**Niu Ziniu: From "Material Production" to "Value Production" —— The Evolutionary Logic of Marxist Philosophy from the Perspective of Production Theory**

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The changes in Marx's production theory reflect the evolutionary logic of Marx's philosophy from historical materialism to the critique of political economy. In his youth, Marx realized the philosophical revolution of new materialism by criticizing idealist philosophy and old materialist philosophy, which was mainly manifested in the theoretical logic of "material production". After that, in order to analyze the particularity of capitalist society and to meet the practical requirements of the new revolutionary situation, Marx realized the concretization of historical materialism in the critique of political economy. Through the premise criticism process of "from abstract to concrete", Marx revealed the special laws of capitalist society and highlighted the dominant logic of "value production". The evolutionary process from "material production" to "value production" is also the deepening process of Marx's philosophy from general to specific. The two together constitute the organic whole of historical materialism.

In the study of Marxist theory, the relationship between historical materialism and the critique of political economy has always been a key topic of academic concern. This article attempts to rethink this important theoretical issue starting from the changes in Marx's production theory. In my opinion, the historical materialism of Marx in his youth and the critique of political economy in his later years are two interrelated organic links in the development of Marx's thought.

The former focuses on the general discussion of "material production" activities, while the latter focuses on the particular description of "value production" activities. Among them, the logic of "material production" reveals the common laws of historical development and is a concentrated embodiment of Marx's new philosophical revolution. After that, in order to conduct a particular analysis of capitalist society, Marx realized the further concretization of historical materialism in the critique of political economy, highlighting the dominant logic of "value production".

The above two links together constitute the organic whole of the philosophy of historical materialism.

**1. Marx’s New Philosophical Revolution and the Formation of “Material Production” logic**

The new materialist philosophical revolution in Marx's early years was mainly manifested in the construction of the logic of "material production", which was completed in the process of criticizing idealism and old materialist philosophy.

The main themes of Marx's philosophical criticism in his youth can be summarized as "abstract speculative criticism" and "existence criticism". The former mainly criticized idealist philosophy and led to a perceptual and practical philosophy; the latter targeted both idealism and old materialist philosophy and led to a generative and active philosophy. The synthesis of these two critical themes requires the proposal of a new philosophy that is both generative and realistic: this philosophy does not understand things in their existing nature, but understands things in the process of their generation and extinction; at the same time, this generative process is not a mysterious history driven by the inner rationality of "spirit", but a history constituted by people's real life.

The next question is, after transcending idealist philosophy and old materialist philosophy through "abstract speculative criticism" and "existence criticism", how should we define the "reality" itself that becomes visible through this transcendence? In "Theses on Feuerbach" and "The German Ideology", Marx gave an answer to this question. According to the general provisions of "Theses on Feuerbach", to understand the world in its changeability is to understand people from the perspective of active and sensual practical activities; and people as the subject of this activity are not the people imagined by idealist philosophy, but "the sum of all social relations". From this, it can be logically deduced that to define people as the subject of practice, it is necessary to define "the sum of all social relations", that is, a very specific empirical reality. Later, in "The German Ideology", Marx took this "real individual" as the starting point of theory and as a "premise without premise".

The question that arises is, how can we define a specific empirical reality at the starting point of the theory? A "concrete" is bound to contain a very rich set of specific provisions, which cannot be all put forward at the starting point of the theory. Among these provisions, which must be put forward, which can be omitted, which are original, which are derived, what is the logical order and level between them, etc., are all issues that must be carefully considered. In this regard, the strategy adopted by Marx in "The German Ideology" is: in this specific empirical reality, select a most prioritized provision, that is, "the first premise of all human existence" and "the first historical activity", set it as the essential provision of real historical activities, and deduce historical development from it. This essential provision is: "In order to be able to 'create history', people must be able to live. But in order to live, they first need food, clothing, shelter and other things. Therefore, the first historical activity is to produce materials to meet these needs, that is, to produce material life itself." In short, Marx set the essential provision of real historical activities as material production for the purpose of meeting needs; the reason for taking this logical step is to solve the problem that is inevitably brought about by defining the starting point of thought as the specific empirical reality of "real people".

**2. The concrete development of “material production” and the discovery of “value production”**

The German Ideology, based on the historical theory of "material production", laid the foundation for the general principles of historical materialism, but it was not the final completion of the philosophy of historical materialism. In the subsequent critique of political economy, Marx further concretized historical materialism and revealed that "value production" is the dominant principle of capitalist society through the analysis of the particularity of capitalist society. There are many reasons for the development of this thought.

**First, it is not enough to infer the special laws of capitalism from the general law of "material production", which is clearly reflected in "Capital".**

At the beginning of "Capital", commodities are decomposed into two factors: "use value" and "value". Among them, "use value" is the attribute of commodities to meet people's needs, contains the material characteristics of commodities, and is directly related to "material production to meet needs". However, "value" is completely different from "use value". Value "does not contain any atom of use value". Value represents the homogeneous exchangeability of commodities and ultimately manifests itself as currency; it is a "ghostly objectivity", not a sensual objectivity, and cannot meet any needs. The "use value" dimension corresponds to "concrete labor", while the "value" dimension corresponds to "abstract labor", the latter is a new form of labor discovered by Marx in the critique of political economy. Therefore, starting from the general law of "material production", it may be possible to understand the production of "use value", but it is difficult to understand the production of "value".

**However, "value production" is precisely the dominant principle of capitalist society.**

The purpose of capital movement is not use value, but value, and the production of use value is only a means of value multiplication. What kind of use value capital produces does not depend on whether the corresponding "need" exists, but on whether the corresponding production activities can generate profits. Therefore, capitalist production activities, in general, are "material production to meet needs", but in particular, they are "value production for capital multiplication". In this sense, the category of "material production" does not cover the special laws of capitalist society. To this end, Marx must reveal the special nature of the capitalist mode of production through specific political economics criticism.

Second, only on the basis of a concrete grasp of capitalist society can historical materialism understand itself historically. Historical materialism advocates that ideas are historical, which also applies to historical materialism itself. "Even the most abstract categories... are also the product of historical conditions in terms of this abstract stipulation itself, and are fully applicable only to these conditions and within these conditions." Based on this, although categories such as "needs" and "production" seem to be the most general, they are actually historical. As the emergence of abstract categories, they are the products of specific historical periods and social forms. In the period of "The German Ideology", Marx focused on the general discussion of universal historical laws and did not make a historical criticism of the premises of these categories themselves. In the critique of political economy, Marx tried to make a historical understanding of the general categories of historical materialism on the basis of a concrete grasp of capitalist society.

For example, during the period of The German Ideology, Marx defined the purpose of production activities as the satisfaction of needs, and defined "needs" as the conditions for the existence of human physical life, as well as what is newly generated from the efforts to meet these conditions. Later, in Capital and its manuscripts, Marx conducted a concrete and historical reflection on "material production to meet needs", placing it in the complex relationship structure of capitalist society, thus understanding it as an abstract link in the activity of "value production".

**First, the universalization of the category of "needs" and the high development of material production are precisely based on the universal expansion of the movement of capital proliferation.**

Capitalist production activities have produced a huge amount of surplus products, forcing capital to expand the scope of commodity circulation as much as possible, thereby establishing "a system of ever-expanding and increasingly rich needs" and "a system of universal usefulness".

Only on this basis will the category of "needs" be established as a universal category, and "material production" will appear as the main form of human practical activities. Secondly, in the real capitalist society, there is a more specific and complex connection between "material production to meet needs" and capitalist value production. With the in-depth development of capitalism, more and more social wealth is used to produce fixed capital, that is, a means of value proliferation, while less and less wealth is used to meet final consumption needs. This shows that the development trend of capitalism is that "value production" gradually occupies a dominant position, while "material production to meet needs" becomes a subordinate link. Although capitalism cannot eliminate this "first historical activity", it tends to let it retreat to a secondary position.

For example, during the period of The German Ideology, Marx directly linked "material production" with "human labor". At this time, Marx tried to explain the whole process of historical development with the concept of "division of labor", which originated from Adam Smith's study of production experience in the manual workshop period and was inseparable from the division of labor and cooperation of living people. Therefore, material production activities are manifested as human labor, and productivity is also manifested as the power of each individual. In the critique of political economy, Marx further analyzed the complex relationship between "material production" and "human labor" in capitalist society.

As the value-added activities of capital occupy a dominant position, the connection between "human labor" and "material production" has gradually become alienated, and the connection with "value production" has become closer. In developed capitalist large-scale industry, machines have replaced a large number of workers, and the direct producers of workers have become the caretakers of machines. The "use value" of commodities is increasingly produced by the activities of machines rather than by human labor. This shows that human labor is not the only source of material wealth. The reason why human labor is indispensable in capitalist production is that it is the only source of "value". Labor is indirectly connected with "material production" through "value production". As a result, an abnormal landscape has emerged in developed capitalist society: human labor has become increasingly unnecessary in "material production", but people have to work harder for "value production", as if human labor is still the source of wealth. Marx pointed out: "The basis of wealth today is the theft of other people's labor time, which is too pitiful compared to the newly developed basis created by large-scale industry itself." In this sense, "productive forces are the power of each individual" has become an ideological representation in capitalist society, which has naturalized and legalized the living situation of workers who have to participate in wage labor. As Marx said in "Critique of the Gotha Program", "the bourgeoisie has good reason to impose a supernatural creativity on labor." The connection between "material production" and "human labor" has shown a special color under the "universal light" of capitalism.

3. Criticism of Political Economics and Innovation of Philosophical Methods of Historical Materialism

The concretization of historical materialism by the “value production” proposition of the critique of political economy is not a simple extension of the “material production” which was proposed in The German Ideology, but a substantial innovation in theoretical methods.

As mentioned above, the theoretical starting point of The German Ideology is the “real individual”, and “material production” is the essential stipulation of the concrete empirical reality of the “real individual”.

However, Marx clearly pointed out in the introduction to the Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858 that it is actually impossible to take the “real individual” as the starting point: “It seems to be right to start from the real and concrete, from the premise of reality. However, on closer examination, this is wrong”.

This is because the empirical concrete is only “a chaotic representation of the whole” at the beginning; even if an idea claims to start from such a “concrete”, it actually starts from a certain abstraction (such as general “production”, “need”, etc.). Moreover, because this idea thinks that it starts from the “concrete”, it is often unaware of the abstraction it has made, let alone the fact that this abstraction is based on specific historical conditions. In this way, this kind of thinking is easily influenced by the ideology of a particular era, and regards categories based on specific social forms as general categories of all history.

For the above reasons, Marx believed that the starting point of the "narrative method" should not be a certain "concrete", but the simplest and most abstract category. Starting from this abstract category and gradually progressing to the concrete of thought is what Marx called the dialectic of "from the abstract to the concrete". However, this does not mean that Marx retreated to the abstract position of idealist philosophy, because the relationship between "abstract" and "concrete" understood by Marx is different from idealism. In the view of idealist philosophy, abstract categories are self-moving and are the cause of the concrete reality itself. It "understands reality as the result of self-synthesis, self-deepening and self-moving thinking". However, in the "from the abstract to the concrete" method of political economics criticism, abstract categories are based on the concrete reality as a premise: the concrete reality "is the starting point of reality", and "the subject, that is, society, must always appear in front of the representation as a premise". Therefore, the process of starting from the abstract category and inferring to the concrete reality is also a process of exploring the premise of the abstract category itself, that is, the process of "premise criticism". In this sense, Marx's method of "from the abstract to the concrete" implies a relationship between the abstract and the concrete that is different from that of idealism, and therefore itself constitutes a new critique of idealist philosophy.

This kind of "premise-critical" inference is possible because there is an essential connection between abstract categories and concrete reality: the simplest and most abstract categories are only possible on the basis of the most complex and concrete social totality, and they depend on the certain structure of this social totality. As Marx said, "the most general abstraction always only arises in the richest concrete development occasions." The existence of this abstract category always contains the embryonic form of all the regulations of this particular society. As Lenin pointed out: "In Capital, Marx first analyzed the simplest, most common, most basic, most common, most ordinary, and encountered billions of times in bourgeois society (commodity society): commodity exchange. This analysis reveals all the contradictions of modern society (or the embryo of all contradictions) from this simplest phenomenon (from this 'cell' of bourgeois society)." This kind of premise-critical reasoning eliminates all kinds of "existing" ideological attitudes from the very beginning, because its use of any category contains a criticism of its historical conditions. In the introduction to the Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, Marx illustrates this method using the general category of "labor": "The example of labor convincingly shows that even the most abstract categories... are also the product of historical conditions, and have their full applicability only for and within these conditions." We have reason to believe that the same method also applies to general categories such as "production" and "needs."

The model of Marx's use of this "premise criticism" method of "from abstract to concrete" is Capital, the masterpiece of political economics criticism. In it, Marx took the category of "commodity" as the starting point, and successively deduced the categories of value, currency, capital, etc., and gave a three-dimensional description of the structure of capitalist society. As mentioned above, "commodity", as an initial abstract category, has two dimensions: "use value" and "value". Among them, the "use value" dimension is directly related to "material production to meet needs" and is intuitively visible; in contrast, the "value" dimension cannot be deduced from the logic of "material production" and cannot be observed in direct experience. The deduction of Capital mainly revolves around the "value" dimension: the universal existence of commodities and the universal expression of value are based on universal commodity exchange relations; this universal commodity exchange, after value form analysis, is based on universal currency circulation; universal currency circulation is only possible as capital circulation (i.e. GW-G' circulation), thus leading to the concept of capital with the purpose of value multiplication. It can be seen that it is precisely because Marx left the level of "empirical concreteness" from the very beginning and started from the abstract category of "value" to analyze its historical premise that he was able to understand the special social relationship form of capitalism and realize the advancement from "material production" to "value production."

So far, through the methodological innovation of the critique of political economy, the philosophy of historical materialism has been further developed. Marx has realized at this time that the "narrative method" of theory cannot start directly from "empirical concreteness", but can only start from a certain abstract category. Therefore, historical materialism not only includes a "positive science" based on "pure empirical method" starting from "real people", but also includes a theoretical system that extends from abstract categories, and its development method is to conduct a historical criticism of the premise of abstract categories. Marx's analysis of capitalism shows that history is manifested as "the history of production" and people are manifested as "laboring people", which is itself a historical phenomenon, and its foundation is the capitalist industry in Europe in the mid-19th century. At this point, historical materialism itself has been historically understood and thus completed itself.

In addition, Marx's dual criticism of idealism and old materialist philosophy has also acquired new forms of expression. First, "criticism of abstract speculation" is no longer expressed as a general opposition to "abstraction" itself, because the understanding of capitalist society can only rely on "abstract power". Here, the criticism of idealist abstract speculation is expressed as a non-idealist understanding of the relationship between "abstract" and "concrete", that is, the self-generation process of abstract categories should not be understood as the cause of reality itself, but starting from abstract categories, inferring their real premises, so as to base abstract categories on the concrete reality as a whole. Secondly, "criticism of fait accompli" still points to a philosophy of activity and generativity, which is not only manifested as the general category of "material production", but also as the historicity of the general category itself: any general category is the effect "generated" by specific historical conditions, and therefore is also historical like these conditions, and is the product of the construction of specific practice methods under specific historical conditions. Therefore, the unique dialectic of political economic criticism "from abstract to concrete" constitutes a new theoretical expression of the generative and active nature of historical materialist philosophy.