Lukács’ one influential view point: is Historical Materialism only Applicable to Capitalist Society?

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**Authors, are the scholars of Shanghai Fudan University, Western Marxism Faculty.**

**Shu Yuanzhao[[1]](#footnote-1), Wu Xue[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**Abstract:** Lukács believes that historical materialism is a kind of self-knowledge/Selbsterkenntnis of the capitalist society and that it will encounter fundamental difficulties to apply it to the pre-capitalist society. This view is very illuminating, raising an extremely challenging question whether historical materialism as a method is universal to all forms of human society. This view has exerted a profound influence on the academic circles at home and abroad, but has also been questioned by some scholars. Objectively speaking, this view cannot hold water because it does not accord with the consistent exposition of historical materialism by Marx and Engels, and it has violated their basic view that historical materialism can be applied to the entire history of human society. Lukács has misread *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the* *State*, equating Engels' distinction between barbarism and civilization with that between the pre-capitalist era and the capitalist era. And when he cites Marx’s A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Lukacs has confused the method of historical materialism and Marx’s method of political economics, which has led to the confusion of political economics and historical materialism.

**Key words:** historical materialism; scope of application; Lukács; capitalist society; pre-capitalist society

According to the traditional Marxist interpretation, historical materialism is synonymous with the materialist view of history (referred to as historical materialism), and it is a theory about the entire history of human society. Historical materialism’s object of study is the entire human social history that is different/apart from the history of the nature. This method of understanding and grasping history also applies to the entire history of the human society. However, this view has been challenged by two aspects in today's Chinese academic circles: Some scholars try to broaden the target object area or scope of application of historical materialism and think that "historical materialism in a broad sense" is Marxist philosophy, and its object is the whole real world including nature, while historical materialism whose object is human history is only "historical materialism in a narrow sense".

Other scholars try to narrow the scope of application of historical materialism, that it only applies to the capitalist society, and does not apply to social forms before or after the capitalist society. For them, the materialism about the history of the entire human society is the obsolete "historical materialism in a broad sense", and the historical materialism applied to the capitalist society is the effective "historical materialism in a narrow sense", and historical materialism has no applicability, whether it is for the society before capitalism or the society after capitalism.

This paper does not intend to analyze and evaluate the above two tendencies but tries to examine the idea of narrowing the scope of application of historical materialism by analyzing and evaluating Lukács’ point of view. Lukács was the earliest representative figure who confined the scope of application of historical materialism to the capitalist society. His point of view has great influence in the academic circles at home and abroad, and therefore deserves special discussion. This paper first introduces Lukács’ exposition that historical materialism is only applicable to capitalist society, then explains the illuminative significance of Lukács’ point of view and its wide influence on future generations, and finally makes further criticism on this point of view on the basis of existing evaluations.

# Lukács on historical materialism only applies to the capitalist society

An elaboration on the scope of application of historical materialism was developed by Lukács in the article " The change in the application function of historical materialism.” [[3]](#footnote-3) (Tarihsel materyalizmin işlevinde Değişim)

In this article, Lukacs elaborates that, as the thought weapon of the proletariat, historical materialism only applies to the capitalist society. According to the "reason" that historical materialism and classical national economics are both truths in a certain social system, Lukacs emphasized that we can study the social scope of application of historical materialism by referring to Marx's study of the social scope of application of classical national economics.

Lukacs argues that we can find the answer to this question in Marx, accordingly Lukacs wrote: Historical materialism in its classical form (which unfortunately has only entered the general consciousness in vulgarized form) means the self-recognition of capitalist society."[[4]](#footnote-4)

This shows that historical materialism requires the basic premise of the capitalist society in order to be applicable. Lukacs also said that historical materialism has a major assertion that the totality and the driving forces (die Totalität und die bewegenden Kräfte) of capitalism cannot be grasped by the categories of bourgeois science but can only be grasped by historical materialism. Therefore, Lukacs wrote: "Historical materialism is therefore first and foremost a theory of bourgeois society and its economic structure."[[5]](#footnote-5)

First, Lukács argues that only historical materialism can understand the totality and the driving forces of capitalism, while bourgeois science does not. Lukács believes that this stems therefrom that the theory of historical materialism adapts to the status quo of the capitalist society: One economic law governs the entire society, and the other, as a “pure natural law”, is able to assert itself without the help of extra-economic factors.

The laws of economics on the one hand dominate the whole of society, but on the other hand are able to assert themselves as "pure laws of nature" by virtue of their purely economic power, i.e. without the aid of non-economic (extra-economic) factors.

This shows that in capitalist society, the law of capitalist mode of production is increasingly carried out in a "pure form", that is, the capitalist mode of production gradually gets rid of the residual influence of the previous economic state. Therefore, the difference between capitalist society and pre-capitalist society is manifested as the difference between capitalism that has governed the society and capitalism that struggles for its role in the society.

Second, Lukács pointed out that from the economic structure of capitalist society, the following situation will occur: different aspects of the social structure will necessarily be independent of each other, and even can have a necessary consciousness of this. Lukács mentioned that in the capitalist society, the economy, the state, and the law are generally manifested as closed systems. These systems have perfect powers, and they control the entire society with inherent laws. The British classical economics born in the late 18th century and the German classical philosophy in the early nineteenth century indicated that these partial systems have independent consciousness. But the original contribution of historical materialism lies in that it cannot only see the seeming independence of each partial system in the capitalist society, but also know that they are essentially interrelated and constitute a comprehensive whole, which goes far beyond bourgeois science. The seeming independence of the bourgeois science is the manifestation of the capitalist social structure in thoughts and categories, while historical materialism is the critique of such independence, which means the supersession of the capitalist society with "promoting power of thought". In the capitalist society, all the factors of social structure are seemingly independent of each other, but in fact they are in a dialectical interaction. Therefore, the appearance of historical materialism is the reflection of the reality of such seeming independence and factual interaction of the structural factors of the capitalist society; it is not an accident that historical materialism, as a scientific method, was established in the mid-19th century.

Third, Lukács focused on the proposition and tried to argue that the application of historical materialism to the pre-capitalist society would encounter theoretical difficulties. Does historical materialism also apply to the social forms before capitalism just as it applies to the capitalist society? Lukács believes that if we take it as a scientific method, it can naturally be applied to the pre-capitalist era, and some people have partially succeeded in doing so. But Lukács also pointed out that if we do this, we are bound to encounter methodological difficulties, because there are fundamental differences between capitalist society and pre-capitalist society. Lukács said that not only did Marx express this difficulty countless times in his writings, but Engels also pointed out this difficulty clearly: "It exists in the structural differences between the civilization and the previous eras."[[6]](#footnote-6).

Lukács quoted Engels' exposition to show that in the pre-capitalist society, production hardly exceeds workers’ scope control and would not cause ghostly and alien changes to them; however, in the capitalist society, workers lost their control over all production in their own field of life, and products and production were subject to contingency.

"Do not grow over the producer's head, do not create ghostly, alien powers over him..." For there "the producers have lost control over the overall production of their circles of life... Products and production fall to chance (contingency).

In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx once put forward the following conclusion: **"In all forms in which land ownership prevails, the relationship to nature still predominates. In those where capital prevails, there is the the socially, historically created element."[[7]](#footnote-7)** (In denen, wo das Kapital herrscht, das gesellschaftlich, historisch geschaffne Element)

Lukács regards this conclusion of Marx as his important argument basis. In his view, in the pre-capitalist society in which natural connection prevails, natural connection must dominate human "social being", therefore, it must also dominate the forms in which such existence is expressed in thoughts and feelings, such as religion, art, and philosophy.

In the capitalist society in which capital dominates, the mode of production has broken away from natural and consanguineous ties. Therefore, Lukacs regards the capitalist mode of production as "the natural law of society"—this law is the purest and even the sole form of the dominatedness of the society. During the long period of transition from the pre-capitalist society to the capitalist society, it seems that a phenomenon of " retreat of the nature barrier" has appeared in all fields. (Zurückweichen der Naturschranke)

Such Natural barrier existed in the social forms before capitalism, and even had a decisive impact on man’s social mode of manifestation.

Lukács further examined this "retreat of the nature barrier" from the perspective of social ideology. (Zurückweichen der Naturschranke)

Lukacs believes that there is a more obvious "structural difference" in social ideology between pre-capitalist society and capitalist society: in the pre-capitalist society, art, religion, philosophy and other ideologies are only man’s explanations of nature (including external nature and human's own nature), while in the capitalist society, these ideologies are more reflective of man’s social relations and social being.

Lukács also pointed out that when Hegel put forward his own speculative philosophy, "the retreat of nature" has begun to make everything reach the purely social level, that is, reach the level of reified relations of capitalism, but there is still a lack of clear understanding of these relations.

For the stage of cognitive development at that time, it was impossible to see the social unity behind the two concepts of nature produced by the development of capitalist economy (One is about the nature as the epitome of natural laws. The other about the nature as the example of the men corrupted by the society) and to see the capitalist society as well as the role it played in the collapse of purely natural connections. It is with the true socialization of all relations in the capitalist society that the true and concrete self-knowledge of human beings as social beings becomes possible. In addition, Lukacs claims that in societies before capitalism, there is no independence, self-closure, arbitrariness and the internality of economic life that were later achieved in the capitalist society, as well as the setting of his own purpose by himself.

Lukacs finally came to the following conclusion**: "Historical materialism cannot be applied to pre-capitalist social formations in quite the same way as to those of capitalist development stage."[[8]](#footnote-8).**

Lukács pointed out that it was possible to apply the classical form of historical materialism to the history of the 19th century invariably and unconditionally, because here all the forces that played a role in society were only effective as manifestation form of the "objective spirit". Therefore, Lukacs asserted that only through historical materialism could the 19th century society acquire its self-knowledge. But according to Lukacs it would be much more complicated to apply historical materialism to ancient society. Because we should not only specify the role of pure economic forces in promoting social development, but also prove how these economic forces affect other social forms.

Lukacs wrote: The role played by purely economic forces, insofar as such forces existed in the strict sense of "purity" at that time, among the forces moving society, on the other hand to demonstrate how these economic forces affected the other structures of society.

# In short, although Lukács admits that some researchers have tried to study the societies before capitalism with historical materialism and have achieved some success, but according to Lukacs since the societies before capitalism have a structural difference with the capitalist society, its application on societies before capitalism will encounter decisive difficulties and historical materialism is only the self-knowledge of the capitalist society. In other words, for Lukacs historical materialism is the doctrine of bourgeois society and bourgeois economic structure.

# 2. The illuminative significance and far-reaching impact of Lukács’ point of view

Undoubtedly, Lukács' above point of view has certain "novelty" and even "originality". Unlike the usual and common understanding, although Lukacs also affirmed in abstract sense that historical materialism could be applied to the social forms before capitalism, he determined that there were great difficulties in its application by pointing out the structural differences between the two. Obviously, Lukács' above point of view is of great illuminative significance. One could argue that he posed an extremely challenging question: Is historical materialism as a method have an effective universality for all human social forms? From the perspective of the object of historical materialism, there is such a question: is there such a "structural difference" between the capitalist society and the pre-capitalist society which is enough to make it difficult for historical materialism to be applied in the pre-capitalist society?

In Lukács' view, his point of view will be supported by the two aspects of fact and theory: On the one hand, historical materialism was not put forward by Marx and Engels until the middle of the 19th century, which showed that even if the bourgeoisie overthrew the rule of feudal lords and established the capitalist society, it was not fully conscious about the social premise of its own existence for a long time, and historical materialism, as an ideological weapon used by the proletariat to fight against the bourgeoisie, came into being only in the mid-nineteenth century, which shows that its formation cannot be separated from the socio-historical condition of the high development and full exposure of the social contradictions of the capitalist society; on the other hand, related discussions in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as well as *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the* *State* constitute the textual basis of its core argument.

It is indeed a historical fact that historical materialism was born in the mid-nineteenth century, but whether it can only be applied to the period when it was born, whether it has explanatory power for the entire human history, whether Marx and Engels only understood and proposed it as "the self-knowledge of the capitalist society" when they founded it, all remain to be further explored. Whether Lukács made an accurate reading of the text he quoted also needs to be examined critically. However, before opening a further criticism of Lukács' point of view, let's first look at the far-reaching impact of his point of view on future generations. Since Lukács put forward his point of view, it has aroused great attention from foreign academic circles, and some scholars have put forward similar views under its impact. The representative figures in this respect are Karl Kautsky, Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens among others.

Karl Kautsky expressed views similar to Lukács in his book *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung.* (Materyalist Tarih Görüşü).

Karl Kautsky pointed out that, as the core content of historical materialism, “the contradictory movement relationship between economic foundation and superstructure” has no universality because “certain legal, political and religious views are restricted by certain economic relations. However, the opposite is true. **Legal and political relations also play a decisive role in economic life.**

Only ultimately should the entire legal, political and ideological apparatus be seen as a superstructure over an economic basis. This is by no means true of its individual manifestations in history.

Whether it is of an economic, ideological or other nature, it will act as a basis in some relationships and as a superstructure in others. Only for the respective new phenomena in history does Marx's theorem of “basis” and “superstructure” necessarily apply.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Here, Kautsky therefore holds that the conditions of application of the regularity itself of the materialist view of history is concrete and historical.

Jürgen Habermas also believes that the core proposition of historical materialism that "economic basis determines superstructure" applies only to the capitalist society. Habermas wrote: “We have determined relations of production by their function of regulating access to the means of production and thus indirectly regulating the distribution of social wealth.” [[10]](#footnote-10)

(Wir haben Produktionsverhältnisse durch ihre Funktion bestimmt, den Zugang zu den Produktionsmitteln und damit indirekt die Verteilung des gesellschaftlichen Reichtums zu regulieren)

For Habermas, in primitive societies, consanguinity relations regulates the means of production and social wealth; but in modern societies, the dominant system exercises this function; only after capitalist society, when the market has the functions of controlling and stabilizing class relations at the same time, will there be capitalist production relations with economic form.

In primitive societies, this function is performed by kinship relations and in highly culturalised societies by systems of domination. It is only when the market takes on the function of stabilizing class relations in addition to its control function under capitalism that production relations emerge as such and take on an economic form.

**Anthony Giddens pointed out by the same token that historical materialism lacked explanatory power to the pre-capitalist societies and could only explain the capitalist society.**

Anthony Giddens argues that in the pre-capitalist societies, authoritative means (power) are the foundation. But in the capitalist society, economic means are the foundation. If Marx's historical materialism puts allocative resources in the primary place, then in his view, in other societies besides capitalism, the integration of authoritative resources constitutes the determining axis of societal integration and change. However, "in capitalist societies, in contrast, allocative resources take on a very particular significance."[[11]](#footnote-11)

On this basis, Giddens asserts that historical materialism, which emphasizes the significance of wealth distribution, needs to be abandoned as a universal theory of the entire history.

In the domestic academic circles of China, Lukács' point of view has also had a significant impact. On the basis of Lukács' point of view, some scholars put forward the distinction between the so-called broad sense and narrow sense of historical materialism. For example, Prof. Zhang Yibing believes that Lukács' point of view belongs to historical materialism in a narrow sense (capitalism), but for Zhang Yibing Marx and Engels also have a broad sense of historical materialism, that is, materialistic view of history is first of all the revelation of the general foundation of human social development—objective material production. But he also holds that historical materialism in a narrow sense is mainly a critical theory of economic reification under the conditions of capitalism.

It can be seen that although Prof. Zhang Yibing admits that historical materialism is a broad theory about the entire human social history, Prof. Zhang Yibing also advocates that it has a particular meaning only applicable to the capitalist society. Prof. Yang Haifeng emphasized in his article “The Dual Logic of Historical Materialism” that historical materialism has the general logic of material production and the capital logic of the specific period of capitalist society. The above two kinds of logic each have their theoretical tendency and their significance. In the societies before capitalism, the logic of material production can be used to clarify, but in the capitalist society, the production logic can only be clarified on the basis of capital logic. Prof. Yang Haifeng's "dual logic of historical materialism" is similar to Prof. Zhang Yibing's distinction between historical materialism in a broad and narrow sense.

**The difference between the materialist view of history and historical materialism**

When discussing the difference between the materialist view of history and historical materialism, Prof. Zhang Kuiliang proposed that the materialist view of history is an empirical scientific theory with the entire human history as its object, but historical materialism is only a philosophical theory aiming at capitalist society.

Kuiliang pointed out: "As the overall point of view guiding historical science, the extension of the materialist view of history covers all human history... The extension of historical materialism is less than that of historical materialism, which is the modern era part of the materialist view of history.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At the same time, Prof. Zhang Kuiliang also linked historical materialism with the historical mission of the proletariat, believing that the **materialist view of history** covers all human history, but **historical materialism** only applies to the capitalist society since modern era.

Despite the differences in the angle of observation and mode of expression in the above points of view, it is agreed that the scope of application of historical materialism should be limited to capitalist society. Of course, it can be seen from this that Lukács' point of view did have a significant impact on these interpretations. There are also some other scholars in China who hold that the materialism applicable to the entire human history is still in a narrow sense, while historical materialism in a broad sense is the entire Marxist philosophical world outlook.

Prof. Yu Wujin holds that the point of view that historical materialism is the core and foundation of Marxist philosophy still belongs to the historical materialism in a narrow sense limited to the field of social history, while the object of the historical materialism in a broad sense is "the entire world displayed in man’s existential practical activity"[[13]](#footnote-13).

This group of scholars try to further broaden the scope of application of historical materialism, which is in sharp contrast with the modus operandi of Lukács and others. Although Lukács' point of view is illuminative and had a wide influence, it has also been questioned and criticized as a very challenging point of view. For example, Jorge Larrain acknowledged that the beginning of historical materialism requires grasping production in a definite historical form, not the concept of production in general; and it also needs to start with the highest production system, not the most primitive one, so that the former system can be understood from the later advanced system in the reverse (post-festum). However, "from the fact that historical materialism must start its analysis with capitalist production it does not necessarily follow that it should be confined to capitalism."[[14]](#footnote-14) On the contrary, it can be fully applied to the social forms before and after capitalism.

Prof. Zhang Yibing also made a criticism of Lukács' point of view. In his article "Young Lukács’ Concept of Historical Materialism", Zhang Yibing asserted that Lukács' position of historical materialism is narrow, which stems from his inability to correctly distinguish the broad and narrow context of historical materialism. Lukács could not understand that "the historical materialism in a broad sense founded by Marx in 1845 is first of all undoubtedly the cognition of the general laws of social and historical development"[[15]](#footnote-15).

Although Prof. Zhang Yibing admitted that the object of historical materialism was capitalist society from the level of a narrow sense, Zhang Yibing never gave up the basic view that historical materialism was about the history of the entire human society.

Other domestic scholars have also expressed their objections to Lukács' point of view. For example, Fang Zheng holds that "Lukács claims that historical materialism can only cognize the specific laws of the capitalist society, but cannot reveal the universal laws of social and historical development"[[16]](#footnote-16). Zou Zhikun holds a similar view that the scope of application of historical materialism is all human history, it does not just apply to the capitalist society.[[17]](#footnote-17)

# 3. A further criticism of Lukács’ point of view

Although scholars at home and abroad have launched a criticism of Lukács' point of view, most of these criticisms have only pointed out that Lukács' point of view cannot hold water but these criticisms have failed to reveal the root of thoughts of Lukács' erroneous point of view to take shape. Therefore, it is necessary to launch a more in-depth and meticulous criticism of Lukács' point of view. There are many problems in Lukács' exposition of the functional change of historical materialism. For example, although he repeatedly emphasized that historical materialism is the most powerful weapon for the proletariat to fight against the bourgeoisie, and understood this weapon of thought **first of all** as a “method” of historical research, he has not made a clear definition of this "method".

Lukacs often mentions historical materialism and "materialist dialectics" or "dialectics" on equal terms, and regards the basic principle that "their social being determines their consciousness" as "fundamental principle of dialectic method"[[18]](#footnote-18). This all shows that Lukacs does not distinguish between materialist dialectics and historical materialist method. When Lukács came to the judgment that historical materialism only applies to the capitalist society, Lukacs seemed to contradict himself in his belief that when we regard historical materialism as a scientific method, it can also be applied to the pre-capitalist society. In answer to the question of what historical materialism finally is, Lukacs also said: **"As a scientific method ...** historical materialism **can of course naturally also be applied to earlier eras that preceded capitalism."[[19]](#footnote-19)**

On the basis of this answer by Lukacs, we can hardly come to the conclusion that historical materialism only applies to the capitalist society.

Regardless of the above ambiguities and contradictions in Lukács' narrative, we believe that his basic point of view is untenable. The main reasons are as follows:

First, this point of view is inconsistent with the basic point of view of Marx and Engels that the scope of application of historical materialism applies to the entire human history; second, the conclusion of this point of view is based on Lukács' obvious misreading of Marx and Engels’ expositions.

Third, the conclusion of this point of view also shows that Lukács falsely confused historical materialism to some extent as a philosophy with Marx's thought of political economy and did not make a proper distinction between Marx's philosophy and his thought of economics.

## How Marx and Engels define the scope of application of historical materialism

In the work which focuses on the exposition of the basic principles of historical materialism*—German Ideology*, Marx and Engels regard the “real edimsel real man” who are engaged in the production of material means, restricted by objective material conditions and situated in certain social relations as the first premise for examining the entire human history, and try to explain the history of all superstructure and consciousness from the process of men's real life process. It can be seen that the principle of historical materialism put forward by them is at least aimed at the entire history of human society so far: The first prerequisite of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals."[[20]](#footnote-20) .

Marx and Engels also pointed out that the birth of historical materialism would deprive " this independent philosophy" of its living environment and replace it with “a summarization (theorization) of the most general results that can be abstracted from the consideration of the historical development of mankind”. [[21]](#footnote-21).

Although they have spent a lot of pen and ink in the book investigating the capitalist society and expounding on the communist revolution aimed at overthrowing the capitalist society, their understanding of "history" includes "all Epochs " so far and is by no means limited to the capitalist society.

In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859, Marx also regarded "**their social being determines their consciousness "** as the universal principle applicable to the entire human history so far. Marx understood the bourgeois relations of production as the last antagonistic form of the social process of production, argued that**: "This social formation therefore closes the prehistory of human society."[[22]](#footnote-22)**

It can be seen from here that historical materialism is at least applicable to the entire " prehistory of human society", including capitalist society.

In *Capital*, the masterpiece of economic research which uses historical materialism, Marx also tried to show that historical materialism is applicable to the pre-capitalist society. Marx argues that "economy not only constitutes" the basis of the capitalist society, but also constitutes the material basis of ancient Greek and Roman society.

In a footnote to the first chapter “on commodities”, Marx pointed out that not only the bourgeois economy constitutes the material basis of the present world, but also some kind of economy of the Greeks and Romans constitutes the material basis of their world. In response to a German-American newspaper's criticism of him, Marx also pointed out clearly that the basic ideas mentioned in the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859, such as the mode of production and the corresponding relations of production ("economic structure") constituted the basis of legal and political superstructure, were of universal applicability.

Marx expressed surprise by a critique made to his theory in the USA, and Marx replied: **"the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally, all this is true for our own times, in which material interests preponderate, but not for the Middle Ages, wherein Catholicism prevailed supreme, and nor for Athens and Rome, where politics reigned supreme. In the first place, it strikes one as odd thing for any one to suppose that these well-worn phrases about the middle ages and the ancient (Athens and Rome) world are unknown to anyone else. However, this much is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world could not live on politics. On the contrary it is the mode (of production) in which they (in those societies) gained a livelihood that explains why Catholicism or politics played the chief part…. For the Roman republic.. we should be aware that its secret history is the history of landed property…. "[[23]](#footnote-23)**

See. Marx Capital Volume I. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm

Engels understood production as the basis of "all social orders" in his *Anti-Dühring* (1876).

**Engels also wrote: "The materialist view of history is based on the proposition that production, and next to production the exchange of its products, is the foundation of all social orders."[[24]](#footnote-24)**

In his article “Karl Marx” (1878), Engels affirmed that Marx had realized the great discovery of change in the whole world outlook. Engels argued that all previous historical outlooks were idealistic and neglected the material life root of all human history. According to historical materialism, the concepts and ideas of each historical period can be explained by the economic living conditions of that period. In 1883, in his speech at Marx's tomb,

Engels said: **"Thus Marx discovered the law of development of human history... people must first of all eat, drink, live and clothe themselves before they can engage in politics, science, art, religion etc...“[[25]](#footnote-25)**

This shows that Engels affirmed the universality of historical materialism in revealing the general law of development of human history.

Engels also said that Marx's revelation of surplus value meant that Marx also discovered the particular law of movement of modern capitalist mode of production and bourgeois society, which distinguished the universality of historical materialism from the particularity of the theory of surplus value. In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888), Engels has further expressed this point of view that historical materialism applies to the entire human history. In the 4th chapter, when expounding on the ideology such as state, political struggle, law, philosophy and religion, Engels repeatedly pointed out that the theory of historical materialism was applicable not only to the capitalist society, but also to the slave society and the feudal society, and even to all the era before capitalism. It can be seen that when Marx and Engels created and interpreted historical materialism, they always regarded it as a universal philosophical theory aiming at the entire human history. They believed that it revealed the general law of human history and that "their social being determines their consciousness" was also a general principle applicable to the historical development of entire human society, which was distinguished from the particular law of operation of the capitalist society discovered by the theory of surplus value.

During the study of the capitalist society, although they affirmed that the capitalist society has its own particular law of movement, and different social forms in history also have their own particular laws, they did not deny the universality of the general principles of historical materialism.

## 2. Lukács’ obvious misreading of classical Marxist writers’ text

Since Marx and Engels have repeatedly stressed that historical materialism is a theory applicable to the entire human history, why does Lukács think that it only applies to the capitalist society? As mentioned earlier, the reason why he thinks so is that historical materialism was born in the mid-nineteenth century, when the basic contradictions of the capitalist society have been fully developed. But as Engels said in his article *Karl Marx*, although a full cognition of the social and economic status of capitalism is a condition for Marx to establish historical materialism, it does not mean that the historical materialism created from it only applies to the capitalist society. Obviously, Lukács' point of view is enormously different from Engels' understanding.

**Firstly, it is Lukács' obvious misreading of Engels' text.**

From the distinction between civilization and barbarism in Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the* *State*, Lukacs draws the conclusion that it is very difficult to apply historical materialism to pre-capitalist society. But Lukacs did not realize that the difference between the civilization and barbarism Engels talked about was not equal to the difference between the capitalist society and the pre-capitalist society. The nineteenth century that the mature capitalist society Lukács spoke of had reached, even if the formation of the capitalist society dates back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, was totally different from the civilization Engels spoke of. Because what Engels called civilization is a new era higher than savagery and barbarism, and its extension is far greater than that of capitalism. For Engels, the division between the exploiting classes and the exploited classes existed throughout the entire period of civilization. Slavery in ancient era, serfdom in medieval era and wage labor in modern era have become three forms of enslavement in the three periods of civilization. Slavery, whether open or covert, has been accompanied by civilization. Thus, it can be seen that civilization includes the capitalist era and the pre-capitalist era of slavery and feudalism, which is by no means equivalent to the capitalist era as Lukács said. Lukács equates Engels' distinction between civilization and barbarism with the difference between the capitalist society and the pre-capitalist society, which is a serious misunderstanding of Engels' thought.

**Secondly, it is Lukács' misreading of Marx's text.**

Marx's text quoted by Lukács comes from the third part of Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, “The Method of Political Economy”. Marx does say here that in the capitalist society, agriculture has been completely dominated by capital and has become a sector of industry (Industriezweig) .

The same is true of Toprak rent.

This shows that agriculture in capitalist society is totally different from that in pre-capitalist society. But the essence of Marx's statement is to point out that the same agriculture and rent are essentially different in capitalist society and pre-capitalist society, but it does not aim at demonstrating the significant difference between capitalist society and pre-capitalist society itself. According to Marx's principle that “**Human anatomy** contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species”. The order of economic research cannot only be according to the succession of time when categories appear, but rather first studying the economic category of highly developed capitalist society, and then doing ( post-festum)retrospection to older forms.

“Capital is the all-dominant economic power of bourgeois society. Capital must be the starting point as well as the end point and must be correctly understood before understanding landed property”. 26 ("Das Kapital ist die alles beherrschende ökonomische Macht der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Es muss Ausgangspunkt wie Endpunkt bilden und vor dem Grundeigentum entwickelt werden.”

It can be seen that what Marx elaborated here is the sequence of his research, he did not say what Lukács has interpreted.

Because Marx deliberately distinguished the capitalist society from the pre-capitalist society. Therefore, it is far-fetched for Lukács to try to draw the conclusion that historical materialism can only be applied to the capitalist society on the basis of Marx's expositions.

## 3. Lukács’ confusion of historical materialism with political economy

If Lukács confused civilization and capitalist era when he quoted Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the* *State*, then he confused the method of historical materialism with the method of Marx’ political economy when he quoted Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that is to say, he understood "the method political economy" clearly marked by Marx as the method of historical materialism, thus simply equating Marx's scientific political economy with the theory of historical materialism. This confusion is the underlying root of thought of Lukács' conclusion that historical materialism is only "the self-knowledge of the capitalist society".

It is precisely because of this confusion that Lukács equates the political economy which studies the mode of production of the capitalist society and its particular law of movement with the theory of historical materialism which grasps the general law of human history. Therefore, it is also impossible to truly understand the guiding significance of the method of historical materialism to the entire historical science (including economics, sociology, politics, etc.) in a universal sense. It is also under the influence of Lukács' point of view that many scholars at home and abroad often blur the boundary between the basic principles of historical materialism and political economy or the theory of scientific socialism.

We advocate that although historical materialism can be used to guide the study of political economy and provide methodological guidance for the study of other historical sciences, after all, it is comparatively different from other empirical historical sciences and cannot be simply equated or confused. In a word, Lukács' point of view that historical materialism can only be applied to capitalist society is untenable. The texts Lukacs quotes are not sufficient to support his point of view. Lukacs’ use of Marx’ economic texts shows that he confuses the method of historical materialism with that of political economy. Under the profound influence of Lukács, some scholars at home and abroad often simply equate the universal principles of historical materialism with the study of Marxist political economy, or completely equate historical materialism with sociology, history, politics, etc. This is what we need to pay special attention to when we examine the scope of application of historical materialism.

1. **Shu Yuanzhao** (1964-), male, Chenxi, Ph.D., Hunan University-College of Marxism, Ph.D. supervisor. Main research directions: Marxist philosophy and classical German philosophy, contact mailbox: shuyuanzhao@aliyun.com; [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Wu Xue** (1991-), female, Yiyang, postgraduate student of Hunan University-College of Marxism, main research direction: basic principles of Marxism. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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