

The Equality Thought in Marx's Critique of Gotha Program and Its Value in the New Era*

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The idea of equality is an important part of Marxist theory system and an ideal creed pursued by mankind. Marx's thought of equality is reflected in the Criticism of Gotha Program. Marx's criticism of "absolute labor income" elaborates the distribution theory of the two stages of communism. The criticism of "labor determinism" defends the fundamental principle of "production decides distribution". It criticizes the essence of "free education for all" and puts forward the idea of education equality in an ideal society. In the new era, it is helpful to improve the equality system and protect the basic rights of citizens to review their equality thoughts. What's more, it is also helpful to develop productive forces Vigorously and consolidate the equal foundation of socialist countries. We will deepen the reform of education and improve the sense of happiness of education equality.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, ideology of equality, the value of the new age

Introduction

"Equality" is a constant theme in human society. In ancient China, a series of ideas on equality emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period, such as the Confucianism's "theory of good nature", the Mohism's "shangxian" and "concurrent love", as well as in Western antiquity during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the famous philosopher Aristotle argued that "equality is a virtue", which includes equality of equality and equality of distribution. Despite the difficulties in achieving an egalitarian society, it is enough to illustrate the pursuit of equality by human beings in both ancient and modern times. Almost all of Marx's numerous works deal with the issue of equality. The Critique of the Gotha Programme (hereinafter referred to as the Critique) is a work from the later years of Marx's intellectual maturity, and contains the maturity of Marx's view of equality. In the Critique, Marx criticised the Lassalleans for their "denial of the workers' and peasants' union, their belief that all classes other than the working class are the only source of reaction, and that socialism under the dictatorship of the proletariat means the uncompromising distribution of labour", and expounded a series of ideas on equality in defence of the interests of the working class. The ideology of equality for this reason, an in-depth discussion of his ideas on equality, is of great theoretical and practical significance for promoting the core values of socialism, promoting common prosperity, and advancing the process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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Organization of the Text

Defining the Concept: Marx's Understanding of "Equality" and the History of Its Production

"Equality" includes "right, law, justice, shall" and thus "equality" can also be understood as "deserving". The term "equality" can also be understood as "should be obtained". Hong Yunsan and other scholars define "equality" as "the equal status of all members of society, with equal conditions and rights to freely exercise their talents and meet their needs" (Hong, Du, & Wang, 1987, p. 132). In a strict sense, this definition is only a summary of the idea of equality in the advanced stage of communist society. Marx pointed out that equality is a historical category, belonging to the social superstructure, and that under different socio-historical conditions and from different standpoints, people have different understandings of equality. The concept of equality is a reflection of the socio-economic base of society, and therefore equality must be examined in relation to the socio-economic relations of the time, rather than in a logical reasoning, purely discursive manner. Marx's discussion of equality can be traced back to his doctoral thesis on "self-consciousness", in which he argued for the relationship between the atom and the "other", and went on to deduce the basic logic of equality—that the fact that everyone possesses "self-consciousness" confirms the equality of all human beings, and is arguably the germ of Marx's concept of equality. In "The Holy Family", he sees equality as "man's consciousness of himself in the practical sphere" (Marx & Engels, 1957, p. 48). In "The Manuscripts", he reveals the unequal situation of the proletariat under the alienation of labour, reveals that the root of inequality lies in the existence of private property, and that the way to achieve equality lies in the renunciation of private property. In "The German Ideology", he establishes the historical materialist concept of equality and introduces a new term "division of labour", which in fact is synonymous with private ownership. In "Capital", he points out that "commodities are inherently egalitarian" (Marx & Engels, 1972, p. 103). In the process of commodity exchange, commodities are exchanged as equivalents, and in this sense, they are equal. However, in the capitalist era, due to the existence of private ownership of the means of production and the separation of the means of production from the workers, the equality formed in the exchange of equivalents has alienated into the reality of inequality, illustrating once again that private ownership is the root cause of inequality, at which point his understanding of equality enters a new stage of development.

The maturity of the Marxist view of equality was shaped in the Critique. In the German workers' movement, in the words of Lassalle in the German Workers' Programme, Lassalleanism used the concept of "bourgeois juridical rights" to defend the principle of bourgeois equality by giving the right to private property a veneer of legality in the form of state juridical rights. Accordingly, Marx responded to the Lassalleans' idealist view of equality by publishing his Critique, which criticised the Lassalleans' erroneous view of distribution: "labour determines right, distributive determinism and the uncompromising income of labour", and other one-sided views, and carried out a thorough liquidation of the bourgeois abstract view of equality. Marx's idea of equality was manifested by the assertion that production determines distribution. In Marx's view, this was a cover-up of the inequality of the actual possession of the means of production by the equality of the law, which was in essence the equality of bourgeois rights and a serious trampling on the human quest for equality. In the Critique, he made scientific predictions about the inequality of future society, put forward his own insights on equality, and conceived how equality would be achieved in future society, marking the maturity of Marx's concept of equality.

Content Elaboration: The Revolutionary Transformation of Marx's Idea of Equality in the Critique

A critique of the “uncompromising income of labour”, which sets out the theory of distribution in the two stages of communism. In his Critique, Marx pointed out the contradiction between the ideas of “equitable distribution” and “uncompromising distribution”, and concentrated on the concept of equality. In Marx's view, it was nonsense to distribute the products of labour to individuals without compromise when the productive forces were not yet highly developed. Should people with physical and mental disabilities, who are unable to work, be entitled to the proceeds of their labour? If they do, then those who are able to work will not be able to enjoy the “undivided” income of labour, because the non-working members of society take over some of the products of labour from the workers and share the fruits of their labour equally with them, thus creating social inequality; if they do not, then for those who are physically and mentally handicapped, without these fruits of labour, “belonging to all members of society” would be an empty phrase, and there would be no talk of “equal rights”. It is clear that “equal rights” and “no compromise” appear in the same principle, and such a programme would only leave the working class ambiguous. As a programme of the working class, Marx had to criticise and correct it. In Marx's view, in order to maintain a functioning social economy, a certain amount of the proceeds of labour must be deducted, for example, to compensate for the consumption of the means of production, to set up funds, and to expand production. “For the Lassalleans, these deductions did not exist and, conversely, they were not so-called ‘uncompromising’”. To insist on the principle of “uncompromising” equality would ultimately be an impediment to sustainable social development and a fantasy completely divorced from reality. In the context of the workers' movement at the time, the workers were unable to understand the goals of the revolution at all because they were unable to speak clearly about “uncompromising”.

In the first stage of communism, “fair distribution of the proceeds of labour” could not be achieved due to the imperfection of the system and technology, and it was necessary to realise the distribution of labour according to work, such as more work and less work. At this stage, the distribution of labour is not based on class distinctions, but on the basis of the ability of people. We have to recognise the de facto inequalities created by the differences between workers due to their labour capacity and living conditions. In Marx's view, “rights must not extend beyond the economic structure of society and the cultural development of society as conditioned by it.” (Marx & Engels, 2009a, p. 345). Such disadvantages are inevitable in the first stage of communist society, the primary stage of socialism. Only in the advanced stage of communism can we break through the narrow vision of bourgeois rights and give more attention to those who are born with lesser abilities and members of poor families, providing them with the conditions within their means, realising that each can truly do his or her best and distributing according to need, achieving equality in distribution in the true sense of the word.

A critique of “labour determinism”, defending the fundamental principle that “production determines distribution”. The Programme of the German Workers' Party begins with the idea that labour plays a dominant role in the creation of culture and material wealth. It was the Lassalleans who advocated the “determinism of labour”, arguing that without labour there would be no wealth. In fact, the Lassalleans do not understand that labour itself is merely a manifestation of human labour, and that it cannot create material wealth at all if “it does not have the appropriate objects and means of production”. He cuts off the relationship between labour and the means of production, ignores the material conditions of labour, the ownership of the means of subsistence, and fails to see that labour is also conditioned by the means of subsistence, for example. In effect, this is an invisible endorsement and justification of capitalist exploitation. The capitalists occupy the means of

production through and through, while the proletarians can only sell their labour to maintain their physical survival, produce using productive forces that do not belong to them, and finally produce material goods that do not belong to them. From this point of view, to speak only of the creative power of labour and ignore the means of production would lead to the misconception that capitalists are generally wealthy because they get their labour for their enormous output, not by virtue of the means of production at their disposal. In this way, the “determinism of labour” justifies the existence of private ownership and exploitation by default, concealing the root causes of inequality.

In his view, labour is not the only source of wealth creation, and the mere possession of labour does not create wealth. Otherwise, it is meaningless to talk about labour without the object of nature. By avoiding the means of production and talking about labour, the Lassalleans objectively acquiesced to the rationality of the capitalists' natural appropriation of the object and means of labour. In fact, this view justifies the exploitation and subjugation of the proletarians by the bourgeoisie: A worker who does not have any means of production should not possess any means of production if he does not work, and conversely, this is an illegal taking of the fruits of another's labour, which is unequal. It is because of this difference in the possession of the means of production that the proletarians are forced to sell their flesh, to be constantly exploited by the capitalists and to become their slaves, when the creativity of labour becomes precisely the tool of the capitalists for their profit. At this point, the working class is unable to understand the increasing poverty of the wealth it has created through its own efforts, or even how it is being exploited by the capitalists. The “determinism of labour” tacitly justifies the existence of private ownership and exploitation, obscures the notion of equality that is the essence of capitalist exploitation, and ultimately does not allow the proletarians to find a way to seek their own liberation. To speak of equality in this context is a mere slogan. The “draft programme”, by talking about equality without taking into account the capitalist mode of production and calling for equality slogans, was unrealistic and would only end in defeat against what the workers' movement was trying to achieve. At this point, Marx pointed out that in order to achieve equality in the creation and distribution of wealth, the proletariat must take possession of the means of production, cease to be dependent on the capitalists, and realise that it owns the proceeds of its own labour.

A critique of the “essence of free education for all” and a vision of equality in education in an ideal society. The Lassalleans advocate “universal and peaceful national education through the state ... free education” (Marx & Engels, 2012, p. 375) and other means to achieve equality in education. In Marx's eyes, these were just their illusions and sorcery to confuse the masses. In a capitalist society, “national education by the state” is totally unacceptable. In a capitalist state, the state is the mouthpiece of the capitalists, a tool and puppet for the welfare and benefit of the bourgeoisie. If the state is the educator of the people, then the content of education must represent the interests of the big capitalists and thus control the minds of the people, which, for the proletarians, undoubtedly puts several shackles on themselves. Especially in the Prussian German Empire of the time, if workers were educated by the bourgeoisie, it was essentially the same as accepting the ideological leadership of the bourgeoisie, which was completely contrary to the original intention of the workers' movement. In Marx's view, at that time in history, the state only needed to stipulate “the funding of national schools, the qualifications of teachers, etc.” (Marx & Engels, 1999, p. 185), after which the state would arrange for personnel to supervise the implementation of the law, but otherwise the state should not interfere with the schools. Marx advocated the equality of education, which enables people to develop fully and freely, and the education implemented should be independent of the state and government, and the government should provide an environment in which “a hundred flowers can blossom and a hundred schools of thought can contend”. He pointed out the need to use

general laws and regulations to determine the content and modalities of national education; instead, it is not up to the government and the church to decide. From the point of view of social development, the economic base determines the superstructure and it is impossible to achieve equity in education in a capitalist society, let alone education for all. The economically dominant bourgeoisie is able to enjoy quality education, while workers and peasants are completely denied access to the education of the upper class, which is, so to speak, only for the capitalists and the aristocracy. Marx hit the nail on the head when he pointed out that the “free education” advocated by the Lassalleans was nothing more than a way of exploiting and squeezing workers’ wages to pay the state as taxes and, in turn, to appease them in order to maintain their rule, covering up the essence of workers’ labour with hypocrisy, which in essence was “wool on the sheep’s back”. The essence is that “the wool comes off the sheep’s back”.

Marx lived in an era when the state was an awesome being to the masses of workers and peasants, a dictatorial apparatus that needed to be overthrown. In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie dominates and the aims, methods, and content of education are set by them to indoctrinate the masses of proletarians with their ideology and further consolidate and maintain bourgeois rule, a manifestation of the enslavement of the working class and a tool for the ideological domination of the workers. Therefore, Marx emphasised the separation of education from the state and government, and in essence, this separation was the separation of proletarian education from the bourgeois state. The state is responsible for providing the hardware facilities for education, while the content of education is determined by its nature, its basic attributes, and the mass of the people. Marx emphasised that only by transferring the right to education into the hands of the people and reflecting their interests could the theory of proletarian emancipation be propagated in depth, the free and comprehensive development of man be achieved, the bourgeoisie be freed from muddling and hoodwinking, and equality in education be truly realised.

Inspiration for the Times: The Contemporary Value of Marx’s Ideas on Equality in the Critique

A sound system of equality institutions to safeguard the basic rights of citizens. In his Critique, Marx criticises Lassalle’s bourgeois conception of legal rights as “equal rights”, revealing its logic of existence and its non-equal essence. Under the manipulation of the bourgeoisie, the proletarians are forced to sell their labour to survive physically, and in this situation, there is no way to speak of equal rights for human beings. At this point, the essence of the human being is the sum of all social relations, and in order to be equal, he must have equal fundamental rights and be able to enjoy the right to participate in politics and to be protected by law.

Guaranteeing the fundamental rights of citizens is one of the strengths of our system: Firstly, it guarantees the right of people to be masters of their own house. Once people have met their basic needs for survival, they will want to have access to development opportunities, to participate in political rights, and to exercise the right of the people to be the masters of their own house. “All people ... should have equal political and social status” (Marx & Engels, 1995, p. 444). Equality of political rights is mainly expressed as: formal and substantive equality. For formal equality, a strict institutional system must be maintained. China practices the broadest and truest socialist democracy and must adhere to the leading role of the Party in political life, which is the prerequisite and basis for guaranteeing the people’s equal enjoyment of equal political rights. At the same time, the system of NPC deputies should be improved, the effective operation of the four major powers of NPC deputies should be guaranteed, the responsiveness of NPC deputies should be enhanced, and timely responses should be given to the people’s issues; the leading role of the CPC in politics should be brought into play, and the distinctive features of the CPC in power and democratic parties in politics should be maintained; the political system of consultative

democracy should be strengthened, and the NPC, the CPPCC, democratic parties, and grassroots social organisations should be incorporated into the institutional arrangements for people's consultation, so as to form a complete and coherent institutional procedure from the formulation of a democratic system to its implementation. For substantive equality, it is the level of implementation of the system. Social development is determined by the productive forces, and the economic base determines the superstructure. The material living conditions of a family determine the size and influence of one's ability to participate in politics, and thus family income remains an important indicator limiting people's political participation. Although a well-off society has now been built, there is still a long way to go to achieve absolute social equality, and for the time being we can only minimise the inequality caused by material conditions. To this end, China must expand the mechanisms for citizens' political participation and open up channels for them to participate in politics in an orderly and effective manner, so that they can participate in political life on an equal footing, regardless of their family's economic level or their location in remote areas. For the legal right of equality for all, "all are equal before the law" (Central Documentary Research Office of the Communist Party of China, 2015, p. 90). It is through the establishment and improvement of a system of scientific legislation, strict law enforcement, fair justice, and law-abiding by all that a bottom line of order can be formed to maintain social equality. "The legal rights of any citizen should be equally protected by the law". Equal legal rights are the basis for guaranteeing all other equal rights, including equality in four areas: legislation, law enforcement, justice, and law-abiding. Firstly, equality in legislation is the basic prerequisite for realising equality in legal rights. It is necessary to strictly enforce legislative procedures, ensure that the enactment of laws reflects public opinion, and give full play to the leading role of the NPC and its Standing Committee in legislative work. Secondly, equality in law enforcement is an important condition for realising equality of legal rights. Equality in law enforcement requires that there must be no favouritism in the process of law enforcement and that every party must be treated fairly and impartially. Once again, judicial equality is an important guarantee for the realisation of legal equality. Judicial equality is committed to promoting de facto equality by means of legal remedies, guaranteeing the equality of the people in judicial cases and, in particular, giving the disadvantaged groups the judicial assistance they can afford when defending their legitimate rights and interests, thereby realising equality in law. Finally, equality in compliance with the law is an important way to realise equality in legal rights. China is a country governed by the rule of law, and it is only when all people abide by the law that privileges can be eliminated and a good culture of fearing the law and upholding it can be formed in society as a whole.

Vigorously develop the productive forces and strengthen the foundation of equality in the socialist state. In the Critique, Marx grounded himself in the reality of capitalist private ownership and took a rational look at the issue of equality of distribution. He criticised the bourgeois abstract concept of equality and pointed out in a nutshell that the capitalist concept of equality ignored the material motive behind it and failed to see that the development of production was the fundamental driving force of social development. In Marx's eyes, the realisation of the category of equality as an abstract idea depends on the development of the productive forces and the transformation of the relations of production. Similarly, equality of distribution is determined by the relations of production, since "distribution itself is a product of production" (Marx & Engels, 2009b, p. 19). There is no equality that transcends history and is eternal. Equality of distribution is closely related to the mode of production.

In his Critique, Marx pointed out that in the primary stage of socialism, the productive forces were not yet highly developed, and therefore "distribution according to work" was the way to go in the first stage of

communism; in the advanced stage of communism, it was “distribution according to each man’s ability”. In the advanced stage of communism, it is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. The fundamental reason why these two types of distribution are possible is that the society at that stage has the corresponding productivity as the material basis. In China, for example, our economy is currently the second largest in the world, but our GDP per capita is very low, and we have only been on the road to socialism for a short time, so we can only implement the inevitable “distribution according to labour”. China is still in the primary stage of socialism and will remain so for a long time. We must adhere to the distribution method of “distribution according to labour as the mainstay and multiple distribution methods co-existing”, and then transition to the advanced stage. At this stage, when the social productive forces are highly developed and social wealth is fully flowing, the principle of distribution according to needs, to the best of one’s ability, can be realised. The report of the 19th Party Congress points out that “development must be firmly placed as the Party’s first priority in ruling the country” (China.com, 2017). In order to achieve equality in distribution at the advanced stage of communism, the fundamental way out lies in the development of the productive forces. Productivity development is the basic prerequisite for achieving equality of distribution. If the level of productivity development is low, then there can only be a low level of equality of distribution, while socialism needs a high level of equality of distribution. Socialism requires a high level of equality of distribution. It can be seen that its level of productivity development is high. At this stage, faced with unprecedented changes in the world, we must continue to deepen the structural reform on the supply side, transform the mode of development, increase the strength of scientific and technological innovation and other measures to maximise the quality of development, promote sustainable and healthy economic development, and continuously consolidate the material basis for equality of distribution. However, we must also see that, in the face of the current problem of inequitable distribution, relying solely on moral criticism will not solve the real problem. We need to examine the specific historical background and historical conditions to determine whether it is suitable for the current development of the productive forces. However, we also need to see that “fairness in the primary stage of socialism can only be relative” (Xi, 2007, p. 147). The development of productive forces is about quality, never about speed of development overnight and blindly. Only by vigorously developing the economy, constructing the principle of equality in distribution that is adapted to the current level of development, and meeting the people’s demand for material resources, can we provide a solid guarantee for the realisation of equality in distribution; only under the guidance of the principle of distribution can distribution be presented in a fairer form, so that the fruits of its development can benefit more people and realise equality in distribution in society.

Deepen education reform and focus on improving the well-being of equality in education. In the Critique, Marx pointed out some ideas about education, such as the nature of man and education, the combination of education and labour, and the link between social development and education, exposing that the nature and function of education in bourgeois society had been alienated, and that the universal education of the nation by the government had become a means of class domination, which in turn enslaved and oppressed the workers.

In the new era, the issue of education remains a focal point of concern for the people. (1), true equality in education must focus on the reality of people, be “people” oriented, and be “people” centred. Since the 18th Party Congress, the Party and the government have attached great importance to the issue of educational equity. The Ministry of Education and local governments have issued a number of relevant laws and regulations, such as the Outline of the Education Plan, which states that equality of opportunity is the key to equality in education, and that the basic requirement is that everyone enjoys the right to education, with the focus on promoting the balanced

development of education in urban and rural areas, allocating education resources in a reasonable manner, supporting disadvantaged groups, favouring the old, the young, and the poor, and accelerating the narrowing of the education gap between different regions. The Central Working Conference on Rural Areas in 2020 and the No. 1 Document of the Central Government in 2021, "Opinions on Accelerating the Modernisation of Agriculture and Rural Areas by Comprehensively Promoting the Revitalisation of Rural Areas", clearly state: "Promote the effective development of urban-rural integration and improve the institutional mechanism for urban-rural integration and development". This provides direction, new opportunities and corresponding requirements for the integration of urban and rural education development levels as the goal, and special measures to make up for the shortcomings of rural education as a means to promote a model of integrated development of urban and rural education with substance, depth, and breadth, and to promote education modernisation and educational equity. The education sector adheres to the guiding ideology of moral education and implements it deeply into all aspects of education to ensure that every child enjoys a fair education. (2), it deals with the distribution of public education resources. At present, the state is stepping up its efforts in favour of education policies in poor and backward remote areas: (1), it should expand the scale of university enrolment in rural and poor areas through the "Special Post Teacher Programme" and the "Free Teacher Training Programme" (referred to as "Publicly-Funded Teacher Training Program") and "Master of Education Teacher Training Program for Rural Schools", and other various preferential policies to attract outstanding teachers, and tilt education development policies towards these areas, and on this basis, gradually increase education funding in areas with scarce education resources to further On this basis, we should gradually increase the investment in education in areas where education resources are scarce, so as to further balance urban and rural education resources and narrow the gap between public education resources, so as to realize the "blood building" of talents in these areas and serve the rural revitalization strategy. (2), the government should increase funding to improve the hardware facilities of basic education in poor areas, such as schools, sports grounds, libraries, and multimedia equipment, and actively promote intelligent teaching, so that children in rural areas can enjoy the educational resources of the city. (3), we encourage outstanding teachers to teach and serve in rural areas, and strive to build a team of teachers who are "willing to devote themselves to their work, love their jobs and are rooted in the countryside". In response to the lack of teachers in rural areas, the government should give support to university students and outstanding teachers, encourage outstanding graduates to teach in rural areas, make up for the shortcomings of rural education, and then increase the supply of quality education resources, so that every student has equal access to public education resources, and constantly improve the sense of access to education and happiness of children in poor and backward areas.

Conclusion

In the Critique, Marx criticised the "equality of rights" proclaimed by the Lassalleists with a distinct class standpoint, and after depicting the blueprint of equality in communist society, he put forward the path of thinking about realistic equality from the perspective of the materialistic historical view, which is a dialectical, rational, and scientific view of equality. In the new era, on the basis of the 1.4 billion people declared out of poverty, we should continue to adhere to the Marxist idea of equality as a theoretical guide, establish a people-centred philosophy of governance, continue to promote the rural revitalisation strategy, pay attention to the disadvantaged groups and support the backward regions, promote real equality in the form of inequality, and advance towards the goal of the second hundred years of struggle.

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