

The Second International's Marxist Research Context and Methodology Reconsidered

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Abstract: *The Soviet philosophical debate of the 1920s and 1930s clearly emphasised Leninism as the only correct Marxism, but another result of this discussion was that it led to a theoretical debate between Leninist and Second International theorists that rose to the level of ideology. In this context, the Second International was denounced as revisionist and opportunist, and this created an ideological context for the study of the Second International's Marxism. After the 1970s, the study of Marxism in the Second International began to gradually shift to the ideological-historical context. And to really enter the context of the history of ideas to study the Marxism of the Second International required the construction of the methodological principles of historical historicism from an epistemological perspective.*

Keywords: *Second International; Ideological-historical Context; Historicism; Methodological Principles*

1. A Theoretical Dilemma in the Study of the History of Marxist Philosophy

It is a theoretical dilemma in the study of the history of Marxist philosophy whether there was a Marxist philosophical phase from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. This theoretical dilemma in the study of the history of Marxist philosophy was raised during the Soviet philosophical debates of the 1920s and 1930s. The philosophical debate in the Soviet Union at that time revolved around two main issues: first, the methods and objects of study of the basic principles of Marxist philosophy, and the relationship between Hegelian and Marxist philosophy, etc. It was the discussion of this issue that led to the gradual development of Marxist fundamentals as a discipline. The second is the question of whether Lenin was a philosopher, that is, whether there was a phase of Lenin's philosophy in the history of Marxist philosophy. This discussion raises the question of whether there was a new form of philosophy distinct from that of Marx and Engels, or whether there was a phase of Marxist philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was also in this discussion that the concept of Leninism was introduced and an affirmative answer to this theoretical dilemma was given. A Concise Course in the History of the Communist Party of the United States, which clearly emphasizes that Leninism is the only correct Marxism. But another result of this discussion was that it led to a theoretical debate between Leninist and Second International theorists that rose to an ideological level, and a sharp confrontation between the Third International and the Second International over ideological ideas.

2. The Shift from an Ideological Context to an Ideological-historical Context

The ideological context of second state studies had in fact been formed as early as Lenin's critique of opportunism, as clearly expressed in the Concise Course on the History of the Communist Party of the United States after the establishment of the Third International, "the Western European type of social-democratic party, the kind of party inculcated in peaceful conditions at home, led by opportunists, fantasizing about social improvement and fearing social revolution." The Bolshevik Party was "a new kind of party, a Marxist-Leninist party, a party that advocated social revolution, a party that could train the proletariat to fight the bourgeoisie and organize the victory of the proletarian revolution." In this context, the Second International was denounced as revisionist and opportunist, and this formed the ideological context for the study of the Second International's Marxism.

After the 1970s, the study of the Marxism of the Second International began to shift gradually to the

context of the history of ideas. In the 1970s and 1980s, the *History of Marxist Dialectics*, edited by Soviet philosophers, dealt with Marx and Engels and then, at some length, with the Marxist theory of the Second International before moving on to the dialectical narrative of Lenin. However, the book did not use the expression 'Second International Marxism', but rather 'comrades and students of Marx and Engels'. It was Kolakowski who really put the Second International into the history of Marxist thought, using the concept of the 'Second International' explicitly. In *Mainstream Marxism*, Kolakowski called the Second International the 'golden age' of Marxism and devotes a volume to the theories of Second International Marxist thinkers. Here, the Second International was no longer a footnote to the thought of Marx and Engels, but an important stage in the history of Marxist thought. This idea of Kolakowski's changed the previous assessment of the Second International by Marxist theorists and constructed an ideological-historical context for the study of the Second International. In addition, the North American Marxist philosopher Ben Ager, in his *Introduction to Western Marxism*, defined Second International Marxism as 'scientific Marxism', affirming the unique position of Second International Marxist theorists in the history of Marxist thought.

Influenced by the former Soviet Union, for a long time the study of Second International Marxism in Chinese academia was in an ideological context. It was not until the 1990s that Chinese academics began to break out of the ideological context formed in the 1950s under the influence of Soviet philosophy and gradually incorporated the Marxism of the Second International into the study of the history of Marxist thought. But instead of the expression "Second International", the expression "comrades and students of Marx and Engels" is used, largely adhering to the tone of the Soviet *History of Marxist Dialectics*. After entering the 21st century, Chinese studies of the history of Marxist thought have begun to pay increasing attention to the ideological resources of Second International theorists and have sought to systematically elaborate the Second International as a whole phase. This indicates that the study of Second International Marxism in Chinese academia has gradually shifted from an ideological context to an ideological-historical research context. However, in terms of how to deeply and systematically expound the theoretical value of the Second International Marxist theory and its uniqueness, it has remained largely in the tone of previous evaluations and has not been systematically and deeply analyzed from the height of the history of ideas. Therefore, in addition to a conscious awareness of the history of ideas, the study of the Marxist theory of the Second International also requires systematic methodological reflection.

3. Methodological Principles of Constructive Historicism

It is well known that the uniqueness of the Marxist theory of the Second International is expressed precisely in the complex links with the thought of Marx and Engels, and with the Third International. The elaboration of Marxist theory during the Second International was mainly in the form of theoretical debates, and therefore the study of the Marxist theory of the Second International in the ideological-historical context should be realized from the analysis of these theoretical debates. Domestic academics have conducted many studies on the theoretical debates of the Second International from the perspectives of the history of the international communist movement and the history of the development of socialism, but basically they have been conducted at the historical level, focusing mainly on the process of the theoretical debates of the Second International and evaluating the theoretical rights and wrongs of both sides of the debates, but rarely analyzing the theoretical debates of the Second International from the epistemological level. Therefore, it is necessary to apply the methodological principles of historicism to the study of the theoretical controversy of the Second International, i.e. to systematically analyze the theoretical controversy of the Second International from an epistemological perspective in relation to the background and issues of the controversy, and then to analyze the mechanisms underlying the transformation of Marxist theory, especially Marxist philosophy, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, this principle can be followed to analyze the significance of the theoretical debates of the Second International on three levels.

The first is to analyze the origins of the theoretical debate on the Second International in relation to the new changes in capitalism and the development of the workers' movement in Western Europe between the 1880s and the early 20th century, and to clarify the Western European character of the Second International. We know that the Second International was created under the guidance, preparation and direct leadership of Engels, who advocated its creation mainly on the basis of the needs of the development of the workers' movement in Europe and America in the 1870s and 1880s. After Engels' death in 1895, between 1896 and 1898 Bernstein published six articles in the journal *New Age* under the general title *The Problem of Socialism*. These six articles were based on his own perception

of the development of European capitalism at the time and presented his revisionist views. He argued that the development of modern capitalism had led to the establishment of a modern credit system, the creation of a well-developed system of postal, telegraphic, passenger and freight communications, alongside significant improvements in commercial statistics and intelligence agencies, the expansion of the organization of industrialists, and so on. Bernstein argued that these had shown that the capitalist system had grown new functions, was capable of adapting to the development of the productive forces, overcoming capitalism's own crises and gradually growing more and more socialist elements, so that Marx's predictions about the collapse of capitalism and the principles of the proletarian revolution no longer applied and the proletariat could achieve socialism by means of trade unions and social improvements. After Bernstein's idea was put forward, it not only gave rise to a heated debate within the Second International, but also continued into the intellectual struggle of the Third International. Most of the studies on this powerful and long-lasting theoretical debate have focused on the criticism of Bernstein's errors, but few have reflected on the Western European context in which the Bernstein phenomenon arose and the significance of the question itself. In fact, this should be an important aspect of our understanding and evaluation of the Second International.

Secondly, the Second International's contemporary character is grasped in the context of its complex relationship with Marx and Engels. In the theoretical argument for the Second International, Bernstein's criticism of Marx's Engels' doctrine is both a starting point and a focus. It was the starting point because the theoretical debate within the Second International began precisely with a critique of Bernstein's revisionist views, and it was in this process of critique that the development of innovations in Marxist theory took place. It was the focus because the theoretical debate of the Second International always revolved around Bernstein's criticism of Marx Engels' doctrine, the questions Bernstein raised about the relationship between the ends and means of socialism, forms of socialist democracy, trade unions and everyday struggle, and the study of the new situation of the capitalist economy. Not only that, but the most creative ideas in the study of Second International Marxist theory have emerged from this debate. Rosa Luxemburg's *Social Reform or Revolution*, for example, is a masterpiece of this theoretical debate.

Thirdly, by analyzing the complex relationship between the Second International and Western Marxism, the influence of the Second International on Western Marxism can be systematically elucidated. Because of its own Western European character, the Second International suffered different fates in Soviet Marxism and Western Marxism. Whereas in Soviet Marxism the idea of the Second International, together with its theoretical perspectives, was roundly criticized and rejected, in Western Marxism the Second International, although subject to criticism in terms of its ideological ideas, was fully affirmed in its leftist philosophical tradition. This view is not difficult to see in Korsch's, Gramsci's and Lukács' assessment of the Second International, and thus there is a relationship between Second International Marxism and Western Marxism that is both affirmative and negative. The negative is directed at the Second International's idea of peace, which embodies a rupture in the development of Marxist theory at a point in time; the positive is directed at the inheritance of the philosophical tradition of historical dialectics espoused by the Left of the Second International, which embodies the inheritance of a Western critical Marxist philosophical tradition.

Through these three dimensions, we can see that the theoretical debates of the Second International are essentially a movement of self-reinvention of Marxist theory; the theoretical debates within the Marxist camp are themselves a manifestation of the infinite openness and inner dynamism of Marxist theory.

4. Re-evaluating the Marxism of the Second International through the Lens of Marxist Theoretical Innovation

Marxist doctrine has not only a theoretical quality, but also a practical quality. Whereas the theoretical quality is acquired and embodied in the creation of academic ideas, the practical character is acquired and embodied in the popularization and practical application of the theory. This has determined the development of Marxist theory in the course of which two different systems of discourse have developed: a system of discourse expressed in academic language; and a system of discourse expressed in popular language. The former discourse system was created by Marx and Engels and expressed the new and original ideas of neo-materialism; the latter discourse system was created by the Second International Marxist theorists. Kautsky's *The Economics of Karl Marx* is one of the best examples of popular books written to enable the working class to understand and accept Marxist doctrine. It is precisely these popular books which, because of their lack of theoretical originality, do

not enter the realm of intellectual history, and this has led to the study of the Second International from the perspective of Marxist propaganda and dissemination.

By reconstructing the research perspective of Second International Marxism, we mean to re-examine and re-evaluate the new theories and ideas created during the intense theoretical debates on the practical problems of the time, at the level of Marxist theoretical innovations. From this perspective, the Marxist theorists of the Second International have made their contributions in the three main fields of scientific socialism, Marxist political economy and historical materialism. For example, Lenin's Three Sources and Three Components of Marxism, which outlines the basic composition of Marxist doctrine into three parts: philosophy, political economy and scientific socialism; Rosa Luxemburg's Theory of Capital Accumulation, which is the most prominent contribution to Marxist political economy, incorporates the non-capitalist system into the world capitalist system, which studied capital accumulation and its crises from a monetarized perspective, thus creating a new paradigm for the study of Marxist political economy.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the major achievements of the Second International's Marxism in the fields of scientific socialism, political economy and Marxist philosophical methodology, and its impact on 20th century Marxist philosophy, are ample evidence that the Second International is an important link in the history of Marxist thought, or that without studying this link and understanding its significance for the transformation of Marxist philosophy itself, we cannot today truly understand of 20th century Marxism. Constructing an ideological-historical context for the study of Second International Marxism is a useful attempt to solve the long-standing dilemma of the East-West Marxist controversy in 20th century Marxist studies.

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