

A Study of Communist Thought in Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

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Abstract

In Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx systematically expounded his communist thought. Taking alienated labor as the core of his critique, Marx analyzed and criticized crude, egalitarian communist thought, democratic or authoritarian communist thought, and communist thought advocating the abolition of the state. On this basis, he developed a relatively comprehensive and profound early communist ideology. He argues and elaborates on communist ideas from an economic and philosophical perspective, asserting that communism is the “positive negation of private property as human self-alienation,” the “true possession of human essence,” and the “fulfillment of naturalism and humanism.” In the new era of Chinese socialism with Chinese characteristics, Marx's early communist ideas remain of significant contemporary relevance, capable of contributing to the construction of a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, ecological civilization, and the promotion of the free and comprehensive development of humanity in the new era.

Keywords

Marx; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844; early communist ideology.

1. Introduction

The Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 is one of Marx's early works. In this book, we can gain insight into Marx's early communist ideas. This article will explore and analyze three aspects of Marx's early communist ideas as presented in the manuscript: the basis for the emergence of Marx's early communist ideas, the rich connotations of Marx's early communist ideas, and the contemporary implications of Marx's early communist ideas.

2. The Foundational Basis for the Emergence of Communist Thought in the Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

Building upon the alienation theories of his predecessors, Marx argued, “starting from current economic facts,” that alienation refers to the process under capitalism where surplus value is disguised as operating profit, labor power becomes a commodity, and the working people are reduced to the slaves of capitalists—mere machines for labor. In the Manuscripts, Marx's critique of political economy centers on the analysis of alienated labor, revealing its fourfold nature: the alienation of the worker from the product of labor, the alienation of the worker from the labor process, the alienation of humanity's species essence from humanity itself, and the alienation of one person from another. Based on this analysis of alienated labor, Marx elucidated his communist ideology.

2.1. Critique of Alienated Labor

2.1.1. The Alienation of Workers from Their Products

National economics holds that labor is the source of all wealth, and workers are the most active factor in the production process. Therefore, the relationship between workers and the products of their labor should be as follows: workers use the means of production they possess to engage in production, the products of their labor belong to the workers, providing a replenishment for the labor power they have expended, and supplying the workers and their families with the necessities of life required for their survival and development. The value of the products of their labor should be collectively owned and distributed among all workers to achieve their own free and comprehensive development.

However, under capitalist production relations, the relationship between workers and the products of their labor is entirely reversed: Capitalists appropriate the vast majority of social wealth, while impoverished workers, who possess nothing, survive by selling their labor power. The products of their labor are appropriated by capitalists without compensation. Capitalists continuously exploit and oppress workers to produce more, as they seek to accumulate as much social wealth as possible. The more products workers produce, the more social wealth capitalists acquire, and the stronger the forces of exploitation become. In this process, the labor products produced by workers become an external alien force that does not belong to them, dominates them, and stands in opposition to them. As Marx pointed out, "So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital."^[1]

2.1.2. The alienation of workers from the labor process

In capitalist society, workers become alienated from their own labor activities. From the perspective of labor activities themselves, labor in capitalist society is labor within the old system of division of labor, forcing people to engage in a single form of labor and preventing them from exercising their creative potential. In this coercive capitalist labor process, workers sacrifice their time for free development and their physical and mental well-being, becoming mere cogs in the production process. Monotonous and tedious labor subjects workers to physical torment and mental degradation; From the perspective of the purpose of labor, labor in capitalist society is a means of subsistence. To achieve this purpose, workers engage in involuntary labor under the coercion and oppression of capitalists. This labor process is not the free and conscious labor of workers but labor that is alienated from them. Therefore, Marx pointed out, "Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague."^[2]

Labor in a communist society is true labor. With the abolition of private property, labor time and capacity are no longer the criteria for distributing consumer goods. Labor is freed from the pressure of subsistence and is no longer a monotonous, forced activity within the rigid, outdated division of labor. In the labor process, people can fully exert their creativity, and labor becomes an activity they are eager to engage in for self-realization.

2.1.3. The Human Essence and the Alienation of Humanity

The human essence refers to the intrinsic characteristics that distinguish humans from other species. According to Marxism, the human essence lies in purposeful and conscious labor. Labor distinguishes humans from animals: while animals merely utilize external forces to alter the natural world through their existence, humans can consciously and purposefully transform the natural world to meet their own needs. Labor has developed human language and cognitive abilities. People form certain relationships through labor, and labor embodies human essence. However, in capitalist society, workers' labor is merely a means of subsistence—a forced, monotonous activity. Workers' labor and its products belong to capitalists and are not means for free and comprehensive development. Therefore, in capitalist society, human essence has

become a means for workers to survive, leading to the alienation of humans from their own essence.

2.1.4. Alienation between people

The alienation of people from their labor products, labor processes, and human nature ultimately leads to alienation between people. This alienation manifests itself in several different ways. First, there is a contradiction between workers and capitalists. The products of workers' labor belong to capitalists, who, in order to accumulate more social wealth, continuously intensify their exploitation and oppression of workers. Where there is exploitation and oppression, there is resistance. Workers resist the bourgeoisie to improve their wages and secure their rights to production and livelihood, leading to severe antagonism between workers and capitalists. Second, there is also opposition between workers themselves. To meet their basic needs, workers may engage in intense competition over employment opportunities, wages, and job security. Third, there is also conflict among capitalists themselves. Capitalism develops under the dual forces of the internal drive to pursue surplus value and external competitive pressure. Individual capitalists often improve production technology and management to enhance their competitiveness. To maintain their competitive advantage, some capitalists even keep business secrets. While their relationships are alienated, they share a commonality in exploiting workers.

2.2. Criticism of Previous Communist Theories

Before the emergence of Marxism, some thinkers recognized the flaws of private property in capitalist society and envisioned a communist society free from exploitation and oppression. These ideas provided valuable intellectual foundations for the development of Marx's communist ideology. However, previous communist ideas lacked a scientific stance, perspective, and methodology, and thus retained elements of utopianism and fantasy, failing to constitute true communist ideology. In his "Manuscripts," Marx criticized utopian socialism, egalitarian communism, and democratic or authoritarian communism to articulate the scientific principles of communism.

2.2.1. Crude, egalitarian communism

The representatives of crude, egalitarian communism were Babeuf and Bagnoli. This ideology recognized the negative role of private property in social development, but they failed to grasp the true nature of private property and did not adopt a dialectical approach toward it. Instead, they advocated retaining private property while striving for its equalization and universalization, and proclaimed themselves to be an "active community." Marx pointed out that "crude communism – is thus merely one form in which the vileness of private property, which wants to set itself up as the positive community system, comes to the surface" ^[3] and is therefore a one-sided and unscientific ideology.

In Marx's view, the reason why this crude communism is crude lies not only in their misunderstanding of the true nature of private property but also in their greed, jealousy, and egalitarian mindset. They attempt to achieve equality for all by equalizing private property that exceeds individual needs, but this is not the abolition of private property and private ownership. Instead, it seeks to satisfy personal greed through equal wages and private property. This absurd extreme egalitarianism even fantasizes about achieving equality in human talents, abilities, and appearances on the basis of equalizing private property, which is clearly a paradox that violates the laws of natural development. Not only is it impossible to achieve, but it would also lead to the destruction and regression of productivity. Marx said, "Crude communism [The manuscript has:43 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Third Manuscript Kommunist. – Ed.] is only the culmination of this envy and of this leveling-down proceeding from the preconceived minimum." ^[4] Furthermore, they advocate replacing monogamy with a system of communal wives, treating women as property to be equally distributed, which is

undoubtedly a regression to primitive conditions and fully reveals the crude nature of this ideology. Regarding crude communism, Marx sharply pointed out that the core of achieving communism lies in actively abolishing private property, and any retention of private property in any form cannot achieve this ultimate goal.

2.2.2. Democratic or Authoritarian Communism

After criticizing crude, egalitarian communism, Marx also criticized democratic or authoritarian communism. We must examine these two forms separately. The representatives of democratic communism are Cabet and Leroux. This ideology holds that the people are sovereign. While recognizing the negative effects of private property, it advocates eliminating private property through peaceful, non-violent means to achieve communism, which clearly has utopian elements. The representatives of authoritarian communism are Weitling and Blanqui. This ideology advocates the immediate overthrow of the bourgeois government and the establishment of a revolutionary regime.

Both democratic or authoritarian communism and “communism that abolishes the state” fall under the category of political communism, and compared to crude, egalitarian communism, this ideology demonstrates a clear progressive nature. First, democratic or authoritarian communism “has already understood the concept of private property.” Its understanding of communism has transcended the economic sphere to the political sphere, and from material property to human relationships, recognizing that the essence of private property is the self-alienation of humanity. Therefore, private property should not be a condition for individuals to enjoy rights in political life; humanity must be liberated from private property; Second, democratic or authoritarian communism “but since it has not yet grasped the positive essence of private property, and just as little the human nature of need, it remains captive to it and infected by it.”^[5]The essence of private property has both positive and negative aspects: on the one hand, Marx believed that private property is the root of all evils in capitalist society. Capitalists constantly exploit workers in pursuit of as much wealth as possible, leading to the continuous intensification of the fundamental contradictions of capitalist society and ultimately its demise; On the other hand, the existence of private property can to some extent promote the development of productive forces and provide the material foundation for the realization of communism. The economic base determines the superstructure. This idea fails to understand the positive role of communism and also fails to understand that the realization of communism requires material guarantees. Therefore, it remains constrained by private property and is an incomplete communist ideology.

2.2.3. Abolishing State Communism

The leading figures advocating the abolition of state communism include Bakunin and Proudhon, who promoted anarchism and sought to abolish the state through violent revolution to achieve human freedom and equality. However, this ideology also falls under the category of political communism, failing to correctly understand the positive essence of private property, and thus remains influenced and constrained by private property. This form of communism seeks to achieve absolute individual freedom by abolishing the state, narrowly interpreting communism as the abolition of the state to unify the entire world into a single nation, allowing people to live together in freedom and equality. This ideology carries a distinct utopian nature. Marx pointed out that while this ideology recognizes that communism aims to restore humanity's essence, it fails to recognize that the material foundation for achieving communism lies in the abundant material resources and the development of productive forces. The existence of the political organizational form under private property also has a certain rationality, especially failing to recognize the important role of the proletarian revolution in social development. Attempting to directly achieve communism by forcibly breaking the

political organizational form of capitalist private property fails to recognize the laws of social development and is therefore an incomplete and unscientific theory.

3. The Main Content of Communist Thought in Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

Marx analyzed alienated labor and criticized previous unscientific communism, offering a completely new interpretation of communism. "Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development.." [6] This interpretation of the essence of communism in the "Manuscripts" has its own internal logic: Marx starts from private property, pointing out that the essence of private property is alienated labor. From the fourfold determination of alienated labor, the essence of alienated labor can be reduced to the alienation of humanity. Therefore, communism primarily aims to achieve the true possession of humanity's essence, thereby unifying humanism and naturalism and resolving the mystery of history.

3.1. Communism is the abolition of private property, which is self-alienation.

3.1.1. The relationship between private property and alienated labor

From the process of the emergence of private property, private property is a product of social and historical development. Private property originates from alienated labor. In the primitive communal society, laborers produced and shared the products of their labor collectively. In the later stages of the primitive society, with the development of productive forces, social division of labor began to emerge, and family private property gradually took root, giving rise to what is known as private property. In capitalist society, the nature of labor also changed. Marx examined the economic realities of capitalist society and identified four defining characteristics of "alienated labor," ultimately concluding that Wages are a direct consequence of estranged labor, and estranged labor is the direct cause of private property. The downfall of the one must therefore involve the downfall of the other." [7] Labor is the essential characteristic of humanity. The four defining characteristics of alienated labor ultimately point to the alienation of humanity. The capitalist private property system also reveals the relationship of human exploitation. Therefore, the true reason why private property violates human nature lies in the self-alienation of humanity.

3.1.2. Communism must abolish private property

Communism must abolish private property, which means abolishing alienated labor, thereby abolishing human self-alienation, freeing humans from the oppression and control of things, and enabling humans to truly possess their own essence, thereby promoting the free and comprehensive development of humanity. The abolition of private property as described by Marx differs significantly from the direct elimination of private property. Crude, egalitarian communism adopts the attitude of eliminating private property through its equalization and universalization. Democratic or authoritarian communism, as well as communism that eliminates the state, fail to grasp the positive essence of private property, and thus represent one-sided and unscientific doctrines. On the one hand, "sublation" is because private property has a positive role, and communism must be built on the foundation of extremely abundant material resources; on the other hand, the core of private property is alienated labor, which is the self-alienation of humanity, and therefore must be abandoned. Communism asserts that abolishing private property does not mean prohibiting its existence, but rather transforming its form of existence to benefit humanity, enabling people to overcome their opposition to

objects and no longer be enslaved or constrained by the things they create, thereby truly realizing communism.

3.2. Communism is the true realization of humanity's essence

3.2.1. The meaning of humanity's essence

In the "Manuscripts," Marx analyzes the essence of humanity. Marx argues that the essence of humanity is the fundamental nature of being human, marking the essential difference between humans and animals. The essence of humanity is labor. Through labor, humans exercise their initiative, proactivity, and creativity. Humans prove their essential nature through labor, an object-oriented activity, and transform nature to meet their needs and achieve their development. In capitalist society, humans have lost their human essence. On one hand, labor in capitalist society is mechanical and repetitive under the exploitation and oppression of capitalists, suppressing human initiative, proactivity, and creativity. Monotonous and high-intensity labor erodes both physical and mental freedom, and human self-worth is drowned in the selfishness of capitalism, preventing the realization of free and comprehensive development. On the other hand, human labor cannot escape the constraints of subsistence and remains profit-driven, thus not being free and conscious labor. The labor outcomes created by humans have become alien forces that enslave and oppose them, and even the world has become the world of capitalists.

3.2.2. Communism is the return to humanity's essential nature

Communism eliminates capitalist private property, abolishes exploitation and oppression, and transforms labor into an activity that people genuinely enjoy as a means of self-realization, enabling them to truly possess their essential nature. Only in a communist society can humanity fully possess its essence and return to being "social beings." On the one hand, with the abolition of private property, the value of labor products will be collectively owned and used by all workers, freeing humanity from the state of being enslaved by commodities and entering a state of freedom, where labor products no longer become alien entities opposed to humanity; On the other hand, labor is no longer solely for the purpose of subsistence. In a communist society, labor is freed from the pressure of subsistence, becoming an activity that people willingly engage in for self-realization. The alienation between people and themselves, and between people, that was formed by private property relations loses its material foundation. Through the abolition of private property, people gradually free themselves from its constraints, the essence of humanity is gradually liberated, enabling people to become complete human beings and achieve the full liberation of their essence. Relationships between people also reach a truly harmonious state, as people become individuals who form harmonious relationships with others in society and engage in labor according to their own purposes, thereby realizing the return of the "social being" and the "human being in accordance with human nature."

3.3. Communism is the unity of naturalism and humanism

3.3.1. The connotations of naturalism and humanism

Marx believed that labor is the essence of humanity, and that human freedom and conscious labor are based on and presuppose nature. Labor is the bond that unites humanity with nature. Naturalism asserts that nature provides the material conditions necessary for human survival and development, and that nature precedes human existence, being the true and unique essence of the world. Humanism, on the other hand, maintains that humans are the true masters of the world, having created everything in it. Humans do not passively adapt to their environment but actively exercise their subjective initiative to conquer and transform nature, imprinting it with their own mark and turning it into a humanized natural world. Although both naturalism and humanism have their reasonable aspects, both are one-sided. Naturalism ignores the fact that humans are the historical subjects, while humanism ignores the fact that

nature precedes human existence. Under the capitalist private ownership system, naturalism and humanism have always been mutually exclusive. This division leads humanism toward idealism and naturalism toward mechanicism.

3.3.2. The Unity of Naturalism and Humanism

Under the alienated labor of capitalism, humans and nature are separated. Capitalists' endless pursuit of wealth has led to excessive exploitation of nature. Marx believed that the deterioration of the ecological environment is caused by the capitalist system, and only by completely abolishing the capitalist system can environmental change be achieved. In a communist society, capitalist private property is abolished, and social production no longer comes at the cost of massive waste and ecological destruction. The relationship between nature and humanity should not be fragmented but unified. Nature and humanity form a unified, bidirectional interactive relationship based on labor. Nature develops itself through humanity, reaching a higher stage, while humanity relies on nature to affirm itself, reclaim the entire natural world, and regain the full true foundation of its sensory activities, thereby achieving its true realization. This is what Marx referred to as "This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism;"^[8] Only in communist society can humanity's essential nature be restored, enabling people to engage in free and conscious labor. Naturalism and humanism then have a unified foundation, and only then can the two truly reconcile, allowing humanity and nature to coexist harmoniously.

4. Contemporary Implications of Communist Thought in Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

4.1. Providing Guidance for Ecological Civilization Construction

In the Manuscripts, Marx argued that communism must achieve the unity of naturalism and humanism. Severing the relationship between nature and humanity is not feasible, as nature and humanity are in a two-way interactive relationship based on labor. Harmony between humanity and nature must be achieved.

In capitalist society, the greed of capitalists has led to sharp opposition between humanity and nature and severe ecological destruction. The rapid development of large-scale industry and science and technology has caused the plundering of resources and environmental pollution, resulting in irreversible damage to nature. To compensate for these losses, it is necessary to achieve harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature and protect the material foundation essential for human survival and development. The Manuscripts remind us to view human social production activities from both philosophical and economic perspectives. We must not treat nature brutally due to the rapid development of industrialization. Any reckless exploitation will ultimately lead to nature's retaliation against humanity.

Therefore, adhering to the ecological civilization ideology in the Manuscripts provides guidance for human ecological development. In recent years, ecological issues have become a key focus for humanity's sustainable development. Some scholars have defined the "relationship between human groups and nature" alongside "a better life and a just society" as the core issues of development.^[9] China has further proposed a strategic deployment focused on building a beautiful China at the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. "New-quality productive forces are inherently green productive forces." Green production methods, lifestyles, and governance approaches guide the value concept of mutual interdependence and coexistence between humans and nature, aiming to achieve the value goal of ecological well-being benefiting the people.

4.2. Promoting the free and comprehensive development of humanity

Marx's exposition of communism in the Manuscripts follows an internal logic, with the ultimate goal of abolishing private property being the true possession of one's essence, achieving the free and comprehensive development of humanity, unifying naturalism and humanism, and resolving the mystery of history. The comprehensive development of humanity in a communist society refers to the full development of human intellectual and cognitive abilities, as well as all aspects of talent and work capacity. Humans are no longer constrained by external factors, enabling them to choose their desired occupations and daily activities based on personal interests, consciously and autonomously select their desired lifestyle, and fully realize their value. The exploitation and oppression of capitalism have subjected workers to immense suffering, with their basic livelihood at stake, let alone any possibility of development. In a capitalist society, humans are abstract, isolated individuals who cannot achieve their own free and comprehensive development. Only by abolishing the capitalist private property system and allowing workers to fully enjoy the fruits of their labor can the rapid development of social productive forces become more promising.

The free and comprehensive development of humanity is the core value of the Marxist philosophical system and the highest value goal of historical materialism. The overall history of human society is a history formed by "real people" engaged in practical activities during social development, ultimately leading to communism, the "true community." The free and comprehensive development of "real people" is the ultimate goal pursued by communist society. Historical materialism takes "humanity" as its starting point and also regards human development as its highest value pursuit. As human society's productive forces continue to develop, the surface appearance is a leap in the material realm, but ultimately it must also be grounded in the free and comprehensive development of humanity, with the three dimensions of enhancing human capabilities, liberating human individuality, and achieving harmonious development between humanity and society as the ultimate value goals of development.

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