract a surplus from unfree labourers. FEUDALISM In the Europe of the Middle Ages a ‘feud’ or ‘feu’ was an estate or large unit of land given in return for military service. Feudalism was a system of social stratification and economic organisation with the monarch at its head, who gave land to his major nobles in return for them raising armies and keeping the peace. The major nobles in turn granted land to lesser lords in return for the same service and so on down to the smallest estate. The result was an elaborate system of reciprocal obligations that bound lords and their ‘vassals’ together; the vassals produced various services for the lord; in return the lord protected the vassal and promoted his interests. The lowest orders, the serfs, were not free to sell their labour to the highest bidder but were bound to their lord and were often treated as his property. For example, if a serf’s daughter married a freeman or someone from another estate, the serf would have to pay a penalty to the lord as compensation for the loss of his property. The status of the feudal serf is perfectly indicated by the fact that many medieval documents use the Latin term for ‘litter’ rather than that for ‘children’ to describe the offspring of a serf.

**Means of Production** Marx begins by asserting that, in every stage of history, human beings have had at their disposal certain productive forces of land, animals, tools and machinery, etc., which are necessary to produce . These are called the means of production. According to Marx, the means of production refers to anything in the external world which is used to obtain livelihoods, produce incomes and acquire material needs. But, said Marx, what we observe historically is that only one class of persons has always owned or monopolized the means of production throughout history. This condition of ownership over the means of production is the single most fundamental fact of the materialist theory of history since it is this that leads to the division of society into economic classes.

**Relations of Production** A second concept in the materialist theory of history is the existence of the relations of production. These are of central importance to the materialist theory of history because it is the relations of production which economically bind one class to another in the production process. The role played by the relations of production therefore becomes clear when we look at the result of class relations in historical terms. First, non-owners are compelled to enter into relations of production in order to satisfy their material and economic. needs, and as a result they are subordinated to the class who are dominant over them. Marx, therefore, thought that the relations of production arose from the necessity to produce in society, and as a result of this necessity coercive relations between bosses and workers were created. Feudal societies expressed this relation very clearly when it came time for the serf to use the means of production in order to produce their livelihood. the serf enters into a relation of production with the land¬ holder so that relations of subordination come into play at the moment that the land¬ holder extracted unpaid forced labor service from the serf and then again when the landholder exercised their right over the agricultural product of the serfs. The relations of production include relationships among people and people’s relationships to the forces of production through which decisions are made about what to do with the results.

**Mode of Production:** the term mode of production is used by Marx to identify the primary elements of a given historical stage of production by showing how its economic base shapes its social relations. In this sense, the way people actually produce and enter- into social relations with one another is called a mode of production and this comprises the total way of life of society, its social activities and its social institutions. Ex: barter system, feudal system etc. In acquiring new productive forces, human beings change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production they change their way of earning their living and all their social relations. Everything that goes into the production of the necessities of life, including the "productive forces" (labor, instruments, and raw material) and the "relations of production" (the social structures that regulate the relation between humans in the production of goods. According to Marx and Engels, for individuals, the mode of production is "a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce. "The mode of production is a central concept in [Marxism](https://www.thoughtco.com/karl-marx-biography-3026494) and is defined as the way a society is organized to produce goods and services. It consists of two major aspects: the forces of production and the relations of production. In Marxist theory, the mode of production concept was used to illustrate the historical differences between different societies' economies, and Marx commented on neolithic, Asiatic, slavery/ancient, [feudalism,](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-f-word-feudalism-1788836) and capitalism.

**Forces of Production** : the forces of production may be taken to mean the instruments, equipment, land, tools, etc., which are put to work for purposes of producing a livelihood. As such, forces of production only have capacities to be put to work; but, in and of themselves, these forces can only be put into practise. This can be shown directly when we look at the different modes of production. For instance, in the ancient mode of production, the patrician class presided over the forces of production in such a way that the relations of production entered into by the producer transformed them into slaves and, as far Marx was concerned, this was as a result of the existing relations of production which derived from the way ancient societies engaged in the production process. In feudal society, on the other hand, the landholder directly presided over the forces of production and had rights to control both the labor of the serf and the serf’s agricultural production. In an industrial society, by contrast, bosses have direct control over the means of production as well as the terms of employment, and this gives them rights over the disposition of the product of labor, and control over the laborer and the production process.

Example of forces of production: forces which are applied by people in the production process (body and brain, tools and techniques, materials, resources, quality of workers' cooperation, and equipments, management, human labour). Forces of production are usually in favour of the owners/capitalists/feuds. The forces of production include all of the elements that are brought together in production—from land, raw material, and fuel to human skill and labor to machinery, tools, and factories.

**I**n Marxist theory the evolution of capitalism is characterised by increased in the concentration of ownership in the hands of capitalist and the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

**BOURGEOISIE** This French term is used by Marxists to denote the capitalist class: those who monopolise the ownership of the capital. Note that in this sense capital does not necessarily mean ready money or hard cash but means more generally the resources required for production.

**PROLETARIAT** Karl Marx used this term to denote the class of property less labourers who live by selling their labour power to capitalists.