

Engels' Concept of Equality and Its Contemporary Value

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Abstract: Engels' concept of equality posits that equality is historically specific and reflects the socio-economic foundations of a given period. Its realization is constrained by the level of productive forces and mirrors the interest relations of a particular economic structure. In the new era and on the new journey, practicing and developing Engels' concept of equality provides theoretical guidance for the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Vigorously developing socialist productive forces and promoting high-quality economic growth offer a material foundation for social fairness. Adhering to the principle of shared development and striking a balance between efficiency and fairness provides a safeguard mechanism for social equality. Upholding the path of modernization with Chinese characteristics offers ideological motivation for steadily advancing modernization that brings about shared prosperity for all.

Keywords: Engels; Concept of Equality; Fairness and Justice

1. Introduction

The discourse on equality is age-old yet ever-renewing. Equality has always been a value that humanity ardently pursues, underpinning the steadfast belief that drives our existence. The philosopher Kant once remarked, "If justice and fairness perish, then man is no longer worthy of living in this world." In this light, one can perceive human history as a continuous journey towards realizing equality and understanding how to achieve it. Engels, standing from the perspective of the proletariat and utilizing historical materialism, retraced the evolution of the concept of equality. He contended that equality should not be relegated to abstract rhetoric. Instead, it must be situated within societal realities. By employing a dialectical materialistic viewpoint, he directly attributed a tangible essence to equality, asserting that it is a historical category whose realization and evolution are constrained by the level of productive forces.

China has always been committed to achieving socialism, the essence of which is to liberate productive forces, develop them, eliminate exploitation, eradicate oppression, and ultimately attain shared prosperity. Therefore, the question of equality is inextricably linked to the pursuit of socialism. Since the reform and opening-up, China has witnessed rapid socio-economic development. The country has prospered, and the standard of living for its people has generally improved. Especially after entering the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, China's comprehensive national strength has surged, underscoring the advantages of socialism. However, significant societal inequalities, such as the vast wealth gap and the uneven distribution of educational and medical resources, remain. Thus, this article delves deeply into Engels' perspective on equality, hoping it offers valuable insights for the construction of socialism in China's new era.

2. The Main Essence of Engels' Concept of Equality

2.1. Equality as a Historical Category

Equality is not an immutable constant but a dynamic historical category, a product of history. It always emerges with specific historical conditions as its backdrop, based on a particular societal system, rejecting the notion of a trans-historical abstract concept of equality. Consequently, the idea of equality has undergone changes over several millennia, from its inception during the primitive societies to its evolution and transformation in the modern age, marking a complex journey.

In primitive societies, the means of production were communally owned, ensuring equal rights and status for everyone. Even tribal leaders were not accorded any special privileges. This egalitarian phenomenon was a result of the rudimentary level of productive forces rooted in material living conditions. However, towards the end of this era, as the role of men in production became more pronounced, equality became an exclusive domain for male members of society, sidelining women. With the advancement of productive forces and the emergence of specialization, private ownership took root. Humanity transitioned into a slave society, where the value created by the slaves became foundational for societal progress. This context nurtured rampant inequalities. Only within the slave-owner class was there a semblance of equality. In stark contrast, slaves, who toiled throughout the day without respite, were bereft of any rights.

The feudal society represented an unprecedentedly complex form, characterized by rigid hierarchical structures with clearly defined class distinctions. From birth, one's fate of inequality was predetermined. However, compared to the inequalities of the slave society, feudal society witnessed some progress with the evolution of economy and civilization. People began to be recognized as independent entities, no longer tethered to the slave-owner class, and gradually gained some basic rights. Yet, due to the rigid hierarchies, even within the feudal landlord class, inequality persisted.

The bourgeoisie, advocating the ideals of "liberty, equality, fraternity," constructed what they claimed to be an "equal society." However, this facade concealed new deceptions and sinister inequalities. Legally, while the bourgeoisie championed the slogan of "everyone is equal before the law," in practice, it served as a duplicitous catchphrase to delude the masses. Laws merely represented the interests of the ruling class, embodying their will. Economically, capitalist society practiced private ownership of the means of production. The working class, possessing no means of production, had to rely on selling their labor to sustain themselves. A significant portion of the value they created was discreetly appropriated by the capitalists. Thus, in a capitalist society, the only 'equality' was the equality of capital to exploit the laborers.

The proletariat's perception of equality arose alongside the bourgeoisie's demands to abolish feudal privileges. "Equality should not just be superficial; it should be actual... What the proletariat demands in terms of equality essentially involves the elimination of classes. Any demands for equality beyond this scope are bound to be absurd."^[1] This is because, in a class society, all dominion is established upon class antagonisms. The interests of the ruling and the ruled are fundamentally conflicting. Expecting the ruling class to relinquish their privileges and achieve genuine equality with the oppressed is mere wishful thinking. Only by "eliminating classes" and eradicating the instruments of state violence can true freedom and equality between individuals be realized.

2.2. The Degree of Equality is Constrained by the Level of Productive Forces Development

Engels' view on equality is grounded in the historical materialism perspective, asserting that establishing egalitarian social relations should originate from the tangible foundation of productive forces, rather than abstract concepts. Given that human societal evolution is a natural historical process, the development of social relations follows objective laws. "Social relations are the manifestations of human development in relation to nature; to approach it from the perspective of social relations is to start from human material conditions"^[2] Hence, equality is predicated on certain objective conditions, specifically on the advanced development of productive forces and the universal progression of human labor capabilities. The proletariat sees the path to achieving equality as the eradication of class distinctions, which in turn is contingent on the profound development of productive forces. This accelerated growth of productive forces doesn't rely on other classes; the proletariat itself can generate the ample material wealth to satisfy its needs, representing the most advanced productive force in society. Only then can equality across society be potentially realized. Conversely, in an extremely impoverished society, even if principles of equality are established, people might still revert to new economic inequalities due to the scramble for scarce resources. Therefore, to truly achieve equality, there's an imperative need to robustly develop societal productive forces.

2.3. Equality Reflects the Interest Relations of a Specific Economic Structure

Marxism posits that social existence determines social consciousness, with the latter being a reaction to the former. Equality, as a concept or consciousness in people's minds, is determined by social existence. Manifested in real life, it echoes the economic interest relations among individuals. Thus, when viewing equality as a value judgment towards societal systems and human behaviors, "it

cannot be understood from its own concept; on the contrary, its roots lie in material structural relations"^[3], stemming from the contradictions and conflicts between societal productive forces and social relations. Therefore, one must elucidate the essence of equality through the tangible material interest relations among people. People's lives have always been built upon production, forming social production relations, that is, economic relations. Economic relations are the root of interest conflicts between individuals. Specific economic relations determine particular interest relations, and these interest relations, in turn, dictate certain value notions. Every form of consciousness is a reflection of these economic interest relations. Engels explicitly highlighted that the essence of equality is "always merely a conceptualized, sanctified representation of either the conservative or revolutionary aspects of the existing economic relations". Thus, equality is not a whimsical or fabricated notion; it mirrors the interest relations of the economic structure in real life, as perceived by individuals. Recognizing equality as the value reflection of the economic structure is a transformative shift in historical understanding. It indicates that to grasp the issue of equality, one must begin with social-economic relations. Equality shouldn't merely be seen as an abstract moral concept, nor solely as a legal right concept. The idea of equality is deeply rooted in tangible social activities, revealing the core of economic relations.

2.4. The Fundamental Realization of Equality Cannot be Sought Through Law or Morality

In class-based societies, equality possesses a class attribute. Thus, Engels elucidated the relationship between the "equality" stipulated in capitalist law and actual equality. Although the bourgeoisie champion the slogan "everyone is equal before the law," this is merely a deceptive and insincere proclamation. This is because, as part of the superstructure, law is determined by the economic foundation. Given that capitalism practices private ownership of the means of production, the law solely represents the interests of the ruling class and embodies their will. Engels stated: "The principle of equality is dismissed by confining it to mere 'legal equality.' Legal equality is an equality that exists between the rich and the poor, essentially labelling inequality as equality."^[4] In this manner, the bourgeoisie, through law, elevates their class interests to the status of the state's will and under the guise of "universal equality," brazenly exploits the proletariat.

Morality, as a form of social consciousness, is determined by social existence. Historically, from primitive societies and slave societies to feudal and capitalist societies, moral principles and concepts have evolved with societal shifts. Thus, morality isn't eternal and immutable; it continuously changes with societal progression. Engels remarked: "All previous forms of morality are, in the final analysis, products of the economic conditions of their time."^[5] He fundamentally pointed out that, akin to the notion of equality, morality stems from societal economic conditions. However, as societal structures have evolved, "morality has always been the morality of classes; it has consistently defended the rule and interests of the ruling class." It is evident that, as a form of consciousness, morality is class-based. It operates as an adjunct, clinging to the ruling class, serving their interests. Therefore, whether it be law or morality, both represent the will of the ruling class. In class-based societies, equality cannot be achieved by appealing to either law or morality.

3. Implications of Engels' Ideas on Equality for the Construction of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in Contemporary China

3.1. Vigorously Develop Socialist Productive Forces to Lay the Material Foundation for Fairness and Justice

Equality, while constrained by the mode of material production, also evolves with its development. Engels believed that the economic foundation is the cornerstone for comprehensive societal growth. There's a need to liberate and enhance productive forces, transform and adjust production relationships, and promote harmonious coordination between the two, to actualize genuine societal equality. Report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized, High-quality development is the primary task for building a modern socialist country. Without a robust economic foundation, it is challenging to establish a modernized socialist nation, let alone achieve societal fairness and justice. As such, amidst the changing dynamics of the world, the era, and history, we must vigorously bolster the socialist productive forces, consolidate and develop the economic base of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and provide a material foundation for societal equity. First, we should leverage the leading role of technology. Science and technology are the primary productive forces and are pivotal in assessing a nation's core competitiveness. Consequently, we must persistently advance reform and

opening up, implement new development concepts, prioritize high-quality growth, and harness technology, the premier productive force. By fully stimulating enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity in production, we can continually liberate and boost societal development vigor, strengthening the economic foundation of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This will offer solid material support for the socialist path, undertakings, and systems, realizing higher-quality, more efficient, fairer, and sustainable development.

Second, we must adhere to and refine socialist production relations. With the development of productive forces, it's essential to continuously reform and optimize parts of the production relationship that don't align with productive forces, fostering rapid socio-economic growth. Therefore, we must unwaveringly consolidate and develop the public ownership economy, support and guide the growth of the non-public ownership economy, and harmonize their relationship. By deepening reforms of state-owned assets and enterprises, invigorating private enterprises, and implementing uniform market entry and fair competition principles, we can uphold rights equality, opportunity equality, and rule equality. This approach maximally stimulates market vitality and ensures fairness in economic and social development.

Lastly, we need to establish a high-level socialist market economic system. The state of productive forces and production relationships directly determines the mechanisms of economic operations. In the course of reforms, China set up a socialist market economic system, maximizing the market's decisive role in resource allocation and optimizing government functions. This approach avoids the inefficiencies of sole reliance on governmental power, which could sap market vitality, and prevents monopolization, disregard for public interest, and exacerbated polarization from purely market-driven mechanisms. A balanced relationship between the market and the government showcases the vitality of the socialist market economy and positively promotes reforms in all areas, especially in refining and reforming the superstructure.

3.2. Adhere to the Shared Development Concept and Construct a Scientific and Rational "Efficiency-Fairness" Balance Mechanism

"In the field of distribution, the so-called issue of equality or fairness is essentially the issue of equalized distribution. The notion of efficiency pertains to the efficiency in resource allocation. The relationship between equality and efficiency is a global conundrum, and ever since the start of reform and opening up, the tension between the two has accompanied the entire reform and development process. "The concept of shared development emphasizes communal building and benefits. It's imperative to strike the right balance between the efficiency of development in socialism with Chinese characteristics and fair distribution. A scientifically grounded and rational "efficiency-fairness" equilibrium mechanism should be built to actively rectify unequal distribution.

On the one hand, from an institutional design perspective, the distribution system should be refined to align inclusive growth and address imbalances in regional and industrial development. The tremendous benefits and wealth generated by economic growth under socialism with Chinese characteristics should benefit all, especially the vulnerable groups and the less developed regions. So China should uphold social fairness and justice, earnestly promote equal development opportunities for everyone, and progressively establish a social fairness guarantee system, with the main focus on rights equality, opportunity equality, rules equality, and distribution equality. Efforts must be made to continuously eliminate barriers that prevent people from participating in and sharing the benefits of economic growth. It's essential to perfect and fortify the social income distribution system, broaden element participation in distribution, increase income for middle and low earners, ban illicit income, regulate excessively high incomes, and narrow the income gap, thereby fully harnessing the role of the income distribution system in promoting social justice.

On the other hand, from the perspective of institutional implementation, there should be measures to foster social fairness and justice. In this new era, the Party and the State have introduced a series of initiatives to address the shortfalls in people's livelihoods, aiming to achieve fairness and justice in education, employment, and social security. In implementing policies and institutionalizing new development concepts, it's crucial to maximize the roles of leaders and civil servants at all levels. This includes enhancing their understanding and application of Marxist theories and their practical capabilities, fostering problem awareness, addressing pressing social issues of public concern, enhancing people's well-being, safeguarding their fundamental interests, and fostering social fairness and justice.

3.3. Adhering to the Chinese-style Modernization Path and Solidly Advancing the Modernization of Common Prosperity for All

Engels once remarked that the future society aims at prosperity for all. China has always been committed to the development of Marxism, resolutely advancing the complete liberation of people, promoting common prosperity, and considering this prosperity as an intrinsic requirement of our socialism. Our socialist construction has charted a new path to Chinese-style modernization that, while reflecting the universality of modernization in various countries, also captures the uniqueness of our nation. This modernization, centered on the prosperity of all, is the pivotal route to fostering social fairness and justice.

China has always placed immense importance on the issue of wealth disparity. In 2021, China achieved a historically significant victory in the battle against poverty, enabling its people to lead moderately prosperous lives. As we embark on the journey towards our second centennial goal, "We remain committed to realizing the people's aspirations for a better life as both the starting point and ultimate goal of modernization. We strive to uphold and foster social fairness and justice, work diligently towards shared prosperity for all, and resolutely prevent polarization, thereby establishing a new path to Chinese-style modernization."^[6]To this end, we must first strike a balance between development and distribution. While promoting high-quality socio-economic development, it's essential to generate greater societal wealth. It's not just about enlarging the 'cake,' but also distributing it fairly. Harmonizing the relationship between distribution according to work and various other distribution methods, regulating excessively high incomes, and effectively utilizing tax, social security, and other regulatory mechanisms are crucial. This will facilitate the fundamental role of tertiary distribution, accelerate the formation of an olive-shaped society with a broad middle and narrowed extremes, and alleviate both wealth disparities and polarization.

Next, we must promote the shared prosperity of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. The "three rural" issues are critical and challenging aspects of shared prosperity. It's vital to solidly advance the rural revitalization strategy, speed up its modernization, leverage geographical advantages, build ecological villages, hasten the equalization of rural basic services, elevate the level of rural basic education and healthcare services, empower farmers with wealth-generating capabilities, and create more universally beneficial and fair conditions for prosperity. Efforts should continuously narrow urban-rural disparities and mitigate the polarization of urban-rural development.

Lastly, the joint development of material and spiritual wealth should be synchronously promoted. The future society's prosperity must encompass both material and spiritual richness. We should constantly fulfill the people's needs for both material and cultural advancements. Our approach should involve collective efforts, sequential progression, and shared aspirations, aiming at comprehensive prosperity and societal advancement. This will foster steady societal progress. In the process of promoting shared prosperity, it's essential to solidify a societal consensus on equality, cultivate an atmosphere where everyone contributes to, builds, and shares societal wealth. This approach will not only provide enduring impetus for achieving modernization of shared prosperity but will also ensure that the fruits of modernization are more extensively and equitably shared among all.

4. Conclusion

Equity and justice are the common values and ideals of mankind and the strong beliefs that underpin the development of human history. In his criticism of the bourgeois concept of equality, Engels revealed its nihilistic essence and expounded the conditions for the realization of equality, that is, "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." This shows that the all-round development of people is the inherent requirement for achieving equality, and the all-round development is to enable everyone's creativity and value to be fully reflected. On the new journey of the new era, we should practice and develop Engels' concept of equality, develop socialist productive forces in an all-round way, establish a scientific and reasonable mechanism of balance between efficiency and fairness, adhere to the Chinese-style path of modernization, and steadily promote common prosperity for all people.

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