

Marxist Philosophy and Sustainable Economic Development

Filosofia Marxista e Desenvolvimento Econômico Sustentável

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between Marxist philosophy and the concept of sustainable economic development, emphasizing how Marxist principles provide a theoretical framework to address economic, social, and environmental challenges in the context of globalization. The analysis focuses on core concepts such as relations of production, class struggle, and surplus value, while linking them to the requirements of sustainable development, including social equity, environmental protection, and economic efficiency. The paper argues that Marxist philosophy not only offers a critical lens to analyze current economic development models but also proposes potential solutions to guide sustainable development in the future. The findings suggest that applying Marxist principles can help restructure economic policies to achieve a balance between economic growth and ecosystem preservation.

KEYWORDS: Marxist philosophy, sustainable development, economy, social equity, environment, relations of production.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a relação entre a filosofia marxista e o conceito de desenvolvimento econômico sustentável, enfatizando como os princípios marxistas fornecem uma estrutura teórica para enfrentar os desafios econômicos, sociais e ambientais no contexto da globalização. A análise concentra-se em conceitos centrais como relações de produção, luta de classes e mais-valia, vinculando-os aos requisitos do desenvolvimento sustentável, incluindo equidade social, proteção ambiental e eficiência econômica.

O artigo argumenta que a filosofia marxista não apenas oferece uma lente crítica para analisar os modelos atuais de desenvolvimento econômico, mas também propõe soluções potenciais para orientar o desenvolvimento sustentável no futuro. Os resultados sugerem que a aplicação dos princípios marxistas pode ajudar a reestruturar as políticas econômicas para alcançar um equilíbrio entre crescimento econômico e preservação do ecossistema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: filosofia marxista, desenvolvimento sustentável, economia, equidade social, meio ambiente, relações de produção.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and the relentless growth of economies, the world faces severe challenges such as environmental crises, rising social inequalities, and the instability of current economic models. Climate change, resource depletion, and wealth disparities have become pressing issues, necessitating a new approach to shaping the future of economic development. The concept of sustainable development has emerged as a strategic goal, recognized by policymakers, researchers, and international organizations as a guiding principle to ensure a balance between economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. Sustainable development is not merely about achieving economic growth but also about ensuring that both current and future generations can maintain a high quality of life through the rational use of resources and the establishment of a just, sustainable society (Jabareen, 2008; United Nations DPI, 2017; Silvestre & Tîrcă, 2019; Emina, 2021).

However, current economic models, primarily rooted in capitalism, often prioritize short-term profit maximization, leading to negative consequences such as overexploitation of natural resources, environmental pollution, and growing social inequalities. These contradictions not only undermine the ability to achieve sustainable development goals but also raise questions about the sustainability of existing economic systems. In this context, the search for an alternative theoretical framework to guide economic development becomes more urgent than ever. Marxist philosophy, with its focus on analyzing relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, offers a unique perspective to evaluate the limitations of current economic models and propose alternative solutions aligned with sustainable development goals (Foster-Carter, 1973; Culley, 1977; Wright, 2005, Neilson, 2018).

From Marx's perspective, the inherent contradictions within capitalism, such as the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and class inequalities, are the root causes of the overexploitation of both labor and natural resources. The relations of production in capitalism, characterized by the opposition

between the bourgeoisie (who own the means of production) and the proletariat (who sell their labor), create a system that prioritizes the interests of the ruling class over the collective good of society and the environment. Moreover, the pursuit of surplus value in capitalism drives unsustainable resource exploitation, leading to environmental degradation and exacerbating issues such as climate change. These ideas not only shed light on the problems of current economic systems but also provide a theoretical foundation for developing sustainable economic strategies that prioritize social equity, rational resource use, and ecosystem protection.

This paper ambitiously seeks to explore three core directions to illuminate the potential of Marxist philosophy in shaping a sustainable economic future: a deep analysis of the foundational principles of Marxist philosophy, relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, to clarify how they illuminate modern economic dynamics; linking these principles to the pressing demands of sustainable development, including creating a just society, optimizing economic efficiency, and protecting ecosystems from degradation; and constructing a novel theoretical framework inspired by Marxist thought to guide economic policies in a globalized context, aiming for a development model that is not only environmentally sustainable but also socially equitable. The paper is organized into several sections: the next section presents the methodology, clarifying the theoretical analysis approach used; this is followed by a theoretical analysis exploring the relationship between Marxist philosophy and sustainable development; the discussion focuses on the practical applications of Marxist principles in shaping economic strategies; and finally, the conclusion summarizes key findings and suggests directions for future research. Through this approach, the paper not only highlights the potential of Marxist philosophy in addressing sustainable development challenges but also provides a fresh perspective for shaping economic policies in the 21st century.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a theoretical analysis approach, based on examining the core concepts of Marxist philosophy, including relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, to construct a theoretical framework for sustainable development: (1) Analysis of Marxist Theory: Examining Marxist concepts such as relations of production, surplus value, and class conflict to identify how they reflect current economic and social issues; (2) Linking to Sustainable Development: Analyzing how Marxist principles can explain the challenges of sustainable development, such as economic inequality, resource exploitation, and environmental degradation; and (3) Proposing a Theoretical Framework: Constructing an integrated theoretical model that incorporates Marxist principles into sustainable economic development strategies, focusing on social equity, environmental protection, and economic efficiency.

This approach does not rely on empirical data but focuses on conceptual analysis and logical reasoning, which aligns with the philosophical nature of the topic.

3. Theoretical Analysis

3.1. Core Principles of Marxist Philosophy

Marxist philosophy, grounded in dialectical materialism and historical materialism, provides a sharp theoretical framework for analyzing the economic and social dynamics of modern society. Unlike idealistic approaches, Marx focuses on the material conditions that shape societal development, particularly how resources and labor are organized to create wealth. The three core concepts, relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, not only form the theoretical foundation but also serve as tools to dissect global economic and social issues, from inequality to resource exploitation (Gupta, 2023). Relations of production are a central concept in Marxist philosophy, reflecting how society organizes resources, labor, and means of production to generate economic value. In capitalism, relations of production are characterized by a clear class divide: the bourgeoisie owns the means of production (factories, machinery, land), while the proletariat has only their labor to sell. This opposition not only creates economic inequality but also consolidates the bourgeoisie's power in controlling the production and distribution of wealth. Marx argues that relations of production are not fixed but evolve with historical stages, reflecting the development of productive forces. In the context of sustainable development, capitalist relations of production often lead to the overexploitation of natural resources to maximize profits, resulting in severe consequences such as environmental degradation and social injustice.

Surplus value, another key Marxist concept, explains how capitalism generates profit through the appropriation of value created by workers. Surplus value is the portion of value produced by labor that exceeds the cost of reproducing that labor (e.g., wages). In the capitalist system, the bourgeoisie appropriates this surplus value, leading to wealth accumulation for a few while pushing workers into exploitation. This process not only exacerbates economic inequality but also encourages unsustainable resource exploitation, as capitalist enterprises prioritize short-term profits over long-term goals like environmental protection. The pursuit of surplus value is a primary cause of issues such as resource depletion, pollution, and climate change, posing significant challenges to sustainable development (Onuoha & Gwunireama, 2022; Raekstad, 2022; Marx, 2024).

Class struggle, according to Marx, is the primary driver of historical change. In capitalism, the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat extends beyond economics to social and environmental issues. Class struggle manifests not only in overt conflicts but also in social movements,

such as protests for labor rights or environmental protection. These movements reflect the antagonism between interest groups, with workers and marginalized communities striving to regain control over resources and protect collective interests. In the context of sustainable development, class struggle can be seen as a mechanism to promote social equity, ensuring that economic policies serve the broader society rather than a privileged minority.

These concepts are not limited to analyzing capitalist societies but can also be applied to understand global issues such as economic inequality, resource exploitation, and environmental degradation. By using the lens of Marxist philosophy, we can identify the root causes of these challenges and seek revolutionary solutions to shape a more sustainable economic future.

3.2. Sustainable Development: Concept and Challenges

Sustainable development is defined as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This concept is not merely an economic goal but a comprehensive vision requiring a balance among three main pillars: economic, social, and environmental. In the context of globalization, sustainable development has become a top priority, but the challenges associated with its implementation remain significant, particularly in capitalist-dominated economies (Rubin, 1978; Fuchs & Fisher, 2015; Scropanti, 2019).

The economic pillar of sustainable development emphasizes the need for stable and equitable economic growth. However, current economic models, particularly in global capitalism, often prioritize short-term profits over long-term goals. The focus on GDP growth without considering environmental impacts or equitable wealth distribution leads to the overexploitation of natural resources, from tropical forests to groundwater reserves. Capitalist enterprises, in their race to maximize profits, often ignore social and environmental costs, creating a vicious cycle that depletes resources and destroys ecosystems.

The social pillar focuses on promoting social equity, reducing inequality, and ensuring access to basic resources such as education, healthcare, and employment. However, income inequality is rising, particularly in countries dominated by large corporations and unregulated free markets. Wealth disparities not only undermine social cohesion but also hinder marginalized communities' access to development opportunities. For instance, workers in developing countries often face harsh working conditions and low wages, while profits flow to multinational corporations. This raises questions about the fairness of current economic models and their ability to meet sustainable development goals.

The environmental pillar requires protecting ecosystems, minimizing pollution, and using natural resources sustainably. However, current economic activities, particularly in heavy industries and mining, often cause severe environmental damage. Climate change, air pollution, and land degradation are clear evidence of the failure of capitalist economic models to prioritize environmental protection (Hansmann

and Frischknecht, 2012). These issues not only threaten ecosystem survival but also exacerbate social inequalities, as poor communities often bear the brunt of environmental disasters.

These challenges highlight the need to rethink current economic models. Sustainable development policies cannot rely solely on technical solutions or superficial reforms but require a fundamental shift in how economies and societies are organized. Marxist philosophy, with its focus on analyzing capitalism's internal contradictions, provides a useful lens to understand these challenges and guide revolutionary solutions.

3.3. Linking Marxist Philosophy to Sustainable Development

Marxist philosophy serves not only as a critical tool but also as an inspiration for building sustainable development strategies. By applying the concepts of relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, we can better understand the root causes of sustainable development challenges and propose alternative solutions.

Relations of production and economic inequality: In capitalism, relations of production create a stark divide between those who own the means of production and workers who sell their labor (Tonkiss, 2006; Muntaner et al., 2015). The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few leads to economic and social inequalities, contradicting the goal of social equity in sustainable development. Marx argues that restructuring relations of production, such as through collective ownership or cooperative models, can reduce inequality and ensure fair resource distribution. For example, agricultural or renewable energy cooperatives managed by communities can redistribute wealth and promote sustainable economic activities while reducing dependence on large corporations.

Surplus value and resource exploitation: The pursuit of surplus value in capitalism is a primary driver of overexploitation of natural resources and labor. Capitalist enterprises often prioritize short-term profits, leading to unsustainable resource use and issues like climate change, pollution, and resource depletion. A Marxist approach suggests that collective control over the means of production, such as through nationalizing key industries or enforcing strict resource extraction regulations, can steer economic activities toward sustainability. Instead of serving a minority's interests, surplus value can be redistributed to invest in renewable energy, improve labor conditions, and protect the environment.

Class struggle and social equity: Marx's concept of class struggle provides a profound understanding of modern social movements, such as those advocating for environmental protection or labor rights (Barker, 2013; Veltmeyer, 2019). These movements reflect the antagonism between interest groups, with marginalized communities and workers challenging the power of corporations or governments. In the context of sustainable development, class struggle can be seen as a mechanism to promote social equity, ensuring that economic policies serve the broader society. For instance,

environmental movements may demand policies to reduce carbon emissions, while labor movements may fight for fair working conditions, contributing to a more just and sustainable society.

By connecting Marxist principles to sustainable development requirements, we can identify capitalism's internal contradictions and propose alternative solutions. These solutions not only focus on improving economic efficiency but also prioritize social equity and environmental protection, laying the foundation for a sustainable economic development model in a globalized context.

4. Discussion

Based on the theoretical analysis, Marxist philosophy not only provides a critical lens to dissect capitalism's contradictions but also opens practical pathways to shape sustainable economic development strategies. Marx's core concepts, relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, can be transformed into concrete solutions, aiming for an economy that balances growth, social equity, and environmental protection. The following approaches illustrate how Marxist thought can guide the future of sustainable development.

4.1. Restructuring Relations of Production

To achieve sustainable development, restructuring relations of production is a revolutionary step to address economic inequality and resource overexploitation. In capitalism, relations of production are shaped by private ownership of the means of production, leading to concentrated economic power in the hands of a minority. This not only exacerbates wealth disparities but also promotes unsustainable resource use, as capitalist enterprises prioritize short-term profits over long-term environmental goals. Marxist philosophy suggests that shifting from private to collective ownership models, such as cooperatives or public enterprises, can create an economic foundation that prioritizes sustainability (Hariram et al., 2023).

For example, agricultural cooperatives can be organized to produce food in environmentally friendly ways, using sustainable farming practices and minimizing harmful chemicals. These models not only provide stable and equitable employment for workers but also ensure that economic benefits are distributed more evenly within communities. Similarly, state-owned enterprises in key industries like energy or mining can be oriented to prioritize renewable resources and minimize environmental impacts, rather than focusing solely on profit maximization. By restructuring relations of production, economies can shift from exploitative models to cooperative ones, where resources are used responsibly in line with sustainable development principles.

Moreover, restructuring relations of production requires changes in labor organization. Instead of workers being dependent on low wages and precarious conditions, collective ownership models can empower workers to participate in economic decision-making. This not only reduces inequality but also encourages innovation in developing sustainable technologies and production processes. For instance, community-managed renewable energy cooperatives can invest in clean energy sources like solar or wind power, creating jobs and improving quality of life for local communities. Thus, Marxist philosophy provides a theoretical foundation for restructuring relations of production, fostering a sustainable, equitable, and environmentally friendly economy.

4.2. Controlling Surplus Value

The pursuit of surplus value is a central driver of capitalism but also the root cause of economic inequality and resource overexploitation. According to Marx, surplus value is generated from workers' labor but appropriated by the bourgeoisie, leading to wealth accumulation for a few and deepening issues like poverty and environmental degradation. To steer economic activities toward sustainability, controlling surplus value through innovative and equitable economic policies is essential to redistribute resources for social and environmental goals.

An effective approach involves using policy tools such as progressive taxation, environmental subsidies, and strict resource extraction regulations. Progressive taxation can reduce wealth concentration, ensuring that large corporations and wealthy individuals contribute more to public funds for sustainable development. Environmental subsidies, such as financial support for renewable energy or organic farming projects, can encourage businesses to transition to more sustainable production models. Additionally, stringent regulations on resource extraction, such as limits on deforestation or mining, can prevent resource depletion and protect ecosystems (Lu & Wang, 2023). Policy tools for sustainability: Evaluating the effectiveness of fiscal measures in natural resource efficiency.

Instead of allowing surplus value to flow into the hands of large corporations, these policies can redirect resources to critical areas like renewable energy, education, and healthcare. For example, investing in clean energy technologies like solar or wind power not only mitigates climate change impacts but also creates job opportunities for local communities. Similarly, using surplus value to improve public education and healthcare systems can enhance quality of life and reduce social inequalities. By controlling surplus value, economies can shift from profit-driven models to those prioritizing sustainable values, aligning with Marx's ideas of redistributing wealth for the common good.

Furthermore, controlling surplus value requires transparency and accountability in economic management. Governments and public institutions can act as intermediaries to ensure surplus value is used equitably, rather than being appropriated by a small elite. This not only promotes social equity but

also builds community trust in sustainable development policies. Marxist philosophy, with its critique of exploitation in capitalism, provides a robust theoretical foundation for guiding policies to control surplus value, fostering a more sustainable and equitable economy.

4.3. Promoting Social Movements

Marx's concept of class struggle is not only a theoretical tool but also an inspiration for social movements, which can play a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development policies. In the context of globalization, social movements, from environmental protests to labor rights struggles, reflect the antagonism between interest groups, akin to the class conflicts Marx described. These movements not only challenge the power of corporations and governments but also create pressure for economic policies to become more sustainable (Fuchs, 2021).

Environmental movements, such as campaigns against climate change or for rainforest protection, can hold governments and businesses accountable for their environmental impacts. These movements often represent communities most affected by environmental degradation, such as rural or indigenous groups, embodying the spirit of Marxist class struggle. By organizing protests, advocating for policy changes, or building community initiatives, these movements can push for stricter regulations on carbon emissions, biodiversity protection, and sustainable resource use.

Similarly, labor movements play a critical role in advocating for fair working conditions and living wages. In many countries, workers in extractive or manufacturing industries face harsh conditions and low pay, while profits flow to multinational corporations. Inspired by the concept of class struggle, these movements can demand improved labor rights, contributing to social equity, a key pillar of sustainable development. For instance, strikes or collective bargaining can lead to policies protecting workers, such as minimum wage increases or better workplace safety, improving quality of life and reducing inequality.

Moreover, social movements can act as catalysts to connect economic, social, and environmental goals. By mobilizing community participation, these movements not only generate political pressure but also encourage innovation in sustainable solutions. For example, community initiatives like urban agriculture or citizen-managed renewable energy projects can integrate environmental and social goals while reducing reliance on capitalist economic models. Marxist philosophy, with its emphasis on class struggle, provides a theoretical foundation to understand and promote the role of social movements in shaping a sustainable economic future.

4.4. Integrated Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Marxist philosophy, an integrated theoretical framework for sustainable economic development can be built on three core principles: collectivization of production, equitable distribution,

and community participation. This framework is not only theoretical but also provides a practical roadmap for reshaping economic policies in a globalized context. Collectivization of production entails shifting from private to collective or public ownership of key means of production, such as energy, natural resources, and land. For instance, nationalizing energy industries can ensure that resources like oil, gas, or renewables are managed for the common good rather than private profit. Cooperative models, where workers and communities co-own and manage means of production, can also promote sustainable production and reduce economic inequality. Equitable distribution focuses on ensuring that surplus value is redistributed to serve social and environmental goals. Instead of wealth accumulating in the hands of a few, policies like progressive taxation, green project subsidies, and public investments in healthcare and education can balance resources. For example, using surplus value to fund renewable energy programs or improve public infrastructure can drive economic growth while protecting the environment.

Community participation emphasizes the role of communities in economic decision-making. By encouraging citizen involvement, economic policies can become more transparent and accountable.

For instance, community councils can participate in land use planning or water resource management, ensuring that economic decisions reflect societal needs and interests. This participation not only enhances democracy but also fosters solutions tailored to local conditions. This framework can be applied through specific policies, such as land reforms to redistribute land use rights, investments in clean energy technologies, and strengthening labor rights through fair regulations. By integrating Marxist principles, this framework not only offers a theoretical vision but also opens practical pathways to build a sustainable, equitable, and environmentally friendly economy in the 21st century.

5. Conclusion

Marxist philosophy provides a robust theoretical framework for analyzing the challenges of sustainable economic development. By focusing on concepts such as relations of production, surplus value, and class struggle, this paper demonstrates that Marxist principles can address issues like inequality, resource exploitation, and environmental degradation. The proposed theoretical framework, based on collectivization of production, equitable distribution, and community participation, offers a viable path to guide sustainable development policies in the future.

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NGO, Thanh Quang. Marxist Philosophy and Sustainable Economic Development. *Kalagatos*, Fortaleza, vol.22, n.3, 2025, eK25044, p. 01-12.

Received: 10/2025
Approved: 11/2025