

Research on the Core Issues of Modern Political Philosophy and the Critical Perspective of Marxism

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Abstract: Modern political philosophy engages in in-depth discussions on core issues such as justice, freedom, and equality, while Marxism critically analyzes these issues, emphasizing their socio-historical context and class foundation. The study of Marxist political philosophy in contemporary China should not only be rooted in the concrete practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics but also actively respond to the core issues of modern political philosophy. Furthermore, it should engage in profound dialogue with Western political philosophy traditions, ancient Chinese political philosophy, and contemporary humanities and social sciences, while adhering to the fundamental theoretical premises of Marxism. Through this process, Marxist political philosophy can achieve theoretical innovation, deepen its critical analysis of socialist society with Chinese characteristics, and serve as an integral part of the construction of contemporary China's mainstream ideology.

Keywords: Modern Political Philosophy; Marxism; Critical Perspective; Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, political philosophy has gradually become a prominent topic in the study of Marxist philosophy in China. The reasons for this phenomenon are multifaceted, including the influence of Western neoliberalism and classical liberal political thought, as well as the theoretical expression of China's social reform and development process and the expansion of the field of Marxist academic research in China. However, behind this academic prosperity, there is also a certain degree of ambiguity in direction and an unstable theoretical foundation. In light of this, Professor Wu Xiaoming wrote an article titled

On the Materialist Historical Foundation of Marx's Political Philosophy in the first issue of *Marxism and Reality* in 2020, attempting to clarify the fundamental grounding, ideological line, theoretical tasks, and contemporary significance of Marx's political philosophy. While this article primarily aims to establish a foundation for the current generation, rather than directly commenting on the specific political philosophy research of contemporary Chinese Marxist scholars, it immediately attracted widespread attention and sparked criticisms from other scholars. This article does not intend to engage directly in the debates to avoid falling into unclear discursive traps. However, in order to promote the flourishing development and theoretical self-awareness of Marxist political philosophy in China, I humbly offer some preliminary thoughts to contribute to the ongoing academic discussion.

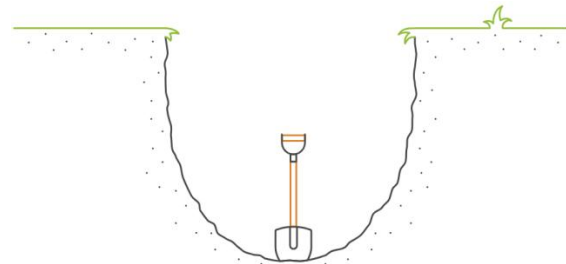


Figure 1. Ambiguity in Marxist Philosophy Causes Instability And Criticism

2. Modern Political Philosophy's Core Issues

Modern political philosophy revolves around several key areas that explore the foundational questions of justice, freedom, equality, democracy, and the legitimacy of the state. These issues continue to shape the way we think about political systems, governance, and individual rights.

2.1 The Justice of Political Systems

A central concern of modern political philosophy is determining what makes a

political system just. Justice is often considered as a combination of formal, substantive, and procedural justice. Formal justice focuses on how a system is implemented, ensuring that laws are applied equally and consistently. Substantive justice emphasizes the nature and content of the system itself, questioning whether the system promotes fairness, equity, and the well-being of its citizens. Procedural justice examines the fairness of the legislative and decision-making processes, ensuring that all voices are heard and that decisions are made transparently and equitably.

2.2 Freedom and Equality

In modern political philosophy, the values of freedom and equality are emphasized as essential pillars for organizing society. Freedom refers to the right of individuals to make choices and pursue their own interests without undue interference. Equality, on the other hand, ensures that all individuals are treated with equal respect and dignity, with equal access to resources and opportunities. These values are not only seen as core principles of political thought but are also considered integral to the structure of political institutions, ensuring that they uphold and protect these rights for all members of society.

2.3 Democracy and Constitutionalism

Political philosophy also addresses the institutionalization of power, focusing on how democracy and constitutionalism can safeguard individual freedoms and rights. Democracy, in this context, is understood as a system in which the power of the government is derived from the consent of the governed, with mechanisms in place to allow citizens to participate in political decision-making. Constitutionalism refers to the framework of laws that limit government power and establish a system of checks and balances to ensure justice, fairness, and respect for individual rights.

2.4 The State and Its Legitimacy

The concept of the state in modern political philosophy has evolved, moving away from traditional notions of divine or hereditary power to a social contract theory, in which the legitimacy of the state is grounded in the consent of the people. This shift prompts

questions about the role of the state in society, the basis for its authority, and the justification for its governance. Modern political philosophy explores how a legitimate state functions, balancing the needs of the public with respect for individual freedoms and ensuring that its power is exercised in a just and accountable manner.

These core issues reflect the ongoing challenges and considerations that political philosophy faces as it seeks to build a more just and equitable society. Political philosophers are tasked with navigating complex questions about how power should be distributed, how justice should be administered, and how individuals' freedoms and rights can be preserved while maintaining social order. The very nature of these debates is constantly evolving, influenced by changes in social, economic, and political contexts. For instance, the ongoing discussions around the balance between individual liberty and collective responsibility, the changing dynamics of global governance, and the need for sustainability in modern societies all raise new philosophical questions.

In striving to create systems that are fair, democratic, and legitimate, political philosophers play a critical role in guiding political discourse and influencing policy-making. Their work not only addresses theoretical questions but also offers practical insights into the design of institutions and the shaping of public policies that can promote justice, protect human rights, and respond to the evolving needs of society. Ultimately, the ongoing development of political philosophy serves as a vital tool in advancing the collective pursuit of a society where individuals are treated with dignity and equality, and where political structures align with the principles of justice and fairness.



Fig2. Exploring Justice, Freedom, and Legitimacy in Political Philosophy

3. Marx's Critique of Contemporary Capitalist Society

Marx's critique of contemporary capitalist society is deeply rooted in an analysis of labor, which he sees as the fundamental basis of both social relations and the economic structure of capitalism. However, this critique is multi-dimensional and can be approached from two fundamentally distinct analytical modes, which lead to different understandings of capitalism and its contradictions. The first mode starts from labor itself, critiquing capitalism as an inherently exploitative system that derives value from labor, yet alienates it from the worker. The second mode, on the other hand, critically examines the historical specificity of labor within capitalism, arguing that labor is not simply a neutral or universal force but rather a social construct shaped by the dynamics of capitalist production. It is this second mode that provides a more comprehensive and historically grounded critique of capitalist society.

3.1 Labor as a Foundation for Critique: A-Historical Understanding

The first mode of critique approaches labor from an a-historical perspective, assuming an essential tension between two aspects of society: one rooted in capitalism's specific social structures (such as the market, private property, and wage labor) and the other built upon the human activity of labor. This approach tends to generalize labor as a universal human activity, which in its purest form should ideally be free from capitalist exploitation. In this mode, the focus of critique is on how capitalism distorts or exploits labor, drawing attention to the alienation and exploitation workers face under capitalist conditions. Labor, in this framework, becomes the basis for critiquing capitalist relations, and the critique is rooted in the idea that the true value of labor is not being fully recognized or compensated in capitalist systems. In this view, the exploitation of labor is seen as the primary injustice of capitalism, and the solution is often understood as a return to a more humane or just form of labor, free from capitalist control.

3.2 Critique of Labor within Capitalism: A Historical Approach

The second mode of critique, however, takes a

historical and materialist perspective, understanding labor as historically specific to capitalism. This approach emphasizes that labor within capitalism is not a neutral force but a social construct that has been shaped by the economic relations and the historical development of capitalism. Marx's analysis shifts the focus from labor as a universal or a-historical category to labor as a product of capitalist relations. In this mode, labor is not merely a basis for critique but is itself the object of critique. This critique highlights how labor in capitalist society is shaped by and embedded within the broader system of capitalist production, which is fundamentally structured around the private ownership of the means of production and the market dynamics that govern economic life.

From this perspective, Marx's critique reveals that the nature of labor in capitalism is inherently exploitative and alienating. Under capitalism, labor is commodified, meaning that workers must sell their labor power to survive, and in doing so, they lose control over the products of their labor and the conditions under which they work. Marx's analysis of exploitation is central here: the capitalist mode of production is driven by the extraction of surplus value from workers, who receive less than the value of what they produce. In this critique, labor is not simply a force that can be freed or restored to its true value, but a socially constructed relationship that is defined by the logic of capital accumulation.

3.3 Moving Beyond Class and Property: Marx's Structural Critique of Capitalism

By interpreting Marx's critique of capitalism as an analysis of the specific historical form of labor within capitalist society, we move beyond the traditional Marxist focus on class relations and property relations. Traditional Marxist analyses often emphasize the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, focusing on the conflict over property and the distribution of wealth. However, Marx's later writings—especially those on commodity fetishism and the analysis of the capitalist mode of production—suggest that capitalist society cannot be fully understood solely through the lens of class struggle and the ownership of the means of production.

Instead, Marx's analysis of commodities and

capital provides a deeper, structural critique of the social relations that underlie capitalism. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, for example, reveals how social relations in capitalism are mediated through commodities, which appear as things with intrinsic value rather than as products of human labor. This fetishism obscures the real social relations behind the production and exchange of goods, disguising the exploitation of labor and the unequal power relations that sustain the capitalist system. Capital, in Marx's view, is not just a sum of money or assets but a social relation that shapes the dynamics of production and the entire structure of capitalist society.

In this context, Marx argues that the true social relations of capitalism are not just the interpersonal relations between classes but the abstract, impersonal forms of domination and exploitation that exist in the form of capital, commodities, and labor power. These relations structure the entire social order and define the capitalist mode of production, creating a society where individuals' lives are subordinated to the logic of capital accumulation. Thus, Marx's critique extends beyond questions of property and class to include a critique of the very forms of social organization that sustain capitalism.

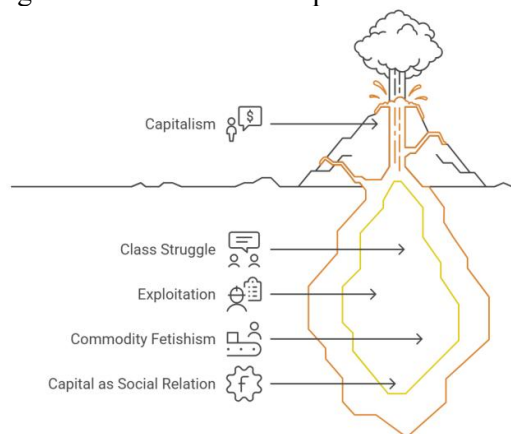


Figure 3. Critique of Labor within Capitalism: A Historical Approach

In conclusion, Marx's critique of capitalism offers a powerful and transformative framework for understanding contemporary capitalist society. By focusing on labor as a historically specific and socially constructed phenomenon, Marx provides a critique that goes beyond traditional class and property relations to reveal the deep structures of exploitation and domination that define capitalism. This analysis remains a vital tool

for critiquing contemporary capitalism and for imagining more just and equitable forms of social organization.

4. Conclusion

The integration of socialism with Chinese characteristics and Marxist political philosophy is both a steadfast adherence to the fundamental principles of Marxism and a profound response to China's unique conditions. The universal principles of Marxism provide theoretical guidance for socialism with Chinese characteristics, while the development path of socialism with Chinese characteristics has innovated and expanded upon Marxist political philosophy in practice. This theoretical innovation is reflected in the combination of adhering to and creatively developing the basic theories of Marxism, particularly in the exploration of socialism's construction and development, including the establishment of a socialist market economy, the improvement of the social governance system, and the deepening of reforms. Marxist political philosophy, within the context of socialism with Chinese characteristics, has not only been expanded in terms of contemporary relevance but also demonstrated its unique adaptability and inclusivity. In conclusion, the formation and development of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the result of the deep integration of Marxism with China's revolutionary, construction, and reform practices. While maintaining the core values of Marxism, it emphasizes the combination of innovation and practice, offering new insights and experiences for contemporary socialist theory and practice worldwide.

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