

An Inquiry into the Theoretical Path of Human Emancipation

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Abstract: Based on The German Ideology, this paper deeply analyzes the theoretical path of "human emancipation" by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx proposed the concept of the "real individual," emphasizing that the essence of man lies in concrete social relations rather than abstract individuals, a view that laid the foundation for the starting point of emancipation. Human emancipation requires the dual emancipation of thought and practice, enabling people to gain true freedom from alienated labor. Individual emancipation is not the final emancipation and still requires the emancipation of the community. Therefore, the paper analyzes that the historical necessity of the illusory community is caused by private ownership and insufficient productive forces. However, the internal contradictions of this community will promote further social awakening, creating conditions for the reversion to the true community. The realization of the true community requires highly developed productive forces, the demise of private ownership, and the seizure of power by the proletariat as preconditions. This will be a historical "retrospective" process, marking humanity's liberation from capitalist constraints toward a social form of freedom and all-round development.

Keywords: The German Ideology, human emancipation, community.

1. Introduction

In the system of Marxist philosophy, "human emancipation" is the core theme running throughout. Marx and Engels detailed the path and conditions of human emancipation in The German Ideology, revealing the deep connections among social relations, modes of production, and ideology. They believed that emancipation is not merely individual freedom and development at the personal level, but relies on the comprehensive reconstruction of human social relations, being a unified process of ideological and practical emancipation. Starting from the concept of the "real individual," historical materialism revealed the concrete forms of human existence in material production and social relations, and further pointed out that ideological emancipation is the theoretical precondition for moving toward practical emancipation. In capitalist society, the illusory community is shaped by private ownership and inadequate development of productive forces; through the forms of the state and law, it disguises the special interests of the ruling class as universal interests. Although the illusory community maintains the ruling position of the bourgeoisie, its internal contradictions will inevitably prompt the awakening of the oppressed, thereby promoting the reversion to the true community. The realization of the true community is the highest form of human emancipation, a historical transformation experiencing highly developed productive forces, the demise of private ownership, and the proletariat's acquisition of political power. Through the analysis from the "real individual" to the true community, this study attempts to explore the specific path and ultimate destination of human emancipation under the Marxist perspective.

2. The Starting Point of Human Emancipation - The "Real Individual"

Marxism emphasizes the "real individual" as the starting point of emancipation, based on authentic individual

existence. Marx pointed out that "man is the highest essence for man" [1] and "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations." [2] Both assertions indicate that the human discussed by Marx is not an "abstract one-sided individual" but a "real individual" or "certain individuals under definite relations of production." How then does Marx define the category of the "real individual"? The German Ideology specifies this from the perspectives of natural basis, material conditions, and social relations respectively.

2.1. Natural Attributes of the "Real Individual"

The "real individual" is a living individual, namely a biological organism in biology. This is the natural foundation constituting the "real individual," exploring human natural needs from the relationship between human and nature. These natural needs refer to what Marx called "geological conditions, orographically given hydrographic conditions, climatic conditions and other conditions." [3] These conditions are the inevitable needs upon which real individuals rely for survival and even production. However, this is still merely the natural attribute of the real individual, remaining at the level of a one-sided abstract human being. Therefore, Marx made further determinations. Understanding the "real individual" purely from a biological perspective is undoubtedly one-sided. Starting from Marx's theory, although natural conditions are the basis of human survival, human is not merely a product of the natural environment, but a social existence. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts and other works, Marx further deepened the definition of the "real individual." He pointed out that the relationship between human and nature is neither static nor a simple natural dependence, but dynamic and interactive. Human productive activities, social practices, ideas, and political relations will all react upon the natural environment. More importantly, Marx emphasized that individuals not only depend on natural conditions, but are also profoundly shaped by social

conditions. At this level, Marx emphasized that the "real individual" is shaped by "social conditions" and is a product constantly generated and developed in the socio-historical process.

On this basis, Marx further proposed that human "natural needs" are not limited to the satisfaction of survival conditions, but more importantly, how to satisfy their social needs through labor and production. This is Marx's dialectical understanding of human needs, meaning human needs are both natural and social. The transition from natural conditions to social conditions is a critical step in Marx's thought. Marx believed that the societal mode of production and its changes directly affect the living state and conditions of existence of individuals. The demands and expectations of society toward individuals are not purely natural reactions, but are concretely embodied through social forms like social relations and production relations. Therefore, the real individual cannot be simplified as a biological organism relying merely on natural conditions; it is continuously shaped and changed within the context of social history, possessing social and historical attributes. In this sense, the "real individual" spoken of by Marx is not an abstract individual, but a concrete individual generated under definite historical conditions. Every "real individual" is subordinated to the social structure, production relations, and class status of a specific historical period. For example, the survival state and development potential of individuals in capitalist society are restricted and shaped by the capitalist mode of production. Individuals do not merely rely on natural conditions to acquire resources, but participate in the social reproduction process through labor and production activities. In this process, an individual's quality of life, productivity level, and social status are often influenced by the socio-economic structure. Therefore, Marx proposed that understanding the "real individual" solely from a biological perspective is far from enough; it must be understood by placing it in historical, social, and economic backgrounds. Although natural conditions are the material foundation for the existence of the "real individual," human social and historical nature determines that humanity can gradually realize self-emancipation through constantly transforming nature and changing the mode of production. Hence, Marx believed that the "real individual" is a dynamic, multi-dimensional existence possessing both natural and social attributes; it is not only a product of nature, but also a product of history and social practice.

2.2. The Decisive Role of Material Conditions and Productive Activity on the "Real Individual"

Material conditions and productive activity determine the "real individual." From natural attributes, humans and animals have no essential differences. Hegel pointed out "because man is distinguished from animals in that man can know what he is and what he does," [4] meaning human subjective initiative distinguishes humans from animals. Yet such a view only considers the spiritual world without evaluating the real world. Therefore, Marx pointed out: "As soon as men begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization, men themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals." [5] In other words, the primary condition distinguishing the real individual from animals is starting to produce their own means of subsistence to meet real living needs. The real individual possesses subjective initiative capable of meeting

material life and production needs. Nomadic peoples are nomadic because their material conditions cannot meet the living needs of the whole tribe, and they can only meet their needs through nomadic production activities. Therefore, "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce." [6] Thus, Marx's "real individual" is not a pure natural existence, but a historical individual developing in changing material conditions and production relations. Through labor and production activities, they constantly interact with nature and society, shaping their position and role in society. From this level, the "real individual" is a product intertwined by material conditions and productive activity, the result of socio-historical development, and the individual's social existence and survival state cannot be detached from the constraints of material conditions and modes of production. This viewpoint of Marx is not merely a philosophical discussion of individual survival, but provides a profound theoretical basis for understanding social change and historical progress. Only by changing the mode of production and material conditions can human social emancipation and all-round development be fundamentally realized. Marx's theory of productive forces and production relations provides us with a powerful tool and perspective to analyze historical evolution, social progress, and individual emancipation.

2.3. The "Real Individual" and Socio-Historical Conditions

The "real individual" is human within the structure of socio-historical development. That is what Marx described as "individuals, active, as they are active under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will." [7] Humans carry out production practice activities in real life, and these practice activities generate certain social relations among people, which constitute the social attributes of the "real individual." This expression emphasizes that the "real individual" is concrete, historical, and social, rather than an isolated abstract individual. The survival and development of the individual are not only restricted by natural conditions, but profoundly influenced by the socio-historical process and production relations. Humans carry out production practice activities in society, and these production activities not only satisfy individual material needs, but directly shape social relations among people. These social relations are not superficial unimportant interactions, but profoundly determine individual social identity, role, and status. The form and content of production activities directly affect changes in social structure, thereby affecting individual living conditions and modes of existence. Therefore, the "real individual" is not merely a participant in production activities, but the concrete embodiment of these production activities under socio-historical conditions.

"The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations." This classic proposition shows that individual existence is determined by the social relations in which they are located. Social relations are reflected not only in the material production field, but also in cultural, political, legal, and various other aspects. The intertwining and interaction of these social relations constitute the individual's status and identity in society. Individuals cannot exist independently detached from the social environment; it is precisely through social relations with others that individuals form their unique

social attributes. Therefore, Marx emphasized that human social attributes are the core elements of the "real individual" identity. Meanwhile, Marx also pointed out "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change," [8] clarifying the interactive relationship between individual social practice activities and the social environment. Human production practice is not only a tool to meet individual needs, but also the driving force promoting social progress and historical transformation. Humans change the natural environment through labor and social activities, promoting the development of productive forces, and simultaneously continuously changing their social relations with others in this process. Therefore, the "real individual" is human within the structure of a certain socio-historical development and constantly changes with socio-historical development and changes in the mode of production.

In short, for Marx, "real man" is a structural existence in real society. This structure is formed in the dynamics of historical development, and existing as an essential structure, it is a trend existence and an overall existence. Therefore, as long as it is not humans in structural existence demonstrated by historical materialism where economics determines politics and politics determines culture, and people are not explained using historical materialism's explanatory framework, then such humans are unreal, one-sided, and abstract humans. This is how historical materialism determines the starting point of human emancipation, fundamentally establishing the root starting point and value system of Marxist doctrine, and is also the inevitable result under the development of historical materialism.

3. The Instrument of Emancipation - The Unity of Thought and Practice

"Marxism is profound and comprehensive, and in the final analysis, it is just one sentence: seeking emancipation for humankind." [9] General Secretary Xi Jinping highly summarized Marxism with "seeking emancipation for humankind" in his speech at the meeting commemorating the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth. The issue of emancipation is indeed a core theme and ultimate value destination in Marx's philosophical thought system, and this thought runs through the entire course of Marx's philosophy. Human emancipation is the ultimate destination of theory and practice in Marxism, and practice guided by Marxism aims to realize the ultimate destination of human emancipation.

3.1. Ideological Emancipation as the Precondition for Human Emancipation

First, Marx and Engels criticized the theoretical system of Hegel's idealistic philosophy and the Young Hegelians, believing that they merely reduced human essence to illusory concepts. Especially the Young Hegelians merely used "world-shaking" phrases to oppose the world; this opposition was ideological and conceptual. The only result of this opposition was "some elucidations of Christianity from the history of religion, and even those onesided." [10] Such elucidations cannot achieve the fundamental purpose of human emancipation, being merely the reflection of an illusory world in people's minds, possessing only negligible value to the real world. This idealist historical outlook is harmful to human emancipation, so Marx criticized it to clarify that the foundation of human emancipation lies in the material mode of production, thereby fundamentally enabling

people to solve problems in reality through practice.

Second, Marx criticized Feuerbach for viewing man as a "sensuous object" rather than "sensuous activity"; Feuerbach's thought made his philosophy only able to see "abstract man" and unable to see "man in real activity." He failed to see that besides love and friendship, what other relationships exist among people, especially failing to see the relationship of practice. This led him to fall into the quagmire of idealism in studying historical views, and he parted ways with materialism in historical views from then on. While criticizing Feuerbach, Marx established the thinking mode of historical materialism, clarifying the role of human subjective initiative in the process of emancipation.

3.2. Practice as the Sole Weapon for Human Emancipation

"The actual, practical dissolution of these phrases... can only be accomplished by changed circumstances in practical life." [11] Once Marx has established historical materialism starting from the "real individual," humans in the socio-historical structure emancipate themselves through practical activity. Practice is "sensuous human activity," so what kind of practice can enable humans to attain emancipation?

First, the practice of labor is the only pathway for humans to turn from "alienated man" to "free man." In capitalist society, people's attitude toward labor is avoiding it, which is because labor at this very moment makes humans alienated from producing commodities, meaning "man's own act becomes to him an alien power, standing over him, instead of being ruled by him." [12] Interpersonal relations are obscured by relations between things, with things controlling humans rather than humans producing things. But "in order to 'make history,' men must be able to live." [13] That is, humans still need labor to meet their own needs; humans cannot abandon labor, without which they cannot survive in the real world. Under the capitalist system, however, alienated labor can only make humans increasingly abhor labor, and the contradiction between the two constantly intensifies, promoting socio-historical transformation. Therefore, people need to transform themselves into "free men" by emancipating their alienated labor. Becoming a "free man" is precisely the starting point for realizing free and all-round human development, and is also the inevitable result of Marx's sublation of alienated labor.

Second, after ideological emancipation, people's practical activities have correct ideological guidance. But "the weapon of criticism cannot replace the weapon of criticism, material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has grasped the masses." [14] Marx believed that only when the masses grasp emancipatory theories will these theories transform into material forces promoting social transformation. In this process, human ideological emancipation and self-consciousness appear particularly important. Marx proposed that emancipation is not only the transformation of material living conditions, but also the elevation of human self-consciousness. Therefore, emancipation is not merely "emancipating matter," but more importantly "emancipating thought," thereby realizing profound cognitive awareness of self-existence.

In short, "human emancipation" in Marxism is not only an abstract theoretical conception, but a historical process supported by concrete practice. Marx believed that human emancipation includes ideological emancipation and practical emancipation, with the former providing the theoretical basis

for the latter, and the latter enabling the realization of the former. Emancipation is not only the change of material life, but also the awakening and elevation of human thought and consciousness. Marxism paves the way for practical emancipation through ideological emancipation, ultimately realizing human freedom and all-round development.

4. The Ultimate Destination of Human Emancipation - The True Community

After realizing "human emancipation," the "real individual" in the conception of Marx and Engels will usher in a completely new lifestyle, surpassing the state of being bound by class and state forms in the past. In this new life, the individual is no longer an appendage of a specific class, nor subject to the coercive power of the state, but realizes self-actualization freely and comprehensively. To this end, the emancipated society will take the "true community" as its core; this community is not only the organizational form for people to participate in social life, but also the ultimate value destination of individuals after gaining emancipation.

4.1. Formation and Development of the Primitive Community

Human social activities unfold in specific social relations; in the process of production practice, connections based on common interests gradually formed the primitive community. Taking the medieval period as an example, urban citizens at that time spontaneously formed territorial communities or civic groups based on common interests to resist the oppression of rural nobility, thereby catalyzing the formation of the citizen class. This spontaneous solidarity and union provided economic, social, and political support for the citizen class, enabling them to contend with the feudal system at the time. Through this process, the citizen class not only gained group identity, but also gradually constructed their own social relations. Marx believed that the social relations of these citizen classes reacted upon the entire social structure, promoting the formation of social existence meeting the lifestyle needs of the citizen class. In other words, through their own production activities and interest demands, the citizen class influenced the political and economic forms of society, forming a social structure suitable for their production and lifestyle. This social structure was not obtained through abstract theoretical design, but gradually evolved from actual production needs, economic interests, and social interaction relations. In this process, the citizen class gradually developed independent class consciousness, identifying with their position and interests as a class in society. However, Marx pointed out that class consciousness formed based on common interests will also bring a potential risk, namely that individual humans will be limited due to class belonging. This limitation manifests as people being influenced by the class structure in the process of realizing personal development, and individual social status and development often depend on the class to which they belong. That is to say, human activities and development in society are determined and constrained by the class they belong to. This leads to individuals no longer acting entirely according to universal "common interests," but gradually being dominated by the special interests of their own class, thereby leading to the weakening of individual independence. Marx reminded us that this phenomenon may produce a

misunderstanding at the philosophical level, believing that individuals obtained "species development" when serving class interests, namely a universal social progress transcending individuals. However, this species development is not equivalent to the development of the "real individual" emphasized by Marx. For Marx, the "real individual" is an individual living in concrete social relations, and their activities do not merely serve the special interests of a certain class, but seek to realize their all-round development as individuals. Therefore, in class society, individual humans are often hijacked by class interests and unable to realize comprehensive individual emancipation.

4.2. The Illusory Community as the Inevitable Stage for the Return of the True Community

Because common interests remained a survival need, the primitive community was still a universal community. Therefore, the primitive community was a crude localized "true community," but the general trend of social development is continuously moving forward. Hence, this primitive community will eventually head toward disintegration. Emerging upon the ruins of the primitive community will temporarily be the illusory community. The generation of the illusory community is premised on private ownership, or rather, Marx's historical materialism destined the birth of the illusory community. Under the capitalist mode of production, with the development of private ownership, private owners' needs for private appropriation will continuously compress the space of common interests, until private owners' special interests are transformed into so-called "universal interests," meaning private owners need to use "legal" tools - the state and law - to rule. Therefore, Marx and Engels pointed out in *The German Ideology*: "Precisely because individuals seek only their particular interest, which for them does not coincide with their common interest, the latter is asserted as an 'alien' interest, 'independent' of them, i.e., still as a special and peculiar 'universal' interest... On the other hand, the practical struggle of these particular interests, which always actually collided with the common and illusory common interests, makes practical intervention and constraint through the illusory 'general' interest via the state necessary." [15] That is to say, for the ruled class, the state and law are deceptive tools used by the ruling class to tout their special interests as the interests of all. The generation and existence of the illusory community are not accidental, but the inevitable result of contradictions between social productive forces and production relations. On the economic basis of private ownership, the development of productive forces and the logic of capital accumulation will inevitably aggravate class antagonism. The economic structure of capitalist society determines that class interest conflicts are irreconcilable, and the ruling class covers up this antagonism through the illusory community and maintains superficial social stability. This illusory community is not only the product of the development of social contradictions, but also a functional existence under the capitalist mode of production. Through means such as the state and law, it superficially coordinates social order, covering up deep-seated economic exploitation and class oppression. Meanwhile, this contradiction also promotes the reversion to the true community. With the further development of social productive forces and the awakening of the oppressed classes, the contradictions of the illusory community gradually manifest, and the ruled classes

will gradually realize that what the state and law represent are not true common interests, but the special interests of the ruling class. At this time, members of society will no longer identify with the legitimacy of the illusory community, but begin pursuing the establishment of a true community, promoting society to move toward free association and universal equality. Therefore, the existence of the illusory community is not only an inevitable historical stage, but also the prelude toward the true community.

4.3. Reversion and Conditions of the True Community

Based on the critique of the illusory community, Marx and Engels proposed the necessary conditions for transforming into the true community. The existence of the illusory community is the comprehensive result of private ownership, insufficient development of productive forces, and legitimate means such as state laws. These conditions act together to maintain bourgeois rule. Therefore, the reversion of the true community must take the elimination of these factors as preconditions: namely realizing highly developed productive forces, eliminating private ownership, and the seizure of political power by the proletariat. Only when the development of productive forces reaches a highly developed stage, people's awareness level generally rises, and the public ownership system is established, will the illusory community finally disintegrate. However, in the current social environment, these conditions are not yet equipped, and the reversion of the true community can only be realized and verified in future historical development. Lenin also pointed out in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* that although "dying capitalism" is inherently corrupt, it still shows stubborn vitality and removes some corrupt factors through self-adjustment mechanisms. [16] Therefore, when the destruction of the illusory community will truly arrive cannot be given an exact time node. Therefore, the reversion of the true community will be a historical "retrospective" process, just like fish swimming upstream. This means future people can truly recognize how the embryo of the illusory community births the true community and understand its actual carrying capacity for productive forces. Therefore, our description of the true community at the present stage can only be a generalized "portrait," outlining only its basic features rather than completely depicting its ultimate form. This abstract description conforms to the basic requirements of historical materialism, because the real environment does not yet allow the specific depiction of the actual form of the true community. Determined by the existing economic foundation and productive force status, it can only provide the outline of an abstract concept. The reversion of the true community is the inevitable trend of historical development, which is the result of the contradictory movement of productive forces and production relations.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of *The German Ideology*, this paper discussed the profound insights of Marx and Engels on the path of "human emancipation." They believed that "human emancipation" is based on the "real individual," and only by unifying ideological emancipation and practical emancipation can humanity cast off alienated labor and realize true freedom. Marx pointed out that the formation of the illusory community is the inevitable result of private ownership and

insufficiently developed productive forces, maintaining the special interests of the ruling class in the form of the state and law under the capitalist system. This illusory community covered up class antagonism, but also harbors contradictions of self-disintegration, which will promote the reversion to the true community in the future. The construction of the true community relies on highly developed productive forces, the demise of private ownership, and the political control of the proletariat, which is the inevitable trend of historical development. Although current social conditions are not yet fully equipped, with the development of productive forces and the awakening of people's awareness, the limitations of the illusory community will gradually manifest. In the future historical process, people will more clearly see the internal contradictions of capitalism, gradually moving toward the true community of freedom, equality, and all-round development. This ideal social form is the ultimate pursuit of Marxism, and is the ultimate destination for humanity to gain emancipation from alienation and realize true freedom.

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