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The New Development and Modern Value of Engels' Letters to Materialism in His Later Years

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Abstract: Historical materialism is one of Marx's greatest discoveries, which is of great significance in the history of human social thought. In Engels' later years, there was a new trend in the development of capitalist society, where letters became an important carrier for Engels to carry out theoretical research, propaganda and struggle. Engels' letters in his later years paid full attention to the reaction to the superstructure of the economic foundation and the relative independence of ideology. In addition, it emphasizes that the theory should keep pace with the times, also puts forward and expounds the thought of "historical resultant force theory." Furthermore, we firmly opposed dogmatism, contrarily adhered and developed scientific Marxism. Engels' letters in his later years not only enriched and developed Marxist historical materialism, but also provided a strong theoretical basis for the great practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

Keywords: Engels; Historical materialism; Letters in old age

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1. Introduction

In the study of historical materialism in Chinese academic circles, Engels' five letters in his later years have important theoretical value. After the death of Marx, Engels had to take-over the work of sorting out and publishing Marx's manuscripts on one hand, and on the other hand, he had to deal with the misunderstanding and attack of Marxism inside and outside the party. In order to clarify and defend Marxism, Engels frequently communicated with workers, activists and socialists, where letters became an important form of his elaboration of Marxist theory.

2. The Realistic Background of Engels' Letters in His Later Years

In the late 19th century, the world capitalism entered a new historical stage, and the second electrified Industrial Revolution began. With the rapid development of productivity and science and technology, the major capitalist countries in Europe and the United States are showing unprecedented prosperity. Driven by huge interests, thus to stimulate the enthusiasm of labor, the bourgeoisie eased the contradiction between the workers and the capitalists by improving the living conditions of the workers, increasing wages and improving social welfare, trying to cover up the fact that they oppressed the workers. As a result, a large number of workers began to have illusions about the bourgeoisie, and even appeared the dangerous thought of eliminating the revolutionary struggle. In Engels' later years, great changes took place in the form of proletarian struggle, the violent revolutionary thought was seriously damaged, the proletarian movement fell into an unprecedented low tide, and the situation became increasingly complex.

In Engels' later period, Marxist theory was widely spread in capitalism, gradually occupied the

dominant position of the workers' movement, and became the ideological weapon of the proletarian revolution. At the same time, the German theorists set off a wrong ideological trend of distorting and attacking historical materialism, which caused great harm to the workers' movement. Engels argues that his and Marx's interpretation of historical materialism in their youth mainly came from the capitalist real society at that time, and they lacked a certain dialectical thinking on issues related to historical materialism, which gave them the opportunity to distort historical materialism. Engels used materialist dialectics in his later letters, which not only emphasized the decisive role of economic factors in social and historical development, but also fully affirmed the status of various factors. This resolutely refuted the negative view of simple economic determinism, and discussed the dialectical relationship between economic foundation and superstructure, besides that focused on the reaction of superstructure and the principle of relative independence of ideology. Thus, it further defended and developed the theory of historical materialism.

3. The Systematic Exposition of Historical Materialism in Engels' Letters in His Later Years

3.1. The reaction of superstructure and the relative independence of ideology

When Marx and Engels founded historical materialism in the early stage, they emphasized the decisive role of economic foundation on superstructure out of the need of struggle, but did not elaborate enough on the dynamic reaction of the superstructure. However, Engels stressed that he and Marx never denied the reaction of the superstructure. Therefore, in order to clarify the misunderstanding and slander of historical materialism and comprehensively expound his scientific theory, Engels wrote a large number of valuable letters in his later years, emphasizing the reaction of state power and law on economic basis and the principle of relative independence of ideology.

First of all, in Engels' letter to Bloch, the reaction of state power to economic foundation is summarized as three situations, "positive promotion," that is, "it can work in the same direction, in this case, it will develop faster." Furthermore, "reverse hinders development," that is, "it can work in the opposite direction." In addition, Engels also pointed out that in the second and third cases, political power will damage economic development and cause waste of human and material resources. The violent occupation and destruction of economic resources by state power is an important reflection of the reaction of economic development, which may lead to the extinction of a place or a nation under certain historical conditions.

Secondly, with the development of capitalism, division of labor makes law form a new independent field. It not only depends on economic development, but also has a dynamic reaction to it. Engels pointed out in his later years, that law as the expression of economic foundation, must not only adapt to the overall economic development, but also eradicate internal contradictions and maintain internal harmony. If the direct and undisguised economic relations are directly established as laws and regulations, it will lead to differences within the law and destroy the harmony of the internal system of law. Blindly pursuing the harmony of the internal system of law will destroys the real reaction of economic relations and affect the interests of the ruling class. Therefore, law not only determines economic relations, but also has relative independence. Contrarily, law essentially embodies the will of the ruling class. In order to safeguard the interests of the ruling class, the jurists legalize various rules and regulations by adopting laws and regulations, that will come into effect and have a great impact on the economic development to a certain extent.

Finally, Engels elaborated the connotation of ideological independence in many works, but he mainly highlighted the decisive role of economic foundation on ideology, and did not elaborate enough on the principle of relative independence of ideology. Therefore, in his letters in his later years, Engels made up for this defect, comprehensively expounded the theory of relative independence of ideology, and

promoted it to a new height and position, which is one of his important contributions to historical materialism. On one hand, the development of social ideology has historical inheritance, where different thoughts of each

era constitute different disciplines and are divided into different fields. People inherit and critically develop new ideological materials on the basis of previous ideological materials. Engels stressed that these new ideological materials are not from scratch, but the inheritance of previous ideologies. It is this historical inheritance that injects new vitality into the development of human history. It also makes human civilization continue to form the unprecedented prosperity of human history and the regularity of its own development. On the other hand, the development of ideology is unbalanced. Engels believes that the development of ideology is not synchronized with the economic level, and may surpass or lag behind the current economic situation. On the contrary, economically backward countries can still play the first violin in philosophy. The important reason for this is that backward countries can directly inherit and absorb the advanced achievements of other nations.

3.2. The theory of historical resultant force and giving full play to the power of the masses

It is one of Engels' point of views about historical materialism in his later years that people create history by themselves. He creatively infers the relationship between the objective law of social and historical development and people's own activities, puts forward the idea of promoting the joint force of historical development, and further probes into the problem of the motive force of historical development. First of all, Engels pointed out that among the many factors that affect social development, economic factor is the first condition we consider, and individual will be the reflection of economic situation. When expounding the relationship between the objective law of historical development and human will activities, Engels stressed in his letter to John Bloch that only on the premise of following the objective law of historical development, each person has different will forces, thus forming many parallelograms of different forces. Finally, producing the total resultant force that determines the result of human history, and this result is an integral and unconscious product of power. People do not create history according to the common will and plan, but it will be affected by others, and the final result of human history is also from the conflict of numerous individuals will power. Therefore, on the surface, the whole human history seems to be a natural contingency, but in fact it is an objective of the law subject to the internal necessity of the same movement, which always dominates the contingency. However, in the process of creating history, people do not do what they want, but are restricted by political, economic, cultural and other factors, among which economic factors play a decisive role in the development of history.

3.3. Expound the scientific attitude towards historical materialism and oppose dogmatism

In the late 19th century, on one hand, Marxism was widely spread in capitalist countries. Some college students and young scholars joined the German Social Democratic Party one after another and declared themselves Marxists. Although these "youth groups" can also read Marxist works, they do not really grasp the world outlook and essence of Marxism, but copy Marx and his own theory regardless of the actual situation. In a letter to Paul Ernst, it was written, "As for your attempt to deal with problems in a materialistic way, I must first state: "If we do not take the materialist method as a guide to the study of history, but take it as a ready-made formula and cut out various historical facts according to it, then it will turn into its own opposition ^[1]." Engels stressed that the real workers' Party must adhere to the Marxist theory as the basis and treat Marxism with a scientific attitude. When Engels criticized the German youth, he did not really understand the essence and connotation of materialism, but regarded it as a formula and labeled it as not to be studied. Engels also vaguely felt that the wrong tendency of "youth school" in Germany had become a common phenomenon at that time. In his letter to Conrad Schmidt, he pointed out that many young scholars in Germany only took materialism as a formula, and did not conduct in-depth research on it. In order to guide young scholars to correctly understand and use historical materialism, Engels repeatedly warned young people to seriously study Marx's works instead of second-hand materials.

Thereby they fully understand Marx's theory, correctly grasp the basic principles of historical materialism, and finally correctly guide practice.

Moreover, Engels emphasized that if the young people want to make achievements in social and historical theory, they must have rich historical knowledge. In order to refute Ernst's wrong view, Engels pointed out that the formation and development of every country, nation and class have their own social and historical conditions. If we don't understand the specific historical background of Norway, we can't understand the formation process of Norwegian petty citizen thought, and we can't understand the difference between German petty citizen class and Norwegian petty citizen class. Engels' scientific attitude towards Marxist theory in his later years is of great theoretical significance to Marxism and the international socialist movement.

4. The Enlightenment of Engels' Later Years to the Innovation of Historical Materialism and China in the New Era

The innovation and development of Engels' letters in his later years reflected the theoretical characteristics of historical materialism advancing with the times, and guided us to comprehensively and accurately adhere to the theoretical essence of Marxist historical materialism. Since the founding of the Communist Party of China, it has always been proceeding from China's objective reality, based on the specific national conditions, adhering to the use of historical materialism, deeply grasping the internal logic of China's social development, and constantly promoting the victory of the cause of the party and the people. Under the historical position of the new era, the study of Engels' letters in his later years is of epoch-making practical significance to guide us to correctly understand the world and carry out the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

First of all, Engels insisted on the unity of historical materialism and dialectics in his later years, discussed the dialectical relationship between economic foundation and the superstructure, emphasized the reaction of the superstructure and the relative independence of ideology. Since the reform and opening up, the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics has made remarkable achievements in the world. However, at the present stage, China is still facing the contradiction of unbalanced and inadequate development, as well as the problems of political system, such as the rule of law, national governance system and governance capacity, which are still serious. Therefore, while consolidating the status of the economic foundation, we must also play a dynamic role in the superstructure. We need to constantly strengthen the party's political construction, ideological construction and the role of the state in the society. We must always adhere to Xi Jinping's new socialist ideology with China's characteristics as the guiding ideology of the party and the state.

Furthermore, Engels emphasized that the economic factor is the decisive factor of social and historical development, putting forward and explained that the theory of "will power" of historical development, and insisted that the people create history by themselves is the decisive force of social change. Only with the help of the people's strength, can we stimulate the people's enthusiasm, combine the national interests with the people, and constantly promote the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Since the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the CPC has always adhered to the original intention and mission of "seeking happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation." Simultaneously, they practiced the fundamental purpose of building the party for the public, assuming power for the people and serving the people wholeheartedly, gathered the wisdom and strength of the people, and worked hand in hand to achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Finally, Engels emphasized that historical materialism is not a ready-made formula or even a formula, but a method and guideline for scientific research. While criticizing dogmatism, he emphasized the scientific

theory of Marx's historical materialism. This valuable ideological theory is the inheritance, persistence and

development of Marxist theory, and has made important theoretical contributions to the world socialist movement. China's historical lessons show that dogmatism is the greatest enemy of the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the future of the ruling party. In his speech, general secretary Xi Jinping stressed repeatedly that we should not treat the materialist conception of history in a dogmatic way, but rather insist on integrating theory with practice, and study problems with realistic problems as the guide. "History and reality show that only by adhering to historical materialism, we can constantly raise our understanding of the laws of socialism with Chinese characteristics to a new level and constantly open up a new realm for the development of contemporary Chinese Marxism." Historical materialism reveals the law of the development of human society and provides a strong theoretical support for the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation ^[11]. As the twenty-first Century Marx doctrine, Xi Jinping's new socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics has become the unswerving faith of the people and become the guideline to China's great rejuvenation of China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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