

Exploring Marx's View of Justice from Marx's Critique of Proudhon

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Abstract: This paper explores Marx's view of justice through his critique of Proudhon. It first traces the evolution of Marx's attitude toward Proudhon from affirmation to divergence and finally to negation, then analyzes Marx's two main criticisms: Proudhon's concept of justice lacks a realistic foundation, and his proposed path to justice is limited to the sphere of exchange. On this basis, the paper summarizes three characteristics of Marx's own view of justice: justice is historically finite, its foundation lies in the sphere of production rather than distribution, and its ultimate goal is the free and all-round development of human beings. Unlike Proudhon's eternal and moralistic justice, Marx's justice is rooted in historical materialism and provides a thorough sublation of bourgeois ideology.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of Marx's view of justice has become a hot topic in Marxist philosophy. Scholars have discussed its connotation and contemporary value from various perspectives, yet few have focused on the role of Marx's critique of Proudhon in the formation of these thought. In fact, this critique is the key clue to understand the evolution of Marx's view of justice. This paper takes this critique as the core, sorts out Marx's attitude change, analyzes Proudhon's defects in Proudhon's view of justice, and summarizes Marx's characteristics of Marx's view of justice, in order to clarify its essential connotation.

2. The Change of Marx's Attitude towards Proudhon

2.1. The Embryonic Stage of Marx's View of Justice: Affirming Proudhon

This stage was the embryonic period of Marx's thought on justice. After completing his doctoral dissertation, Marx affirmed the sublimity of human self-consciousness in his thesis. He believed that Epicurus' doctrine highlighted human independence and freedom. At this stage, Marx held that 'justice is not something that exists independently, but a contract made in all mutual interactions, in order not to harm and not to be harmed.' [1] During his doctoral period, Marx accepted the liberal view of justice, believing that justice is linked to law.

During his tenure at the *Rhenish Newspaper*, Marx gained a clearer understanding of justice. In

response to the poor social situation in Germany, Marx not only criticized it, but also improved his own view of justice in the Critique of the Status Quo. In the Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood, Marx argued that the state should embody the spirit of justice, rather than serving certain privileged classes. During this period, Marx mainly expressed his ideas by criticizing the social status quo. At this time, Marx derived human freedom and equality from human self-consciousness, taking this as the measure of justice, that is, pursuing justice in the sense of legal right. However, he lacked a theoretical basis for the issue of economic interests.

Proudhon published his famous work "What is Property?" in 1840, which mainly discussed the theories of ownership, equality, and the inherent, natural idea of justice. Marx praised, nothing that 'this book, with rich wisdom and rigorous scientific analysis, exposes private ownership and the consequences caused by this system, namely competition, moral decay, and poverty'. At first, Marx regarded Proudhon as a member of the socialist camp and highly evaluated his ideas. He believed that, compared with the Young Hegelians and utopian socialists, Proudhon brought a new perspective to look at social problems. [2]

2.2. The Development Stage of Marx's View of Justice: Divergences with Proudhon

Although Proudhon inspired Marx to pay attention to practical economic problems, focus on criticizing the capitalist private system, and combine the critique of political economy with philosophical critique to analyze social problems, when Marx went deep into the theoretical critique of political economy and political practice, the divergences between his ideas and Proudhon's emerged.

During this period, Marx published Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, criticizing Hegel for exaggerating the status and role of ideas and confusing the relationship between ideas and civil society. Marx emphasized that the foundation of society is civil society: 'relations of rights, like the forms of the state, can neither be understood on their own nor from the so-called general development of the human mind. On the contrary, they originate from the material relations of life, the sum of which Hegel, following the example of the Englishmen and Frenchmen of the 18th century, calls civil society, and the anatomy of civil society must be sought in political economy. During the period of the *German-French Annals*, Marx advocated returning freedom belonging to human beings from the height of human liberation, and began to criticize the liberal idea of justice. In the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, Marx got rid of idealist philosophy and turned to Feuerbach's materialism by criticizing Hegel's philosophy of right.

In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marx absorbed Feuerbach's materialist method, based on labor alienation, and condemned the injustice of capitalism. At this time, Marx was influenced by Feuerbach's humanism, and his critique was not thorough. By the time of *The German Ideology*, Marx initially formed a view of justice based on historical materialism. He emphasized the investigation of the mode of material production, and from this perspective, criticized that eternal justice is divorced from the realistic foundation, and the 'justice' and 'equality' advocated by capitalist society are empty words.

During this period, Marx criticized the practice of the classical political economists represented by Smith and Ricardo, who regarded economic laws as eternal laws, and through dialectics, concluded that economic relations are the product of history, which indirectly pointed out Proudhon's mistake. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, he criticized Proudhon's equal thought of petty-bourgeois socialism. However, Marx still tried to guide Proudhon to the path of scientific socialism. In 1846, Marx specially wrote a letter inviting Proudhon to be the correspondent of the Communist Correspondence Committee in Paris, but was rejected by Proudhon.

2.3. The Mature Stage of Marx's View of Justice: The Stage of Negation

Proudhon's publication of *"The Philosophy of Poverty"* in 1846 and Marx's publication of *"The Poverty of Philosophy"* in 1847 marked the official start of the debate between the two socialists. Proudhon's *"The Philosophy of Poverty"* was a philosophical argument for his petty-bourgeois socialism. In terms of historical view, Proudhon established a system of vulgar idealist dialectics. In terms of methodology, Proudhon used the so-called 'serial dialectics' to study political economy. In terms of core arguments, Proudhon took value theory as the core of his political economy. In terms of social change, Proudhon adhered to the reformism of political indifference. All in all, *"The Philosophy of Poverty"* tried to depict the system of economic contradictions to which all social life belongs, demonstrate the scientific nature of the theory of constituted value, so as to realize the absolute equal exchange of social products, that is, 'buying products with products', to defend his own kingdom of justice. After the publication of *"The Philosophy of Poverty"*, it was sought after by many people, including Marx's followers, which had a great negative impact on the workers' movement in Europe.

In order to eliminate the negative impact brought by the spread of Proudhon's ideas, Marx published *"The Poverty of Philosophy"* in 1847 to comprehensively criticize Proudhon's ideas.

3. Marx's Critique of Proudhon

3.1. The Connotation of Justice Divorced from a Realistic Foundation

Proudhon believed that justice is the source and driving force of the existence and development of human society, and the highest standard for judging human society. In "What is Property?" Proudhon believed that justice is the star that dominates all societies in the center, the pivot around which the political world revolves, the principle and standard of all things. All actions between people, without exception, occur in the name of axioms, and all depend on justice'. Proudhon believed that the reason for social injustice is that people's understanding of the concept of 'justice' is vague. Therefore, to eliminate human suffering, we must correctly define the connotation of justice.

He believed that justice is a social instinct that humans and animals naturally have. This instinct makes humans or animals live with their own kind, and hold an inherent closeness and compassion for their own kind. It is justice that makes people live together and form human society. Without the social instinct of justice, there would be no emergence and development of human society. In human society, no one can fight alone; they must cooperate with each other; and cooperation requires equality. Without equality, no cooperation in commerce, industry or agriculture is conceivable. Therefore, justice inherently contains the requirement of equality. Proudhon linked the three categories of justice, equality and society together: 'Society, justice and equality are three equal nouns, three terms that can explain each other, and their mutual substitution is always reasonable.' In this way, equality and justice have become synonymous and essential characteristics of society. The formulation of social systems must take equality and justice as the goal. Proudhon sought the root of justice in human nature, and thereby proved the innate legitimacy of justice. Marx conducted an in-depth critique of this view.

Marx believed that Proudhon misunderstood the emergence and connotation of the concept of justice: 'M. Proudhon does not even know that the men who produce social relations corresponding to their material mode of production also produce the ideas, the categories, that are the abstract expressions of these relations.' [3] Thus, the categories are just as little eternal as the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products. With M. Proudhon, on the contrary, abstraction, the category, is the primitive cause. According to him, it is abstraction, the category, that creates

history, not men. Abstraction, the category, taken by itself, that is to say, separated from men and their material activity, is naturally immortal, immutable, fixed. Marx pointed out here that ideas and categories such as justice cannot be separated from the realistic conditions that produce them. They are generated from the abstraction of social relations by human thinking, and these social relations are rooted in material production. Material production and social relations develop and change with the development of productive forces, so these ideas and categories are not fixed. Proudhon independently and substantiated the categories abstracted by human thinking such as fairness and justice, making them the eternal principles of historical development, which reversed the relationship between categories and historical development, and distorted the meaning of justice.

Then, since there is no eternal and unchanging justice, regarding social development as the trend and returning to justice is a view that completely ignores the objective laws of social development. Marx believed that the reason why Proudhon had such a view is that he did not understand the objective laws of social development, and did not understand what force is driving history forward. Therefore, he could only seek this force in his mind, imagining social development as the movement of the continuous realization of the ideas of justice and equality. Marx further pointed out that Proudhon's view is essentially the product of the vulgar transformation of Hegel's view of historical development. 'M. Proudhon, unable to follow the real course of history, gives us a set of absurdities, a set of absurdities that pretend to be dialectical absurdities... This is Hegelian trash. This is not history, not secular history—the history of men, but sacred history—the history of ideas.' For Hegel, historical development is the process of the absolute idea constantly transforming itself and realizing itself through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Proudhon replaced Hegel's absolute idea with the idea of eternal justice and absolute equality, and regarded history as the process of continuously realizing justice and equality. Thus, in Proudhon's perspective, justice was extracted from the material content and turned into an eternal value presupposition to promote the realization of social progress. Marx insisted on using the principle of the dialectical movement of the mode of production to explain historical development. With the development of productive forces, people will inevitably change their production relations, and the superstructure will change more or less quickly with the change of the economic base. Therefore, there is no eternal and unchanging view of justice, nor is there such a justice principle that 'dominates all societies in the center', let alone justice driving history forward.

3.2. Critique of the Realization Path of Justice

In response to the problem of uneven wealth between the rich and the poor in society, Proudhon believed that in addition to natural disasters and man-made disasters, the direct cause of poverty is the uneven distribution of wealth caused by human factors. Therefore, his way to realize justice is to explore the laws of social development and implement a series of economic measures. Proudhon believed that value consists of two parts: use value and exchange value, which are contradictory and opposed to each other. This opposition will affect the realization of justice. Therefore, Proudhon introduced constituted value as the intermediary between the two. Through constituted value, products maintain a certain value ratio. In Proudhon's view, only when products are in a certain proportion can they have value and constitute social wealth; if not, they cannot constitute social wealth. Therefore, he concluded that the solution to the contradiction between the use value and exchange value of products lies in their exchange value, and the fairness of social wealth also lies in the existence of exchange value. That is, social production activities only have two links—production and consumption. Proudhon achieved fair exchange by setting a certain value ratio.

Marx believed that Proudhon's economic theory was an abstraction of real economic life, and Proudhon limited economic activities to the links of production and consumption, while the reality

is more complicated. At the same time, Marx believed that Proudhon distorted Ricardo's value theory. Proudhon put a moral coat on Ricardo's theory, and this utopian conception could not be realized in the end. Although Proudhon tried his best to eliminate all the antagonistic factors in product exchange through the intermediary link, and claimed to have found the 'equalitarian relationship' that meets the requirements of justice, this equalitarian relationship is only a reflection of social existence. 'It is absolutely impossible to transform society on the basis of what is nothing but an idealized shadow of this society.'

Marx believed that Proudhon's demand for fair exchange was a historical regression of the petty bourgeoisie to the era of large industrial machinery. In Marx's view, although Proudhon advocated upholding justice for the proletariat, the class he wanted to defend was the peasants, the 'small owners', who obtained land after the French Revolution. Marx accurately pointed out that Proudhon's class position is that of a petty-bourgeois socialist. He sympathized with the broad masses, but also coveted the money of capitalism, and always 'could not go beyond the horizon of the bourgeois'. And the just society he pursued can only be a petty-bourgeois society. Proudhon criticized the capitalist social system, believing that it did not conduct equal exchange, so it is not in line with justice. Therefore, he believed that as long as fair exchange is realized, human freedom can be realized. In Marx's view, Proudhon only focused on the exchange field and ignored the production field, which means that Proudhon's conception cannot fundamentally solve social problems. Because the exchange mode is restricted by the production mode, reforming only from the exchange field cannot shake the capitalist ownership of production relations. To realize substantial justice, we need to go deep into the production field and see that the bourgeoisie expropriates the surplus value of workers without compensation. Therefore, to completely change this status quo, we must overthrow the capitalist system, rather than realize justice through social reform.

4. The Characteristics of Marx's View of Justice

On the basis of comprehensively criticizing Proudhon's thought on justice, Marx formed his own view of justice. From the perspective of historical materialism, Marx believed that justice is not the source and driving force of social development, and justice is historical; at the same time, justice cannot circle around the distribution field, but should be explored in the production field; and the realization of justice takes human development as the standard, that is, the value of justice lies in human liberation.

4.1. Justice is Finite

Proudhon exaggerated the role of justice, taking justice as the source and driving force of historical development, and formed his own theoretical system based on justice. As Marx criticized, Proudhon was on the wrong path from the very beginning. Justice is neither eternal nor the highest norm. On the contrary, justice changes with the changes of social history and is restricted by the social mode of production.

In Proudhon's theoretical system, justice is the fundamental standard for measuring all social things. Society starts from justice and returns to justice, and social development is a cycle centered on justice. At the same time, Proudhon limited justice to the distribution field, emphasizing everyone's 'desert'. Since the ancient Greek philosophers, the 'desert' has become the traditional perspective of Western philosophy to explain justice. Proudhon's concept of justice is essentially the embodiment of moralism. In Marx's view, changing the world with moral principles is not thorough; it changes with different historical environments.

Marx criticized the moralistic concept of justice, but this does not mean that Marx criticized

justice itself. On the contrary, Marx understood justice from the perspective of historical materialism. To correctly interpret justice, we must be based on the realistic relations of developing social history. Marx's justice is historical rather than ahistorical. The understanding of justice is different in different historical stages. As Engels said: 'The Greeks and Romans considered slavery fair; the fairness of the bourgeois of 1789 demanded the abolition of the feudal system, because it was said to be unfair.' [4]

From a historical perspective, it is not difficult to understand the core text that Wood discussed: 'This content, as long as it is compatible and consistent with the mode of production, is just; as long as it contradicts the mode of production, it is unjust. On the basis of the capitalist mode of production, slavery is unjust; falsifying the quality of goods is also unjust. Marx did not, as Wood said, think that the capitalist system is compatible with its mode of production, so the capitalist system is just. In fact, Marx's subtext is—what was just in slave society is unjust in capitalist society; in other words, what is just in capitalist society is unjust in communist society. Marx always viewed justice from its fineness. [5]

4.2. The Foundation of Justice Lies in the Production Field

Marx also attached importance to justice in the distribution field, but in Marx's view, the core problem lies in the production field. Marx believed that social reproduction includes four links: production, exchange, distribution, and consumption, among which production plays a decisive role, and distribution is the subordinate link of production. 'The relations of distribution, and the mode of distribution, are nothing but the reverse side of the factors of production. The individual who participates in production in the form of wage labor, participates in the distribution of products, the results of production, in the form of wages. The structure of distribution is completely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself is the product of production, not only in terms of the object, but also in terms of the form. In terms of the object, only the results of production can be distributed; in terms of the form, the specific way of participating in production determines the special form of distribution, the form of participating in distribution. Through the investigation of the production field, Marx directly revealed the justice problem of capitalist society.

By exposing the essence of ownership in capitalist society, Marx further criticized the injustice in the process of capitalist exchange: 'The exchange of equivalents, the original activity, as it were, has become merely a surface operation... Originally, ownership seemed to us to be based on one's own labor. At least we must admit such a presupposition, since only commodity owners with equal rights confront each other, the means of appropriating the other's commodity can only be to alienate one's own commodity, and one's own commodity can only be created by labor. Now, ownership for the capitalist appears as the right to appropriate the unpaid labor of others or their product, while for the worker, it appears as the inability to appropriate his own product. In capitalist society, the seemingly equal exchange is only superficial, and the problem behind it is the exploitation and possession of the surplus value of workers by capitalists.

Marx believed that in the past, revolutionary achievements were only the limited possession of the means of production, and they were bound by these limited production tools: 'But under the ownership of the proletariat, many means of production must belong to everyone, while property belongs to all individuals. Modern universal intercourse can only be dominated by all individuals, not by each individual. Therefore, the collective possession of the means of production is the real justice in the true sense.

4.3. The Ultimate Goal of Justice is the Free and All-round Development of Human Beings

Communism is the starting point of the 'realm of freedom', where everyone can get free

development, and labor becomes the first need of humans.

This paper clarifies Marx's view of justice through his critique of Proudhon: it reveals that Proudhon's eternal justice view is divorced from realistic production foundations, while Marx's historical materialist justice view points out that justice is a historical category rooted in the production field, with the ultimate goal of human free development. This view not only sublimate bourgeois right ideology, but also provides theoretical guidance for contemporary justice issues.

5. Conclusion

This means the proletariat must overthrow capitalist society through revolution to realize its own liberation: only by seizing the means of production can we get rid of bourgeois political rule and economic enslavement, and the expanding proletariat ranks with growing political ability will surely lead us to the realization of justice.

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