

Advisors

Wang Weiguang, Li Shenming, Zhu Jiamu and Zhang Yingwei

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Basic Theories and Practical Studies on Marxism

The Significance of Studying and Grasping Marx's Two Great Discoveries

Wang Weiguang

Abstract: Marx had two discoveries: first, he discovered the materialist conception of history and founded historical materialism by revealing the law of development of human history; second, analyzing the capitalist society with historical materialism, he discovered the mode of production of modern capitalism and its special law of motion and founded the theory of surplus value. Based on these two discoveries, he pointed out the inevitable breaking up of capitalism and the communist future of human society, unveiled the historical mission of the proletariat, found the working class as the mainstay force to realize this profound social transformation, and thus turned socialism from Utopian to science. These two discoveries build a solid foundation for the whole theoretical system of Marxism and are still of important practical significance today.

Keywords: Materialist Conception of History, Theory of Surplus Value, Idealism

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For the entire history of human thought, Marx made two greatest contributions to human thought in his lifetime: first, he discovered the materialist conception of history and founded historical materialism by revealing the law of development of human history, i.e., the dialectical materialism and the historical materialism; second, he revealed the secrets of the capitalist exploitation of the workers and discovered the surplus value, which laid the foundation for establishment of Marxist political economy. As Darwin discovered the law of development of the organic world, Marx discovered the law of development of human history, which is a simple fact concealed by complicated ideologies: people must at first eat, drink, have shelter and clothing before carrying out political, scientific, artistic, religious and other activities, and therefore the direct production of material means subsistence, and then the certain economic development of a given people or a given epoch constitutes the foundation for the development of the state institutions and the conception of the law, art and religion. Moreover, Marx also discovered the modern capitalist mode of production and its special law of motion as well as the surplus value. Just as Engels said, “Two such discoveries would be enough for one lifetime. Happy the man to whom it is granted to make even one such discovery.”¹

§ I. Completely Changing the Historical Conception in History of Human Thought, the Materialist Conception of History Is the Most Incisive Ideological Weapon that the Party of the Working Class Must Possess

The discovery of the materialist conception of history is an epoch-making contribution made by Marx to the history of human thought. Engels viewed the materialist conception of history as Marx’s “first great discovery.” Lenin argued, “His historical materialism was a great achievement in scientific thinking.”²

1. Significance of Establishing Materialist Conception of History

It can be said that developing from Democritus and Heraclitus of ancient

1 *Completed Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 25* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2001), 597.

2 *Completed Works of Lenin, Volume 23* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1990), 45.

Greece to Feuerbach of German classical philosophy in the 19th century, materialism had culminated in human thought before Marx, so had Hegel's idealist dialectics. Although a master of dialectics, Hegel enclosed his dialectics in the framework of idealism, while Feuerbach's materialism was both metaphysical and still idealistic in historical conception. Standing at the summit of the history of human thought, Marx founded dialectical materialism by organically combining materialism with dialectics.

Before Marx's first great discovery, human beings had been inextricably bogged down in the wrong ideological path of idealist conception of history. Despite explorations about social history by a large number of thinkers in many aspects, they gave only two types of answer to the mystery of history: one was the idealist reply, attributing the historical development either to the role of God or fatality, or to that of spirit. For example, the subjective psychical determinism of subjective idealism attributed the historical development to human rationality, emotions, motivations and consciousness; while the objective idealism's determinism of objective spirit did to the objective and unmanned rationality which emerged earlier than nature and human society. The other was the old materialist reply. Although adhering to materialism in conception of nature, some of the old materialists were confused by particularity of social fields and historical process in the study of social history. They saw only the ideological motivation for people's historical activities without further exploring the reasons hidden behind; they noticed only the spiritual impetus in the field of social history while neglecting the material motivation hidden behind, and therefore, regarded spiritual impetus as the ultimate cause of social development, and still bogged down in idealism in terms of the conception of history. An overview of all the old conceptions of history can easily reveal that they had two fundamental deficiencies: one was the old ideological motivation conception of history, illustrating the motive of men's historical activities and driving forces of social development from ideological reasons rather than material economic source; the other was the heroic conception of history, an old conception of history, seeing only the role of a small number of historical figures but ignoring that the masses were the real master of history and obliterating people's decisive role in the development of history. The heroic conception of history fundamentally attributed

historical development to personal wills of emperors, high officials or heroes, whose good ideas were thought to prosper a nation while bad ideas to ruin it. In the last resort, the heroic conception of history was the old idealist conception of history.

The historical materialism, as a scientific conception of social history, was both the product of specific social and historical conditions, and the inevitable result of the development of human knowledge. The modern production of capitalism provided the material premise for the establishment of historical materialism. The modern production created the most complicated organizations of production in history, and the society was more and more splitting up into two great and distinct antagonistic classes: the working class and the bourgeoisie. Capitalism initiated the “world history,” enabling people to compare social histories of different states and nations and find the laws in them. People could also penetrate the social structure of capitalism and the structure and relations of the previous societies of private ownership to reveal the contradiction between the modern production of capitalism and the private appropriation, thus providing the objective basis for understanding social and historical laws. However, the emergence of capitalism just created the necessary objective condition for the genesis of historical materialism, and the creation of the materialist conception of history could not be divorced from Marx’s theoretical innovations in practice. Marx’s outstanding and great conception of history can be associated with the famous paradox “who shaves the barber” proposed by the British philosopher Russell in 1901: there was in a town only one barber, who advertised, “I only shave the natives who don’t shave themselves.” Meanwhile, an unwritten rule of the town provided that any man who didn’t shave himself must be shaved by the barber. One day, the barber saw in the mirror his own beard and took the razor instinctively, but could he shave himself? If he did not, he was a “man who didn’t shave himself,” and in accordance with the rule of the town, he should be shaved by the barber himself; but if he did, he was a “man who shaved himself,” and should not be shaved by the barber himself either. It turned out to be an unsolvable paradox.

A paradox refers to an antinomic, contradictory and unsolvable predicament. In fact, to interpret the ultimate driving force of historical development,

even some famous materialist philosophers fell into insoluble paradox in the development of the history of human thought, let alone the idealists. For example, the French bourgeois Enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu proposed “geographical determinism,” a conclusion with clear materialistic tendency, arguing that different particular climates played a decisive role to a nation in terms of physiology, psychology, temperament, religious belief and political system. However, he argued that the geographical environment determined human rationality, which in turn determined the political and legal systems. Obviously, Montesquieu’s determinism of geographical environment started from materialist proposition and reverted to the beaten track of idealism that human rationality determined the existence of social existence. Another example was Helvetius, a French materialist philosopher in the 18th century, who was famous for his argument “Man is the product of his environment.” He argued that environment was mainly reflected as the political system, which was determined by man’s will. Circling back in a similar way, he could by no means escape from an idealistic conclusion.

Lenin argued in *Philosophical Notebooks* that Hegel took the idealistic form, but the historical law he talked about was just the closest to the materialist conception of history, and “intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism.”¹ Hegel transformed a certain concept independent of man into nature and history and very clearly described the dialectical process of historical laws which was close to the answer of the materialist conception of history, yet his interpretation was put in the framework of idealism. Breaking through Hegel’s idealism, Feuerbach argued that it was sensuous and corporal men that determined the development of history. However, in the view of Feuerbach, the sensuous and corporal men were inactive and passive, unsocial and impractical, and they were abstract rather than living human beings in the realistic society. He argued that history was determined by abstract, eternal and universal love possessed by abstract men, and the abstract love was the driving force that determined the historical development, which again went back to the antinomic paradox. It was obviously wrong to idealistically interpret history; however, although it seemed materialistic for the old materialists to attribute historical

1 *Completed Works of Lenin, Volume 55* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1990), 235.

development to some real substance or the passive and abstract men, they were certainly wrong in that they reverted to the abstract human nature, human concept, human self-consciousness and other idealistic conclusions.

Marx put forward in *Theses on Feuerbach* “materialism of practical activity,”¹ which offered a thorough solution to the paradox of the old conception of history. He laid stress on “sensuous human activity,” or the practical function. “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”² In its reality the essence of man “is the ensemble of the social relations,” and “all social life is essentially practical.”³ While criticizing Feuerbach’s viewpoint of humanistic materialism, Marx formed the scientific conception of practice and found men who were not only corporal and material, but also active, practical and realistic, and whose practical activity of material productive labor was the core secret of all Marx’s discoveries. Incorporating all men’s corporality and initiative in their practice of productive labor, Marx materialistically and dialectically untied the fast paradoxical knot of the idealist conception of history. *Theses on Feuerbach*, the first document germinating the gifted new world outlook, marked the genesis of historical materialism.

Contrary to the previous idealist conceptions of history, Marx did not base his investigation of social history and exploration of the real cause of social development on the subjective or objective spirit, the god, divinity or abstract human nature, but on real men as well as their activities, their conditions of existence, and their production practice. Marx regarded “the existence of living human individuals” as the first premise of all human history. Men must make a living before creating the history, and therefore they must produce the material means of subsistence. Material production was the first historical activity of mankind, and the basic condition of all histories. The material production for subsistence and development is the most profound material root behind all the ideological motives of human beings. Men’s production of material means is the root cause of social development. In human society, the economic relations as

1 *Selected Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 1* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2009), 502.

2 *Selected Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 1* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2009), 500.

3 *Selected Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 1* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2009), 501.

well as the derived political, ideological, cultural and all other social relations are constructed based on the material production, and develop and change with the development and changes of the material production; interpretation of the development and changes of human society and that of all human social and historical phenomena must be based on the material economic basis for subsistence and development of human beings.

The creation of historical materialism was a great revolution in the history of human thought. It thoroughly removed idealism from the field of social history, and thus entirely changed the dominant position of idealism in the field of historical conception. It unified materialist conception of nature and materialist conception of history, turning Marxist philosophy into a thorough and complete materialist doctrine. Chinese Communists accepted Marx's historical materialism, and theoretically guided by Marxist materialist conception of history, they led the Chinese people to achievement of great victories in revolution, construction and reform. As General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, in various historical periods of revolution, construction and reform, our Party uses historical materialism to systematically, concretely and historically analyze the law of China's social development, constantly masters the law and actively uses the law in understanding and transforming the world, and helps achieve one victory after another in the cause of the Party and the people. Both history and reality have indicated that only by adhering to historical materialism can we constantly upgrade the understanding of the law of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and constantly open up new realms of the development of Marxism in contemporary China.

2. Main Contents of the Materialist Conception of History

The theoretical system of historical materialism is very rich in content. In *Preface of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx incisively expounded on basic thoughts of historical materialism, demonstrated basic categories and laws of historical materialism, and outlined the basic framework and main points of the theoretical system of historical materialism, for example, the viewpoint of production, of the masses, of class and of class struggle; the theory of mutual relations between social existence and social consciousness, of

social and economic formation, of the basic social contradictions, of the state, of social revolution leading to the change of social forms and eventually to the dictatorship of the proletariat, of social ideology, of social interests, and people's free and integral development... In a concise study and master of historical materialism, the most important thing is to understand and grasp its basic viewpoints and principles as well as its scientific world outlook and methodology, and to put them into practice of social recognition and transformation.

Most fundamentally, the materialist conception of history has three basic viewpoints.

The first is the viewpoint of production. Human practice in material production labor is the premise and foundation of all social beings. In productive labor, the relationship between man and nature constitutes the productive forces, while that between man and man constitutes the relations of production. The productive forces and the relations of production are combined into the mode of production, whose evolution determines the evolution of social forms. The ensemble of the relations of production constitutes the economic base, on which is the superstructure, political and ideological. The unity of opposites between the productive forces and the relations of production, and between economic base and superstructure constitutes the basic social contradictions. The movement of the basic social contradictions boosts the social and historical development, to which the productive forces are the decisive force. Of course, the superstructure is relative independent of the economic base, so are the relations of production of the productive forces; the ideological superstructure can react to the political superstructure, hence to the economic base; and the relations of production can react to the productive forces. It is the basic law of social history that the relations of production have to adapt to the development of the productive forces, so does the superstructure to the requirement of the economic base.

The second is the viewpoint of class. The basic social contradictions in the class society are expressed as class distinctions (or antagonism), class contradiction and class struggle. The history since disintegration of the primitive society is the history of class struggle, which runs through the whole development process of class society and promotes the development of class society. The theory of class and