

Engels' Theoretical Contribution to Historical Materialism and its Contemporary Value Implication

-- Based on Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy

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Abstract: As Marx's close comrade-in-arms and revolutionary partner, Engels undertook the major mission of perfecting Marxist philosophy in defense of Marx after Marx's death, but Engels's interpretation of Marxism caused scholars to explore the academic relationship between Marx and Engels, and his book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (hereinafter referred to as Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*) became the focal point of the research on the academic relationship between the two. The work presents Engels' systematic interpretation of the materialist conception of history, his innovative formulation of Engels' theory of historical synergy and the fundamental question of philosophy, and is a strong proof of the consistency between the ideas of Marx and Engels. Engels' theoretical contribution to the materialist conception of history in the work still has valuable theoretical value in contemporary times, and inspires us to hold on to Marxism without wavering, and to innovate without stopping, in order to better guide our practice.

Keywords: Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy; Engels; Materialist View of History.

1. Introduction

Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy (hereinafter referred to as Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*), written in 1886, is an important work by Engels, the great revolutionary teacher, to explain the materialistic conception of history. The death of Marx in 1883 undoubtedly dealt a heavy blow to the world proletarian movement. On the one hand, the bourgeoisie intensified its attacks on and distortion of Marxism, and on the other hand, Hegelian philosophy showed a tendency to resurrect. It was precisely at this time of crisis that the work appeared out of nowhere to carry out a thorough liquidation of German classical philosophy, to fulfill the long-cherished wish of Marx and Engels that had not been fulfilled more than forty years ago, to draw a clear line between Marxism and German classical philosophy, and to systematically elucidate the fundamental principles of Marxism. Engels systematically expounded the basic principles of Marxism, and made a firm defense and correct propaganda of Marxism. However, it is because Engels' alone combing and systematic elaboration of Marxism after Marx's death, some scholars think that Engels' thoughts are not in line with Marx himself, and Engels' series of writings have led some scholars to think about the academic relationship between Marx and Engels. Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888* has been regarded as the originating text for the discussion of the academic relationship between Marx and Engels, and in fact Engels' refinement and innovation of the materialist conception of history in this book is the best proof of the essential consistency between the two academic ideas. Therefore, interpreting Engels' theoretical contribution to the materialist conception of history in the work under the conditions of the new era is the best retort to the distortion of the academic relationship between the two giants and the discrediting of Engels' historical contributions, and the academic

contributions, theoretical innovations, and sentiments of the times embedded in Engels' thoughts are of great significance in guiding the development of the era of the Chineseization of Marxism as well as of the present era.

2. The Consistency of the Scholarly Relationship between Marx and Engels - An Analysis Based on Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*

As Marx's close comrade-in-arms and revolutionary partner, the academic relationship between Marx and Engels has always been a controversial issue in the academic world, and has long formed three classic views: Marx-Engels opposition theory, Marx-Engels opposition theory, and Marx-Engels Consistency Theory. The work is a classic textual basis for refuting Marx-Engels opposition theory, examining Marx-Engels Difference Theory, and then analyzing the consistency of the academic relationship between Marx and Engels, providing valuable textual support for an in-depth interpretation of Engels' theoretical contribution to the materialist conception of history.

The "Marx-Engels opposition theory" is a viewpoint that puts the academic thoughts of Marx and Engels in diametric opposition, and according to the data, there have been three waves of "Marx-Engels opposition theory" in the history of the development of Marxism. The first time, from 1897 to 1914, was represented by Bernstein, Schmidt and others. Bernstein saw dialectical materialism as a revision of earlier metaphysics, and called Engels' dialectical materialism "theology". The second wave, which lasted from 1923 to 1939, was driven by the Frankfurt School, represented by Lukács, Gramsci and others, and was longer and more influential, focusing on a critique of Engels's dialectic of nature. The third began in the 1950s and 1960s, represented by Levin, Lubell and others, advocating fallacies such

as “Two Marxisms” “Engelsism against Marxism” “Leninism against Marxism” and other fallacies. The three waves of “Marx-Engels opposition theory” distorted Engels' thoughts and academic contributions, and were obviously one-sided. Under the influence of “Marx-Engels opposition theory”, the study of Engels' Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888 in the academic circles at that time generally showed a kind of “belittling theory”.

In contrast to the extreme viewpoint of “Marx-Engels opposition theory”, “Marx-Engels Difference Theory” focuses on textual and empirical research, affirming the theoretical contributions of Engels while at the same time refining the differences between the two. On the one hand, Carver, a western scholar, is a representative of the “Marx-Engels Difference Theory”, who advocates exploring the differences between Marx and Engels under the premise of consistency of their ideas, and David McLellan, in his book “Friedrich Engels”, also emphasizes that there are certain differences between the ideas of Engels and Marx, and affirms the historical contribution of Engels. On the other hand, the “Marx-Engels Difference Theory” represented by Carver has triggered the reflection of the Chinese academic circles. Chinese scholars Prof. Yu Wujin and Prof. He Zhonghua are the representatives of this view, and Yu Wujin thinks that the differences between Marx and Engels' ideas mainly focus on The relationship between practice and nature, between ontology and epistemology, and between real people and pure thought. On the surface, this view seems to have a certain degree of rationality, but this view will potentially result in the fragmentation of their academic thought. However, under the influence of the “Marx-Engels Difference Theory”, some scholars have grown a new understanding from the study of Engels' Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888, expanding the direction and ideas of Marxist research.

The “Marx-Engels Consistency Theory”, which holds that Marx and Engels' academic thought is essentially consistent, is a correct viewpoint recognized by most Marxists. Firstly, both Marx and Engels themselves showed the consistency of their academic thought: In a letter to Bertalan Szemere on 22 November 1860, Marx insisted that Engels ‘must’ be regarded as ‘my alter ego’. Engels also modestly stated his academic relationship with Marx in the work: “But the greater part of its leading basic principles, especially in the realm of economics and history, and, above all, their final trenchant formulation, belong to Marx. What I contributed — at any rate with the exception of my work in a few special fields — Marx could very well have done without me”, this shows the closeness of their relationship and the consistency of their thinking. Secondly, this view was dominated by the “orthodox Marxists” of the Second International as well as some Soviet socialist scholars, represented by Kautsky and Plekhanov, etc. In the face of the opposition of Bernstein and others to Engels, the Second International, represented by Kautsky, firmly defended Engels with this view, and therefore Engels was still in a very high position before the dissolution of the Second International. They believed that the ideas of Marx and Engels had a profound internal consistency and wholeness, and compared the ideas of Marx and Engels to “a piece of steel”, i.e., a piece of impermeable steel plate with no gaps. Thirdly, some early scholars in China were mainly influenced by the Soviet Union in their study of the relationship between Marx and Engels, and insisted on this view. For example, Chen Xianta, a scholar in China, once mentioned that “It is Marx's revelation of singularity in the general sense of social history

and Engels's later analysis of diversity in the specific sense that constitute the whole picture of the dialectical unity of the Marxist theory of social history”. “Marx-Engels Consistency Theory” is a scientific point of view for understanding the academic relationship between Marx and Engels, and influenced by this viewpoint, some scholars in the USSR and in China have shown a “positive theory” in their study of the work, and believing it, as an important work in Engels' systematic elaboration of the concept of materialist history, is the “best teaching material for learning Marxist philosophy”.

As one of the two major discoveries in Marx's life, the materialist conception of history is also the combination of Marx's and Engels' academic thoughts. Engels clearly divided his work with Marx in the process of the creation of the concept of the materialist conception of history, providing the world with the Engels' perspective in the study of Marxism, and the work is the strong proof of the consistency of the two ideas. First, Marx and Engels co-authored a number of works centered on the creation and formation of the materialist concept of history, which is a strong proof of the consistency of their ideas. Two works, *The German Ideology*, which Marx and Engels wrote together in the spring of 1845, and *The Communist Manifesto*, which they wrote together in 1848, marked the creation and formation of the materialist conception of history. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels first systematically expounded the basic principles of the materialist conception of history. Later, Marx and Engels utilized the basically perfected materialist conception of history to write the *Communist Manifesto*, in which they further elucidated some of the basic principles of the materialist conception of history, and which opens with the statement that “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.” Using the method of analysis of the basic contradictions in society and the method of class analysis, he pointed out the opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as well as the core proposition of the inevitable victory of communism and the inevitable demise of capitalism, which provided a scientific theoretical guide to the world socialist revolutionary movement. In 1859, Marx also made a classical statement of the materialist concept of history in *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*. Secondly, Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*, as a work written independently by Engels, is still highly consistent with Marx's thought, even though a small part of its ideas are slightly different from Marx. In terms of the purpose of writing, It is a work written by Engels in order to defend Marx's academic thought. After the death of Marx, the world socialist movement faced a complicated situation, not only produced some theoretical differences but also suffered from external political oppression, German classical philosophy at this time also appeared some tendency to resurrect, Engels wrote the work in response to these new changes, and once again, thoroughly clarified the difference between Marxism and German classical philosophy, and counterattacked the misrepresentation of Marxism, and maintained the academic status of Marx. It defended Marx's academic position and continued to provide guidance for the world socialist movement. From the point of view of the content of the writing, the basic ideas of the work are a development and innovation of Marx's thought. It was an article written independently by Marx in 1845 and discovered only after Marx's death, in which Marx established the birth of a new practice-based worldview, the materialist conception of history, by criticizing the old materialist ideas, including

Feuerbach's. Grounded in the new situation of the world socialist movement, Engels continued to liquidate the German classical philosophy and the old materialist philosophy of Feuerbach's in *The Theses on Feuerbach*. In Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*, he continued to liquidate the German classical philosophy and Feuerbach's old materialism, and the refinement and innovation of the materialist conception of history was also the continuation and perfection of the new worldview in *Theses on Feuerbach*. In addition, Engels highly praised the paper as "the first document containing the genius seeds of a new worldview" and made it the preface to the Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*, which was the first time to be published, also fully explaining that the new worldview is based on practice, also fully illustrates the consistency of the two men's thinking.

3. Engels' Theoretical Contribution to the Materialist Conception of History in Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888*

Engels systematically expounded a series of basic principles of the materialist concept of history in the work, and put forward the "the fundamental question of philosophy", "the theory of historical synergy" and other original ideas. A detailed dissection of the book's discussion of the materialist conception of history is a powerful weapon for a deeper understanding of and adherence to the fundamentals of Marxism, and for an objective view of Engels's historical contributions to Marxism in his later years.

3.1. Engels' Systematic Interpretation of the Materialist Concept of History

As one of the two great discoveries of Marx's life and one of the most important discoveries, the materialist concept of history is the crystallisation of the common wisdom of Marx and Engels, as well as the combination of Marx's and Engels' thoughts, which is the proof of the consistency of the two thoughts, and the theoretical contribution of Engels to the materialist concept is reflected, first of all, in the fact that he adhered to the materialist concept of history and further systematically interpreted it.

In 1886, Engels made a further elucidation of the fundamentals of the materialist conception of history in the work. Firstly, Engels expelled idealism from the shelter of social history by pointing out that social history, like nature, has its objective laws. 'the fact that the course of history is governed by inner general laws', the development of social history appears on the surface to be a function of chance, but in fact chance is governed by internal laws of necessity. Secondly, Engels continued to reveal how the social power system promotes social development in the objective law of social and historical development: firstly, he pointed out that the economic base determines the superstructure, and that the continuous development of the capitalist society has led to the division of the society into three classes, namely the landed aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and that class exploitation and oppression bring about revolt, which triggers the class struggle, which is all centred around economic interests in capitalist society. The class struggle in capitalist society revolves around economic interests, therefore "all political struggles are class struggles, and all class struggles for emancipation, despite their necessarily political form - for

every class struggle is a political struggle - turn ultimately on the question of economic emancipation." Secondly, he points out that class struggle is the direct driving force of the development of class society, and that in capitalist society not only does the bourgeoisie arise, but also the bourgeoisie's own 'enemy', the proletariat, which is the third warrior in the struggle for domination. The struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie has led to the transformation of the whole of society to varying degrees, while the ultimate goal of the proletarian revolution is the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of proletarian domination by violent means. Finally, he emphasises that the masses of the people are the mainstay of history, the creators of history. In the process of the proletariat's revolt against the bourgeoisie, and in the process of the development of society as a whole, the masses played a vital role. To inquire into the motives behind history, it is necessary to inquire into the motives that "set in motion great masses, whole people, and again whole classes of the people in each people", and to inquire into the motives behind the "a lasting action resulting in a great historical transformation".

3.2. Engels' Theoretical Innovations in the Materialist Conception of History

3.2.1. The Formulation of "the Theory of Historical Synergy".

In the work, Engels creatively put forward the "theory of historical synergy", which he later refined in his letters on the materialist conception of history. He interpreted social history in terms of the 'parallelogram of forces', clarifying the relationship between the objective regularity of historical development and the subjective initiative of human activity, the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure, and the relationship between individual will and collective synergy.

Firstly, he pointed out the unity of the objective regularity of historical development and the Human subjectivity. He first distinguishes between the blind, unconscious dynamics of nature and the conscious purpose of social history, and then further points out that although the subject of social history has a purpose and consciousness, it is often unable to achieve the desired purpose due to the constraints of subjective and objective conditions, and thus concludes that human social history, like the natural world, is still determined by the objective laws behind it, even though it has a wide variety of human purposes and aspirations. The conclusion is that, despite the variety of human aims and aspirations, the determining factor in human social history, like nature, is the objective law behind it. On the basis of clarifying the objective regularity of historical development, he further pointed out that "Men make their own history, whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end, and it is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions, and of their manifold effects upon the outer world, that constitutes history", emphasising the unity of man as the subject of social history, achieving respect for the laws and the exercise of subjective initiative through practice in order to achieve the desired end.

Secondly, it analyses the unity of individual will and group synergy in the creation of history by the masses. "History is so made that the end-result always arises out of the conflict of many individual wills, in which every will is itself the product of a host of special conditions of life. Consequently there exist

innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite group of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant product – the historical event.” Engels pointed out that the driving force of history is the combined force of countless individual wills in conflict with each other, we must see that individual wills contribute to history, i.e., “each contributes to the resultant and is to this extent included in it.” we must also see that the combined force of the masses constitutes the ultimate driving force of social development, so that a firm mass view of history is distinguished from a heroic view of history. We must also see that the combined forces of the masses constitute the ultimate driving force of social development, and draw a clear line between a firm mass view of history and a heroic view of history.

Thirdly, the unity of economic base and superstructure was emphasised. In ‘To J. Bloch’, Engels further elaborated the “the theory of historical synergy”, in which J. Bloch, a student of the University of Berlin, asked Engels whether the decisive role of the economic factor in the process of socio-historical development and the role of man in socio-historical development are in contradiction with each other? If not, how should the relationship between the two be regarded? Engels replied to this, “Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive. But the political ones, etc., and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, although not the decisive one.” This viewpoint affirms the decisive role of economic factors in the process of social development, while emphasising the relative independence of other factors such as the superstructure, and with the term ‘in the final analysis’, strongly refutes the vulgar economic determinism of some thinkers, and draws a clear line between a firm materialist standpoint and an idealist view of history.

3.2.2. Clarity of the “the Fundamental Question of Philosophy”

The question concerning the relation of thinking and being is one that no philosophy can avoid having to answer, and this pair of relationships has a history of its own transformation. In ancient times, due to the relatively low level of productive forces, cognitive level of ignorance, and social class oppression, people could only turn to God outside of nature, and contemplating the relationship between the soul and the body became an ancient manifestation of the fundamental question of philosophy. In the Middle Ages, when the status of theology was elevated, philosophy became subdivision of theology, and the problem of the relationship between thinking and being could only be presented in a more hidden way, around the dispute between nominalism and actualism. In modern times, the fundamental question of philosophy has been raised in a very obvious way, centred on the question: what is essential - is it spiritual, or is it natural? Thus, the question is a central one in the history of philosophical development, and Engels, for the first time in the history of philosophical development, explicitly raised the question, which has shown its great philosophical value.

Engels made a clear definition of the historical development and scientific content of the fundamental question of philosophy, giving them a truly scientific meaning. He pointed out for the first time that “The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being.” He clarified the two sides of the fundamental problems of philosophy, delineating the camps of materialism and idealism; the theoretical division between Epistemology and Agnosticism. In addition to this, Engels emphasises that

materialism and idealism are only answers to the first aspect of the fundamental question of philosophy and not to be abused, and here he criticises Starcke for equating materialism with behaviours such as gluttony and drunkenness, and idealism with ideals and beliefs, which creates confusion in thought. Engels also introduces the practical viewpoint to the fundamental question of philosophy, and points out that with regard to agnosticism “The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical crotchets is practice - namely, experiment and industry.”

4. The Contemporary Value Implications of Engels' Theoretical Contribution to the materialist conception of history in Engels' Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888

4.1. Unwavering Adherence to Marxism

In the work, Engels adhered to and further elaborated the principles of historical materialism, and firmly defended and propagated Marxism. In the context of the time, the international workers' movement was booming in the 1870s and 1880s, and bourgeois philosophers attacked Marxism by distorting the relationship between Marxist philosophy and German classical philosophy. He was furious at the theoretical distortions, dissatisfied with the stagnation of the philosophy in Germany, and anxious about the current situation of the workers' movement. So he decided to make a fundamental distinction between Marxism and German classical philosophy and to defend Marxism from the ground up. In order to cope with the tendency of a certain resurgence of Hegelian philosophy in Germany, Engels began his account of the book with a critique of Hegelian philosophy and ended it with a call for the German workers' movement, which fully embodied his adherence to Marxism as well as his sentiment of time.

Since its inception, Marxism has always provided invaluable theoretical guidance for all countries in the world, especially for the world socialist movement, and the charisma and light of truth contained therein have always provided theoretical treasures for the development of the world, illuminating the way forward for generation after generation. Today's era is far away from the era of Marx and Engels, but the basic principles of Marxism have never been outdated, and the “Great changes unseen in a century” and “the overall situation of the strategy for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” are intertwined and jointly affect the current world situation. The charm of Marxism has become more prominent in the complex changes, and it can still guide contemporary practice: on the one hand, from an international perspective, some new changes have emerged in the process of the development of Western societies, and more and more Western scholars have deepened the study of Marxism, attempting to provide methodological guidance for the new changes in Western societies through the worldview and methodology of Marxism; On the other hand, from China's point of view, in the development of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the CPC must adhere to the correctness and innovation of Marxism in order to promote a new chapter of the Chineseization of Marxism, we must use the basic principles of the materialist conception of history to guide the development of China, use “historical thinking” to grasp the historical initiative of Chinese modernization, use

“historical synergy” to unite the development force of Chinese modernization, and use “historical confidence” to establish the value confidence of Chinese modernization.

4.2. Unceasing Innovation in Marxism

The classical writers of Marxism have never considered their theories to be unchanging truths, but have continuously enriched and improved their theories with the times in the course of practice. In the work, Engels innovatively put forward the fundamental question of philosophy, Engels' theory of historical synergy, made a thorough liquidation of German classical philosophy, and enriched and deepened the concept of material history, which enlightens that we should always promote the innovation of Marxism.

There is no end to practice, and no end to theoretical innovation. Marxism is not a dogma, but a scientific truth that guides our actions, and the classical views of Marxism still have a certain theoretical value in contemporary times, but we should make interpretations that meet the requirements of the development of the times. For example, from an international perspective, the era of big data and artificial intelligence has brought human society to a new level, but it has also given rise to a number of economic and social problems, for which scholars at home and abroad have put forward innovative theories such as digital labor and the Revisiting the Labor Theory of Value, artificial intelligence and labor, and eco-Marxism, to respond positively to the problems of the times and to provide innovative new solutions of Marxism. From China's point of view, Xi Jinping's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era is the latest achievement of the modernization of Marxism, fully embodies theoretical innovation in grasping the new problems and new changes in the development of the times. Constantly grasps the new problems and new changes in the development of the times and dares to “say something new” and “do something new”, and continues to open up new horizons.

5. Summary

A series of classic Marxist works, including Engels' Ludwig Feuerbach of 1888, are the best works for us to learn the basic principles of Marxism, deeply understand the academic contributions of great men, and realize their sentiments of the times, and the important ideological contents of these works have become more and more everlasting along with the changes of the times. The work provides us with the textual basis for in-depth understanding of the consistency of the academic thought of Marx and Engels, and continuously inspire us to promote theoretical innovation on the basis of practice under the guidance of scientific theories and insist on the unity of theory and practice.

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