

The Scientificalization and Vulgarization of Marxism in the 20th Century: A Critical Analysis on K. Popper's Critique of Marxism

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Marxism was indeed vulgarized due to scientism in the 20th century, which even limits the development of Chinese social theories nowadays. This paper put forward the idea that it was serious misunderstanding to interpret Marx as prophet or inventor like empiricists who regard finding out eternal laws as the goal of science. In fact, Marx did not propose any so-called "natural laws of historical development". He articulated that the only thing worth to do was to take note of what happened before his eyes and to become its mouthpiece. Thus, to understand science in the face of social practice, to analyze everything historically and never to thrust "eternal" laws in any era should be taken as the core of Marx's new science, which is very important to China today.

Keywords: Kant; Hegel; Marx; Popper; Marxism; Science; Vulgarization

Introduction

Vulgarization of science has been very serious since Marx's time. The focus of Marx's critique of bourgeois economics was, in fact, to critic its vulgarization—vulgar empiricism, positivism and materialism. For a long time, however, Marx's conception of science has not been understood well, so Marx theory was vulgarized again. Faced with the French Marxists of 1870s, Marx said: "All I know is that I am not a Marxist." (Marx/Engels, 2001: p. 7). In the afterword to the second German edition of *Das Kapital* in 1872, Marx complained openly that the method employed in *Das Kapital* "has been little understood" (Karl Marx, 1982: p. 17). In *Critique of Gotha Program* in 1875, Marx even used words such as "nonsense". After Marx died, the problem was more serious that Lenin said: "Half a century later, none of the Marxists understood Marx!!" (Lenin, 1976: p. 180) But Lenin also did not prevent this trend; ultimately, much-criticized Stalinism happened.

In the 20th century, Marxism was vulgarized indeed. Karl Popper, one of the most influential philosophers of science in the twentieth century, pointed that the men who vulgarized Marxism were Marxists after Marx. It was the followers of Marx that turned the original empirical scientific theory of Marx into non-testable and irrefutable one. Popper lived in the era of Cold War, and his theory aimed to oppose Soviet Marxism or Stalinism. Putting aside political ideology reasons, however, we found that Popper also misunderstood Marx's scientific method, which led to a new round process of vulgarization of Marxism. This paper will explore this difficult problem in the history of Western science and philosophy to propose some helpful suggestions for the development of China today.

Empirical Science and the Vulgarization of Marxism

In 1919, the Austrian social revolution was underway, there were at great length all about the evidences of Marxist theory on newspapers. But Einstein's relativity hadn't so much evidences, as long as there was a solar eclipse observation prove that its description didn't exist (at that time, the observation of the solar eclipse confirmed Einstein's theory of relativity just), the theory would be denied. Popper was greatly impressed by the huge theoretical risks of relativity. He began to believe that "can be verified" could not be regarded as the criterion of science, instead, "The criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability." (Popper, 1963: p. 37) And then Popper began to suspect that Marxism was simply false. Popper claimed that some of Marxists' early formulations (for example, Marx's analysis of the character of the "coming social revolution") were testable, and in fact had been falsified (even so, they were scientific). Yet instead of accepting the refutations, the followers of Marx re-interpreted both the theory and the evidence in order to make them be agreed. In this way, they rescued the theory from refutation but at the price of adopting a device which was made irrefutable. As a result, the followers of Marx destroyed much advertised claim to scientific status of Marxism (Popper, 1963: p. 37).

Evidently, Popper mainly blamed the followers of Marx (it should be stressed), and what Popper blamed the followers of Marx was that they transformed Marxism theory which was an original theory of empirical science into non-testable and irrefutable one. It was very clear that the aim of Popper was to criticize the Orthodox Marxism (namely, Scientific Marxism), which has been degenerated into dogmatism. At that time, both

Soviet Marxism and the Second International Marxism regarded themselves as Scientific Marxism, articulated to be proven in the strict sense of science, in fact, they had serious dogmatic tendencies. At the moment Popper admitted some formulations of Marx were empirical science, however, he actually still vulgarized the scientificity of Marxism theory. What happened in the case?

Let's turn to the history of Western science. Francis Bacon distinguished "natural philosophy" (i.e., "nature science") from theology. In Bacon's human knowledge system, only nature science should be regarded as the great mother of the science, other sciences wouldn't grow if they left this root (Francis Bacon, 2000: p. 64). To emphasize the real source of science is nature, which was to emphasize the objective, and seek the truth in objective things. One had to put the "real object" at the centre of discourse, and endeavor to find out the eternal truth hidden behind the object. In this sense Galileo's physics serves as a paradigm shift in the history of the science. His telescope showed that it was not belief, but observation, induction and experiment that stood at the horizon of human knowledge. According to classical empiricism, we could get a universal and objective statement from a finite number of observation statements. The trend could no longer be reversed since Galileo. When the history of science reached Hume, however, the "pure" objectivity of science was questioned. Fundamentally, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is mainly to answer the question asked by Hume, namely, how can empirical knowledge be objective and effective?

After Hume, it was impossible to reach objective injures directly through observation, so Kant turned to think objective validity did not result from immediate sense-perception, but "judgments of perception" (also called "concepts originally begotten in the understanding"), because "concepts" have their origin quite *a priori* in the pure understanding and necessary universality. In Kant's texts, necessary universality is objective validity, they are equivalent terms (Kant, 1949: pp. 54-56). In this way, Kant argued that he solved the problem on why pure nature science had objective validity and thus opened a new channel for empirical science.

Yet Hegel didn't think so. Hegel thought that the most important defect of Kant's epistemology was lack of "movement". In Hegel's analysis, there was no always object, nor eternal subject. The process of cognition was "the transforming of that *in-itself* into that which is *for itself*, of Substance into Subject, of the object of *consciousness* into an object of *self-consciousness*, i.e. into an object that is just as much superseded, or into the *Notion*." "The movement is the circle that returns into itself, the circle that presupposes its beginning and reaches it only at the end." (Hegel, 1977: p. 488) Thus, Hegel supplemented Kant's scientific epistemology: scientific cognition should not be limited to static analysis of object; instead, the transformation between object and subject should be realized. By emphasizing the transforming between object and subject, Hegel's concept of science had the exceptional historical sense, which was the point that Hegel really beyond Kant. As well known, Hegel went too far when he emphasized dialectic identity between object and subject, his science was absolute. As a result, Hegel developed a speculative idealism. As a kind of reactionary of Hegel's philosophy, Feuerbach still went too far on the other hand so that he turned back to the old materialism in which "the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous

human activity, practice, not subjectively" (Marx/ Engels, 1975: p. 3).

It was here that Marx entered the scene of scientific discourse. Marx said: "Feuerbach speaks in particular of the perception of natural science; he mentions secrets which are disclosed only to the eye of the physicist and chemist; but where would natural science be without industry and commerce?" (Marx/Engels, 1970: p. 36) Instead, as long as subjectivity was put into scientific cognition process, the opposition of man and nature, as well as social science and natural science, disappeared. In another word, the humanity of "pure" natural science was revealed. Science was no longer just objective and technical epistemology, and no longer tried to find eternal essence hidden in objects (in Marx's late writings, all of these words, such as "truth", "essence" and "eternal", vanished), but "intervened in and transformed human life all the more practically through industry and has prepared the conditions for human emancipation" (Karl Marx, 1975: p. 355). In Marx's analysis, the question of *Being (Sein)* was replaced by the idea of *Becoming (Werden)*, "natural laws" also became "historical". Because of this reason, what we caught in the landscape of Marx was the incorporation of the "science of humanity" into the natural sciences. This is a new science, "the science of history" (Marx/Engels, 1975: p. 27).

According to this point, not only did Marx go beyond empiricism, positivism and materialism, in which objective validity was adored to the point of idolatry, but also beyond the mechanical antithesis of subjectiveness and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity. At that time, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, natural scientists and utopian socialists did not have a good understanding of science in this complex and covert forms.

From the perspective of the history of modern Western science, Marx's theory was empirical science certainly, but was far from the scope of traditional concept of empirical science. Although Popper read some works of Marx, still did not understand the process of science from Kant to Marx profoundly. Based on the criterion of "falsifiability, or refutability, or testability", Popper claimed that some formulations of Marx were scientific. However, he actually interpreted Marxism theory according to empirical science or natural science. Is this not vulgar?

Historical Prophecy and the Vulgarization of Marxism

Scientific Marxism claimed that Marxism theory was scientific, because Marxism brought the method of natural science into social science, found out the "natural law" of human society, and predicted the development process of human history precisely. This view was called Historicism by Popper. In the eyes of Popper, Historicism was vulgar and wrong.

"Historicism" was a word that Popper singled to refer to the theory about historical prophecy, which means "the view that the story of mankind has a plot, and that if we can succeed in unraveling this plot, we shall hold the key to the future." (Popper, 1962: p. 338). And Marxism just was such a theory: "Marxism is a purely historical theory, a theory which aims at predicting the future course of economic and power-political developments and especially of revolutions." (Popper, 1947: pp. 78-79). Popper's attitude was very clear: historicism has never been successful in scientific prediction, because "scientific"

determinism is impossible. According to Popper, “scientific” determinism is a doctrine that if we were given a sufficiently precise description of events, together with all the laws of nature, any events could be rationally predicted, with any desired degree of precision. Popper firmly opposed to scientific determinism. In his opinion, the future predictions of a certain moment would be possible only in a completely isolated, steady and periodic system. But it is very rare in nature, and certainly didn’t exist in the modern society. In natural science, the idea of a law which determined the direction and the character of evolution was “a typical nineteenth century mistake, arising out of the general tendency to ascribe to the ‘Natural Law’ the functions traditionally ascribed to God”; In social science, “society is changing, developing”, and “this development is not, in the main, repetitive” (Popper, 1962: p. 340). So Scientific Marxism established its historicism on the “scientific” determinism, which was certainly not scientific.

Besides opposing to Scientific Marxism, Popper also attacked Marx directly. Why attacked Marx, then? It because that Marx was “a false prophet”, especially, Marx “misled scores of intelligent people into believing that historical prophecy is the scientific way of approaching social problems” (Popper, 1947: p. 78). So here, another vital historical question emerged: was Marx the historical prophet described by Popper?

Sincerely, historicism was indeed an important tradition of Western culture. Ancient Greek philosophy, medieval theology, French positivism, English empiricism, Kant and Hegel, though these schools were very different, all of them believed: behind the changing world, there were so-called eternal laws or primary beings. In any case, the world was determined by these laws, to discover them and forecast the future of the world was the primary task of scientific cognitions. According to Russo, this characteristic of Western culture came from the anxiety of people to get “safety”. In this sense, Religion assured to people the “eternal” and thus provided a “decisive” future, which gave the spiritual comfort to them. Science, like philosophy, also aimed to find some permanent substratum amid changing phenomena (Russo, 1961: pp. 45-46). However, in fact, precisely in Marx this tendency had been curbed and even abandoned.

We have indicated above that Marx found a perspective of dynamic social practice when he overcame the mechanical materialism of Feuerbach, and found a “historical” perspective when he critiqued Hegel’s speculative idealism. Consequently, Marx suggested a significant meaning when he wrote down “We know only a single science, the science of history.” (Marx/Engels, 1975: p. 28). “*The science of history*” was a science about movements or changes, namely, both social science and natural science should understand the world in the perspective of changes. How can there be eternal things! As long as viewing science alongside social practice (the main characteristics of social practice are subjectivity, activity and change), meanwhile, understanding science in the point of dialectics (dialectics “regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence.” (Karl Marx, 1982: p. 20). Marx’s understanding of science should not be regarded as determinism, and historical prophecy certainly should not be treated as Marx’s scientific method and goal.

Actually, Marx valued the general laws of human history only within certain limits. General laws were not Marx’s scientific goals. For example, at the beginning of political economy research, Marx pointed that the modern science apart from the

changing social practice, but seeking of the general laws. Marx said: “What indeed should we think of a science which *primly* abstracts from this large area of human labor, and fails to sense its own inadequacy, even though such an extended wealth of human activity says nothing more to it perhaps than what can be said in one word—‘need’, ‘common need’?” (Karl Marx, 1975: p. 354) In *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), Marx and Engels blamed the founders of critical-utopian socialism and communism who only knew to search “new social laws”, but ignored historical conditions of the emancipation of the proletariat. In *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy* (1857-1858), Marx stressed that when we talked about the production, we referred to production at a certain stage of social development, there was no so-called absolute law of “production in general”. Even if we speak of “general laws” on the common sense, this “general” concept itself were multifarious compound comprising divergent categories. Some elements were found in all epochs, some were common to a few epochs. The purpose emphasized these “general laws” only to avoid repetition, thus the most important thing for us to do was not to highlight the common, but to emphasize the essential differences. However, modern economists did not perceive this fact, all wisdom of them were used to prove the eternity of the laws of existing social relations. After the publication of *Das Kapital*, Marx’s scientific method was misunderstood and critiqued. In 1872, Marx endorsed the view attributed to him in *afterword to the second German edition of Das Kapital* that: “But it will be said, the general laws of economic life are one and the same, no matter whether they are applied to the present or the past. This Marx directly denies. According to him, such abstract laws do not exist. On the contrary, in his opinion every historical period has laws of its own...” (Karl Marx, 1982: p. 18). In 1877, when someone wanted to change Marx’s theory about the history of western European capitalist development thoroughly into a general theory of historical philosophy, Marx said: “He is both honoring and shaming me too much... events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historic surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.” (Marx/Engels, 1968: p. 111). By the word of “super-historical”, Marx distinguished his scientific theory from all categories of knowledge which regarded seeking eternal laws and general truth as their essential mission (Chang, 2012).

Engels also has elaborated this view clearly. Soon after the publication of *Das Kapital*, Engels pointed out that, whatever the fate of the propositions of this book, a lasting merit of Marx is to have put an end to the narrow-minded concept which treated political economy “as abstract and universally valid a science as mathematics”. Due to Marx’s historical outlook, it is impossible to view social laws as “eternally valid truths” (Marx/Engels, 1985: p. 218). In the difficult exploration about the scientificity of Marxism theory, Louis Althusser also found that when Marx said in a sarcastic tone that he was not a Marxist, Marx actually opposed to describe his works as the general philosophy of history or the political economy finding total law of human society by a “writer”. And actually, Marx claimed that *Das Kapital* was not a “science” (Althusser, 2003: p. 251). Professor He Ping, a Chinese scholar, put forward this point in

her research, too. She said that there was indeterminism thought definitely in Marx's early research on political economy and late research on anthropology (Ping, 2008). Even Popper himself had to recognize that "Karl Marx himself was one of the first to emphasize the importance, for the social sciences, of these unintended consequences" (Popper, 1962: p. 342). How can Marx's theory be understood as scientific determinism like Newtonian physics? How can Marx be read as social prophet pursuing the general law of history?

"Scientific Marxism" interpreted Marxism theory as historical determinism, consequently, over highlighted the significance of general historical law. So it was impossible to avoid dogma and vulgarization. Ultimately, they misunderstood science and put Marxism into this erroneous scientific understanding, so left away from the essential spirits of Marx thought farther and farther. Popper put forward that the goal of modern science was not prophecy and he was right. Any scientific theories would make some judgment about the expected development in the field more or less. Marxist Theory was no exception. However, if science leads to some conclusions about prophecy, it must be a byproduct of science, which could not be regarded as the standards of science. Popper labeled Marx as historical determinism without exploring Marx's science profoundly. A new round of misunderstanding and vulgarization of Marxism inevitably occurred.

Conclusion

Our research indicates that there is a close relation between Marxism's vulgarization and scientific process in 20th century. In *Das Kapital*, Marx once satirized Proudhon socialists because of their misusing of the word "science": "where thoughts are absent, words are brought in as convenient replacements." (Marx/Engels, 1989: p. 98) But what a pity, soon after *Das Kapital* publication, Marx's theory also fell into this prevalent doctrine. This situation existed and developed in the whole 20th century. Even today, 140 years later, the situation has not fundamentally changed. Not only has his scientific method still "been little understood", but also some of his conceptions faced to explicit denials. So did Popper. For this reason, Marxism theory faced various misunderstandings and plights in its history. Were Marx alive now, how would he think?

In fact, Marx was a scientific realist who rejected the conception of empiricist analysis of science. Not only was Marx not a "founder"—a "scientist" like Newton or Darwin, or a "writer" who tried to establish knowledge system—all bourgeois economists critiqued by Marx did so, but also he was not a "historical prophecy"—to find out so-called "natural laws of historical development" has never been Marx's ends. What Marx did merely was to take note of what happened before his eyes and to become its mouthpiece. The whole *Das Kapital* was just a logic expression of social reality. In a word, to understand science in the face of social practice, analyze everything his-

torically, and never thrust "eternal" laws into every era should be taken as the core of Marx's new science. In this sense, the first thing Marxists should do was to understand reality, not to tell stories of the future or extract some abstract laws from history to define any of the actual historical stages. The future developed and grew up from the current situation; at the same time, history was helpful only in the sense that history could lead us to understand today well. Evidently, it was crucial for China to understand Marxism from the perspective of these, especially at the moment when China decides to enhance the confidence of socialism with Chinese characteristics, establish the Chinese model and solve Chinese increasing practical problems nowadays.

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