

Research on the Concept of Equality from the Perspective of Marxism

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Abstract: This paper delves into the concept of equality in Marxism through dialectical scrutinizes. Marx believed that all people should have equal opportunities and enjoy equal opportunities for comprehensive development [1]. Firstly, it analyzes the abstract equality under the conditions of the bourgeoisie, and through criticism of it and summarization of the inequalities in people's own conditions and social status during activities, it the study concludes that the equality from the socialist perspective mainly includes equality in rights: political status equality, opportunity equality, and equality in distribution standards; as well as three types of differences that will still exist: urban-rural differences, worker-peasant differences, and individual quality differences.

Keywords: Marxism; Human Rights; Equality

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1. Preface

In a static sense, equality is a human right, an pivotal element in building a harmonious society, and a crucial foundation for establishing democracy. At the same time, in a dynamic sense, equality is also an enduring aspiration of human society. Social equality demands that every individual should receive equal respect, with the value tenet of achieving equal relationships among people [2]. Throughout the course of history, the pursuit of equality and the continuous expansion and improvement of the concept of "equality" have been ongoing. However, from a practical perspective, since the reform and opening up, the rapid development of social productive forces has greatly improved people's living conditions. At the same time, the gap between the rich and the poor in society has become increasingly wide. Therefore, in order to maintain the stability of social development and provide guidance for the pursuit of true equality throughout society, we need to adopt Marxist view of equality as a guiding principle.

From the Marxist perspective, although Marx himself did not have a specialized and systematic discussion on the issue of human equality, his view of equality is reflected in the materialist conception of history and political economy he established [3]. Professor Chen Peiyong from the School of Marxism at Peking University also pointed out: "Marx and Engels were not opposed to discussing and pursuing equality, but they were opposed to problematic theories of equality without scientific methodological support[4]." The reason for such a controversy is that according to the research results of American scholar Allen Wood, "with a few exceptions, the 'equality'[5] that Marx often mentioned was merely to illustrate

that it was completely a ‘political concept’, and as a political value, it was a unique bourgeois value. Therefore, to use Marxism as a theoretical weapon for achieving equality, it is necessary to study and distill Marx’s view of equality.

2. A Dialectical Perspective on the Critique of Capitalist Equality and an Overview of Marxist Equality

As articulated in the introductory section of this treatise, equality represents humanity’s perpetual aspiration. When societal structures evolve from antiquated systems to more progressive ones, the concept of equality under these new conditions must inherently possess a more comprehensive connotation, broader scope, and more theoretically rigorous foundation. “Equality is freedom, freedom is equality, and there is no longer any irreconcilable conflict between the two^[6].” Bourgeois thinkers unconditionally posit equality as the universal aspiration of the masses. They adopt the perspective of the bourgeois elite, freely extolling the virtues of so-called “equality” that is accessible to all, a notion engendered by their class and social standing. They regard this form of equality as a divine endowment. In response, Marx pointed out that social equality among people is not a gift from heaven or bestowed by God, but a product of social history and a reflection of the economic base of society. The so-called equality under capitalism is actually based on capital. The size of capital directly determines one’s social status, that is, the degree to which the scale of equality tilts towards them. The capitalist law rights established on the capitalist system are also partial to capital.

In conclusion, the so-called “equality for all” proposed by the bourgeoisie is merely an abstract and hypocritical equality. In reality, equality under capitalism is predicated on capital. The political equality, economic equality, and legal equality derived from it are all subject to the whims of capital^[7]. They are both the illusions of the proletariat and the illusions of bourgeois philosophers.

2.1. The issue of equality in terms of the inherent conditions of human activities

In “The Civil War in France,” Marx argued that only by achieving the destruction of the old state machinery and returning to the rule of the actual political subject can genuine equality in political life be realized^[8]. In Anti-Dühring, Engels refuted Dühring’s erroneous notion that “two people are completely equal” from multiple perspectives^[9]. Engels believed that the inherent conditions of human activities can be roughly divided into three aspects:

- People’s physical qualities are different: The physiological structures of different genders are different. Generally speaking, the testosterone level of men is 20 times higher than that of women, which makes men’s muscle mass and strength generally stronger than women’s, and their bone strength and cardiovascular strength are also stronger than women’s. In this regard, Marx also said that the socialist system of distribution according to work is also a certain kind of inequality because he tacitly acknowledges that the differences in labor capacity caused by unequal personal talents is a natural privilege.
- People’s psychological qualities are unequal: Different people also have different personalities and wills. Due to different environments and experiences, different people have different wills. Some are resolute and courageous, while others are timid and cowardly. This is an objective difference among people. Modern society is one of globalized capital, where the wealth gap has grown excessively large. Whether it’s the class conflicts within nations or the disparities between countries, as Husami argues, the injustice in capitalist property rights and income distribution is inherently linked to inequality^[10].
- People’s moral qualities are unequal: In this regard, since morality has both class nature and universality for all mankind, the discussion departs from the individual and rises to the group. Morality in a group represents the fundamental interests of the broadest masses of the people. Therefore, it naturally follows that there will be differences in morality among different classes due to conflicts of interests. Even within the same class, people will form different moral outlooks due to differences in social status and economic level. As long as the communist society has not been built, moral outlooks representing different interests will not be equal. This is the

inequality caused by morality.

2.2. The Issue of Equality in Social Status

- **Economic Equality:** Economic equality serves as the cornerstone of political and legal equality. Marx believed: “As a form of social consciousness, the emergence of the concept of equality is ultimately determined by specific historical conditions, namely the socio-economic living conditions of that time^[11].” It manifests primarily in two forms: the first is the most fundamental equality of outcomes, which pertains to the equality in the actual amount of wealth accrued from economic activities; the second is equality of scale, which involves distribution according to a unified standard, such as the Marxist principle of distribution according to labor, which exemplifies equality of scale. However, scale equality alone cannot engender genuine economic equality; it also necessitates equality of opportunity as a safeguard.
- **Political Equality:** Political equality primarily refers to the equal enjoyment of various rights to participate in the nation’s political life by all individuals, including democratic rights and personal rights. Specifically, it encompasses gender equality, racial equality, and so forth.
- **Legal Equality:** This is commonly referred to as “equality before the law,” meaning that no citizen in a country can possess privileges above the law, and the law ensures the equality of citizens in terms of rights and obligations. However, the term “everyone” here does not refer to all people in the truest sense. Marx posited that law is the embodiment of the will of the ruling class, a product of class contradictions, and a tool of violence for the rulers. Therefore, there is no legal equality between the ruling class and the ruled class.

Marx’s concept of equality represents both a critique and inheritance of the bourgeois view of equality, with individual freedom and human liberation as its fundamental tenets, demonstrating profound theoretical qualities^[12]. In conclusion, when considering humans as a species, all individuals should possess the right to survival and development due to their unique characteristics that distinguish them from other animals. When considering individuals within society, they should be equal in social status. To resolve this contradiction between what should be and what is, the proletariat must eliminate the exploiting class and liberate all of humanity, unifying people’s inherent rights with their actual rights and truly achieving equality in social status among individuals.

3. Equality in the Field of Socialism

After Marx exposed the hypocritical equality of capitalism and the existence of inequality among individuals from both biological and social perspectives, the subsequent consideration is how to transition from the abstract equality of capitalism to the concrete equality of socialism. The essence of the socialist revolution against capitalism lies in the abolition of classes through the elimination of private ownership, thereby eradicating exploitation entirely and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat.

3.1. Equal Rights

The author does not intend to delve into the extensive extensions of equal rights, as it would lead into the realm of law, which is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, the focus is on the specific connotation of equal rights itself.

- **Equality of Political Status:** In socialist countries, whether leaders or ordinary citizens, rich or poor, physically able or disabled, all should enjoy fully equal political status. The fundamental assurance of complete political status integrity lies in public ownership, i.e., the distribution of means of production through collective ownership, enabling every individual to possess the means of production according to actual circumstances. This also forms the basis for equality in political, economic, and legal status.
- **Equality of Opportunity:** Based on political status, equality of opportunity is a necessary step to implement the equal rights of labor. As mentioned earlier, the distribution system in socialist countries should be based on labor,

so the economic benefits each person earns in society are directly related to the amount of labor they engage in. If labor rights are restricted and monopolized, it constitutes exploitation of the proletariat. Therefore, to ensure labor equality and economic equality among individuals, it is essential to guarantee equal opportunities for everyone to participate in productive labor.

- **Equality in Distribution Scale:** Based on equal opportunities, every individual involved in production, after necessary societal deductions, should receive economic benefits according to the same standards and the quantity and quality of their labor. This not only embodies the inherent meaning of socialist equality but also the core of socialism's ability to focus on achieving great things.

3.2. Equal Obligations

Next is the equality of obligations, which is dialectically unified with the equality of rights mentioned above. If equality of rights is seen as the demands of the masses on leaders, then equality of obligations is the demands of the entire society on all citizens, specifically: Everyone should contribute to the development of society through productive activities, which is the most basic equality of obligations. Everyone should abide by the laws of the country and respect the rights of others.

3.3. Persistent Objective Disparities

"Equality is liberty, liberty is equality, and there is no longer any irreconcilable conflict between the two^[13]." The aforementioned analysis elucidates the advancements in equality under the socialist state system in comparison to the capitalist state system. Nevertheless, according to Marxist theory, socialism represents merely a transitional phase for human society en route to communism, constituting a distinct stage of social development. Consequently, within the socialist framework, objective factors persist that engender substantive inequalities:

- **Urban-Rural Disparities:** Particularly during the primary stage of socialism, the modernization of rural areas remains insufficient. Taking China as a case study, from the inception of the People's Republic of China to the present, rural regions have shouldered substantial costs under the significant price scissors gap to facilitate rapid national industrialization, ultimately enabling China's transformation from an agrarian to an industrial nation. To achieve common prosperity, industrial sectors must now support agricultural development. In addressing this issue, successive Party leaders have proposed various strategies for rural modernization, ranging from the "eight-character constitution" and collectivization in the early years of the PRC, to the household contract responsibility system, and currently, the rural revitalization strategic plan.
- **Worker-Peasant Disparities:** The distinction between workers and peasants essentially reflects the political status disparities rooted in urban-rural economic differences. Equality is an important theme in contemporary political philosophy^[14]. This disparity can only be mitigated when rural areas achieve comprehensive socialist modernization, when population flows between urban and rural areas stabilize, and when the integration between these sectors reaches a substantial level.

As Stalin articulated: "Some believe that socialism demands equal and uniform satisfaction of societal members' needs and personal lives. Needless to say, this notion bears no relation to Marxism-Leninism. In reality, neither socialism nor communism can achieve complete consistency in individual needs^[15]." Marx maintained that the socialist labor-based distribution system remains inherently unequal, as it tacitly acknowledges natural privileges arising from individual talent and ability differentials. Our objective should be to base distribution on objective production conditions and essential needs, guided by actual circumstances, progressing from formal equality to substantive equality, ultimately realizing the communist principle of from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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