**Feng Wangzhou: How To Understand the Ideas of "Political Marxism" : Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood’s Ideas**

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[Abstract] The research on "political Marxism" by domestic and foreign academic circles mainly focuses on important theoretical issues such as the connotation and formation of "political Marxism", the theory of the origin of capitalism and social development forms, the theory of new imperialism, the theory of nation-state, the theory of capitalist social crisis and class struggle, the theory of globalization and modernity, the critical theory of post-Marxism and postmodernism, the theory of historical materialism, and the critical theory of capitalist ideology.

【Key words】politics, Marxism, capitalism, society, property relations, capital, logic

"Political Marxism" is an important academic school of contemporary foreign Marxism. "Political Marxism" emerged in the 1970s and became popular in the British and American Marxist academic circles. It has an important influence on the Western left.

Its main founders, Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, adhere to the basic views and methods of Marxism and construct their unique "political-historical materialism" theoretical system. They oppose the “non-historical traditional Marxist analysis” model and believe that historical materialism is still the best theoretical weapon for criticizing capitalism; but they also believe that historical materialism cannot be understood as the general law of social history, but should first be understood as a criticism of capitalist society. They emphasize the role of class relations, social property relations, etc. in explaining historical development. In recent years, the research on "political Marxism" by domestic and foreign academic circles has entered a steady development stage. Domestic and foreign academic circles have studied "political Marxism" from many aspects and profoundly explained the basic theoretical issues, main contents and contemporary values ​​of "political Marxism".

**1. The Concept and Formation of “Political Marxism”**

"Political Marxism" has been formed in North America for more than 40 years and has formed three generations of academic communities. [1] David McNally pointed out: "Wood's theoretical orientation was given the title of 'political Marxism' by French historian Guy Boyce. Wood undoubtedly attaches more importance to social and political struggles than many Marxist historians, but she also has reservations about this title: she agrees with the importance of political economy and economic development process, but she just thinks that this alone cannot explain major historical changes, so more attention needs to be paid to political events that have occurred." [2] Vivek Chibber pointed out that Wood played an important role in the development of "political Marxism", and the initial discussion revolved around the works of Robert Brenner, focusing on the analysis of the origins of capitalism and its structure. [3]

The academic community has basically reached a consensus on the connotation of "political Marxism" and formed a relatively accurate conclusion. Some scholars pointed out that the connotation of "political Marxism" mainly includes four aspects: First, "political Marxism" is the product of the collision, integration and competition of many foreign Marxist thoughts (such as the British Marxist Historical School, structuralist Marxism, post-Marxism, etc.) in the 1970s in a specific historical context. Second, "political Marxism" is the collective wisdom formed by the two founders Brenner and Wood and their students' independent exploration, mutual influence and common development in a specific historical context. Third, "political Marxism" has developed into a theoretical school with two or three generations of theoretical inheritance, multiple academic centers, and influence on many disciplines.

Fourth, the core categories and methods of "political Marxism" are historical particularity, class relations and class analysis, and to a certain extent, it has made important deepening of the historical-political dimension of historical materialism. [4] Some scholars believe that "political Marxism" takes history as the core of theoretical analysis, emphasizes the role of social subjects and class conflicts in explaining history, and opposes the non-historical traditional Marxist analysis model. They believe that historical materialism cannot be understood as the general law of social history, but should first be understood as a criticism of capitalist society. [5] Other scholars have pointed out that the theoretical viewpoints of “political Marxism” emphasize the criticism of capitalist society and the reinterpretation of historical materialism. [6] “Political Marxism” pioneered by Brenner and Wood abandoned the model of historical change in classical Marxism, and gave priority to the interpretation of history in close connection with production. [7] “Political Marxism” is committed to the criticism of capitalism. It has not deviated from Marxism, but has clarified a series of issues in traditional Marxism on the origin, nature and development of capitalism. It has also strengthened Marx’s historical materialist analysis method by reconstructing the social history analysis model, highlighting the contemporary value of Marxism. [8]

II. Theory of the Origin of Capitalism and Social Development According to Political Marxism

First, from the perspective of totality, some researchers have pointed out that the analysis of the origin of capitalism by "political Marxism" provides a very useful reference for exploring Marx's historical theory, but there is a tendency to move from one extreme (productive forces determinism) to another extreme (class initiative). [9]

"Political Marxism" emphasizes that capitalism originated from the agricultural sector in England, and its root lies in the transformation of social property relations. [10]

On the basis of a comprehensive reflection on the universal ideas of capitalism such as the commercial origin theory and the population origin theory, political Marxism constructs the theoretical premise of "market urgency" as a rational factor in the origin of capitalism through the three presuppositions of "capitalism's particularity", "the continuity of class relations" and "the key to the status of farmers". [11] "Political Marxism" constructs a model of the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, but in the process of explaining social transformation, it focuses one-sidedly on class exploitation and struggle. Class struggle alone cannot explain the transformation from one mode of production to another. Showing or hiding the conflict between exploiters and the exploited is a universal feature of class society. [12]

Second, from Wood's perspective. Some researchers point out that Wood argued that capitalism was not a historical necessity as described by the commercialization model, but was formed unexpectedly under very special conditions. Wood's views on the origin of capitalism were directly inherited from Brenner's views and enriched and developed on this basis. [13]

Wood analyzed and criticized the widely circulated capitalist commercialization model, demographic model, and absolutist state theory, and based on the actual situation of British agriculture, he established the theory of the origin of agricultural capitalism. [14] Third, from Brenner's perspective. Some scholars believe that Brenner triggered the discussion on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Brenner's criticism of neo-Malthusianism and the use of comparative methods to examine the class structure and class struggle of different European countries were supported by some scholars in Britain and France. [15] Brenner criticized the "demographic model" and "commercialization model" and proposed that the transformation of the natural economy was determined by the "rural class structure", but his "class structure model" also encountered difficult questions. [16]

Brenner argued that capitalism was accidental and was based on the transformation of social property relations based on class struggle, revealing the two main factors in the origin of capitalism in Western Europe. [17] Brenner constructed the theory of social property relations, transition theory and economic crisis theory, which especially triggered the famous "Brenner Controversy". [18]

Some other researchers have revealed the characteristics of Brenner's theory on the transformation of social property relations in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. [19] Brenner argued that social property relations were more standard production relations, so he called Brenner's theory on the origin of capitalism the "social property relations model". [20] Brenner argued that it was precisely because of the differences in social property relations that the development of European countries in the same period and under similar circumstances was divided. [21]

3. Theory of New Imperialism

First, the essence of the “new” of the new imperialism. Some researchers point out that the “new” of Wood’s new imperialism is that hegemony is implemented through purely economic means, while Harvey is still confined to the old colonial model and does not distinguish the essence of the new and old imperialisms. [22]

American imperialism rules through the power of the market (or capital) rather than military tyranny. [23] The hegemony of the United States and the appreciation of American capital are achieved through the implementation of international economic and geopolitical strategies, and most of these strategies can also achieve the interests of its economic partners and even competitors. [24]

**Second, the power logic of the new imperialism.**

Some researchers have explained it from the perspective of comparing Wood and Harvey, pointing out that in the capital logic and territorial logic of power, Wood emphasizes the capital logic, while Harvey pays more attention to the mutual intersection of capital logic and territorial logic, and emphasizes the importance of dispossessive accumulation. [25]

Wood criticized Harvey’s power logic of the new imperialism. Wood distinguished between economic power and extra-economic power. The former corresponds to Harvey’s capital logic, and the latter corresponds to territorial logic. On the one hand, the geographical expansion of capital does not necessarily require the support of the state at the political level, nor does it necessarily require the state to expand its own territorial scope through colonization; on the other hand, the state does not necessarily support the geographical expansion of its own capital. The uncertainty of the relationship between the two highlights the independence of territorial logic, or super-economic power, from the logic of capital. The logic of capital and the logic of territory are in conflict during the period of new imperialism. [26]

Third, the contradictions, crises and resistance struggles of new imperialism. Some scholars pointed out that Wood argued that new imperialism has multiple contradictions, mainly including: the contradiction between the global expansion of new imperialism and the weakening of competitors; the contradiction between the breakthrough of geographical space boundaries by new imperialism and the pursuit of social order stability; the contradiction between the pursuit of profit maximization by new imperialism and the continuous decline in the purchasing power of ordinary people; the contradiction between the global supervision required by new imperialism and the lack of a global country; the contradiction between the reliance of new imperialism on military means to enable a single territorial country to maintain the globalization system of capital and the unlimited expansion of capital. [27] In the process of implementing globalization, new imperialism can never get rid of a basic contradiction, which is the contradiction between constantly expanding markets and not making competitors stronger. [28] The nation-state is still the most critical arena and the most powerful subject in the fight against neo-imperialism. We advocate a path of resistance with socialism as the direction, the nation-state as the platform, and the working class as the main force. [29] Neo-imperialism is capitalist imperialism, with the United States as the typical representative. The crisis of neo-imperialism is manifested in political democratic deficit and military surplus. The root cause of the crisis of neo-imperialism lies in the inherent expansion logic of capital and the power configuration relationship under its dominance. [30]

IV. Theory of Historical Materialism

Domestic academic research on the theory of historical materialism of "political Marxism" mainly focuses on Wood, and has been studied from the following perspectives.

First, from the perspective of totality. In China recently a monograph book was published entitled "A Study on the Historical Materialism of Alan Meiksons Wood". This book is the first book in China to study Wood's historical materialism. The book revolves around the theoretical theme of reconstructing historical materialism and reveals Wood's historical materialism from a general perspective. [31]

Second, from the perspective of the mode of production. Some scholars pointed out that Wood opposed both orthodox Marxism and criticized post-Marxism. On this basis, she drew on the analysis of Thompson and Brenner, "reconstructed historical materialism" around the core concept of the mode of production, and put forward the proposition of "political Marxism". [32]

Third, from the perspective of clarifying the basic concepts of historical materialism. Some researchers pointed out that Wood argued that the "base-superstructure" metaphor used by Marx in 1859 was misinterpreted by "orthodox" Marxism. On the basis of drawing on Thompson's ideas, Wood reconstructed the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure. [33]

In order to solve the theoretical separation of "economy" and "politics", Wood rethought the relationship between "base" and "superstructure" as important categories of historical materialism. [34] Fourth, from the functional perspective of historical materialism. Some scholars pointed out that Wood mainly proposed and demonstrated that the core of historical materialism is to adhere to the historicity and particularity of capitalism, rather than the universal laws of history. [35]

By examining the important function of people in the theory of historical materialism, Wood criticized various forms of "determinism" and deeply criticized the social form of contemporary capitalist imperialism represented by the United States. While inheriting Marx's thoughts, Wood's historical materialism innovated the narrative method of explaining the characteristics of capitalism, providing people with a new perspective and methodology for understanding and criticizing contemporary capitalist ideological trends. [36] "Political Marxism" emphasizes the role of class conflict among social subjects in explaining history, and believes that historical materialism is first and foremost a critical theory of capitalist society, advocating a reinterpretation of historical materialism in combination with social reality issues. [37] Wood’s reconstruction of historical materialism actually understands historical materialism as a democratic political theory, focusing on the construction of democratic politics in modern capitalist countries as a starting point to explore the theoretical innovation of historical materialism in the contemporary era. [38] Other researchers have conducted a comparative study of Wood and Habermas’ reconstruction of historical materialism, revealing the important theoretical and practical significance of Wood’s reconstruction of historical materialism. [39]

5. Theory of the Nation-State by Political Marxism

The academic community mainly interprets the nation-state from the perspectives of its origin, function and multifaceted nature. Some researchers pointed out that Wood elaborated on the function of the state in detail and argued that the state should not be defined as a tool of class rule or a product of irreconcilable class contradictions.

The state should be defined as any form of public power. Capitalist states are not class neutral and there is still exploitation and autocratic rule at the state level. [40]

The role of the nation-state in the process of globalization has not been weakened, but strengthened, and it has an irreplaceable role. The global accumulation and expansion of capital requires the nation-state, and the nation-state still plays a role that cannot be replaced by transnational economic organizations. [41] "Political Marxism" believes that capitalism and modern nation-states are closely related. The history of capitalist development is the history of the formation of modern nation-states, and capitalist countries are typical representatives of modern nation-states. [42]

Other scholars pointed out from the perspective of the relationship between the state and imperialism that political Marxism uses power logic to analyze the capitalist political form and emphasizes the conclusion that the nation-state is the only unit of the international system. This not only conceals the reasons for the power struggle, but also violates objective facts and ignores the positive role of international organizations. [43] In the spectrum of left-wing thought, Wood and Brenner’s theoretical thinking on the nation-state is representative of their views and has a leading role in thought. [44]

VI. Theory of the Crisis of Capitalist Society and Class Struggle

The academic community mainly interprets the class struggle, economic crisis and social crisis of capitalism. Some researchers interpret Wood's theory of class struggle from the perspective of the separation of capitalist politics and economy. Wood pointed out that the separation of capitalist economy and politics makes the extraction of surplus an economic issue rather than a political issue. The result of this separation is the separation of the working class's militancy and political consciousness, which makes the class struggle a struggle for better working and living conditions. [45]

Other scholars have analyzed Brenner's theory of capitalist crisis. They believe that Brenner's analysis of the contemporary capitalist social crisis is very influential, especially his analysis of the capitalist crisis in the 1970s is quite distinctive. He focuses on the competitive level of capitalism, explains the negative impact of competition on the output price and profit rate of manufacturing, and reveals the long-term decline in the profit rate of capitalism and the long-term stagnation of the capitalist economy. However, in his analysis, he ignores the discussion of the various premises on which competition is based. [46] Brenner and Wood highlight class relations and class struggle by re-examining the origins of capitalism, and actively defend the dominant position of class struggle in the development of human history. [47] Some scholars believe that Brenner has made a different interpretation of Marx's crisis theory. Based on Marx's crisis theory, he used the "theory of social property relations" as a framework to analyze and study the long-term prosperity and subsequent recession of the economies of developed capitalist countries after World War II. [48]

Brenner believes that the current economic crisis is rooted in the continuous decline in the rate of profit. As soon as Brenner's explanation of the long-term low rate of profit in post-war capitalism was put forward, a debate on it broke out in the Western academic community, with detailed examinations of Michele Aglietta and others' doubts about Brenner's economic crisis theory and the affirmation and development of Brenner's economic crisis theory by Western left-wing scholars represented by Chris Harman. [49]

7. Globalization and Modernity Theory by Political Marxism

The academic community has interpreted globalization from the perspective of its nature, and the relationship between globalization, modernity, and capitalism. Some scholars pointed out that Wood correctly interpreted the nature of capitalist globalization, believing that the globalization of capitalism is both a sign of its success and the beginning of its failure; globalization is the internationalization of capital and the universalization of capitalism, and its purpose is to achieve the global hegemony of capitalist imperialism. [50] Modernity and capitalism are not the same thing, and the history of capitalism cannot be divided into two stages: modernity and postmodernity. The nature of capitalism has not changed with the development of history. [51] Some scholars pointed out that globalization marks the peak of the spatial expansion of capitalism, and also means that the systemic contradictions of capitalism are becoming more and more universal. The possibility of socialist politics in the era of global capitalism is not smaller but greater. [52] Other scholars have studied the modern international relations theory of Benno Teschke, a representative of "political Marxism", from the perspective of international relations. Political Marxist scholars represented by Benno Teschke have conducted critical research on modern and contemporary international relations initiated by the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Tasca critically analyzed the misunderstanding of this major international relations transformation by international relations theories such as neorealism, constructivism, and historical sociology, and used the methods of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to redefine the historical dividing line. [53] Wood argued that all the problems that have emerged under the rule of global capitalism are mainly caused by some basic laws of capitalism, such as the principle of competition, the principle of profit maximization, and the principle of capital accumulation, rather than being caused by globalization as some people usually understand. Globalization has only strengthened these laws, and globalization itself is actually the result of these laws rather than their cause. The essence of globalization includes the following four aspects: First, globalization is the manipulation of world trade by "capitalist imperialism" represented by the United States. Second, globalization and free trade are two different things. Under the state of globalization, it will only encourage underdeveloped countries to open up to developed countries, but will not allow developed countries to open up to underdeveloped countries.

If two-way opening is truly implemented, it will go against the original intention of the designers of globalization. Third, the result of globalization is, on the one hand, the formation of a market that is subject to the vassal economy of the capitalist empire, and on the other hand, the capitalist empire tries to avoid the negative effects of globalization. Fourth, the root cause of the problems that arise in the process of globalization does not lie in the degree of globalization, but in the vulnerability of poor countries’ markets to imperial capital. Precisely because of this, Wood requires that when people criticize global capitalism, they must focus their criticisms on capitalism, rather than on globalization. [54]

8. Critique of Post-Marxist and Postmodernist Critical Theory by Political Marxism

Some scholars pointed out that Wood refuted postmodernism’s questioning of the scientific nature of Marxist theory and the feasibility of practice from four aspects:

“First, defending historical materialism and opposing postmodernism’s non-historical view; second, emphasizing the holistic view of cognition and opposing postmodernism’s fragmented deconstruction; third, confirming the revolutionary subject status of the working class and opposing postmodernism’s dissolution of the subject; fourth, emphasizing the particularity of capitalism and opposing postmodernism’s discontinuous interpretation. As an important representative of anti-postmodernism, Wood’s criticism of postmodernism is conducive to defending the orthodoxy of Marxism, but it also shows a certain narrowness and extremeness.” [55] In Wood’s view, post-Marxism and postmodernism are essentially the same, dissolving Marx’s class theory, promoting radical democratic politics, and advocating Western liberal democracy. [56] In response to the erroneous thoughts of postmodernism, Wood pointed out that the essence of postmodernism is “a product of consciousness formed in the so-called golden age of capitalism” and the gradual decline of criticism of capitalism. He criticized postmodernism from the perspectives of the times and history, the research perspective of holism, and the subject status of the working class, and defended and developed Marxism. [57]

IX. Critical Theory of Capitalist Ideology

The academic community has explained the criticism of capitalist ideology by "political Marxism" from four aspects. "Political Marxism" is based on the historical development of capitalist society and explains the nature, function and effect of capitalist ideology. From the perspective of the concept of "progress" as a capitalist ideology, the concept of "progress" is directly related to property rights and bears the imprint of capitalist power discourse, which makes people only abstractly view the so-called progress of capitalism and even regard capitalist colonial plunder as progress and justice. From the perspective of democracy as a capitalist ideology, capitalist democracy has become a tool of its rule, inherent in the capitalist ruling system, and even an indispensable component for maintaining imperial hegemony. From the perspective of the "unlimited war" of neo-imperialism as a capitalist ideology, neo-imperialism represented by the United States, under the banner of "just war", uses the excuse of combating terrorism and eliminating "rogue states" to attempt to achieve its goal of global hegemony. From the perspective of liberalism as a capitalist ideology, liberalism has not only become an important ideological weapon for capitalism to resist the power of feudal absolutism, but also the core content of capitalist political rule. By applying the critical method of Marxist historical materialism, “Political Marxism” reveals that the above four capitalist ideologies have become a kind of illusion in the actual global expansion of capitalism and will inevitably be eliminated by the actual proletarian revolutionary movement. [58]

Notes

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