

# *The Role of Contingency in Combating Dogmatism*

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**Keywords:** Contingency, Dogmatism, General Historico-Philosophical Theory, Historical Formula

**Abstract:** General historico-philosophical theory, also called dogmatism or bookism, denies contingency and thus it pursues universally applicable methodologies or treats acquired knowledge as formulas to be applied to all situations. With the development of modern society, the role of contingency in history has become increasingly significant. So we must know what contingency is and its function in history, particularly we should summarize its crucial importance in opposing dogmatism to guide people to analyze specific problems concretely. Marx, Mao Zedong, and others provided systematic analyses of dogmatism. This paper takes Mao Zedong's critique of dogmatism as its main thread to explain why contingency serves as a theoretical weapon for criticizing the general historico-philosophical theory, and to demonstrate why Marxism is not dogma but a methodology.

## 1. Introduction

Modern society increasingly reveals its characteristics of contingency (*Zufälligkeit*, in German) and uncertainty. So people need to correspond actions within specific contingent circumstances to grasp and utilize contingency rather than rigidly adhering to established theoretical models in pursuit of a universally valid methodology. Current philosophical research on contingency is largely confined within the dialectical framework, overlooking the independent significance of the category of contingency itself and its crucial role in historical development. Drawing on Marx, Mao Zedong, and others' critiques of dogmatism, this paper argues that contemporary society must cultivate a mindset of contingency to develop methodologies for navigating uncertain existential conditions.

Contingency elevated its theoretical status during critiques of the general historico-philosophical theory—or rather, the essentialist tradition within Western philosophy. The general historico-philosophical theory seeks uniformity in the development of all nations, overlooking the possibility that each could develop in diverse ways. It essentially imposes a general historical theory onto all contexts, opposing the principle of the concrete analysis of concrete conditions. Within the Chinese context, the general historico-philosophical theory is also called dogmatism or bookism. Marx strongly opposed treating established theories as dogma rather than methodology. Similarly, Mao Zedong employed Marxism as a methodology and he took Marxism as a critical tool to conduct profound and systematic investigations into the origins and Characteristics of dogmatism, and as pathways for overcoming dogmatism or bookism. Based on it, this paper elucidates why

Marxism is not dogma but methodology.

## 2. The Connotation of the Category of Contingency

In everyday life, people regard events that occur infrequently as contingent. Thus, contingency stands in opposition to regularity, so it is the non-regularity. This is because the causes of such events are either uncertain or remain unexplained (People have not yet identified the cause of them). This kind of things that cannot be grasped by people's rationality in time is often excluded from scientific research; in other words, contingency is frequently viewed as the enemy of scientific research.

Hegel sought to explore the root cause of why contingency is difficult to predict and why the contingent can manifest or occur in various forms. He explained it from the perspective of the basis of a thing's Being: "The contingent may be described as what has the ground of its being, not in itself but in somewhat else".<sup>[1]</sup> In contrast, when the thing is through itself, in which all dependence on something else is lost to view, that is necessity, because it determines its own existence. Therefore, it is certainty—it must be or must not be, and it can only be in this manner. This means that contingency encompasses multiple possibilities, rooted in the fact that its basis of existence lies in external factors rather than within itself. As Hegel said, "we consider the contingent to be what may or may not be, what may be in one way or in another, whose Being or not-Being, and whose being on this wise or otherwise, depends not upon itself but on something else".<sup>[1]226-227</sup> Among multiple possibilities, which one ultimately materializes into reality is determined by the specific conditions and circumstances of its time and place—that is, it is determined by "something else" rather than by itself. This demonstrates that the realization of contingency has its own necessary causes. Engels interpreted it, "Die Notwendigkeit, die hier durch alle Zufälligkeit sich durchsetzt, ist wieder schließlich die ökonomische."<sup>[2]</sup>

This view of Engels exerted a significant influence on Mao Zedong. "The matter being what it is' indicates necessity, yet the form in which this necessity manifests itself is accidental. All the forms in which necessity manifests itself are, as a rule, contingent."<sup>[3]P.23</sup> From this, it can be seen that he explained necessity and contingency from the perspective of the relationship between cause and effect. Taking the the 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution) as an example, "the necessity of the 1911 Revolution (major cause) must have necessarily been provoked by another contingency (minor cause), and completed by way of numerous contingent causes."<sup>[3] P.23</sup> "It might well have been the Hanyang Uprising of October 10 or an uprising in some other place on some other date". "It is also right to say that 'had it not been for the fact that it broke out at that most appropriate moment, it might not have spread like a prairie fire.' But it would have necessarily broken out at some other appropriate moment and become a prairie fire."<sup>[3]P.23</sup>

In summary, things that do not frequently occur in daily life and are beyond human rational expectations are contingency, but the contingent can not be excluded from scientific research. In fact, its Being or not-Being also has some basis, and it is not determined by itself but something else. On the contrary, the characteristic of a probability of one hundred, which means that people are certain that something will happen or will not happen, so it is necessity, which is determined by the conditions of the thing itself. In other words, contingency is a philosophical concept with a complex connotation.

## 3. Contingency as a Weapon against Dogmatism

"Being on this wise or otherwise", this characteristic makes contingency a theoretical weapon for critiquing general historico-philosophical theory. This means that acknowledging contingency is to affirm and recognize the diversity of historical development—that is, to affirm the multiple

possibilities for realizing historical necessity. This paper uses Mao Zedong's relevant theories as examples to illustrate how contingency serves as a theoretical weapon for critiquing the general historico-philosophical theory and dogmatism.

### **3.1 Contingency's Breakthrough against the General Historico-philosophical Theory**

A historical view that acknowledges only one model of historical development while denying that history could have unfolded in this manner or in other possible forms constitutes a general philosophy of history. In other words, it pursues universal laws, so there is only one way to realize historical necessity, and the laws discovered by humanity universally will be applied to all historical contexts.

In reality, history is made by people through their actions and decisions, in response to the particular circumstances of their time and place. For example, the march toward modernization represents a historical inevitability and necessity. It does not follow a single developmental model; it can take one path or another, so history embodies multiple possibilities. As such, it is realized within concrete historical circumstances replete with contingencies. This process encompasses both the prevailing trends and characteristics fully manifested by pre-existing historical conditions, as well as factors and circumstances that are difficult to anticipate or control. Even the path to socialist modernization will manifest itself in diverse developmental forms across different nations and peoples. It is neither predetermined to be a certain way, nor is it impossible for it to be thus; rather, it is a composite result of the specific historical conditions encountered in that particular time and place.

As Marx observed, "events strikingly analogous, but occurring in different historical milieux, led to quite disparate results. By studying each of these evolutions on its own, and then comparing them, one will easily discover the key to the phenomenon, but it will never be arrived at by employing the all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical."<sup>[4]</sup> This statement by Marx illustrates that historical contingency is characterized by a dual quality of being both one way and not necessarily another. Yet history remains comprehensible and knowable; amidst vast contingencies, one can find the key to understanding history. However, this key or acquired knowledge cannot be applied universally to all historical conditions, otherwise, such a theory will become a super-historical essentialism, which eliminates the diverse possibilities of history.

Taking the realization of communism as an example, economic factors play a fundamental role, and communism is built upon a highly developed economic level. However, relatively economically backward nations and countries can first establish a socialist system and then gradually transition to the advanced stage of communism. The revolutionary paths of Russia and China were precisely guided by such revolutionary theory. This actually affirms the significant role of contingency in history, while not negating the fundamental role of economic necessity.

### **3.2 Dogmatism as a Manifestation of General Historico-Philosophical Theory**

It can thus be seen that when people turn general historico-philosophical theory into a formula to be indiscriminately applied, they commit the error of dogmatism. Whether one acknowledges the diversity of paths in historical development and whether one adheres to historical dialectics are important criteria for distinguishing Marxist historical philosophy from non-Marxist historical philosophy. Marxism regards theory as a method for studying and transforming the objective world, rather than as a dogma to be worshipped and believed in for solving all historical problems.

Throughout the history of Marxist development, there have been many erroneous dogmatic practices that treated Marxism as dogma rather than method—acknowledging only the authority of

established models and extending general theories to the socialist movements of various nations and countries. During the Chinese Revolution, there was a period when the guidance of Marx, Lenin, or the Communist International(1919-1943) was treated as a general historico-philosophical theory, mechanically copying existing revolutionary experiences while neglecting the specific historical contexts and national characteristics of each movement. This committed the error of dogmatism and overlooked historical contingency. In response, Mao Zedong consistently adhered to the view that necessity manifests itself through contingency, critiquing dogmatic tendencies at both theoretical and practical levels, exploring a scientific path that integrated the fundamental principles of Marxism with China's actual conditions, thereby enriching and developing Marxism. As will be detailed later.

Marx and Engels were not the kind of “Marxists” who applied a fixed theoretical yardstick to judge all historical situations; in other words, they were not dogmatists. Instead, they repeatedly emphasized that their historical theory was merely a research method. “the materialist method turns into its opposite if, in an historical study, it is used not as a guide but rather as a readymade pattern in accordance with which one tailors the historical facts.”<sup>[5]</sup>The fundamental error of dogmatists lies precisely in transforming this method of research—which inherently encompasses contingency and possibility—into a “formula” that can be applied directly without examining empirical reality. Thus, historical materialism, originally designed to investigate the laws of historical motion under specific conditions, is reduced to a dogma to be recited; historical experience, which requires arduous research to discover and summarize, is replaced by a priori logical frameworks. As a result, history is no longer a practical process interwoven with countless contingencies, but is rewritten as a transcendental idea that automatically evolves according to a logical sequence. As Althusser put it, “instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies.”<sup>[6]</sup>He opposed a priori predeterminism, arguing that history realizes its necessity through the continuous encounter of various contingent events. He thus defined this necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies. This implies that necessity itself emerges within the developmental process, and contingency no longer subordinates itself to necessity. In Althusser's view, both the Russian Revolution and China's revolutionary movements were determined by the contingent historical circumstances and specific environments of their time—situations that could have unfolded either way. He placed great emphasis on the capacity of Marxists (especially figures like Lenin and Mao Zedong) to engage in independent analysis and creative responses when confronting unprecedented new situations. He opposed substituting historical contingency with logical necessity, or replacing concrete real-world contradictions with abstract conceptual movements. He termed this theoretical doctrine “aleatory materialism”<sup>[6]</sup>.This undoubtedly constituted a powerful rebuttal to general historico-philosophical theory—or dogmatism. It signified that contingency remained a potent weapon philosophers wielded against doctrines pursuing universal laws, and that contingency served as the primary avenue for critiquing general historico-philosophical theory and dogmatism.

### 3.3 Mao Zedong's Critique of Dogmatism

During China's revolutionary movement, certain dogmatists applied Russian experience to guide China, treating the Russian revolutionary model as a template for all proletarian revolutions. Later, they imposed the Soviet model as a “historical formula” on China's socialist construction.

Confronting this dogmatism that disregarded China's specific national conditions and ethnic characteristics, Mao Zedong emphasized: “we must study the Marxist ‘books,’ but they must be integrated with our actual situation. We need ‘books,’ but we must definitely correct the bookism

which departs from reality.”<sup>[7]</sup> Mao Zedong pointed out that the fundamental error of dogmatism and bookishness lies in the separation of theory from practice, believing that “so long as you observe the methods laid down there, you can never fail to triumph”,<sup>[7]</sup> refusing to acknowledge that history can unfold in different ways. Based on this, he profoundly criticized this erroneous tendency from a philosophical perspective in works such as “*Oppose Bookism*”, “*On Practice*” and “*On Contradiction*”. As the author has argued, in his critique of dogmatism, Mao Zedong truly initiated the path of Sinicization of Marxist Philosophy by integrating its fundamental principles with China’s concrete revolutionary practice and traditional culture.<sup>[8]</sup>

In revolutionary practice, Mao Zedong also systematically addressed dogmatic errors in military, political, and other spheres. For instance, he criticized, dogmatists believed that “it is enough merely to study the experience of the Russian revolutionary war, or, to put it concretely, that it is enough merely to follow the laws by which the civil war in the Soviet Union was directed and the regulations they issued. They do not realize that the laws and regulations of the Soviet Union include the specific characteristics of the civil war of the Soviet Union and of the Soviet Union’s Red Army and that if we copy and apply them without the slightest alteration, without allowing any changes, we shall likewise be cutting the feet to fit the shoes and be defeated.”<sup>[9]</sup> He also explained this viewpoint from a philosophical perspective: “Our dogmatists are lazy-bones. They refuse to undertake any painstaking study of concrete things, they regard general truths as emerging out of the void, they turn them into purely abstract unfathomable formulas, and thereby completely deny and reverse the normal sequence by which man comes to know truth.”<sup>[10]</sup>

On the contrary, the correct ideological approach lies in creating a new situation through mass struggle. The reason lies in the fact that within the concrete struggles of the masses, there are numerous contingent events that can unfold in multiple ways—both this way and that, both thus and not thus, neither necessary nor impossible. This historical situation tests and develops our theories, enabling the inevitability and regularity inherent in history to be realized through various contingencies. And this is precisely the task of scientific research: to develop theory through practice and to guide practice with scientific theory, it affirms the essential powers of human beings. Thus, when confronted with various contingent events, people neither reduced to passivity retreat into a priori dogma.

In other words, Mao Zedong not only identified the errors of dogmatism but also provided a scientific methodology. He stated: “when man attains the knowledge of this common essence, he uses it as a guide and proceeds to study various concrete things which have not yet been studied, or studied thoroughly, and to discover the particular essence of each; only thus is he able to supplement, enrich and develop his knowledge of their common essence and prevent such knowledge from withering or petrifying. These are the two processes of cognition: one, from the particular to the general, and the other, from the general to the particular.”<sup>[10]P.321</sup>

#### 4. Methodological Implications

Modern society is characterized by intense contingency. As Heller observed, “the modern person is a contingent person. In a broader sense, contingency is one of the main constituents of the human condition.”<sup>[11]</sup> He and she are thrown into the world, where their living environment can be shaped in diverse ways. Accordingly, theories guiding life and historical activities must be tested and renewed within the ever-changing circumstances of the times. This requires people to be able to adapt to changes in external conditions and not to view the world and living environment of human with dogmatic thinking. That is to say, “we must at all times understand social conditions and carry out practical investigations”<sup>[7]P.424</sup>. When analyzing and resolving issues using Marxism as a methodological framework, we not only study the matter of understanding the general laws, but also

study the standpoint and method in examining and solving problems. In a word, we should use different methods to resolve different contradictions, when a contingent event occurs.

## 5. Conclusion

Contingency is one of the defining characteristics of things, endowing the world with diversity. Pursuing a universal formula applicable to all domains can only lead to general historico-philosophical theory and dogmatism. Only by acknowledging contingency can people take diverse historical contexts seriously, break free from dogmatic thinking, and thereby develop theory through practical activities. This allows for the integration of universal principles with concrete realities, ultimately providing better guidance for human existence.

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