

# Western Marxism's Misreading of Marx's Critique of Capitalism

## Research Article

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## Abstract

Since its advent in the early 1920s, western Marxism has undergone a torturous process from anti-liberalism to virtually liberalism. The main theoretical deficiency behind this process is the over-estimation of Marx's cultural critique of capitalism while neglecting his core tenet—the economic base determines the superstructure. In fact, Marx's critique of capitalism is twofold, economic and cultural aspects. When the leading proponents of Soviet Marxism gave prominence to Marx's economic critique, as circumstances required, they and some key figures in the Second International misread his theory with emphasis on economic determinism. In contrast, George Lukács and most western Marxists proceeded to develop a Marxian cultural critique with the consequence that they marginalized his economic research. Without the counterbalance of a continuous and consistent economic theory to challenge a confident international capitalism, the cultural critique is consequently reorganized in confluence with liberalism, which is centered on an individual ontology. Re-excavating Marxian dual critical theory, with his standpoint and method to perform a consistently comprehensive critique of capitalism taking economic foundation as the prerequisite, may help western Marxism escape the dilemma.

**Keywords:** Western marxism; Marx's dual critique of capitalism; Economic critique; Cultural critique; Individual ontology

## Introduction

The publication in 1923 of Georg Lukács's foundational *History and Class Consciousness* is approaching its centenary. Arising from high revolutionary passion, this book faces bleak prospects a hundred years on. After much influence and attention, western Marxism—and broadly speaking, the western Left—likewise has declined since at least 1968. Perry Anderson, the leading philosophical exponent of western Marxism, is in fact criticized as "strangely conservative" [1]. Facing rising global inequality, Noam Chomsky seems confused about how to turn socialist ideals into reality [2]. The financial crisis of 2008 offered a rare opportunity to do just this, but despite the furious critique of neoliberalism it provoked, no constructive outlet has taken shape. A question thus arises about the cause of this apparent lack of initiative. David Laibman has proposed that in criticizing Soviet socialism, western Marxists unwittingly joined forces with the foremost neoliberal figure, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman [3]. Alan Freeman has argued that Marx's systematic critique of capitalism, founded on his profound economic analysis, was weakened by being detached from that foundation during and since the 1930s; thus, western Marxism lacked focus at the moment of financial crisis [4]. Increasingly, scholars have realized the negative effects of overlooking Marx's economic dimension and concentrating on his cultural critique. The present article builds on these findings to offer for consideration two distinct yet related solutions to this loss of focus. One involves a re-emphasis on the re-orienting potential of Marx's economic critique [5]. The other involves an analysis of western Marxists' cultural critique as it converges with neoliberalism. Through a consideration of the decline and

possible future of western Marxism, this article has as its aim a reassertion of the importance of the duality of Marx's critique of capitalism.

Toward this goal, two methods are adopted in this essay. One might be termed ideological archeology: the history of scholarly thinking around Marx's dual critique of capitalism. Traced through a review of sources, what emerges from this critique is a history of a pendular swing from one extreme position to its opposite. The other method involves explication, with key historical sources being read afresh from new perspectives.

## The Connotation of Marx's Dual Critique of Capitalism and its Evolution

Marxism, whose core tenet is the economic base determining the superstructure, is a far-reaching theory aiming at understanding and changing the world by uncovering the essence of capitalist society. As one of the founders of the theory, Marx's critique of capitalism is twofold, in that it approaches its object from two seemingly opposite aspects, the economic and the cultural, each separately rooted in economic and philosophical research. To counter capitalism and its mainstream ideology, liberalism, Marx spent most of his life integrating these aspects into one systematic structure. He thus answers persistently perplexing questions about relationships—not only between determinism and liberalism, which has confused liberals for well over a century, but more profoundly between objective law and subjective initiative, which had been debated through the entire history of western philosophy. A first reading often leads to the

conclusion that tension also exists in Marx's theory, but further exploration can draw attention to an integral relationship within the superficial opposition.

Marx spent his life criticizing capitalism and going beyond liberalism. As his economic research went deeper, his dual critical theory matured. Back in the early 1840s, when Marx, still very much a Hegelian, held the post of chief editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, he was compelled to address the difficult question of "material interest." When he wrote in defense of the peasants' practice of gathering dead tree branches against charges of theft, he found that his analysis was too weak, even with the benefit of Hegel's rigorous logic. This realization led Marx to doubt Hegel's idealism and to turn to a new outlet for exploration [6].

Grounded in Ludwig Feuerbach's emphasis on "man" instead of God or the Hegelian Idea as the criterion for judgment, Marx absorbed Feuerbach's humanistic attitude and abandoned his own previous prejudice against materialism, which he once criticized as "abject" for its exponents' exclusive concern with passive adaptation to the external environment. Through Friedrich Engels' research into political economics, Marx began to replace a Hegelian abstract critique of legal rights with a realistically economic critique. These changes informed the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Here, addressing the problem of alienated labor, Marx for the first time systematically criticized economic liberalism along with its political and cultural dimensions. As the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts are regarded by many western Marxists as foundational, these writings deserve particular attention.

In the first manuscript, Marx argues that liberal political economics uncritically premises individual freedom on "the fact of private property" [7]. Considering this "self-authenticating" precondition leads Marx contrarily to posit four levels of alienated labor, and thus to transform liberal freedom into a utopian ideal while also perhaps anticipating a newly humanistic line of thought. Familiar as this process is, it deserves a brief summary, as follows [8].

In the first place, Marx posits that labor is external to the worker: employed in a factory, the worker is not affirmed but denied; instead of achieving physical and intellectual potential, the worker experiences bodily mortification and mental ruin; wage labor is forced and thus inimical; escape from labor is undoubtedly preferable.

Secondly, the worker's labor is alienated from its products. In the process of estranged labor, activity becomes suffering and begetting becomes emasculating. Separated from the worker, the products of labor turn against the worker. The more that is produced, the stronger external power becomes and the less the worker is valued.

Thirdly, alienated labor estranges the worker from the nature of the human species. In Marx's view, "free, conscious activity is man's species-character" [9]. Under capitalistic conditions, however, the poor have no choice but "freely" to enter the capitalists' factories and accept exploitation. Therefore, alienated labor is neither free nor voluntary but passive and painful.

Finally, the worker experiences alienation, existing not as a real human being but as a means of subsistence. Ends and means are reversed, and what is human becomes inhuman. Consequently, Marx asserted that under capitalism, freedom and equality become force and enslavement, and material wealth produces misery rather than the happiness postulated by earlier liberals.

From these discoveries, Marx in fact produced a new emphasis on what "ought to be," in place of the liberals' "to be." This emphasis could be described as his humanistic strain, supported by cultural or ideological research in the critique of capitalism. That is, Marx advocated that alienated labor "ought to be" overthrown in order to restore the species' free and productive activity. By doing so Marx availed himself of the opportunity to advance beyond the superficiality of so-called "actual economic facts" into the negative side of capitalism. Nevertheless, as Marx had just commenced his economic research and yet knew little about liberal political economics, he could not yet break through its limits to resolve the dilemma of alienated labor. What he achieved was a passionate yet ultimately ineffective ethical critique derived from an abstract analysis of the nature of the human species.

Fortunately, in the latter two manuscripts, when Marx thought about the antithesis of capital and labor, he perceived the inseparable relationship between feudal agricultural production and modern industrial production: on the one hand, both pertained to private property and arose from the integration of labor with capital; on the other, they differed in that the former depended on landed property and was not fully developed as capital, while the industrial base of the latter gave it a more mature, developed character. In Marx's words, modernity involved "the necessary victory of the capitalist over the landowner—that is to say, of developed over undeveloped, immature private property" [10]. From this development, liberals asserted that capitalism had achieved perfection and would eternally prevail. Marx, contrarily, regarded it as an interlude. That is, although capitalism had achieved a historical advance, it nevertheless contained inherent and fatal defects that would ensure its being replaced by a preferable model. In positing this vision, Marx began to germinate a historical, realistic position that entailed a transformative new value orientation.

In sum, while Marx's social research commenced with a humanistic emphasis, it spontaneously generated a realistic critique. The scientific and the humanistic, or economic and philosophical, duality began to take form in his thinking. Hereafter, Marx threw himself into four decades of objective economic research to demonstrate the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism.

After the mid-1840s, an interesting phenomenon has been posited to have occurred in Marx's development, according to which the humanistic dimension was abandoned, while objectively economic thinking grew more prominent. The term "alienation," frequently used in the Manuscripts of 1844, appears more sparingly in the later works. Louis Althusser, the famous structuralist Marxist, called this phenomenon Marx's "epistemological break," distinguishing the ideological "problematic" of the early works from the scientific "problematic"

of *Das Kapital*, with the year 1845 serving as the dividing line [11]. However, disagreement with Althusser is possible, in that he does not clarify why the humanistic term "alienation" apparently reappears unexpectedly, after Marx's research in economics, in *Das Kapital* and its series of economic manuscripts. In 1857, Marx noted:

The emphasis is not laid upon labour's being objectified, but upon its being alienated, given up, sold. It is laid upon the fact that the enormous objectified power which social labor has set up over against itself as one of its moments belongs, not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital [12].

Apparently, in comparison with alienation as elaborated in 1844, Marx's interpretation became deeper and thicker in his later economic research.

In *Das Kapital* I, Marx thus devoted a whole chapter to various quotations exposing the brutal work environment, unthinkably long working hours, and miserable lives of the working poor. Relating factual evidence, Marx not only sustained the thematic thread of alienation, but he also raised it to a new height. "The fetishism of commodities," by which the value of commodities arose from "the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them," was "in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" [13]. In other words, commodities rooted in alienated labor were not only material artifacts to satisfy consumers' physical needs, but they also implied some profound cultural connotation used to manipulate those consumers' spiritual and cultural needs, and this development can indeed be called "ideological fetishism" corresponding to "fetishism of commodities," even though Marx did not use the term explicitly.

Accordingly, it was precisely in *Das Kapital* that scientific and humanistic enquiry into capital fetishism and ideological fetishism came into a focused unity. Combined economic and philosophical research gave the former a human connotation and the latter a realistic application through rigorous analysis. Without the leading humanistic thread of the theme of alienation, it would be difficult to figure out how Marx could apply several decades of his life to economic research; conversely, without sustained economic investigation, the humanistic appeal would remain utopian. Without both of these means of intellectual propulsion, Marx's critique of capitalism would not fly.

Evidently, the dual philosophical/economic critique relies on a perception of indivisibility, but also on hierarchy, as in Marx's memorable and influential formulation of "the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" [14]. What deserves particular attention in this familiar concept is the latency and even obscurity through which the conditioning of "the general process of social, political, and intellectual life" by "the mode of production of material life" can work. In other words, Marx is not a rigid economic determinist. Without providing all of the details, he indicates that the economic structure derived from activities satisfying people's material needs simply provides the larger conditions for social, political,

and intellectual life. The relationship includes some accidental and even subjective factors that render the economic function incomplete and intermittent-flickering, as it were. Nevertheless, what ought to be added here is that Marx surely pays less attention to these non-objective factors. Crucially, and perhaps because of his over-estimation of the human capacity for revolution, his work lacks an analysis of ideological fetishism. Thus, in the twentieth century, when consumption gained primacy over production, the critique was transferred to the control of consumption, and thus the applicability of Marx's critique based on productivity analysis has been questioned beyond the immediate social conditions that gave rise to it. This shift of focus presages the vicissitudes of western Marxism: over-emphasis on the humanistic and cultural aspect leads to neglect of the objective determinant; thus Marx's critique of capitalism degenerates into pure utopia.

### The Second International's Debate between "Science" and "Ethics"

Though Marx put forward a dual critique of capitalism and even promoted it, as shown above, to a critique of two fetishisms, the breadth and depth of his thinking exceeded the capacities of his time. Thus, it is readily comprehensible that his theoretical orientation would subsequently be misread. In the late nineteenth century, especially after the death of Engels in 1895, capitalists implemented concession tactics to win the support of the working class-raising salary, improving staff benefits and shortening working hours, etc. Consequently, on the question of how to cope with the "new situation", Marx's fraught duality was imperfectly reflected in the socialists' ensuing debate between "the scientific" and "the ethical" during the Second International, which was the focal organization of socialist movement at that time. As it is a vital connecting link between the thoughts of the founders of Marxism and those of the succeeding western Marxists, a brief analysis of pertinent related ideas would be valuable before stepping into western Marxism.

Eduard Bernstein, the famous revisionist, was the first to dispel the objective aspect deriving from Marx's economic research. In his eyes, socialist inevitability should come from subjective ethical consideration rather than objective economic study, now that the socialist aim was that each individual human being should live a good and humane life. To stimulate individual initiative, Bernstein redefined socialism: "movement means everything for me and that which is usually called 'the final aim of socialism' is nothing" [15]. In other words, the crux was neither the ultimate socialist aim nor its economic inevitability but realistic actions to reform existing society through each individual's subjective effort. Progressive reform, not abrupt revolution, was the only choice to help people achieve a socialist ethical character; enhance political consciousness, and only then to attain the consensus needed to overthrow capitalism. In this way, Bernstein became the first to announce and provoke the debate between Marx's scientific and humanistic dimensions.

Many Marxists of the Second International based their insistence on objective inevitability upon rigorous economic research. For instance, Rosa Luxemburg held that the scientific

basis of socialism predicted "the growing anarchy of capitalist economy, leading inevitably to its ruin" [16]. Not all were as forthright. Karl Kautsky, who styled himself as an "orthodox Marxist" and professed "scientific socialism," ascribed two sources to socialism, "one ethical and the other economic. The first emanates from the natural instinct of man, the second from the nature of capitalist society and the position of the workers as a class" [17]. Like Bernstein, Kautsky held that democracy was the only route to the embodiment of socialist ethical nature and the exercise of individual rights [18]. In Kautsky's contradictory formulations, the gap widened between Marx's scientific and humanistic aspects.

By the early twentieth century, from the perspective of political practice, the socialist camp had split into two main schools, the ethical and the scientific. The former grew into European ethical socialism, which aimed at awakening workers' enthusiasm for realizing socialism but hidden a tendency of subjectivizing Marxism and aligning with liberalism. Profoundly influenced by Kautsky, the latter became dominant in Soviet socialism, which awarded primacy to objective economic factors while ignoring the role of the ordinary individual in historical process. Bukharin-for Lenin, "the greatest Marxist of the Soviet Union"-declared "there can be no such thing as accident in history" [19]. According to such an ossified and utopian position, historical laws based on rigid "economic determination" would automatically lead people to socialism. Such a questionable position stimulated western Marxists to counter this by reinterpreting Marxism humanistically through philosophical research. In a sense, their practice is an in-depth study to the ethical school.

### The Antagonism in Western Marxism between "Economics" and "Philosophy"

In the 1920s, inspired by the success of the Russian Revolution, some European Marxists tried to launch socialist revolutions in their own countries, which unfortunately ended in failures. Georg Lukács was the first to attribute these failures to ignoring the question of value. In Lukács' view, the so-called orthodox Marxists of the Second International focused exclusively on objective historical laws and rigorous economic determinism, and took for granted that good values "must be" automatically turned into reality. But in fact, society was entering an epoch of plural value. Not only was the gap between ideals and facts becoming increasingly clear-which meant not all ideals would come to pass in reality-but what was obviously the best for some could not be accepted by others. The range of attitudes to socialism was typical of the wider phenomenon.

As workers' living conditions were improving in the early twentieth century, revolutionary enthusiasm waned. Lukács wanted consequently to shift the key point from an objective demonstration of socialist inevitability toward the subjective aspect in order to awaken workers' revolutionary zeal. While not denying Marx's objective economic research, drawing lessons from the rising humanistic trend since the late nineteenth-century, Lukács sought to integrate Marx's two critiques into one unified whole by replacing the "morality" of the Second International with a deeper question of value. This was an

important transformation from "must be" to "ought to be," which opened up a new, unorthodox "subjectivized Marxism" [20].

Lukács' theoretical innovation is obviously beneficial in rectifying the defect of rigid economic determinism, but he left two questions open that had far-reaching consequences for later Western Marxists. First, he produced a characteristic Hegelian category of "totality." He viewed this as the principle of revolution and asserted "the production and reproduction of a particular economic totality, which science hopes to understand is necessarily transformed into the process of production and reproduction of a particular social totality" [21]. This was not merely a rhetorical change but an important intellectual transformation. Moving from "economic totality" to a broader "social totality" essentially shook the fundamental status of economics, calling into question the necessity of objective research in economics. Second and correspondingly, Lukács reformed Marx's "praxis" from its connotation of material production to a purely theoretical critique, just as he argued that "the rational and formalistic mode of cognition is the only possible way of apprehending reality" [22]. Contrary to Kautsky's determinism based on so-called economic research, the main equipment in Lukács' toolkit became cultural or ideological research based in philosophy [23]. To some extent, this emphasis rectified the fault of "scientific Marxism," but more importantly it addressed the danger of Marx's economic critique becoming increasingly marginalized. In the process of the development of "humanistic Marxism" in the Frankfurt School, Lukács' underlying defects were continuously amplified. Marx's objective economic research was ignored, leaving Lukács subjective cultural critique the unique emphasis.

The turning point occurred on the eve of World War II. Fascism forced the Frankfurt School's Institute of Social Research to move to Geneva and then to the United States. This removal produced a significant transformation of its research emphasis. North America offered comparative prosperity, expanding political rights, and widening access to education. Here, above all, it appeared that consumption was displacing production at the center of social existence and its ills. Ubiquitous advertising and credit card consumption were coming to occupy daily life and stimulate growing demand.

In this new world, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School perceived the other side of material prosperity. Max Horkheimer, foremost in the school's first generation, investigated the growth of ideological alienation with the rise of the consumer age. For him, now that the distinction between real and artificial needs was becoming ambiguous, and the gap between ruling and ruled classes was fading with the proletariat being reorganized into the existing order, it was necessary to change the research emphasis from workers as a class to the human individual.

Thinking through "the decline of individuality," Horkheimer perceived a new instrument of capitalist domination: technology [24]. Hardly a neutral capability, this was increasingly the means to develop an "industrial culture," featuring all kinds of forms of amusement-motion pictures, radio, popular novels, etc.-that conditioned people to accept the surface of capitalist "reality as it is and should be and will be" [25]. In Horkheimer's eyes, industrial culture was essentially an instrument of ideological alienation.

The more technology developed, the more individuality and indeed humanity evaporated.

Analyzing the cause of ideological alienation, Horkheimer apparently developed Marx and Lukács' ideas of alienation; that is, he issued a nuanced critique of capitalism in terms of its ideological aspect. But in turning to methods to overcome alienation, he parted company from Marx and Lukács. Even Lukács had not denied the importance of economic research, but Horkheimer resorted to an abstract "love," which "had nothing to do with the person as economic subject or as an item in the property of the one who loved, but rather as a potential member of a happy humanity" [26]. Cultural awakening was considered to be what remained to help people out of ideological alienation, leaving Marxist economic research eclipsed. This is hardly a negligible transition. Since 1939, Horkheimer, one of the chief executives of the Institute of Social Research, not only despised, but intentionally obstructed, Marxian economic research [27]. As can well be imagined, significant Marxian economic research was subsequently marginalized. This theoretical stance, with more emphasis on subjective and imaginative factors in his study of individuality, caused Horkheimer to find himself in the murk and mush of an ineradicably pessimistic swamp.

In the aftermath of World War II, reform movements-feminism, civil rights, pacifism, etc.-gained energy and attention. From such movements, some western Marxists caught a glimmer of hope to counter Horkheimer's pessimism. Individuals' subjective feelings were raised to an unprecedented prominence, as motivators of social change. From Freud's psychological perspective, even marginalized individuals could not be fully alienated. In their deepest "instinct" there still existed the impulse to resist prevalent social values. What intellectuals were to do was to mobilize individual enthusiasm to push the "revolution" forward. This is the core idea of so-called "individualized Marxism" prevailing from the 1950s through the 1960s [28].

For Erich Fromm, for example, Marx hadn't neglected the individual, but had rather all along reflected upon individual liberty: "Marx is primarily concerned with the emancipation of man as an individual, the overcoming of alienation, the restoration of his capacity to relate himself fully to man and to nature" [29]. And because universally alienated labor under capitalism reduced individuals into "things," according to Fromm, Marx presented Marxism to recover the truly free, rational, active and independent individual. The central task was not redressing the unjust distribution of material wealth that was related to capitalist ownership, but instead was transforming alienated and meaningless labor into productive, free, and humane labor.

Similar to Fromm, other "individualized Marxists," such as Herbert Marcuse and Jean-Paul Sartre, sought forms of resistance to the ideological alienation endemic in capitalist society. Marcuse argued that "the rebellion would then have taken root in the very nature, the 'biology' of the individual; and on these new grounds, the rebels would redefine the objectives and the strategy of the political struggle" [30]. For Sartre, "Man is nothing else but which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call it's 'subjectivity'" [31].

Obviously, individualized Marxists declared the same theme in different ways, that only through awakening an individual's radical passion by cultural re-enlightenment could practical changes in existing society be produced. The issue of property ownership, a fundamental emphasis for Marx, no longer had much importance. The key point was progressive reform, not a repudiation of capitalism. Although the significant shift from the Marxian fundamental critique based on objective economic research to a microscopic daily and cultural struggle was regarded as an important and necessary achievement by many western Marxists, a sense of anticlimax accompanied the solutions they confidently put forward to improve the subjective consciousness of individuals-romantic love (Fromm), liberalization of sexuality (Marcuse) and free choice (Sartre).

In the short decades from Lukács' hopeful "revolutionary" aspiration to the failure of the student movement of the late 1960s which symbolized the end of cultural critique, western Marxism experienced several great changes: from tacitly approved Marxian dual critiques of capitalism to explicit negation of his economic critique; from collective "class consciousness" to individual subjective consciousness, and further to irrational instincts. However, things went contrary to intentions. With cultural research seemingly going deeper and deeper, nihilism and pessimism became stronger and clearer. This unexpected result cannot help but provoke further reflection.

### Multiple Introspections on Western Marxism

On the whole, western Marxism experienced dramatic vicissitudes in the twentieth century. After exhausting available theoretical resources, western Marxists found themselves in a desperate situation. With virtually all attempts to integrate post-structuralism, ecologism, and feminism hastily going with the wind, so-called post-Marxism seems to have little to do with Marxism [32]. The financial collapse of 2008 and the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 seemed to offer opportunities to resist liberalism, but no enabling theory has yet emerged to impel such resistance.

More than one reason can be adduced for this failure. Most important is perhaps the stubborn western Marxist tendency toward cultural critique, which tends toward individual ontology-the core tenet of liberalism. In other words, western Marxists' inclination to think in terms of individuals in a negative relationship with society results in fragmentation, subjectivization, and individualization-immediate interests and piecemeal reforms occupy the main focus of attention, individual freedom increasingly becomes solipsistic and separate from practical considerations.

Antonio Gramsci, another great exponent of western Marxism, offers some explanation in theory. He considered individual and society as one and the same: "If individuality is the whole mass of these relationships, the acquiring of a personality means the acquiring of consciousness of these relationships, and changing the personality means changing the whole mass of these relationships" [33]. Now that the individual emerges out of group relationships, now that changing the individual equates with

changing society, and now that each worker is a constituent part of the proletariat, attention shifts ineluctably from Lukács' collective consciousness toward that of the individual human being.

In the "cult of personality" of the 1960s, with the research emphasis shifting from the collective subject to the individual subject, virtually simultaneously there also occurred a steadily rising increase in the value of the individual. Fromm regarded the socialist aim to be "the full realization of individualism" [34]. Sartre argued that "nothing remains but to trust in our instincts," promoting individual "inter-subjectivity" [35]. Marcuse posited an "aesthetic dimension" to improve human beings' solidarity and then to achieve a society with "poetic justice" and "freedom without exploitation" [36]. From these assertions, it is hard to distinguish these self-proclaimed Marxists from liberals who stick to belief in the supremacy of individual freedom.

Even more seriously, heading toward rapprochement with liberalism, western Marxists and their concrete critique of ideological alienation essentially had an opposite impact, that is, they not only disguisedly affirmed capitalists' form of government, but they even gave advice as to how to perfect strategies for domination through spiritual control. In this sense, David Laibman argued that western Marxists unwittingly joined forces with neoliberals [37].

It is important to stress that not all western Marxists neglected any economic critique of capitalism. Some of them were devoted to reinterpreting and developing Marxian economic research under new paradigms. But on the whole, in the past several decades the economic critique of capitalism has been discontinuous and scattered. The Marxian economic theory advanced in the nineteenth century was regarded as not acclimatizing itself to the circumstances of the new centuries; thus, utilizing some of its aspects rather than the integral theory system was the best option. Some have reinterpreted "the law of accumulation" (Henryk Grossman); some have put forward the theory of a "long wave of capitalist development" (Ernest Mandel); some have exposed the hypocrisy of capitalists' democratic management (Harry Braveman and David Gordon); some have condemned capitalist despotism in terms of multinational corporations (Paul Sweezy); some have pointed out the contradictions of capital (David Harvey); and some have criticized increasing income inequality in capitalism (Thomas Piketty).

Attempting to solve the problems of existing society, the western Marxists, by remaining entrenched in economic research, are accustomed to placing their hopes in reforming the current situation-resorting to economic democracy to reduce huge waste [38], seeking financial transparency to "regulate capitalist dynamics" [39], crying for "a secular revolutionary humanism", and so on. Although their theoretical endeavors have had many positive effects in the promotion of social fairness, these endeavors essentially and unconsciously give the impression of maintaining rather than opposing capitalism, just as the cultural Marxists did.

Accordingly, David Macgregor commented that western Marxism did not develop an economic theory adequate to challenge confidence in international capitalism, as they were preoccupied with philosophical research. Joachim Zweynert argues that western Marxism's inability to develop a consistent

economic theory has resulted in the triumph of neoclassical doctrine after World War II [40]. Going to the root of the discouraging phenomenon, the non-negligible reason behind this inability is the marginalization of Marx's economic critique of capitalism since the 1930s, accompanied with the separation of economy from cultural research. Events have shown that cultural critique has achieved little except for facilitating the venting of righteous anger and of various as-yet hollow personalized appeals, without any basis in a consistent and adequate economic theory. In this sense, western Marxism's inevitable destiny cannot help but swing to neoliberalism and its core precept of individualism, which leads to the individual breaking away from social reality and retreating to the realm of pure spirit.

Contrary to these western Marxists, all along Marx explored the perception of the individual in the dialectical relationship between economy and culture. In 1853, when he discussed the French revolution, he offered an especially relevant view: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past". Mehet Tabak interpreted this idea as "not world history illustrated by the experiences of an individual, but world history shaping that experience, or rather offering a shifting but always limited set of choices" [.]. The individual acts only in relation to others under specific social and historical circumstances. In this sense, Marx firmly opposed the abstract liberal idea of individual ontology. Although he admitted individuals' free choice and kept their determining function in view to some extent, he paid close attention to how individuals are determined by objective factors-history, culture and contemporary society-which could be found only through a macroscopic and realistic vision based on objective economic research.

As a figure of a speech, culture and economics may be compared to a kite and a kite runner. When the kite flies freely in the sky, no one will notice the person standing on the earth who skillfully manipulates the kite. People raise their heads to appreciate the kite's graceful dance, which is seemingly instinctive and everlasting. Once the string linking the kite with the person is broken, the kite falls to the ground. At the moment of failure, the role of the kite runner becomes apparent.

The relationship between humanity's economic and cultural activities is the relationship between essence and phenomenon, similar to that of the kite runner and the kite. When the economic development of a given society is smooth and rapid, people, increasingly indulging in creature comforts, are inclined to neglect the existence of objective economic activities. Material prosperity is often regarded a reality, as it is and should be and will be, while individuals focus on increasingly pursuing cultural and political freedom-just as happened with the new social movements that occurred in the 1960s. As soon as economic development falters-especially when economic crises produce unemployment and poverty-basic economic roles will immediately emerge while cultural life diminishes and fades.

Facing liberals' defenses of the rationality and immutability of capitalism, Marx made the opposite choice. He worked to destroy ideological fetishism by criticizing capital fetishism from

its economic aspect. Marx integrated the dual critiques in his philosophy of historical materialism in two regards: objective economic research is the means, while subjectively humanistic research is the end. The former proceeded through descriptive research, while the latter pursued a normative value. In this light, Marx's economic research is thus also ideological research. Only by capturing the indivisible relationship between the two could the Marxist ideal be termed "scientific socialism." Not heeding Marx's "philosophical utterance behind economics" led western Marxists to separate subjective cultural critique from objective economic research. Cultural critique then descended toward an abstract utopia and economic critique lost its orientation. Some scholars have recently perceived this mistake and have begun to emphasize the Marxian "perspective on capitalism as a fundamentally crisis-prone socioeconomic system," and advise to "grasp the relationship between everyday life and systemic trends and struggles".

Historically, Marx was hardly the first to stress such dual modes of thinking. John Locke, the founder of liberalism, noticed the close relationship between economy and culture. Although he defended the concept of the sacredness of private property and a "possessive individualism," he also refused to boil all social relationships and moral rules down to market relations and market rules. Similarly, when elaborating the notion of free market competition in *The Wealth of Nations* from the economic perspective, Adam Smith wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to depict a humane realm in order to complement the icy economic one. Regrettably, later liberals did not inherit their ancestors' dual modes of thinking but gradually abandoned the humane aspect, resulting in an increasingly sharp contrast between material prosperity and spiritual crisis as well as a gap between rich and poor. When western Marxists highlighted the humanistic young Marx and denied his later economic research, when they substituted Marx's "men" with their "man as an individual," they meanwhile tacitly acknowledged liberalism and its mode of thought but actually became more and more distant from the true Marx.

In the twenty-first century, consumerism and "accumulation by dispossession" appear to be constructing a global hegemony. It is predicted that by 2016 the top one percent of the world's population will own more than the other ninety-nine percent. Being hardly accidental, this outcome can be regarded as an inevitable result of capitalist logic: pursuing the maximum personal benefit through producing absolute surplus value, domestically and overseas. The lack of a macroscopic and historical vision of capitalist development from unfettered capitalism to new imperialism, and an emphasis only on the facts of material prosperity during a certain period within several developed countries, will intensify a disabling focus on phenomenally cultural research and will lose sight of the facts of humanity's increasing economic inequities.

## Epilogue

For Karl Marx, the capitalist ideology of "liberalism" gave human beings unprecedented freedom; also, because of its inherent and ineradicable defects, it restricted further human development. Through a historical, realistic, and specific perspective derived from his dual critiques of capitalism, and especially through his objective economic research, Marx achieved a transcendence of

liberalism and proposed a new way toward broadened rights and freedoms. Intentionally or unintentionally discarding Marx's economic critique, western Marxists re-entered the abstract mode of thinking of liberalism and accordingly thought of individuals as separate from their constituent groups, which resulted in an individualist ontology. Consequently, with individual eyes fixed watchfully on respective benefits, relations grew predictably strained between individuals and also increasingly so between human beings and the natural world. Thus Naomi Klein has attributed the current ecological disaster to "a battle between capitalism and the planet" because of private profit maximization and "market logic".

What should we do to extend individuals' freedom and save human society from such dismal prospects? At the moment, the answer is often the question itself. Now that separating cultural research from economics results in an individualist ontology of self-regard, a good option is the combination of the two human activities into one through critical reflection on liberal individualism.

In other words, inheriting the traditions from Marx's political economy can provide some remarkable perspectives and methods through which to examine modern capitalist society. Although there have emerged some signs indicating the integration of culture with economics-i.e. "culture is economics", "a cultural approach to economics", and "econocultural transformation research"-a reappropriation of Marx's dual critique of capitalism from the perspective of institutional forms, with the reinstatement of the originally humanistic intention of economic development and emphasis on the sociality of individual to ease the strained human relationships, can help not only to overcome western Marxist shortcomings, but can also benefit the future of mankind. For this purpose, what's the most important is reappraising Marx's objectively economic critique of capitalism and applying his standpoint and method to perform a consistently comprehensive critique of capitalism taking economic foundation as the prerequisite.

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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