

# Exploration of the Methods and Insights in the Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*

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**Abstract:** Marx, as one of the founders of Marxism, experienced a significant transformation in his thought during the period of 1843–1844. The Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (hereafter referred to as the Introduction) is one of Marx's most representative works from this time. Lenin noted that this text, along with Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, marks Marx's transition from idealism and revolutionary democracy to materialism. In this renowned text, Marx offers a rational critique of the absolute authority of religion, articulates a vision for human emancipation, and envisages the possibility of free and comprehensive human development. During this intellectual shift, Marx absorbed the essence of German classical philosophy and, from a positivist perspective, began employing critical thinking and materialist expression. This enabled him to embark on a path of critique addressing both the religious and real social worlds. In the new era, systematically studying Marxist classic works allows for the exploration of their contemporary relevance. By aligning these classics with specific directions outlined in reports such as those from the 20th CPC Central Committee's Third Plenary Session, the vitality of these works can be reinvigorated for the modern age.

**Keywords:** Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*; Marx; Method

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## 1. Introduction

Among the classic works of Marxism, the Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (hereafter referred to as the Introduction) stands not only as a significant milestone in Marx's ideological transformation but also as a paradigm of the early perfect integration of scientific rigor, critical thinking, and practicality in his thought. The General Secretary has emphasized that studying Marxist classics is a crucial path to strengthening ideals and beliefs and enhancing theoretical literacy. In the context of the decisions made by the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on further comprehensively deepening reforms and advancing Chinese-style modernization, we can gain a deeper understanding of the positivist

scientific nature, the critical and revolutionary aspects of the theoretical embryo, and the materialist practicality inherent in Marx's Introduction. These ideas not only provided profound criticism and guidance for German society at that time but also offered valuable insights into the socialist modernization drive in contemporary China and beyond.

## 2. Structural planning from a positivist perspective

Positivism, as a philosophical trend originating with French philosopher Auguste Comte and with Saint-Simon as its precursor, emphasizes the use of observable phenomena and data to verify and explain the world. It criticizes Hegel's pure speculation and metaphysical theoretical construction<sup>[1]</sup>. Its basic principles include observability, empiricism, and value neutrality. In the Introduction, although Marx's main focus is on criticizing Hegel's philosophy of right, his methodological approach implicitly bears certain characteristics of positivism.

During his time at the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx engaged in real-life struggles against the book and newspaper censorship decree and the forest theft law, which provided him with firsthand experiences reflected in the Introduction<sup>[2]</sup>. Firstly, he offered a profound critique of religion, stating that "religious suffering is at once an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering"<sup>[3]</sup>. This not only reveals the social function of religion but also marks the beginning of Marx's empirically grounded criticism of religion. Simultaneously, through observing social phenomena, Marx discovered that religion often becomes an important means for people to seek spiritual comfort during times of hardship. Such observations are based on reality and are verifiable. Moreover, Marx's criticism is not based on abstract philosophical speculation but rather on a deep understanding and analysis of social reality. Through empirical observation, he points out that "the mythology about man will end in science"<sup>[4]</sup> and that religion is "the opium of the people"<sup>[3]</sup>, concealing the real contradictions and hardships of society. In writing his critique of religion, Marx further conducted an in-depth analysis of German social reality, highlighting various issues and contradictions such as the remnants of feudal autocracy and the incompleteness of the bourgeois revolution<sup>[3]</sup>. It is worth noting that while Marx did not directly use quantitative data in his writing, he supported his viewpoints with specific social cases through careful observation and analysis of social phenomena, thus revealing the maladies of German society. This analytical approach also confirms his positivist leanings<sup>[5]</sup>.

The content that emphasizes Marx's positivist principles is his criticism of Hegel's philosophy. In this aspect, Marx<sup>[6]</sup> pointed out that "modern German institutions are an anachronism... It only imagines that it has self-confidence... Does it resort to hypocrisy and sophistry?" Hegel inverted the relationship between the state and civil society, viewing the state as the realization of the idea, while civil society was seen as an appendage of the state. By contrasting Hegel's views with his own, Marx revealed the idealist nature of Hegel's philosophy of right<sup>[2]</sup>, stating that "Hegel's method here exhibits a unique combination of 'idealism and positivism,' and 'history is regarded as the result of concepts.'" This comparative analysis is similar to experimental design in modern social science, where the validity of different theories or hypotheses is tested by comparing their predicted results. Marx also verified his viewpoints through historical facts<sup>[2]</sup>, asking, "Is there a country in the world like the so-called constitutional Germany... that indulges in fantasies without sharing in their reality?" to demonstrate the current situation and historical development of German society, proving the falsity of Hegel's philosophy of right. This historical verification method reflects the empiricist principles of positivism.

Marx was not satisfied with merely describing and explaining phenomena, but is committed to uncovering the deep-seated reasons and social contradictions behind them. He asserted that "it is impossible to destroy the

particular obstacles in Germany without destroying the general obstacles of contemporary politics”<sup>[7]</sup>. Marx’s positivist approach is not just descriptive but also critical. Through in-depth analysis of social phenomena, he believed that “the task of philosophy now is to expose the various alienations in civil society,” thereby revealing the inherent contradictions and exploitative nature of capitalist society<sup>[8]</sup>. Based on his criticism, Marx also strived to construct his own theoretical system. His viewpoint on civil society determining the state lays the foundation for later historical materialism.

Marx’s positivist method has a strong practical orientation. He emphasized that philosophy should not only explain the world but also change it. Therefore, his positivist approach is not just a theoretical exploration but also aims to guide social practice. Marx’s positivist method provides an action guide for the proletarian revolution. Through an in-depth analysis of social reality, he pointed out the necessity and possibility of the proletarian revolution, stating that “for one class to become a truly emancipating class, another must become, in contrast, an openly enslaved class,” and issued a call that “I have no status, but I must become everything”<sup>[7]</sup>. Marx’s positivist approach aims to promote social change and progress, seeking to provide theoretical support and practical strategies for the complete emancipation of humanity in the realm of ideas by exposing and criticizing all unreasonable social and ideological oppression<sup>[5]</sup>, and enabling those oppressed by reality to see it clearly.

In the Introduction, Marx’s viewpoint that civil society determines the state lays the foundation for his later historical materialism. This perspective is not only a criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of right but also a significant outcome of Marx’s positivist approach. Marx revealed the objective laws of historical development through his positivist method. He believed that historical development is determined by the mode of material production, rather than by abstract ideas or spirits. Marx analyzed the relationship between the economic base and superstructure through his positivist approach. He pointed out that the economic base determines the development and changes in the superstructure, while the superstructure reacts upon the economic base.

### **3. Rational analysis beginning with critical thinking**

In the Introduction, Marx not only employed a positivist approach but also closely integrated it with a critical spirit. Feuerbach’s philosophical ideas played a significant role in inspiring Marx during his criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of right.

Marx inherited Feuerbach’s critical method of subject-object inversion in the Introduction, which involves reversing the relationship between subject and object that Hegel had upside down, restoring a materialist stance. Marx applied this method to his criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of right. He pointed out that Hegel views the concepts of state and law as manifestations of absolute spirit, an expression that inverts the relationship between matter and spirit. By reversing this relationship, Marx restored the materialist position, arguing that the material world is the foundation of the spiritual world, and the state and law are merely reflections and manifestations of the material world. However, Marx did not stop at Feuerbach’s level but further transcended Feuerbach’s limitations. Marx not only criticized Hegel’s idealist philosophy of right but also argued that “in Germany, only partial liberation from the triumphs of the Middle Ages...cannot be destroyed”<sup>[3]</sup>. He deeply analyzed the contradictions and limitations of bourgeois society and proposed the historical mission of proletarian revolution from the perspective that “a radical Germany will not undergo a fundamental revolution...its heart is the proletariat”<sup>[9]</sup>. Marx believed that the proletariat, as the gravedigger of bourgeois society, declares the disintegration of the world system so far<sup>[9]</sup> and embodies it as the principle of society, thoroughly expressing

that the proletariat will overthrow the bourgeoisie's rule through revolution <sup>[1]</sup> and establish a new society of proletarian dictatorship.

In the Introduction, Marx began with a profound critique of religion. He pointed out that religion is the emotion of a ruthless world, serving as a social consciousness that fundamentally originates from social existence and is an illusionary reflection of real-world suffering. Therefore, criticism of religion is essentially a criticism of the real world. Marx believed that abolishing religion, which serves as the people's illusionary happiness, is a demand for their real happiness. This viewpoint reveals the intrinsic connection between religious criticism and social criticism, providing an important theoretical foundation for later social critiques. Based on his critique of religion, Marx further delved into the level of social criticism. He argued that the emergence of religion stems from an inverted worldview, specifically an inverted relationship between the state and society. In this inverted relationship, people cannot find their true selves or real happiness. Therefore, to completely eliminate the influence of religion, profound criticism and transformation of the real world are necessary. Through his criticism of German social reality, Marx exposed the decadence of feudal absolutism and the contradictions of bourgeois society. He believed that although the bourgeoisie has overthrown feudal absolutism and established the capitalist system, it has failed to achieve true freedom and equality. Bourgeois society still suffers from class oppression and exploitation, and people continue to live in misery. Therefore, the proletariat must overthrow the bourgeoisie's rule through revolution and establish a new society of proletarian dictatorship.

In the Introduction, Marx closely integrated religious criticism with social criticism, forming a dialectically unified relationship. On the one hand, religious criticism serves as the "germ" <sup>[3]</sup> and foundation of social criticism, revealing the contradictions and limitations of the real world through its critique. On the other hand, social criticism is the deepening and development of religious criticism, further eliminating the influence and shackles of religion through its critique of the real world. This dialectically unified relationship reflects the completeness and profundity of Marx's critical thinking. By employing these critical methods, Marx was able to deeply analyze the essence and contradictions of his subjects, revealing the limitations and historical trends of Hegel's philosophy of right. Marx's critical purpose in the Introduction is very clear: to expose the contradictions and limitations of bourgeois society and propose the historical mission of proletarian revolution. Marx believed that the proletariat, as the decisive force in burying bourgeois society, would overthrow the bourgeoisie's rule with the attitude of "I have no status, but I must become everything" <sup>[10]</sup>, establishing a new society of proletarian dictatorship as an inevitable social trend. This clear critical purpose makes Marx's critical thinking more targeted and effective. This rigorous critical logic also enhances the persuasiveness and credibility of Marx's critical thinking.

#### **4. Holistic expression in the context of materialism**

Materialism, as the foundation of Marxist philosophy, also represents the earliest scientific transformation in Marx's thought. The materialist approach emphasizes starting from the objectively existing material world, avoiding subjective assumptions and prejudices. Marx believed that philosophy should not only explain the world, nor should it merely "take the proletariat as its material weapon" <sup>[6]</sup>, but also change the world by enabling "the proletariat to take philosophy as its spiritual weapon" <sup>[6]</sup> to achieve a thorough revolution and liberate the Germans as true "humans." Therefore, his materialist approach underscores the verification and development of theory through practice. Marx recognized that "exposing and criticizing wrong ideas does not

automatically lead to the correct ideas entering people's minds and hearts as beliefs and spiritual principles." He viewed social phenomena as products of historical development, "not achieved in one stroke or naturally occurring" <sup>[11]</sup>. Hence, his materialist approach focuses on explaining and predicting social phenomena from the perspective of historical development.

In the Introduction, Marx criticized Hegel's philosophy of right as being based on idealism, inverting the relationship between matter and consciousness, and viewing ideas and concepts as determinative factors while ignoring the objectivity and practicality of the material world. Marx pointed out that Hegel saw the state as the realization of the "Idea" and regarded the family and civil society as derivatives of the state. This inversion of matter and consciousness is a typical manifestation of idealism. By emphasizing the objectivity and practicality of the material world, Marx criticized Hegel's idealist philosophy of right.

Based on his critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, Marx proposed his own materialist philosophy of law system. He emphasized starting from the material world and using practice as the foundation to understand and explain legal phenomena. Marx put forward the famous assertion that "civil society determines the state." He believed that it is not the nature of the state that determines the nature of civil society, but rather the nature of civil society that determines the state. This viewpoint overturned Hegel's idealist perspective of "the state determining civil society," emphasizing the objectivity and practicality of the material world. From this, Marx "rethought the meaning of 'human'" and "broke through class limitations" <sup>[10]</sup>. Marx also argued that law, as a superstructure, is determined by the economic foundation. By analyzing the economic relationships of capitalist society, he revealed the class nature and social functions of law.

## 5. Real-world implications

In his Introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx demonstrated the positivism inherent in his early thoughts through a profound critique of religion, adhering to the principle that "the degree of realization of theory 'grasping the masses' depends on the advancement and scientific nature of the theory itself" <sup>[9]</sup>. Furthermore, he uncovered the social roots of religion and the social contradictions it concealed. This approach, grounded in reality and emphasizing observation and verification, lies at the heart of positivism. Simultaneously, Marx fully utilized a comprehensive critical method, engaging in both conceptual abstract criticism of religion and concrete criticism of objectively existing social phenomena through deep observation and analysis. This approach allowed him to construct his unique philosophical system. This integrated analytical method, starting from positivism and combining a materialist perspective with comprehensive criticism, was not only of epoch-making significance at that time but also provides crucial insights for contemporary China as it comprehensively deepens reforms and advances Chinese-style modernization.

In the Introduction, Marx employed a positivist approach, closely aligning it with the realities of German society to offer a profound analysis of religion. Through empirical observations of religious phenomena, he exposed the social origins of religion, namely, the oppression and exploitation of feudal rule. This positivist methodology demands that we closely align with reality, conduct deep research, discern essence from phenomena, and extract patterns from data when facing complex social issues. In contemporary China, the positivist approach remains significantly relevant in the process of comprehensively deepening reforms and advancing Chinese-style modernization. The communique of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee clearly outlined the goals and tasks of "further comprehensively deepening reforms," emphasizing the need to "summarize and apply the valuable experience gained from reforms since the reform and opening-

up, especially from the comprehensive deepening of reforms in the new era.” This fully reflects the positivist spirit embedded in the development of Marxism in contemporary China. By summarizing historical experience and considering current realities, we can better grasp the laws and directions of reform, ensuring the scientific validity and effectiveness of reform measures.

In the Introduction, Marx not only exhibited the scientific nature of positivism but also embodied the critical and revolutionary aspects of his theoretical framework. Through a profound critique of Hegel’s philosophy of right, he exposed the hypocrisy and exploitative nature of the bourgeois state system. The complete application of this critical thinking requires us to dare to criticize outdated concepts and systems when facing social issues, and more importantly, to be brave in innovation and explore new solutions. In advancing economic system reforms, we also need to dare to criticize old systems and mechanisms that hinder economic development, and we must be brave in innovating and exploring new systems and mechanisms that better align with the laws of the market economy. For instance, in promoting supply-side structural reforms, we need to drive industrial transformation and upgrading through innovation-driven development strategies, thereby enhancing the quality and efficiency of economic development.

The complete application of critical thinking is also reflected in the pursuit of theoretical innovation. In his critique of Hegel’s philosophy of right, Marx did not blindly accept Hegel’s theory. Instead, he revealed the limitations of Hegel’s theory by comparing historical facts and social phenomena. Similarly, in advancing Chinese-style modernization, we also need to “further comprehensively deepen reforms and summarize and apply the valuable experience gained from reforms since the reform and opening-up, especially from the comprehensive deepening of reforms in the new era.” We must timely adjust and improve policies and measures to ensure that reforms always move forward in the right direction.

In the Introduction, Marx ultimately pointed the critique towards practice. His emphasis on philosophy not only explaining the world but also changing it underscores the practicality of materialism, which is the core of Marx’s thought. In criticizing Hegel’s philosophy of right, Marx proposed the grand goal of achieving human liberation through proletarian revolution. This goal not only has profound theoretical significance but also important practical value.

In contemporary China, facing the historical mission of comprehensively deepening reforms and advancing Chinese-style modernization, we also need to adhere to the practicality of materialism. This requires us to focus not only on theoretical innovation and policy development but also on practical exploration and implementation effectiveness in advancing reforms. On the one hand, we should prioritize practical exploration and innovation. In the process of promoting Chinese-style modernization, we need to boldly experiment, be brave in innovation, and explore development paths and institutional models that are tailored to China’s national conditions. In advancing the innovation-driven development strategy, we need to encourage enterprises to strengthen independent innovation and enhance their core competitiveness. In promoting the rural revitalization strategy, we must adapt measures to local conditions and villages, exploring development paths and models that align with local realities. Additionally, we must also emphasize practical implementation and effectiveness. In the process of advancing reform and development, we cannot merely stop at slogans and theories. Instead, we should take practical actions to “deeply study and understand the spirit of the plenary session, profoundly grasp and master the themes, major principles, significant measures, and fundamental guarantees for further comprehensively deepening reforms.” By integrating various aspects of deepening reforms, we can promote the effective implementation of policies.

The practicality of materialism also demands that in advancing Chinese-style modernization, we must

consistently unite problem orientation with goal orientation. We should focus on hotspots and difficult issues that concern the people, and drive reform and development with a problem-oriented approach. Simultaneously, we must clarify our objectives, tasks, and timelines, strengthening supervision, inspection, and evaluation with a goal-oriented approach. Only in this way can we ensure that all tasks of reform and development are implemented effectively.

The report of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee clearly proposes the goal of “building a high-level socialist market economy system,” emphasizing the need to “better leverage the role of market mechanisms and create a more equitable and dynamic market environment.” This fully reflects the practicality of materialism, requiring us to prioritize practical exploration and effective implementation in advancing economic system reforms, and to ensure that reform measures can truly stimulate market vitality and social creativity.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the application and analysis of the methods in the Introduction, we can clearly see how Marx skillfully employed positivism, comprehensive critical thinking, and materialism, enabling him to closely align with German social realities and reveal the disconnection between Hegel’s philosophy of right and the real world. Marx comprehensively rebutted Hegel’s philosophy of right from multiple perspectives, demonstrating his profound philosophical insight and critical spirit. This provides powerful theoretical support for our understanding of the material foundation of social history and the importance of class struggle. The scientific nature of positivism, the critical and revolutionary aspects of the theoretical framework, and the practicality of materialism embodied in this not only played a theoretical guiding role in Marx and Engels’ collaboration on *The German Ideology*, where they “clarified that the premise for establishing historical materialism is the empirical grasp of real people”<sup>[6]</sup>, but also holds significant enlightenment for us today in comprehensively deepening reforms and advancing Chinese-style modernization. We must thoroughly study and implement the spiritual essence and core meaning of the General Secretary’s important expositions on studying Marxist classics, persisting in observing, interpreting, and leading the times with Marxist standpoints, viewpoints, and methods. Simultaneously, we must closely integrate China’s realities and characteristics of the times, continuously promoting theoretical and practical innovation, and contributing wisdom and strength to realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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