

Re-examine Popper's Critique of Marxist Historicism

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Abstract: The challenge of Popper's critique to Marxist philosophy has been the subject of academic research and discussion. However, in recent years, most of the academic rebuttals to Popper are still in opposition to Marxism, and they have not listened reasonably to its academic nature. This paper discusses Popper's criticism of Marxist historicism through comparative analysis, aiming to find the rationality of his criticism, so as to perfect the path of Marxian historical materialism. Through analysis, the article clarifies Popper's stance on Marxist historicism, and objectively excavates the rationality of Popper's criticism, which provides a new thinking about the construction of the cause of human happiness.

Keywords: philosophy of science, popper, marxism historicism

1. Introduction

As an important modern philosopher of science, Popper applied the principles of critical rationalism and the methodology of conjecture-retort in the field of social history, and his social historical philosophy of criticizing historicism also arises. In view of the serious challenge to Marxist philosophy caused by Popper's criticism, academic community have conducted continuous research and discussion on his theory. Internationally, study of Popper philosophy has a long history and a wide range of materials, but in China it once stayed in the field of philosophy of science. It was not until the revolution of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 after an ideological shock, that Chinese Marxists gradually realized the urgent need for institutional reform under the current world situation, and then conducted an in-depth study of Popper's philosophy. Although studies in the field of Popper's social philosophy have emerged in recent years, the academic retorts of Popper are still mostly based on ideology, which is generally in the critical stage of opposition to Marxism, and the reasonable listening to its academic nature is slightly insufficient.

This paper takes Popper's criticism of Marx's historicism as the research theme and makes a comparative analysis of the two in order to clarify Popper's critical perspective of Marxism, so as to break the traditional retort of maintaining Marx from an ideological standpoint. In addition, this research objectively explores the rationality and misunderstanding in Popper's criticism, faces up to the advantages and disadvantages of Marxist historicism, so as to make up the theoretical deficiencies and gaps. Further, it hopes to find, build and improve the way to realize the cause of human happiness.

2. A New Field of Criticism of Holism and Totalitarianism

Popper argued that freedom could become a central issue, especially under the revival of historicism and large-scale planning (or totalitarianism) ideas. So he was against totalitarianism and

authoritarianism to defend freedom, and warned the dangers of superstitious historicism [1]. In *the Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper's critique of philosophers such as Hegel, Spengler, and Toynby stems from the prophetic schema they proposed about the future of world history. In *the Poverty of Historicism*, Popper believes that natural phenomena are repetitive, while social and historical phenomena are not, so history has no rules, let alone predictions. Thus, Popper denied the fantasy of holistic social engineering, and advocated establishing piecemeal social engineering. Popper is skeptical that people can have a general grasp of the state of development in society, or even put forward a whole set of planned plans. So, he advocated the gradual development of society, for the planned development model will sacrifice intergenerational happiness, and the means will replace goals. So, the development path can only be corrected in the process of trial and error.

Popper criticises historicism and its fantasy criticism, and puts forward proposals such as piecemeal social engineering to replace holistic social engineering, in fact, it is a concentrated criticism of the *Holism* (a vital issue of historicism) and the *Totalitarianism* caused by it. Therefrom, Popper realized the criticism of historicism turning to *Holism from Relativism* [2]. For Popper, *the Poverty of Historicism* is a critique of *Holism in philosophy*, while *the Open Society and Its Enemies* is a criticism of *Totalitarianism* in political philosophy. The two are unified on the basis of some "holistic" thinking and strategy.

3. The Basic Connotation of Popper's Social and Historical Philosophy

3.1. Basic Principle: The Falsification Principle

The Falsification Principle is a way of demarcating science from non-science. It suggests that for a theory to be considered scientific, it must be able to be tested and conceivably proven false. Popper advocated *Critical Rationalism* in the field of philosophy of science, and the application of this principle in the field of historical politics led to his criticism of Marxism. Popper believes that the boundary between science and non-science is a matter of epistemology, while the boundary between meaningful and meaningless propositions is a linguistic problem, and that the two cannot be equated. He pointed out that *Logical Positivism* repels scientific theories and universal laws, confuses the boundary between science and pseudoscience, and confounds the problem of demarcation and meaning [3]. Therefore, Popper advocates the standard of scientific demarcation is *the Falsification Principle*, namely:

- (1) Scientific theories all have the form of strict universal statements;
- (2) The strict universal statement, because of the universal validity of space-time, determines that it cannot be affirmed by the singular proposition, but can be falsified by the singular proposition;
- (3) The falsification principle is a form of deductive reasoning;
- (4) Over time, theories that cannot be falsified could be translated into scientific problems that can be falsified;
- (5) The principle of falsification itself cannot be falsified, so it is a convention.

In short, Popper believes that scientific theories should be able to falsified, and anything that cannot be falsified is pseudoscience. The principle of falsification is embodied in the indeterminism of the growth of scientific knowledge. Objective truth exists, but we may never really know the distance from the truth, only criticizing and critical discussion are the only approaches to close to the truth [4].

Popper believes that it is the principle of falsification and reasonable criticism that form the tradition of bold speculation and free criticism, create a rational attitude, and even make western civilization based on science. According to the tradition of rationalism, bold changes in doctrine are not forbidden. On the contrary, theoretical innovation can be controlled by the seriousness of critique, it is far from a hidden theoretical change along with the name of the old theory and its founders as a

tradition, and the material of the history of thought also became a part of the tradition of the school [4]. Therefore, Popper believes that the principle of falsification and Critical Rationalism extends from the scientific field to the ideological field. No matter the scientific or ideological theory, the truth is not achieved overnight, let alone through direct and eternal determinism.

3.2. Proposition of Historical Irregularity

Popper attaches great importance to the application of scientific theory (especially the physical method) in social and historical philosophy, so he appeals to the Falsification Principle in this field and points out the irregularity of the historical process. Popper saw historicism as a way to explore the social sciences. It affirms the laws of social and historical development, assumes that historical prediction is the main purpose of social science, and assumes that by discovering the rhythm or patterns, laws or tendencies hidden under historical evolution, people can predict history on the basis of understanding this law. Since acting as a prophecy, it has been rejected with the aforementioned principle of falsification.

According to the historicism view of the application of physics methods, Popper divided it into two schools: pro-naturalism and anti-naturalism. If it favors the application of physics methods to the social sciences, it is called pro-naturalism or affirmative. If against, it is called anti-naturalism or a negative [5]. Popper introduced and criticized these two kinds, and jointly from two schools of thought, to demonstrate his views that natural phenomena are repetitive, but social and historical phenomena are not, so there is no law, let alone prophecy.

One of the important manifestations of regularity is repeatability. Therefore, Popper firmly grasps the unique and unrepetition of historical changes to deny the existence of the law in historical development, while emphasizing the unrepeatability of the historical process. Social and historical development is dynamic change, but also rapid. By the time people notice the changing situation, society has already changed [5]. Moreover, since social history is about the process of human development, and human creativity directly affects the process of social history, human social history has a complexity different from that of the natural science. The attributes of social and historical development itself and human subjectivity create the novelty and complexity of history, making it impossible to repeat it with the same accuracy and precision as the nature laws. Even the scientific field can not make accurate predictions according to the nature laws, and the uncertainty of the future state of knowledge is the same thing as the uncertainty of the future state of the physical world [3].

Popper also tries to deny the regularity of history from the logical direction [5]. All the nature laws are hypotheses. Popper believes that because the hypotheses are often used to express general nature laws, the fact that hypotheses are not general laws is unclear understood. It should not be ignored that the nature law is a universal proposition, while the historical hypothesis is only a single proposition about an individual event or some individual events, and the two can not be confused [5]. Single proposition will change due to various contingency in the historical process, and is not repeatable. Therefore, the law and prediction of history has been falsified and negated due to this impossibility.

In order to completely break the illusion of the existence of laws of historical development, Popper denies that historical trends are regular and emphasizes the non-homogeneity of historical trends and historical laws. Trend is not a law, and a proposition asserting the existence of trend is a existential proposition rather than a universal proposition (a universal rule is not a definite existence). The proposition asserting the existence of trend is a single historical proposition at a given time and space, rather than a universal law. The practical significance of this logical circumstance is worth considering [5]. The prudent statisticians understand that although people make scientific predictions according to the laws, they cannot make scientific predictions based solely on the existence of trends. He took population growth as an example to illustrate that laws and trends cannot be equated. It is

the confusion and intuition of the two that led Comte to propose the theory of Laws of Succession [5].

Historical determinism cannot guarantee that laws are generally valid, and they argue that one cannot assume in social science that people has found truly universal law, because people cannot assure whether laws seen in certain periods hold in other periods. While Popper acknowledged the view, he also pointed out that historical determinisms' problem is to add a condition to the formula of the law, saying that they are judged only suitable for the period when they are observed to hold. But an important postulate of scientific methods is to seek laws of unrestricted validity. If one admits that laws themselves are subject to change, then they cannot be used to explain the change. This would be the end of scientific progress. For, if unexpected observations are raised, there is no need to revise the theory, ad hoc hypothesis can be used to explain everything [5]. In Popper's view, this assumption of invariance is careless about science (whether natural or social), and an absurdity that resists the principle of falsification.

4. Popper's Critique of Marxist Historicism

4.1. Deny the Decisive Role of the Economic Foundation

In Popper's opinion, it was Marxist historicism have the wrong prediction of scientific form, thus inducing countless people to believe that the purpose of studying social science is to make historical predictions, and to provide scientific proof for the Utopian Project to completely transform society by violent means [6].

Popper regarded Marxism as the historicism of economism. The conclusion drawn from the analysis of productive forces and relations of production in Marxist Historical Materialism is that "all" history is the history of class struggle. Popper thinks "all" is already blind. Because history is a complex process restricted and acted by various factors, and the characteristic of historicism is precisely to simplify the historical process to a conflict between two forces. Thus, the historicism of Marxist economics describes history as the history of class struggle, which is no better than other forms of historicism [6].

It is generally believed that Marx's economism explains the nature of society, structure, and change reasons of society, that is, the Historical Materialism of "social existence determines social consciousness", "economic foundation determines the superstructure" etc. Popper questioned Marx's idea that the economy decides thought, believing that the thought constituting knowledge is more fundamental than the whole material and means of production. It is thought that determines the economy, and then determines the development of society. Popper compared the situation that uses knowledge to rebuild a destroyed economic system with the situation where civilization vanishes and only the material machines is possessed, and opposed the idea "the economic base determines the superstructure". At the same time, he emphasized the decisive role of politics in the economy, and believed that the reformist democratic politics can just disprove the Marxist theory of violent revolution. Therefore, historicism (including but not limited to Marx's revelation of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism and the prediction of the inevitable demise of Capitalism), which is based on economism and reveals the historical laws and predicts the future of social development, is equally unreliable [6].

4.2. Criticism the Potential Violence of the Established Blueprint

Popper does not deny the many shortcomings of Capitalism proposed by Marx, but it is the Falsification Principle that promotes the continuous adjustment of politics rather than unchanged. By the social Try Out Method, politics gradually restricts economic power, thus making up for the defects proposed by Marx. Therefore, the defects of Capitalism proposed do not necessarily point to socialism,

but can guide political correction and economic intervention. The rights and interests of the Working Class can be improved and guaranteed through democratic politics (such as political correction and intervention in the economy), so an armed revolution can be avoided. At the same time, due to the political intervention in the economy, the Proletariat mainly the poor is no longer the social main body, and the growing size and stability of the Middle Class makes it difficult for the proletariat movement to promote [6]. Similarly, based on political intervention, the basic contradiction of Capitalism is no longer irreconcilable.

Therefore, Popper pointed out that the poverty of Marxist historicism lies in the desire of a great number of Marxists to turn social science into a powerful tool in the hands of politicians [5]. Historicism is not a purely academic theory, it also has the purpose of serving the rulers. The historicism of Marxism attempts to fully grasp and realize the overall social transformation in accordance with the law of historical development predicted by Marx and the schema provided by Marx. However, Popper believes that, precisely for the irregularity of history, this stereotype of the ideal end through planning engineering could not finally get the result promised by Marx's historicism prophecy. Therefore, Popper believes that it is different from Marx's fundamental foothold. Popper does not criticize the political ideal itself, and always says he does not declare that a political ideal could never be achieved [4]. He mainly criticized Marx in academic theory as a philosopher. However, Marxism's ideological discourse in the 20th century has gone far beyond philosophical theory.

According to Popper, differences in positions or interests must be decided and resolved because they lead to intolerable tensions (such as an arms race). The way to solve the problem is almost exclusively argument (dialogue) and violence, so a rational argument attitude is the only alternative to violence. Popper describes Marxism as a Utopian Project, applying the argument of rational action (an action makes the best use of all available means to achieve a certain purpose) to politics. In this view, the choice of an ideal social state is the goal for which all political action should serve. Popper believes that this utopian approach is likely to cause violence. Since the ultimate purpose of political action cannot be determined scientifically or in a purely rational way, differences of view about the ideal society state cannot always be eliminated by means of argument [4].

Based on this, Popper believes that there are two problems with the Marxist historical prophecy schema:

(1) A society with a preset developmental schema would be violent, because all actions point to the ultimate goal. This is contrary to the purpose of realizing human liberation and happiness.

(2) This schema reverses both the means and the aim. When the transitional historical stage becomes a means, the suffering of one generation is seen only as a means to the permanent happiness of next or more generation [4]. The present generations should not be sacrificed by the promised ideal happiness or the benefits of multiple generations. Therefore, Popper criticized Marxist historicism as dangerous, harmful and self-destructive, and as leading to violence.

4.3. Oppose Marxist Who Against Falsification

The falsification principle in Popper's social history philosophy echoes the objective law of indeterminism in the field of physics. Popper believes that regularity is not the same as determinism, the existence of objective laws in the world does not mean that the world is determined by objective laws. This is also consistent with Popper's indeterminism regarding the growth of scientific knowledge. Therefore, all physical laws can be understood as hypotheses, which can make a lot of predictions to guide people, but such regularity is not accurate deterministic prediction. People will eventually find false scientific theories and correct them on this basis. It should be regarded as pseudoscience.

Moreover, Popper believes that true science is not afraid of falsification. The communist path drawn by Marx based on the laws of history can be used as a guide in the search for the cause of human happiness, but it should not be maintained unconditionally as a Marxist dogma. Realizing that communism was the end of prediction, its supporters complement the schema of Marx's communism theory with various assumptions and modifications, and strive to shape it into a completely unfalsified theory. For example, in the October Revolution, Lenin revised Marx's prediction that the victory of the proletarian revolution was first achieved in the developed capitalist countries, and put forward the theory of imperialism about contemporary Capitalism. Popper sees it as a pseudoscience against the falsification principle. But there is also a major problem that Popper is not clear on how to define resistance to falsification and revise the theory with the times to guide reality.

5. A Re-examination of Popper's Position on Marxism

Although Popper was critical of Marxist historicism, this does not mean that Popper was a fierce anti-Marxist, much less that Popper's criticism was a complete denial of Marx's thought, as some anti-Marxist have argued. The misunderstanding of Popper is related to Popper's political stance and liberal propositions. At the same time, Popper's personal relationship with Hayek also largely masks the true face of his mind. So Popper's thought is often regarded as the basis of anti-socialist capitalist theory. In fact, although both held libertarian positions, Hayek took classical economics as a starting point, advocated private ownership as the basis of freedom, fundamentally maintains private property and market economy, and defended capitalism in the ideological field.

But Popper's original intention was not from the ideological position of opposition and criticism. He mainly used democracy as the guarantee of freedom, and never denied the ills of capitalism. Precisely because of his similarity to Marx's highest ideal appeal, he did not see the utopian project as a better way to achieve human liberation through the logical judgment of his own theory. Popper's support for capitalism and his opposition to Marx simply stemmed from the different chosen paths to realize the highest moral ideal.

5.1. The Theoretical Basis of the Criticism Is not the Bourgeois Ideology

Popper's main basis is not bourgeois ideology, but the rational criticism of Marx's academic position as a philosopher, rather than the rejection of the ideological nature. As an ideological discourse, Marxism has the distinction between criticism of weapons and weapon of criticism. Although the weapon of criticism (theory) cannot replace the criticism of weapons (proletarian revolution), it can persuade and master the masses for it. Popper divided the debate of rationality into non-Critical Rationalism and Critical Rationalism. The former takes rationality as its own standard, and believes that any rational standard has presupposition rather than neutrality, and considers any rational criterion as presupposed rather than neutral and unsupported by demonstration and experience. The latter is an attitude of equal exchange of views, which is ready to not only persuade others, but also to be persuaded. This rational attitude can be expressed as "I think I am right, but I may be wrong, you may be right, and let's discuss it, because that is closer to a correct understanding than insisting that you are right" [4].

The Falsification Principle does not mean the loss of science, but opposes the danger of an authoritative truth and alert the dangers of rational conceit. Recalling the war of religious believers to believe in truth, Popper realized that violence caused by piety and responsibility could be controlled only by renouncing the authority of public opinion and by establishing an equal exchange of opinions and a willingness to learn from others. Therefore, theoretical criticism must be restricted to the scope of reason, or to rational debate as a contest between criticism of weapons rather than an ideological struggle. Because although ideological discourse is systematic of its own, external criticism of another

ideology based on its beliefs, methods and standards can consolidate the critic's own ideology, but it is unlikely to convince the man criticized. The counterattack of the man who is criticized according to his own ideology can produce the same effectiveness [6]. Therefore, Popper advocated solving problems through equal and rational dialogue and internal criticism of mutual absorption and improvement, rather than such external criticism of ideological struggle.

Popper deeply shared Marx's moral ideals of human liberation, equality and freedom, was not a die-hard of capitalist ideology, nor rejecting communism and socialism. If it is possible for socialism to be combined with individual liberty, it would be socialist [1]. Popper's pursuit is not a political stand or ideology, but a pursuit of moral ideals similar to Marx, and his criticism of it is only derived from the difference in paths. Therefore, Popper's criticism of Marxism should be treated objectively. Based on Marx's historical materialism, Popper observed the social phenomena explained by Marxist theory and found that the reality of social development did not get the results predicted Marx, proving the Marxist theory, which is undoubtedly of reference significance for the construction of the communist career today. We the Bourgeois theoretical basis should not be blindly refute and reject because of Popper's critique from reality. On the contrary, It is precisely because of problems existed in the process of the Soviet Union showed drawbacks that only by seriously responding to Popper's criticism of Marxism from both rational and factual perspectives can avoid repeating the same mistakes and truly realize the Marxist ideal.

5.2. Did not Deny the Science of Marx's Theory

Popper did not deny the rationality of Marx's theory. According to Popper the feature of Marx's historicism was that it departed from the metaphysical and religious meaning of traditional historicism and studied it as a science. It was studied based on a scientific attitude, and the critical prediction of capitalism, though falsified, was right to the point. Popper never denied the ills of capitalism pointed out by Marx, and affirmed that it was through Marx's sharp criticism that the capitalist society was improved in reality. Though some parts of the predictions of Marx's theory have been realized in the 20th century, others have been falsified, such as the poverty of the proletariat in the capitalist countries and the victory of the proletarian revolution first achieved in the developed capitalist countries. The falsification only show that this scientific theory should be keep pace with the times, at least no longer apply to modern capitalism. This is precisely the falsification of historical prediction that reflects the scientific nature of Marx's theory.

Popper also never considered Marx's own theory a pseudoscientific, it was the later Marxists he objected to. First, Popper argued that through continuous auxiliary corrections and periodic hypotheses, Marxists never falsified Marx's theory, thus losing its original appearance. Second, Popper criticized the reality of the socialist camp of the Soviet Union, believing that Marxists had become rigid. They regard Marxist theory as an unchanging dogma, and reverse the purpose and means of achieving the ultimate goal. In contrast, Popper maintained a serious attitude of respect for science in Marx's theory. When Toynbee said Marxist is a religion, Popper was even defending Marx, stating that Marx's belief was not religious but rational because Marx was a scientist who explained how socialism would be achieved through purely rational means [7].

Neither does Popper think that falsified scientific theories should be immediately abandoned. On the contrary, Marx's theory still has a strong vitality. First, it was Marx's critique that makes people correctly realize the defects of Capitalism and promote the improvement of society. Second, Popper affirmed the humanistic concern in Marx's theory. Popper always expected the society to be improved, and the pursuit of freedom and equality was no less than Marx, so he both criticized and maintained Marx. The social ethics proposed by Marx goes beyond the category of ideal and has become the program of action and the critical spirit of reason. This spirit is consistent with the Popper's Critical

Rationalism [6]. Although Popper and Marx have different paths, the spiritual core of ideal pursuit are the same, not completely negative and absolute opposition.

Popper believes that no matter how charitable the purpose of the Utopian Project is, it does not bring happiness but the common suffering of living under an autocratic government. It begins with good goals and plans, and inevitably ends up in a chaotic state of anti-rationality and unplanned [4]. This argument is not completely true, but the ills of totalitarianism were confirmed and learned from the revolution of 1989. The ills of the Planned Economy exposed by the Soviet model, as well as the political persecution such as the expansion of the rebellion, the suppression of dissidents and internal strife, were attributed by Popper to Marx's false prophecy and holistic design [6]. Popper's opposition is based on the inherent social engineering schema that will lead to rigid dogma. Planned projects of political goals would sacrifice intergenerational happiness, and people's real life would become a transitional means in the historical situation. To some extent, it can be considered that Popper's fundamental pursuit coincides with Marx's. Therefore, Marxists need to fully understand his criticism, which is the elimination of concrete evil rather than the realization of abstract good [4]. At the same time, Marxists need to face up to the immediate problems, listen to the specific requirements, solve the accessible reality, and change the current pressing suffering. Meanwhile, For the disadvantages of formalization in the planning system, Marxists should draw lessons about the formalized evils of the planned system, while pay attention to regaining the subjectivity of the people, divorced from the abstraction, and return to the concrete reality.

6. Conclusion

Re-examining Popper's criticism of Marx's historicism, it can be found that the Falsification Principle, which underpins Popper's philosophy of science, is not only conducive to combating the subjectivism of modern physics, but also conducive to avoiding the formation of dogmatism in social and historical philosophy. At the same time, it is precisely the Falsification Principle that highlights the scientific nature of Marx's theory. We should realize the shortcomings pointed out by Popper. When it comes to the ideal schema of human happiness, no matter what approach is chosen, it should not be stuck on the grounds of mastering the truth. Only by adhering to humanism, rationally listening to problems, admitting, facing up to and correcting mistakes, can we better realize the ideal blueprint.

While this article clarifies Popper's position, it does not explain how Marxism should respond to such academic criticism in addition to maintaining its political stance, and how to make up for its own theoretical flaws. Popper's criticism of Marx's historicism is also not entirely correct. How to choose Popper's above criticism and improve his own theory is also an urgent problem for marxists to solve in the academic field.

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