

PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE

EDITION 2026

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 14

Marx, Gramsci & Arendt · 9 questions

Every question carries a Flow Snapshot — and a handwritten model answer on the channel.

No PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Gramsci's concept of Hegemony.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** hegemony = **Gramsci's** answer to “why no proletarian revolution” → bourgeois power exceeds the economic base
- R2** rule rests on ideas + culture → ruling worldview made “common sense” → consent, not force alone

Body flow

hegemony = predominance of one class → coercion + consent → **Roger Simon**: coercive power + persuasive influence → site = civil society (schools, churches, media) → civil society a real seat of power, beyond the state (vs orthodox Marxism) → **Bobbio**: theoretician of superstructure

Counter-view

hegemony neither total nor permanent → counter-hegemony built through “war of position” in civil society → consent can be contested before power is seized

Conclusion routes

- R1** hegemony frees Marxism from economic determinism → power located in culture, not the economy alone
- R2** while hegemony holds, revolution is impossible → ideological ground must be won first

Hegemony was Antonio Gramsci's answer to why the revolution Marx predicted never came. The bourgeoisie, he argued, rules not only by controlling the means of production but by controlling ideas and culture. It projects its worldview so successfully that subordinate classes accept it as "common sense".

Hegemony thus means the predominance of one social class over another through both coercion and consent. According to Roger Simon, its starting point is a combination of coercive power & persuasive influence over the ruled. This persuasion works through civil society - schools, churches and media - which Gramsci, unlike orthodox Marxists, treated as a real site of power alongside the state. For this focus, N. Bobbio called him a theoretician of the superstructure.

But hegemony is not permanent. So long as it holds, revolution is impossible; the working class must build a counter-hegemony, winning a "war of position" within civil society before any direct assault on power. In this way hegemony freed Marxism from economic determinism, locating power in culture, not economy alone.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 15 marks

Explain Marx's understanding of Human Essence and Alienation.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 Young **Marx's** humanist question → what kind of being is man / what order lets him flourish
- R2 essence and alienation as two sides of one enquiry → what man is vs what capitalism makes of him

Body flow

human essence = species-being / *Gattungswesen* → social animal, rejects liberal individualism → productive, creative, free conscious activity → labour as creative self-expression (**Fromm**: social, cooperative) → alienation = estrangement from this essence → material and social, not intellectual (*Entfremdung*) → four forms: product as alien thing → process as forced labour ("outside himself") → species-being as mechanical toil → other men as competition over solidarity → estranged labour breeds private property → society splits into owners and workers

Counter-view

Marx's material-social alienation set against **Hegel–Feuerbach's** purely intellectual alienation

Conclusion routes

- R1 de-alienation is structural → abolition of private property and wage-labour → labour restored as free self-activity
- R2 real freedom = freedom from want + room for self-development → secured only by ending alienation

Marx's early writings begin from a humanist question: what kind of being is man and what order lets that being flourish? Human essence and alienation are two sides of one enquiry - what man is and what capitalism makes of him.

For Marx, human essence is species-being, *Gattungswesen*. He rejects the isolated individual of liberalism and treats man as a social animal in the Aristotelian sense: productive, creative and capable of free conscious activity. Labour is the mark of this essence; at its highest it is not survival work but creative self-expression. Erich Fromm read Marx similarly: man is cooperative and social, not selfish and atomised.

Alienation is the estrangement of man from this essence. Unlike Hegel and Feuerbach, for whom alienation is intellectual, Marx makes it material and social - *Entfremdung*. Under capitalism the worker is estranged from his product, which confronts him as an alien thing.

From the act of labour, now forced labour where he "only feels himself outside his work"; from his species-being, as creative activity sinks to mechanical toil; and from other men, as competition replaces solidarity.

This estranged labour produces private property and splits society into owners and workers. De-alienation is therefore structural: only abolishing private property and wage-labour restores labour as free self-activity and secures real freedom—freedom from want and room for self-development.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 20 marks

Discuss Hannah Arendt's analysis of the role of ideology in modern totalitarian regimes.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 Origins of Totalitarianism → totalitarianism a novel form of rule, not enlarged tyranny → terror + ideology as twin instruments → ideology = inner logic of domination → role: remake the ground of judgment, not merely persuade
- R2 how does rule become "total"? → ideology supplies a total explanation of past-present-future → claims infallible laws of Nature/History → spine: its role is to destroy independent judgment

Body flow

total explanation claiming infallible laws of Nature/History → Nazi race + Aryan myth + **Hitler's** Darwinian "struggle for existence" → communist historical inevitability → contingent choices presented as superhuman laws → form: immune to falsification + deduced from axioms + cut off from fact → fiction dressed as science → dissolves true/false distinction (ideal subject) → mobilises masses + targeted enemies + normalises violence → propaganda: "central fiction" → "functioning reality" → education destroys the capacity to form convictions

Counter-view

presents itself as rigorous science → yet immune to falsification and detached from fact → power lies not in convincing true believers but in producing people for whom true and false no longer differ

Conclusion routes

- R1 ideology's role is not persuasion but destruction of plurality and independent thought → the one condition total domination needs
- R2 once judgment and plurality collapse → total domination becomes possible

In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt treats totalitarianism not as an enlarged tyranny but as a novel form of rule resting on two instruments: terror and ideology. Ideology is what gives total domination its inner logic. Its role is not merely to persuade, but to remake the ground on which people judge reality.

For Arendt, ideology offers a total explanation of past, present and future. It claims to have discovered infallible laws of Nature or History and presents political events as their necessary outcome. Nazism invoked race and the myth of Aryan superiority, with Adolf Hitler borrowing the Darwinian language of "struggle for existence"; the communist tradition was defended as a scientific reading of historical inevitability. Both presented contingent choices as the execution of super-human laws.

The danger lies in its form. Such ideology is immune to falsification, deduced from fixed axioms & steadily cut off from fact.

At bottom, it is fiction dressed as science. Its deepest work is to dissolve judgment itself: "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between true and false no longer exists."

Once this distinction collapses, ideology mobilises the masses, marks targeted enemies and normalises violence, while propaganda converts the "central fiction" into a "functioning reality".

Ideology's role, then, is not persuasion but the destruction of plurality and independent thought. By making people incapable of judging for themselves, it supplies the one condition without which total domination could not stand.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 15 marks

Differentiate between Freedom and Liberty. Discuss Marx's notion of freedom.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 terms used interchangeably → **Marx** gives them a distinct edge → liberty = liberal non-interference (**Mill**)
- R2 liberty = freedom from external restraint, negative → **Marx** prefers “freedom,” deeper and social → real freedom is more than being left alone

Body flow

liberal liberty: being left alone, **Mill** → **Marx** prefers freedom, liberty tied to liberalism → bourgeois liberty partial: isolated individual, civil-political not socio-economic equality, bound up with alienation → **Marx's** freedom: not isolation, social, in community → “freedom from necessities,” necessity + alienation reduced → natural needs connect people, common good not a sum → labour as “a liberating activity,” ruined by capitalism → **Walicki**: unfettered self-realisation, fewer constraints + positive conditions → conditions: abolish private property + wage-labour, shorter labour time

Counter-view

liberal defence: liberty as non-interference + formal equality guards the individual vs **Marx's** social freedom as collective and condition-dependent

Conclusion routes

- R1 freedom realised collectively → **Engels**: kingdom of necessity → kingdom of freedom
- R2 **Marx** redefines freedom: from non-interference to self-realisation → “free development of each = free development of all”

Though often used interchangeably, liberty and freedom carry a distinct edge in Karl Marx's thought. In liberal thought, liberty means being left alone - freedom from external restraint and protection against the state or other persons.

John Stuart Mill stands in this tradition. Marx prefers the language of freedom because liberty had become tied to liberalism. His objection is sharp: bourgeois liberty treats human beings as isolated individuals and grants civil-political equality without socio-economic equality. It remains partial and bound up with alienation.

For Marx, freedom is not isolation but is found in human community. One does not become free by merely being left alone; one becomes free when material necessity and alienation are reduced. Freedom, in his phrase, is "freedom from necessities". Since natural needs bring people into relations with one another, the common good is not a sum of individual goods.

Freed from alienation, labour becomes "a liberating activity" through which people realise themselves; capitalism destroys this. Andrzej Walicki reads Marxian freedom as unfettered self-realisation, demanding fewer external constraints & positive conditions for development. This needs abolishing private property and wage-labour and shorter labour time. Freedom is collective

Friedrich Engels's leap from the Kingdom of necessity to the Kingdom of freedom, where "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 20 marks

According to Gramsci, 'hegemony is primarily based on the organisation of consent.' Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 Marx's missing revolution → Gramsci's answer is hegemony → rule by organised, manufactured consent, not force alone
- R2 hegemony = control by cultural means → consent produced, not freely given → "organisation" is the operative word

Body flow

civil society (family / school / church) → existing order as common sense → intellectuals: traditional (falsely independent) + organic (voice of their class) → philosophy for masses → bourgeoisie unquestioned → consent also organised by accommodation (subaltern demands absorbed → particular interest as general) → Gramsci's inversion of Marx: belief is the basis of state power, not the reverse → Anderson: state as instrument of socialisation, shaping minds

Counter-view

"primarily" not "wholly" → coercion never disappears → Gramsci (p. 12): apparatus disciplines those who do not consent → force as the armour behind persuasion → consent itself uneven → Jackson (p. 570): "contradictory consciousness" — approbation/apathy, resistance/resignation

Conclusion routes

- R1 rule rests first on organised consent (civil society + intellectuals) → force held in reserve
- R2 consent primary because organised into common sense → coercion the backstop, not the foundation

For Antonio Gramsci, the central puzzle was why the revolution Kaul Marx predicted never arrived in advanced capitalist societies. His answer was hegemony - the rule of the bourgeoisie not by force alone, but by the active organisation of consent. The word "organisation" is decisive. Consent here is not freely given; it is produced.

Gramsci locates this work in civil society - the family, the school, the church - which teaches respect for the existing order as common sense. Traditional intellectuals believe themselves independent, yet uphold the dominant ideology; organic intellectuals articulate the worldview of their class. Consent is also organised by accommodation: the ruling class absorbs some subaltern demands, so that its narrow interest appears as the general interest.

The consent is primary follows from Gramsci's inversion of Marx - belief and agreement become the basis of state power, not power the basis of belief. According to Perry Anderson, the Gramscian state becomes an instrument of socialisation, shaping minds rather than only enforcing order.

Yet "primarily" is not "wholly". Coercion never disappears. The state's apparatus, Gramsci writes, "enforces discipline on those groups who do not consent"; it is the armour standing behind persuasion. Consent itself is uneven - Jackson calls it a "contradictory consciousness" mixing approbation and apathy, resistance & resignation.

The statement therefore holds. Bourgeois rule rests first on organised consent, secured through civil society and intellectuals, with force held quietly in reserve.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 20 marks

Critically examine Hannah Arendt's conceptual triad of labour, work and action.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 triad set inside *vita activa* → the ascending ranking is itself the argument
- R2 ranking recovers action + freedom from a world fixed on survival/production → reordering = both her achievement and the target of critics

Body flow

labour (*animal laborans* → biological necessity → no freedom → near-slave) → work (*homo faber* → durable world → partly free → bound to means/ends) → action (*zoon politikon* → highest → speech + deed → discloses who we are) → *differentia specifica* (apart from animals + gods) → freedom as natality + plurality (equal yet distinct) → action = politics → reverses **Plato** (contemplation first) + **Marx** (labour first) → politics an end in itself / participatory democracy vs elite rule

Counter-view

Marxist: control of production → *homo faber* precedes action → labour category too simple (ignores skilled work) → inconsistency: contemplation restored in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Conclusion routes

- R1 the ranking is at once her contribution and her vulnerability
- R2 triad as a diagnosis → dominance of labour/work narrows freedom → action is what lets humans live fully

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt divides the *vita activa* into labour, work and action, ranking them in ascending order. The ranking carries her argument: she recovers political action and with it freedom, from a world that prizes survival & production. This reordering is both her achievement and the point critics press hardest.

Labour, the activity of animal laborans, meets biological needs and ties humans to necessity, leaving the labourer no freedom, a near-slave to need. Work raises humans to *homo faber*, maker of a durable world; here the craftsman governs his material and is partly free, yet bound to means and ends. Action the activity of *zoon politikon*, stands highest: through speech and deed among equals, humans show who they are.

It is *differentia specifica* dividing humans from animals and gods, where freedom appears as natality, the power to begin anew, and plurality, being equal yet distinct. For Arendt, action is politics itself.

This hierarchy reverses Plato, who placed contemplation first & Karl Marx, who placed labour first.

The same ranking draws strong criticism. For a Marxist, whoever controls production controls the superstructure, so homo faber precedes action. Her category of labour is too simple, ignoring skilled roles like managers and supervisors. She is inconsistent too: having dethroned contemplation, she restores critical reasoning in Eichmann in Jerusalem.

Even so, the triad holds as a diagnosis: when labour & work dominate public life, the space for freedom narrows, and action remains what lets humans live fully.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Discuss Karl Marx's concept of class.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 class = **Marx's** central social category → not rank/status but relation to means of production
- R2 class as a production-relationship → "fixed place in the process of production" → basis of history and revolution

Body flow

relation to means of production → bourgeoisie / proletariat → three classes in *Capital* (wages / profit / rent), tied to surplus → class "in itself" (shared position) → class "for itself" via consciousness → organised political force → "history of all... class struggle" → capitalism sharpens haves vs have-nots → proletariat abolishes itself + class antagonism

Counter-view

Weber: two-class too simple, layered structure → **Ambedkar**: class insufficient for India, caste shapes relations

Conclusion routes

- R1 class = relationship of production that drives history and grounds emancipation
- R2 **Marx's** lasting achievement → class as the bridge from economic structure to historical change

For Karl Marx, class is the central category of social analysis, but it is neither a rank nor a legal status. It is a relationship defined by one's relation to the means of production—"a social class occupies a fixed place in the process of production."

"At its broadest, capitalist society splits in the bourgeoisie, who own & the proletariat, who do not. In Capital Marx also recognises 3 classes - labourers on wages, capitalists on profit, landowners on rent - each tied to the distribution of surplus."

Shared position in production gives only a class in itself. It becomes a class "for itself" when members recognise common interests; consciousness then turns a category into an organised political force. Hence Marx and Friedrich Engels open with the claim that "the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle."

Under capitalism the antagonism between haves and have-nots grows sharpest and proletariat alone can abolish itself as a class, and with it class antagonism itself.

Critics resist this design. Max Weber rejects the two-class reduction and argues for a more layered structure, while B.R. Ambedkar finds class insufficient for India, where caste shapes social relations. Still, Marx's achievement holds: he made class a relationship of production that drives history and grounds the hope of emancipation.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 15 marks

Marx's concept of 'alienation' is an essential part of the reality in capitalism. Explain.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 alienation ≠ moral complaint about employers → it is the objective condition of capitalist life
- R2 estrangement is material & social, not intellectual (vs **Hegel** / **Feuerbach**) → "springs from the very nature of capitalist production" → essential, not accidental

Body flow

root in capitalist structure: producer cut off from means of production + labour power becomes a commodity → four estrangements follow → product (alien object owned by capital) → act of labour (forced; "mere means to satisfy needs outside itself") → species-being (free conscious activity → mechanical survival-work) → other people (competition over solidarity → class antagonism) → alienated labour produces private property → deepens the structure → **Allen Wood**: objective structure of capitalist society

Counter-view

reformist/welfare reading (alienation as a removable defect) vs **Marx's** structural claim → concessions cannot touch what springs from the nature of capitalist production

Conclusion routes

- R1 alienation is the lived reality of capitalism, ended only by abolishing its structure
- R2 de-alienation needs common ownership + conscious control by associated producers, not charity

For Karl Marx, alienation is not a moral complaint about harsh employers; it is the objective condition of capitalist life.

Unlike Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach, who treated estrangement as intellectual, Marx (*Entfremdung*) makes it material and social.

It springs, in his words, "from the very nature of capitalist production," and so cannot be a passing defect.

The root lies in capitalism's structure. It separates producers from the means of production and turns labour power itself into a commodity. Four estrangements follow. The worker is alienated from the product, which confronts him as an alien object owned by capital. He grows estranged from his species-being, as free conscious activity sinks to mechanical survival work. And he is set against other people, as competition replaces solidarity and hardens into class antagonism.

Anienated labour in turn produces private property, deepening the same structure. As Allen Wood notes, alienation is "the objective structure of experience and activity in capitalist society." Welfare concessions cannot remove it; only common ownership and conscious control by associated producers can.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 15 marks

Hannah Arendt analysed a few categories of *vita activa*. Explain.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 *vita activa* = three human activities (labour / work / action) → ranked in ascending order of importance
- R2 **Arendt** reframes the human condition → activity over contemplation → three modes ranked by degree of freedom

Body flow

labour / *animal laborans* → biological necessity, repetitive, near animal & slave, no freedom → work / *homo faber* → fabrication of an artificial, durable common world that divides & unites, partial freedom → action / *zoon politikon* → speech & deed among equals in the public realm, discloses identity, freedom as natality, plurality (equal yet distinct), highest realisation

Counter-view

rival claimants for the highest activity → **Plato's** contemplation vs **Marx's** labour → **Arendt** crowns action as the *differentia specifica*

Conclusion routes

- R1 action = *differentia specifica* → separates humans from animals and gods
- R2 the ascent culminates in action → only here are freedom and politics fully realised

In the Human Condition, Hannah Arendt uses the term *vita activa* for 3 fundamental human activities - labour, work & action - and arranges them in an ascending order of importance.

labour answers the biological necessities of life. It is commanded by necessity and endlessly repetitive, so the labouring human is reduced to animal laborans, close to the animal and even to the slave. Here man has no freedom.

Work corresponds to fabrication. As *homo faber*, the maker of things, man builds an artificial, durable world that both divides and unites human beings. He is partially free, though still bound to the material world.

Action is the highest activity and the true realisation of the *vita activa*. Here man appears as *zoon politikon*, acting and speaking among equals in the public realm. Action discloses who we are and actualises freedom – the capacity to begin something new (*natality*) – within a condition of plurality, where all are equal yet distinct.

This ranking is deliberate. Against Plato, who placed contemplation highest and Karl Marx, who placed labour highest, Arendt holds that action is the *differentia specifica* of human beings – what separates them from animals and from gods, and the sphere where they are free in the true sense.

• FORUMIAS •

PSIR OPTIONAL 2026

Programs Starting This Month

FOR UPSC CSE 2026 ASPIRANTS

O-AWFG Prime 2026

📅 Started · 2 June 2026

● ONGOING

O-AWFG 2026

📅 Started · 2 June 2026

● ONGOING

ATS 2026

📅 Started · 7 June 2026

● ONGOING

OGP Advanced 2026

📅 Starts · 14 June 2026

○ UPCOMING

OGP Advanced+ 2026

📅 Starts · 14 June 2026

○ UPCOMING

STRUCTURED MENTORSHIP • ADVANCED ANSWER WRITING • TEST SERIES •
PERFORMANCE TRACKING

Enrolment & Mentorship Queries

📞 93117 40432

Amit Pratap Singh • PSIR Faculty, ForumIAS

• FORUMIAS •

PSIR OPTIONAL 2027

Programs Starting This Month

FOR UPSC CSE 2027 ASPIRANTS

O-AWFG Prime 2027

COHORT 2

● ONGOING

📅 Started · 8 June 2026

O-AWFG 2027

COHORT 2

● ONGOING

📅 Started · 8 June 2026

ATS 2027

COHORT 2

○ UPCOMING

📅 Starts · 14 June 2026

BUILD STRONG FOUNDATIONS • MASTER PSIR CONCEPTS •
DEVELOP ANSWER WRITING EARLY

Enrolment & Mentorship Queries

📞 93117 40432

Amit Pratap Singh • PSIR Faculty, ForumIAS