

Normative Foundation of Modernity: Habermas' Criticism of Marx and Its Limits

—An Investigation Based on *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

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Abstract

According to Habermas, the essence of modernity is subjectivity (subject rationality). Marx has put forward the modernity theory based on “labor” in *The Manuscript of Economics and Philosophy* in 1844. However, Habermas believed that there was still a single subject reason behind the concept of “labor”, which showed that there were problems in the normativity of Marx’s theory. According to Habermas, the normative foundation can only come from the free interaction between subjects at the rational level, and can be expressed as “dialogue” activities in the public domain when implemented in theoretical strategies. However, from the standpoint of historical materialism, the “capital” that Marx pays attention to constitutes the limit of Habermas’s “dialogue” activities.

Keywords

Modernity, Normative, Foundation, Labor, Dialogue, Limit

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, critical activity can be regarded as a kind of “potential” dialogue activity. Any dialogue must follow certain explicit standards, such as logical consistency, focus on evidence, etc. Ontologically, these standards can be further abstracted into basic norms such as clarity, understanding and tolerance. The reason why they are “basic” norms is that when one party to the dialogue follows these norms, the other party should also follow these norms. Even if one party opposes these norms, it should still express its opposition on the premise of clarity, understanding and tolerance, otherwise even the activities of expressing this opposition cannot be carried out (Li, 2002). This is to say that these

norms are the inescapable “meta-norms” of the conversation. Habermas’s “normative foundation” is discussed in this sense.

As an important representative of Western Marxism, Habermas attempted to rebuild historical materialism and believed that Marx’s criticism of modernity was based on “labor”, but “labor” was supported by “subject rationality” (subjectivity). At the level of rational self-criticism, subjectivity cannot generate normative connotation, just like instrumental rational criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno, it will fall into a “dilemma of self-enclosed reason”. In other words, in Habermas’ view, there are problems with the normative foundation of Marx’s theory. In view of Habermas’s query on Marx’s normative basis, the academic circles mostly take the *Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* as the text to discuss, while ignoring the modernity perspective in *the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. However, the author believes that only from the perspective of modernity can we see the differences between Habermas and Marx. This paper first clarifies the foundation of Marx’s criticism of Modernity: labor, then takes *the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* as the text, presents Habermas’s criticism of Marx’s concept of “labor”, leads to the two levels of Habermas’s normative foundation, and finally defends Marx from the standpoint of historical materialism.

2. The Foundation of Marx’s Critique of Modernity

And what is modernity? In *the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas argues that Hegel first discovered that subjectivity is the principle of modernity (Habermas, 1987a: pp. 16-17). According to Habermas, the essential regulation of modernity is subject reason (subjectivity). As we know, in *the Manuscript of Economics and Philosophy in 1844* (hereinafter referred to as the *Paris Manuscript*), Marx initially outlined the outline of his theory in his life, and launched the criticism of modernity (subjectivity) from the three dimensions of philosophy, economy and politics. That is, the criticism of Hegel’s metaphysics, political economy and communism (Wang & Liu, 2019; Luo, 2012). These three dimensions all focus on the problem of “human essence”. With the clue of “human essence”, we can summarize Marx’s critical approach as follows: human essence (free and conscious activities) - human essence alienation (alienated labor and private property) - human essence return (communism)¹. In the first dimension (the criticism of Hegel’s metaphysics), Marx first presupposed a foothold for the critique of modernity: human nature is labor, a “free and conscious activity” (Marx & Engels, 1988: p. 76).

¹Scholar Chen Bo thinks that Hegel’s critical framework in *phenomenology of Spirit* is: consciousness (human essence) - → objectification of consciousness (essence alienation) - → overcoming of objectification of consciousness (essence return) (See Chen Bo, “interpretation of Marx”, *Journal of Sichuan University (philosophy and Social Sciences Press)*, No. 3, 2002, p. 36). Needless to say, the whole idea of *Paris Manuscript* follows the three-stage dialectic of Hegel’s alienation logic, that is, Hegel’s critical framework in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but Marx replaced Hegel’s “consciousness” with “free and conscious activity”. The author Outlines the whole idea of *Paris Manuscript*: human essence (free and conscious activity) - human essence alienation (private property and alienated labor) - human essence return (communism).

On human essence, Feuerbach reversed Hegel's "self-consciousness" with "perceptual reality" before Marx. But this is just standing from one angle against another. In abstractness, "perceptual reality" is as one-sided as "self-consciousness". From the materialist perspective of Feuerbach's "perceptual reality", Marx replaced the essence of human beings from Hegel's "self-consciousness" to "labor" (Marx & Engels, 1988: pp. 153-154). Although labor is a "free and conscious activity", it should be said that, different from Hegel's consciousness activities limited to consciousness, Marx's concept of "labor" has broken through the internality of consciousness, and acquired the connotation of materialism, and absorbed "self-consciousness" and "perceptual reality" together. Marx said: "The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created" (Marx & Engels, 1988: p. 77). Because labor is not only the labor of consciousness, but also the labor of reality, thus "through and because of this production, nature appears as his work and his reality" (Marx & Engels, 1988: p. 77). Here, "labor" depicts a person's original state of existence: through "labor" activities, people put their essential strength into nature realistically, and then confirm themselves in the changed nature and obtain freedom and pleasure. In the real labor activities, people have relations with nature, society and itself, look back on and confirm themselves in the labor products.

But in real life the worker's situation is this: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men" (Marx & Engels, 1988: p. 71). In Marx's view, this fact merely indicates the alienation between man and labor products, "the object which labor produces labor's product-confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer" (Marx & Engels, 1988: p. 71). This is to say that there is alienation between man and the product of labor, or that alienation of labor produces private property (capital). In this process, not only human and labor products, but also human and labor process itself, human and the species nature, and the relationship between man are alienated. Originally, the essence of man is a free and conscious activity. Man has a comprehensive relationship with nature, society and himself through labor activities, and looks back on himself and confirms himself in labor products. However, alienated labor makes people unable to confirm themselves in labor activities, abstracts the essence of human as private property, and splits people with labor products (nature), species being and others (society), and labor process (itself), cause people living in a state of overall alienation. In order to realize the return of human nature, Marx's theoretical strategy is to abolish the private property (capitalists) produced by alienated labor through political revolution, break the unequal relationship between labourers and capitalists, return alienated labor to the original creative activities, restore the unity of the rela-

tionship between man and nature, society and itself. This unified state is “communism”. Marx said: “This communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man, the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species” (Marx & Engels, 1988: pp. 102-103).

Since the essence of man lies in labor, from another point of view, we take “labor” as the main clue to outline the main ideas of Paris Manuscript. It is presented as such a clue of thinking: the alienation of labor (free and conscious activities)-the alienation of labor (alienated labor and private property)-the return of labor (communism). Obviously, labor runs through the starting point, middle end and end point of Marx’s theoretical system, and becomes the basic concept of Marx’s theoretical system. In the sense of linear development theory, the degree of human freedom depends on the state of human labor. Just because of this, Marcuse pointed out that labor is the ontological foundation of Marx’s critique of political economy and scientific socialism theory (Marcuse, 1973). Under this understanding, we have reason to say that labor is the foundation of Marx’s whole critique of modernity. However, such a critical foundation has been deeply questioned by Habermas. The main doubt is that Habermas believes that the normative connotation of Marx’s concept of “labor” is confused.

3. Habermas’s Questioning of the Concept of “Labor”

In *the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas believes that Hegel belongs to reflective philosophy, while Marx belongs to praxis philosophy. After completing the above clarification, Habermas argues that for praxis philosophy, “not self-consciousness but labor counts as the principle of modernity” (Habermas, 1987a: p. 64). Since labor is the principle of Marx’s criticism of modernity, Habermas will ask Marx about the rational connotation of labor concept from the perspective of modernity (reason). In the comparison between Hegel and Marx, Hegel first made a hard conclusion: praxis philosophy “It remains a variant of the philosophy of the subject that locates reason in the purposive rationality of the acting subject instead of in the reflection of the knowing subject” (Habermas, 1987a: p. 65). This is Habermas’ basic judgment on Marx: Marx’s praxis philosophy is still a kind of subjective philosophy, while behind the concept of “labor” in praxis philosophy is still a single rationality: cognitive-instrumental rationality.

From the standpoint of Weber’s social rationality and according to Kant’s rational division tradition, Habermas made another stratification of the subject rationality contained in Marx’s “labor”, and believed that Marx’s concept of “labor” had not only cognitive-instrumental rationality (productivity), but also includes the connotation of moral-practical rationality shown by alienated labor (inequality in the relationship between people), and the connotation of aesthet-

ic-expressive rationality which similar to artistic production. The key to the problem is that Marx quietly added other rational connotations - the moral-practical rational connotation of alienated labor (the inequality between people) and the aesthetic-expressive rational connotation which similar to artistic production to the concept of labor, resulting in the confusion of the normative connotation of labor (Habermas, 1987a: pp. 64-67). The resulting problems are:

Because the aesthetic liberation of a single subject cannot guarantee the liberation of the social collective, how did Marx transfer “the aesthetic production of a single subject” to “class labor production” (social collective labor production)? So as to, “he can conceive social labor as the collective self-realization of the producers” (Habermas, 1987a: p. 64; Wu & Lu, 2018). In a word, “the aesthetic production of a single subject” is a subjective category limited to the opposition between man and nature, and “species labor production” is a category of intersubjectivity that extends to the interaction between people. How can the aesthetic implication with the nature of liberation get out of the single subject itself and obtain the connotation of intersubjectivity?

In a word, Marx wants to use “the aesthetic production of a single subject” to realize the freedom and equality between people (communism), but subjectivity (labor) and intersubjectivity (interaction) are two different levels of things in logic. At the conceptual level, we can't jump directly from the former to the latter. Because “liberation from hunger and misery does not necessarily converge with liberation from servitude and degradation, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labor and interaction. Still, there is a connection between the two dimensions” (Habermas, 1996a: p. 148).

Moreover, Habermas then developed a further understanding of Marx: “Marx does not actually explicate the interrelationship of interaction and labor, but instead, under the unspecific title of social praxis, reduces the one to the other, namely, communicative action to instrumental action.” (Habermas, 1996a: p. 147). This means that Marx incorporated moral-practical rationality and aesthetic-expressive rationality into the cognitive-instrumental rationality of labor, made cognitive-instrumental rationality the only internal basis of rationality, and regarded the other two fields within rationality as a means to realize itself. Based on Habermas' critical analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, at the conceptual level, that is, at the rational level, we can analyze that Marx did not keep the boundary between cognitive-instrumental rationality and moral-practical rationality, aesthetic-expressive rationality, but used instrumental rationality to attack and replace the latter two rational fields. However, in Habermas's view, the latter two rational fields are the source of normative values such as freedom and equality, and their loss and even absence means that labor does not have a reflective standard to judge whether the “productive forces” caused by it are forward or backward (Habermas, 1987a: pp. 65-67). The rationality behind “labor” is based on the philosophical model of

subject-object dichotomy, and its essence is the self-entanglement within the rationality of the same subject. Because the dichotomy of subject and object can only originate from the same subject, so in the final analysis, it is the self-criticism of the same abstract subject, and the standard of criticism can only come from the interior of cognitive-instrumental rationality. In this way, just like Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental rationality in *the Dialectics of Enlightenment*, the self-criticism of subjective rationality will fall into a "dilemma of self-enclosed reason": the self-criticism of subjective rationality still needs to borrow subjective rationality itself, therefore, reason cannot get out of its own compulsion. The result is that the rationality of a single subject leads to the coercion and violence of abstract identity, and the lack of norms to constrain itself. The root of the problem is that the subject reason is a monad closed in itself and cannot accept the existence of other monads. In order to solve this dilemma, Habermas believes that a transformation of rationality paradigm is needed, that is, from subject-centered rationality (subjective rationality) to communication-centered rationality (communicative rationality), or from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, because only the free interaction between one subjective rationality and another subjective rationality can produce norms, so as to make up for the lack of norms within subjective rationality.

4. The Normative Foundation of Habermas Theory

As a matter of fact, norms cannot come from inside the subjective rationality, but can only come from the outside of the subjective rationality. Only through the process of mutual distinction, infiltration and identification from one rationality to another can norms be produced. On this point, Habermas was deeply influenced by the sociologist George Herbert Mead. Mead believes that the self can be divided into the principal self (I) and the guest self (me). The principal self represents the instinctive impulse of the pre-society and is the behavior taken by the self in the social interaction with the other. When the principal self takes the perspective of the other and regards the behavior expectation of the other as his own behavior expectation, the guest self, a kind of "universal other", that is, "the normative expectation of the society", appears (Habermas, 1992; Feng, 2020). In short, the interaction between the self (one subject) and the other (another subject) promotes the formation of the "me", that is, the formation of social norms. On the basis of absorbing Mead's theory, Habermas argues that "this intersubjective recognition grounds the social force or currency of the norm" (Habermas, 1984). "I understand communicative action, symbolic interaction. It is governed by binding consensual norms, which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects" (Habermas, 1971a). In this regard, at the rational level, norms come from the free interaction between subjects.

But the question now is: how can the self and the other, the subject and the subject, be mediated? Habermas's answer: use language. "Language use develops

itself from the interaction of socialized subjects. The subject of socialization, with signs as the intermediary, as different individuals, they know and recognize each other” (Habermas, 1971b). Habermas believes that there is a requirement of understanding and consensus hidden in the deep structure of language, and when we use language to say the first sentence, a universal and non-coercive consensus is clearly expressed. However, the real consensus does not come from the outside of both sides of the speech, or imposed by one side on the other, such as reward, threat, inducement or misleading, etc., but from the binding force of the dialogue itself. Only when the two sides follow the provisions of the dialogue itself, abide by the requirements of the dialogue itself, and according to the precondition or value presupposition of the dialogue, can the consensus between the two sides of the speech be formed. In this context, consensus and dialogue are the same thing, and only in this way can consensus be binding among subjects.

Such a dialogue precondition or value presupposition is an “ideal speech situation”, that is, everyone is free to participate in the discussion, put forward reasons to defend their claims, and, without internal and external coercion, only believe in the power of better arguments (Habermas 1996b: p. 181, 228, 230; Wang, 2002: pp. 87-88). This “ideal speech situation” was called “ideal communicative community” by Karl-Otto Apel. Like Habermas, Apel also believes that “ideal communication community” is the value presupposition of dialogue, and makes “ultimate foundation argument” for it with the help of Heidegger’s “being-in-the-World” theory. Appel believes that the opening of any dialogue “always already” includes a relationship between freedom and equality in which subjects can communicate and reach consensus, that is, an “ideal community of communication”. In other words, the absolute and unconditional premise of dialogue is an “ideal communication community”. Even if one side of the dialogue refutes such “ideal communication community”, such as “equal participation and free discussion”, it is also actually based on the premise of “equal participation and free discussion”, otherwise it is impossible to express such opposition activities (Habermas, 1996b: pp. 322-323; Sun, 2020).

In order to institutionalize the “dialogue”, Habermas replaced “ideal speech situation” with “public sphere” in politics, trying to interpret the true connotation of freedom and democracy through mutual transformation between dialogue and law. On the one hand, the legitimacy of law lies in that the receiver of law is also the maker of law. Law is the legalization of consensus formed by people’s open dialogue and free discussion. On the other hand, after the formation of the law, it should be constantly revised and improved, with the help of people’s criticism, inspection and supervision in the public sphere. In other words, law is the institutional expression of dialogue activities and the condensation of the relationship of mutual recognition between subjects, so it is also the temporary solidification of the relationship between freedom and equality. In fact, Habermas wants to give every citizen equal private autonomy such as life and property rights, and ensure that every citizen has public autonomy to ex-

press opinions and participate in politics in the public sphere, so as to establish a right system in which private autonomy and public autonomy coexist. Here, private autonomy and public autonomy form a hermeneutic cycle: citizens' private autonomy can only be realized through public autonomy, while public autonomy can only be guaranteed through private autonomy. The result is the emergence of "an association of free and equal consociates under law" (Habermas, 1996b: p. 176). In Habermas' view, the difficult problems of modernity (such as loss of freedom and loss of meaning) are the result of the invasion of system (economy and politics) into the world of life (culture, society, personality). His rescue scheme is to fully tap the cultural factors of the life world, form legal norms through dialogue in the public sphere, make the law become the "intermediary" and "converter" between the system and the life world, in turn, regulate and limit the expansion of the system, and set the direction for the operation of the system. Habermas advocates that people can participate in designing their own lives in reality and live a good life of autonomy and responsibility. It can be said that he is facing human itself, and his theoretical purport is still human emancipation.

Now we can see that at the rational level, Habermas's normative foundation comes from the free interaction between subjects, which is reflected in the theoretical strategy and presented as "dialogue" in the public sphere.

5. A Defense of Historical Materialism

As early as in *on the Jewish problem*, Marx raised a sobering question in response to Bruno Powell's attempt to free the state from religious bondage and realize human freedom: "What kind of emancipation is involved?" (Marx, 1992: p. 215) Marx thought it was: political emancipation. Now, we can ask Habermas the same question: what kind of emancipation is your scheme? Political emancipation or human emancipation? Marx believed that "political liberation" means that the state is liberated from religion, and people have basic human rights such as freedom, equality, property and security in law, and take this as a basis to participate in the political community. Marx pointed out that political liberation is only the liberation at the political and legal levels, but man in the real material life relationship, that is, in the civil society, is not a free man. "The limitations of political emancipation are immediately apparent from the fact that the state can liberate itself from a restriction without man himself being truly free of it, that a state can be a free state without man himself being a free man" (Marx, 1992: p. 218). This shows that political emancipation is not complete, and civil society constitutes the limit of political emancipation. "Human emancipation" means criticizing the political emancipation itself and launching a revolution within the limits of political emancipation, that is, subverting private ownership in civil society and eliminating the actual differences caused by private property, eliminating the private character of civil society and realizing "human society or social humanity" (Marx later said "communism").

Although Marx's analysis of political emancipation points to the criticism of liberalism, and Habermas claims that his theory is "Kantian republicanism", which is a two-way transcendence of liberalism and republicanism, the author believes that Habermas' emancipation scheme relies on free dialogue in the public sphere to build a democratic state under the rule of law, the purpose of which is to protect the equal and free rights of individuals. In essence, this scheme is still the emancipation at the political and legal levels. It does not criticize the private property or capital of real material life, is also limited in the horizon that Marx has long criticized political liberation, and does not realize human emancipation.

According to Marx, capital will derive a kind of social power to dominate others in real daily social life. Marx said in capital: "Capital is not a thing, it is a definite social relation of production pertaining to a particular historical social formation, which simply takes the form of a thing and gives this thing a specific social character" (Marx, 1991). In daily real life, as an exchange value, capital gets rid of various natural regulations and becomes a universal and identical social existence, becomes "the universal light with which all the other colors are tinged and are modified through its peculiarity. It is a special ether which determines the specific gravity of everything that appears in it" (Marx & Engels, 1998). Capital permeates into every corner of real life like light, becoming the essential regulation of modern society, the way of existence of all things, and therefore the measure of all things. Whoever owns capital has the power to dominate others, and this power can be legitimized as political power if it rises to the national level. As Marx pointed out in *German ideology*: capital in material life relations produces a kind of social power, and political power (army, prison) is only the legal expression of social power at the political level².

In other words, in the dialogue activities of formulating legal norms, if both sides of the dialogue have the inequality of private property (capital), it will lead to the inequality of social power. So the first question Habermas faces is: in the case of the inequality of private property (capital) between the two sides of the dialogue, how can the dialogue activities of formulating legal norms avoid the potential domination of the economically strong side with social power over the economically weak side? In other words, if the social power of capital is possessed by a certain class or group, how can Habermas ensure that the public sphere remains neutral and free from ideological manipulation? In fact, Habermas also realized that the social power of capital might influence and distort the

²In the sense of comparison with "political power", Marx clearly used the word "social power" in *German ideology*. Marx believed that social power originated from material life relations and was "deriving from its property"; Political power is the legal argument of the ruling class (the class occupying property) on the conceptual level (secular or religious) of social power, that is, it is the "practical-idealistic expression in each case in the form of the state". Therefore, there is a relationship between the two: social power is the basis and political power is derived from it. See Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The German ideology: including Theses on Feuerbach and introduction to The critique of political economy*, Prometheus Books, 1998, p 60; Wang Defeng: "Rereading Historical Materialism in Contemporary Circumstances", *Journal of Yunnan University (Social Science Edition)*, 2015, 4 (9).

public sphere. In the early *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he said, “His critique of political economy was indeed aimed at the presuppositions upon which the self-interpretation of the public sphere in the political realm rested” (Habermas, 1989). In his later book *between Facts and Norms*, he also made it clear that “The idea that the state can, as *pouvoir neutre*, rise above the pluralism of civil society was always ideological” (Habermas, 1996b: p. 175). Unfortunately, since Habermas interprets “dialogue” from the perspective of “culture”, “I use the term culture for the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world” (Habermas, 1987b). In his view, culture is a light and the deep background of dialogue, all distortions of dialogue activities can be repaired in the explanatory potential of culture. It can be said that he did not solve the problem of the influence of capital on “dialogue” activities from the beginning to the end. Therefore, in the construction of theory, he will inevitably ignore the power relations derived from capital and the class composition of members in the public sphere.

If there is indeed a struggle between different social forces in the public sphere, resulting in a Gramsci style competition for cultural leadership, then, in order to achieve the goal of using the public sphere back-feeding system, Habermas’ theory cannot ignore the factual premise of cultural leadership struggle (Li, 2007; Wang, 2002: p. 305). Perhaps, a reasonable remedy is that Habermas can introduce other factors other than economy (capital), politics (power) and culture (ideology) to deepen the theoretical level and structure, and establish a specific and dialogic cultural leadership theory on the basis of Gramsci, so as to make the explanatory power of the theory realistic. However, no matter what form a dialogic theory of cultural leadership takes, it is likely to fail in real life if it does not pay attention to Marx’s view that the real material life relationship, strictly speaking, capital is the real source of power.

In a word, Habermas’s Modernity criticism Based on “dialogue” and from the perspective of “culture” is essentially a typology of rational criticism, which undoubtedly confined within the framework of rational criticism. Marx’s modernity criticism not only criticizes rationality itself, but also aims at the basis of Rationality: capital. In this regard, Marx’s “capital” constitutes the theoretical limit of Habermas’s “dialogue”. Although Habermas tried to have a kinship with Marx in the name of “reconstructing historical materialism”. But in fact, Habermas’s theory has been far from the basic position of historical materialism. He thought that Marx’s interpretation framework of “economic foundation-superstructure” was outdated and wanted to replace it with the double-layer structure model of “system-life world”. The author believes that as long as capital is still the dominant principle of our time and overwhelmingly becomes the yardstick and standard for measuring everything, Marx’s critical spirit of capital is far from out of date. Perhaps we can borrow Sartre’s words to say: “Far from being exhausted, Marxism is still very young, almost in its infancy; it has scarcely begun to develop. It remains, therefore, the philosophy of our time. We cannot

go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it” (Sartre, 1966).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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