



Comparison Between Marx's and Marcuse's Alienation Theories

HE Juan^{[a],*}; SUN Daojin^[b]

^[a]Graduate Student, School of Political Science and Public Administration, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

^[b]Professor, School of Political Science and Public Administration, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Alienation theory from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and alienation thought from Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* are different analysis to social contradictions and class relations during early and late capitalism society. The paper expounds those two theories respectively and compares their difference and connection meantime, analyzes both rationality and limitation in order to give important reference for overcoming all sorts of alienation phenomenon in the construction of the socialist market economy in our country, keeping human-oriented scientific development road and finally realizing people's overall and free development.

Key word: Marx; Marcuse; Alienation; Comparison

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INTRODUCTION

Alienation issue is the common point concerned by Marx and Marcuse together. Marx put forward "labor alienation" based on workers' production and living condition under early capitalism society. While Marcuse was dedicated to analyze various kinds of alienation phenomenon in late capitalism society when science and technology is highly

developed and came up with "scientific and technical alienation", considered developed industrial society is a society of "overall alienation". In hence, the comparison of Marx and Marcuse's alienation theory will get us better understand alienation phenomenon during the process of capitalist society development and realize nature of capitalism, also it will offer reference for us to think, explore and solve the problem of alienation in our country, it is beneficial for us to better fully understand and grasp Marxist theory (Ni, 2011).

1. MARX'S ALIENATION THEORY

"Alienation" occurred several times in Marx's works. His alienation theory takes labor alienation as core content and mainly can be found in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he investigates its nature and specific performance of labor alienation in following four aspects:

1.1 Alienation on Labor Products

Among the capitalist society, "The more energy consumed in labour process, the power of alien object world built against them will be stronger, their inner world and themselves will be poorer and their belongings will be less." (Marx, 2000, p.52) That is to say, opposite relationship is existed between workers and products they produced, the products are made by workers but don't belong to them; the more products they produce, the less value themselves will be.

1.2 Alienation on Labor Activity Itself

Alienation on labor activity itself means alienation of labor process and their relevant activity. Labor is a kind of objectification activities, workers may improve themselves in such activity also get created happiness and pleasure. While among the alienated labor, "workers deny themselves rather than affirm during working, feel misfortune rather than happiness, get tortured on body

and destruction on the mind rather than give full play on physical strength and intelligence freely.” (Ibid., p.54)

1.3 Alienation on Human Nature

According to Marx, those practical activities with consciousness and purpose are only with mankind. However, influenced by alienated labor, human activity becomes just like animal's and their labor is just for maintain survival. It is pointed by Marx, “People may feel like acting freely when apply with their animal function—eating, drinking, reproduction no more than living and decoration, while they would consider they are animals by using mankind function (Ibid., p.55).

1.4 Alienation Among Mankind

Alienation among mankind is the direct outcome for first three kinds of alienation. Not only the workers get alienation, but also the capitalists who are opposite get alienation as well. By possession of production materials capitalists exploit workers' surplus value, they own means of production but never participate in labor, which differs from truly free labor. Therefore, under the capitalist private ownership, all people are alienated with real “human” .

2. MARCUSE'S THEORY OF ALIENATION

After the Second World War, the western capitalist countries have experienced unprecedented development and entered into the so-called “affluent society”, “consumer society”. When all people still indulged in such kind of “happiness”, *One Dimensional Man* by Marcuse attracted people's attention. He made a deep analysis towards all kinds of alienated social phenomenon in new situation and reflection on modern industrial society mainly from the following aspects.

2.1 One Dimensional Man

People's life-styles are very different in the developed industrial society. As rapidly developed science and technology are driving people's ideology into a closed consciousness without function of denying. Moreover, such “false consciousness” help people generate false demand, which turns unreasonable in reasonable, illiberality into free, “as if they are living for goods. Limousine, HD fax device, multi-layer house have become the soul of people's life” (Marcuse, 2006, p.10). People turning from original two-dimensional into one dimensional choice (only with positive one) is just affected by false demand, it makes people with one dimensional choice.

2.2 One Dimensional Politics

With the development of science and technology, the improvement of productivity and increase of social wealth, the contradiction between workers and ruling class seems to have disappeared. Technology has

weakened their negative power, they think “equality” is existed between bourgeoisie and themselves but don't sense any illiberality depended on machine behind easy and comfortable life. Further, the trend of assimilation occurred among worker class and the bourgeoisie, both of them turned into an organic group without any resistance, which became a positive power in capitalist society rather than the negative factor (Dai, 2012).

2.3 One Dimensional Idea and Culture

Marcuse clarified that modern philosophy which represented by empirical philosophy and language analysis philosophy are one dimensional idea due to their direct acceptance uncritically after his analysis. In the terms of cultural field, he criticized “affirmative culture” from cultural classification and then shifted into “mass culture”, he expounded that it was because of western developed industrial society ideology that depressed personality development and materialization, alienation (Xu, 2012).

3. DIFFERENCE OF MARX'S AND MARCUSE'S ALIENATION THOUGHTS

3.1 Difference of Alienation Subject

In terms of Marx, the alienation subjects are the proletariat and bourgeoisie. However, what he emphasizes more is the proletariat in his alienation thought research. Because of capitalist society, labor, capital and land are separated from each other. As labors do not have production means, they can only sell their labor force to acquire livelihood means that can keep their life. However, due to the effects of alienation, their labor products do not belong to themselves, but an existence as a kind of dissident which is antagonistic to labor. Besides, labor alienation also happens in the overall labor process, so laborers deny themselves, rather than affirm themselves in the labor process. What they can get is not creation and enjoyment, but a physical torment and mental damage. Their labor results do not belong to themselves, and it is a kind of compulsive labor and dissident labor. Such kind of alienated labor transfers people's freedom and self-conscious activity to the active life animal only for keeping their subsistence. In the opinion of Marx, to abandon and overcome alienated labor, the working class themselves shall realize self-redemption and liberation.

From Marcuse's criticism towards modern industrial civilization, he revealed alienation is the alienation of all orders of society from the working class to the bourgeoisie, production field to consumption field, from technology to culture. Marcuse thinks that these alienations all are caused by the progress of science and technology. Technological progress promotes mechanization and automation of production, which gets the working class completely lost in the rich material life

and forgetting their deserved criticism function. This is exactly the alienation behind the flourishing material life. In such kind of life, people are depressed, and lose their decisions control. People have never got rid of the status of being enslaved, and still are slaves. Therefore, Marcuse hopes to establish a “new society”, so that people’s instinctive desire, spiritual autonomy, creative talent and other aspects can be completely liberated. To construct his own new social ideal, he proposes breaking out a revolution in “old society”.

3.2 Difference in Relations of Laborer and Labor Product

In Marx’s times, level of productive force was relatively low. The labor products from workers were occupied without payments, and capitalists exploited workers with help of their productive means to make profits. Therefore, workers were kept in the status of being exploited and depressed. When capitalists exploited and depressed workers, Marx further indicated that workers would be dominated by the products created by themselves forever. As the quantity of products was insufficient, to acquire their necessary livelihood means, workers had to labor like all possessed, but the more products they created, the poorer they would be, which developed a vicious circle. When workers were dominated by production means and the labor products created by themselves, they could only acquire the livelihood means to keep their subsistence, so workers were the slaves of their own products. What is stressed here is the productive relations between workers and labor products.

In modern capitalism society Marcuse lived, the productivity was highly developed with abundant material wealth. Capitalists permeated various product information into all fields of people’s life with all kinds of publicity approaches, to leave an impression of “false needs” to people and compel workers to buy the labor products, so that workers became the slaves of consumption products (Sun, 2008). Marcuse criticized the compulsory consumption relations between workers and labor products. In the consumption process, workers were always kept in the status of being depressed, were dominated by the products created by themselves, and were the slaves of the products. Marcuse indicated that the alienation relations between workers and products were that capitalists compelled workers to buy their occupying products, and made laborers become slaves of products. What is stressed here is consumption relations between workers and labor products.

3.3 Difference in Relations of Workers and Ruling Class

As to the relation problem between workers and ruling class, Marx and Marcuse hold different opinions. Marx thinks under the effects of early capitalism alienated labor, workers and ruling class are two opposite classes. They have poignant and irreconcilable contradictions. When the

working class bands together to overturn the ruling class, they can only break the living status of being depressed. While Marcuse thinks, in the late capitalist society with rapid development of productivity and science and technology, mechanized production replaces the large-scale manual production. Then, social wealth increases, and the contradictions between workers and bourgeoisie disappear. The two classes tend to assimilation, and the working class and bourgeoisie are fused together. All counteragents disappear, and the working class becomes a kind of positive power in capitalist society (Sun, 2008).

4. RATIONALITY AND LIMITATION OF MARX’S AND MARCUSE’S ALIENATION THOUGHTS

4.1 Rationality and Limitation of Marx’s Alienation Thoughts

Marx’s labor alienation theory profoundly reveals the living state of workers in capitalist society. The existence of his theory is of great value. First of all, Marx assimilates those reasonable factors from previous alienation theory. Especially he gets enlightenment from Hegel’s thoughts, and realizes that to explain alienation only from the mental domain is impracticable, because those real reasons of human alienation can only be found in economic field. Secondly, Marx’s labor alienation theory correctly explains that alienation is a kind of opposed to state under the condition of private ownership, especially the condition of capitalism, and correctly indicates approaches of eliminating alienation.

However, because of the restrictions of the theoretical background and development condition of economic society, Marx’s alienation theory also has limitation. Firstly, the vision field of his theory is confined to capitalistic production field, but to neglect the alienation phenomenon in social politics field, human spirit, life and other fields. Secondly, it is very visual to overcome alienation in the form of communism; the contents are short of systematicness and richness; its realistic routine also is very visual without scientificity and realistic and specific operability.

4.2 The Rationality and Limitations of Marcuse’s Alienation Theory

With more extensive visions, Marcuse put forward the alienation theory to criticize the modern industrial civilization. The rationality of its theory was reflected in following aspects: First of all, his alienation theory of science and technology helped people realize their inherent strength to negate the reality, and people can get rid of the current situation of alienation with such strength and achieve real liberation and freedom. Secondly, Marcuse’s criticism on the social reality of modern and western developed capitalism provided a new angle of

view for us to comprehensively and correctly understand the capitalist society. At last, Marcuse's One Dimensional Theory redefined the connotations of freedom, happiness and rights, and called on people to attach more importance to the satisfaction of spiritual needs while pursuing material needs.

However, in the meantime, we also find some defects in Marcuse's alienation theory. Firstly, in terms of the epistemology issue, Marcuse attended to trifles and neglected the essentials. He essentialized some superficial phenomena of capitalist society and exaggerated things within a local scope, which cannot correctly reveal the intrinsic nature of capitalist society and the irrationality of itself. Secondly, in terms of the demand issue, Marcuse put "material needs" and "spiritual needs" in an absolutely opposite position, which neglected the internal unity of them. At last, the conception of new socialist he put forward turned out a sort of "Utopia".

5. MODERN ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON ALIENATION THEORY OF MARX AND MARCUSE

5.1 Unswervingly Take the Road of Scientific Developing That Adheres to "People First"

Marx's alienation theory of labor began with focusing on people's living conditions, indicating directions for us to establish correct values in socialist society. One directional society criticized by Marcuse was a morbid society with rich materials and impoverished spirits. The reasons lied in the fact that people blindly pursued and lived for material wealth. Similarly, for parts of people who live in the current society, material wealth is the goal that their life pursues, and they measure the value of themselves and others by the value of materials they occupy and enjoy. It is such incorrect values that deepen people's degree of alienation. Accordingly, in order to truly eliminate alienation, first of all, the incorrect values in people's mind should be corrected. The "material oriented" values should be changed to "people first" values, which require to be adhered to unswervingly.

5.2 Correctly Recognize the "Double-Edged Sword" Effect of Science and Technology on People

Science and technology are the primary productive forces. Science and technology are the important signals of the development of productive force, and also the significant catalyst to facilitate the development of productive force. Marx also put much emphasis on the effect of science and technology, but he believed that the positive effect of science and technology was on the basis of facilitating the liberation and freedom of the working class. In his

book *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse systematically elaborated the role that science and technology played in capitalist society. As he had interpreted in his book, the role that science and technology played in developed industrial society was extremely prominent. On one hand, it greatly improved the level of productive forces in capitalist society and enriched people's material needs. On the other hand, science and technology had exerted great negative impact on people's freedom and all-round development. Marcuse held that it was indeed the development of science and technology that gave rise to such alienation phenomenon. In present society, people blindly pursue efficiency and neglect the negative effect and damage brought by the technical progress to the natural environment. In face of such current situation, on one hand, we should give full play to the role that modern science and technology play as the primary productive force; on the other hand, we should be on the alert for the negative effect that may be brought by science and technology, and consciously establish the correct value goals of developing science and technology, namely benefiting humankind and focusing on the rationality of the applications of science and technology. In other words, the coordinated development of humans, the society and the nature together with people's all-round development are the ultimate goals.

5.3 Adhere to the Harmonious Development of Material and Spiritual Civilization

Marcuse's criticism on the typical social phenomenon of "abundant materials" and "pain spirit" in the developed industrial society provided reference meaning for us to correctly deal with the relation between material civilization and spiritual civilization in the establishment of market economy. Marcuse pointed out that although developed capitalist society had high level of productive force and abundant material wealth, it was not a society with healthy humanity. The pain and anxiety hid behind the abundant material life, presenting the morbid phenomenon of "high degree of material civilization and extreme spiritual degeneration" (Marx & Engels, 1957, p.44). The act that Marcuse put "material needs" and "spiritual needs" in an absolutely opposite position had its limitations, but these viewpoints still warned us that abundant material wealth was not equal to happiness. The economic base determines superstructure, but the latter will react upon the former. Accordingly, during the process of market economy construction, we are required to not only satisfy people's material needs, but also people's spiritual needs, and attach importance to the harmonious development of material and spiritual civilization.

In conclusion, alienation thoughts of Marx and Marcuse had limitations, but still had important meanings for us nowadays. Based on their alienation thoughts, we can make understandings and criticisms suitable for the present age level of some phenomena in modern society.

We are required to find not only the rationality of such phenomena, but also the constraints of people's freedom behind them and then continuously overcome alienation phenomena and change the world in order to achieve "people's all-round development" that Marx was longing for.

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