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CONSTRUCTING THE PROBLEM IN MARX'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY¹

Abstract:

This article explores Marx's political philosophy, advocating for a normative and scholarly approach that transcends traditional interpretations. It shows how Marx's analysis of contemporary political issues leaves behind classical metaphysical frameworks and thereby gains practical relevance. The study highlights the necessity and possibility of systematically reconstructing Marx's political philosophy, demonstrating its grounding in historical materialism and critique of capital logic. The domains of Marx's political philosophy are examined, focusing on human emancipation, community, and justice. The article concludes by asserting today's relevance of Marx's ideas, underscoring their enduring impact on understanding and transforming the world.

Keywords: Critique of Political Economy, Human Emancipation, Marx's political philosophy, Problem Consciousness, True community

Reconstructing Marx's political philosophy requires a normative and scholarly approach. Unlike traditional political philosophers, Marx was not solely an academic figure. His thought represents a "new political philosophy" that goes beyond classical metaphysical framework. Judging Marx by traditional standards shows a lack of understanding of this new approach. Simply reshaping Marx's ideas to fit old frameworks does not capture their true essence. Interpreting Marx's philosophy should involve a critical inquiry of traditional political philosophies. It should also highlight Marx's surpassing and practical relevance as a political philosopher. This perspective helps analyze contemporary political issues effectively.

1. The Necessity and Possibility of Constructing Marx's Political Philosophy

Since high school, Marx focused on current political issues and reflected on the concept of an "age of happiness". He believed that working for humanity should be a key consideration when choosing a career. During his studies at the University of Bonn and the University of Berlin, he studied legal classics intensively and developed strong interests in philosophy and history. He was especially diligent in understanding Gans's lectures on criminal law and Prussian civil law from Hegelian perspectives. As a member of the Young Hegelian "Doctor's Club," he grasped the Enlightenment principles of self-awareness philosophy. Recognizing the importance of practical relevance in theory, Marx gradually saw that the Young Hegelians had not escaped the confines of "The German Ideology". He criticized their self-indulgent ideas critically and practically. From this critique, through analyzing Scottish Enlightenment political economy and French revolutionary political thought, Marx underwent a philosophical transformation. He arrived at the foundation of historical materialism in political philosophy.

Marx's political philosophy, grounded in historical materialism, differs from traditional views based on natural law and metaphysics. It envisions a future ideal society rooted in reality. This realism involves creating a new world by transforming the old, and overturning Western political philosophy to establish a "new worldview" centered on human emancipation. In developing a political philosophy to change the world, Marx sharply

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critiqued the objectification of capital logic and its philosophical reality. He pointed to practical paths beyond the “illusory community”. Although Marx did not develop a normative political philosophy or write exclusively on politics, his call for human emancipation and his critique of political economy sparked a world-historical social revolution. This formed a transcendent new political philosophy. Understanding Marx's ideas with a normative perspective is both necessary and feasible for grasping his future-oriented, ever-growing political philosophy.

Framing this scholarly construction within a developmental view reflects Marx's ideological evolution – from a democrat to a communist, and from a humanist philosopher to a historical materialist. It also shows that Marx's political philosophy as an intellectual method remains open and evolving. His efforts to go beyond natural law and metaphysics feature a practical historicity and humanist reflection. His analysis of real conflicts of interest engages with questions of legitimacy and justice. Marx saw human labor, more than political life, as a concrete reality. His ethical assumptions about human nature – good and evil – also shifted to be based on historical and empirical facts, aiming for a rational hope grounded in reality. «What was at the root of Marx's impact and of his scientific work? [...] his political philosophy!»². In this context, political philosophy is less a branch of Marx's thought than its core essence.

Viewing political philosophy as the fundamental substance of Marx's ideas reveals an internal logic connecting his historical materialism, critique of political economy, and communist theory. This logic is rooted in practical thought and reflects a social conception of human action, distinct from traditional Western political philosophy. The resulting intellectual tradition is not merely a «a (new) practical philosophy, but a (new) philosophical practice»³. Philosophy, in Marx's view, no longer merely explains the world but acts as a practical activity governed by historical laws, aimed at transforming the world. «In his philosophy, political philosophy truly replaces metaphysics as the “first philosophy”»⁴. Marx's political philosophy, as this “first philosophy” is not about an ideal “good life” but about practical, revolutionary efforts to forge an emancipated society – an approach that profoundly influenced the mid-19th century labor movement and socialism.

Without a deep understanding of this internal logic, one cannot truly grasp the wave of social revolutions over the past two centuries. Reflecting on Marx's critical engagement with Scottish Enlightenment economics, French revolutionary thought, and Young Hegelian philosophy of self-consciousness reveals his revolutionary stance. Marx's political philosophy first emerges as a revolutionary claim – an active, transformative force. Attempts to fully normalize or intellectualize Marx's ideas without their revolutionary context fail to appreciate this core. Reconstructing Marx's thought in terms of political philosophy must not distort its original appearance, hence it should not be read as a form of philosophy which historical materialism intends to overcome.

Views claiming Marx lacked political philosophy still cling to traditional conceptions of political philosophy. Another line of thought, which attempts to argue that Marx had a political philosophy, adds to Marx's thought a traditional paradigm of political philosophy that “ought” to be there, arguing that there is some kind of a transcendental normative logic to Marx's thought. However, understanding political philosophy as an open discipline attentive to current issues requires active engagement with real problems, not merely moral or normative ideals⁵. From a philosophical revolutionary perspective, grasping Marx's innovative political philosophy involves clarifying its historical materialist dimension, its critique of political economy, and its communist project as a practical endeavor rooted in contemporary reality. Interpreting his ideas about human emancipation,

² Arendt (2012), p. 84. [The English translation of all works cited is by the author].

³ Althusser (2010), p. 142.

⁴ Guangyun (2018), p. 10.

⁵ For more, see Fengyu (2013).

community, and justice should not revert to classical political philosophy but rather be recontextualized within society's open realm.

Achieving this ambitious goal demands careful scholarly investigation. It requires tracing Marx's philosophical development, understanding how his heroic effort – akin to Prometheus stealing fire – revealed the secrets of capital's logic, and exploring how he transformed world-explanatory political ideas into practical ideals for changing the world. Only through a thorough study of Marx's youthful, polyphonic philosophical exploration can we confirm the genesis of his political philosophy and clarify the complex relationship between his philosophy and intellectual resources. This intertwined philosophy of human emancipation, closely linked to political practice, embodies the essential qualities of modern political philosophy. It reflects Marx's resourceful borrowing from the tradition of human-centered political thought since ancient Greece and his in-depth critique of fetishism and reification, which chart the path toward human emancipation. Only then can we fully comprehend the philosophical meaning of the "community of free individuals".

Additionally, Marx's political philosophy must be understood through a dialectical and historical lens that clarifies its practical logic. Marx aimed to change the fate of the oppressed and exploited – and to improve the living conditions of the proletariat. He pursued this goal not through pure normative ideals but through practical exploration rooted in the recognition and adherence to social laws. Laws do not create history spontaneously; only purposeful human action applying these laws can do so. In the rigid logic of modern capitalism, achieving proletarian emancipation requires collective struggle, and such struggles must follow social laws. Therefore, the practical logic of Marx's political philosophy reflects the unity of lawfulness and purposefulness, embodying a dialectic of facts and values. While it is necessary to outline the overall structure of Marx's philosophy with normative reasoning, there are no pre-existing or eternal doctrines within it. Instead, it evolves with changing historical conditions, aiming toward the emancipation of all members of the community. This philosophy is inherently critical and revolutionary.

2. The Domains of Marx's Political Philosophy

Human emancipation is the overarching goal of Marx's political philosophy. Marx conceived human emancipation through critical reflection on the limitations of political emancipation. Political emancipation achieved formal freedom based on private property and established civil rights (*droits du citoyen*), but it did not eliminate the social inequalities that restrict the freedom of the lower classes, rendering it incomplete. Marx believed that emancipation should reach a "human height", he stripped off the "lion's skin" of political emancipation and regarded the "critique of political emancipation itself" as «the universal problem of our time»⁶. This critique reveals the essence of modern politics, exposing the alienation of rights and establishing a secular, labor-based foundation for human emancipation. Genuine emancipation involves not merely pre-existing ideas of freedom but active resistance to external oppression, realization of self through lived experience, labor, and social relations, and the affirmation of human rights (*droits de l'homme*). It entails reshaping the inner power of subjectivity.

Human emancipation is not "the end of history" but a "practical movement" – a process of overcoming alienation and instrumentalization. Understanding Marx's categories – freedom vs. self-awareness, state vs. civil society, political emancipation vs. human emancipation, property vs. justice – reveals that the emancipation of mankind is the realization of practical reason in the external world. It aims to eliminate class conflict, social oppression, and exploitation, fostering individual and societal freedom and happiness⁷. This transcendence beyond political emancipation is not purely formal; it must be realized through equal relationships based on labor respecting human dignity. It

⁶ Marx (2002), p. 167.

⁷ See Berki (2007), pp. 7-8.

requires the active overcoming of private property and capitalist relations, building on a solid material base. It embodies a principled revolution, a purposeful activity by the proletariat following historical laws, ensuring that individual freedom develops into conditions for universal freedom – an essential leap from the kingdom of necessity to that of freedom. For Marx, the realization of human emancipation is the proletariat's historic mission. Only by emancipating all humanity can the proletariat break its chains and achieve its own ultimate emancipation through the process of collective emancipation. This conceptual framework involves three key questions:

The first is, what kind of community should be constructed? How should this community be built? Marx advocated for the proletariat to unite globally, to fight and “unite until tomorrow,” aiming to establish a “true community”. This is a central issue in Marx's political philosophy – a constructive response developed concurrently with the deconstruction of old regimes. Only through collective struggle can the proletariat forge a new world. Marx studied both classical and modern forms of community, analyzing the social bonds and foundations that sustain them across history. He particularly examined the fetishism of money and commodities, revealing its ideological illusions. By synthesizing historical experiences and the traditional dilemmas of community-building, he pointed to realistic paths beyond material scarcity and social alienation – aimed at overcoming economic and social relations that enslave people – to create a “union of free individuals”.

Marx viewed the construction of a “true community” and the realization of human emancipation as a unified process. The richness of each person's social relations determines their spiritual and practical fulfillment. When the individual, freed from his traditional territorial limitations, is integrated into the worldwide pattern of production, making himself the conscious master of his social union, «with the free trade and the establishment of the world market, and with the convergence of industrial production and the conditions of life which go with it, the national divisions and antagonisms between peoples are disappearing more and more»⁸. The sacrifices of the many for the few – stemming from innate talent disparities and partial development – along with labor alienation, will gradually disappear. This world-historical achievement – based on the common ownership and control of the means of production – enables «Free exchange by individuals united on the basis of common possession and common control of the means of production»⁹. In this sense, creating a future society based on dependency and cooperation is the essential meaning of constructing a “true community”.

The second key issue concerns the secret of capital logic. How can we reveal this secret through the critique of political economy? Building a “true community” requires a profound understanding of the relationship between the state and civil society, transforming outdated economic and social relations, and ensuring ample material conditions for life. Marx emphasized that this process represents a living, dynamic effort by individuals uniting to create history – an active movement for communism. He clarified that «communism is not for us a state of affairs that should be established, an ideal to which reality should be adapted. What we call communism is that movement which annihilates the reality of the existing condition. The conditions of this movement are produced by existing premises»¹⁰. To this end, Marx critically exposed the secret of capital logic, justified and revealed the legitimacy and feasibility of “expropriating the expropriators”, and sought to develop socialism from utopian dreams into scientific reality. In this context, critique of political economy is fundamental to Marx's political philosophy. Through this critique, Marx explained the objective necessity of overcoming capital's logic, illustrating how the proletariat could actively abandon their self-alienation by challenging and transforming existing conditions – the road to emancipation.

⁸ Marx (2012c), p. 419.

⁹ Marx (2009), p. 53.

¹⁰ Marx (2012a), p. 166.

Marx thus established a labor logic distinct from capital logic. After analyzing Adam Smith's assertion that "labour alone is the only final and realistic measure by which we can at all times estimate and compare the value of the various commodities", Marx points out that labour can't be understood only as a sacrifice of peace, emancipation and happiness, rather than as a normal life activity as well"¹¹. As a life process, labor has a temporal nature; capitalists exploit workers' unpaid portion of this "normal life activity" to expand capital. To free labor from capital's constraints, it is necessary to abolish economic relations rooted in exploitation and inequality, transforming labor into an essential aspect of human life where «individuals do not think of themselves as labourers, but as owners and members of the community who also carry out their labour. [...] The purpose of their labour is not to sustain the individual owners and their families and the community as a whole»¹². Hence, labor becomes an activity integrated with social development and not external to human essence, reflecting a truly humanized form of activity.

The third question pertains to what constitutes fairness and justice – how can these ideals be realized? Since labor is not a priori, its role as the intrinsic need of community members depends on a historical process of transforming production relations. Each historical stage reveals forms of law and justice aligned with its mode of production. Marx viewed justice as a historical category – that different modes of production generate different conceptions of justice. During social shifts, these notions undergo "dialectical transformation", inspiring conscious resistance to old regimes. Since contemporary notions of justice reflect bourgeois ideology, they should not be regarded as fixed axioms. Marx believed that simply invoking justice does not directly solve social problems; rather, creating a new social environment where justice can be realized is prerequisite. Considering both the historical materialist foundation and implicit pathways, debates on Marx's theory of justice, ongoing since the 1970s, involve two main approaches – historicism and moral-philosophy – and remain central to Marx's political philosophy.

These extensive debates nearly reconstruct the historical context of Marx's discourse on "justice", emphasizing the importance of interpretation aligned with his original intent rather than projecting various normative visions or pre-historical materialist interpretations. If these debates lack overall coherence, Marx's concept of justice will appear multifaceted, giving rise to a "beyond historical materialism" version. From a new political philosophy perspective, Marx's theory of justice differs fundamentally from eternal justice rooted in natural law; it is not purely moral but a recognition of historical necessity. Therefore, analyzing Marx's justice involves understanding its historical and contemporary significance – its connection to specific modes of production and the power of "dialectical transformation" of justice concepts, revealing the dialectic of "facts and values" embedded within.

In summary, human emancipation remains the overarching issue in Marx's political philosophy. His investigations into community, capital logic, and justice reflect its key concerns. These domains help reveal the overall structure of Marx's thought, including his ideas on freedom, equality, and critiques of modernity. They show that a new political philosophy underpins Marx's ideas – a viewpoint distinct from ancient political philosophy, social contract theory, liberalism, and utilitarianism. It deepens the understanding of modern politics and has driven revolutionary movements worldwide. In contemporary terms, it demonstrates the practical value of political philosophy.

3. The Contemporary Relevance of Marx's Political Philosophy

Marx's investigation of the laws governing modern politics from a worldview of world history, along with his critique of political economy revealing the hidden mechanisms of capital, constitutes a radical "overturning of metaphysics" via his new political philosophy.

¹¹ Marx (2001), p. 60.

¹² Marx (1995), p. 466.

His philosophical explanation of human emancipation continues to motivate critical reflection on reality and self-transcendence. «It is Marx, and above all Marx, who still provides us with the sharpest weapon for criticising existing society»¹³. Today, we still reside within the horizon of Marxist political philosophy. His reflective awareness of modern politics aligns with contemporary issues, and his theory of world history – advanced through a practical and dialectical mindset – continues to serve as an effective paradigm for analyzing global challenges. Understanding the principles and methods of Marx's political philosophy is therefore an urgent, realistic, and necessary pursuit to grasp what “contemporary political philosophy” should be.

Firstly, Marx's profound critique of modernity and his incisive analysis of its economic foundations cut straight to the core. His denunciation of capital logic and fetishism offers a rational blueprint for overcoming the crises of modern society. While he valued the tremendous productive forces generated by capitalism, he recognized that “the rule of capital” and the social relations it sustains produce an undeniable materialization of social alienation. Nearly 170 years after Marx raised the problem of fetishism, this phenomenon still haunts modern society. «Materialisation itself is not a frozen fact, i.e. the change from early big-machine production to the contemporary assembly line is by no means a conceptual change, but a reality change»¹⁴. Surpassing the mediated relationships of commodity exchange, re-establishing human nature on a material basis, and avoiding cultural loss and value nihilism remain pressing issues today.

As Engels pointed out, one of Marx's key discoveries was the analysis of the economic laws and social movements generated by modern capitalism – the mode of production and class relations – marking one of his two great insights. It was this critique of surplus value that made Marx a “Prometheus” of capitalism, enabling the proletariat to understand how labor's alienation and surplus value creation produce poverty. Today, most people live under the shadow of capitalist fetishism, with consumer culture and alienation pervasive. Addressing this requires careful analysis of the “spectacles” of materialized existence, rejection of false needs and symbolic domination, and insight into the roots of ecological crises. Simultaneously, the practical logic of Marx's political philosophy affirms responsible use of capital's productive elements to develop socialist market economies, providing a solid material foundation for enhancing living standards.

Second, Marx exposed the false forms of modern community and the real antagonisms among individuals within them. His insights into building an ideal community – free from material scarcity and social alienation – remain highly relevant. Genuine communities reflect shared interests and mutual dependence. In modern society, communities linked solely by money foster alienation, perpetuating “the war of all against all”. Marx analyzed historical shortcomings of communities, proposing a construction rooted in authenticity, collectivity, and human essence. When people become obsessed with zero-sum conflicts or animalistic survival strategies, they risk falling into “hell on earth”, where selfishness and limited resources exacerbate human misery. Therefore, fostering collective effort to escape modern dilemmas and forge a shared future becomes a philosophical commitment – realizing global justice and common progress.

Today, transcending the pitfalls of modernity calls for prudent application of Marx's principles. Although Marx and Engels admitted that their earlier views «are now outdated in actual practice», they emphasized that «the general principles enunciated have been perfectly true in their entirety up to the present time»¹⁵. These principles embody identifiable laws of history and trends of development. Practical application must consider the complex realities of world history, proposing constructive paths based on universal

¹³ Wolff (2006), p. 2.

¹⁴ See Zhang Yibing (2009), p. 26.

¹⁵ Marx (1995), p. 466.

interests and shared values. This entails “actions by civilised states united”¹⁶, developing a global justice framework, and building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Thirdly, Marx’s method for analyzing contemporary political issues maintains great practical relevance. Engels observed that «Marx’s entire worldview is not a doctrine, but a method. It offers not ready-made dogmas, but points of departure for further research and methods for use in such research»¹⁷. Historical materialism is fundamentally a method – replacing pre-established dogmas of traditional political philosophy. Marx’s practice-oriented, dialectical approach examined social structures and states rooted in individual life experiences, awakening the material force of dialectics. By applying dialectical materialism to modern contradictions and issues – embedded within specific contexts and grasping the objective laws of history – Marx critically reformed classical political economy and modern political philosophy, establishing a practical dimension that informs his new political philosophy.

Undoubtedly, Marx’s political philosophy embodies a unity of logic and history. Starting from abstract principles, it proceeds through dialectical analysis into concrete realities, then returns to «a rich totality with many provisions and relationships»¹⁸. This method avoids forcing facts into rigid molds and instead promotes the unity of theory and practice within historical development. In this sense, Marxist political philosophy remains one of our most powerful tools and weapons for analyzing current political realities, with profound implications for understanding and transforming the world.

In conclusion, constructing Marx’s political philosophy is a necessary endeavor to comprehend the essence of his thought. Following the trail of Marx’s philosophical ideas and integrating them within a normative framework requires a problem-oriented approach – focused on addressing key issues within Marx’s political philosophy and affirming its contemporary relevance. It is evident that Marx’s philosophy «remains the philosophy of our time: it is unsurpassable, because the situation which produced it has not yet been surpassed. Our ideas, whatever they may be, can only be formed in this soil; they must necessarily lie within the limits which this soil affords them, or disappear or decline in the void»¹⁹. Analyzing today’s complex and profound political realities through Marxist political philosophy – embedded in the world-historical context – serves both as a theoretical pursuit and a practical means of changing the world. This provides a valuable model for today’s research in political philosophy.

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¹⁶ Marx (2012c), p. 419.

¹⁷ Marx (1974), p. 417.

¹⁸ Marx (2012b), p. 700.

¹⁹ Sartre (1998), p. 28.

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