**Guan Feng: Pros and Cons of Ellen Meiksins Wood’s “Political Marxism”**

**March 2017**

 **Source: Journal of Nanjing University: Philosophy, Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Author: Prof. and tutor in the School of Marxism, South China Normal University**

"Political Marxism" is an important academic school of contemporary foreign Marxism, which has a significant influence in the British and American academic circles. Its main representatives include Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood, George Comninel, [Hannes](https://zhida.zhihu.com/search?q=%E6%B1%89%E5%86%85%E6%96%AF&zhida_source=entity&is_preview=1) Lacher, Benno Teschke, etc. Wood and Brenner are jointly known as the flag bearers of "political Marxism" and are recognized as Marxist theorists and political scientists around the world. "Political Marxism" was formed in the 1970s. After more than 40 years of development, three generations of [academic communities](https://zhida.zhihu.com/search?q=%E5%AD%A6%E6%9C%AF%E5%85%B1%E5%90%8C%E4%BD%93&zhida_source=entity&is_preview=1) have been formed . The first generation includes Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiskens Wood, Neal Wood, George Cominaire, Charles Post, Harvey Kaye, and others. The second generation includes Hannes Rachel, Beno Tasca, Michael A. [Zmolek](https://zhida.zhihu.com/search?q=%E8%8E%AB%E8%8E%B1%E5%85%8B&zhida_source=entity&is_preview=1)[Samuel](https://zhida.zhihu.com/search?q=%E6%8B%89%E5%BC%97%E6%9C%97%E6%96%AF&zhida_source=entity&is_preview=1) Knafo, Geoff Kennedy. The third generation includes Xavier Lafrance, Eren Duzgun, and others.

Ellen Meiksins Wood has made a penetrating critique of post-Marxists represented by Laclau and Mouffe with her brilliant words such as "retreat from class" and "historical change without history", and is well-known in the international left-wing thought circle. Ellen Meiksins Wood has tried her best to defend the contemporary timeliness of the core concepts of historical materialism such as class struggle and mode of production and has fought against the turbulent tide of post-structuralism and postmodernism, willing to be an "unfashionable alternative", so that some people say that she holds a "fundamentalist belief" in Marxism.

Strictly speaking, this judgment is full of misunderstandings and far from fair.

Wood is by no means a dogmatic Marxist. In fact, she fights on two fronts. She not only adheres to the basic position of Marxism and vigorously refutes the discourse politics of post-Marxism, but also resolutely draws a clear line with the Second International and Stalinism, and mercilessly criticizes technological determinism and linear universal historical views, and then "reconstructs historical materialism." Wood’s adherence to and unique interpretation of the importance of the concept of mode of production is the most fundamental support behind this two-front battle and "reconstruction".

Therefore, in-depth research on Wood's "reconstruction" of historical materialism has at least three meanings:

First, Wood's own academic level, influence and her adherence to the basic position of Marxism deserve our attention and respect.

 Secondly, Wood's "reconstruction" not only has original new construction and unique interpretation, but also has its own origins, continues a certain academic tradition, and has the significance of "academic community". Research on Wood is not only a personal study, but also a study of the logic of academic inheritance.

Thirdly, more importantly, Wood deeply touches on the basic concepts and core propositions of historical materialism. The gains and losses, rights and wrongs are of great reference, reference and reflection value to us.

Unfortunately, although the China’s academic community has paid more and more attention to Wood, there is still a lack of research based on or highlighting the second and third meanings I have mentioned above.

　　**1. The Mode of Production and the Reinterpretation of Historical Materialism: Thompson and Brenner**

As we all know, the mode of production is the core concept of historical materialism. It is a symbolic term of Marxist historical epistemology, widely known and which is far-reaching. Baudrillard specifically pointed out that the mode of production is "the fundamental concept of Marxist analysis", which implements "the logic of material production and the historical dialectics of the mode of production";

Kolakowski is convinced that in Marxism, the mode of production is not only the basic tool for dividing historical periods, but also the basic tool for understanding history as a single whole; and **Hobsbawm asserts that "the mode of production is the basis of our human social changes and human social relations and understanding of the historical dynamics of human society".**

Botomore and others argue that "this term **mode of production** has been formulated as a core element of a systematic explanation of history since Marx used it, that is, history is considered to be a continuous process composed of different modes of production".

And Balibar further said that Marx's "special object of the evolutionary diagram is the history of the 'social structure' that is considered to be determined by its own 'mode of production'"; Rigby argued that **mode of production** "plays a key role in the Marxist explanation of social structure and historical change".

However, as Bottomore and others have said, "Marx did not use this term in any simple and consistent sense." In Marx's historical materialism texts, the mode of production does have multiple meanings. Cohen believes that there are three meanings, namely the material mode or technical mode of production, the social mode, and the mixed mode (including both the material mode and the social mode). This point has been recognized by many people. Such an important core concept, with such rich and complex connotations, is prone to different interpretations and explanations.

The concept of mode of production has therefore become an important starting point and basic entry point for successors to reinterpret or reconstruct historical materialism. This is very obvious in British and American Marxist historiography. Among them, Edward Thompson and Robert Brenner, who had a direct influence on Wood and were regarded as her peers, are very typical.

**British cultural Marxism**

Edward Thompson was a famous British historian and left-wing social activist. Edward Thompson is well-known for his status as the main standard-bearer of British cultural Marxism. Cultural Marxism, also known as cultural materialism, is a reflection and criticism of the Second International's economic-technological determinism and economic materialism. Cultural Marxism advocates the importance and relative independence of social consciousness such as culture, and then re-understands, re-interprets Marxism and historical materialism. Among British cultural materialists, it is generally recognized that Thompson has worked the hardest and achieved remarkable results.

Thompson believes that Marxism has great superiority and rationality in analyzing and explaining history with the help of the core concept of the mode of production; moreover, **"theoretical creation based on the concept of the mode of production may be done very badly or very well",** for example, Balibar did very poorly, while Simon Clarke did very well and put forward a clear and concise new explanation, which is quite helpful. Thompson clearly emphasized: **"I think the problem is not the central position of the mode of production for any materialist in understanding history,** but the understanding of later generations”.

They "make the mistake of confusing the important concept of the mode of production with the narrow economy", "use economic terms to describe the mode of production", and then regard the "norms, culture and key concepts embedded in it and constituting the mode of production as secondary things" and determined, and the materialist conception of history is degraded into economic or technological determinism; and "capitalist society cannot be described without power and control relations, concepts of use rights or private ownership, cultural recognition patterns and the unique needs of the mode of production in cultural composition".

 Therefore, Thompson proposed "when we talk about the capitalist mode of production, we are also indicating the core of a special relationship between people, that is, the relationship of exploitation, domination and acquisition that is inseparable from production". Thompson proposed that to correctly understand the materialist conception of history, we must "turn to the full meaning of the mode of production".

**Thompson’s Views**

There are three key points: First, we must fully realize that once we talk about the mode of production, "it also brings us the production relations that men and women are born with (which is also a relationship of control and obedience)", and the production relations are its core, not the productive forces or technology that the Second International believes.

Second, we must determine that production relations are not equivalent to economic relations. It involves cultural, political, moral and other factors. "Production relations are also relations between people; they are relations of oppression or cooperation; there is a moral logic, just as there is an economic logic that arises from these relations."

In the eyes of Thompson Clarke deserves recognition because Clarke recognizes that "the production relations that are the basis for these different modes of production... can be manifested in various specific economic, ideological and political forms."

Thirdly, we must keep in mind that production relations are inseparable from class struggle. They manifest themselves as class struggle and production relations are replaced and changed through class struggle. **"In modern society, production relations manifest themselves as class structure and class struggle (sometimes equilibrium)", and new "power relations, forms of domination and forms of social organization are always the result of struggle."** Therefore, the mode of production itself is not automatically changed by productive forces or technology as orthodox Marxists believes, nor can it automatically determine the change of social forms.

Kaye pointed out that for Thompson, whether the historical development of a mode of production is repetition or change ultimately depends on the result of class struggle. Class struggle plays a decisive role in the change of social forms. Robert Brenner was the director of the Center for Comparative Studies in Social Theory and History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Robert Brenner’s ideas were influenced by British Marxist historians, especially Hilton, and economist Dobb. His lecture "Marxist Social and Historical Theory" is very popular among students.

According to Perry Anderson, Brenner "creates his works from the perspective of a historian in the Marxist tradition", "but this is an original Marxism, which has little in common with the past orthodox Marxism derived from Capital ." Brenner also admitted that his research on history benefited directly from the pioneering work of Maurice Dobb, Rodney Hilton and others.

**"It was through Dobb that I began to discover that the origins of the new economic development model must be sought in the emerging production relations. This means that when studying the transition from feudal society to capitalist society, we cannot simply start from the perspective of the linear self-development of productive forces (especially technology), but must start from the real root behind this phenomenon, that is... from the contradictory relationship between the feudal landlord class's appropriation of surplus products by extra-economic means and the peasant class's limited use of the means of production. ... The real reason must be found in the political community behind the economic phenomenon and the complex social production relations system it has constructed." (Brenner)**

Its core proposition is that for historical evolution, "it is crucial to analyze the specific class structure, especially the relatively autonomous process of the construction of property or surplus exploitation relations, and the specific class conflicts it has caused (or not caused). Brenner believes that this analytical approach is very different from that of the Second International, and the key reason is that the two have very different understandings of the core concept of the mode of production. Brenner clearly emphasized: "Marx's concept of 'mode of production' has been seriously misused by Marxists in the later Second and Third Internationals, and has a tendency towards technological determinism that should not have been there."

In the eyes of Brenner, specifically, their problems are: first, although they emphasize that the mode of production is the unity of productive forces and production relations, when analyzing the replacement of social forms and historical evolution based on the mode of production, they overemphasize the decisive role of productive forces and ignore the importance of production relations, making the concept of mode of production productive and technological. In fact, production relations are the core and key of the mode of production.

Secondly, they regard ownership relations, such as distribution, exchange, and consumption relations, as the main content of production relations, and tend to understand production relations in a narrow economic sense, which downplays or weakens the more important class relations. The essence of production relations is the class struggle, conflict, balance (even cooperation) relations formed around production. It is these relations that determine the development of production, the development of productive forces, and the change of social forms.

In order to distinguish, Brenner deliberately created the concept of "social property relations" to replace the usual production relations. Brenner also deliberately pointed out that "capitalist property relations may have appeared before there was a newer production technology than that used by producers under the feudal system", which means that the so-called "production technology" that people are familiar with that promotes the arrival of capitalism is precisely the continuous development after the emergence of capitalist social property relations;

In the eyes of Brenner “in the view of orthodox Marxism, it is technological innovation, the continuous emergence of new technologies and the corresponding development of productive forces that have prompted the old feudal production relations to withdraw from the stage of history and be replaced by new capitalist production relations. In fact**, "social property relations determine the rules of reproduction. People can only engage in a certain form of reproduction under the framework of established social property relations, thus giving rise to different development models with the characteristics of the times. In short, social property relations are both historically specific and politically reproductive. In this way, the causal chain of tracing the history and theory of social development has shifted from the search for some iron laws or rules to the examination of specific, historical and political social property relations." (Brenner)**

Brenner proposed that it is necessary to clarify that ***"the rise of capitalist property relations is the unconscious result of the reproduction law of pre-capitalist individual production actors and pre-capitalist class conflicts".*** The property relations in capitalist society were born out of the class struggle between landlords and peasants in feudal society, or in other words, this struggle led to the disintegration of the property relations in feudal society. Class struggle determined Britain's transition from the feudal mode of production to the capitalist mode of production in both a fundamental and direct sense. Specifically, the reason why British feudal society withdrew from the stage of history was that the original "political community" - mainly referring to the feudal aristocracy as a whole - could not continue its existence and activities. Faced with the decreasing number of peasants or those who were re-enslaved, as well as their active resistance or passive non-cooperation, the feudal aristocracy could no longer directly strengthen exploitation through political power as before, and could not maintain its original mode of exploitation and class relations. The "political reproduction" of the feudal aristocracy was destroyed, so feudal aristocracy had to take the initiative to adopt the employment system and transform itself into the emerging bourgeoisie. In this sense, the feudal aristocracy and the landlord class themselves became the main promoters of anti-feudalism.

Brenner believes that “the emerging bourgeoisie did not emerge outside the landlords as Dobb saw, due to low production efficiency, which drove the continuous changes in the means of production and working methods. "

Dobb regarded the emerging bourgeoisie as 'originating from production itself': a class of free small producers, peasants and handicraftsmen - in the cracks of feudal society - produced a class of industrial and agricultural capitalists, who established hegemony in the bourgeois revolution. In this regard, Dobb also underestimated the key role played by British lords in hindering and weakening small peasant production and thus providing conditions for the development of capitalism through their commercial tenants." In the eyes of Brenner Dobb gave too much concession to the traditional Marxist productive forces determinism.

**II. Wood’s “Political Marxism”, Her Explanation and Defense of the Political Dimension of the Concept of Mode of Production**

French Marxist historian Guy Bois coined the term "political Marxism" to describe Brenner's analysis of social and historical changes from the perspective of the survival, maintenance or change of the "political community" or "political reproduction" based on class struggle.

Wood liked this term and concept of "political Marxism" very much and was happy to identify with it, and tried her best to explain, construct and improve it. Through Wood’s efforts, "political Marxism" has now become a very influential research branch in the international left-wing ideological circle, and when Wood discussed political Marxism, she often gave reference to and compared herself with Brenner and Thompson.

　**Voluntarism Critique against political Marxism**

However, Bois created it mainly because Bois ridiculed and criticized it for its strong voluntarism tendency. We know that in Thompson's interpretation and reconstruction of historical materialism, "experience" is an indispensable core concept, and the working class became the working class by virtue of working class experience.

This so-called working class experience is formed by the interaction of the objective status and experience predetermined by the production relations and the subjective experience formed by the social subject after processing these experiences with the help of traditional habits, value systems, emotional preferences, and ideas, and the latter is particularly important.

Based on this, Thompson expanded a considerable space for social consciousness such as subject initiative and culture, reflected on the traditional mainstream contradiction between economic base and superstructure, and emphasized the mutual penetration, mutual integration and indivisibility of the two. In the eyes of Thompson the mode of production is not purely economic and technical, but also cultural, moral, and political, and the well-known terms such as "socialist humanism" and "class struggle without classes" also appeared accordingly in Thompson’s writings. Thompson also suffered many accusations of voluntarism and cultural idealism.

 **Thompson and Working Class**

　　As Bell pointed out, **“Thompson believed that the most revolutionary working class was not the factory proletariat, but the declining handicraft workers”.** In this sense, class is far from being an automatic product of a specific mode of production. Class is actually painfully constructed by the working class in a long and humiliating historical process, combined with its own cultural traditions and moral values. This means that the emergence of the working class is independent of the changes in the mode of production (marked by production tools and production organization) in the traditional sense, at least before the capitalist mode of production (marked by large-scale machine industry) is truly universally formed. On the contrary, for Thompson it is the emergence of the working class and its class struggle that promotes the formation of the capitalist mode of production. For this reason, Thompson criticized Althusser for **"equating the mode of production with social structure and returning historical materialism to the cage of political economics",** absolutizing, independent (independent of the subject's activities), and abstracting (separated from the actual process of history) the mode of production on the basis of objectification; on the other hand, Thompson specifically pointed out that "changes in the mode of production and production relations are actually changes in people's experience", in other words, the result of the class struggle of the historical subject.

In view of this, Timberg judged that Thompson's analysis lacked **"the constraints and determination imposed on the British working class by the material relations of the capitalist industrial revolution" and basically turned a blind eye to "** the structural material constraints within which the British working class had to create itself."

Anthony Giddens also criticized Thompson for **"not paying enough attention to factors that prevent people from making history in the way they like, such as structural conditions of action, unintended consequences of action, and unrecognized and unconscious factors in motivation."** Even Johnson, who was more sympathetic to Thompson, had to say that Thompson made "a more developed concept of production relations seem to be about to emerge," and "experience was used by Thompson to illustrate the full content of objective determination, and to express the substitution or mutual relationship between economy and culture," which downplayed the objectivity and determination of the mode of production.

Perry Anderson compared Althusser and Thompson and said: **"Althusser is more faithful to the core tenet of historical materialism in his unswerving emphasis on the necessity of historical structure"** because Thompson did not mention the "speed and scope of industrialization" in Britain at that time and the general scale and population proportion of British workers as a class as a result; and Perry Anderson added: "according to historical materialism, the most fundamental factor in all social change mechanisms is the systematic contradiction between productive forces and production relations, rather than the class conflicts and oppositions generated by production relations, the former contains the latter".

Thompson did the opposite and artificially integrated the mode of production into the class struggle.

Bausch's criticism of Brenner also hits the nail on the head: Brenner's **"method is purely subjective in general and is essentially an idealist view of history. Brenner's "method” separates class struggle from all other objective possibilities, first of all from the specific laws of development of a particular mode of production. Who can imagine that in explaining the development of capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, only social factors are involved without taking into account the law of capitalist accumulation and its main source, the production mechanism of surplus value? In fact, the result of doing so is to empty the basic concept of historical materialism, namely the mode of production and its essential content."**

**Wood’s Responses to Critique**

In the face of these scholars' doubts about "political Marxism", Wood made further explanations and constructions.

Wood argued that this first concerns the theoretical characteristics and inherent endowments of historical materialism. Wood emphasized that **"the original intention of historical materialism is to provide a theoretical basis for explaining the world in order to transform the world. This is not an empty slogan but has precise meaning. ... At least historical materialism shows those places where political behavior can intervene most effectively. ... purpose of historical materialism is to provide us with an analytical method that is particularly suitable for exploring the fields where political activities must occur."**

Marxism is a theory that explores why political activities (especially class struggle and social revolution) occur and why they are carried out and Marxism has a political mission and ambition; more importantly, Marxism fully and deeply reveals the political nature of human social history, or reveals the most core political dimension in human social history and its complex style and hidden existence.

"**Marx not only in his political monographs, but even in his most professional economic works, he showed society from a political perspective. One of the purposes of Marx’s criticism of political economy is to reveal the political aspects of the economy that were concealed by classical economists", and "Capital" is to reveal that "the ultimate secret of capitalist production is political." "Political Marxism" is to fully restore and recover the two dimensions of this political endowment”.**

Wood proposed that, in addition to its political nature, Marxism's "great power lies not in any single-line view of history, but in its unique sensitivity to historical particularity", and its core is "the general guiding principles it provides for discovering the special 'logical process' of a particular social form", which is essentially "a general theory of historical particularity".

This is another outstanding theoretical characteristic and important idea from Wood. The most important of these is that it "adheres to the historical particularity of capitalism, emphasizing both the particularity of its system logic and the particularity of its historical facts". Unfortunately, some later Marxists have forgotten or betrayed these two basic characteristics.

In the eyes of Wood the Orthodox Marxism has carefully crafted a mechanical technological determinism and a single-line view of universal historical evolution. In the eyes of Wood orthodox Marxism has reconstructed historical materialism with philosophy, cultural (aesthetic) politics or utopianism, which has "produced a fatal separation" between theory and revolutionary practice and "severed the bond it should have with the masses fighting for revolutionary socialism". Although later Western Marxism has advocated political strategies such as "people's alliance" and "radical democracy", it advocates the randomness of history and politics, the impossibility of class politics and has constructed a "rootless" "political ontology".

　　In Wood's view, the reason why historical materialism has such theoretical characteristics and inherent endowments lies in its most basic core concept - the mode of production; the reason why the above-mentioned types of Marxism have various errors, as well as the doubts and accusations against political Marxism by Perry Anderson and others, also lies in this.

Wood emphasized that "political Marxism" also recognizes the extreme importance of material production, and the mode of production is the most fundamental and effective core concept of historical materialism. However, any theory that inherits Marxism must "explain the meaning of the fact that the 'base' of production exists in the form of specific social processes and social relations, and in special legal and political forms", and "the mode of production is not just a technical method, but also the social organization of production activities".

And "Marx's fundamental change to bourgeois political economy lies precisely in defining the mode of production with 'social factors'". Therefore, the core of the mode of production is not the technical method of production, but the social organization of production. The core is the special form of "extracting surplus labor from direct producers", which touches on the essence of production relations - "production relations refer to the relationship between people formed in the production process, and the antagonistic relationship between producers and the appropriators of their surplus labor."

Therefore, in the eyes of Wood "the nature of the mode of production depends on the continuous nature of its production relations". Since production relations is full of confrontation, the essence of production relations is a political relationship in an economic guise (or in other words, it is a political relationship for the competition of economic interests, that is, the appropriation of surplus labor).

"Equally important are the relations of production (which are also the key to all practice) in their political aspects. These political aspects refer to the actual struggle for relations of domination, the actual struggle for property rights, and the actual struggle for the power to organize and manage production and possession."

In the eyes of Wood: **“Thompson's criticism of the mechanical division of economic base and superstructure is indeed very useful. Production itself is both economic, technical, and political. The economic base itself also contains the superstructure (especially the political superstructure). The political dimension constitutes the core of the mode of production. This is why historical materialism is political Marxism, or the first reason why political Marxism is established”.**

Wood also emphasized that there is a very complex relationship between production relations and class struggle, which many people do not realize. **"The division between direct producers and appropriators of their surplus labor, and the inherent conflict of interests in this relationship, undoubtedly define the two poles of class confrontation."**

 Production relations are the premise and basis for the formation of class relations. "However, class relations cannot be simply reduced to production relations." Class relations are by no means directly given by production relations.

Wood adds: “on the contrary, the formation of classes is a complex process in which various social factors will be absorbed and integrated. Thompson's greatness lies in his use of the concept of "experience" to vividly and subtly present the complexity between production relations, production methods and class relations.

More importantly, class struggle has a huge dynamic reaction. Firstly, this is manifested in "the power relations that restrict the nature and degree of exploitation are the political organization of the opposing classes and between them. In the final analysis, the relationship between appropriators and producers depends on the comparison of class forces, which is determined by the internal organization and political forces of the parties engaged in class struggle."

The mode of production and production relations are not completely determined in advance by something but are largely maintained and shaped by class struggle.

Secondly, it is manifested in the decisive role of class struggle in the change of production mode. **"Class relations are the driving force and source of the internal movement of a certain production mode. The history of a production mode is the history of class relations in its development and change, especially the history of the continuous development and change of the connection between class relations and production relations. Within a production mode, the development process of the combination of class members revolves around production relations, and classes develop with the changes in the composition, combination, consciousness and organization of class formation. Within a production mode, when the development of class relations causes the established production relations to be deformed in fact, this production mode encounters a crisis."**

The change of class relations and production relations, that is, what Brenner called the "political community reproduction", the original model is unsustainable, and the production mode must be replaced by a new one. The historical evolution manifested in the replacement of production modes is actually the result of the complex interaction between production modes, production relations and class struggle, among which class struggle occupies a particularly active position. Therefore, class struggle and "political community reproduction" have become the primary determinants of historical development and the basic perspective of Marxist analysis of social change. This is the second reason why political Marxism was established.

Wood argues that in this regard, Thompson's high attention to and in-depth analysis of the formation of the working class is very close to the fundamental essence of historical materialism.

And Brenner's analysis of the transition from feudal society to capitalist society from the perspective of "political community reproduction", that is, the maintenance and change of class relations, more clearly highlights the basic principles and essence of historical materialism. In addition, political Marxism insists on the basic determining role of the mode of production and the social structure it forms as objective social forces, especially its basic restrictive role in class formation, which is the adherence to and defense of the "material" dimension of historical materialism.

Wood further proposed: **“because of this way of understanding the mode of production and its complex relationship with class struggle can be accurately explained, as a result another theoretical characteristic of historical materialism has emerged - historical materialism is a theory about historical particularity”.** Because as Thompson and Brenner analyzed, in the process of class formation and its operation and effectiveness (such as promoting the transformation and replacement of the mode of production), multiple factors such as a certain level of productive forces or economy, the labor mode at that time, social politics and property system, as well as historical traditions, customs, popular culture, etc. are superimposed and interacted, which not only makes the mode of production in each period have historical uniqueness, but even the mode of production in different regions (such as Britain and France) in the same specific period has uniqueness. **“Therefore, "each mode of production has its own specific system logic" should be the "primary premise" of historical materialism, and mechanical determinism and unilinear development are completely contrary to historical materialism”.**

Among them, the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist society formed by the capitalist mode of production are the most special, and its ownership "has acquired a purely economic form because it has gotten rid of all its previous political and social decorations and mixtures."

Therefore, public political power is, first, individualized, that is, transformed into private control of production rights, and second, transformed into economic power, that is, power is not centered on political demands such as maintaining privileged status, but on the pursuit of economic interests, and is accomplished in the economic field through economic means, with politics hidden behind the scenes, which is why many people understand the capitalist mode of production as purely economic. Specifically, under the capitalist system, "there is no direct transfer of surplus labor", "more specifically, capitalists do not impose any direct (political) coercion on workers... In pre-capitalist society, lords or the state directly used political power or military power to collect rent, collected taxes or tributes from producers, while the pure economic coercion of capitalist society that forces workers to sell their labor for wages is very different. ... This coercion is impersonal... not people, but the market."

Wood argues that in this sense, only capitalist society truly forms and exists the reality of "economic determinism" and "technological determinism" with the continuous development of productive forces. Unfortunately, some people, including “orthodox Marxists” and bourgeois historians, have extended this feature of capitalist society to all historical eras and concocted a unilinear evolutionary view.

 In order to "explain the origin of capitalism, “orthodox Marxists” presuppose that capitalism has long existed; in order to explain that profit maximization is the unique driving force of capitalism, “orthodox Marxists” presuppose that profit maximization has general rationality as a premise; in order to explain that technological progress is the driving force for the improvement of capitalist labor productivity, “orthodox Marxists” presuppose continuous technological development as a general historical premise." Wood specifically reminded that "when we recognize the inherent logic of the mode of production", we must consider "how to include both historical particularity and the role of people."

 **III. “Democracy against Capitalism”: Wood’s “Political Marxism” Reinterpretation of the Original Meaning of Democracy**

The book "Reconstructing Historical Materialism", which brings together Wood's core ideas, has a special main title "Democracy Against Capitalism".

At first glance, the table of contents of the book is quite confusing, because in the first half of the book, Wood mainly constructs political Marxism based on the concept of mode of production, and is more theoretical, **while the latter part of the book talks about what democracy is and why democracy is incompatible with capitalism, which focuses to make an analysis of facts.** The two parts do not fit together well, so the book is divided into two parts.

In fact, this is what Wood did with great pains and intentionally. In her view, democracy is both the core content of Marxism and the core issue of socialist reality; a correct understanding of democracy is highly unified with a correct understanding of Marxism, and both are indispensable; only by deciphering the historical origins of democracy based on the Marxist standpoint, analytical path and relevant viewpoints can we grasp the essence of democracy, and only by deeply grasping the essence of democracy can we more reasonably highlight its inherent nature as political Marxism.

This unity is particularly relevant in today's era, both in theory and practice: since the 1970s, post-Marxism represented by Laclau and Mouffe has advocated "radical democracy" on the basis of constructing political ontology and the theory of historical randomness. Not only does post-Marxism represented by Laclau and Mouffe has a double misunderstanding of historical materialism and democracy, but post-Marxism represented by Laclau and Mouffe also attempts to integrate socialism with capitalist democracy in practice. In the eyes of Wood true Marxists must stand up and effectively fight back against the above-mentioned polyphonic errors in theory and practice.

**So, how should we correctly understand democracy?**

Wood believes that this certainly requires tracing back to its prototype and original meaning - Athenian democracy. Most people understand it in the sense of direct democracy or participatory democracy or R. Barber's "strong democracy".

For Wood, this is certainly good, but R. Barber's "strong democracy" still does not grasp the essence. Because to understand Greek democracy, we must accurately grasp the social situation in Greece at that time. Unfortunately, many people have a general misunderstanding of Greek society, "few historians are unwilling to regard slavery as a fundamental feature of the social system of ancient Greece, especially Athens".

The so-called slave society and slave production mode have therefore become popular, and people further believe that it is precisely because of the labor of slaves that the conditions and foundation for Athenian citizens and the ruling class to participate in democratic political life have been created - allowing the Athenian citizens to escape the pressure of survival and freely and leisurely engage in political activities. The question is, are slaves and their production really that important?

The fact is that "although slavery developed to an unprecedented degree in ancient Greece, especially in Athens, unfree labor or the relationship between masters and slaves was no different in the ancient world."

 In the eyes of Wood, the uniqueness of Athenian society was not determined by slavery at all, but by its unique class of free laborers. "The status of free laborers in democratic Athens was unprecedented, and it has been unparalleled in many ways since then." This is the most prominent feature of Athenian society. These free laborers first manifested themselves as a large number of free farmers, whose importance to agricultural production even exceeded that of slaves, and secondly, as a certain number of free craftsmen.

Wood proposed that the real uniqueness of Athens' "city-state itself as a form of state organization lies precisely in the unity of labor and citizenship, especially in the emergence of peasant citizens." It was the unique situation of laboring citizens that determined Athenian democracy.

**What is this unique situation?**

That is: although free peasants and craftsmen work to earn their own living and are not rich in property, they are obviously economically disadvantaged compared to the aristocratic ruling class, but this does not prevent them from enjoying full political rights and freedoms; more importantly, their citizenship and political rights and freedoms "have direct economic implications.

Political equality not only coexists with social and economic inequality, but also makes substantial modifications to it." The so-called "substantial modification" means that it has exempted these producers from being directly exploited, squeezed and enslaved by the nobles through super-economic (non-economic) means such as power like slaves. Workers and the exploited are not unified, and political equality and economic freedom from exploitation and slavery are inherently consistent; workers have complete citizenship, and democracy is substantial rather than formal.

"The Greek city-state broke the common pattern of stratified society divided between rulers and producers... In the citizen community... the qualification of producers means an unprecedented degree of freedom from traditional exploitation", which "represents a new social dynamic in the form of class relations". Although there are class differences between free laborers and rulers in Greece, there is no class exploitation or there is no slavery, but a class relationship of near equality, and a mode of production that interacts and is closely related to this class relationship, that is, the laborers freely and self-sufficiently carry out material production, without dependence, submission or deprivation due to ownership, and a large number of laborers then become free citizens, which determines the existence and continuation of Greek democracy.

Wood has repeatedly explained the determined relationship between democracy and class relations and production methods: **"Democracy, in its original meaning, has class meanings" and "The original meaning of democracy comes from the class conflicts in ancient Greece."**

Wood pointed out that for this reason, the capitalist liberal democracy that many people talk about with great relish (even considered to be the most democratic or the end of democracy, the only form) is precisely anti-democratic in nature.

Specifically, "the legal and political forms of liberal democracy are compatible with - in fact, based on - capitalist production relations", and the latter has two prominent characteristics. First, it is based on private ownership and separates workers from the means of production. Workers lose the basis of freedom and are enslaved and exploited.

Second, it is free from extra-economic (non-economic) coercive forces. Exploitation seems to be a matter of the economic field on the surface, which in turn separates the entire social politics from the economy and creates an independent economic field. As a result, civil rights are concentrated in the political field, and workers' civil status and class status and economic status are doubly separated.

"On the one hand, civil rights are not determined by social and economic status - in this sense, capitalism can coexist with formal democracy - on the other hand, civil equality will not directly affect class inequality, and formal democracy does not fundamentally touch exploitation."

In capitalist society, people's civil status will certainly not be lost because of their economic disadvantage, but conversely, their civil status will not affect their class status and economic status. On the contrary, it effectively defends and solidifies their economic inequality and disadvantage. "Political equality in capitalist democracy can not only coexist with socio-economic inequality, but also keep such socio-economic inequality basically unchanged."

Ultimately, capitalist democracy manifests itself as political freedom, equal voting and representative government, which is only a superficial formal democracy, a democracy that has lost its "social" content and dimension (just pure political democracy, especially electoral democracy). "Democracy against capitalism" by Wood has two meanings. One is that true democracy and capitalism are incompatible and they are naturally hostile, and the latter can only accommodate and promote formal democracy; the other is that democracy reflects certain class relations, class forces and class struggles. Conversely, capitalist democracy is the stage for class struggle. "If there is any single tone that can unite the various scattered forces of resistance to capitalism, it is the desire for democracy." Today, democracy is the main form of struggle for the working class to resist the rule of the capitalist class. Striving for true democracy has become the basic path to overthrow capitalism and realize socialism.

Wood proposed that we should keep in mind that "liberal democracy and capitalism are coordinated, but socialist democracy, by its definition, includes changes in production relations."

This change in production relations is also a change in class relations and the principles of social public life. This of course requires a revolution in the ownership of the means of production and a democratic reform of production organizations. However, these are far from enough. "The problem is not just the internal organization of the enterprise. As long as possession is still determined by the market and possession is still subject to the original rules, even if the producer's re-possession of the means of production is a necessary condition, it will not be sufficient," because socialist democracy "means not only democratic organization, but also liberation from 'economic' coercion."

"What we are looking for is not just a new form of ownership, but also a new dynamic mechanism, a new rationality, and a new economic logic." "We should replace the market rationality as a dynamic mechanism" to build a brand new social life. "The association of free people" is the most valuable statement that is closest to the essence of socialist democracy. She warned: "The first lesson we learn from the failure of Soviet socialism is that capitalism has proven itself to be able to function properly without being democratic, which cannot be the case with socialism, which is by definition a democratic organism in society, from the workplace to national politics and social life." "There is no simple, non-confrontational extension of liberal democracy to socialist democracy."

**IV. The Problem Behind the Problem: Overall Analysis and Further Thoughts**

Compared with Habermas’ radical reconstruction, which is basically subversive and starts from scratch, Wood’s “political Marxism” is more of a “reconstruction” within the theoretical horizon of Marxism.

Therefore, she carefully chose “renewing” instead of “reconstruction” used by Habermas to express the meaning of reconstruction. Perhaps more precisely, Wood tried to conduct a reflection and reinterpretation of the original source. This kind of “reconstruction” that respects and respects the original intention of Marxism should be more valuable and meaningful, and there are many points worth mentioning.

First of all, Wood not only grasps some of the most core things in Marxism, such as the great emphasis on historicity, but also reconstructs around the most core concepts. As Larry Patriquin pointed out: “When its focus is on the relationship of exploitation, the mode of appropriation of surplus value, and social property relations, the ‘mode of production’ is a very useful concept.

Wood inherits Marx’s theoretical task of discovering the most hidden secrets of social structure. ... This encourages us to focus on human practical behavior and struggle in specific historical contexts.”

This is undoubtedly the lifeblood of Wood’s political Marxism. Wood's understanding of the mode of production and his criticism of mechanical technological determinism and unilinearism based on this understanding are both reasonable. As Kellner and others summarized: "In fact, one of Marx's core contributions is to destroy the technological economic concepts that are irrelevant to history and analyze the capitalist mode of production from a historical and political perspective. Marx insisted that economic and social productive forces is by no means 'neutral', but is formed in the relationship of class struggle. ... Marx also did not envision a mechanical theory of historical stages or a deterministic historical teleology."

Kellner and others deeply agree with Wood for this. Engels once said: **"The ultimate cause and great driving force of all important historical events is the economic development of society, the change in the mode of production and the mode of exchange, the resulting division of society into different classes, and the struggle between these classes."**

Wood's political Marxism connects them more clearly and radically. Eagleton, who was deeply influenced by Wood, specifically pointed out: "Class struggle, like the mode of production, is not Marx's original creation. The uniqueness of Marx's thought lies in the fact that Marx combined the two concepts of class struggle and mode of production, thus creating a completely new view of history."

Analyzing history from the perspective of the mode of production is still of great value in demonstrating the legitimacy of Marxism even today, because, as Kellner pointed out, "we still live in an era where the mode of production dominates our cultural and social life."

Jameson is a successful example in this regard. On the basis of insisting that "the 'problem framework' of the mode of production is the most dynamic new field of Marxist theory in all disciplines today," he regards capitalism as "a most flexible and adaptable mode of production," and then makes a profound analysis of "late capitalism." Jameson also believes that the mode of production "does not simply specify specific and unique modes of economic 'production' or labor processes and technologies, they also indicate specific and unique modes of cultural and linguistic (or symbolic) production (together with politics, law, ideology, etc. in other traditional Marxist superstructures)."

　　Secondly, Wood's political Marxism understands democracy from the perspective of the mode of production and class struggle, which effectively punctures many myths about the eternity and ultimateness of bourgeois formal democracy, and Wood firmly defends the basic logic and analytical perspective of Marxism in analyzing democracy. Marx and Engels pointed out very early that the struggle between democracy and monarchy is a "real struggle between different classes under the form of the illusory community of the state"; later Lenin said more clearly: "Any democracy, like any political superstructure, ultimately serves production and is ultimately determined by the production relations in that society."

Whether Wood's analysis of the social foundation of the ancient Greek democratic system - free laborers - is appropriate is still controversial in historiography, but it is not groundless.

In fact, Wood’s analysis is based on the work of the famous left-wing ancient historians Moses Finley and Ste Croix. In his book "Class Struggles in the Ancient Greek World", Ste Croix elaborated on the rise and fall of ancient Greek democracy in detail based on historical facts and defined it as "class struggle in the political field". For this reason, Brian Roper, a contemporary left-wing democratic historian, emphasized**: "All democratic methods are based on specific social and economic foundations, and can only be properly understood based on these foundations." "In the final analysis, the emergence of democracy in Athens was brought about by the fire of the revolutionary uprising of peasants, craftsmen and free laborers."**

**Problems of Wood’s Historical Materialism**

Wood inherited and carried forward "a brilliant way of interpreting democratic history."

However, Wood's political Marxism and its reconstruction of historical materialism also have obvious problems. We know that the historical perspective is indeed an important characteristic of historical materialism. Marx not only profoundly criticized the "general philosophy of history" that deified abstract laws and such general philosophy of history which transcended history, but also emphasized that he analyzed capitalism based on the historical particularity of capitalist production relations.

However, historical materialism also attaches importance to the universal and general regularity of history, believing that behind the complex events and appearances of history, there is a certain unified logic and evolutionary trend. In Marx’s historical dialectics, the universal regularity and particularity of history are like two sides of a coin, two in one. In order to promote the particularity of history and highlight the initiative of the subject, Wood even rejected the universality of history and denied the existence of universal laws. This is the most prominent problem of Wood's political Marxism.

**Wood's Some Other Important Mistakes.**

Professor Tang Zhengdong pointed out from a methodological perspective that Meiskins Wood lost herself in the empirical methodology because she did not truly grasp the "scientific abstract method" of historical materialism. However, there is another deeper reason, which is Wood’s biased understanding of the core concept of the mode of production.

As we all know, social historical determinism is the basic characteristic of historical materialism, and this is the reason why history has universal laws can be defended and justified. Social historical determinism first manifests itself as the determinism of the mode of production, that is, a certain material mode of production determines a certain social structure and social form (realized by the economic base determining the superstructure), and the evolution of the mode of production leads to changes in the social form. Russell once pointed out very sharply: **"The most urgent problem in Marx's theory is the cause of the change of the mode of production. The mode of production appears as the basic cause in Marx's works, but the reason for their constant change is not explained at all."**

Unfortunately, Russell’s understanding is biased. Marx certainly gave a more adequate explanation for this, that is, the contradiction within the mode of production: including both the internal contradiction of a mode of production itself and the contradiction between multiple other modes of production that exist at the same time.

The key to the problem is whether to focus on the internal generation, accumulation, and evolution mechanism of these contradictions, or their ultimate solution and means - usually manifested as certain social events and social activities.

If we focus on the latter, then the class struggle (and social revolution as its highest form) which is directly related to the shaping and change of production relations is undoubtedly the most important answer; if we focus on the former, we must deeply analyze the contradiction between productive forces and production relations.

As Shtomka pointed out, they are the "inherent and endogenous" basic driving forces that social structures cannot get rid of, and they are the most fundamental basis for Marx to construct historical dynamics.

Obviously, only by focusing on the former can we grasp the essence of history and the trend and logic of historical evolution. To achieve this, we must push the determinism of the mode of production one step further, move towards the determinism of productive forces, and attach importance to the outstanding importance of productive forces in the dynamic system of historical development.

Unfortunately, Wood only acknowledges the production relations and denies the more important former one. On the one hand, she repeatedly emphasizes that production relations are the core of the mode of production and class struggle is the core force that drives the change of the mode of production and core force that drives historical evolution.

On the other hand, Wood clearly states that "although the development of productive forces is an important argument for understanding the historical process, she says its “explanatory power is still quite limited" and "it is best not to discuss productive forces as if they represent a spontaneous principle of historical movement, which is somehow external to any given system of social relations."

The reason why Wood rejected productive forces determinism is mainly because of her such evaluation: “according to the understanding of “orthodox Marxism”, productive forces is a purely technical and physical thing. Productive forces develop spontaneously and continuously, productive forces conflicts with production relations, and then promotes the progress of history.

The problem is that, on the one hand, as Soviet Marxist philosopher Oiserman pointed out, "the explanation of social development from the perspective of technology-process determinism is no longer convincing at all". On the other hand, as McLellan concluded, "the unconstrained development of productive forces... obviously this concept has been strictly questioned", and many historians have pointed out through rigorous textual research that the reason why the feudal social mode of production replaced the slave mode of production was not because its production relations were more adaptable to and promoted the development of productive forces. Even within the feudal mode of production, productive forces was relatively stagnant for a considerable period of time. If so, how can the above productive forces determinism idea be established?

We know that Althusser also proposed "multi-determinism" because Althusser felt that technological determinism was mechanical and rigid. Althusser also made a fuss about the issue of production mode and devalued the role of productive forces.

As a result, Althusser’s students Balibar and Poulantzas proposed "combination of production modes" (that is, a social form is formed by the competition of multiple production modes) to solve the problem of transition from one production mode to another production mode, opening up the way to understand social transformation from the contradictions between production modes, and Perry Anderson successfully realized this in works such as "The Transition from Antiquity to Feudalism".

However, as Jones analyzed: **"Althusser's success was short-lived. ... Althusser failed tragically. If there is no concept of productive forces in Marxism, it is difficult for people to call it Marxism. ... In the concept of historical materialism, productive forces is the core concept."**

In any case, Althusser still recognized historical determinism, while Wood went further and basically denied historical determinism in a dynamic sense.

Even Eagleton, who was deeply influenced by Wood, said very pointedly: **"Some Marxists try to belittle the view that 'productive forces determine production relations' and emphasize the decisive role of production relations in social development. But this approach is too cautious. Supporters of the former view can find enough evidence in Marx's works to prove that Marx took this view very seriously and was by no means a joke."**

More importantly, is the Marxist theory of productive forces determinism really a single-line technological determinism?

On this issue, several points have been increasingly widely recognized. First, production technology and technical division of labor, organization, procedures and tools are indeed important contents of productive forces and are also main external signs of productive forces, but productive forces can never be simply equated with production tools and production technology.

Productive forces is a combined force in the production process. Secondly, productive forces is only in a continuous development because of the accumulation of human knowledge in general, which does not mean that it must move forward every moment and in every society, but productive forces is indeed in a leading and inducing position in the contradiction with production relations, and ultimately causes changes in production relations so as to make production relations generally adapt to productive forces. Thirdly, not only is productive forces itself a product of a complex system, but it is also the complex contradiction between productive forces and production relations that causes adjustments and responses in the mode of production, and through the mode of production, which causes social changes. Therefore, productive forces determinism is not a direct and simple determinism, but a complex and dialectical determinism. Precisely because of this, history has a certain degree of contingency, and specific social forms, historical stages and processes have particularities. Productive forces determinism is by no means a single-line mechanical technological determinism.

Here, Hobsbawm, who also opposed the single-line mechanical technology-economic determinism, and Hobsbawm emphasized: **"the mode of production not only reflects a specific production procedure (a production path based on specific technology and division of labor production), but also reflects "a specific, historically existing set of social relations" at a certain stage of development... Marxist historians must examine the above two functions of the mode of production. The former is more fundamental, so "the analysis of the mode of production must be based on the study of effective material productive forces: this study includes both the study of technology and its organization, and the study of economics."**

Hobsbawm also pointed out specifically: **"First, the basic elements that exist within the mode of production and gradually undermine the stability of the mode of production contain the possibility of transformation rather than the inevitability of transformation, but because these basic elements depend on the structure of the mode of production, these basic elements also set certain restrictions on the specific types of possible transformation. Secondly, the mechanism that leads to the transformation from one mode of production to another may not only come from the inside of the mode of production, but also from the integration and mutual influence of societies with different structures. In this sense, all development is mixed development."**

Historical evolution is very complex, and productive forces determinism only stipulates the basic logic and general trend of historical evolution. For this reason, Heller says, despite Marx's **"firm belief in the all-encompassing paradigm of the productive forces, the 'development of the productive forces' has often not been seen as an independent variable throughout history."**

As for the "political Marxism" constructed by Wood by weakening the importance of productive forces, Collinicos first criticized this understanding for its obvious "voluntarism" color. Later, Collinicos made a detailed analysis and said, **"Historical materialism identifies two mechanisms of change, namely, the development of productive forces and its contradiction with social production relations, and the class struggle between exploiters and exploited under this structural condition caused by it."**

The former is undoubtedly the most basic, internal and hidden, but Wood rejected it; so **"Wood only provides a very weak theory of historical transition. ... It is not really a historical theory in the sense of explaining historical change," "because a theory of historical interpretation should provide some internal and imperceptible mechanisms to explain phenomena within a specific range."** (Collinicos)

Therefore, "a theory of explaining history like Wood can at most become what Levine calls a 'theory of social form' rather than a historical theory." The universal regularity of history naturally escaped her vision. Collinics's latter judgment and criticism are quite profound and appropriate.