

The Theoretical Defects of Western Marxism and Marxism's Degeneration

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Abstract: Marxism should not only be interpreted by a single academic means such as text ploughing, paraphrasing, and discourse analysis, nor should it be an exclusive matter of a professional group (philosopher or politician), but should also avoid the “backtracking” and retrogression of Marxist “Spekulation of philosophy” and the absence of “practicality”. In China, the research on “Western Marxism” in recent decades has been accompanied by shortcomings such as lack of problem awareness, lack of awareness of research objects, passive research mode, weakened subject consciousness and lack of theoretical innovation, etc. As for the trend of “backtracking” in contemporary Marxist studies, we should stop and correct that movement on the basis of constant vigilance.

Keywords: Western Marxism; Theoretical Degeneration; Theoretical Defects

1. Introduction

As a kind of political theory, Marxism takes “interpreting the world” as its premise and “changing the world” as its own responsibility, and its vitality lies in the organic combination of revolutionary character, scientificity and concrete practice. This is also the experience of the transformation of “Marxist philosophy” from “old philosophy”. The conversion of humanities of young Marx has become a true proletarian revolutionary theory, which reason is that “philosophers only interpret the world in different ways, and the problem lies in changing the world” [1] 54-57. This is Marx's paradigm of philosophical study. This is Marx's revolution in the study paradigm of philosophy and constitutes the unity of theory and practice. Western Marxism is a popular representative of Marxist academic practice in the 20th century, but it has also greatly undermined the unity of Marxist theory and practice. From the theoretical flaws of “Western Marxism”, we will be able to see the obvious trend of “degeneration” of Marxism, which also puts forward higher requirements for the study of contemporary Marxism in our country.

2. Marxism's “Backtracking” Tendency and Its Risk

2.1. The exact meaning and problem of “backtracking”

In a broad sense, “backtracking” refers to Marxism's self-reclusive of the theoretical form, the narrowness of the audience scope, and the depoliticization of the carrier. At the same time, the lost of Marxist theoretical research direction and its unclear use, and the deterioration

of Marxist researchers, the weakening of ideology centering on Marxist social and political practical functions are also “backtracking”. In the narrow sense, “backtracking” refers to the pure speculative philosophical form, just as what it looks like before the Marxist philosophy revolution. This is an old philosophy even criticized by Marx himself. It is full of the entanglement of metaphysics, lacks a clear political and practical nature, and cannot be used as an ideological weapon by the working masses. Later Marx changed the critical logic and means of capitalist reality, saying that “criticism of heaven should become a critique of the world”, because “after the truth of the other side of the world has disappeared, the task of history is to establish the truth of this shore of the world.” [1] 2, 74 The theory of historical materialism and surplus-value based on the study of political economics was combined with the workers' movement and turned into a real power even from now on.

The study of contemporary Marxism from the 20th century to the present has gradually begun to take a philosophizing trend, and is specifically represented by professionalism, academicization, textualization, and depoliticization. In other words, there may be boundaries and generation gaps between “Marxist researchers” and “Marxists”. The position of Marxism research and practice may shift from a vast society to a closed study, and the means of Marxist research may also be changed from practical problem-solving to textual archeology. In this way, the mass of the proletariat will no longer be the “us” of the subject of Marxism but the “them” of Marxist research objects. Marxism may no longer be a powerful tool for the armed minds but has a danger of becoming an intellectual games of professional philosopher and academic elite. Through diversified and personal inter-

pretation, Marxism may be redirected to mysticism. Once Marxist ideological weapons are dismantled, it is easy for the reality to remain indifferent and powerless.

2.2. The ideal picture and the dilemma of marxism research

We should make it clear that Marxism should ultimately become a kind of bold philosophical practice rather than a simple philosophy of practice. It should not only be embodied in academic monographs on the bookshelf, but also need to avoid academic mistakes. When Marxist philosophy once again became “philosopher’s philosophy” and “forum philosophy”, Marx’s ideals of “elimination of philosophy” and his aspiration to make philosophy hold by the masses of the people will run aground. Because the academical and elitist Marxism is narrower and more subjective in the field of vision, it is impossible to spread out, and has no extensive publicity, substantive political functions and inexhaustible vitality as well. The decline in the popularization of Marxism is entirely likely to result in the recurrence of the problem of the separation of theory and practice, even cause “Marxist theoretical crisis”, which just like what Kersch said.

Nowadays, besides politicians, scholars, and other groups who continue to discuss Marxism in political organs, research institutions, colleges and universities and other occasions, the “aphasia” of Marxism in social life is more and more common, and the “Value-Free” of Marxist studies, which lies in the separation between academic and politic, has gradually become a visible image [2]. This should be attributed to, but not limited to, the connection between theory and practice is not close enough, and the pace of theoretical innovation is out of touch with the actual needs. However, this cannot be the reason for Marxism to “backtrack” anyway. The revolutionary nature of Marxism requires that Marxists must face the reality and look for answers, and seeking “hidden in the world” never conforms to the realistic purport of “changing the world” by Marxism. In Western Marxism, pure philosophical speculation has become the main form of Marxist research, and textual interpretation has become the main carrier for philosophers to criticize the reality. However, the courage to put into practice and the feasibility of theoretical solutions are not very impressive.

3. The Criticism of the Theoretical Defects of Western Marxism

3.1. Conceptual features and logical development

“Western Marxism” emerged from the background of The Second International’s differentiation and misunderstanding of Marxist theory. It was a theoretical movement that deviated from the fundamental position of traditional Marxist philosophy, and has been defined as a “philosophical trend of thought” since its creation, which

also indicates its theoretical natural tendency. The doctrines of the recognized founders of Western Marxism (such as the young Lukács, Colsch, Gramsci, etc.) and their successors are mainly attached to the views of certain Western philosophies or cultural theories, seeking a “third road” by criticizing capitalist society and advocating a new way of reading Marxism. Therefore, Western Marxism has the following typical features[3]: Formally, it has anti-traditional unconventional features, presents “heresy” and “diversity”; because of the multi-dimensionality above some kind of modern western philosophy or social trends, “variability” and “floatness” are obvious the framework of philosophical theory tends to oscillate, showing “contradictory” and “non-systematic”. In philosophical tendency, it prefers to emphasize individual initiative and subjectivity; to explore social local phenomena and accidental factors; from rationalism to irrationalism; to focus on philosophy, aesthetics and other superstructures; from realism to ideal utopia. Therefore, overall, Western Marxism cannot be regarded as the mainstream in Marxist philosophy. It has many factions and complicated theories. Some of the viewpoints are self-contradictory. The dominant framework of humanism is prominent, and has an obvious difference from the “materialism” of traditional Marxist materiality.

Western Marxism has gone through several complicated stages of development. After Lukács and his colleagues debuted in the 20th and 30th centuries of the last century, a new wave of criticism and interpretations of Marxism quickly attracted people's attention, and later they gradually changed their inclination to humanism, humanity and individuality. The second generation of main characters lifted the banner of humanism under the influence of the 《Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844》, but their viewpoints were different, finally forming a clamorous complexion which full of various voices from Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Fromm, Sartre, and the others. In the end, the Western Marxist camp shifted from internal conflicts to finality. A large number of leftists in Western Europe went negative, and the workers’ movements fell to low levels; Althusser and others reiterated the scientific nature of Marxism and explicitly opposed humanism, which shocked Western Marxism itself and accelerated its disintegration.

Since the late 1960s, Western Marxism has changed from a humanistic philosophical thinking to a comprehensive social criticism of modern capitalism; after the 1970s, its classical theoretical logic gradually came to an end. Since the 1980s, the so-called “post-Marxism” has begun to appear scattered. There are no specific delimitation of this conception.

3.2. The theoretical defects and sources of “Western Marxism”

Judging from his identity experience, the representative of “Western Marxism” has many professors and professional philosophies in colleges and universities. Although there are many communist party members, they lack organizational connections and political activities, and retain more independent intellectuals characteristics. Although individual representatives (such as Lukács, Gramsci, etc.) are directly related to revolutionary activities, they have not been able to continue because of tough experience and difficulties. Later Western Marxist philosophers have increasingly parted ways with direct revolutionary practices (Marcuse’s “new leftist” movement is still ended up with nothing definite even if it is famous for a moment.)

From the perspective of research interests, they do concern about the dynamic reality of the workers’ movement and capitalist economic politics, but the response method is merely a retreat of “theoretical criticism”. Like previous philosophers before Marx, forced by the pressure of the government and the decline of the revolutionary situation, or the eclectic development of capitalism in the new period, they hide the sharp thinking in the word code and protect there inside body with obscure cases, revolutionary consciousness is no longer sharp. Thus, with the reliance on Marx’s classic texts and evanescent self-explanations, “Western Marxism” seems to simplify “liberation of all humans” as “liberation of discourse”, and gave birth to the risk of reconstructing Marxism as metaphysics in the new era.

From the perspective of epistemological shortcomings, since the philosophers themselves failed to derive the characteristics of the revolutionary fighter or activist but have turned into professors and scholars, therefore, the philosophization of Western Marxism has become a necessity. Unlike Marx and Engels, who fought whole life by the way they lived, Western Marxism has the character of sitting and talking. As a vicious circle, Western Marxists will naturally not have the natural “touching angle” of the masses of workers like Marx and Engels, and they will not be able to sense the failure of the underlying reality. The need and ability to adjust theories according to reality will also weaken and lag behind. So they have to once again make subjective interpretation of Marx.

From the perspective of methodological flaws, in the Western Marxism, the extension of subjectivity blurs the absolute boundary of binary opposition and adds weight to the logical chaotic space. This created an embarrassing situation in which most Western Marxist doctrines could not be practiced. For example, Bloch’s “spirit of hope” still relied on the “concrete Utopia” practiced by Marxism, and Marcuse’s reconstruction after “great refusal” was also difficult to give a concrete reality plan. In addition to the role of an objective political environment, this kind of “Marxism” has to be returned from the factory,

community and the fields to the college pulpit, and turned from popular to minority.

4. Strategies of Research on Western Marxism in China

4.1. The crux of the study of Western Marxism

In fact, the earliest academic work on Western Marxism in China can be traced back to Mr. Xu Chongwen’s 《Western Marxism》 in 1982, and originally came from the political mission of relevant academic institutions for gathering academic intelligence[4]. It should be said that our study of Western Marxism has always been to develop Chinese Marxism. However, the starting point for “use for me” does not lead to a logical path of practice that takes “me” as the mainstay; moreover, as a special carrier in the study of Chinese Marxist philosophy for the last 40 years, the trend of Western Marxist philosophy has not seamlessly connect with academy and politic in China. From extensive translations in the 1990s to logical reflections in the new century, some scholars have attempted to reconstruct Marx and his doctrines in order to solve China’s current social and theoretical problems. What is often overlooked is that people can easily unconsciously place Western Marxist philosophy above Chinese Marxist philosophy. However, the theoretical connection channel is still not clear. The framework of understanding based on the reality of China cannot yet be established. The Chinese discourse is still hidden in the study of Western Marxist scholars by the “acceptance interpretation”. The hidden realities behind the Western Marxist theoretical logic cannot be highlighted, and China’s major practical problems cannot get enough attention. Thus, ignoring the theoretical research of realistic practice may turn the multiple interpretations of Marxism into the so-called academic prosperity of ulterior motives and create a “value-free” that should never have been and cannot be achieved in academic research by erasing political “ism”, and will eventually leave behind a gaudy and colourably specious “Marx”.

4.2. The optimization of Western Marxism

For the study of Marxist philosophy in China, Western Marxism has a certain critical reference value. In the critical means and formal innovation of capitalism and the recovery of Marxist philosophy’s spirit, Western Marxism has provided us with precious resources. Its reflections on issues such as market economy, social science and technology, consumerism, and ideology also have components that are worth learning from. At the same time, it should also be noted that research on foreign Marxist ideologies is a window in which Chinese academy is in line with the world. It is also an excellent opportunity for Chinese theoretical circles, which guiding ideology is Marxism, to make an equal dialogue with inter-

national scholars and exhibition of Chinese wisdom. After the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping's socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics in the new era became the latest achievement of Marxism in China, and the concept of human destiny community received global response. The "World Congress on Marxism" were successfully held twice in China, world famous foreign Marxist scholars such as Samir Amin, David McClellan, David Koz, David Harvey, Boozgarin have also frequently attended or taught in China in recent years. Our Marxist discourse power has been gradually improved, and China's Marxist practice has also received more and more attention and recognition. In the academic field, Chinese scholars with clear ideas and clear-headed thinking will strengthen Marxist beliefs in the study of Western Marxism and correctly summarize the experiences and lessons of the world socialist movement. They also contribute to cognitive modernity, globalization, and neo-liberalism.

At the same time, it has to be said that the criticism of capitalism by Western Marxism in the philosophical academic form is based on the fact that it does not substantially subvert the capitalist social system. It does not substantially inherit and develop Marxist practical intervention capabilities. It is obviously not enough to solve the problems of the times of socialist China, which is now under the guidance of Marxism. The self-confidence requirement of the socialist theory with Chinese characteristics tells us that the philosophical attitude towards Westernization and thus assisting the "backtracking" movement of Marxism will not work in contemporary China. The renewal and upgrading of Chinese Marxism still depends on the creative study of our own independent integration with China's national conditions. In the study of Western Marxism, we still need to learn to have "ideas" and find "problems" so that we can find ways to serve the theoretical innovation of contemporary Chinese Marxism and serve the construction of discourse system of Chinese philosophy and social sciences and the promotion of discourse power. Judging from the latest development of Marxism in China, we are full of confidence in the completion of these tasks.

5. Conclusion

Giving full play to the political functions of Marxism and strengthening its ideological functions are the prescriptions for the narrow-minded "backtracking" of Marxism, and they are also the most important points for effectively guiding all tasks. The continuous development of the market economy in our country seems to give a realistic picture of some Western Marxist theories, but it should be made clear that Marxism is a revolutionary political theory about human liberation, rather than a simple economic theory of getting rich [5]. Due to the fundamental nature of socialism, the socialist market economy cannot

focus solely on market efficiency but ignores ideological security and institutional stability. The exchange laws, the law of interests, competition rules, and consumer laws established in the market economy of China cannot violate the socialist system. Therefore, we must make Marxism always maintain the political function of ideology, be full of vitality because of continuous innovation, and regain universal recognition; avoid "degeneration" of Marxism and make Marxism no longer be recognized by only a few people and be misunderstood as self-entertainment and self-deception.

As a theoretical support for the socialist system, Marxism can only move forward in more concrete terms, and it must not be "backtracked" narrowly. At the same time, just as the disintegration of the Soviet Union could not represent the failure of the socialist system, China's social problems do not arise because of Marxism. The basic economic system and basic political system of Chinese society under the guidance of Marxism are the correct design of China's national conditions. The relationship between "system" and "rule" is worth studying, but this is also not the reason why Marxism "retrospected" degenerates and is even denied or rejected. Marxism is still worthy of our adherence and practice. Marxist philosophy is still the highest peak of human theoretical thinking so far. It is a philosophical and theoretical guide for the entire Chinese Communists' thoughts, lines, and actions[6].

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