

A Synthesis of Historical Materialism's Premise of the Principle of "the Economy Plays a Decisive Role"

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Abstract: *The fundamental position of the principle of the materialist conception of history that "the economy plays a decisive role" in historical materialism determines that the interpretation of its premise is an unavoidable fundamental issue in the process of the interpretation and development of the materialist conception of history. However, this crucial premise lacks rigorous argumentation and in-depth explanation in the writings of Marx and Engels, and is intrinsically hidden in the principle of the materialist concept of history that "the economy plays a decisive role", which has become a premise that has been obscured and tacitly recognized. This concealment has caused Marxism to attract criticisms such as "economic determinism" and deconstruction such as "pluralistic determinism" and "cultural determinism". At present, there is no direct discussion in the academic circles at home and abroad on the inquiry into the premise of the materialist concept of history that "the economy plays a decisive role". However, some scholars have conducted enlightening and constructive discussions on the issue of the development power of productive forces in "productive forces determining the relations of production" and the universality of "the economic base determining the superstructure", forming a series of rich theoretical results.*

Keywords: *historical materialism; principle of the "decisive role of the economy"; premise*

1. Introduction

In the historical materialism founded by Marx and Engels, the economy, as an important element in the composition of society, plays a decisive role in the historical development of society as well as in other elements of history, which is summarized in this thesis as the principle of the materialist concept of history, "the economy plays a decisive role". For a long time, the preconditions for the principle of the materialist concept of history that "the economy plays a decisive role" have not been sufficiently explained and sufficiently emphasized. At the same time, in real life, this decisive role of the economy is not always reflected in all aspects of social history, nor can every historical event be directly attributed to the economy. It is the absence of the preconditions for the principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role" that has led a large number of non-Marxists, either for ideological purposes or because of a superficial understanding and misinterpretation of the theory, to regard the Marxist materialist conception of history as an "economy-only theory".

2. Connotation of the premise of the historical materialist principle of "the economy plays a decisive role" in inquiry

2.1 The principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role"

Historical materialism holds that the activity of material production is the most basic practical activity to satisfy human existence, and people must first eat, drink, live, and clothe themselves before they can engage in politics, science, art, and religion. Historical materialism explains the concrete and historical process of material production in terms of real-life material production, and understands the corresponding forms of social interaction based on the mode of production as the basis of human social history.

This conception of history rejects the epistemology and methodology of all previous materialistic conceptions of history, which sought to explain the world in "certain categories" at different times. In addition, historical materialism always stands on the basis of real history, revealing from material

practice that the formation and development of social phenomena and various conceptual forms, concrete historical state facilities, legal perspectives, art and even religious concepts are all based on the corresponding economy.

Historical materialism recognizes the economy as an important element in the constitution of society, which plays a determining role in the historical development of society as well as in the other elements of history. This "determining role" does not mean that there is a one-to-one linear causal relationship between the economy and the other elements, nor does it mean that there is necessarily an explicit causal correlation between the economy and the other elements, but that among the many interacting historical factors, the economy is the "thing that ultimately constrains historical development". In other words, among the elements that make up social history, it is ultimately the directly living elements of production and reproduction that are decisive, and therefore the development of social history is ultimately the economy that plays a decisive role in social history. In conclusion, this thesis summarizes the above ideas of the founder of Marxism as the principle of historical materialism, "the economy plays a decisive role".

2.2 Prerequisite inquiry of philosophical categories

The dictionary "Ci Hai" defines "premise" as a condition precedent to the occurrence or development of something. In the context of formal logic, a premise is a known proposition that serves as a basis for reasoning. In Aristotelian logic, the three concepts of major premise, minor premise and conclusion are involved, in which the major premise usually expresses general knowledge, and the minor premise usually expresses special knowledge connected with general principles and principles. In the General Theory of Philosophy, Sun Zhengyu thinks about "premise" from the philosophical category, and considers "premise" as the constitutive tool, the fulcrum of deduction, the scale of evaluation and the standard of examination of ideas and theories.[1] By interpreting the principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role", it is easy to find that this article takes the idea of "the economy plays a decisive role" of the founder of Marxism as the object of research to carry out premise criticism, which is essentially to carry out premise criticism of the idea from the philosophical category. In essence, it is a philosophical critique of the premise of the idea.

Exploring theories of thought from the perspectives of "rationality" and "value" is the main path of study in all disciplines. However, it is more profound and unique to philosophy to inquire into the prerequisites of thought from the perspective of "premise", and to abandon thought itself in the process of inquiry and reflection. What are the presuppositions of thought? What is the "prerequisite" reflection of thought? How can the critique of the premises of thought be carried out from the philosophical sphere? Before formally launching a multidimensional inquiry into the premises of historical materialism "the role of the economy as a determining factor", it is necessary to recognize the character of the premises of the idea and to clarify what is meant by a critique of the premises of the principle of historical materialism "the role of the economy as a determining factor". This confirms the possibility of a multidimensional approach to this topic. First of all, from a philosophical point of view, the premise of thought is the basis and principle of thought, and is the precondition and basic element of what makes a thought a thought. Secondly, the "universality" of the premise of thought constitutes the possibility of criticizing the premise of thought, which determines the possibility and necessity of carrying out the critique of the premise of thought. In addition, to carry out the critique of the premise of thought from the philosophical category requires us to form a conscious awareness of the critique of the premise, to cultivate the consciousness of philosophical reflection, and to take the initiative to search for the premise implicit in the thought. It also requires us to use the power of logic to dissolve the original compulsion of thought and iterate the premises that constitute thought. Finally, changes in the objective material environment have created a real need for a multidimensional inquiry into the premise of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role".

3. Exploring the issue of the dynamics of productivity development

The fundamental position of the productive forces in historical materialism determines that the question of the development of the productive forces is a major issue that cannot be avoided in historical materialism. Around the question of the driving force of the development of the productive forces, many debates have arisen in the domestic academic circles from the 1950s to the present, and there are mainly the following five views:

3.1 Endogenous productivity dynamics

The theory of the endogenous power of the productive forces attributes the power of the development of the productive forces to the basic contradiction of the development of the productive forces themselves, that is, the contradiction between human beings and nature generated by the reality of people in practice. Based on the fact that the society at that time was "always trying to change the relations of production", [2] Chi Chaobo proposed: "On the one hand, we should affirm that the internal contradictions of the productive forces are the driving force and source of the development of the productive forces; on the other hand, we should correctly estimate and recognize the role of the compatibility and contradictions between the relations of production and the productive forces in the development of the productive forces and the role of the obstruction of the productive forces." [3] Li Pingxin also advocates that the productive forces have the tendency to proliferate and renew themselves, i.e., the development of the productive forces has its own inherent power. [4]

After the reform and opening up, Hong Yuanpeng put forward: "It is impossible to deny that the development of productive forces has its own internal source. If we deny that the development of the productive forces has its own internal source, it will either lead to the theory of exogenous causes, in which the relations of production and the superstructure are regarded as the ultimate determining force of the development of the productive forces, or to the cyclical theory in which the productive forces determine the relations of production and the relations of production determine the productive forces." [5] Lin Gang and Zhang Yu believe that the division of labor is not only an important manifestation of the development of the productive forces, but also promotes the development of the productive forces from both the macro and micro aspects, and that "the law of motion of the labor process itself is the fundamental driving force of the development of the productive forces". [6] Liu Tongfang advocates that the fundamental driving force of the development of the productive forces is the labor caused by human needs and capable of resolving the contradictions. At the same time, he believes that it is reasonable to take human needs, the contradictions within the productive forces and the contradictions between the productive forces and the relations of production as the driving force of the development of the productive forces but it is unscientific to understand them as the fundamental driving force of the development of the productive forces. [7] An Qinian believes that since the tools of labor is the main symbol of the development of productive forces, and the creation and invention of the tools of labor depends on human thought and understanding, especially in the era of science and technology has become the first productive force, the development of productive forces and even the progress of the entire human society, are derived from the human, especially the individual geniuses of the creation of ideas. [8]

3.2 The dynamics of production relations

Two scholars in political economy, Hu Jun and Wei Xinghua, argued around the issue of the development of productive forces. Hu Jun disputed Wei Xinghua's disagreement with the theory of the dynamics of production relations. Hu Jun believes that relations of production are the fundamental driving force behind the development of the productive forces, and considers the theoretical statement that "the productive forces determine the relations of production, and the relations of production react on the productive forces" to be "inappropriate". [9] In "The Significant Practical Significance and Contemporary Value of Defining the Objects of Political Economy Research as the Relationships of Production", Hu Jun summarizes the history of the development of human society as a history in which the relations of production have driven the development of the productive forces. He takes the practice of China's socialist economic construction as an example to illustrate that "relations of production adapted to the level of productive forces play a decisive role in the further development of productive forces." At the same time, "the whole history of mankind is the history of certain relations of production from being the main promoter of the development of the productive forces to its main obstacle, and finally to be replaced by new relations of production which are more capable of promoting the development of the productive forces." [10]

3.3 The view of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production

There have been many scholars who have argued that the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production is the driving force of the development of the productive forces. As early as the 1950s, Wang Yanan criticized the theory of the power of the relations of production in the debate. He said, "The driving force of the development of the productive forces can neither be

accounted for by the contradictions existing within production nor by the facilitating effect of the relations of production alone; in the final analysis, it must be found in the unity of the contradictions and antagonistic struggles between the productive forces and the relations of production, and in the dialectical development between them." [11] After the reform and opening up, Zhao Jiaxiang argued this point of view more deeply, pointing out that "the power of the development of productive forces" is to put the productive forces into the dynamic examination of the total connection with other social elements, and advocating that "the contradictory movement of the productive forces and relations of production is the basic driving force of the development of the productive forces." He also refuted the view that the internal contradictions of the productive forces are the basic driving force of the development of the productive forces. [12]

3.4 Combined factor dynamics perspective

Tong Changhu believes that the continuous development of the productive forces is not attributable to individual dynamics, but rather to combined dynamics. In his view, the driving force of the development of the productive forces is firstly the internal driving force of the development of the productive forces, that is, the contradictory movement of the internal elements of the productive forces; and secondly, the external driving force of the development of the productive forces, that is, the driving force of the relations of production and the superstructure on the development of the productive forces". In addition, he emphasized that "the development of the productive forces without external forces, relying only on the internal forces of the productive forces, does not exist in this world". [13]

3.5 The view of the main driving force of the development of productive forces

In the process of exploring the fundamental power of the development of productive forces, some scholars will turn the research perspective to the main body of productive forces, that is, the real people. Liu Yanling pointed out that the needs of real people is the internal power of the development of productive forces, but not all the needs can constitute the power of the development of productive forces, only with the subjective and objective unity, reasonable needs can constitute the power of the development of productive forces. [14] According to Dong Keqiang, the most fundamental driving force for the continuous change and development of productive forces lies in "human nature", which is more accurately expressed as "human's 'trans-migratory nature' (beyond animal nature)", and drives "the development of productive forces". The most fundamental driving force is "human nature", which is more accurately expressed as "man's 'transcendental nature' (beyond animal nature)", and the real determining force that drives "the development of productive forces" is "culture". [15]

4. Exploration of the issue of the dynamics of economic base development

Starting from the counteraction of superstructure to economic base, the developmental dynamics of economic base is explored. According to Shen Bu and Li Zhe, the unity of materialism and dialectics in Marxist philosophy determines that it is inaccurate to emphasize the "determining role" from either side alone. Therefore, in formulating historical materialism accurately and completely, it must first be recognized onto-logically that "in the overall process of historical development, it is the productive forces that determine the relations of production and the economic base that determines the superstructure". At the same time, it must also "recognize, from the point of view of development and the interaction of development processes, the determining role of the relations of production in relation to the productive forces and of the superstructure in relation to the economic base under certain conditions". Only in this way can Marxist historical materialism be distinguished from both the idealistic view of history and metaphysics.

5. Study of the universality of the historical materialist premise that the economic base determines the superstructure

According to Wang Xiaosheng, the relationship between economic and political rights cannot be understood simply as the relationship between the "base of the statue" and the "statue", nor can it be literally understood as the relationship between the "foundation of the building" and the "building", nor can it be understood as a "hierarchical relationship". Nor can it be literally understood as the relationship between the "foundation of a building" and the "building", nor as a "hierarchical relationship". Rather, it should be understood from the perspective of "functional relationship", that is,

"economic relationship has a decisive function for the political rights system (the function of maintaining the existence of the society), while the political rights system has an important counteraction for the economic relationship". According to him, when we understand the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure from a functional perspective, "such a functional relationship exists in any society".[16]

Lucio Col-letti, a leading representative of neopositivist Marxism, argued in *Ideology and Society*, among other works, that Marx differed from his contemporaries in that while other scholars were always accustomed to taking "society in general" as the object of their study, Marx focused on "this society", which means modern capitalist society. According to Col-letti, Marx had a complete theory of society and methodology of social research, but after his death, his successors, including Engels, distorted his theory of society and methodology of social research. He argued that Marx's *Capital* was not a study of society itself, not an abstract study of "general" society, but a specific study of a "particular" society, namely, capitalist society. Thus Marx emphasized that he was exploring the particular laws of development of capitalist society rather than the commonality of the laws of development of all human societies. This makes the theory of "the economic base determines the superstructure", in Col-letti's eyes, a law that applies only to the particularities of capitalist society. [17]

In addition, both Karl Kautsky and Habermas have argued that the proposition that "the economic base determines the superstructure" is not universal. According to Kautsky, the entire body of legal, political, and ideological institutions can be regarded as the superstructure of the economic base only in the ultimate sense. But this is not at all true for individual phenomena in history, and Marx's propositions about base and superstructure are absolutely true only for certain new phenomena in history. Habermas accepted this basic idea and used it to analyze different historical forms. In his view, to determine whether a social phenomenon, such as economy, politics, science and technology, is the basis of a society is to look at the basic problems that a society is trying to solve. In his view, the basic problems to be solved by a society determine whether or not a social phenomenon is the basis of that social stage. If the basic problem to be solved by a society is economic, then economy is the basis; if the basic problem to be solved by a society is political power, then political power is the basis. In primitive societies it is the blood system that regulates the distribution of the means of production and the distribution of social wealth, while in highly culturally advanced societies (slave and feudal societies) it is the system of political power that performs this function. In these societies, the system of blood relations and the system of political power are their foundations, respectively. Only in capitalist societies does the economic system directly regulate the distribution of the means of production and social wealth, and thus the economy is the basis of society, while in future societies the educational and scientific systems may play a fundamental role.[18]

6. An inquiry into the ultimately determining role of the economy

Louis Althusser, the famous French philosopher and "structuralist Marxist", proposed that "the ultimate determining role of the economy is exercised in the interchange of the principal roles of the elements". One of the key conclusions he draws from his structuralist approach to interpreting Marxism is that "contradictions are determined by plurality". Althusser points out that according to the "pluralistic determinism of contradictions", the development of a society depends on various factors, that is, the development of a society is the result of the combined action of various factors in society. In his view, Marx shows us the two ends of a chain: at one end, the ultimate determining role of the mode of production; at the other, the relative independence of the superstructure and its special forces. But it cannot be concluded from Marx's thought that of the two main factors, the economic base and the superstructure, which are relevant to the development of society, the economic base is the determining factor, while the superstructure is determined. Rather, it is only possible to derive the implication that both the economic base and the superstructure are both determining and determined, that each contributes to determining the nature of the global structure of which it is an integral part, and is in turn determined by that structure. In other words, insofar as the economic base and the superstructure are related to each other, there is no unidirectional relation of determining to being determined between them, but a bidirectional relation of determining and being determined. Althusser believes that in real history, economic, political, cultural, theoretical and other elements are alternating and taking turns to play the main role, and the ultimate determining role of the economy is only reflected in the alternating and taking turns to exist in the main role of such elements. He explains that the ultimately determining role of the economic base is manifested, on the one hand, in the fact that the economic factor determines whether it is itself determining or non-determining in a social structure at a given time; on the other hand, in the fact that the economy can determine which of the elements of the superstructure

becomes determining when it is itself non-determining. Althusser's explanation of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure fully embodies his structuralist "contradictory pluralistic determinism". On the face of it, he did not completely deny the ultimate determining role of the economic base, but in fact he has dissolved the determining role of the economic base in the interaction of various factors.[19]

7. Conclusion

Taking an overview of the research in the domestic academic community, the achievements made in exploring the premise of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role" are mainly manifested in the following ways.

First of all, the research on local issues has constantly broken through the original cognitive framework. Since the founding of New China, domestic academics have interpreted the basic premise of "productivity determines the relations of production", that is, the power of productivity development, from many angles, such as the theory of endogenous power of productivity, the theory of the power of relations of production, the theory of the contradiction between productivity and relations of production, the theory of the power of comprehensive factors, and the theory of the power of the main body of productivity development, and so on. These theories have laid a solid ideological foundation for the premise of the principle of "economy plays a decisive role" of historical materialism.

Secondly, we have begun to explore the relationship between different premises in a connected way of thinking. It is not difficult to find that the scholars' perspective on the premise of "the economy plays a decisive role", especially on the question of the driving force of the development of the productive forces, has changed from a single driving force to a combination of factors. This also makes the systemic and structural problems of the principle premise of "the economy plays a decisive role" gradually appear.

Finally, in the process of answering the premise that "the productive forces determine the relations of production" and the universal question of "the economic base determines the superstructure", some scholars are also using their ideas to answer the practical problems of the development of the socialist market economy and socialist reforms in many areas. This also inspires us how to further arm our minds and guide our practice with the latest theoretical achievements of the Sinicization and modernization of Marxism in the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

However, there are some shortcomings in the current domestic research on the premise of the principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role", which are mainly manifested in the following ways. On the one hand, there is no synergy between the different research results. Some scholars have conducted in-depth research on some of the premises of "the economy plays a decisive role" and formed a corresponding theoretical system. However, the relevant theoretical studies have not made good use of these research results, and have not formed a general inquiry into the premise of the principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role". On the other hand, there is a lack of research in the current academic community on the overall nature of the premise of historical materialism that the economy plays a decisive role. Although there is a rich theory of the dynamics of the development of productive forces, there is a lack of general research on the premise of the development of productive forces and the universality of "the economic base determines the superstructure". In other words, the inquiry into the premise of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role" requires systematic and in-depth study from a general perspective.

From the general overview of foreign scholars' inquiry into the premise of the principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role," it can be seen that Western Marxist scholars tend to focus on the actual situation of Western capitalist societies. In the process of studying historical materialism, they usually combine Marxism with one or several philosophical trends in the West, and use rationalism or humanism to conduct in-depth thinking and research on issues that have long been controversial or have not yet attracted much attention in the history of the development of Marxism. To a certain extent, these researches have made up for the shortcomings of the weak links in historical materialism's "productive forces determine the relations of production" and "the economic base determines the superstructure", such as the dynamics of development of productive forces and its universality. They have contributed to the further exploration of the premise of the principle of historical materialism that "the economy plays a decisive role".

However, Western scholars have usually revised Marxism to varying degrees, and their research

results are mostly presented in a non-Marxist philosophical way of thinking, or structuralizing Marxism, or existentializing Marxism, or Hegelianizing Marxism, or Freudianizing Marxism, and so on. Therefore, in the process of learning from the ideas of Western scholars, we should not only see their refinement and development of Marxism, but also pay attention to avoid falling into their non-Marxist philosophical mode of thinking.

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