

A RECONSIDERATION OF MARX'S IDEA OF "ASSOCIATION OF FREE INDIVIDUALS"*

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Abstract: The whole Marxist theory centers on the emancipation and freedom of human beings, the naming of his highest ideal as 'association of free individuals' being the clear proof. However, it would be superficial to announce Marxism as humanism of individualism according to Marx's pursuit of 'free development of each'. The 'free development of each' put forward by Marx when describing the 'association of free individuals' refers to individuals' re-subjecting their social relations that have been changed into material powers owing to private ownership and alienation. In this sense, the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. In this very sense, too, the foundation of the real community is required as the presupposition so as to relate his theory of freedom to the theory on the elimination of private ownership and the alienation and elimination of class and state finally.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx and Engels declared: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"(Marx & Engels, 1984). However, this vital statement failed to come sufficiently into people's notice for quite a long time. When summarizing Marxist elaboration on the characteristics of communism, it is usually neglected intentionally or unintentionally. The reason for saying it is neglected intentionally is that some people believe that Marx and Engels have reversed the relationship between 'the free development of each' and 'the free development of all.' Fortunately, the case has now changed to a great degree. This statement has been taken as Marx and Engels' classical elaboration on the characteristics of communism, and Engels' treasure of this statement in his later years has now received much emphasis.

However, the emphasis on Marx's idea of 'association of free individuals' does not necessarily mean real understanding of this idea, as the contrary of error is unquestionably truth. Many expounders have developed the viewpoint of 'an individualist standpoint' out of the thought of 'association of free individuals' and thought it defended 'humanism.' Yet, the problem is not to make a choice as to whether Marxism is humanism or not. By comparison with the traditional explanation that Marxism is thought as economic determinism of 'see things but not people', it is really an advance that Marxism is expounded as humanism. The key to the problem is: Can Marxism be boiled down to humanism? If so, then what is the representation of revolution realized in the history of ideas by Marx? This problem is still left unsolved.

This paper proposes a reconsideration of Marxist thought of 'association of free individuals'. By this, we hold that 'association of free individuals', as the basic symbol of communist society which differs from any other previous patterns

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of society, is Marx's social ideal constructed on the stand beyond humanism.

INDIVIDUALISM AND CRITIQUE ON IT

Society and individual as well as their relations are the basic problems to be expounded in every sociopolitical theory. Historically, from Plato to Hegel, conceptions of solving these problems in the history of sociopolitical theory can be roughly summed up into three types: Society must exist for the sake of individuals; or individuals must have their ends and ways of living set for them by society; or else society and individuals are correlative, organic, to one another, society requiring the service and subordination of individuals and at the same time existing to serve them (Dewey, 1988, p.187).

From a historical viewpoint, the distinction between the extreme individualistic and extreme socialistic theories is demarcated by modern subjectivity revolution. Ancient political theoreticians demonstrated the notions of priority of society and state over the individual. According to Plato, justice not only exists in individuals but also in the state, which has priority over the individual. Therefore justice for the state is written in bigger letters and recognized more easily than justice for the individual. Since the individual cannot gain good alone but gets it only from society, goodness for the individual means taking on one's own obligations. Aristotle proposed that though the polis and the individual both treat good as the common goal, the polis essentially has priority over the individual. According to Aristotle, the human being is in the most literal sense a political animal that tends to polis life: 'The man who is isolated, is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a God' (Aristotle, 1999). Thus the possible basis of free action is a free inter-subject relation. That is to say, it is association of free individuals, rather than free individuals, that are the first to be free. Undoubtedly, for Aristotle, ethic action, i. e. free action, stems from political association, and his theory of ethics belongs to politics, and is not a theory about a moral subject, but a theory about associ-

ation of free individuals.

Modern subjectivity revolution changed the understanding of the relations between the individual and society or state. Collapsed ancient ethics is substituted with atomic society, in which society or state is regarded as a tool of the individual, which is the chief aim instead. As Hegel described this transformation in *The Phenomenology of Mind*: 'The universal being thus split up into the atomic units of a sheer plurality of individuals, this inoperative, lifeless spirit is a principle of equality in which all count for as much as each, i. e. have the significance of Persons' (Hegel, 1999, p. 501). The ideology based on the individual is liberal humanism "It was a philosophy which was utilitarian in its ethical outlook, atomistic in its social philosophy, analytic in its science of man" (Taylor, 1993, p. 1). This ideology can be roughly taken as resulting from the Enlightenment and bourgeois political revolutions.

It is not difficult to find historical necessity and rationality for the substitution of the extreme individualistic theory with the extreme socialistic theory realized by modern subjectivity revolution. So far as the 'image of men' is concerned, the philosophy of subjectivity and humanism define 'the principle of the self-subsistent inherently infinite personality of the individual, the principle of subjective freedom' let alone the great progress in regime achieved by the revolution (Hegel, 1971, para. 185). However, this modern view does not achieve the truth about 'image of men' and the relation between society and individual, but also brings about serious consequences when 'in thought, inspired by which he builds up the world of reality' (Hegel, 1956). Therefore, contrary to the modern view, emphasizing the pre-cognitive basis of subjectivity and the priority of the society over that of the individual's autonomy has become the main connection between contemporary philosopher's writings (Dallmayr, 1992). If we look back on the history of criticism on the philosophy of subjectivity and humanism, Hegel will be unanimously accepted as the forerunner.

As mentioned above, Hegel regarded the appearance of modern liberalism, individualism and humanism as being historically inevitable. At the same time he also pointed out that such modern viewpoints did not have the notions of

mind or concept. The thoughts of the enlightenment and subjectivity incarnate the externality of spirit by prompting spirit to present its inner thoughts, to develop individuality factors and to develop dynamic role. Without the stage of externality, spirit would not develop and realize the unity of subject and substance. Nevertheless, the thoughts of enlightenment and subjectivity comprise only one link of the development of spirit, which is filled with contradiction and even confusion. According to Hegel, individualism has falsified the nature of society and state as well as of the individual as far as the foundation of social political theories. Hegel believed that self-consciousness does not stem from individuals; that individual rights do not have priority over society; and that society is not a simple aggregate of individuals either. Furthermore, this 'pure insight' knows the pure self of consciousness to be absolute and brings in the notion of 'absolute freedom'. Thus 'absolute freedom' can produce 'neither a positive achievement nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the rage and fury of destruction' (Hegel, 1999, p. 604). For example, the French Revolution, which began with the declaration that everyone is free and equal and ended with the terrorism of the Jacobins, showed the deficiency of this abstract idea (Yu Jianxing, 2000).

Through clearing the heritage of political philosophy in Europe during the 17th – 18th century, especially Kant's 'moral world outlook', Hegel reconstructed the theory on the individual and society as well as their relations. Having reviewed the genealogical basis of self-consciousness, Hegel pointed out that neither 'I' or 'thinking' (in Descartes' principle "I think, therefore I am") can become the first principle of philosophy; and that the forming of the concept of ego and self-consciousness cannot depart from the relation of self with others and that of self-consciousness with the opposite side. Hegel asserted, "Ego that is 'We', and 'We' that is a single Ego" (Hegel, 1999, p. 227). This means there exists a real universality between ego and others. Reciprocal recognition between ego and the other means both 'I' and the other are subjectivity, which is intersubjective. The inter-subjectivity pattern substituting for (single) subjectivity pattern incarnate on politi-

cal theory that Hegel distinguished between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*, and emphasized the priority of *Sittlichkeit* over *Moralität*. Sure enough, on the one hand, this means Hegel wanted to carry on ancient Greek ethical thought, for the last time that the world saw an effortless and undivided *Sittlichkeit* was among the Greeks. Hegel's phenomenology of mind (*Geist*) overcomes Kant's theory of moral conscience (*Gemüt*). This means 'society must be such that men relate to it as to a larger life in which they are immersed' (Taylor, 1993, p. 80). On the other hand, however, Hegel also saw that ancient Greek ethical thought was deficient in subjectivity, and longed for '*Sittlichkeit*' revival in a new manner.

That is to say, although he emphasized the principle that ethical life has substantial relationships, Hegel brought about an entirely new twist in this substantial concept that substance should be simultaneously understood as subject. This means that Hegel's concept of Liberty realizes a historical and epochal synthesis. When compared with ancient idea, Hegel's concept of liberty about ethical substance elaborates subjectivity, and when compared with modern idea, it elaborates the substantial principle (Xue Hua, 1988). Hegel managed somehow to combine both Plato and Kant (Taylor, 1993, p. 82). This embodies the distinct character of Hegel's political theory, which is taken as a reflection on the development of modern political theory, even the development of human thoughts (Yu Jianxing, 2000). By briefly reviewing the development of political theory from Plato to Hegel as above, we could see that, before Marx, Hegel had discussed the progressive aspect and the defects of subjective humanism with 'an individualist standpoint', which is a symbol of modern thought. Marx, as a real inheritor of Hegel's philosophy, instead of regressing the humanist standpoint, continued to deepen the criticism on subjectivity and humanism. In the following, we are to reveal it.

THE CONCRETE CONCEPTIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Hegel attempted to realize a historical and epochal synthesis. Did he succeed? As Dewey

criticizes, Hegel's theory would seem true that the "organic" conception meets all the objections to the extreme individualistic and extreme socialistic theories, avoiding the errors alike of Plato and Bentham. But, they are all committed to the logic of general notions under which specific situations are to be brought. In Hegel's conclusion, the meaning and value attached to the general notion, over the concrete situation and thereby to cover up the defects of the latter and disguise the need of serious reforms. The effect, if not the intention, of Hegel's idealism as applied in social philosophy was to provide a bulwark for the maintenance of the political status quo against the tide of radical ideas from revolutionary France (Dewey, 1988, p.187 – 189).

Just in this respect, we see that Marx greatly advanced Hegel's sociopolitical philosophy. It is evident that Marx's political philosophy originated from Hegel, whose criticism on individualism and liberalism and revelation on the social nature of individual evoked Marx's strong sympathy. But different from Hegel, Marx defined the individual and society with a lot of concrete content. That is to say, even if Hegel introduced the concept of 'the other', another self-consciousness, and revealed the formation of ego and self-awareness and identified human beings are social in form the unity of ego and others or self-consciousness and its opposite, he only expounded "how the form or attitude of self-consciousness in the first instance appears" (Hegel, 1999, p. 218), which belongs to genealogical theory of self-consciousness instead of social history scope. Even the fable on the relationship between Lordship and Bondage is only a hypothesis of 'the first man,' it cannot successfully explain the advent of freedom and bondage. "The only labour which Hegel knew and recognized was abstractly mental labour" (Marx, 1975). In contrast to Hegel's method of approach that the startpoint was consciousness taken as the living individual, Marx conformed to the notion of real life of the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness was considered solely as their consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1964, p.38).

Marx believed that the first premise of human history is the existence of the living individual. The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, "but of individuals, not as they may

appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e., as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will" (Marx & Engels, 1964, p.36 – 37).

There is no doubt that Marx regarded the existence of 'individual' as the base of his theory. But "Individual" has no methodological interpretation meaning. On the contrary, "individual" can only be defined in the processes of material production and the social relations thus resulted. Marx once said, "What they (individuals) are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production" (Marx & Engels, 1964, p.32).

According to Marx, definite individuals live under definite relations of production. In *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote, the essence of men is an 'ensemble of social relations.' Production is only possible as the result of inter-personal communications. Therefore, the individual as viewed from its actuality, is 'the summation of all social relations'.

Marx also pointed out that all the social relations are objective:

These relations are not relations between individual and individual, but between workers and capitalist, between farmer and landlord, etc (Marx, 1984, p.159).

Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another. As if someone were to say: for society, slaves and citizens do not exist: both are men. They are both men, if we consider them outside society. To be a slave and to be a citizen are social determinations, relations between human beings A and B. Human being A as such is not a slave. He is a slave in and through society (Marx, 1986, p.195).

By emphasizing the priority and objectivity of social relations, Marx distinguished the conceptions of a personal individual and a class individual in *The German Ideology*. Marx said, individuals are under definite classes. If from a 'philosophical' point of view one considers this evolution of individuals in the common conditions of existence of estates and classes, which fol-

lowed one another, and in the accompanying general conceptions forced upon them, 'in this way one can give history some hard clouts on the ear' (Marx & Engels, 1964, p.92 - 93). It is 'a great insult to human history' to deny that personal development accompanied the existence of "class" and "rating" and conceived it as the development of the entire human race or its group. In *Capital*, Marx even regarded individuals as the personifications of economic categories:

Here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them (Marx, 1983). In this sense, social relations have priority over individuals, i. e. social relations (society) are not merely 'social framework' with respect to individuals, but they stand as the very structural 'ensemble' which constitutes individuality itself. Individuality is precisely a product of the ensemble of social relations. Undoubtedly, Marx opposes this category to that of the 'isolated individual' of the Robinsonades who appears as an individual without social connectedness. So there is no such 'theory of the individual' in Marx, but theoretical treatment of the individual (Molina, 1990).

Furthermore, the contribution Marx made to the advancement of Hegle's criticism on subjectivity and humanism can also be seen in his advocacy that the extreme individualistic theory of modern thinkers has its profound social historical source. According to Marx, the modern thinkers' theory, which was based on the isolated individual, is the anticipation of 'civil society,' in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth. He said, "The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole.It is not until the 18th century, in 'bourgeois society,' that the various forms of social nexus confront the individual as merely means

towards his private ends, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is precisely the epoch of the hitherto most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations. Man is a 'political animal' in the most literal sense: he is not only a society animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society" (Marx, 1986, p.18).

However, why is it that the age with the most advanced social relations which brings about the viewpoint of 'isolated individual'? Marx found explanation in the ideology of commodity, money and capital. According to Marx, in money relation, in a developed system of exchange (and this appearance leads democracy astray), the ties of person dependence, distinctions of birth, education, etc (all the personal ties at least appear as personal relationships), are in fact broken, abolished. The individuals appear to be independent... (this independence, which altogether is merely an illusion and should more correctly be called unconcern, in the sense of indifference), appear to collide with each other freely, and to exchange with each other in this freedom (Marx, 1986, p.100).

But, Marx also pointed out that the existence of independent individuals in the developed exchange system in the civil society "is merely an illusion and should more correctly be called unconcern, in the sense of indifference." In truth, The dissolution of all products and activities into exchange-values presupposes both the dissolution of all established personal (historic) relations of dependence in production, and the all-round dependence of producers upon one another. The production of each individual producer is dependent upon the production of all the others, just as also transformation of his product into means of subsistence for himself has become dependent upon the consumption of all the others (Marx, 1986, p.93). The absolute mutual dependence of individuals, who are different from one another, constitutes their social connection (Marx, 1986, p.94). This means Marx intended to reveal the objectivity of the social bond between individuals (through the media of 'the tension provided by the interaction between universal need and supply') by distinguishing indifference between individuals and personal independence, and then point out the social historical origin of

the isolated individual's idea of modern philosophers and surpassed it too.

Marx also revealed the serious consequence of individualistic ideology and demonstrated the necessity of overcoming 'civil society.' He said the serious result of ideology of the "isolated individual" is fetishism, such as commodity fetishism, currency fetishism, and capital fetishism. "Every individual possesses social power in the form of a thing". It produces 'dependence mediated by things' (Marx, 1986, p. 95). This means the production of the individual "is not directly social, not the offspring of association distributing labour within itself. The individuals are subsumed under social production, which exists outside them as their fate; but social production is not subsumed under the individuals who manage it as their common wealth" (Marx, 1986, p. 95 - 96).

The objective relationship of dependence is nothing but the social relation independently confronting the seemingly independent individuals, i. e. their own reciprocal relations of production which have acquired an existence independent of and separate from them. Yet the abstraction or idea 'dominate the individuals' (Marx, 1986, p. 101). Therefore, in order to achieve the overall development of the individual, we must eradicate the society based on exchange value, turn social relations into people's common relations as such which are in their control; that is to say, to build an association of free individuals.

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF STATE

Marx stressed that objective social relations comprise individuality itself and that the overall development of individuals presupposes the destruction of societies based on exchange value and the establishment of the association of free individuals. This reveals Marx's inheritance of Hegel's theory of social politics and the traditions thereof dating back to the Platonic-Aristotelian period. However, as he went beyond Hegel's abstract idea by defining individual and society accurately, Marx's advancement of Hegel's social and political thought lies in the fact that his 'association of free individuals' is in no case the refurbished version of Hegel's

concept of state.

Based on his critique of modern subjectivity theories, Hegel pointed out that actual and concrete freedom consists in the ethic entity life. The supreme form of this ethic entity is state. Hegel said, "Self-consciousness finds in the state, as its essence and the end and product of its activity, its substantive freedom" (Hegel, 1971, para. 257). Although Hegel's worship of state reflected the actual situation of Germany after Napoleon's war and the Germans' bitter national humiliation and their hope for a unified nation, and as Hegel's state idea could not make contact with 'totalitarianism' simply, there existed in Hegel's state idealism conclusion the case that "committed to the logic of general notions under which specific situations," as Dewey called it. Hegel said that what he examined the Idea of state:

"In considering the Idea of the state, we must not have our eyes on particular states or on particular institutions. Instead we must consider the Idea, ... the ugliest of men, or a criminal, or an invalid, or a cripple, is still always a living man" (Hegel, 1971, para. 258A).

For Hegel, bad behaviour may disfigure the state in many respects, but they do the Idea of the state no harm.

Until his work in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx's thoughts had been under the influence of Hegel. Through his editing work Marx came to realize that state is not a universal thing, which places itself above the private, classes interests. The state of Prussia had been debased to act with the characteristics of private ownership. Marx, however, still insisted that such behavior of a state is not in accordance with the nature of itself. In March 1843, as the *Rheinische Zeitung* was closed down by the Prussian government, Marx readily retired from the social stags to his study. The reason why Marx readily retired to his study was that his previous Hegel's stand of Philosophy of Right was insufficient and that he was going to ravel out the nature of state and its relationship with society. His 'study' work resulted in the manuscript of *Critique of Hegel philosophy of Right* and the articles published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, in which Marx concluded that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general

development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of 'civil society'. Furthermore, based on his initial study on civilian society, Marx discovered the limitation of political revolution and political emancipation, put forward the goal of endless revolution for human emancipation and found that the proletariat is the social force capable of carrying out the complete emancipation of mankind.

Afterward, Marx, through his political economic analysis of the civil society, definitely realized the basis of private ownership of state; and that the state is just a tool of class ruling. So Marx treated Hegel's ideal state as 'illusory community' or 'substitute for the community'.

"In the previous substitutes for the community, in the state, etc., personal freedom existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class. The illusory community, in which individuals have up till now combined, always took on an independent existence in relation to them, and was at the same time, since it was the combination of one class over and against another, not only a completely illusory community, but a new fetter as well"(Marx & Engels, 1964, p.91).

In contrast to the various 'illusory community,' Marx brought forward the concept of 'real community'. According to Marx, the transformation, through the division of labor, of personal powers (relationships) into material powers, cannot be dispelled by dismissing the general idea of it from one's mind, but can only be abolished by the individuals again subjecting these material powers to themselves and abolishing the division of labor. This is not possible without the community. Only in a community does the individual have the means to cultivate his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible. "In the real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association"(Marx & Engels, 1964, p.91 - 92).

From the above discussion we can see that Marx stressed that individual freedom can only be obtained in the community or the free relations between individuals. A state, which is worshipped as god by Hegel, is just a tool for the ruling class, and so, is not only an entirely illu-

sory community, but also a new fetter for the ruled class. As a result, the realization of human freedom and emancipation is bound to presuppose the dying out of class and state.

As early as July, 1844, Marx, after his first economic analysis of civil society and his realizing the basis of private ownership on which a state exists, pointed out that, in order to overcome the contradiction between personal interests and public interests, the state must perish of itself. Marx also wrote in *The German Ideology* that the proletariat in order to assert themselves as individuals, "they must overthrow the State" (Marx & Engels, 1964, p.95). In *The Poverty of Philosophy* "The working class, in the Course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society"(Marx, 1984, p. 212).

Thus the concept of the 'association of individuals' has been clearly expounded through the discussion on the critique of modern individualism and liberalism and the disenchantment of state. Society or community has priority over the individual and individuality is composed of social relations, not vice versa. Of course society's priority over the individual is a conceptual category rather than a temporal one. The human being is not only a gregarious animal, but also an animal only independent in a society. Society is fundamental for every individual. Therefore, the 'free development of each' put forward by Marx when describing the 'association of free individuals' refers to individuals' re-subjecting their social relations that have been changed into material powers owing to private ownership and alienation. In this sense, the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. In this very sense, too, the foundation of the real community is required as the presupposition so as to relate his theory of freedom to the theory on the elimination of private ownership and the alienation and elimination of class and state finally. Since the freedom of every individual can only be achieved in and through a community of themselves, the community independent of every individual and society in which classes and their antagonism exist is 'illusory';

hence the fetter restraining free development of every individual. Thus Marx's concept of 'association of free individuals' hits home the individualism which treats the relations between individuals and society or state in an means-end way, and Hegel's state idealism which, with the integration of history and age as its target, regards state as the unsurpassable highest form for the realization of freedom. Accordingly, we can reasonably suppose that, based on Hegel's political philosophy, Marx successfully summarized the whole developing history of political thoughts and further, surpassed the history by bringing forward and demonstrating a post-political social ideal.

At the beginning of this paper we mentioned the traditional interpretation of Marxist theories. It is undoubtedly ignorance or prejudice to interpret them as economic determinism, which spurns individual freedom. The whole Marxist theory centers on emancipation and freedom of human beings, the naming of his highest ideal as 'association of free individuals' being the clear proof. However, it would be superficial to announce Marxism as humanism of individualism according to Marx's pursuit of 'free development of each.' This understanding completely omits the revelation of 'image of men' made by Hegel and Marx; Besides, in methodology, it cannot overcome the deficiency of all modern political philosophy including Hegelianism committed to the logic of general notions of society and individual as well as their relations. These misunderstandings, in terms of Marx, are just the illusive reflection of social alienation and antagonisms.

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