

The Historical Materialism Thought and Contemporary Implications in "The Poverty of Philosophy"

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Abstract

In the surging socialist ideology of 19th century Europe, Proudhon once occupied the center of the ideological stage with his sharp criticism of capitalist private ownership and a series of seductive social transformation plans, and was regarded as a theoretical authority and spiritual leader by many working classes. However, when diagnosing the root causes of capitalism, Proudhon led a non scientific, petite bourgeois path of reformism. He proposed an anarchist social concept centered on "mutual aid" and hoped to peacefully "eliminate" the evils of capitalism through reform measures limited to the circulation field, such as establishing a "People's Bank" and implementing "interest free credit", in order to achieve a so-called "eternal fairness". This seemingly radical but actually conservative theoretical system, cleverly catering to the psychology of oppressed small producers and some workers who were afraid of violent revolution at that time, triggered a huge social response in Western European countries, quickly gathering an undeniable ideological force and a large number of loyal followers. However, the widespread spread of Proudhonism has caused extremely harmful consequences in practice, leading the workers' movement astray from fundamental political struggle in terms of economic reform. This has objectively caused serious confusion and internal division in the thinking of the working class, greatly hindering the awakening of the proletariat towards independent and unified political action. In view of the various harms brought by Proudhon's erroneous ideas, Marx realized that criticizing Proudhon's economic ideas alone could not fundamentally refute him. It was necessary to delve deeper into Proudhon's erroneous theory, that is, to start from a deeper level of philosophical thought. "The Poverty of Philosophy" was an "important battlefield" for Marx to awaken those who were addicted to Proudhon's erroneous ideas and criticize Proudhon's mistakes from a philosophical perspective. This article focuses on exploring the historical materialist ideas in "The Poverty of Philosophy" as its core text. This article first analyzes the historical background of the birth of "The Poverty of Philosophy" and clarifies its three major theoretical sources. Secondly, this article starts with the text and discusses the main body of historical materialism, the core propositions of historical materialism, and the theoretical destination of historical materialism from three levels. Establishing the dialectical movement principle of productive forces and production relations as the fundamental driving force of historical development, and demonstrating that class struggle and social revolution are the inevitable manifestations of the contradiction between productive forces and production relations in class society. Finally, based on the completion of the ideological interpretation, this article will summarize "The Poverty of Philosophy" and demonstrate how it not only publicly declares historical materialism through this criticism, but also provides a direct theoretical precursor for the birth of "The Communist Manifesto" and the creation of "Capital". At the same time, it explains its practical significance, providing theoretical support for us to strengthen our confidence in the Chinese path to modernization road today, distinguish the new contradictions in the era of globalization and digital capitalism, and criticize the illusion of new liberalism and reformism of all kinds.

Keywords

The Poverty of Philosophy; Marx; Proudhon; Marx; Proudhon.

1. Introduction

The Poverty of Philosophy, as an important work of Marx's critique of Proudhon and systematic exposition of historical materialism, has a crucial significance in the development of his ideas. Marx used historical materialism as a weapon in his book to profoundly reveal the social and historical essence of the economic category, and emphasized the historical law that production relations constantly change with the development of productive forces. He established a scientific path for analyzing social phenomena from the perspective of real economic relations by criticizing Proudhon's metaphysical methods, making historical materialism truly a "weapon of criticism" and a "theory of revolution". This idea not only lays the methodological foundation for political economy criticism, but also guides us to deeply understand the inherent contradictions and development dynamics of social forms. To this day, the historical dialectical thinking contained in "The Poverty of Philosophy" still provides us with sharp ideological weapons to grasp the evolution laws of contemporary capital logic and analyze the deep roots of global development imbalances, inspiring us to continuously explore the cause of human liberation in the unity of theory and practice.

2. The background of the formation of historical materialism in "The Poverty of Philosophy"

The philosophical poverty "is not an isolated theoretical product, but a crystallization of the turbulence and intense intellectual confrontation of a specific era. In the 1840s, the wave of the Industrial Revolution was reshaping the social landscape of Europe, with the accumulation of wealth by the bourgeoisie and the poverty and suffering of the proletariat intensifying simultaneously, and social contradictions becoming increasingly acute. The Lyon workers' uprising in France and the Charter movement in Britain both declared that a new class had stepped onto the historical stage, seeking its own path of liberation. However, various socialist ideologies that were popular at the time, especially Proudhon's petty bourgeois reformism, with their seemingly radical but actually conservative theories, caused ideological confusion in the workers' movement. Marx wrote 'The Poverty of Philosophy' precisely to thoroughly rectify this ideological trend in theory and guide the workers' movement towards a scientific track. Understanding this is a key prerequisite for accurately grasping the ideological content of 'The Poverty of Philosophy'.

(1)The development of productive forces and the intensification of class contradictions

In the 1840s, Europe was at a critical historical juncture of rapid capitalist industrialization. Capitalist countries led by Britain have completed the Industrial Revolution, greatly promoting production efficiency. At the same time, the market economy system continues to expand, and the scale and speed of capital accumulation have reached their peak, resulting in unprecedented concentration of social wealth. However, what comes with it is not sustained economic prosperity, but the outbreak of cyclical economic crises and the exacerbation of poverty among the working class. Especially around 1837, serious economic crises erupted in many European and American countries, which fully revealed the inherent disorder and destructiveness of the capitalist mode of production. At the same time, the proletariat, as an independent political force, began to step onto the historical stage, shifting from spontaneous economic struggles to conscious political struggles. This posed an urgent question to the theoretical community at that time: the proletariat needed a scientific theory to guide their struggle, and Marx faced the challenges of this era and drew nourishment from the magnificent social practices. He realized

that traditional political economy could no longer explain the fundamental roots of these crises and inequalities. Therefore, it is necessary to fundamentally criticize its theoretical premises and seek new ways out for social sciences.

(2)The influence of the early socialist ideology led by Proudhon

Theorists represented by Fourier, Owen, Saint Simon, and others are dedicated to depicting an ideal society and criticizing the unequal phenomena of capitalism. Their ideas are an important source of scientific socialism. Due to the lack of in-depth analysis of class contradictions and production relations, utopian socialists always place their hopes for social change on abstract principles or moral influences such as "rationality," "justice," and "humanity," in order to conceive of achieving social harmony through rational persuasion and institutional design, rejecting or even fearing the class struggle and violent revolution of the proletariat. Regarding this, Marx pointed out that all recorded human history to date is a history of class struggle [1]. The proletariat can only overthrow bourgeois rule and liberate itself and all humanity through revolutionary struggle.

Although Proudhon keenly observed the exploitation and injustice in capitalist society, he proposed the "Exchange Bank" plan aimed at ensuring that producers directly exchange labor products of equal value. He believed that as long as the credit system and exchange methods were improved, the exploitation of merchants and high interest lenders could be eliminated, thereby eliminating all non labor income. This obviously remains within the logical framework of commodity production and market exchange, and cannot touch upon the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system. Marx, on the other hand, achieved a transcendence of the utopian nature of his petty bourgeois reformism through a comprehensive critique of Proudhon's system of "economic contradictions". Marx pointed out that thorough social change cannot be achieved through peaceful economic experiments or moral preaching, but must be achieved through the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. Only by fundamentally overthrowing the production relations that the bourgeoisie relies on for survival can new production relations be established and social evolution be achieved. This position marks a significant transition for Marx from utopian socialism to scientific socialism, and also heralds the formation of a social theoretical system based on class struggle as its fundamental driving force.

3. The core connotation of historical materialism in "The Poverty of Philosophy"

(1)Real people are the starting point of historical materialism

Marx's exposition of the starting point of social history in "The Poverty of Philosophy" always revolves around the dialectical relationship between the individual and society.

Firstly, real people are the true starting point of social history. The first premise of human history is the existence of living beings, and all historical records must start from these natural foundations and the historical changes caused by human activities. "[2] The existence of real people is the starting point of history. Without the existence of real people, there can be no history. History is not a self performance of ideas, but a process created by real people through material production activities on a natural basis. Therefore, real people should be examined under the historical conditions of that time. This completely shattered Proudhon's obsession with abstract universal rationality as the starting point of history, thus achieving a crucial leap from idealism to materialism in his view of history.

Secondly, real people are both characters and authors in historical dramas. In Marx's view, real people have a dual position and role in the development of social history. "You can only spiral back to the true starting point by immersing yourself in the long river of history and being a character in it." [3] . On the one hand, real people are "playwrights" and creators of history.

History is not interpreted according to a predetermined script set by a few heroic figures, but rather a process of continuous creation by concrete individuals through practical activities under certain material conditions and social relationships. On the other hand, humans are also the "characters in the drama" of history, the experiencers of history, limited by the conditions they have created, and each generation can only engage in practice within the material conditions left by their predecessors. Therefore, humans are both products of history and creators of history, and this dual identity is precisely the embodiment of humans as historical subjects.

Finally, society is a product of real-life human interaction activities. In "The Philosophy of Poverty," Proudhon uses political economy as a starting point to expound on the idea of social organism. In his view, the entire society is an organic existence. But he ultimately attributed the fundamental driving force of social development to a metaphysical 'God', believing that society was only its manifestation, which prevented his thoughts from breaking free from the shackles of philosophical metaphysics. Marx pointed out that society is the inevitable product of material production and communication activities carried out by real people under specific historical conditions. It is the practice of individuals that creates and transforms the social organism itself, rather than any metaphysical principles external to humans. Thus, Marx achieved the understanding of the essence of society on a solid foundation of historical materialism.

(2)The theory of productivity and production relations is the core assertion of historical materialism

In "The Poverty of Philosophy," Marx made a systematic and clear classic expression of the law that productive forces determine production relations. On the one hand, productivity determines production relations. The society produced by manual grinding is led by feudal lords, while the society produced by steam grinding is led by industrial capitalists. "[4] . What a society is ultimately determined by the level of development of its productive forces. When a new and more advanced productive force emerges and the old production relations cannot accommodate its development, social revolution will come, and the old social form will eventually be replaced by a new and higher social form. On the other hand, production relations have a dynamic and reactive effect on productivity. When production relations are in line with the level of development of productive forces, they will become a powerful driving force for the development of productive forces; On the contrary, it will become an obstacle and shackle, seriously constraining or even destroying the development of productive forces.

This dialectical relationship reveals the dynamic process of historical development: productive forces always move forward, while production relations have relative stability. The transition from basic adaptation to basic maladjustment, and then to new adaptation through social change, in a cyclical manner, drives human society to continuously evolve from lower forms to higher forms, constituting the fundamental contradiction and law of human social development. The dialectical movement of the two provides a theoretical basis for the historical mission of liberating the proletariat and liberating all mankind. From this, it can be seen that the dialectical movement of productive forces and production relations not only provides a scientific theoretical foundation for the great mission of Marx and Engels, but also points out the inevitable path to achieve this mission: only by breaking the class social production relations that shackle productive forces and destroy human beings themselves, and establishing a new communist society, can we completely liberate the "most revolutionary factor in productive forces", that is, human beings themselves, and truly achieve the historic liberation of the proletariat and all mankind.

(3)Realizing a communist society is the theoretical destination of historical materialism

The capitalist mode of production is not an eternal natural order, but a product of a specific historical stage. Its emergence and development have historical inevitability, and similarly, its

path towards extinction and replacement by higher forms of socialism also follows the objective laws of historical inevitability.

On the one hand, communism is an objective inevitability of the contradictory movement between productive forces and production relations. The fundamental flaw of the socialism constructed by Proudhon is that his theory does not stem from a profound insight into real economic life, but rather from a dogmatic interpretation of existing economic theories. This method of thinking from concept to concept is destined to fail to touch the essence of social problems in its system. In sharp contrast, Marx's theory is rooted in a profound analysis of the real production relations and class contradictions. Marx pointed out that "social relations and productive forces are closely connected." [5] The social forms in history are all the result of the dialectical movement between productive forces and production relations. The capitalist mode of production is by no means eternal. It is a product and existence of history, with the inevitability of its emergence and development, as well as the inevitability of its demise and replacement by scientific socialism or communism. The 'economic relations' and 'economic categories' of capitalist society are 'historical and temporary products' "[6]. They are both constantly in motion, so the production relations of capitalist society are not eternal social relations. When the productive forces and production relations are highly developed, they will inevitably be replaced by scientific socialism or communism.

On the other hand, the proletariat is the real force for realizing communism. One of the differences between idealistic and materialist views of history lies in who is the true creator of history. Proudhon adhered to the idealistic hero view of history and always had a profound suspicion and even negative attitude towards the people, believing that they were passive and blindly obedient "masses". In his theoretical vision, the direction and process of history are not shaped by the practice of the masses, but are predetermined and determined by a few "social geniuses" [7]. Their thoughts and wills, rather than the practice and struggle of class, are the fundamental forces that determine the change of social form. Marx adhered to the materialist view of history. In Marx's view, social productive forces are the foundation of all society. Starting from the basic viewpoint that social existence determines social consciousness and material production methods determine social development, he believed that social history is fundamentally the history of material production development, and the productive forces of material production are created by the vast majority of the people in society. Although the revolutionary class and the proletariat are oppressed classes in capitalist society, they are also representatives of new productive forces and new production relations. To achieve the liberation of the oppressed class, it is necessary to start from the proletariat itself. Communism is a contradictory movement between material productive forces and production relations, which determines that the driving force for the realization of communism is the people. The people constantly change their production relations by promoting the development of productive forces, and their support reflects the laws of social development. The study of Marx's ideology cannot be separated from mass movements. It is necessary to combine the theoretical system of Marxism with the movement of the people and the establishment of the socialist system, that is, to combine theory with practice, in order to fully reflect the guiding significance of Marx's new worldview for the contemporary proletarian revolutionary movement.

4. The Contemporary Value of Historical Materialism in "The Poverty of Philosophy"

Although "The Poverty of Philosophy" was written over a century ago, its intellectual brilliance was not limited to the era it was in. The historical development laws it reveals, the critical methods for erroneous social trends, and the scientific framework for analyzing economic

relations make it a timeless theoretical mirror that continuously reflects and inspires our understanding of the contemporary world.

(1) Provide a Marxist worldview and methodology for the development of China in the new era. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Marx: We must adhere to and apply the worldview and methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Currently, the world is undergoing unprecedented changes that are accelerating, with a significant increase in unstable and uncertain factors. Human society is facing unprecedented profound adjustments; At the same time, China is at a critical stage of realizing the great cause of national rejuvenation, and the task of comprehensively building a socialist modernized country is arduous and heavy. The interweaving and interaction of internal and external environments enable us to face both opportunities and challenges, as well as risks and tests, on our path forward. In such a profound era of change, how to scientifically analyze and effectively resolve the main contradictions in society, how to promote the qualitative and quantitative improvement of the economy, and how to better respond to the people's diverse, multi-level, and all-round new expectations for a better life have become the era's issues that we must answer well. Faced with these major issues, we are not without rules to follow. Looking back at the source of thought, Marx's brilliant discourse in "The Poverty of Philosophy" still contains a powerful ideological force that guides us forward.

Marx's profound insights in "The Poverty of Philosophy" provide fundamental guidance for us to tackle complex challenges today. This requires us to adhere to seeking truth from facts, starting from the historical position and specific national conditions of our country's development. At present, the main contradiction in Chinese society has been transformed. In order to scientifically analyze and effectively resolve this contradiction, it is necessary to apply the dialectical materialism demonstrated in "The Poverty of Philosophy", deeply analyze the reality of China's productive forces and production relations, accurately grasp the particularity and main aspects of the contradiction, and seek solutions in dynamic development. In promoting high-quality economic development, the basic principle in "The Poverty of Philosophy" that productivity determines production relations and production relations in turn affect productivity has strong guiding significance. Marx's criticism of Proudhon's metaphysical economic view enlightens us that in order to promote the effective improvement of quality and reasonable growth of quantity in the economy, we must follow objective economic laws. We must continuously liberate and develop productive forces through technological innovation, and deepen reforms to break down institutional and mechanism barriers that restrict high-quality development, so that production relations can better adapt to the requirements of productive force development. Especially in the process of building a new development pattern, we must avoid any economic decisions that are divorced from reality, always adhere to problem orientation, and implement targeted policies.

In response to the new expectations of the people, Marx taught us that fairness and justice are historical and concrete, and must be built on the economic foundation of reality. Therefore, we must base ourselves on the greatest reality of the primary stage of socialism, do our best and act within our capabilities, ensure and improve people's livelihoods in development, solidly promote common prosperity through institutional innovation, and ensure that the fruits of reform and development benefit all people more and fairly. To avoid unrealistic promises and continuously enhance the sense of gain, happiness, and security of the people through concrete policy measures. In the face of risks and challenges on the road ahead, the historical materialist stance contained in 'The Poverty of Philosophy' is particularly valuable. We should be good at grasping the essence from complex phenomena, understanding the inevitability from contingency, nurturing opportunities in crises, and opening up new opportunities in changing situations. We need to maintain strategic determination while enhancing our awareness of

potential risks and improving our ability to handle complex situations. The shining light of truth in "The Poverty of Philosophy" transcends the barriers of time and space, and radiates vitality on the land of China in the new era. Standing at a new historical starting point, we must consciously adhere to and apply the worldview and methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism, combine the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific reality and excellent traditional culture, and continuously promote theoretical and practical innovation.

(2) Provide theoretical support for understanding the phenomenon of alienation in modern society

The Poverty of Philosophy still has important practical significance in contemporary society, as its analysis of social contradictions from the perspective of material production relations provides a theoretical tool for us to understand the phenomenon of modern alienation. In today's global capitalist system, the means of production are highly concentrated, workers are incorporated into the production chain of transnational capital, work is divided, standardized, and digitized, and humans gradually become vassals of machines. This phenomenon is precisely the contemporary manifestation of labor alienation revealed by Marx: "Labor is not a means to satisfy a need, but only a means to satisfy those needs outside of labor." [8]. At the same time, consumerism culture is extremely inflated under the impetus of capital, people's value judgments are replaced by market logic, and social relations are simplified into commodity relations. Individuals, in seemingly free choices, are actually manipulated by intangible capital forces and trapped in new spiritual enslavement. Marx pointed out in "The Poverty of Philosophy" that the economic category has historical and class characteristics, and abstract concepts that are detached from concrete social relations cannot reveal real social contradictions. This idea has important implications for contemporary times. Faced with new forms of exploitation dominated by information capital, platform economy, and algorithms, we should return to the real production relations to analyze the interactive logic between technology and power. The alienation of capitalism is no longer limited to factory production, but extends to digital labor, social media, and even daily consumer life. Only by re-understanding the social significance of labor and rebuilding the true connection between people can we resist the spiritual emptiness and social tearing brought about by modern alienation. Therefore, the ideas of "The Poverty of Philosophy" provide continuous theoretical resources for contemporary criticism of capital logic and rethinking of human freedom.

(3) Provided the key to correctly solving current social problems in China

The principle of historical materialism systematically expounded in "The Poverty of Philosophy" is not a dogma buried in the 19th century, but provides a crucial methodological key for us to correctly understand and solve current social problems in China. The essence of this key lies in its teaching that we must start from the material living conditions of reality, rather than abstract ideas or desires, to explore the deep roots of all social problems.

In the face of challenges such as uneven and insufficient development, income distribution gap, and technological innovation bottlenecks, firstly, in epistemology, we must adhere to the principle that social existence determines social consciousness. This means that we must delve into the real foundation of China's economy and society, accurately grasp the essence of the problem through empirical analysis of production, distribution, exchange, consumption and other links, and avoid falling into unrealistic fantasies or simply copying foreign models. Secondly, in terms of methodology, the method of contradiction analysis should be applied to grasp the dialectical movement between productive forces and production relations. The fundamental way to solve the current problems lies in unwaveringly liberating and developing social productive forces, and through comprehensive deepening of reforms, breaking down institutional and mechanism barriers that are not suitable for or even restrict the development of new quality productive forces, so that production relations can better adapt to and promote the development of productive forces. Finally, in terms of subjectivity, we must always adhere

to the principle that the people are the creators of history. Solving social problems must rely closely on the practical wisdom and pioneering spirit of the broad masses of the people, and take promoting the comprehensive development of human freedom as the starting point and foothold of development. Therefore, 'The Poverty of Philosophy' does not provide ready-made answers, but rather a scientific compass for analyzing problems and a theoretical cornerstone for promoting practice. It ensures that our reform and development endeavors are always based on a profound understanding and conscious application of the objective laws of social development, thus maintaining strategic determination in the complex reality and steadily moving forward along the direction guided by historical materialism.

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