

Ecological Criticism of Historical Materialism

CHEN Yanlin^{[a],*}; SUN Daojin^[b]

^[a] Institute of Politics and Public Administration, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

^[b] Doctoral Supervisor, Institute of Politics and Public Administration of Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Historical materialism, as an important component of Marxism, contains very wealthy ecological ethic thought. The founders of Marxism always kept materialist conception of history as the fundamental principle, and regarded “the first historical activity” of humans—namely production practice activity, as the most direct, intimate and realistic intermediary between humans and the nature, humans and society as well as humans and themselves, based on which they demonstrated and elaborated the essential contact between humans and the nature, humans and society as well as humans and themselves in detail, which reflected very wealthy ecological ethic thought.

Key words: Marxism; Historical materialism; Practice; Ecological criticism

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INTRODUCTION

The double “reconciliation” historical task between human and nature, human and human, human and themselves, will not be accomplished by taking plunder

and controlling the rule for nature and then give some “emotional gift”, which is advocated by human centrists; it will also not be achieved by just nature conservation but cannot possess the nature and the so-called “natural rights”, the environment “own value”, unconditional return and obey the nature advocated by the ecological centrists; it also can not blindly draw lessons from repairing the lack of capitalist mode of production—namely revisionism of the capitalist mode of production which was proposed by foreign ecological, but to “return to Marxism” itself, and to research and conform from the history of “mediation” between contact of human and nature, human and themselves—“the first historical activity”—the production practice and its relationship to achieve “double reconciliation” historical mission, so as to realize the real harmony between human and nature, human and human.

1. SOCIALIZED NATURE AND NATURE SOCIALIZATION

From the respective of Marxism, the nature is neither idealism view of nature in the sense of theology and religion, nor the old materialism view of nature that “passively adore the nature and bewitched to worship the magnificence and omnipotent of the nature”, but the “natural environment” constituted by both “humanized nature” and “natural nature”. Marx criticized feuerbach’s old materialism view of nature, “the emotional world around him was by no means existing since beginning and consistent, but a product of the industrial and social condition, product of history, and also the product of the activities of the generations. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 3)*, 1960, p.48) Engels also stressed, “They not only changed the position of plants and animals, but also changed the appearance and climate of the place where they live, and they even changed the plants and animals themselves, which made their activities disappear

together with the earth's general death. Marxism view of nature, therefore, is realistic, concrete and through the intermediary of production practice activities, based on the human production practice activities. Marx firmly opposed to the nature that "be understood in abstract and isolation, be fixed as separation with human, and dispensable for human beings. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 42)*, 1985, p.178) Based on humanized nature of the practice of Marxism, on the relationship between human and nature, we must insist on the Marxism view that "the subject is human and object is nature" (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 46)*, 1979, p.22). That is to say "in the interrelated and interacted network between the human and nature, human always in dominant position". (Wang, 1999, p.192) In this sense, the relationship between human and nature including ecological ethics relations, is not only the relationship between cognitive subject and object, and the value relationship that object meets need of the subject, but also highlights interaction between the subject objectification and object subjectification. The nature cannot only be regarded as object of human use. Engels has repeatedly warned, when human transform, use, control and rule the nature, they should always realize, "we together with flesh, blood, and brain all belong to and exist in the nature." (Engels, 1984, p.305) Because "human itself is a product of nature, exist and develop with the environment." (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 20)*, 1971, pp.38-39) "Theoretical knowledge in the independent law of the nature showed as cunning, the purpose of which is to make the nature (whether as consumer goods, or as means of production) subject to the needs of human." (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 46)*, 1979, p.393)

In view of Marx and Engels, when establishing the relationship between human and nature including ecological ethics relation, we should regard the principle of subjectivity as starting point and standpoint for environment understand and reconstruction on environment and human itself, not simply from the nature emotion or social emotion of human, but form the premise of human's natural emotion and social emotion—production practice itself. As Marx said,

the first premise of human history is undoubtedly the existence of individual life. So the fact first need to be confirmed is the individual body organization and the resultant individual's relationship to the other nature---any historical record should be on these natural foundation and the change due to people's activities in the historical process. (*Marx and Engels: Selected Works (Volume 1)*, 1995, p.67)

Therefore, the relationship between human and nature, first of all, need to confirm the first premise of human survival, namely the first premise of all history—the premise of satisfying people for "make history", that is "must be able to live"---"satisfy food, clothing, shelter and other things". (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 3)*, 1960, pp.31-32) That is to say, ecological ethics

relations find the answer from real-life activity of and between subjects, as well as subjective objectification and object subjectification and their relations. Marx pointed out,

human in production are not only associated with the natural world. If they don't combine in a certain way and exchange activities, they cannot undertake production. Certain communication and relationship occur in production; only in the range of social contact and social relations will have their relationship to nature as well as the productive relations. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 6)*, 1961, p.486)

the natural world that formed in the human history, namely in the process of human society, is a human's real nature; therefore, the nature that formed through the industry—although in the form of alienation, is the real nature of anthropology. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 6)*, 1961, p.486)

Marx also said, "the society is the essential unification between human and nature, real resurgence of nature, as well as human's implementation of the naturalism and nature's implementation of the humanitarian." (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 42)*, 1985, p.122) Marx regards Nature—Human—society as a unified system, and grasps ecological ethical issues from the social basic contradiction movements, and overcomes drawbacks that all the usual materialism separated nature, human and society. This makes people realize that the contradiction between man and nature is closely connected with that between human and human, and also restrains and promote with each other, thus the relationship between human and nature cannot be understood and solved without social relations.

2. CAPITALISM PRODUCTION: ALIENATION OF RELATION BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE

Capitalism production makes the relationship between human and nature, human and society intense and deteriorated, the root cause of which lies in the capitalist, under the control and salary of the capital, cause the separation, opposition and loss of its essence as subject (including the capitalists themselves, workers) in the capitalism mode of production and production relations. The capitalists under the control and slavery of the capital, whether single or capitalists alliance, when they make direct production and exchange for direct profits, they can only first notice the most recent and direct result, cannot and will not take notice of further results of ecological damage due to their behavior. Engels pointed out in *dialectics of nature* the defects of the influence of all the capitalist mode of production on the ecological environment. He said, "All the mode of production so far start from the latest and most direct beneficial effects. The further result that will appear later and become effective through the gradual repetition and accumulation has

always been neglected. (Engels, 1984, pp.306-307) For example, in agricultural production of capitalism, “the production process of capitalism transformed and at the same time showed the producers’ martyrdom history; the labor data showed the slavery of workers, exploitation of workers and poverty of workers; social combination of labor process at the same time showed organized repression for personal energy, freedom and independence of workers.

The improvement of labor productivity and the increase of labor are at the expense of damage and recession of the labor itself. Any progress of capitalist agriculture is nothing but skillful progress of plundering laborers as well as the land. Any progress of improving soil fertility in a certain period is also the progress of destroying the land fertility lasting source.

“Capitalism production has developed the technology and combination in social production process, but at the same time, it also destroys the source of all wealth—land and workers.” (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 23)*, 1972, pp.552-553) As capitalism production continuously assembled to the metropolitans, on one hand, it destroyed material exchange between people and land, on the other hand, the consumed part of the land in the form of clothing and food cannot be returned to the land, so as to destroy the land lasting fertility under the eternal natural condition.

With the progress of science and technology, the traditional factory production or small workshops gradually transit to big industrial production, thus keep breaking the geographical limitations of mass industrial production, and gathering together to big cities, which has created the basic conditions for capitalism production. Rural factory evolved to urban factory, and the original pure and fresh air, clean water became waste water and gas after industrial use, which made serious damage to workers’ health. For example, bleaching workers often have to breathe into chlorine which is extremely harmful to the lungs; in grinders’ work, a lot of metal debris, dusty, extremely subtle and with sharp edges, flew out and filled the air, thus was inevitably sucked into workers’ lungs. It’s hard to live to an average age of 35 for dry grinders, and wet grinders also rarely live to 45 years old; in pottery polish workshops, the air is filled with rare earth and dust, and workers are tuberculosis died. Once the river is dominated by industry, polluted by Dye and other waste, the water quality will be destroyed. Factory and city have changed water into stinking sewage. Capitalists seem to have seen the damage of industrial production on the environment, and they always try to leave the big cities caused by capitalist production, but migration to rural areas. As a result, capitalism industrial constantly moved from countryside to countryside, thus constantly create new industrial cities. Capitalism factory area change seems to “protect” the ecological environment of original factory after destruction, but as a matter of fact, through transferring the factory, on one hand, it continues to

squeeze more capital for itself, on the other hand, increase the influence of environmental damage. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 20)*, 1971, pp.20-321) Capitalism mode of production in the capitalism countries have tasted the bitter fruit of the destruction of ecological environment, and ecological environment has brought “tragedy” to the people in their countries, however, under the capital globalization “flag”, as the capitalism mode of production is indulging and invading the developing countries, such a “tragedy” also repeats in the developing countries, but just be regarded as “comedy” in the eyes of capitalists.

It is such vicious circle of production mode of capitalism that is bound to lead the ecological environment to a situation beyond repair. And the contradiction between socialization of production and private ownership of capitalism that are both developed by capitalism will certainly be intense, while that between human and nature, human and human as well as humans and themselves are gradually worsening and deepening. This directly reflects that the core essence, as the precondition of determining the capitalists, capitalist societies and capitalist system, makes the ecological crisis globalized with the capital globalization, and exists in it as well as develop with it. The ecological crisis globalization will not gain relief and elimination as long as evolutionary reforms are not carried out in terms of production mode of capitalism and the basic contradiction generated by it remain unsolved.

3. REFORM OF SOCIAL SYSTEM: BASIC SOLUTION TO REALIZE THE HARMONY OF HUMANS AND NATURE

Marx and Engels repeatedly warned people that “do not be enchanted at our victory over the nature. Every victory will bring the nature’s revenge to us.” (Engels, 1984, p.304) “Environment is changed by human”, “The consistency of change of environment, human activities or self-change can only be seen and reasonably understood as the practice of evolution.” (*Marx and Engels: Selected Works (Volume 1)*, 1995, p.55) In the eyes of Marx and Engels, the change of natural environment has a direct, realistic and inseparable links with practical activities of humans.

Because “to what extent the natural behavior of humans become their behaviors, or to what extent human nature becomes essence of nature for humans, and to what extent his human nature becomes the nature for him.” (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 3)*, 2002, p.296) Consequently, “the relationship between human and nature is directly the relationship between human and human, just like the relationship between human and human is the relationship between human and nature, and the natural regulations of his own.” (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 3)*, 2002, p.296) The evolutionary reform

of environmental change and human practical activities, namely evolutionary reform of production mode of capitalism, has become the logical starting point to solve environmental problems, tackle ecological issues and realize the dialectical unity of environmental change and development and change of humans. As Engels said, “all of the production modes that had existed so far lied in the acquisition of the closest and most direct beneficial effect of labor, Those were presented later as the further outcome taking effect by gradual repetition and accumulation.” (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 20)*, 1971, p.521)

A complete reform on the production modes that had existed so far and our whole social system linked with this production mode is required. Namely, the production modes ever existed in history and private ownership linked with these production modes shall be changed. (Engels, 1984, p.304)

In other words, an evolutionary reform is required on all the production modes before, including capitalist production modes, and the capitalist system and private ownership that are based on it as the precondition.

CONCLUSION

In a capitalist society, capitalists or capital combo are engaged in blind and unsystematic (even if with organization, it's no more than that capitalists spontaneously organize it for the purpose of profits) production, in order to gain more profits, resulting in the separation between extensively genuine producers and means of production and development due to man-made capitalist production mode, so that the means of production and development produced by capitalist production mode are far more than the consumption of capitalist society. Meanwhile, the destruction to ecological environment is getting more intense. This will certainly lead to the over capacity of the means of production and development belonging to capitalists, while the producers directly engaged in production can barely obtain the basic necessities of means of livelihood to maintain their needs for survival. The producers will become more and more poor till their production capacity slows down and dies out. Marxism held that the only approach to eliminate the waste and destruction of production and products brought by capitalist production mode is to implement the social possession of means of production. Because this not only eliminates existing man-made barriers of production, but also removes obvious waste and destruction of productivity and products; besides, a large amount of means of production and products will be saved for the whole society due to the elimination of existing ruling class and the extremely extravagant and luxurious waste of its political representatives.

The social production may not only ensure that all social members enjoy the wealthy and more and more material life,

but also many ensure that they could give full and free play to the development and application of their physical power and intellect.... Once the society is in possession of means of production, the commodity production will be eliminated, and the ruling of products over producers will come to an end. The internal anarchy in social production will be replaced by well-planning and self-conscious organization. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 20)*, 1971, p.307)

Marx also put forward that to carry out land nationalization system. From Marx's point of view,

land nationalization will change the relation between labor and capital thoroughly, and will wipe out the capitalist production mode in industry and agriculture after all.....Agriculture, mining industry, industry, in a word, all production departments will be organized gradually in the most reasonable way. The national concentration of means of production will become the national basis for the society consisting of free and equal producers combo. These producers will participate in social labor consciously according to common reasonable plans. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 18)*, 1964, p.6)

With the disappearance of anarchy in capitalist social production, “human finally becomes the master of his social combination, thus the mater of the natural world and of his own—a free man” (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 19)*, 1963, p. 247),

The nature of the human in natural world only exists for social men; because only in the society, the natural world is the bond of people's connection for people, and an individual exists for others and vice versa; and only in the society, the natural world is the basis for human's own existence, and the factor for human's realistic life. Only in the society, human's natural existence is his own existence for him, and the natural world will become a human for him. Accordingly, the society is the unity of essence accomplished by the human and the natural world, and the true resurgence of the natural world, as well as the naturalism accomplished by human and the humanism realized by the natural world. (*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume 3)*, 2002, p.301)

Consequently, it has become the logical necessity to solve ecological crisis and realize the reconciliation of human and nature that reforming capitalist production mode, eliminating capitalist system and the capitalist private ownership generated with it that are both based on capitalist production mode, and forming a socialized production and public ownership that the producers unite as one.

Socialized people and united producers, will reasonably adjust the material exchange between themselves and the nature in order to keep it under their mutual control instead of making it the blind strength to rule themselves; in addition, make this material exchange happen relying on the least consumption of strength, and under the condition that lives up to and is most suitable for their human nature.

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