

Marxism in the XXI Century and Marx's Ideas of Human

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Abstract: *In comparison with the Marx's doctrines of capital and surplus value, of materialistic determinism and socio-economic forms, or of the proletariat and socialism, human issue is not his central theme. However, Marx's ideas of human nature though represented mainly in the "young Marx" period, are significant enough to survive in the mankind's thinking treasure as a considerably influential and substantial doctrine to human sciences and the cause of human liberation. Against the background of the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth, the paper provides information about attitudes of international community toward Marxism in recent years. Marx's great ideas of human nature and their values today to be analysed in the paper include: 1) Human beings are a natural entity that possess human nature; 2) Nature is human's inorganic body; 3) Humans are realistic individuals including their activities and physical living conditions; 4) Human nature is the harmonic sum of social relations; 5) Each individual's free development is the condition for everyone's free development. These ideas prove meaningful dimensions that remain core theoretical premise of various human sciences. In reality, they also act as guidelines of worldviews and methodologies in many social theories.*

Keywords: K. Marx, Marx's Theory, Marx's Thought, Human Liberation, Marxism in the Twenty-first Century, Marx's Ideas of Humans

I. Marx in the XXI century

Turning to the XXI century, Marx and his theories are still an attractive and controversial topic in the intellectual life of humanity. Besides the skepticism, criticism, and even discrimination,

mostly from the right, and some communities that used to live in the socialist system, or some extreme social activists, a large number of people and communities still hold an opposite view. They increasingly appreciate Marx in

terms of an ideologist, a scientist and a human.

In September 1999, in a BBC's poll of the greatest thinkers in the last millennium, Karl Marx was unexpectedly voted as the first placeholder; Albert Einstein only held the second position (See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/461545.stm>).

During 2008-2009, when the world began to fall in the financial crisis, Marx and his book *The Capital* suddenly became famous again following the concern of most of the Western countries. Many famed magazines such as Time, Newsweek, Forbes, the Financial Times and even Der Spiegel put Marx on their front page.

Under the joint proposal of Germany and the Netherlands in 2013, the *Communist Manifesto* and the first volume of the Marx's *Capital* were added to the Memory of the World (MOW)^(*) list of UNESCO. The proposal is based on the notion that these works have had a great impact on the social movement around the world since they were written.

In 2014, *the Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, written by the French economist, Thomas Piketty, discusses Marx and

The Capital in the XXI century, were published by Harvard University and later sold nearly a half millions of copies^(*). Piketty was just one among many other Western authors who have published well-known books that include insights toward Marx's contribution. For example, Terry Eagleton (*Why Marx Was Right*, Yale University Press, 2011), Michel Vadee (*Marx, penseur du possible*, Méridiens Klincksieck, Paris, 1992), etc.

In 2016, in a survey of more than a million documents that American students are required to read, the *Communist Manifesto* was one of the three most read and used documents in educational programs about social theory in the United States, in terms of both the number and the frequency of teaching (Berry, 2016).

In April 2018, at Trier, where Marx was born and attended high school before leaving the city to the Bonn University, the city tourism office has sold thousands of EUR sheets having the portrait of Karl Marx to honor him in the 200th anniversary of his birth. Notably, the first 5,000 bills were sold immediately after launch. The city had to print more 20,000 sheets to meet the demand of buyers from Australia, Brazil, USA and other countries worldwide (Petroff, 2018).

These phenomena are just the appearances. The important thing is such

^(*) "Memory of the World" is organized and promoted by UNESSCO since 1992 in order to preserve and approach the rare documents from being harmed and faded in many countries and regions in the world. Until now, Vietnam has six heritages that is awarded this title, including "Moc ban trieu Nguyen", "Chau ban trieu Nguyen", "Moc ban kinh Phat thien phai Truc Lam chua Vinh Nghiem, Bac Giang", "Bia da Van Mieu - Quoc Tu Giam", "Tho van tren kien truc cung dinh Hue" and "Moc ban Truong Phuc Giang Ha Tinh".

^(*) The French version: Thomas Piketty (2014), *Le Capital au XXI siècle*, Pub. Éditions du Seuil, Paris; The English version: Thomas Piketty (2014), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Translated by Authur Gold Hammer, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London.

phenomena are certainly meaningful indicators of the significance of Marx after 200 years, especially in comparison with the other great people. That has indeed made future generations ponder deeply about him and his works.

Nowadays, capitalism not only exists but also has achieved incredible development and the self-adjustment of the capitalist mechanism is a remarkable phenomenon worth studying. Meanwhile, socialist realism though has existed more than 70 years, but it was disintegrated and collapsed in the Soviet Union and several Eastern European countries.

Human beings and human society at the beginning of the 21st century are still alienated and fraught with disabilities that Marx warned. This truth made the Communist movement and the international workers fall into setbacks and the belief in socialism decline. Even so, the ideals of Marx and Marxism, particularly elimination of oppression and exploitation, human liberation, and freedom of human beings, etc., could still not be considered to have existed in the societies of the former socialist system. Terry Eagleton (2012) was one of the authors that had relatively convincing arguments on this issue.

To explain the surprising appeal of Marx and Marxism in the XXI century, we would like to contribute some more arguments:

First, with Marxism, social life and its manifold manifestations, including unexpected phenomenon, or revolutions of history, etc., are the process with certain

basis and conditions, real motives and tendencies. Moreover, that process cannot be beyond the rule and determinism of the objective law of human history. That is the progressive process, although there are often many difficulties and even backward steps.

From prehistoric societies to modern societies, every social change is not mysterious. Marx and Engels said “if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.” (Marx & Engels, 1999).

Looking at the human society in a logical, predictable and orderly manner is the dream of every single rational thinking, scientific perception, and especially social activist at the macro level. The more complex and chaotic the modern world is, the more people want to rearrange it in order to reveal its deterministic tendency in order to find out controlling solutions. More than any other, Marx and Marxist theory are the most reasonable place to satisfy this demand.

Second, in comparison with the other social theories, the theory of Marx is one of the rare doctrines sympathizing with the poor, advocating of the poor, and fighting for the benefits of the poor. Not “a dose of painkiller” or “superior humanitarianism”, the Marxist theory pointed out the social position of the poor, the role of working class in creating social wealth and promoting the social development. Today,

although the attitude of governments and international organizations toward poverty eradication has been much more positive and profound than before, that attitude is still very different from the perspective of Marxist theory on poverty and the proletariat. Until now, there has been no theory that can replace the Marxist theory in the perspective toward the poor.

Third, as for the social movements, besides providing orientations, effective methodologies, Marx and Marxism provide an ideal that can captivate the sentiment of all participants. According to Mark Skousen (2007), in almost 200 years, no philosopher or thinker would possess the capacity to charm as Marx ever did. Even nowadays, Marx remains as a revolutionary idol not only for scientists, but also for the young, the worker, and the activist. That makes it hard to find another alternative of Marx's theories in fighting for the idea of liberating people, finding the resolution of social problems, and striving for the social justice and development.

These are objective reasons for the existence and no less powerful attraction of Marx and the Marx's doctrine in the XXI century.

II. Great ideas of Marx about human

Since the *Economic - Philosophic manuscript of 1844* was published in 1932, the criticism of "Marx forgot human" in the West has somewhat declined (Fromm, 1961; Leopold, 2009; Lukes, 1982; Lacroix, 2012). Since then, however, the exploitation and interpretation of

Marx's thought about human beings have sometimes gone too far. As can be seen in many of documents were published, Marx's thought about people were often presented in ways that people did not know whether Marx's thought was like that or not (Философия. Основные идеи и принципы, 1985; П.С. Гуревич, 2001; Философия. Учебник для вузов, 2005; А.Г. Спиркин, 2006).

In this article, "Marx on human" was selected and presented with five big ideas of Marx. We wanted to stick to the classic, not to add anything Marx did not say. The so-called "big ideas" have acquired great stature and played an essential role in leading social-political activities in more than a century. Moreover, those ideas were premises and basic methodologies which promoted the progress of science. Even now, they are still the core premises in some modern social theories and science about human beings.

1. Man is a natural human being

In *Economic - Philosophic manuscript of 1844*, K. Marx asserted "Man is a natural human being" (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 234). In fact, *man is a natural being* is the thought of L. Feuerbach, whom Marx believed "making social relations among human become the basic principle of reasoning". Feuerbach said that man is a special entity of nature because it is the only entity acquiring consciousness. However, it is necessary to determine a man's nature in the same way with other organisms. To elaborate, one must consider "external objects" which guarantee the existence of human, such as air, water,

light, food, and materials, etc. Adopting this notion, Marx emphasized “Man is directly a natural being”. He explained as a “living natural being”, man, on one hand, is endowed with a natural strength in the form of “capacity” and “talent”. Nevertheless, on the other hand, man is “defined and restricted” by external objects which are independent of human, but “necessary” and “fundamental” for a human. Therefore, humans are “suffering beings” (Marx reused Feuerbach’s term, which meant man is subjected to the regulation of nature). Marx also added, “The being without nature outside of it is not a natural being, as it does not participate in the life of nature” (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 232-233).

As can be seen, this idea is slightly different from the modern concept of the relationship between man and nature. Currently, even the concept of sustainable development, which advocates the protection of the environment as a key factor for social and human development, does not consider nature as a major part as Feuerbach and Marx argued. Of course, the modern concept does not neglect the natural power that dominates within and beyond human being. It is, therefore, necessary to ponder: Why more than a hundred years ago, Feuerbach and Marx have already emphasized the natural element in the existence of human? Is it necessary to emphasize it once more or not?

Despite absorbing the natural element in the concept of Feuerbach, Marx completed his own idea about a human

being. He wrote: “But man is not merely a natural being: he is a human natural being. That is to say, he is a being for himself. Therefore he is a species-being, and has to confirm and manifest himself as such both in his being and in his knowing”^(*) (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 234).

Man is a natural human being was the definition of *human being* of Marx. We believed that this statement met the strict requirement of being a definition in term of presentation, content, and stature.

2. *Nature is human’s inorganic body*

In the theme of the relationship between human and nature, the most unique ideology of Marx is considering natural world as human’s inorganic body.

When analyzing the corruption of the natural world resulted from the alienated workers, Marx said, “nature is a part of human life” because of two reasons: “nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life activity”. In that sense, nature is also the human body - *human’s inorganic body*. Marx wrote “Nature is man’s *inorganic* body - nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself a human body. Man *lives* on nature - means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx & Engels, vol.42 2000, p. 135). In addition to this, Marx also said that human life is not only

^(*) In *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General*.

maintained by nature, but that nature is also the source of human life. If a human does not create itself, then, of course, the creator of it must be outside of it. The creator is the nature. Overall, the mass cannot understand “the existence through themselves of nature” (Marx & Engels, vol. 42, 2000: 180).

We consider the view *nature is human's inorganic body* is unique, because, to our knowledge, from the ancient time to today, besides Marx, no one regards nature as the human body. Even ancient Eastern philosophers, who emphasized the harmonization of human and nature and view nature and human as one, still did not consider nature as a human body. The sophistication and depth of Marx were reflected in that, in Marx's time, environmental issues were not major matters to human life as they are today. Certainly, at that time, Marx could not know about the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, and other complex ecological phenomena that we now call an ecological crisis. Even so, Marx still asserted *nature is human's inorganic body*, which entailed every human's impact on the natural world is the impact on its body. In other words, harming the nature is harming a human, as Marx wrote: “That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx & Engels, 2000, vol. 42, p. 135).

3. *Human is the real individual, their activities and their material conditions*

In German ideology, Marx and Engels

(1995, p. 29) wrote: “Our premises are not arbitrary premises and dogma; they are real premises that can only be ignored in imagination. They are real individuals, their activities and material conditions, which are both available and created by their own activities. Thus, our premises can be tested by empirical path”. “People are influenced by their activities. Therefore, they are who depends on their production, their products, and their methods. Thus, material conditions and production determine individuals” (Marx & Engels, 1995, p. 30).

When talking about a human, if we only pay attention to the biological aspect, humans in different eras are not much different. Therefore, in what aspect are humans different? Marx believed a human could only be interpreted by realistic premises in human research. Those premises were human's activities and production conditions. To elaborate, those premises were individuals and their material conditions, which were available and created by their own activities.

This idea was the fundamental foundation for many concepts at the beginning of the 20th century written by Soviet Union scientists, such as A.R. Luria, L.S. Vurgosky, N.A. Leonchiev, and X.L. Rubenstein, etc., and scientists from German, France, and Bulgaria. Those concepts were later developed into a new school of human psychology. This school of thought advocates explaining all psychological phenomena, including the most complex ones, by social activities, communication, and relationships.

Human psychology is influenced by society and, therefore, a product of social activities and communication. This school of thought has acquired many achievements and significant influence in psychology, education, etc. until today (Haggbloom, 2002).

4. Human nature is the ensemble of the social relations

In the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, Marx wrote: “Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man [menschliches Wesen = ‘human nature’]. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in every single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations” (Marx & Engels, vol. 3, 1995: 11).

For decades in the 20th century, this thesis has become a methodological premise for many scientific studies and social reforms. In fact, the thesis has acknowledged the real contradictions of human and human nature. Human nature regulates and shapes each individual and community, it is the quality that is not within each separate individual, and it is not isolated, abstract, and separate from history and the world as characterized by Feuerbach and others. The human nature, in reality, is the totality of all social relations that each subject is engaged with - both the normal daily relationships and the sacred ones. I.T. Frolov considers this thesis one of the most insightful ideas of Marx, it is the biggest discovery about human. In Frolov’s opinion, in the history of science, there is no other idea so simple and obvious, yet truly

insightful and deep that it takes many centuries of struggling that people can find and confirm it.

In the 1980s, this thesis was subjected to many criticisms, that it undervalues the importance of individuality and biology. The scientists have carried out many experiments. In the end, though still debatable, they can confirm that human nature is beyond individualistic (non-individualistic), “it is not under the shape of an individual” but it must express as the totality (harmony) of all social relations (See: V.E. Davidovich, 2003: 341-342).

In terms of science, this thought has allowed the reasoning on the categories of human nature and it has important implications for the practical worlds.

5. The free development of each is the condition for the free development of all

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote: “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels, vol. 4, 1995: 628).

Marx and Engels explained, after all, capitalist relations are abolished, the proletariats and their regime cannot exist forever. When fulfilled their mission, that regime must be replaced by the “association of the individuals”, which is a completely new form of society, the communist state. In that state, the free development of each individual is the condition for the free development of all individuals.

It is necessary to say that, in the mental life of mankind, freedom is always the

highest ideal of all classes. Religions always teach people to respect the freedom of other people's freedom by restraint one's own freedom. Hegelian philosophy always emphasizes "awareness of freedom" relative to the awareness of the inevitable. That is to say, the freedom of each person cannot avoid restricting the freedom of others and of the whole society. In all kinds of philosophies, all have created their own method to resolve this conflict. However, the key point is that no theory or religion recognize the harmony of one's freedom with others' freedom, or even to be a condition of each other, like Marx.

This is a unique and attractive viewpoint of Marx. The future society can be an association of the individual, in which, the free development of one person can create a condition for others to be freer. This a new viewpoint on human development that even the international organizations nowadays haven't achieved.

Conclusion

Although the general attitude towards Marxism and Socialism is doubt and distrust, the general attitude toward Marx, himself, as a thinker and a scientist and a human being, is totally different. As time goes by, he becomes greater as a figure, though there are a few numbers of people still hold him in a negative view.

As a human being, Marx acknowledges that he is a human and nothing human is alien to him (*Nihil humani a me alienum puto*) (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/04/01.htm>). This attitude shows that the root of a human

is human itself (Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol. 1, 1995: 580). A human being is a natural being that has humanness, which means the real individual, the product of the activities of the person. Marx is a great thinker and is admired because first and foremost, he is not a god, his thought is a human's thought.

As a scientist, Marx acknowledges that he is a person who doubts everything (*de omnibus dubitandum*). In this objective stance, he has contributed to the humankind many new and meaningful discoveries, those that mark an era. Among those are the theories of surplus value, historical materialism, socio-economic condition, etc. Based on these discoveries, the history of human society appears not random, but to have certain foundations and momentums, to follow objective and deterministic principles of societal progress.

As a thinker, Marx is considered to be the greatest thinkers in human history in more than 1.000 years- a thinker with earthly solutions to realize the dream of abolishing all oppressions, injustice, inequality; he advocates for building a society whereby, the freedom of each person is the condition for the freedom of everyone else.

Nowadays, the workers, the social movements, the social activists and the progressive mankind have not found a thinker that could replace Marx in leading the fight for the solutions of societal problems and striving toward the beautiful ideas on social progress and human liberation □

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