

Labor and the Comprehensive Development of Human Freedom

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Abstract: The realization of the comprehensive development of human freedom is the core idea of Marxism and the highest value standard of Marxist philosophy. Labor, as a conscious and voluntary practice, holds historical significance in advancing humanity toward comprehensive freedom and development. This paper begins by examining the prerequisites for human emergence from the perspective of primitive labor. It then explores the constraints encountered in human development through the concept of alienated labor. Furthermore, it highlights the intrinsic connection between free labor and the true realization of comprehensive human freedom. Finally, the study connects these insights to China's specific context, investigating the historical basis and practical significance of China's labor education strategies aimed at achieving the goal of comprehensive human freedom and development.

Keywords: Marx; Labor Theory; Comprehensive Human Freedom and Development; Labor Education.

1. Introduction

The question of "human beings" has always been a significant category in Marxist philosophy. The realization of comprehensive human freedom and development is not only the starting point of Marxist historical materialism but also the goal for which the Communist Party of China, as a Marxist party, strives. Moreover, it represents the noble pursuit of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. Marx proposed that labor is the fundamental prerequisite for achieving comprehensive human freedom and development. In his view, labor not only creates the world but also shapes humanity itself, playing a crucial role in individual development. In the context of the new era, the question of how to advance human development has become a concern for both individuals and the nation as a whole.

2. Labor: The Prerequisite for Achieving Comprehensive Human Freedom and Development

Whether viewed from the perspective of the relationship between humans and nature or humans and society, the study of human beings has been a central concern of philosophers since ancient Greek philosophy.

2.1. The Relationship between Labor and Human Development

Marx transcended the one-sided definitions of labor proposed by modern Western thinkers and redefined its fundamental connotation from the perspective of individual existence. He regarded labor as a unique, objective practice exclusive to humans, fundamentally distinguishing them from animals. In his view, labor serves two key purposes: on the one hand, it enables individuals to meet their basic needs; on the other, it allows individuals to affirm their existence as a species-being. Unlike philosophers such as Hegel, who defined labor as an externalization of absolute spirit, Marx broke free from the metaphysical constraints of previous philosophical traditions. Instead, he focused on analyzing labor as a fundamental human activity, which became a core

concept in his materialist conception of history, further elucidating the fundamental laws of human society.

First, labor is the most fundamental human practice. In the earliest stages, humans had to rely on available resources to meet their basic needs. Nature, as the foundation of human existence, was also the source of material necessities. Initially, humans were subjected to nature, passively adapting to its laws—much like animals. However, Marx pointed out: "An animal does not distinguish itself from its life activity. It is its life activity. A human being makes his life activity itself the object of his will and consciousness." According to Marx, the fundamental distinction between humans and animals lies in the human possession of spiritual attributes that animals lack. This subjective spiritual domain is precisely cultivated through labor. In this process, humans realize that they are not merely passive beings adapting to nature but can actively shape their own existence. This marks the transition from mere existence to self-awareness. Without labor as the foundation, human development would not be possible.

Second, labor is a process of self-realization. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx stated, "Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity." This highlights the role of labor in shaping human nature. Labor not only creates the world but also creates humans themselves, allowing individuals to experience existence. Unlike animals, which instinctively adapt to life, humans can regulate their life activities according to their own will. Through labor, humans exert control over their own actions, breaking free from the constraints of animalistic existence and exhibiting autonomous freedom. This underscores the fundamental nature of labor in defining human existence.

Finally, labor aligns with both individual and societal development. From Marx's perspective, human survival is predicated on fulfilling basic needs, which also serves as the foundation of historical development. By situating labor within the broader process of social development, Marx demonstrated its crucial role in achieving human freedom and development. In fact, the trajectory of labor and human advancement is inherently unified. As humans modify nature through labor, they establish social relationships through

production activities and ultimately come to possess their own essence. This process parallels the increasing manifestation of human free will. With successive technological revolutions, labor productivity has continually improved. Humans, equipped with more advanced tools, engage in productive activities that, in turn, drive changes in production and labor relations. While labor must adhere to certain socio-historical conditions and developmental laws, it also carries an inherent purposiveness. In Marx's view, labor is the process through which humanity continually pursues truth, goodness, and beauty.

2.2. Primitive Labor and the Emergence of Humanity

Human creativity unfolds through labor, shaping the material world externally while shaping the self internally. In Marx's perspective, humans are part of nature, and their emergence and development follow a specific set of laws and processes. Comprehensive human freedom and development is not an instantaneous achievement but a gradual and progressive approach toward a goal.

From Marx's viewpoint, human development revolves around labor as a fundamental practice. However, labor is not a static activity; it evolves over time, just as human development changes with historical progress. As a thinker with a vision for human liberation, Marx examined human and social development across different historical periods. He proposed the "three stages of social development" theory, in which primitive labor corresponds to the stage of "relations of personal dependence." At this initial stage, humanity's ability to transform nature was extremely limited. People viewed nature with reverence and, consequently, chose to submit to collective authority. Moreover, in order to overcome natural disasters more effectively, humans developed tools to extend their biological capabilities, gradually shifting from passive adaptation to active transformation of nature. As history progressed, particularly in the later phases of this stage, labor tools became more refined, the ability to control nature improved, and social productivity advanced. This expansion of productive capacity also granted individuals a greater degree of freedom—rather than relying solely on a single labor method for survival, they learned to utilize and explore nature's laws to enhance their agency.

First, the homogeneity of labor hindered the emergence of individuality. Under these social conditions, individuals relied on collective unity to improve their living conditions. Labor was not a matter of personal choice but an inseparable part of the communal structure. The interests of the collective dictated the direction of individual labor. Thus, labor activities were not diverse but rather homogeneous—everyone followed the same natural laws, used the same production methods, and achieved similar outcomes. This environment did not foster the development of individuality.

Second, individuals were compelled to submit to the protection of tribal communities. Under conditions of extremely low productivity, nature often appeared as an external force hostile to human survival. To navigate these challenges, individuals sought refuge within collective structures. In this sense, primitive humans survived by relying on communal protection. However, as society developed and class divisions emerged, individuals were no longer bound to a single unified collective but were instead stratified into different social classes. The struggle for dominance among these classes introduced conflicts, and individuals had to

conform to the needs of the ruling class to ensure their survival. As a result, personal development was often neglected.

These observations illustrate that labor played a crucial role in the emergence of individuals. However, at this stage, human development remained relatively superficial. With the advent of private ownership, alienated labor emerged as both a cause and a consequence, necessitating further examination.

3. Alienated Labor: The Arduous Path Toward Human Freedom and Comprehensive Development

In Marx's view, there exists an inherent consistency between labor and human development. On a macro level, human development progresses alongside the advancement of labor, and overall trends continue to evolve with the development of productive forces, leading individuals toward a trajectory of freedom and comprehensive growth. However, in reality, the idealized vision often diverges from actual social development. As capitalist society evolves, labor generates negative factors in the course of its advancement. Thus, human freedom and comprehensive development cannot be achieved overnight but rather follow a winding and arduous path.

3.1. The Negative Form of Labor

Before Marx, some economists, in their defense of capitalist society, stood in opposition to the working masses. They took for granted the idea that workers should sell their labor, ignoring the stark contradictions of reality, such as the paradox where laborers produce goods yet remain impoverished. This prompted Marx's sharp critique of prevailing economic theories. Building upon previous philosophical discussions on labor, Marx, in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, observed the emergence of alienated labor within capitalist society. Labor had gradually transformed into a means of exploitation, becoming a restrictive factor that hindered human freedom and comprehensive development. This alienation manifests in four key aspects:

Alienation from the Product of Labor. Examining labor through the lens of its outcomes, the relationship between workers and their products becomes one of opposition. In capitalist society, workers externalize their labor into the products they create, which logically should belong to them. However, the reality is that "the increase in the world of things is proportional to the devaluation of the human world." That is, while the total volume of produced goods continuously grows, workers do not own them. Instead, they find themselves dwarfed by the very products of their labor. The essence of labor, which should be an extension of human creativity, is thus alienated from the laborer. Moreover, in order to survive, individuals must first become workers, facing both unemployment and survival pressures. Consequently, they are compelled to seek employment, effectively becoming slaves to their own labor. Their creations do not serve their development but rather become shackles against them. The fundamental condition for human freedom and comprehensive development is the fulfillment of human needs. However, under alienated labor, even basic material necessities remain unmet, posing a significant obstacle to development.

Alienation from the Act of Labor Itself. According to Marx,

in capitalist production, workers lack independence and must rely on capitalists for survival. This dependency deprives workers of their ability to express their free will through labor. Their work is no longer a self-directed activity; they cannot choose whether to engage in labor, nor do they retain control over the results, which are dictated by capitalist planning. Labor, therefore, becomes coercive rather than voluntary. Furthermore, capitalism reduces humans to mere survival machines—rather than transcending basic biological needs, they are reduced to fulfilling them. Alienated labor confines individuals to production, leaving them with little time or opportunity for personal growth and self-expression.

Alienation from Human Species-Being. Unlike animals, humans should exist freely beyond the constraints of mere survival. However, under capitalist production, human nature itself becomes alienated. Labor is no longer a free and conscious creative activity but a means to acquire the basic necessities of survival. The freedom of choice that characterizes human nature is thus eroded, leading individuals toward self-estrangement. This alienation severely hampers human development, distorting human potential and making true progress unattainable.

Alienation from Other Human Beings. Ultimately, the above three forms of alienation lead to “the alienation of man from man.” Marx viewed harmonious social relations as a crucial indicator of whether humans could achieve freedom and comprehensive development. However, alienated labor disrupts this harmony. In capitalist society, the two opposing classes—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—cannot coexist on equal terms. Workers expend immense effort to produce goods but own almost nothing, whereas the bourgeoisie, possessing both the means of production and the resulting products, accumulate immense wealth. Moreover, labor does not provide workers with a fulfilling experience; instead, it is a struggle for survival. In contrast, capitalists derive great pleasure from labor—not because they work, but because the labor of others enriches them. Despite their different social positions, neither class achieves true freedom and comprehensive development.

3.2. The Overcoming of Alienated Labor

Within the grand framework of capitalist production, labor has been reduced to a means for capitalists to generate profit. While individuals appear to have freedom of choice, they are, in reality, mere tools serving the goals of others. The endless competition of capitalism turns people into adversaries, leading to widespread social alienation. This alienation is an outcome of labor objectification, which, under capitalism, negates itself. The root cause lies in the division of labor under capitalist conditions.

The division of labor exacerbates alienation, harming individuals on both macro and micro levels. On a societal scale, it leads to private property ownership in capitalist society, where the bourgeoisie control the means of production and the fruits of labor, while workers have no autonomy over either. Private property then becomes the mechanism of class exploitation, as capitalists enrich themselves by appropriating the labor of others. Beyond economic divisions, private property also creates geographical restrictions, confining individuals to urban or rural spaces and limiting personal expression. On a micro level, industrial division of labor results in workers being trapped in monotonous, specialized tasks. Factory workers, for example, are confined to repetitive assembly-line jobs,

cultivating narrow skill sets while being subjected to exploitation. Forced to increase labor intensity merely to survive, workers have no opportunity for personal growth.

Through a close examination of laborers’ living conditions under capitalism, Marx concluded that the only way to overcome alienated labor was to dismantle both the division of labor and private property. His writings suggest that the prerequisite for overcoming alienation is the continuous advancement of productive forces.

Human development and social progress are interdependent. From a historical perspective, social evolution follows a set trajectory, and alienated labor is a byproduct of social development at a certain stage. It signifies a rise in productive capacity but also indicates room for further development. As a temporary phase, alienation will eventually be replaced by a higher form of labor. At this stage, individuals can only find meaning in purely physiological activities, while labor itself remains an unpleasant necessity. Social relations are obscured by material relations, and people are enslaved by objects rather than being truly free. This poses a significant barrier to achieving human freedom and comprehensive development.

However, within this “society of material dependence” described by Marx, the continuous advancement of productive forces accumulates the necessary momentum for achieving the ultimate goal of human liberation. This period is an inevitable transitional stage. From a historical standpoint, every stage of labor and human development ultimately aims at achieving comprehensive human freedom. Each period represents an incremental accumulation toward this goal. As Marx put it, capitalism “creates and establishes the material conditions for the full development of individual productive capacities.” Capitalism, however, cannot resolve its internal contradictions, as its vitality depends on an unexhausted potential for productive growth. Only a communist society can resolve these contradictions. In that context, labor would become a primary human need rather than a form of oppression. It would return to its original nature as a free and conscious activity, enabling people to achieve true freedom and comprehensive development. Understanding both the necessity and eventual dissolution of alienated labor thus paves the way for realizing free and autonomous labor.

4. Free Labor: The Inevitable Path to Human Freedom and Comprehensive Development

Karl Marx profoundly exposed the decay of the capitalist system through the social-historical phenomenon of alienated labor. In his view, the manifestation of alienated labor is primarily dominated by objectification and reification, behind which lies an infinite motion and transformation. This phenomenon, caused by the private ownership of the means of production and the old division of labor, will ultimately be eradicated. In Marx’s vision, it will be replaced by “free labor.” First, the vigorous development of social productive forces accumulates the material foundation for the realization of free labor. Second, human nature is fully expressed in free labor, embodying the intrinsic essence of labor ethics. Furthermore, under the premise of actively overcoming alienated labor, individuals must be freed from the shackles of the existing capitalist system through the power of social transformation, the establishment of new social relations, and the construction of a reasonable social system. Marx pointed

out that the replacement would be a new society—namely, a communist society. Only in this way can individuals achieve their own free and comprehensive development, thereby advancing society toward a brighter future.

4.1. The Relationship Between Free Labor and Human Development

When individuals gain a space of freedom through labor in their relationships with nature, society, and themselves, they gradually deepen their labor experience and perceive an increasing agency in shaping the world. Human development operates along two parallel dimensions: breaking the barriers to individual free existence and expanding the boundaries of self-growth, ultimately achieving comprehensive development. Marx elucidated the meaning of comprehensive development in his works: "Man appropriates his comprehensive nature in a comprehensive way, in other words, as a complete human being." Comprehensiveness requires individuals to break free from their previously fragmented state of development and fully express their subjectivity. This includes both social relational development and self-improvement in personal capabilities. It represents a deepening of the notion of freedom, extending the trajectory of human development. Freedom and comprehensiveness go hand in hand, driving individual progress.

Free Labor Lays the Basic Premise for Human Freedom and Comprehensive Development. Through the analysis of alienated labor in capitalist society, we recognize the difficulties individuals face in their development—such as social polarization and workers' lack of free time to pursue self-development. Human development depends on access to freely disposable time, which, in turn, requires a solid material foundation. Free labor provides the fundamental material basis for humanity's realization of free and comprehensive development. Marx noted, "In conditions of extreme poverty, the struggle for necessities must begin anew, and all the old filthy business will revive." This highlights that without highly developed productive forces and material prerequisites, social systems cannot undergo transformation, and human freedom and comprehensive development remain unattainable.

Free Labor Enables Workers to Fully Realize Themselves. Labor allows individuals to appropriate their essence. Under previous conditions, workers did not own the products of their labor; they merely toiled for an "other." Labor became an activity forced upon them for survival, contradicting their inner aspirations. However, free labor allows workers to own the results of their labor and enjoy the rich experiences it brings. Through this process, individuals appropriate their essence, thereby interpreting freedom from the perspective of self-identity. Free labor enables individuals to fully engage in life activities and express their unique personal freedom, thereby promoting continuous self-development.

Breaking the Passivity of Labor: In previous social conditions, labor was a necessity for survival, suppressing individual personality and subjecting workers to exploitation and oppression. Marx stated, "The proletariat, in order to realize its individuality, must abolish the existing conditions of its existence." With the establishment of socialist public ownership and the removal of labor's constraints, people can gradually escape forced labor, apply their consciousness to their work, and engage in "genuine production" free from physical enslavement.

Achieving Comprehensive Development: In Marx's vision,

"it is possible for me to do one thing today, another tomorrow, hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, tend cattle in the evening, and engage in criticism after dinner, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic." Under private ownership, workers resemble cogs in an assembly line, focusing solely on immediate tasks without understanding the entire labor process—leading to one-sided development. In contrast, free labor allows individuals to develop freely according to their interests.

Free Labor Promotes the Formation of Harmonious Social Relations. Traditional production methods and divisions of labor established a hierarchical structure in labor, resulting in unequal social relations. The ideal form of labor division under free labor dismantles the old unequal relations of production, transforming labor into a means of human liberation. Laborers are no longer constrained by oppressive conditions. Within free labor, individuals maintain harmonious social relationships, which effectively safeguard personal development. When class antagonisms are sharp, social relationships become more alienated. However, free labor fosters harmonious interactions, enabling individuals to participate in practice under equal conditions. When relationships are not structured around oppression and subjugation, individuals can better enjoy their time, choose activities that align with their interests, and avoid undesired tasks. This autonomy in personal development is a fundamental condition for progress.

Free Labor Facilitates the Transition from the Realm of Necessity to the Realm of Freedom. Marx identified free labor as the fundamental means of human self-perfection. According to historical materialism, human history arises from productive activity, and free labor serves as the driving force in constructing an ideal social form—transitioning from the realm of necessity to a "union of free individuals." Certainly, free labor is the necessary path to achieving human freedom and comprehensive development. However, the role of alienated labor cannot be entirely ignored, as it constitutes an essential prerequisite for transitioning to free labor. Only with a robust material foundation can communism be realized. The pursuit of communism is a long-term and arduous process. As both a necessary condition for human liberation and the starting point of "true human history," communism is not a utopian fantasy but Marx's vision for future society. Its realization will not mark the endpoint of social development but will continue to evolve with historical progress.

4.2. The Ultimate Goal of Realization

Free labor does not emerge out of thin air—it requires the development of social productive forces to provide a material foundation. At its core, this mode of labor aims at reaching the "realm of freedom."

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx described the ideal social structure as follows: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." This vision embodies a collectivist proposition and a fundamental tenet of Marxist scientific socialism. The free development of a single individual is insufficient—only in a society with stronger altruism, harmonious interactions, and the abolition of class distinctions can labor become both a means and an end.

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx framed the concept of freedom around labor. Alienated labor

corresponds to "unfreedom," whereas freedom is inseparable from human species-being. Freedom is rooted in labor, and when labor ultimately returns to a free state, individuals will experience fulfillment and enrichment. From a historical perspective, a society where free labor exists must be a true association of free individuals. As national borders dissolve within established geographic boundaries, humanity will embrace the realm of freedom. However, Marx's conception of freedom was not static. Initially rooted in humanism, his thinking gradually transcended the limitations of traditional philosophy and embraced historical materialism. The historical necessity of reaching communism is undeniable, yet the level of freedom achievable in specific historical periods is limited. The pursuit of absolute freedom is an ongoing journey, shaped by the evolving possibilities of each moment.

Thus, the realization of the "realm of freedom" is not an absolute state but a continuous process. Although we discuss it as a tangible goal, it remains a relative reality—one that progresses dialectically. The transition from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom is inevitable, but even after

reaching this stage, society will continue to evolve, as new challenges will always arise. Consequently, this goal is one that is "constantly being realized."

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