

# Does Humanitarianism Exist in Leninism? —A Book Review of “A Study of Lenin’s Anthropology”

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**How to cite this paper:** Lim, J. W. (2021). Does Humanitarianism Exist in Leninism?—A Book Review of “A Study of Lenin’s Anthropology”. *Advances in Literary Study*, 9, 84-90.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2021.92010>

**Received:** April 2, 2021

**Accepted:** April 22, 2021

**Published:** April 25, 2021

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## Abstract

Based on the in-depth study of the text, author explains the theoretical and practical background, development process, essential characteristics, main content of the formation of Lenin’s human studies, and the historical fate and enlightenment significance of this thought in contemporary development. The book indicated that Lenin’s human studies have enriched and developed Marxist human studies in human existence theory, human liberation theory, and human development theory with its distinctive characteristics of the times, nationalities, and practices. It forms another vital stage of development after Marx’s human studies.

## Keywords

Humanitarianism, Leninism, Book Review

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## 1. Summary

More than just a pandemic, Covid-19 has caused the increasing of social problems that lead to a global humanitarian crisis. The humanitarian crisis is a topic that became the concern of many academicians and researchers that have interest of studying Marxism tradition in the U.K. One of the prominent academicians is Professor Dr. Yang Jing who elaborates his concern about the crisis in a book published by China Social Science Publishing House in June, 2019, entitled “A Study of Lenin’s Anthropology”.

This book comprises of eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the research background and its significance.

Chapter 2 highlights background that became the formation of Lenin’s humanitarian thought. The author, firstly, explains three stages of the thought: capi-

talist freedom to monopoly, the rise and fall of the Second International, and the pursuit and conflict of Russian modernization. Based on the research background then the author explains the theoretical background of Lenin's Humanistic Thought. Lenin's humanistic thought was enlightened by Marx and Engels' humanitarianism, nurtured by Russian revolutionary democracy, and influenced by the theoretical intermediary of the second international theory. The author criticized the inheritance of Hegel's humanistic logic.

Chapter 3 has very important account for the formation process and essential characteristics of Lenin's humanitarianism. As Lenin realized that socialism changed from theory to practice and created the world's first socialist country, He actively participated in the Russian democratic revolution and led the Russian proletarian revolution, socialist construction, and the international communist movement, and made immortal contributions to the liberation of the Russian people and humanity. In this process, Lenin took the Marxist anthropology as a guide and developed it into realistic socialist anthropology for the people of the backward countries in the East that were at that time under the imperialist era's conditions. The thought inspired these people to against the imperialists and manage their communities to survive, resolve, and develop.

In chapter 4, Professor Dr. Yang Jing introduces Existential theory to different varieties in Lenin's Humanitarian Thought: Human subjective ontology, Human Social Ontology, and human Historical Ontology. This chapter's key topic is 'existential theory,' which involves Lenin's Humanitarian Thought, which builds the theoretical framework of this whole book.

Professor Dr. Yang Jing then in Chapter 5 considers Lenin's anthropology as a perspective that can enrich and develop Marxist anthropology. This approach has distinctive characteristics of the times, nationality, and practice in many aspects such as the theory of human existence, the theory of human liberation, and human development. Professor Dr. Yang Jing thinks Lenin took the Marxist anthropology as a guide and developed it into realistic socialist anthropology for people of the backward countries in the East under the imperialist era's conditions to seek survival, freedom, and development.

Chapter 6 is used to introduce Lenin's Criticism on Abstract Humanism. Lenin's human studies are another critical development stage in Marxist human studies' history after Marx's human studies. Lenin's humanism not only gained momentum in the practice of the Russian people's liberation cause but was also in line with the "Populists", "Economists", "God-seekers", "God-makers", and Kautsky's "general democracy". And the false community theory and other forms of abstract humanitarian struggles have been pushed forward.

The historical destiny of Lenin's humanism is the topic of Chapter 7. Lenin's human studies emphasized that under certain material conditions, human beings' role as the main body of practical society and history and the promotion from spontaneity to consciousness is the prerequisite for the formation of the main body of practice. From historical passivity to historical initiative, it is the

foundation of human beings' formation as the subject of history. Lenin's human science based on the scientific analysis of the unbalanced development of capitalism and the contradiction between the East and the West as well as the full affirmation of the people's historical initiative in the East proposed the backward countries in the East. "Theory of the Victory of a Socialist Revolution in One Country". In this revolution, man's liberation will experience three steps: political liberation, economic liberation, and complete liberation, that is, the gradual realization of the whole and free development of man. The victory of the October Revolution and the establishment of Soviet power provided the necessary political guarantee for the Russian people's liberation. Lenin led the Soviet to promote socialist construction in economics, politics, party building, and culture, emphasizing improving people's living standards, enhancing the people's dominant position, and promoting the people's development in many aspects.

By looking closely to Lenin's humanism theory and history, the author examines Lenin's Humanism's contemporary significance in chapter 8. Although Lenin's human studies have been interpreted unilaterally by Western Marxism, and Soviet Russia in the post-Leninist era was ill-fated, this cannot conceal the brilliance and great value of Lenin's human studies. Lenin's human studies provided theoretical guidance for the liberation of the Chinese people and enriched and developed them. However, it was also crucial for contemporary Chinese to realize socialism's scientific development with Chinese characteristics, constructing a harmonious society and people's overall development.

## 2. Evaluation

In the 1960s, in the Marxism developed by Stalin in the Soviet Union, the British New Left proposed the need to understand cultural factors in the superstructure of people's practical activities, demonstrating the humanitarian characteristics of Marxist theory. As a key initiator of British Marxist humanitarianism, Edward Palmer Thompson (1957) advocated that only when socialism manifests its humanitarianism that can it reproduce its communist revolutionary glory. He also led a strong proposition that Communism is not a political goal while it takes people as its goal. He suggested the concept of "proletariat," which contains human subjectivity and initiatives, and affirmed the important role of history's masses. By holding on to this concept, British Marxism completely denied Stalin's reductionist and economic deterministic transformation of Marxism. In the United Kingdom, even in Europe and the United States, the Marxist theory researchers confirm that Marxism originated from the "Manuscript of Economics and Philosophy in 1844" by young Marx. However, part of this book's inspiration comes from Engels' "The Condition of the Working Class in Britain". In this book, Engels intuitively described the phenomenon of British workers' extreme poverty as an observer and revealed the low social status of the British proletarians and the reasons for poverty. These theories constitute the basis for launching a proletarian revolution in the West.

The humanitarian interpretation of British Marxism originates from the works of Marx and Engels. However, people attribute Stalin's deprivation to the foundation of Lenin, even though there is no relationship with Lenin. Therefore, the European theoretical academia has doubt that Leninism is humanitarian, and few works are willing to reflect on this conclusion seriously. Jean-Paul Sartre used Stalinism to deny Lenin's humanitarian authority. Norman (1997) provided the textual basis, but Lenin had not read Marx's "Manuscript of Economics and Philosophy in 1844." So far, the reasons why the Western academic circles deny Lenin's humanitarianism seem to be incomplete.

However, looking back carefully on Lenin's comments to British classical political-economy certainly they are not the same thought. Sismondi accused Ricardo's classical political economy of "forgetting people," while Lenin criticized Sismondi's retrogression of classical political economy. He praised classical political economy theory for perfectly reflecting the current capitalist mode of production, which broke feudal system's privileges, inequality, and imprisonment, and supported capitalist ideology characterized by fairness and freedom. Although British humanitarian Marxism values British working class's subjectivity and revolution, its conclusions are oriented towards reformism. The New Left replaced material practice with culture, dispelled the revolution's economic significance, and transformed it into a formal improvement.

As the product of people's initiative and reflection to the world's concept and values in practice, culture has the spiritual attributes of people. Due to it being conceptual, it does not directly harm human rights itself. Culture is regarded as a soft way of governing the world. Lenin also indicated that excessive reliance on culture would make people ignore the reality of culture and thus forget that human liberation is also a real issue. According to process of history, British liberation is different from the liberation of the Russians. The liberation is not a cultural conflict but stems from Britain's and Russia's historical paths. The organization is a product of the British Industrial Revolution. The British proletariat has consciously united together to solve human emancipation by seemingly peaceful assembly.

Although peaceful gatherings cannot wholly solve the problem, their organizational nature will allow capitalists to compromise and give the poor a little respite. Meanwhile, the peasants in Russia have not been blessed by large-scale industry, and they are left unsuccessful by the exploiting class, just like scattered sand. Therefore, the greatness of Lenin was that he used political means to replace economic means in the war, allowing the majority of the proletariat to reach a consensus and take concerted action. If this method is unable to adapt to changes in a peaceful age, it will become a new means of alienation that oppresses and enslaves people. Another great thing about Lenin is that he knows when and how to make a "person" into a "person."

Professor Dr. Yang Jing's monograph has significance and believes that Lenin defends and pursues people's rights under the seemingly relentless years of rev-

olution. Moreover, he also emphasized that Lenin tried to defend the purity of socialist humanitarianism by criticizing Russia's backward and hypocritical feudal humanitarianism. Because of the complexity of revolutionary dialectics, Lenin would not bluntly praise humanitarianism as a great revolutionary mentor. Putting aside the historical representations of writing, we should critically penetrate Lenin's theoretical core.

Lenin wanted to solve how 90% of peasants in Eastern society should break away from the attachment to private ownership of land and see their path to liberation in a semi-feudal economy. This process is complicated. The peasants are unconscious of self-liberation, but Lenin takes it as a mission to accomplish it. When Lenin carried out this humanitarian mission, he did not rely on the apocalypse at all. He only believed in the power of the people. As a realistic movement, the key to communism is how to lead people's power, which has to rely on political means to push the people forward. However, relying on the leader's will must be controlled within the range that the people's economic life can bear. This is the cornerstone of Lenin's leadership art, and Professor Dr. Yang Jing emphasized this point.

Therefore, Professor Dr. Yang Jing draws convincing conclusions that Lenin defends and pursues the people's rights under the seemingly relentless years of revolution. Another important point is that Lenin tried to defend the purity of socialist humanitarianism by criticizing Russia's backward and hypocritical feudal humanitarianism. Because of revolutionary dialectics' complexity, Lenin would not bluntly praise humanitarianism as a great revolutionary mentor. Putting aside the historical representations of writing, we should critically penetrate Lenin's theoretical core.

As a Chinese scholar, Professor Dr. Yang Jing must eventually focus on China's issues, which constitutes a vital conclusion part of this book. He saw the inheritance relationship between Leninism and Chinese socialism on humanitarian issues. In old China, like Tsarist Russia, the proportion of peasants in the total population was high, and industrialization was low. The people's understanding of historical trends was vague and indifferent. On humanitarian issues, the two have a highly similar historical starting point. This is what the Chinese Communist Party must face when leading China's new democratic revolution and the socialist revolution.

Great arguments and thoughts in this book can provide reader inspiration to think and act to solve China's problems, using Lenin's theory as the intermediary. Only by understanding Lenin's thoughts can we obtain the key to understanding China's problems. It is easy to understand why Mao (1993) put forward the slogan "Take Russia as a teacher" in the early days of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Although later under the slogan of "independence and self-reliance," the Chinese Communist Party rarely mentioned "taking Russia as a teacher," but the model significance of Soviet-Russian socialism to China's practice cannot be denied.

After the founding of New China, both the construction of a new democratic society and the socialist transformation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China faced the same problem: the contradiction between the speed of social construction and the masses' recognition ability. At the same time, the speed of social construction also contains multiple contradictions. The most important thing is the U.S. and the Soviet Union's international situation for hegemony, forcing China to increase its overall national strength rapidly. As a result, China adopted a highly politicized development model and finally deviated from the standard track of economic construction. The level that it extracted stipulated people's attributes and it fell into the practice of extreme utopian socialism.

Deng Xiaoping publicly admitted that China's reform and opening-up began with a new study and understanding of Lenin's new economic policy. Professor Dr. Yang Jing told us through the last chapter that the Chinese Communist Party has returned to the issue of people, but it refuses to be confused with Western humanitarian ideas. They returned to the New Economic Policy, and then to the young Marx and his "Manuscript of Economics and Philosophy in 1844" and launched an academic debate on the issue of "humanitarianism and alienation" in Chinese academic circles.

Meanwhile, the Chinese people have continuously formed a consensus in practice: The people that Marx and Lenin care about are individuals in the labor-production community, and they link the destiny of people and people through social labor. The Chinese Communist Party's concern for people does not come from the hymn of morality but guides the people to realize that the common interest is the most extended. At present, the Communist Party of China is standing based on socialist humanitarianism, carrying out its national governance and participating in global governance.

Professor. Dr. Yang Jing's research methods focus on analyzing texts, but there are two types of "texts." A kind of "text" is the "document" that carries ideas. He not only read through the Chinese version of "The Complete Works of Lenin", which is said to be the largest and most complete version in the world at present but also carefully read the works of historical figures of Lenin's time and who had intersections with Lenin's historical context. Another type of "text" is the "document" that records the historical process. The writing of thought cannot be separated from the possible scope of historical delineation. Dr. Yang Jing has not waited to master a large amount of Russian historical materials to make the thought and interpretation of his retelling closer to the truth of history.

This book is highly recommended for scholars who have interest in social humaniora theory in the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, this book also can help us to avoid prejudices and re-introduce Lenin who respects and cares for people.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this pa-

per.

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