

Marx, Gramsci & Arendt

Day 14 closes Western Political Thought with its three giants — Marx, Gramsci and Arendt. Dense in the paper and dense on the page; this is a revision sprint, so move fast and fill any gaps from your class notes. **Revise → write a little → don't break the chain.**

These three thinkers across the last decade — counted from this chapter's own PYQ list (2016–2025): **1 × 10m · 5 × 15m · 3 × 20m**. Marx, Gramsci and Arendt each recur.

1 Karl Marx — the man and his age

Karl Marx is decisive in political thought because he joined economy, society, state and human freedom in a single frame. Writing in the Industrial Revolution, he read capitalism not as a moral error but as a historically specific **mode of production** — admiring how it transformed productive forces, condemning its exploitation, alienation and inequality. He cast himself as a social scientist of history: material life, above all production, shapes social existence and consciousness. His thought returns with force whenever inequality, concentration of wealth, overproduction and social breakdown sharpen.

"Philosophers have only interpreted the world, what matters is to change it." — **Karl Marx**

Historical background

Nineteenth-century Europe, with industry remaking labour, production and class. The **French Revolution** gave modern politics the language of liberty, equality and fraternity. He studied at the University of Berlin where **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** dominated philosophy. His ambition: move socialism from moral appeal to scientific explanation; his concern, not only the suffering of workers but the emancipation of humanity as a whole.

Influences

Source	What Marx drew from it
G.W.F. Hegel	The dialectical method — but he rejected Hegel's idealism and shifted dialectics from ideas to material life
Young Hegelians	Critique, reason, dialectical change; he began here, then moved beyond
Ludwig Feuerbach	Religion as a projection of human powers — then argued religion itself rests on material conditions
British political economy	John Locke on property; David Ricardo 's labour theory of value
Utopian socialists	Louis Blanc, Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen — called "unscientific" for appealing to the conscience of capitalists, not class struggle

Louis Althusser later named the shift from Young to Mature Marx an **epistemological break**.

Marx on religion

Early Marx accepted the Young Hegelian view of religion as **false consciousness**. He later held it a symptom of oppression more than its root cause.

"Religion is the Opium of the Masses." — **Karl Marx**

It dulls the pain of oppression without removing its material basis; emancipation needs transformation of material relations, not only critique of belief.

2 Human Essence and Alienation

Human essence — species-being

The early writings begin from a humanist question: what kind of being is man, and what order lets that being flourish? Marx rejects the liberal image of the isolated individual; man is a social animal in the **Aristotle**-ian sense. In *Holy Family*, natural needs bring human beings into relations with one another and give rise to civil society. Man is not defined by reason alone but is productive, social and creative — Marx's term is **Gattungswesen** or **species-being**. What separates man from animals is **free conscious activity**; labour at its highest is not survival-work but creative self-expression. **Erich Fromm** reads Marx here: man is fundamentally social and cooperative, not selfish and atomised.

Species-being

"Man is a species-being... because he treats himself as the actual, living species." Human essence is not fixed outside history; it develops with the mode of production, and freedom means freedom from want and the room for self-development.

Meaning of alienation

For **G.W.F. Hegel** and **Ludwig Feuerbach** alienation is mainly intellectual; for Marx it is **material and social**. His term is **Entfremdung** or estrangement — the separation of things that naturally belong together: worker and product, worker and labour, man and his species-being, human beings and one another.

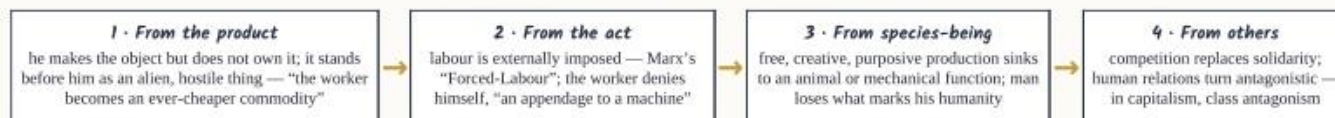
"The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself." — **Karl Marx**

UPSC 2016 · 15m Explain Marx's understanding of Human Essence and Alienation.

3 The Four Forms of Alienation

Alienated labour is the central form of alienation in capitalism: the worker loses control over both the product and the process of labour.

Estranged labour — four deepening separations



George Lukacs later called the world of produced things confronting the worker the **reification** of social relations. Marx also contrasts primitive man, who faced a hostile nature, with modern man, who faces a hostile environment of his own making.

Private property and de-alienation

Marx does not treat private property as a separate moral evil; he links it directly to alienated labour.

"Private property is... the product, result, and necessary consequence of alienated labour." — Karl Marx

Alienation and private property reinforce each other, splitting society into the "haves" and the "haves-not." **Allen Wood** summarises it: alienation is the objective structure of experience and activity in capitalist society. The remedy is structural, not charitable — abolition of private property in the means of production, collective control, the end of wage-labour, the restoration of labour as human self-activity. **Juliet Schor**'s data on stress and overwork show alienation surviving well beyond the nineteenth-century factory; Marx insists it "springs from the very nature of capitalist production," so welfare concessions cannot remove it.

UPSC 2021 · ISm Marx's concept of 'alienation' is an essential part of the reality in capitalism. Explain.

4 Historical Materialism and Dialectics

Historical materialism is Marx's philosophy of history and a direct rejection of Hegelian idealism. **G.W.F. Hegel** treated history as the dialectical movement of ideas or **Geist**; Marx said Hegel stood on his head and had to be set on his feet — ideas do not create material life, they reflect it.

The core thesis

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."

Before thinking or philosophising, human beings must produce the means of subsistence: "The first historical act is... the production of material life." **Friedrich Engels** systematised this — the ultimate cause in history is the economic development of society, read through change in the mode of production.

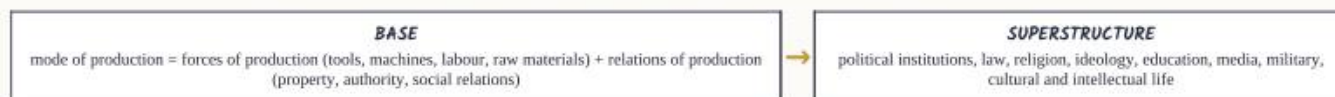
Praxis

Marx joins theory to action; he never treats human beings as passive spectators of historical law: "Man also makes history but only in given circumstances and not under the chosen circumstances." History has objective conditions, yet human action still matters — workers must understand their condition and act, not wait for capitalism to collapse.

Base and superstructure

The economic structure is the real foundation of society; the class that controls the base controls intellectual and cultural production, so the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. Critics therefore charge Marx with **economic determinism**.

Base and superstructure — the base shapes the superstructure in the last instance



5 Mode of Production and the March of History

Every mode of production combines **forces of production** and **relations of production**. At first the relations suit the level of the forces; over time the forces outgrow the old relations, breeding contradiction, crisis and pressure for change. New relations are incubated within the old society, and social classes emerge from these contradictions — slave/master, serf/lord, proletariat/bourgeoisie.

Marx's broad sequence of historical development



The notes also record an alternative classification — **Asiatic**, ancient, feudal, capitalist, with communism as culmination.

6 State, Ideology and Commodity Fetishism

Marx on the state

The state is not neutral; it is part of the superstructure and expresses class domination.

"The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." — Karl Marx

Friedrich Engels sharpens it: the state is "nothing but an instrument of oppression of one class by another — no less so in a democratic republic than in a monarchy." Democratic form does not erase class character. Marx's normative direction: "Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it."

Ideology

Ideology hides, mystifies or justifies inequality, making oppression appear natural and offering false solutions while preserving the order. **False consciousness** — produced by institutions that keep workers from grasping their real condition (religion, nationalism). **True consciousness** — class consciousness, where workers grasp their objective interest.

Commodity fetishism

Not all ideology is imposed; some emerges spontaneously from capitalism itself. In **commodity fetishism**, social relations among people appear as relations among things, and a commodity's value seems an objective property of the object. Human beings become subordinate to commodities.

"The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi fi set..." — Herbert Marcuse

7 Class and Class Struggle

Class is the central category of Marxist analysis — not a rank or status group but a social relationship rooted in production and property, defined by one's relation to the means of production.

Marx on class

'A social class occupies a fixed place in the process of production.'

At the broadest level capitalist society divides into **bourgeoisie** (owners) and **proletariat** (non-owners); in *Capital* Marx also names a three-class structure — labourers (wages), capitalists (profit or surplus value) and landowners (ground rent).

Class as	Criterion	Meaning
Class "in itself"	Objective	persons sharing the same relation to the means of production form a class-position
Class "for itself"	Subjective	members recognise common interests — consciousness leads to organisation and collective action

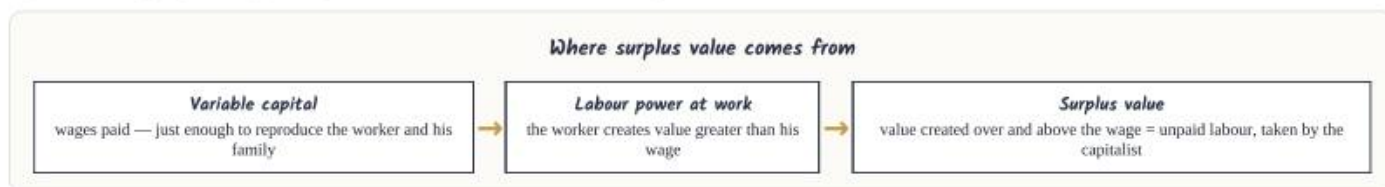
"The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle." — Marx & Engels

In capitalism the antagonism between haves and have-nots reaches its highest point; society splits into two hostile camps. The proletariat is decisive: its suffering is the culmination of exploitation, and by abolishing itself as a class it can abolish class antagonism itself. **Terry Eagleton** cautions that this does not make everything a matter of class struggle, only that class struggle is "most fundamental to human history."

UPSC 2020 · ISM Discuss Karl Marx's concept of class.

8 Surplus Value and the Anatomy of Capitalism

Vladimir Lenin called the theory of surplus value the cornerstone of Marx's economics. Building on **David Ricardo's** labour theory of value, Marx argues that the value of a commodity is set by labour, and that in capitalism labour power creates value greater than the wage paid for it. That excess is **surplus value** — unpaid labour appropriated by the capitalist, and the fundamental law of capitalism.



(Constant capital — raw materials and machinery — transfers its value but creates no surplus.) The contract looks free, but the freedom is illusory: unlike slave or serf, the worker is formally free yet materially compelled by need; he "only chooses his exploiter." Wages are held down by a **reserve army of labour** — the unemployed, the underemployed and those displaced by machines.

Capitalism's internal contradictions

Profit rises as costs fall and wages are pushed toward survival; machinery replaces labour. Yet capitalism impoverishes the very masses who must consume its goods, so purchasing power falls as production expands. Competition eliminates smaller capitalists, monopoly grows, and even the middle class is gradually proletarianised. Marx's phrase: capitalists "dig their own graves."

Thomas Piketty returns to this terrain — when the return on capital exceeds growth, wealth concentrates (he proposes a global progressive wealth tax). **Francis**

Fukuyama concedes Marx's force: he "talked about the crisis of overproduction... that workers would be impoverished and there would be insufficient demand."

9 Revolution, Freedom and the Communist Vision

Theory of revolution

History moves through contradiction: between forces and relations of production (structural change) and between classes (political struggle). **Marx** and **Engels** offer no step-by-step manual — they show how one society grows out of another. The **objective condition** is the existence of the proletariat within capitalism; the **subjective condition** is revolutionary consciousness, the move from class "in itself" to class "for itself."

"Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains and you have a world to win." — Marx & Engels

The political result: overthrow of the bourgeoisie, capture of state power, the **dictatorship of the proletariat** as a transitional phase, and eventual movement to a classless, stateless order. "The bourgeoisie produces its own grave diggers"; revolution is 'the indispensable midwife of social change.'

Freedom and liberty

In liberal thought — the tradition of **John Stuart Mill** — **liberty** means being left alone, freedom from external restraint. Marx prefers the language of **freedom** because liberty had become tied to liberalism. (**Hannah Arendt** is noted as another thinker who sharply distinguishes the two.) Bourgeois liberty treats human beings as isolated individuals and grants civil-political equality without socio-economic equality — so it remains partial and bound up with alienation.

Marx on freedom

Freedom is not isolation but is found in human community; one becomes free not by being left alone but when material necessity and alienation are reduced — freedom is "freedom from necessities."

Labour, freed, is "a liberating activity"; **Andrzej Walicki** reads Marxian freedom as unfettered self-realisation. Its institutional conditions: abolition of private property, end of wage-labour, communistic and rational regulation of production, and a reduction of labour time — the primary condition for the development of human powers.

UPSC 2017 · ISm Differentiate between Freedom and Liberty. Discuss Marx's notion of freedom.

Vision of communist society

Communism is not merely the abolition of private property; its deeper purpose is ending self-alienation. Production is controlled by **associated producers** who decide collectively "what, how and for whom" to produce.

"In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." — Marx & Engels

Class distinctions end, coercive political power "withers away" at the higher stage, and people work according to ability and receive according to need.

Friedrich Engels calls the transition a leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.

10 Marx — Assessment, Critics, Relevance

Contribution	Limitation
turned socialism into a systematic theory of history, society and revolution	often charged with economic determinism — religion, culture, politics appear too dependent on the economy
linked production, property and power permanently	the predicted imminent collapse of capitalism did not occur as expected
shifted attention from legal equality to material inequality	inevitability of proletarian revolution has not borne out historically
class struggle, surplus value and alienation remain strong tools; praxis joins explanation to action	the two-class model looks too simple beside complex modern stratification

The critics

Karl Popper attacks Marx for historicism in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*: "the gaps and loopholes and inconsistencies in the Marxist theory became obvious." **Max Weber** rejects the reduction to two classes and argues for a more complex stratification. **Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi** rejects the inevitability of violent antagonism and offers trusteeship. **Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar** finds class analysis insufficient for India, where caste shapes social relations. **William Robinson** extends class analysis to a transnational capitalist class.

Continuing relevance

Marx remains indispensable wherever inequality, unemployment, underconsumption, monopoly and labour insecurity deepen; alienation persists in blue- and white-collar work alike. **Raya Dunayevskaya** puts the wager plainly: "Marxism is a theory of liberation or it is nothing." Even where his predictions failed, his questions stay alive — who controls production, who appropriates surplus, what happens to human freedom under capitalism.

11 Antonio Gramsci — the Quarrel with Orthodox Marxism

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), Italian Marxist and founder of the Communist Party of Italy, shifted Marxist analysis from the means of production alone to culture, ideology, civil society and everyday life. His sharp question: why did the proletarian revolution predicted by **Karl Marx** not occur in advanced capitalist

societies? His answer was **hegemony** — the bourgeoisie rules not only by owning production but by making its values appear normal, natural and binding as “common sense.” This made him a Hegelian Marxist, a Neo-Marxist, and a major “theoretician of superstructure.”

“The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership.’” — **Antonio Gramsci**

Life and works

Won a scholarship to the University of Turin; joined the socialist movement; in 1921 became a Central Committee member of the new Communist Party of Italy. Arrested in 1926 under Fascism — **Benito Mussolini**: “We have to prevent this mind from continuous functioning.” In prison he wrote the *Prison Notebooks* (1929–1935); also *The Modern Prince* and *Notes on the Southern Question*, where hegemony first appears.

Influences

G.W.F. Hegel (history, consciousness, dialectic), **Benedetto Croce** (culture and historical development), **Niccolo Machiavelli** (*The Modern Prince* — the party as organiser of collective will), **Rosa Luxemburg** (*The Mass Strike* — war of position and manoeuvre), with **Vilfredo Pareto** and **Georges Sorel** in the background.

Agreement and departure

With Marx, Gramsci keeps	From orthodox Marxism, he departs
society split between bourgeoisie and proletariat; class domination is real	rejects crude economic determinism
capitalism rooted in property and control over production	refuses to treat the superstructure as a passive reflection of the base
the state tied to class power; revolution still necessary	gives autonomy to civil society; rule works through “manufactured consent” as much as force

Philosophy of praxis

Gramsci describes the **philosophy of praxis** as a reformed Hegelianism — the living interaction of theory and practice arising from counter-hegemonic struggle, by which subaltern classes “educate themselves in the art of government.” His humanism shows in the line: “Man is above all else mind, consciousness — that is, he is a product of history, not of nature.”

12 The Theory of Hegemony

Hegemony

The predominance of one social class over another through leadership, consent and moral-intellectual direction — “predominance by consent,” not mere domination by force. A class becomes hegemonic when its worldview is accepted as natural, normal and universal by subordinate classes.

Hegemony works on the economic, political, moral and intellectual planes together; the dominant class projects its particular interests as the general interest of society. It must also be a **fundamental class** — an owner or non-owner at one of the two poles of production. **Lucio Gruppi** captures it: hegemony is “the ability to unify and maintain united a social whole via ideology that is... characterized by deep class contradictions.”

Two faces: domination and leadership

Supremacy shows as **domination** (coercive control through political society) and **intellectual and moral leadership** (guidance of allied groups through persuasion, education and culture). Political society supplies force; civil society supplies legitimacy. Coercion never disappears — it remains the “armoured core” behind the legal order, and a rule based on repression alone is a “dictatorship of the night-watchman.” **Stuart Hall** adds that hegemony must be “continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified”: “Hegemony is not a state of grace which is installed forever.”

Consent, common sense and the historic bloc

The ruling class converts its ideas into **common sense** — “a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions” diffused through schools, churches, family, media and popular culture until domination appears spontaneous. It does not rule alone: it builds a **historic bloc** through alliances, compromises and limited sacrifices, “winning over” subaltern classes. **Richard Peet** and **Elaine Hartwick**: hegemony “mystifies power relations... encourages fatalism and political passivity, and justifies the deprivation of many so that few can live well.” Colonial rule worked the same way — the “White Man’s Burden,” an Anglicised elite, civil servants and zamindars easing imperial domination; the Gandhian era reads as a struggle against that ideological legitimacy.

Limited and expansive hegemony

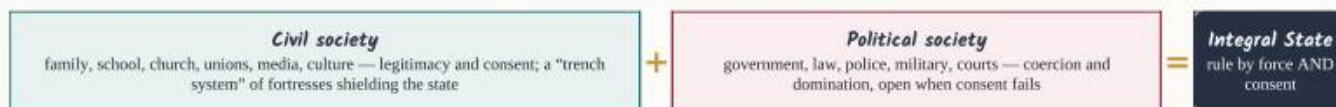
Limited hegemony — the dominant class fails to accommodate subaltern interests; revolution becomes more feasible. **Expansive hegemony** — it accommodates them through reforms and concessions; revolution becomes harder. Hegemony is therefore a moving process of negotiation, not a static fact.

UPSC 2016 · 10m Gramsci’s concept of Hegemony. **UPSC 2019 · 20m** ‘Hegemony is primarily based on the organisation of consent.’ Comment.

13 The Integral State — Political and Civil Society

Gramsci expands the state beyond government. The **integral state** = political society + civil society; it rules through force and consent together. His line “Every State is a dictatorship” underlines that even consent-based orders keep a coercive capacity.

The integral state — coercion and consent fused



Transparent and opaque states

Type	Civil society	Strategy that fits	Example
Transparent	weak; rule directly coercive, state exposed	frontal attack — War of Manoeuvre	Czarist Russia
Opaque	developed; civil society shields the state	War of Position before any frontal assault	Western Europe

Passive revolution & the state as educator

Under modern capitalism the bourgeoisie often changes the *forms* of its rule without surrendering class power — absorbing demands from below and reorganising hegemony. Gramsci calls this **passive revolution**; reformism, fascism and the assembly-line methods of **Frederick Taylor** and **Henry Ford** are examples. **Perry Anderson** reads the Gramscian state as an **educator** — it socialises and carries cultural transformation, so belief and consent become the basis of state power rather than the reverse. This is why Gramsci is called a “theoretician of superstructure.”

14 The Theory of Intellectuals

Gramsci widens the category far beyond scholars and artists: intellectuals are all who perform organisational, technical, cultural or directive functions — administrators, bureaucrats, managers, politicians, the “organizers of culture.”

The starting point

“All men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”

None are independent in an absolute sense; all are organic to social groups. On the vertical plane he distinguishes “specialists” (who organise industry) from “directors” (who organise society); on the horizontal plane, traditional from organic intellectuals.

Traditional intellectuals	Organic intellectuals
see themselves as autonomous, neutral, detached — self-styled “free thinkers”	arise with the development of a specific class engaged in production
their independence is mythical: “Intellectuals as a separate class is a myth”	give their class “homogeneity and awareness of its own function” in the economic, social and political fields
deposited by earlier history (ecclesiastics, priests, lawyers, teachers); carriers of continuity and status quo	bourgeois examples: the industrial technician, the political economist, the organiser of a new culture and legal system
act as deputies of the dominant class, preserving the existing order	subaltern classes can produce their own — Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is treated as an organic intellectual of the Dalit community

Organic intellectuals organise the “systems of relationships” that build hegemony; they give a class coherence, confidence and direction, bound to the masses by “organic cohesion.” An emerging class must also ideologically conquer the traditional intellectuals while elaborating its own — this is how counter-hegemony becomes possible. **Norberto Bobbio**, in “Gramsci and the Conception of Civil Society,” calls him a “theoretician of superstructure” for showing how intellectuals shape ideological power.

UPSC 2015 Discuss Gramsci’s notion of ‘organic intellectuals’.

15 Counter-Hegemony and Revolutionary Strategy

If bourgeois hegemony blocks revolution, proletarian politics must first break it. **Counter-hegemony** means constructing alternative values, beliefs, institutions and leadership — working-class intellectuals, broader alliances and a new “collective will.” Gramsci does not expect subordinate groups to liberate themselves automatically; education, organisation and critical consciousness are necessary.

War of Position	War of Manoeuvre
long, slow, hidden struggle for ideological influence and legitimacy, fought mainly within civil society	open, frontal conflict — direct clash with the coercive apparatus of the state
builds counter-hegemonic culture, alternative institutions, a socialist vision among workers	possible where civil society is weak and political society exposed (Czarist Russia)
the only viable strategy in Western liberal democracies — “fought mainly on the cultural front”	in the West, without prior hegemony in civil society, it risks defeat or counter-revolution

Drawing on **Niccolo Machiavelli**, the **Modern Prince** is the revolutionary party: it develops organic intellectuals, educates the masses in the art of government, converts dispersed grievances into direction, and becomes the expression of the collective will. Counter-hegemony begins when imposed “common sense” is punctured and subaltern groups articulate their own “good sense,” forming a “coalition of subalterns.”

16 Marx vs Gramsci — and Gramsci's Reach

Question	Karl Marx	Antonio Gramsci
Central concept	state as committee of the bourgeoisie	the "integral state"
Control runs through	the economic base and mode of production	economic control <i>plus</i> the production of ideas and ideologies
Domination	stronger stress on coercive force	coercion plus ideological persuasion
Superstructure	largely reflects the base	has autonomy or semi-autonomy
Civil society	part of superstructure, no independent centrality	crucial terrain of power, consent and struggle
Strategy	direct revolutionary overthrow	in the West, War of Position must precede War of Manoeuvre

The reach is wide: **Ernesto Laclau** and **Chantal Mouffe** extend hegemony to the discursive construction of political identities; **Stuart Hall** applies it to media and popular culture; **Paulo Freire** to critical pedagogy; **Robert W. Cox** carries it into International Relations — "dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony," with the IMF and WTO read as pedagogical institutions of a neoliberal worldview. **David Harvey** notes that common sense "typically grounds consent" for market rule; **Louis Althusser's** Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses speak directly to the Gramscian concern. Black Lives Matter reads as counter-hegemonic politics; **Greta Thunberg**, as an organic intellectual of contemporary activism.

Criticism

His position stands sharply against orthodox Marxism; the political-society / civil-society line is powerful but, by his own admission, only conceptual; consent never fully leaves coercion behind (the "coercive armor" remains); and the War of Position is intellectually rich but slow and demanding. Critical interlocutors include **Antonio Negri**, **Michel Foucault**, **Nicos Poulantzas** and **Herbert Marcuse**.

"The abolition of the class struggle does not mean the abolition of the need to struggle as a principle of development." — **Antonio Gramsci**

17 Hannah Arendt — Method and Frame

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) is among the seminal political thinkers of the twentieth century. A German Jewish exile who studied under **Martin Heidegger** and was shaped by **Karl Jaspers**, she fled Nazism and settled in the United States. Exile, statelessness, Nazism and the fate of European Jewry drove her lifelong concern with freedom, authority, total domination and the human condition. A heterodox thinker, she fits no single camp; she called her practice "thinking without barriers."

"The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action." — **Hannah Arendt**

Method / school	What it means in Arendt
Phenomenology	attention to lived political experience; concepts studied as disclosed in speech, action, plurality, fear and public appearance — an existential phenomenologist who turned phenomenology toward politics
Civic republicanism	freedom is not withdrawal from politics but participation in a public world; citizenship is no mere legal status; she opposes apathy, depoliticisation and the reduction of politics to administration

Influences: Greek philosophy, especially **Aristotle** (the polis as a sphere of speech and action); **Saint Augustine**; **Martin Heidegger** (the world of appearances), though she moves from individual existence toward **plurality**; and **Karl Jaspers** (dialogue, "limit situations").

Major works

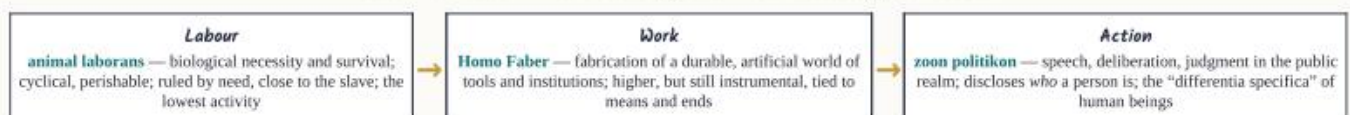
The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) · *The Human Condition* (1958) · *On Revolution* (1961) · *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) · *On Violence* (1969) · *Crises of the Republic* (1970, with the essay "Civil Disobedience") · *The Promise of Politics* (2005).

18 The Human Condition — the Vita Activa Triad

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt reorders the hierarchy of human activities, recovering politics from both economic reductionism and philosophical withdrawal. **Vita contemplativa** is thinking and contemplation; **vita activa** is labour, work and action — and in this phase she sharply privileges the active life, locating the highest realisation of the human condition in **political action**.

"With the term *vita activa* I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action... The human condition of labor is life itself; ...of work is worldliness; ...of action is plurality." — **Hannah Arendt**

Labour to action — an ascending order from necessity to freedom



Action is valuable not because it produces an object but because it discloses freedom in a shared world; politics is a mode of human togetherness in which freedom becomes real. Arendt rejects two traditions — **Plato**, for elevating contemplation above public action, and **Karl Marx**, for elevating labour above political freedom.

Freedom, plurality, natality

“The two central features of action are freedom and plurality.” **Freedom** is not inner will or consumer choice but the capacity to begin and bring something new into the world. **Natality** is the human capacity for new beginnings — the “miracle of beginning.” **Plurality** means human beings are equal yet distinct: “action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men.”

“Men are free... as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.” — **Hannah Arendt**

Critics of the triad

The hierarchy is powerful but too sharp: it leaves little room for mixed roles (managers, supervisors, modern professions); Marxists object that material production cannot be pushed below political action; feminist critics note that care work and household labour vanish; her later concern with thinking and judging in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* sits uneasily with the earlier downgrading of contemplation. Her analysis of depoliticised masses recalls **Jose Ortega y Gasset**’s warning about mass society, and a hard question remains — what of those denied entry into political participation, as with the Palestinians?

UPSC 2019 · 20m Critically examine Arendt’s conceptual triad of labour, work and action. **UPSC 2025 · 15m** Arendt analysed a few categories of *vita activa*. Explain.

19 Politics, Citizenship and Power

Politics has, for Arendt, a degraded meaning and a noble one; her project recovers the second.

Politics in the ordinary sense	Politics in the higher sense
interest articulation and the struggle for power; manipulation, propaganda, narrow self-interest; a relation of rulers and ruled — “the lowest level of human affairs”	free and equal citizens acting together in public; the major achievement of civilisation — “the highest level of human affairs”; to be political is to be free

The **public sphere** has two dimensions: the **space of appearance** (born whenever citizens act in concert through speech) and the **common world** (shared institutions and settings that give human life durability). **Citizenship** is more than legal status — it is direct participation, common action and collective deliberation; only through participation can agency be exercised and collective identity formed.

Power as acting in concert

Arendt on power

“Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert.” Power is not coercion; it arises when people speak and act together in a common world, and draws on **Edmund Burke**’s idea of acting in concert.

“All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of Power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living Power of the people ceases to uphold them.” Laws are only “fences” around freedom; they do not create it. **Jurgen Habermas** later reworked this insight as “power as communicative action.”

20 Civil Disobedience

Arendt treats civil disobedience as a political act of organised public judgment, not private moral withdrawal. She accepts **John Rawls**’s description — a “public, non-violent, conscientious yet political act... aimed at changing laws or policies” — but parts company with **Henry David Thoreau**’s conscience-based view.

“Here, as elsewhere, conscience is unpolitical. It trembles for the individual self and its integrity.” — **Hannah Arendt**

Civil disobedience rests on collective power — “organized minorities, bound together by common opinion rather than common interest” — open illegality, public reasoning and a willingness to accept responsibility. The collective basis matters for legitimacy (the grievance is shared), deliberation (the claim enters the public world) and accountability (dissenters remain tied to constitutional politics). **Conscientious objection** protects personal integrity; **civil disobedience** seeks public change. Her illustrations: the draft resister, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Salt March.

21 Totalitarianism — a Novel Form of Rule

Arendt does not treat totalitarianism as an enlarged tyranny but as a distinct form of rule — the degradation of civic republicanism and the collapse of the public realm, a movement from **polis** to **oikos**, from citizenship to managed existence. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she studies Nazism and Stalinism. Its two instruments are **terror** and **ideology**: past tyranny used fear instrumentally, but here terror becomes a permanent principle and violence an end in itself, seeking domination over body and mind and destroying spontaneity, judgment and the capacity to think.

Roots

She traces it to nineteenth-century Europe — antisemitism, racialism, imperialism, nationalism, tribalism, colonial and capitalist expansion, bureaucratic growth. European myths of racial superiority predate Nazism and were strengthened through empire; **Joseph Arthur de Gobineau** is faulted for racial theory, and lines in **Plato**, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** and **Friedrich Nietzsche** can be read to support totalising politics. It grows when stable life breaks down — crisis, the First World War, the Great Depression, eroded citizenship and the rise of depoliticised, superfluous masses.

Ideology in modern totalitarian regimes

Arendt criticises **ideology** because it claims scientific certainty while resting on fiction. It offers a total explanation of history, claims infallibility, and presents

events as the necessary execution of the laws of Nature or History — Nazism invoked race and Aryan myth; **Adolf Hitler** used the language of “struggle for existence” and “natural selection.” Immune to falsification, deductive from prior axioms, severed from empirical fact, it performs total explanation, mass mobilisation, the elimination of dissent and the justification of violence.

“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.” — Hannah Arendt

Terror, propaganda, organisation

Totalitarian rule does not simply lie; it rebuilds the world so the lie functions as reality — the conversion of a “central fiction” into a “functioning reality.” Its organisation is deliberately chaotic, a “fluctuating hierarchy” with the secret police as power nucleus. Its “real secret” lies in the camps, the regime’s “true central institution,” “laboratories in which the... belief... that everything is possible is being verified” — reducing “the infinite plurality” of human beings to one interchangeable “bundle of reactions” and aiming to “make men superfluous.”

Mass society, loneliness, education

Totalitarianism feeds on atomised mass society where loneliness becomes normal; **Samantha Rose Hill** notes it “crystallises occasional loneliness into a permanent state of being,” and **Roger Berkowitz** that it is “defined by the absence of plurality.” Her warning on education: “the aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any.” The remedy is active citizenship, plurality and the revival of deliberative politics.

UPSC 2016 - 20m Discuss Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the role of ideology in modern totalitarian regimes.

22 Banality of Evil, Revolution and Modernity

The banality of evil

Reporting the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker*, Arendt shifted from political action to the relation between evil, thinking and judgment. What struck her about **Adolf Eichmann**, organiser of the “Final Solution,” was not demonic depth but moral shallowness — no remorse, no hatred, only “Duty is Duty.” Great crimes, she argues, are often committed by ordinary people not because they are monsters but because they stop thinking.

“Evil becomes banal (Ordinary) when ordinary people participate in it, build distance from it and justify it in countless ways. Evil does not look like evil when it becomes faceless.” — Hannah Arendt

Bureaucratic culture and blind obedience turn evil into routine; the perpetrators are “just bureaucrats.” She thus shifts attention from ideological hatred to thoughtlessness.

Revolution

Liberation vs foundation

“The end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom.”

She rejects two reductions — the liberal reduction of revolution to limited government, and the Marxist reduction to the social question of poverty. The **French Revolution** was drawn into the social question and ended in terror and despotism; the **American Revolution** came closer to *constitutio libertatis*, yet even there the participatory spirit of town halls declined — the “lost treasure of the revolution.” Citizens must “participate in government, or it means nothing”; genuine revolutionary politics reappears in councils — Paris 1871, Petrograd 1905, Budapest 1956.

Modernity

Her account of modernity is dark: a **loss of the world**, the shrinking of the public sphere before private introspection and economic interest, the rise of “the social,” and the victory of **animal laborans** over both *Homo Faber* and the citizen. Politics is replaced by bureaucratic administration; isolation and loneliness erode solidarity; totalitarianism becomes possible — yet the appraisal is meant to recover the conditions of freedom, not to surrender to decline.

23 Arendt — Criticism and Legacy

Line of critique	Charge
Feminist	the strict public/private split sidelines the household and has historically enabled male domination of politics
Marxist	poverty, exploitation and distribution cannot be placed outside politics; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl faults her neglect of economic structures
Boundary	politics itself is a contest over what counts as public; her line is too rigid
Democratic	her love of the Greek polis is hard to apply in large, representative societies — Jurgen Habermas faults her for idealising pre-modern forms and understating modern democracy and human rights
Eichmann	Bettina Stangneth argues she underestimated Eichmann’s ideological commitment
Style / system	Dana Villa notes the absence of a single systematic framework; Hanna Pitkin , that her rich prose leaves room for divergent readings; Seyla Benhabib , that her “sociology of modernity is curiously truncated” on care work

(**Richard J. Bernstein** discusses the controversy over her view of political violence; **Harold J. Laski**’s reminder that every thinker is a thinker of their times applies here too.) Even so, criticism has enlarged her relevance.

Legacy

She restored action, participation and public freedom to the centre of political thought; *The Origins of Totalitarianism* remains foundational; her reflections on refugees and statelessness shaped human rights thinking — “the right to have rights... should be guaranteed by humanity itself.” Against **Karl Marx** she foregrounds public action over labour; against the liberal individualism of **John Stuart Mill** she stresses common action over private liberty; her defence of civic participation has affinities with **Jürgen Habermas** and with **Mahatma Gandhi**’s active self-rule. Her “action in concert” illuminates movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter; her “banality of evil” reads bureaucratic complicity and war crimes; her concern with control speaks to an age of surveillance and Big Data.

“To think and to be fully alive are the same.” — **Hannah Arendt**

24 Power Quotes — carry these into the hall

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world, what matters is to change it.” — **Karl Marx**

“The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” — **Karl Marx**

“The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle.” — **Marx & Engels**

“Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains and you have a world to win.” — **Marx & Engels**

“The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership.’” — **Antonio Gramsci**

“All men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.” — **Antonio Gramsci**

“Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert.” — **Hannah Arendt**

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is... people for whom the distinction between true and false no longer exists.” — **Hannah Arendt**

“The end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom.” — **Hannah Arendt**

25 Scholar Index — if a name feels unfamiliar, go back to your notes

Allen Wood · Andrzej Walicki · Antonio Gramsci · Antonio Negri · Aristotle · Benedetto Croce · Bettina Stangneth · Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar · Carl Boggs · Chantal Mouffe · Charles Fourier · Crawford Brough Macpherson · Dana Villa · David Harvey · David Ricardo · Edmund Burke · Elaine Hartwick · Elisabeth Young-Bruehl · Erich Fromm · Ernesto Laclau · Francis Fukuyama · Frederick Taylor · Friedrich Engels · Friedrich Nietzsche · G.W.F. Hegel · George Lukacs · Georges Sorel · Hanna Pitkin · Hannah Arendt · Harold J. Laski · Henri de Saint-Simon · Henry David Thoreau · Henry Ford · Herbert Marcuse · James Joll · James P. Hawley · Jean-Jacques Rousseau · John Locke · John Rawls · John Stuart Mill · Jonathan Sperber · Jose Ortega y Gasset · Joseph Arthur de Gobineau · Joseph V. Femia · Juliet Schor · Jürgen Habermas · Karl Jaspers · Karl Marx · Karl Popper · Louis Althusser · Louis Blanc · Lucio Gruppi · Ludwig Feuerbach · Marcus E. Green · Margaret Ledwith · Martin Heidegger · Max Weber · Michel Foucault · Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi · Niccolò Machiavelli · Nicos Poulantzas · Norberto Bobbio · Paulo Freire · Perry Anderson · Plato · Raya Dunayevskaya · Raymond Williams · Richard J. Bernstein · Richard Peet · Robert Owen · Robert W. Cox · Roger Berkowitz · Roger Simon · Rosa Luxemburg · Saint Augustine · Samantha Rose Hill · Seyla Benhabib · Stuart Hall · Terry Eagleton · Thomas Piketty · Thomas R. Bates · Vilfredo Pareto · Vladimir Lenin · William Robinson · Wolfgang Fritz Haug

26 How UPSC Asks It — the file’s own PYQ map

Theme	Years & marks
Marx — human essence & alienation	2016 / 15m
Marx — freedom vs liberty; Marx’s notion of freedom	2017 / 15m
Marx — concept of class	2020 / 15m
Marx — alienation as the reality of capitalism	2021 / 15m
Gramsci — concept of hegemony	2016 / 10m
Gramsci — organic intellectuals	2015
Gramsci — hegemony as organised consent	2019 / 20m
Arendt — ideology in modern totalitarian regimes	2016 / 20m
Arendt — triad of labour, work and action	2019 / 20m
Arendt — categories of vita activa	2025 / 15m

27 Today's Practice — write before the evening

1. Marx's concept of 'alienation' is an essential part of the reality in capitalism. Explain. (UPSC 2021, 15m)
2. According to Gramsci, 'hegemony is primarily based on the organisation of consent.' Comment. (UPSC 2019, 20m)
3. Critically examine Hannah Arendt's conceptual triad of labour, work and action. (UPSC 2019, 20m)

Model answers drop tonight on the channel — @psirbyamitpratap. Blank on a point above? It is covered in full in your **Foundation & OGP** class notes and handouts — revise it, then write. **Don't break the chain.**

See you tomorrow with Day 15 — Indian Nationalism (Part I).