

# *An Exploration of the Theory of World History from the Perspective of Historical Materialism*

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**Abstract:** The theory of world history profoundly reveals the historical process and inherent laws of human society's transition from fragmentation to integration, constituting an important component of Marx's materialist conception of history. On the basis of critically inheriting predecessors' ideas, Marx creatively constructed the theory of world history. This theory encompasses rich content, including the concept of "world history," the agents of its formation, the fundamental driving forces, and its value orientation. Marx's theory of world history provides significant theoretical guidance for understanding the "people-centered" development philosophy and the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.

## **1. The Formation Background and Theoretical Origins of Marx's Theory of World History**

### **1.1 Formative Context**

The emergence of world history was fundamentally rooted in the Age of Discovery. In the pre-discovery era, civilizations and regions across the globe largely existed in isolation or maintained limited interactions. With the opening of new sea routes, European navigators unveiled previously unknown territories, establishing for the first time transcontinental and transoceanic global connections. This revolutionary breakthrough in spatial integration dismantled the long-standing isolation between civilizations of different continents. This radical reconfiguration of spatial relations not only reshaped humanity's perception of the world but also, through material exchange and civilizational encounters, gave birth to the genuine process of globalization in historical terms. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, social development progressed at a relatively slow pace. Most societies sustained themselves through self-sufficient, natural economic production, with limited transportation networks reinforcing their relative isolation. By the mid-18th century, however, the widespread application of steam engines propelled humanity into the Steam Age, revolutionizing modes of production and ways of life. The advent of large-scale socialized production provided the material foundation for the theory of world history, accelerating what Marx termed "the transformation of history into world history." This paradigm shift marked the irreversible integration of previously fragmented regional histories into an interconnected global narrative.

## 1.2 Theoretical Origins

Hegel's philosophy of history exerted a profound influence on Marx. Hegel applied dialectics to explore the relationship between world history and national histories, viewing world history and national histories as a whole and its parts. On one hand, parts cannot exist independently of the whole, as every nation-state must maintain close ties with others. On the other hand, the whole depends on its parts, as the development of world history is inextricably linked to each nation-state. Hegel argued that among diverse nations, certain peoples align with the trajectory of world history during specific periods, naturally becoming the dominant nations of that era. Regarding such dominant nations, he stated: "They possess the absolute right to serve as the bearers of the current stage of world history. Against this right, the spirits of other nations are invalid, and those peoples—along with those whose historical epochs have passed—no longer count in the unfolding of world history."<sup>[1]</sup> Consequently, Hegel categorized nations into "world-historical nations" and "non-world-historical nations." Each world-historical nation undergoes a unique cycle of emergence, flourishing, and decline, and through the successive rise and fall of these nations, world history progresses continuously. However, Hegel's philosophy of history contains significant flaws. He attempted to explain the development of world history through the self-unfolding and self-liberation of the "Absolute Spirit," divorcing it from the objective processes of historical development and thus falling into the trap of idealism. Moreover, Hegel treated humans merely as instruments for realizing the "Absolute Spirit," neglecting their subjective role in shaping world history. Marx and Engels critically inherited Hegel's concepts of "world history" and "national history," reconstructing the theory of world history on a materialist foundation.

## 2. The Key Components of Marx's Theory of World History

### 2.1 The Concept of Marx's World History

In Marx and Engels' classical works, they frequently employed the term "world history" without providing an explicit definition. Moreover, the articulation of this concept varied across different developmental stages and contextual frameworks.

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx asserts: "So-called world history is essentially the process through which humanity creates itself via labor."<sup>[2]</sup> Here, Marx integrates the historical process inextricably with human labor, emphasizing that history advances fundamentally through productive activity. This perspective underscores labor's ontological centrality in human existence and marks a pivotal transition in Marx's intellectual trajectory toward the materialist conception of history.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx's interpretation of world history underwent a transformation. He noted that the bourgeoisie "for the first time created world history insofar as it made all civilized nations and every individual member of them dependent for the satisfaction of their wants on the whole world, thus destroying the former natural exclusiveness of separate nations."<sup>[2]</sup> Here, world history refers to the formation of universal interactions among nations. The capitalist mode of production propelled the globalization of productive forces, dismantling the isolation of different nations and states, expanding the scope of production and exchange, and establishing a worldwide network of connections. As these ties deepened, mutual interdependence among nations grew stronger, and the characteristics of world history became increasingly pronounced.

Overall, the concept of world history in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* emphasizes the temporal dimension, reflecting the vertical development of history, while in *The German Ideology*, it focuses on the spatial dimension, representing the horizontal expansion of history. These two conceptions of world history each hold distinct scientific significance in their respective

contexts. With the deepening of globalization, connections between different parts of the world have grown closer, and interactions have become more frequent. Therefore, we should primarily understand it from the perspective of the horizontal development of world history.

## 2.2 The Subject of Marx's World History: "Real Individuals"

Marx and Engels assert: "The premise of history is human beings—not as abstract entities existing in imagined isolation or static conditions, but as real individuals observable through experience, developing within concrete material circumstances."<sup>[3]</sup> Here, "human beings" are not disembodied "abstract beings" confined to the realm of ideas, but rather "real individuals"—those engaged in material productive activities. A fundamental distinction between humans and animals lies in humanity's capacity to sustain existence through consciously producing the means of subsistence. Grounded in his new worldview (historical materialism), Marx identifies the primary condition for "real individuals" as securing basic material survival, thereby inextricably linking their modes of existence to their material conditions of life. This conceptual shift marks a decisive break from prior philosophical traditions. In *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx emphasizes the active agency of human practice: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>[3]</sup> History, in this framework, emerges through humans' transformative engagement with both objective reality and subjective consciousness via practical activity. Thus, world history constitutes an open-ended process predicated on "real individuals" and perpetually shaped through their material practices.

## 2.3 The Fundamental Driving Forces of Marx's World History: The Development of Productive Forces, Division of Labor, and Social Intercourse

World history is an ongoing process created by real individuals through practice, propelled most fundamentally by the interplay of productive forces, division of labor, and social intercourse. Marx emphasizes: "The transformation of history into world history is not some abstract act of 'self-consciousness,' a cosmic spirit, or a metaphysical phantom—it is an entirely material process, empirically verifiable and demonstrated by every real individual engaged in the practical necessities of eating, drinking, and clothing themselves."<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, the formation of world history remains inseparable from material production, with the development of productive forces serving as the decisive catalyst for historical change. The rise of the capitalist industrial revolution unleashed unprecedented growth in productive forces, generating vast material wealth for society. This advancement drove continuous innovation in production tools and expanded social division of labor, gradually leading to divisions between nations. Human interactions transcended geographical boundaries, unfolding on a global scale. Further, the expansion of division of labor inevitably necessitated broader and deeper intercourse. As commerce extended beyond domestic markets to a globalized system, nations integrated into the world market became enmeshed in universal competition. This competition, in turn, fueled industrial development, intensified international interdependence, and catalyzed the emergence of world history. Throughout this process, each element—productive forces, division of labor, and intercourse—reinforced the others, weaving nations into an increasingly interconnected organic whole. In this dynamic, materially-rooted progression, the world evolves not through abstract ideals but through the concrete practices of real individuals, bound together by the relentless logic of production, exchange, and transformation.

## 2.4 The Teleological Aim of Marx's Conception of World History: The Attainment of Communist Society

In *The German Ideology*, Marx elaborates on the relationship between universal intercourse and the realization of human freedom within the context of world history. Marx characterizes humans as "gregarious beings"<sup>[4]</sup> who inherently "possess the need for intercourse with their kind."<sup>[4]</sup> With the emergence of world history, human interactions transcend regional limitations. Through such expanded intercourse, individuals acquire new skills, enhance their innovative capacities, and strengthen their practical abilities, ultimately enabling them to engage in freely self-determined activities.

Marx further elaborates that only in communist society can human beings achieve free and all-round development. "The proletarians must abolish their own existing mode of appropriation, and thereby the entire existing mode of appropriation, to gain control of social productive forces."<sup>[3]</sup> In communist society, with highly developed productive forces and abundant material resources, all individuals enjoy freedom and equal rights. Labor power achieves its ultimate liberation, and practice based on material abundance becomes the subjective initiative for self-realization. Communism maximizes the undifferentiated human labor of each individual. People no longer need to sell their labor power as a commodity, allowing labor to return to its essential human nature. Simultaneously, communism strengthens connections between individuals and regions, creating broader spatial and temporal conditions for free and comprehensive human development.

## 3. The Contemporary Value of Marx's Theory of World History

Marxism maintains its contemporary relevance because it is an open system and an evolving theoretical doctrine. Marx's theory of world history stands as a vital scientific framework for human development, serving as the most powerful intellectual and theoretical tool—whether in the past, present, or future—to guide humanity in comprehending the Marxist perspective on world historical development and in transforming the real world. As a pivotal force in globalization, we should be guided by Marx's theory of world history to gain deeper insights into the latest developments both internationally and domestically. With a more inclusive approach, we will actively participate in global economic and political affairs, consistently promoting harmony and unity in the course of world history.

### 3.1 Conducive to Deepening the Understanding of the "People-Centered" Development Philosophy

The theory of world history provides a profound historical materialist perspective for comprehending the "people-centered" development philosophy. By revealing the laws governing human societal development and the essential characteristics of globalization, this theory deepens the epistemological foundation and practical logic of the people's subjective agency across two dimensions.

First, the theory of world history deconstructs the capital-dominated illusion of globalization. By stripping away the facade of capital accumulation, this theory exposes how transnational capital expansion erodes workers' rights and plunders ecological resources in developing countries. This critical analysis reveals that the essence of the "people-centered" approach lies in resisting the alienation of capital logic, demanding that the value coordinates of development be re-anchored in the dimension of free and well-rounded human development.

Second, the Contemporary Reconstruction of Historical Subjectivity. Marx's theory of world history emphasizes that "the transformation of history into world history" is not a spontaneous process,

but rather “a thoroughly material, empirically verifiable activity.” This provides a methodological insight for the “people-centered” approach: in the era where the digital economy is reshaping production relations, we must both guard against the new forms of alienation imposed by algorithmic hegemony on workers and, more importantly, empower the people through the construction of digital sovereignty. The remarkable achievements of China’s poverty alleviation campaign exemplify a creative application of world-historical principles, transforming the right to development into tangible gains in people’s well-being.

This dialectic between theory and practice demonstrates that Marx's theory of world history is not a static philosophical proposition but a dynamic guide to action. It demands that we grasp two imperatives amid the century's profound transformations: We must recognize the irreversible objective trend of globalization while steadfastly upholding the value orientation of people's subjective agency. We must engage in global market resource allocation while fortifying a development safety net centered on the people's interests.

### **3.2 It provides theoretical underpinnings for building a community with a shared future for mankind**

Marx's theory of world history, from the perspective of historical materialism, reveals the universal laws of human social development and the essential characteristics of globalization, providing profound theoretical foundations for understanding both the historical inevitability and practical necessity of building a community with a shared future for mankind.

First, Marx's theory of world history unveils the objective trend of globalization, thereby providing historical inevitability for building a community with a shared future for mankind. The capitalist mode of production, propelled by the Industrial Revolution and technological progress, has dismantled geographical barriers and integrated the world into a unified economic system—the “world market.” While driven by the logic of capital, this process has objectively fostered universal interconnectedness and interdependence among human societies. The theory demonstrates that globalization is not accidental but an inevitable outcome of productive forces development. In today's world, global challenges such as climate change and economic crises transcend the governance capacity of any single nation, underscoring the reality of a shared future for humanity. The vision of building a community with a shared future constitutes an active response to this historical trend.

Second, the organic integration of world history theory with China's practice provides empirical validation for the feasibility of a community with a shared future for mankind. The theory of world history is not merely philosophical abstraction but a practical framework for action. As an active participant in world-historical development, China has infused substantive meaning into this vision through concrete initiatives - from poverty alleviation to green development, from pandemic cooperation to the Global Development Initiative. These demonstrate that the vision represents not rhetorical idealism but actionable global governance. This praxis perfectly embodies the theory's core concepts of “real individuals” and “universal intercourse”, proving the concept's dual validity as both theoretically profound and operationally viable. The theory thus supports the community vision through two fundamental dimensions: historical inevitability and methodology.

## **4. Conclusion**

Marx's theory of world history reveals the general laws governing the development of human society, providing us with a scientific methodology to comprehend the contemporary world. This theory illuminates the necessity to transcend the narrow perspectives of nation-states and grasp the trajectory of human civilization within broader historical and spatial dimensions. Confronting unprecedented global transformations unseen in a century, we must adhere to the guidance of Marx’s

world history theory to promote the establishment of a more equitable and rational international order, thereby contributing Chinese wisdom and offering Chinese experience for the realization of humanity's free and comprehensive development.

## References

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