

Introduction to critical thinking

Why is this important?

Because our movement needs to educate leaders who can think **independently**, **non-dogmatically**, and **creatively**, and who can apply our values to political struggles and win

What do we want to learn today?

- Understanding of critical thinking and why it is important
- Learning some common mistakes we make in our analysis (logical fallacies)
- Appreciating the effect that cognitive biases can have on clouding our ability to make rational judgments
- Synthesizing this knowledge with that we take from our Marxist tradition

What is critical thinking?

Our doctrine — said Engels, referring to himself and his famous friend — is not a dogma, but a guide to action. This classical statement stresses with remarkable force and expressiveness that aspect of Marxism which is very often lost sight of.

And by losing sight of it, we turn Marxism into something one-sided, distorted and lifeless; we deprive it of its life blood; we undermine its basic theoretical foundations — dialectics, the doctrine of historical development, all-embracing and full of contradictions; we undermine its connection with the definite practical tasks of the epoch, which may change with every new turn of history.

— Lenin, “Certain Features on the Historical Development of Marxism” (1910)

What is critical thinking?



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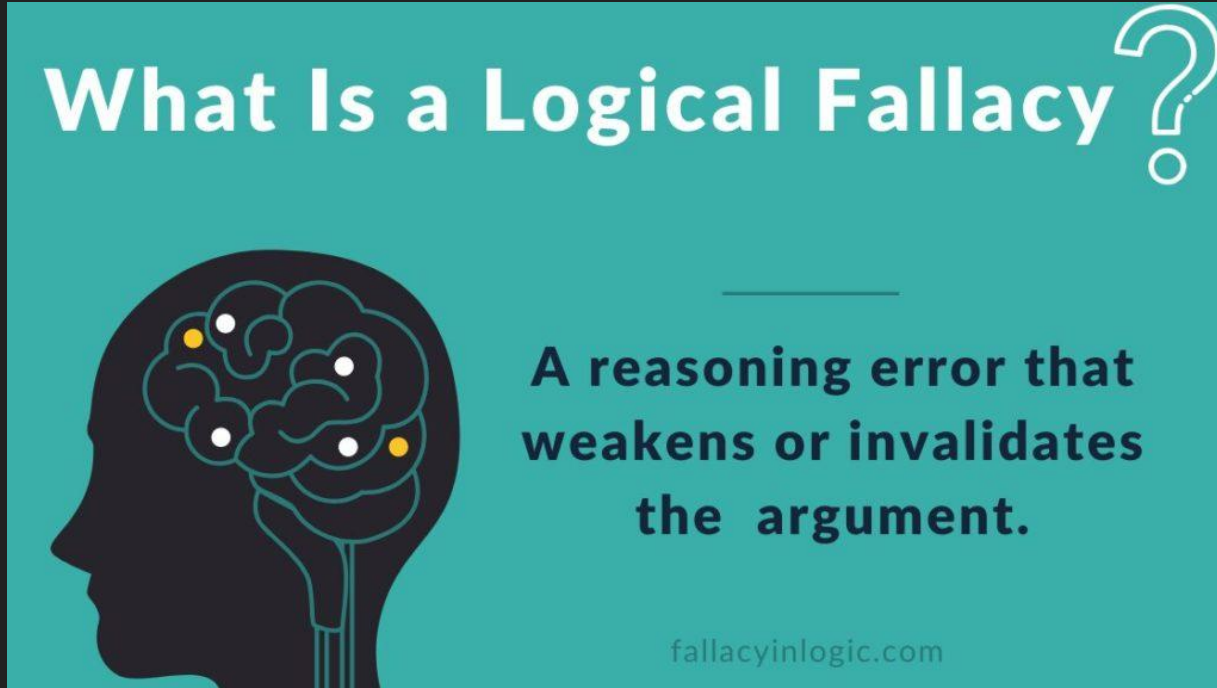
“It’s all about **asking questions**... questions that help you assess both the meaning and the significance of claims and arguments.”

“**Assess evidence, evaluate arguments**, and adapt your thinking”

“**Critical thinking isn’t about being critical**; *it’s about much more about finding flaws in other people’s claims*”

“Evaluating the evidence to **decide for yourself what is accurate, what is relevant, and do I have sufficient information to take a decision on this topic**”

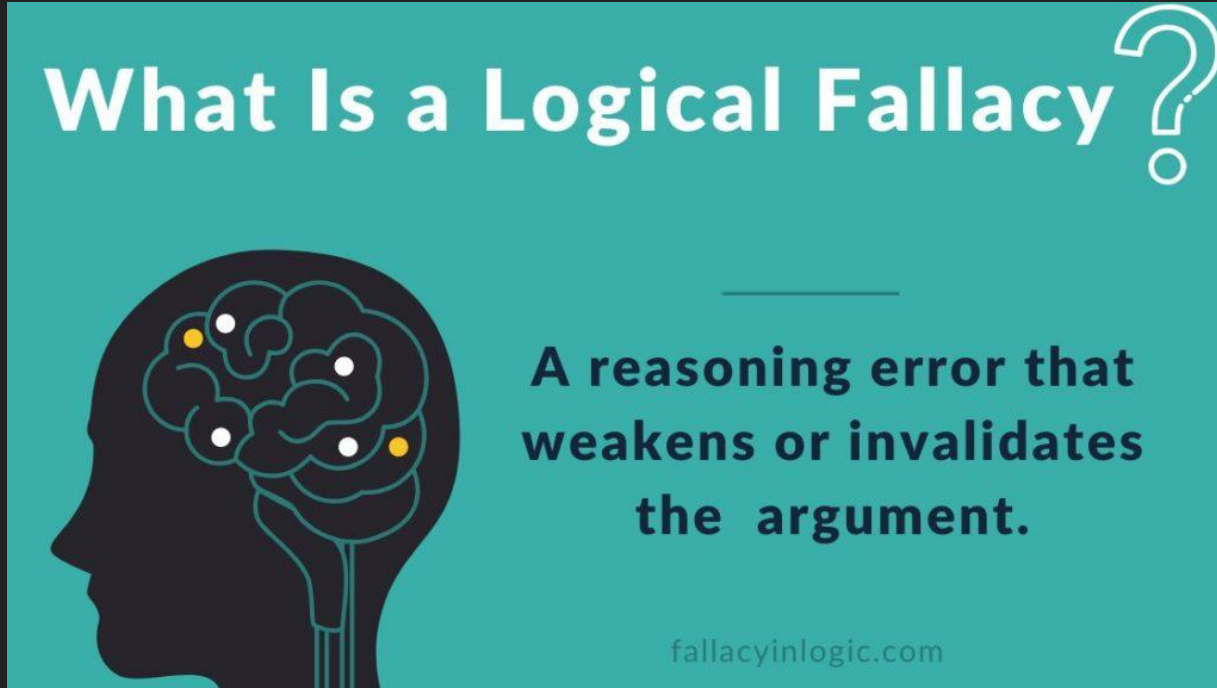
Logical fallacies



A defect in reasoning; the reasoning itself is flawed, regardless of the evidence or the conclusions.

Just because reasoning is fallacious doesn't necessarily mean conclusions will be false.

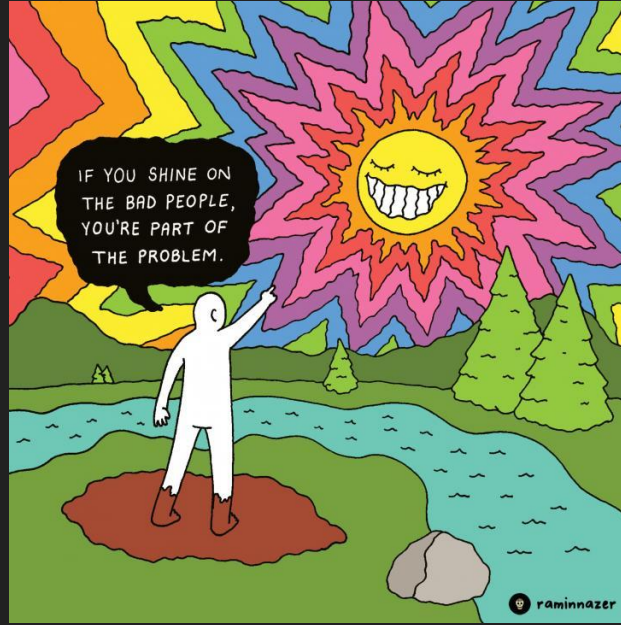
Logical fallacies



Fallacies can be intentional or unintentional. Sometimes fallacious arguments are made on accident; other times fallacies are intentionally weaponized in order to muddle the thinking of others

Common logical fallacies

Ad hominem fallacy



Guilt by association

Common logical fallacies

Ad hominem fallacy

Genetic fallacy

Occurs whenever an attempt to cast a claim into question by condemning its origin. E.g. the person who founded this organization embezzled money, therefore the organization is still corrupt and can never change

Common logical fallacies

Ad hominem fallacy

“Circumstantial ad hominem”

Simply because someone has something to gain from making an argument doesn't necessarily impact the correctness or incorrectness of their argument. It can allow us to question the intentions of the person, but doesn't impact the argument itself. E.g. If I argue I deserve a raise because I'm a hard worker, I stand to benefit from this, but that doesn't have any bearing on whether or not I'm a hard worker

Hypocrisy

Simply because someone is acting hypocritically does not mean their position is incorrect

Common logical fallacies

Strawperson



Common logical fallacies

Correlation and causation

Correlation and Causation

Simply because two events are correlated does not mean that one event caused the other

When two events occur together, it may seem like one causes the other, but there may be alternative explanations we've ignored

Perhaps there is a common cause for both events. Perhaps there is an alternative cause altogether. Or perhaps it is just a coincidence.

Common logical fallacies

No True Scotsman

Saying, for instance that a particular revolution wasn't a "real" revolution, or a particular form of socialism wasn't "actually" socialism

Common logical fallacies

Correlation and causation

Correlation and Causation

Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc -- Just because some situation happened after something else doesn't mean that this situation was caused by that something else

For instance, you could look at the stock market and say that stocks fell on the same day that the president got sick. But you can't infer a causal relationship without more evidence (for instance, looking at stock market trends during every instance of a president becoming sick in the past 100 years).

Even with evidence, causation is difficult to establish

Common logical fallacies

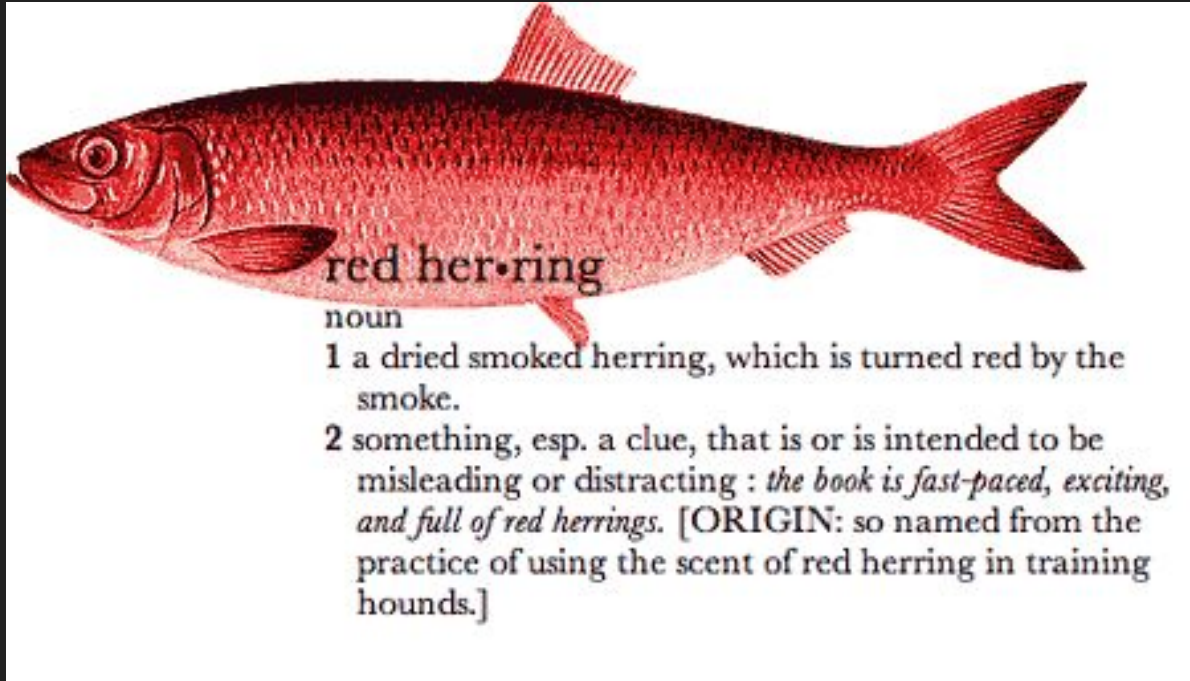
Slippery slope



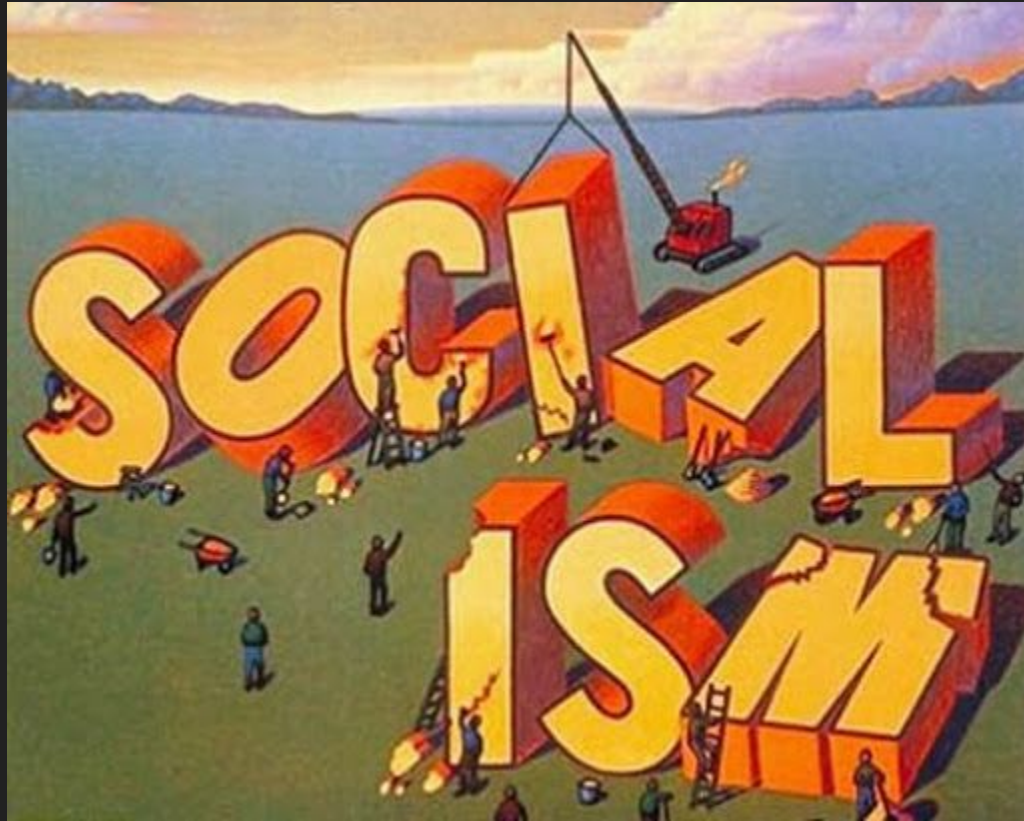
Slippery Slope

Common logical fallacies

Red herring



Break



Cognitive biases

Cognitive bias is an umbrella term that refers to the systematic ways in which the **context** and **framing** of information influence individuals' judgment and decision-making.

Unlike logical fallacies, these are not necessarily errors in reasoning, but rather how outside factors impinge on our judgments

Many biases act as shortcuts that make it easier to live and navigate in a complex world and in different situations in life.

However, sometimes the shortcuts short circuit, leading to faulty conclusions

12 Cognitive Biases Explained

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Loss aversion



Confirmation bias

Examples of Confirmation Bias



Not seeking out
objective facts



Interpreting information to
support your existing belief



Only remembering details
that uphold your belief



Ignoring information that
challenges your belief

Sunk costs

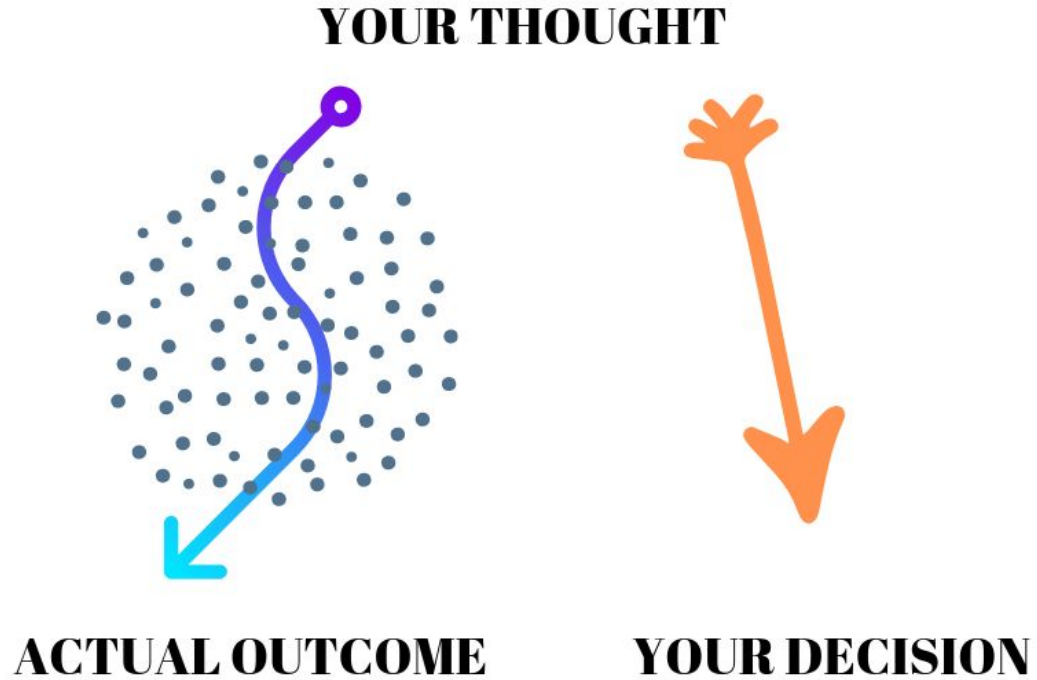


Groupthink



ALL THOSE IN FAVOUR SAY "YES"

Outcome bias



Break-outs and group activity



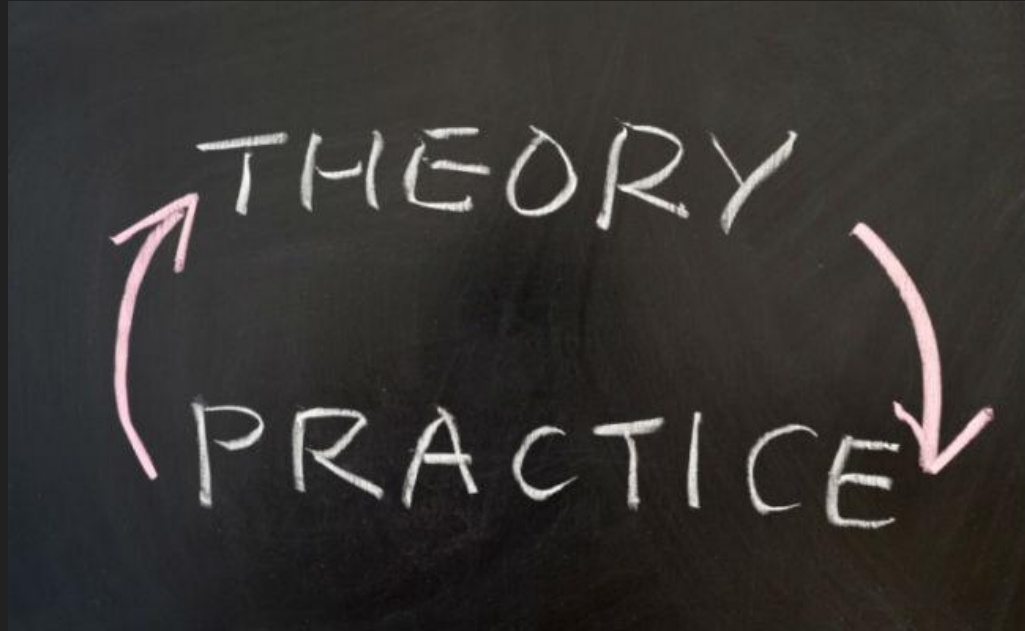
Determine which mistake people are making in each example

Where do correct ideas come from?



“Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone; they come from three kinds of social practice, the struggle for production, the class struggle and scientific experiment.”

Where do correct ideas come from?



“Human knowledge makes another leap through the test of practice. This leap is more important than the previous one. For it is this leap alone that can prove the correctness or incorrectness of the first leap in cognition, i.e., of the ideas, theories, policies, plans or measures formulated in the course of reflecting the objective external world. There is no other way of testing truth.”

Questions

How do people learn how to fight? How do we learn how to govern ourselves, i.e. how to practice democracy?

How do we come to understand socialism, and how to win it? (and, eventually, how to implement in practice)?

Do you think that people learn primarily from direct experience? How can we draw lessons from direct experience relevant to the establishment of an entirely new social order?

Two concepts of mass line, two different roads



“There is a misleading presentation of this problem of “where do correct ideas come from?” And the core of the distortion is that it flattens experience and practice — so that the implication is that people learn mainly from their own direct and often individual practice and experience. And that consciousness arises rather linearly and directly from peoples’ own social conditions.... Often when people “draw lessons” from their own experiences they are not radical ones”

Two concepts of mass line, two different roads



“Most consciousness arises from the summation of indirect experience, not direct experience. Direct experience is mainly a way that people evaluate complex theoretical summations and strategies”

Two concepts of mass line, two different roads



“There is a conjunctural quality to human events (especially in our epoch) and the leaps of consciousness have a great deal to do with special stresses and ruptures in society generally”

Two concepts of mass line, two different roads



“Practice is the ultimate test of truth — but it is not some simple spiral cranked out right around ourselves, but often in a longer arc of experience through which whole peoples, movements and periods of history are gripped by an idea (or two) and where the summation sometimes takes place over decades and is debated by whole movements.

Questions

Are lessons we learn from our personal experience always valid? How do we tell if they are or if they are relevant or not in the context of a new situation?

Modalities of thought that help us in everyday life, or in the fight for reforms: are they useful to conceptualizing revolution? Will they be useful in understanding how to establish socialism?

What have been your assumptions about why people get involved in social movements? Has your experience borne out your assumptions, or challenged them? How so, or how not?

Do ideas change based on “conjunctural qualities?” Do you think mass protests such as the recent George Floyd rebellion change minds? Or do they push people’s minds further along a path they were already going down (for instance: can they actually make people more reactionary?) How so, or how not?

Further study

Critical thinking (online course)

Fred Hampton, “Power anywhere where there’s people”

Mao Zedong, “Oppose Book Worship”

Thou shalt not commit logical fallacies (website)

24 cognitive biases stuffing up your thinking (website)

Next week readings

November 5th — Class, exploitation, & oppression

Readings:

Hadas Thier, The working class is the vast majority of society

Contention, All the basics of how and why markets work

Engels, Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy

Further study:

Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, “Classes in Marxian Theory”