

The Attribute of Marxist Philosophy by Althusser

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Abstract

The interpretation of Marxist philosophy, as a part of Marxist studies, has been an important topic discussed by academics. Althusser’s interpretation mainly reflected in attempting to define the attribute of Marxist philosophy. For early Althusser, Marxist philosophy is “the theory of theoretical practice”; and for late Althusser, Marxist philosophy is the “class struggle in the field of theory”. This shift was closely related to his self-criticism since 1967.

Key words: Althusser; Marxist philosophy; Theoretical practice; Class struggle

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INTRODUCTION

In the view of traditional Western Marxism, Karl Korsch, as a representative of Humanitarian Marxism, firstly put forward the issue of the relationship between Marxism and philosophy, namely “Korsch Problem”. By exploring this problem, he established the important role of philosophic perspective in Marxist theory for the study of Western Marxism. Althusser, a representative

of Scientism Marxism, although emphasized the dimension of philosophy in Marxist theory as with Humanitarian Marxism, he still felt dissatisfied with the way of interpretation by the Humanitarian Marxism; although both belong to the “Western Marxism”, to some extent they disapproved the Soviet textbook system. Therefore, for Althusser, it is necessary to rebuild Marxist philosophy. His theoretic efforts are mainly reflected in the early and late interpretations of the attribute of Marxist philosophy.

1. THE EARLY INTERPRETATION: MARXIST PHILOSOPHY IS “THE THEORY OF THEORETICAL PRACTICE”

In 1965, Althusser published his book named *For Marx*. In this book, mainly based on Marx’s early works, Althusser made an interpretation of Marxist philosophy. In “On the Young Marx”, he studied Marx’s early writings on political, theoretical and historical aspects, especially attached great importance to the theoretical problem, and made a detailed analysis of the relationship between Marx and Hegel. First of all, he put forward a political problem about Marx’s early work, namely, young Marx and late Marx who is the true Marx. Althusser firmly opposed including the philosophical dimension of Marxism into young Marx. Thus it can be seen that Althusser’s view of Marxist philosophy is just the opposite to the view of Humanism Marxism philosophy, which insists that Marx’s youth represents the real Marx. In order to illustrate the correctness of his theory, Althusser further presupposed the orthodox Marxists’ positions in the face of attack and then criticized them. Firstly, in his view, Marx’s youth is not a part of Marxism. Secondly, he further refined this political problem to text study, put forward the principle of analysis of Marx’s early works, namely theoretical problem. In his opinion, people tend to lack a historical analysis of the source of some ideas when reading Marx’s

works. Even though Marx used Hegel's terms in his youth, one need to be aware of that different people using the term has different meanings. He opposed studying Marx's early works from Hegel's view, opposed emphasizing too much on the continuity of Marx and Hegel, for the latter at most can only lead to a theory of sources or a theory of anticipation. Althusser called this research method as "analytico-teleological theory". In his view, this method breaks the integrity of Marxism philosophy, unfavorable to the unity of theory and practice. In other words, Althusser not only opposed the economic determinism, but also opposed too much emphasis on the reaction of the superstructure. For him, only do "symptomatic reading" of Marxism, through comparison study on problematics of Marx's ideas and other ideas especially Hegel's ideas, can reveal the new meaning of Marx's thoughts. To this end, he put forward the three principles for studying young Marx's ideas: a) emphasizing the integrality of Marxism; b) emphasizing the relationships among thoughts, ideology, social problems and social structure; c) emphasizing the role of intellectuals with their time in promoting the development of social thought. These are also the characteristics of Marxist philosophy in Althusser's view.

On the base of these analyses, Althusser illustrated the formula of the "retreat" in study of young Marx's ideas, that is, revealing "the concrete man and the real history" (Althusser, 1969, p.71), in order to explain the emergence of Marx's thought and its mutations. Through the analysis of the German ideology world, Althusser pointed out that Germany is more developed and deep in thought and theory, but the economy itself is not developed. The result is that the ideological advance development becomes a hindrance, and needs to retreat to a corresponding stage. That is to say, in Germany, the theory is higher than the real, and thus needs retreating to the reality. Therefore, Marx's criticism of the German ideology, relative to the theory in Germany at that time, is not a kind of transcendence, instead is a step backward. In this sense, Althusser denied the legitimacy of Marx's youth, mainly based on the discontinuity of Marx's philosophy and Hegel's philosophy. This view drawn criticism from others (especially John Lewis), therefore, Althusser proposed that it should reveal the "specific difference" which strictly distinguishes the Marxist dialectic from the Hegelian, and argued that it is of great significance for understanding the Marxist philosophy. After this discussion, Althusser provided a definition of the Marxist dialectic namely Marxist philosophy—Marxist philosophy is "Theory of theoretical practice" (Althusser, 1969, p.171). In his view, Marxist philosophy had already existed in Marxist practice, so what we need to do is just to fill the gap between theory and practice. In other words, since the practice of Marxism had solved such problem, then what we get to do is to interpret it in theory. Because in a certain sense, finding a truth

in practice doesn't mean it has been fully understood. Nonetheless, why Althusser put forward this problem in theory? In his view, it can be answered by Lenin's words "without theory, no revolutionary action", that is to say, the theory can be utilized to guide the practice in reality. So, the task is tantamount to solve this problem which has existed in a practical state, as the solution to "what is Marxist philosophy", that is, the definition of the attribute of Marxist philosophy.

It was starting from Marxist practice that Althusser explored the issues on the attribute of Marxist philosophy. In his view, "practice in general" means "any process of transformation of determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production')" (Althusser, 1969, p.166), which itself contains the "specific difference", and different practices have different characteristics. For example, "social practice" contains a large number of distinct practices, such as production social practice, political practice, ideological practice and theoretical practice. As well as other practice, theoretical practice has its own raw material, means of production and product. So it aims at transforming the raw material (representations, concepts and facts) into the product (knowledge) by certain means, which is "a specific form of practice, itself belonging to the complex unity of the 'social practice' of a determinate human society" (Althusser, 1969, p.167). In Althusser's opinion, theoretical practice in its most general form does not only include scientific theoretical practice, but also include pre-scientific theoretical practice, that is, ideological theoretical practice. And there is a strict distinction in the theoretical practice in its general form, characterized by "epistemological break", that is, dividing Marx's ideas into the ideological phase before 1845 and the science phase after 1845. That is to say, in Althusser's view, there is a qualitative break in Marx's thoughts. This conclusion is actually derived from his "symptomatic reading" of Marx's writings.

After these analyses, Althusser put forward that "the Theory of practice in general" (Althusser, 1969, p.169) is the materialist dialectic. As Althusser himself said, the "Theory" here refers to Marxist philosophy. In this sense, for Althusser, Marxist philosophy, as a "Theory", can be used to guide people's practice. In other words, the "Theory of theoretical practice" can contribute to realizing the essence of general theory namely dialectics, in which is theoretically expressed the essence of theoretical practice in general, through it the essence of practice in general, and through it the essence of the transformations, of the development of things in general (Althusser, 1969, p.169). In addition, the "Theory of theoretical practice" also plays an important role in the areas without Marxist theoretical practice. Many problems in these areas have not been solved as it has in *Capital*, on the contrary, in large part need to be constituted by researchers, and then

become a truly theoretical practice, rather than technical practice. Therefore, these areas of epistemology, history of art, history of ideology, history of philosophy and so on, both need the guidance of Marxism. Moreover, any science is likely to be besieged by ideologies in the process of historical development, on pure science only can exist on condition that it continually frees itself from the ideology which occupies it. However, in this struggle, only Marxist philosophy, that is, “Theory of theoretical practice”, can provide the best method, and indicate direction for science; only Marxist philosophy can judge whether the disciplines like social psychology is science, and thus make a distinction between technical practice and historical practice. Therefore, in this sense, Marxist philosophy, as “the Theory of theoretical practice (as distinct from ideological practice)”, is “the Marxist dialectic in its specificity” (Althusser, 1969, pp.171-172).

To emphasize the guidance of Marxist philosophy as a theory of practice, Althusser defined Marxist philosophy as “the Theory of theoretical practice”, in order to defend the scientificity of Marxist philosophy. But this definition was unilateral, which attracted criticisms from all sides. Therefore, Althusser reflected the formulation, and in the process, attempted to redefine the attribute of Marxist philosophy.

2. SELF-CRITICISM: REFLECTIONS ON “THE THEORY OF THEORETICAL PRACTICE”

In 1967, in the Italian edition of *Reading Capital*, Althusser for the first time pointed out a theoretical tendency in his interpretation of Marxist philosophy. He said that the definition of Marxist philosophy as a theory of theoretical practice, which was given in *For Marx* and again Part One of *Reading Capital* is unilateral, and it is an error in the conception itself, and therefore inaccurate. “To define philosophy in a unilateral way as the Theory of theoretical practices (and in consequence as a Theory of the differences between the practices) is a formulation that could not help but induce either ‘speculative’ or ‘positivist’ theoretical effects and echoes.” (Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p.8)

For Althusser, the theoretical tendency reflected in two aspects: First, ignoring combining the theory and practice in political practice, that is, not exploring the unification of Marxist theory and workers’ movements, while the latter occupied a very important position in the tradition of Marxism-Leninism. Second, not clearly revealing that what distinguishes Marxist philosophy from the other philosophy. In Althusser’s view, Marxist theory includes both science and philosophy. But he did not clearly reveal the difference between science and philosophy, not illustrate the link between philosophy and politics and its nature, and thus easily lead to “positivism”.

In June 1972, in “Elements of Self-Criticism”, Althusser criticized again on the theoretical tendency in his early interpretation. He thought that the theoretical tendency mainly reflects in two concepts: one is the “epistemological break”, the other is the “theoretical practice”. He firstly criticized the theoretical explanation of the “break”, that is, “contrasting truth and error in the form of the speculative distinction between science and ideology, in the singular and in general. The contrast between Marxism and bourgeois ideology thus became simply a special case of this distinction. Reduction + interpretation: From this rationalist-speculative drama, the class struggle was practically absent” (Althusser, 1976, p.106). In other words, in Althusser’s view, his theoretician explanation of the “break” reflected in contrasting science and ideology and thus distinguishing Marxism from bourgeois ideology. This is because the notion of ideology which appears in *The German Ideology* is very equivocal. It plays two different roles, “designating a philosophical category on the one hand (illusion, error), and a scientific concept on the other (formation of the superstructure)”. “Marx did after all overcome it”, but Althusser brought this equivocal notion of ideology into “play within the rationalist context of the antithesis between truth and error. And so ideology was reduced to error, and error called ideology, and this whole rationalist game was given a fraudulent Marxist appearance.” (Althusser, 1976, p.119)

Then, Althusser criticized the definition of Marxist philosophy as “Theory of theoretical practice”, for it is “quite indefensible, and must be done away with. And it is not enough to suppress a formula: it is a question of rectifying, within their theoretical apparatus, all the effects and echoes of its reverberation. In the same way, the category of ‘theoretical practice’, which was very useful in another context, is nevertheless dangerous in its ambiguity, since it uses one and the same term to cover both scientific practice and philosophical practice, and thus induces the idea that philosophy can be (a) science: But in a context which does not cause the ambiguity to become speculative confusion, this category may still, on occasion, play a role, since it serves as a materialist reminder to ‘theory’ of practice.” (Althusser, 1976, p.147) Althusser tried to deny the definition of Marxist philosophy as “Theory of theoretical practice” by rejecting its general, rationalist-speculative form, and reworked it from another point of view. So he brought the notion “class conflict” to the definition of Marxist philosophy. As he said then, lacking class struggle and its effects in theory in his first essays on Marxist philosophy was the biggest mistake, “the class struggle does not figure in its own right in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*; it only makes an appearance when I talk about the practical and social function of ideology; and of course (this is certainly the biggest mistake I made in my essays on Marxist philosophy)” (Althusser, 1976, p.146).

Therefore, Althusser in his late years made a revision of the definition “Theory of theoretical practice”. In the process, he made use of Mao Tse-Tung’s method of contradiction analysis. Because in his view, in order to correctly evaluate Marxist philosophy, starting out from Mao’s categories on contradiction is the only correct choice.

Now Mao talks above all about politics, even in his philosophical texts— and in this he is correct, more so than might be imagined—and he gives reasons for believing what Engels and Lenin suggested, which is the theoretical foundation of the Leninist “materialist reading” not only of Hegel, the absolute idealist, but of all philosophers without exception (including Engels, Lenin and Mao themselves): That in every philosophy, in every philosophical position, you must consider the tendency in its contradiction, and within this contradiction the principal tendency and the secondary tendency of the contradiction, and within each tendency the principal aspect, the secondary aspect, and so on. (Althusser, 1976, p.145)

3. THE LATE INTERPRETATION: MARXIST PHILOSOPHY IN THE LAST INSTANCE IS “CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE FIELD OF THEORY”

Of course, in the process of reflection on “Theory of theoretical practice”, Althusser is also trying to redefine the attribute of Marxist philosophy. The attempt is firstly embodied in his essay “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon”. In this essay, he discussed the relationship between philosophy and politics, put forward that “philosophy is fundamentally political” (Althusser, 1971, p.12). In his view, politics determined everything. But the “politics” he said here refers to Marxism-Leninism politics, not a general sense of politics. In addition, Althusser also explored the relationship between philosophy and science, thought that “philosophy is always linked to the sciences” (Althusser, 1971, p.15). In his view, Marxist theory includes both science and philosophy. After the continent of Mathematics opened by Thales and the continent of Physics opened by Galileo, Marx opened up a third continent to scientific knowledge, that is, the continent of Historical Science. This new continent induced a revolution in philosophy, which is called dialectical materialism. The emergence of philosophy is always accompanied by significant events, and therefore the philosophy always lags behind the science in Marxist theory. Through the definition of relationships between philosophy and politics, philosophy and science, Althusser clarified the relationship between the class struggle and Marxism-Leninism philosophy, pointed out that Marxist philosophy is “the proletarian class struggle in theory” (Althusser, 1971, p.19). This is the first time Althusser explicitly referring to “class struggle in theory”, but did not argue that in detail. Later, in “Lenin and philosophy” and other essays, Althusser

reasserted the relationships among philosophy, science and politic. He said, “Philosophy is a certain continuation of politics, in a certain domain, vis-a-vis a certain reality. Philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory, or to be more precise: with the sciences— and, vice versa, philosophy represents scientificity in politics, with the classes engaged in the class struggle.” (Althusser, 1971, p.65) In Althusser’s view, “what is new in Marxism’s contribution to philosophy is a new practice of philosophy. Marxism is not a (new) philosophy of praxis, but a (new) practice of philosophy.” “This new practice of philosophy can transform philosophy. And in addition it can to some extent assist in the transformation of the world.” (Althusser, 1971, p.68)

In Althusser’s opinion, the theoretical error he made in the early interpretation consists in thinking that philosophy is a science, and that, like every science, it has an object, a beginning, and a history. So he began to “put things right”. In a philosophy course for scientists, dating from 1967, and then in *Lenin and Philosophy* (February 1968), he put forward other propositions: 1. Philosophy is not (a) science. (b) Philosophy has no object, in the sense in which a science has an object. (c) Philosophy has no history, in the sense in which a science has a history. (d) Philosophy is politics in the field of theory (Althusser, 1976, p.68). But he argued that proposing such a new definition of philosophy (politics in theory), of the system of “double, equal representation” at the level of the Sciences and of Politics philosophy is still a temporary solution, still part of the compromise. (Althusser, 1976, pp.149-150) Therefore, in “Elements of Self-Criticism”, he reasserted the role of social (political, ideological and scientific) practice in the field of philosophy. He said:

The point that I wanted to bring home, and which seems to me, as things are, decisive for Marxism, is not only the “mixed-up” character of the theoretical and practical functions of philosophy, but the primacy of the practical function over the theoretical function in philosophy itself. It was to mark the decisive importance of this position (Thesis) and to clarify the primacy of the practical function that I put forward the thesis: “Philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in theory”. (Althusser, 1976, p.143)

In July 1972, in “Reply to John Lewis”, Althusser made a self-criticism of Lewis’s criticism and expressed his position. In this essay, starting from the reality after the founding of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Althusser revealed the realistic difficulties and philosophy origin under the Stalinist model. In his view, for a long time Stalin denied the contradiction in socialist society, so he could not admit the possibility of the existence of exploitation in socialism. Therefore,

he tended to displace the problems resulting from the contradictory development of class relations within the USSR onto the two forms of class struggle which he did recognize, thus explaining them as effects either of the international class struggle or of the struggle against the former exploiting classes. (Althusser, 1976, pp.13-14)

Althusser further pointed out that Stalin wanted to explain everything by economic infrastructure alone, forgetting about the role of the superstructure in the reproduction of production relations, so he fell into economism. But to forget about the role of the superstructure is also to forget how the superstructure operates,

it operates through apparatuses which maintain the domination of the ruling class, but at the cost of continuously reproducing class struggle. To fall into economism is therefore also to forget about class struggle and to forget about class struggle is humanism. (Althusser, 1976, p.14)

That is to say, in Stalin view, the way toward communism is through the development of productive forces, rather than through the class struggle, so he fell into both economism and humanism.

It was exactly from the criticism of Stalin, Althusser once again proved that Marxist philosophy is “class struggle in the field of theory”. He said, “it has also been made by Gramsci and by Mao: the working class needs philosophy in the class struggle. It needs not only the Marxist science of history (historical materialism), but also Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism). Why?” “I should like to reply by using a formula. I will take the (personal) risk of putting it this way: the reason is that philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory.” (Althusser, 1976, p.37) Here, Althusser added the qualifier “in the last instance” to “class struggle in the field of theory”, “in order to be able to give both the class struggle (the last instance) and the other social practices (among them scientific practice) their due in their ‘relation’ to philosophy.” (Althusser, 1976, p.150)

As Althusser said, Engels and Lenin had repeatedly mentioned that there were three forms of class struggle: economic form, political form and theoretical form. Althusser further pointed out, on the one hand, “when it is fought out in the theoretical field, the concentrated class struggle is called philosophy” (Althusser, 1976, p.38). But, on the other hand, Marxist philosophy as the “class struggle in the field of theory”, can not be simply summed up in class struggle and politics. Because philosophy has its own particularity, and it is only the theoretical expression of class struggle in the field of theory. Besides that, it also needs a premise, namely a factor: science, which can be represented. Thus, Althusser revealed the relationships among the philosophy, politic and science. In his view, if philosophy is the class struggle in theory, if it is determined by politics, it will have a political effect in specific political practice. But if regarding philosophy as the class struggle in the field of theory, it will have the effect both in the fields of science and ideology, and thus effect on the combination of theory and practice, including understanding and realizing the combination. “It therefore has effects, of course, not only in political practice and scientific practice, but also in

every social practice, from the ‘struggle for production’ (Mao) to art, etc.” (Althusser, 1976, p.58).

Therefore, by comparing Lewis’s argument with thesis of Marxism-Leninism, Althusser revealed how the philosophy operates. In his view, philosophy operates either in a forward manner or in a backward manner. For the former, it helps to produce new scientific knowledge, while for the latter, it tries to cut these advances, pulling human back to the era in which science did not exist. “Strictly speaking, we should say that it tends to act in one way or another—for every philosophy is always contradictory.” (Althusser, 1976, p.61) That is to say, though philosophical practice plays an important role in many respects as well as Lenin’s political practice, it operates in a characteristic way—philosophical way, which is different from the way political practice operates. At this point, Althusser illustrated his new definition on the attribute of Marxist philosophy, which is in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Althusser’s definition on the attribute of Marxist philosophy has a shift closely related to his self-criticism since 1967. He thought that class struggle and its influence in theory are what he mainly ignored in his early work. If realizing this, one can replace some categories as starting point in the correct position. So through giving both the class struggle and the other social practices their due in their relation to philosophy, Althusser made a new definition on the attribute of Marxist philosophy, and thus, to a certain extent, realized the intervention to humanitarian interpretation of Marxist philosophy, achieved the expected effect of the theory. But in fact, due to the pressure of social and political environment, Althusser must wring a life between the cracks of humanitarian and dogmatism, and thus made his theory come to a concession to the interpretation by Soviet textbook system or the interpretation by Humanitarian in different periods. Therefore, in this sense, it can be said that the attribute of Marxist philosophy interpreted by Althusser is a theoretical interference between the interpretations by Humanitarian and the Soviet textbook system.

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