

The Ecological Interpretation of Marx's Thought on Practical Subjectivity

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Abstract: In the process of human historical development, the issue of the relationship between human beings and nature is an important topic. Marx's practical subjective thought implies ecological implication. On the basis of fully affirming the subjectivity of human beings, it analyzes and argues the relationship between human beings and nature, and criticizes the alienation of the subject of practice under the Western capitalist mode of production in the three dimensions of social history, practice and development. Marx's idea of the subject of practice points out that the logic of capital must be fundamentally rejected, and the working class must initiate a revolution until it completely realizes its own emancipation in a communist society. At this time, the subject of practice, as a being united with passivity and agency, rationally coordinates the relationship between human beings and nature under the premise of the high development of productive forces, and realizes the restoration of the object relationship between the two.

Keywords: Marxist Ecology; Practice; Subjectivity; Ecological Interpretation.

1. Introduction

Yu Wujin has pointed out that "Marx himself almost never understood the concept of subject as his own object of study; he only used it." [1] Although Marx did not systematically discuss the understanding of the subject and subjectivity, Marx's idea of subjectivity runs through the entire Marxist theoretical system in the form of implicit, with overarching characteristics, which involves a number of fields such as man and nature, man and man, and man and society. Among them, the issue of the relationship between human beings and nature is the focus of contemporary global sustainable development. Since the industrial revolution, the capitalist mode of production once triggered an ecological crisis, which requires the academic community to study in depth the relationship between man and nature, economic development and ecological construction, which gave birth to a series of theories such as anthropocentrism and eco-centrism. However, its essence is the product of the wrong understanding of the object relationship between man and nature, and did not fundamentally solve the ecological crisis. Marx placed man and nature in practical activities, pointed out the subjective status of man, criticized the alienation of man and nature in capitalist society, and interpreted the idea of subjective liberation with implied ecological meanings on the basis of the abandonment of the capitalist mode of production, thus pointing out the direction for the sustainable development of contemporary society.

2. Multiple Interpretations of the Human-Nature Relationship within the Perspective of Subjectivity

As a historical concept, "subjectivity" has been given different meanings in different socio-historical conditions. The idea of subjectivity of Aristotle is embedded in his cosmology, in which he believed that all natural objects are constantly changing according to their inner tendency to move under the impetus of the Eternal Being, and that it is in this fixed cosmic order that human subjectivity is prescribed.

Man sees the natural world as a self-contained meaningful entity in the capacity of a cognizer and receives perceptions about the object through the sense organs and the mind. Augustine and Martin Luther, on the other hand, explored the meaning of subjectivity on the basis of religious thought, emphasizing that man can reflect on himself and perceive himself only through God, thus transforming subjectivity into an absolute truth-like existence. Introducing ecological thinking into the subjectivity perspective of Western philosophy to examine the relationship between human beings and nature, it can be divided into the subject-object dichotomy of human beings and nature based on the idea of "inner subject" of Descartes, the abstract and unified relationship of human beings and nature based on the idea of Hegel's subjectivity, and the abstract and unified relationship of human beings and nature based on Feuerbach's idea of "inner subject" of Hegel. The relationship of abstract unity based on Hegel's idea of subjectivity, the relationship of mechanical unity of man and nature based on Feuerbach's idea of subjectivity, and the relationship of dialectical unity of man and nature based on Marx's idea of practical subjectivity.

Descartes stipulated the intrinsic nature of the subject, and on the basis of the criterion of "universal doubt", he severed the dialectical relationship between man and nature, between thought and existence, and reduced the natural world to a purely objectified object. Descartes put forward the concept of "I think", advocating that "I think" takes precedence over "I am", and that the world of mind is superior to the world of reality. He believed that individual consciousness is the starting point of cognition, and that the subject of the mind, as the basis of cognition, is fundamentally different from all other external things, and thus has a general skepticism towards all things other than the subject. Unlike Aristotle, who advocated a "meaningful world," Descartes believed that entities in nature could only have meaning through the human subject, and that nature, once removed from the subjective mind of the human being, had lost its ultimate reason for existence. Even in his account of the human being himself, Descartes similarly discards the "I am" part, the material part

of the body. For Descartes, the "I think" and the "I am" cannot be united, but correspond to two separate "I's". It is only in the subject of the I-thinking that the ego has the capacity to recognize and provide a measure for the whole of nature. He thus leads man to the inner world of mind and denies the outer world of nature, which becomes subordinate to him.

In response to the view represented by Descartes that man is cut off from the external world, Hegel, in combination with the Romantic view on creativity as well as holism, pointed out that the original unity of man and nature should be returned to through the abandonment of oppositions. For Hegel, the subject is spirit. From the moment the subject is born, it naturally exists in the state of a unity in which subject and object are united. Therefore, "subject" means not only self-consciousness, but also a way of existence, that is, the way of existence of the unity of self-development in the process of contradiction". [2]The object is the product of the subject's materialization, i.e., externalization, and in order to break through the finiteness of the materialized spirit and realize the ultimate rationality, freedom and self-consciousness, the subject must abandon this externalization, and through the denial of the necessity of the spirit's existence, achieve the awareness of its own rational necessity. Thus Hegel argues the dynamic process of the continuous flow of absolute spirit in the upside-down world, and the return of self-consciousness through the continuous externalization and the abandonment of such externalization, constituting a "closed circle". Similarly, in Hegel's philosophy, nature is treated as an abstract object separate from the subject, and is inevitably reduced to an object of negation. Although self-consciousness and nature return to the original state of unity after many negations in Hegel's philosophical system, nature at this time is still an alienated nature subjugated to human beings, and the contradiction between human beings and nature has not been truly resolved. Although compared with Descartes, Hegel recognized the possibility of the existence of a unified state between subject and object, but the dialectical movement of such pure thinking can only conclude that the object is subordinate to the subject and nature is subordinate to human beings.

Feuerbach fundamentally overturned the idealistic assertion of Hegel's philosophy on the concept of the subject, and constructed the principle of "sensible objectivity" on the basis of sensibility, shaping the image of the subject, which is rich in sensibility, and the image of the object, which provides sensibility. Feuerbach criticized the absolute significance that Hegel gave to the spirit, and argued that in the process of negation of Hegel's philosophy, the identity of thought and existence, which are at the point of departure and at the point of termination respectively, must not coincide due to the existence of some kind of intermediary. "To start from sensibility, the new philosophy has to understand sensibility as objecthood, which characterizes both subject and object as object beings"[3]. Focusing on the interdependent symbiosis between subject and object, Feuerbach equates sensibility with objectivity, emphasizes object and objecthood, and argues that any objective being presupposes the object for its own existence. On the one hand, the subject itself exists as a perceptual object. On the other hand, the subject can manifest its essential power only through its essential relationship with the object, and once it leaves the object, the subject itself will become a non-objective existence. Analyzing the relationship between human beings and nature by the principle of "sensual objectivity", the interaction of the two as sensual objects in an

essential relationship allows human beings to realize their own natural nature. However, "nature, whether objective or subjective, does not exist in direct correspondence with human existence"[4]. Feuerbach regarded all things in nature as non-human objects, understood as the carrier of human feelings, and did not put the sensible objects in the dynamic process of understanding, only through the sensible intuition to grasp the short-lived static state of the sensible objects, and did not understand that the sensible objects can realize the development through the sensible activities. Therefore, Feuerbach's principle of "perceptual objectivity" is still an abstract philosophical theory, and the relationship between human beings and nature on this basis is a mechanical relationship of unity.

Marx criticized and inherited Hegel's principle of "object activity" and Feuerbach's principle of "perceptual objectivity", and understood the relationship between man and nature on the basis of "perceptual activity". The object relationship between man and nature is understood on the basis of "sensual activity", i.e., the subject and object are linked by practice. This link is social and historical, meaning that the relationship between subject and object has the possibility of internal differentiation. It also explains the alienation of man from nature in capitalist society. First of all, Marx affirms the "sensibility" of the subject and object in the object-object relationship. Unlike the "sensibility" in Feuerbach's philosophy, the "sensibility" advocated by Marx is not the pure and simple "sensibility" that exists in discursive philosophy, but the real "sensibility" that is based on human sensual activity. It is the real "sensibility" based on human sensible activity. Secondly, Marx analyzes the formation of object relations between subject and object from the point of view of movement, and points out the social nature of object relations between man and nature. Feuerbach, from the object relationship between man and nature, only recognizes the natural attributes of man's nature, and believes that man is a sensual being with feelings. This is only man in the physiological sense, not essentially different from other animals. However, the object relationship between man and nature also has a social nature. With the increasing ability to transform nature, man gradually distinguishes himself from other animals and becomes a sensual being with self-consciousness. Man not only consciously objectifies nature, but also is able to objectify nature into his own consciousness at the spiritual level. In this way, both the nature that exists in reality and the nature that exists in man's consciousness take on the significance of proving the essential power of man. Marx pointed out that "all human activity is hitherto labor"[5]. Through the practice of labor, man transforms nature and himself, thus giving himself a social character and distinguishing himself from all other things in nature.

3. Marx's Ecological Critique of the Alienation of the Practical Subject

Marx attributed the object activity between man and nature to the practice of labor, through which man establishes an object relationship with nature and achieves a state of harmony and unity between subject and object. However, since the feudal society, the subject and object have gradually separated in the structure of commodity economy and reached a complete alienation relationship in the structure of capitalist economy, and the contradiction between man and nature has become more and more intense. In the 1844 Economic and

Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx, with reference to the life activities of the practical subject, pointed out that the fundamental cause of the alienation of the relationship between man and nature lies in the alienation of labor under the domination of the logic of capital, which essentially arises from the alienation of the self-relationships of man as the subject of practice.

Analyzed from the socio-historical dimension, the materialistic relations inherent in capitalist society dominate the endless exploitation of natural resources by the people who are the subjects of practice in it. As practical subjects, human beings are in a certain social relationship, and the relationship between human beings and nature will change with the change of social and historical conditions. The form of social civilization at a particular historical stage is not only a generalization of the productivity and mode of production of the society at that time, but also reflects the relationship between man and nature. At present, human society has experienced four civilization forms, including primitive civilization, agricultural civilization, industrial civilization and ecological civilization. During the period of primitive civilization, nature dominated the object relationship between human beings and nature, and human beings unilaterally feared nature and passively adapted to it. During the period of agricultural civilization, with the birth of some production tools, human beings went from purely fearing nature to actively transforming and influencing nature. Although nature was developed and utilized as a product of people's labor during this period, due to the relatively low level of productivity, the degree of human's objectification of nature was limited, and the purpose of which was not only to maintain their own survival, but also to discover and understand the value of the different species in nature and enrich their own understanding. In the period of industrial civilization, with the development of science and technology to promote the level of social productivity, the ability of human transformation of nature has also been greatly enhanced, and human beings try to rule nature. The acute conflict between man and nature reached its peak during the period of capitalism.

In the capitalist era, capital's principle of utility regards usefulness as the measure of the value of everything. Capital's mere categorization of nature as a means of production means that it denies the self-made state of nature and treats it only as an object of human activity. Capital's enslavement of nature is directly expressed in the capitalists' enslavement of the working class. Marx states that man "knows how to produce according to the measure of any species, and how to apply the inner measure to objects everywhere"[6]. Capitalists, as puppets of capital, also implement the principle of utility in their own practical activities. The profit-seeking nature of capital pushes capital to continue to increase, and the desire to increase the value of capital requires capitalists to increase the degree of slavery and exploitation of workers, and to increase the scope and extent of exploitation of the natural world in order to obtain more means of production. The proletarians have to accept the oppression of the capitalists in order to maintain their livelihood, and the material relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, based on money, is one of employer and employee. With the deepening of socialized production, human relations in the whole capitalist society are gradually assimilated into such material relations. In the money-oriented capitalist society, the working class can only earn wages through the

exploitation of nature, while the bourgeoisie aspires to obtain a constant flow of means of production from nature, with which it can obtain more capital. As a result, both the bourgeoisie and the working class, consciously or unconsciously, continue to exploit nature at a high intensity.

Analyzed from the practical dimension, the alienation of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in capitalist society is a concrete manifestation of the alienation of the subject of practice, which together lead to the alienation of man and nature. Under the action of the logic of capital, human labor and labor products exist in the form of capital, and the objects of the subject's activities, such as commodities and capital, occupy a dominant position, while human beings are in a dominated position. On the one hand, for the worker, nature serves only as a tool for his own survival and cannot embody his own essential power. Human beings are natural beings, and in order to survive and develop, they need to obtain material materials from nature through object-based activities, i.e., human beings objectify their own essential power into an object to form the means of production and the means of life. In alienated labor, nature is alienated from human beings as a product of labor. The more the worker appropriates nature through the activity of objectification, the less means of subsistence and production he or she has access to, and the less he or she is able to escape from the capitalist's enslavement. On the other hand, for the capitalists, the extraction of nature's resources is a key part of the fulfillment of their desires, and the more wealth the bourgeoisie acquires through nature, the less they are able to break away from this flawed model of development. The wealth that comes with capital symbolizes to the capitalists both the power to rule from below and an alien power over themselves, so much so that the capitalists are so lost in power and desire that they are unable to fully dominate their own actions and outcomes. Nature possesses natural raw materials that help capital proliferate, "and once natural objects take on the nature of such 'resources', they are increasingly concentrated in the hands of various power groups and capital groups in the process of being rapidly marketized and commodified"[7]. Capitalists, as personified capital, are an alien force as opposed to workers. They do not take the acquisition of means of subsistence as their ultimate practical aim, but take the expansion of capital as their practical point. However, in the competitive capitalist market, in order to increase their competitiveness, capitalists must utilize all the capital they possess to expand their capital in the natural "market", and the relationship between them and the natural world is only one of subjugation and subjugation, of oppression and oppression. In capitalist society, "the worker and the capitalist are equally distressed, the worker for his survival, the capitalist for the profitability of his dead money." [8] At this point, both the worker and the capitalist are separated from nature. The logic of capital thus creates an alienation of the relationship between man and things, man and man, and man and nature.

Analyzed from the development dimension, the alienation of the practical subject denies the subject's passivity and runs counter to the goal of long-term human development. In a capitalist society, human needs are alienated to the needs of capital, which has been aggressive since its birth. In a capitalist society, capital has the space to multiply at will, which is "due to the fact that the capital system, which upholds the logic of capital, regulates the material transformations of the society with the rules of production and exchange of value, and helps capital to successfully overcome

all the boundaries of opposition to its multiplication"[9] . In the process of proliferation, the dependence of man on nature and the reaction of nature against man are ignored by capital. The speed of capital's proliferation far exceeds the speed of natural ecosystem's recovery, and when the gap between the two reaches a certain critical point, nature fights back against the endless human desire and capital's appreciation in the form of ecological crisis. Contemporary Western societies have attempted to propose solutions to the ecological crisis, such as charcoal trading programs, market mechanisms for "payments for ecosystem services," and research and development of renewable energy technologies within the framework of capitalist markets. However, these programs are still essentially "green capitalist solutions that rely on market mechanisms and technological innovation to improve the environment" [10], proposed by the bourgeoisie to protect its own interests, and only temporarily cover up the deep-rooted contradictions between the capitalist mode of production and the natural world, but are unable to address the root causes of the ecological crisis.

4. The Ecological Implications of Marx's Thought on Practical Subjectivity

Although the ecological problems caused by the capitalist mode of production did not have a significant impact on human society in Marx's time, Marx was still keenly aware of the anti-ecological nature of the capitalist mode of production, and in order to realize the emancipation of nature as well as the reversion of the object relationship between human beings and nature, Marx put forward his vision about communism, emphasizing that the subjectivity of practice in a communist society transcends the conditions of capitalist alienation of the practical subject.

First of all, Marx's idea of the subject of practice recognizes the interdependence of the practical subject's activeness and passivity, giving full play to human subjectivity on the premise of understanding the independent status of nature. On the one hand, human society and human beings are both object existences based on nature. As an objectively existing practical object, nature not only provides the necessary material materials for human survival, but also is the material source for the construction and enrichment of the human spiritual world. Marx believed that human beings can acquire perceptual knowledge of nature through practical activities, which means that as the subject of practice, human beings have sensibility, i.e., passivity. The fact that human beings need to acquire perceptual knowledge of the natural world through practical activities also shows that Marx's idea of the practical subject recognizes that the natural world exists independently of the human spirit. Nature is not merely an element in the process of practice, but also produces a certain reaction to human beings. It is obviously impractical for the bourgeoisie to naturally categorize nature as subordinate to itself. On the other hand, man is capable of transforming nature in a dynamic way. People transform nature into their own inorganic bodies through practical activities, greatly enhancing their practical ability. At the same time, people discover laws and form theories of natural science in their practical activities, create and construct marvelous humanities and arts in a dynamic way, and constitute a rich and full spiritual world. Marx's idea of the practical subject highlights both the objectivity of man and the naturalness of

nature, emphasizing that man is a natural man.

Secondly, Marx's idea of practical subject believes that man can keep the relationship between man and nature under control within a reasonable range through practice. Marx pointed out that "material forces can only be destroyed by material forces"[11] . The alienation of labor caused by the logic of capital cannot disappear in the movement of concepts, and the abandonment of alienated labor can only be accomplished in the reality of practical activities. Based on the analysis of alienated labor, Marx found that private property, which is occupied by a few capitalists in real life, is the direct cause of the alienation of the relationship between human beings and nature. By forcing workers to perform alienated labor, capitalists convert large amounts of natural resources into commodities for exchange, thus realizing capital accumulation and acquiring private property. The desire for possession that accompanies private property almost replaces all the other rich sensations that man is supposed to acquire in his sensual activities, so that he is unable to confirm his own essential power through his sensual activities. Thus the more private property the capitalists have, the more impoverished their senses become, and the more egoistic their needs become. The abandonment of private property is accomplished in communist society. On the one hand, communist society affirms the contribution of the capitalist mode of production to the development of the productive forces and the rationality of the existence of material wealth. Communism is not a communism of poverty, but a communism of material wealth. On the other hand, the renunciation of private property is essentially equivalent to the renunciation of alienated labor. For private property is the very product of the activity of alienated labor. Thus, along with the abandonment of alienated labor, man is liberated from alienation. The needs of the human being develop from the egoistic desire to possess things to the needs of the "human being" in all its fullness and richness. The natural world became the key object for man to realize his creativity and potential in the communist society, and became an important "partner" for him. Therefore, the transformation of nature by human beings who have returned to their subjectivity is a practical activity that is both humane and in accordance with the laws of nature, in which human beings are able to consciously and systematically regulate the exchange of materials between human beings and the natural world, and in the process prove their own intrinsic power. Human beings and nature establish a harmonious relationship of co-construction and coexistence, realizing the unity of humanism and naturalism.

Finally, Marx's idea of the subject of practice is consistent with the historical law of the co-evolution of man and nature. Before the emergence of human society, nature was in an undeveloped and primitive state, and man existed only as a higher animal during this period. However, as the subject of practice, human beings elevated themselves out of nature through practical activities in a dynamic way. On the one hand, man has realized his own evolution in the sense of biological evolution. On the other hand, as an organic body of nature, man realizes his own evolution while implying that nature has realized evolution in a certain sense. In a communist society, the synergistic evolution between man and nature will not be fixed in a static state, but will be a harmonious and stable dynamic development. Man is the only practical subject with self-consciousness in the natural world, therefore, giving full play to the power of human subjectivity, transforming nature

with dynamic rational and creative activities is the inevitable requirement for the coordination of the whole ecosystem.

On ecological issues, there have been anthropocentric assertions and ecocentric paranoia. But this boils down to arguing in the dichotomous view of man and nature. Marx's idea of the subject of practice analyzes the reasons for the alienation of the relationship between man and nature from a philosophical point of view, argues that the alienation of the relationship between man and things, man and himself, and man and man is the deep-seated cause of the alienation of the relationship between man and nature, and thus provides a new way of thinking for the modern society to reconcile the contradictions between man and nature, i.e., to realize the harmonious development of man and nature on the basis of the adherence to the idea of the subject of practice.

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