

# The Subjective Dimension of Historical Materialism

## —From the Perspective of “Need”

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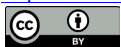
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### Abstract

The thought of need always occupies an important position in Marx's theory. Through the literature review of Marx's need thought, we can conclude that it is a central clue running through Marx's thought, but also the basic category of historical materialism. The position of need thought in historical materialism lies in the need of people to promote the development of productive forces. The need of people is the source of promoting social development, and the targeted activities to meet the needs are the driving force of social development. In the classical historical materialism, it emphasizes the objective dimension of historical materialism, while ignoring the subjective dimension of the dominant factors of the social and historical process, which Marx also attaches great importance to. For the study of needs, it can be further found that social history is not only “a natural historical process”, but also a specific historical process based on the reality of human subjects.

### Keywords

Need, Historical Materialism, Subject

## 1. The Development Process of Marx's Need Thought

The thought of need is a basic category of Marxist historical materialism. Through the study of the text, we found that Marx's needs thought went through a process of gradual maturity. It is roughly divided into three stages: first, during the period of *the Economic and Philosophy Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx's needs of thought initially sprout; Second, during the period of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels gradually constructed the basic framework of historical materialism of need thought from the perspective of human social history; Third,

from *the Economic Manuscripts* (1857-1858) to *Das Kapital*, this is the period when Marx's need thought went to mature and be further enriched and perfect. By sorting out the formation trajectory of Marx's needs thoughts, it is convenient for us to understand the different changes and connotations of Marx's needs thoughts in each period of time.

In *the Economic philosophical Manuscripts of Economics 1844*, Marx began to cover the category of need in the philosophical sense, and "human needs" was a term that Marx used more frequently in it. In the manuscript, Marx put forward many concepts related to need, including human needs, and the needs of nature, body, direct, self-interest and communication, civilization and crude, and workers; the type and level of need, need and human nature, alienation of need, relationship between need, labor and production, as well as liberation and human needs. Marx revealed the inhuman situation of workers in capitalist society, and formed the prototype of Marx's ideological needs. Although Marx in this period was influenced by Feuerbach's humanistic thought of need and bourgeois economists such as Smith, Ricardo and Muller, Marx's thought of need was influenced by Feuerbach's humanistic thought of need, but from the perspective of human social history, from the height of the nature and nature to understand the need and other categories has begun to close to the category of historical materialism.

In the period of *German Ideology*, through thinking about the needs, Marx further elaborated the historical operation law of needs and production, formed the perspective of historical materialism, and used this perspective to reflect on and study the necessary problems. First of all, Marx put the need into the perspective of human history. He said: "The first premise of all human history is undoubtedly the existence of a living individual. Thus, the first fact to be confirmed is the physical organization of these individuals and the resulting personal relationships to other nature." (Marx & Engels, 1995a). Without "the existence of living individuals" and "the physical organization of these individuals", there is no need for survival, and all the basic conditions of history cannot exist. In order to exist and sustain life, and to maintain the existence of physical tissue, it is necessary to produce survival materials, that is, "in order to be able to 'make history', people must be able to live a life. But for the sake of living, the first need...the information that meets these needs, namely the production of material life itself, and, the historical activity which people must do daily from thousands of years ago to today, is the basic condition of all history." (Marx & Engels, 1995a) "The first need that has been met, the activities that meet the needs and the tools already obtained to meet the needs create new needs. The emergence of this new need is the first historical activity." (Marx & Engels, 1995a). This series of life is to meet the basic needs as the initial power of human history activities, promote the human production activities, and this activity is not only the first historical activities, but also produce new needs, this is the basic fact of history, from the root illustrates the "not consciousness decides life, but life decides consciousness" (Marx & Engels, 1995a). On this basis, Marx put forward the needs

of five aspects of human society, namely the need of production of material life itself, the needs of reproduction, the needs of the production, the needs of social relations and the needs of spiritual production. On this basis, Marx discusses the need to meet the needs, need and social relations, level, need and human nature, historic nature of need as well as need and the liberation of the people.

In *the Economic Manuscript* (1857-1858) (hereinafter referred to as “*Manuscript*”), Marx from the general relationship between need and material production, reveals the general properties, then back to the specific production of capitalism to study the needs and the way to meet need. Under the premise, Marx found the secret of exploitation under the capitalism—surplus value rule. Finally, according to the criticism of capitalist mode of production, Marx revealed the needs of people and the possibility of labor liberation. In the *Manuscript*, Marx also enriched his previous concepts of need, such as social needs. He pointed out: “The need generated from history itself is the need generated from production itself, and the social need is the need generated from social production and exchange.” (Marx & Engels, 1995b). For example, when talking about the necessary needs, Marx pointed out that the opposition between the necessary needs of workers and the extravagant needs of capitalists is determined by the contradictory relationship between necessary labor and surplus labor. In the further analysis of this relationship, the secret of workers was being exploited—surplus value. In the *Manuscript*, he also expounded the dialectical relationship between the mutual decision, restriction and promotion of need and production, new ideas such as the expansion of the system with the development of the production system, as well as a more scientific outlook of communism from the perspective of need. In the stage of *Manuscript*, Marx’s needs thought has become matured, and the unique vision and basic content of his needs thought are fully presented, clarifying his position of historical materialism.

In the text after the *Manuscript*, Marx further explained some of the concepts of need. In *Das Kapital*, for example, he enriched the connotation of the necessary need, points out: “the scope of the so-called essential needs, like the way to meet these needs, is the product of history. So it mostly depends on a country’s level of culture, which mainly depends on when the free working class is formed under what conditions, thus it has what habits and life requirements.” (Marx, 2004). That is to say, in addition to social and economic factors, necessary needs also include historical and moral factors, and these factors themselves are constantly developing and changing with history. About social needs, Marx is more widely used in the “*Das Kapital*”, and more widely enrich the concept. He thinks this social need is in two kinds of “special useful private labor” in “exchange and equal” to be satisfied, namely the producer of private labor must meet certain social needs, his private labor is useful labor, thus to meet the needs of individuals, and so on.

To sum up, it is necessary to experience a basic concept to a more oriented historical materialism category in Marx’s thought.

## 2. The Position of Need in Historical Materialism

### 2.1. The Meaning of Historical Materialism

As for historical materialism, Marx said in *the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy in 1859*: “People have certain and inevitable relations in their social production regardless of their will, that is, the relations of production suitable for a certain stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of the society, that is, the legal and political superstructure erected it and has a certain form of social consciousness corresponding to it. The mode of production of material life restricts the process of the whole social life, political life and spiritual life. It is not people’s consciousness that determines people’s existence. On the contrary, it is people’s social existence that determines people’s consciousness.” (Marx & Engels, 1995c). This is what people call the “classical expression” of historical materialism. In summary, it is “social existence determines social consciousness”, that is, the productive forces determine the relations of production, the economic foundation determines the superstructure, and emphasizes that social and historical development has objective laws, and is a “natural historical process” similar to nature. However, the question is whether the historical materialism is a materialist historical view, or is it Marx’s historical materialism, which will be elaborated in two aspects below.

First of all, the “classical expression” is not logically thorough enough, and does not completely draw a clear line with the idealistic view of history. It takes the productive forces as the final deciding factor, and the productive forces are objective and realistic. This historical view shows the nature of materialism, but what determines the productive forces? Without a reasonable explanation of the development of the productive forces itself, it is entirely possible to become a historical idealism theory. The reason is very simple. The main sign of productivity is the production tools, tools are made according to the design of the mind, and the design and update of tools depend on people’s knowledge, needs, thinking creation, so the whole social history ultimately depends on the ideological understanding of a few intelligent people. This is obviously historical idealism.

Secondly, when it comes to Marx’s creation of historical materialism, people often take overcoming the abstract humanism as an important symbol, while Marx’s symbol of overcoming Feuerbach’s abstract understanding of people is the discovery of human reality. *The Theses of Feuerbach* said “Feuerbach attributes the nature of religion to the nature of man. However, the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in a single person. In its reality, it is the sum total of all social relations.” (Marx & Engels, 1995a). Taking Marx’s thought as an important symbol of historical materialism is also logically incomplete. Social relations are established by people, and the establishment of social relations is based on their corresponding ideas. The logical conclusion can only be that “people’s ideas ultimately determine the essence of people”, which is not materialism.

So, where is Marx's historical materialism? In the labor practice.

First of all, Marx elaborated the historical materialism in *the German Ideology*: "This view of history lies in: explaining the realistic production process from the material production of direct life..." which of course includes the productive forces. Later, he said: "each stage of history has a certain material results, a certain productivity, the historical relationship between nature and individuals, met the former generation to a generation of productivity, capital and environment, although on the one hand, the productivity, capital and environment is changed for the new generation, but on the other hand, they also specified in advance the new generation of living conditions, make it get certain development and has special nature. Thus, this view shows that the people create the environment, and similarly, the environment also creates the people." (Marx & Engels, 2003) Here he explained the development mechanism of productive forces: each generation will obtain a certain productivity, it is handed down by the previous generation objectively not by his will; but each generation changes the productivity that he inherited, and passes the changed productivity to their next generation; the development of productivity is reflected in the inheritance and innovation from generation to generation. Marx also used the phrase that "the 'struggle' between man and nature promotes the development of his productive forces on the corresponding basis" (Marx & Engels, 2003). Marx summed up the above thought as "people create the environment, the same, the environment also creates people." That is to say, the development of productive forces is determined by labor practice activities.

Secondly, about people is the sum of all social relations, Marx also explained in the third article of *the Theses*. It says: "The materialist theory of changing the environment and education forgets that the environment is changed by people, and the educator himself must be educated. Therefore, this doctrine must divide society into two parts, one of which is above it." "The change of environment and the consistency of human activities or self-change can only be seen as and reasonably understood as the practice of revolution." (Marx & Engels, 1995a). It can be seen that Marx's point of view is that the environment is changed by human practice. People change the environment in practice, and the environment changed by practice in turn changes people themselves, and people are in the "self-change". Therefore, it is not enough to say only that the essence of people is the sum of social relations (i.e., social environment), which may also belong to the idealistic historical view. Only the first affirmation that the environment is changed by human labor practice, "human essence is the sum of social relations" is the view of social materialism.

To sum up, Marx's understanding of history is not based on the productive forces, nor the social relations determined by the productive forces, but the labor practice of people at a level deeper than them. He said: "The whole so-called world history is no more than the process of birth through human labor and the process of nature." (Marx & Engels, 1995a). Labor constantly changes the productive forces, change people's social environment, the natural environment,

thus changing people. This is Marx's complete thought of historical materialism.

## 2.2. The Position of Need in Historical Materialism

Through the above discussion, it can be seen that Marx's historical materialism is built on the basis of labor practice, and labor practice is developed by people under the promotion of need. Marx and Engels made a detailed analysis of the historical premise in *the German Ideology*: "The premise that we begin to talk about...is the premise of determination. These are some realistic individuals, which are their activities and their material living conditions. The first premise of any human history is no doubt the existence of a living individual. So the first specific fact to be identified is the physical tissue of these individuals, and their relationship to nature, constrained by the physical tissue." "The way that people produce their necessary means of life...is a certain form of activity for these individuals" (Marx & Engels, 1995a). Marx and Engels thus determined the role of human needs in promoting the development of productive forces. According to him, the first premise of historical materialism is the existence of living individuals, their certain physical organization; the second premise is the necessary contradiction between the connection with nature; the third is the inevitable product of this contradiction—productivity, and finally is the unity of productivity and production relations—the mode of production. If further summarized at this level is the human needs to determine the production (productive forces, production relations), that is, the human needs promote the development of the productive forces.

The object of human need is provided by nature, and nature will never automatically meet the needs of man, will not automatically provide ready-made object of need, thus determines the relationship between man and nature is a pair of contradictory relationship with nature. In this contradictory relationship, man is the active subject, always actively active to solve this contradiction. To possess nature, make nature become the inorganic body of people, to meet the needs of people, so people must carry out the object practice activities, and form the productive forces in the object practice activities. As Marx said, "man himself as a natural force stands opposed to natural matter. In order to possess natural matter in a form useful to his own life, man makes the natural force on his body—arms and legs, head and hands move." (Marx & Engels, 1995d). When people act on the external nature and change the external nature, they also change their own nature, develop and play their potential abilities. "People cause, adjust and control the material transformation process between man and nature with their own activities" (Marx & Engels, 1995d). Moreover, man not only transforms the forms endowed by nature, but also achieves his own purpose in natural things, which is the reflection of man's needs in his consciousness. The purpose of human needs is drawn up by consciousness, which is the result of activities thought in advance. If the conceptual factors are put aside, we cannot understand the essence of the needs of human beings as the source of social development and the development itself, because "everything that causes people

to act must go through their minds” (Marx & Engels, 1995e). As the source of development, the need of man is firstly the reflection of the inevitable contradiction between man and nature. Therefore, the reflection of the need formulated by consciousness “this purpose is what he knows, and as laws determines his way and method of activity, and he must make his will to that purpose subordinate.” (Marx & Engels, 1995d). So “people achieve their own purpose in natural things” means to achieve their own needs. Therefore, productive force is the people’s ability to conquer and transform nature. It is determined and driven by the needs of human body organization, and is the way of object practical activities to meet the needs.

As the social relationship formed by people in the production process of material materials, the relationship of production is the guarantee of the object practical activities carried out by people to meet their own needs, which ensures the most reasonable proportion, intensity and continuity of such activities. Human needs are always transformed into the object practice activities in the certain production relations, which have become the means to meet the needs in the production relations.

Therefore, through the analysis of the core of historical materialism—productivity and production relations, it can be concluded that the need of people is its premise and basis, is the reason and source of its beginning. In the object practice of the struggle against nature, the productive forces to meet their own needs, Formed the unity of the relations of production, productive forces and production relations to ensure the satisfaction of the activities of their own needs. It fully shows how people meet their own needs and satisfaction in nature and society, therefore, summing up the great discovery of historical materialism, Engels said, “Just as Darwin discovered the law of the development of the organic world, Marx discovered the law of the development of human history. A simple fact that has always been hidden by a lush ideology: people must first eat, drink, live, wear, then they can do politics, science, art, religion, etc. Therefore, the direct production of the material means of life, so that a nation or a certain stage of economic development of an era, forms the foundation. The people’s state system, legal views, art and even religious ideas are developed on this basis, and therefore must also be interpreted on this basis.” (Marx & Engels, 1995f). This points out that the source of historical development is the inner inevitability of people’s needs. And the object practice activity is the direct executor who needs this source function, which makes the need to be met and realized. Need category is the basic category of historical materialism.

Here, we may encounter a problem, that is, need belongs to the category of human consciousness, the starting point of historical materialism is need, how to reflect its materialistic nature? This is discussed in the second article of Marx’s “*Theses*”, “Whether people’s thinking has objective truth is not a theoretical question, but a practical question. People should prove the truth of their own thinking in practice, that is, the reality and strength of their own thinking, and the shore of their own thinking. The debate about the realism or nonreality of

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thinking—from thinking—is a question of purely scholastic philosophy.” (Marx & Engels, 1995a).

### 3. Subjective Dimension in Historical Materialism

In the discourse operation of the traditional philosophical interpretation framework, Marx’s historical materialism has always been interpreted as something that is almost impossible from the real subject of history—“people”. The infinitely rich human social existence is compressed in this system of interpretation, becoming a simple sum of three material entities, namely the geographical environment beyond man, the reduction to the entrance of natural quantity, and the mode of material production that seems to have nothing to do with “man”. The basic contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the economic foundation and the superstructure and the “dialectical movement” also seem to be the object process of operation without “people”. Therefore, historical materialism is only a kind of “historical view without subject”. In fact, this is only the result of the arbitrary understanding of the dimension of the object of Marx’s historical dialectics. And, more importantly, Marx’s economic power in a certain historical stage become the dominant force of human subject theory, is understood as the general condition of the social history movement, the human social history development process is not interpreted as human subject will and submit to the “natural law” of the “natural history process”. From the main points of these basic theories, it seems that the traditional interpretation framework seems to adhere to the root of the materialist historical view in the social and historical development. But the overall dialectics of the development of social history in this system is completely “evaporation”, also ignore and Marx said, “nothing history”, human subject practice history, specifically, reality to create the human social history, human society from low to advanced, from inevitable kingdom to freedom kingdom, from “human dependence”, “dependence” to “personal comprehensive development” the important point of view. Therefore, the initiative of human subjects in social history only stays on the reaction of social consciousness, that is, the gradual atrophy and drying up on the level of subjective initiative. In the final analysis, Marx’s view of history has degenerated into a Hegel theory, that is, the objective process that emphasizes “history is outside man” (Zhang, 2002).

Emphasizing the role of needs in the development of social history, human needs are the source of promoting social development, and the materialized activities that meet the needs are the driving force of social development, which breaks through the pure objective dimension of traditional philosophy for historical materialism. Because Marx founded historical materialism based on the existence and needs of people, and need theory is an important embodiment of human factors.

First of all, the need is the need of the main body, is as the main body of people in order to survive and development with control, access or possess the



tendency of the object, the tendency reflected in the consciousness of the object of desire to meet needs, formed the object of practice “intrinsic motivation”, the “intrinsic motivation” as need and purpose to become the premise of production. It is because of the needs of the main body that people continue to carry out production practice and enrich themselves in practical activities. Without the subject needs this premise, there will be no practical activities to meet the needs. In the process of practice, the subject is to process and transform the object according to its own needs and understanding, change the structure and form of the object, so that it obtains new functions, that is, the essential force of the subject is objectified and the subject is objectified. Social labor practice is a two-way transformation process, and the object also reacts on the subject, making the objective law internalized into the understanding of the subject, improving the main ability of the subject, that is, the subjectivity of the object, making the object become the energy in the main body, so that the function of the subject is perfected and developed.

Secondly, the need is the essence of the man as the subject. In *the German Ideology*, Marx and Engels regarded the human nature (nature) as the need of man from the perspective of need. They pointed out that “their needs are their nature.” (Marx & Engels, 1995a). In *the Economic Philosophy Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx also pointed out that “your own essence is your needs”. Human needs are the original motivation for people to engage in all production activities. It is through production practice activities that human needs can be realized and satisfied, and at the same time, the inner essential power of people can be confirmed, and social relations are produced in this process. Marx believed that the essence of man is to meet its needs, the overall development of man is the realization of the essence of man, and the realization of the essence of man is the comprehensive realization of human needs. Therefore, the process of human development is reflected in the process that people’s needs are constantly produced and constantly met in practical activities.

Finally, the human need itself is an active, conscious need. Man is actively transforming nature, actively absorbing the needs of nature. In the process of meeting the needs, people have the subjective initiative. The need of people is the clear direction of the subject to the object in need, which is the basic feature of anyone’s need.” Hunger is a natural necessity; and therefore, to satisfy himself and to feed himself, he needs objects outside his nature and outside him.” (Marx & Engels, 1995g). This is the most basic physical needs of man, and so is the spiritual need. In order to meet the spiritual needs of people, it is necessary to make them meet the spiritual needs of objects (such as TV, tape recorder). People’s needs clearly point to the objects of material and spiritual needs, which is based on people’s active reflection of the material and spiritual living conditions, which shows that people’s needs have a certain subjective form. Need is a contradictory relationship between the subject of needs and the object of need that he depends on, and the lack of these objects in need, so it needs them, which indicates the subjective and objective contradiction between the subject and the object of

need. To solve this contradiction, it is necessary to make the subject actively active and grasp the object of need, so that the needs of people can be met. The initiative, selectivity and creativity of mastering the world all show the subject position and subjectivity of people in the object activities of dealing with their relationship with the external world.

To sum up, the embodiment of human factors can be regarded as an important expression of the subjectivity of historical materialism. In short, the scientific historical view of Marxist philosophy first recognizes the objective regularity of social and historical development, recognizes that the production and reproduction of human life is the general basis of social and historical development, but all these are actively composed of the practice of human subject, not the natural growth of material process free from human beings; Marxist philosophy is revolutionary and practical in essence, its theoretical logic is of course the establishment of human subject status and the final liberation of all mankind—communism, and the specific path to achieve this lofty goal. Therefore, Marx did not study history out of pure theoretical interest, but to seek the scientific path of human liberation. Marx's unique view of history was to seek the road of human liberation.

### Conflicts of Interest

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

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