

## What Is Comparative Marxist Philosophy? Some Methodological Considerations

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**Abstract:** This study offers a position statement for comparative Marxist philosophy. It does so in two parts. The first part provides some methodological considerations concerning comparative Marxist philosophy, initially in relation to comparative philosophy per se, and then in reply to those may erroneously assume that Marxist philosophy is merely a branch of Western European philosophy. We may trace the initial moment when it ceased be such in the early 1880s, and from that moment it has taken root and developed distinct characteristics in light of regional histories, cultures, and levels of economic development. The second part provides two examples of how comparative Marxist philosophy may work: the differing definitions of a “Communist,” whether in existential terms by a freelance intellectual or in collective terms as a Party member; and the definition of socialism, based on different interpretations of the Communist Manifesto itself, in terms of ownership of the means of production and liberating productive forces. The conclusion returns to the question as to how the basic principles of Marxism and its contingent judgements relate to one another.

**Keywords:** comparative Marxist philosophy; basic principles; contingent judgements; Chinese Marxism; Western Marxism; defining “Communist”; defining socialism.

Comparative Marxist philosophy is not a term one often hears. The closest that one comes in China is, for example, works that engage in comparison between Marxist philosophy and Confucian thought. In other parts such as the relatively few countries that make up the “West,” one encounters comparative philosophy as such, as well as works that seek to compare Marx and another Western thinker. But there is not, to my knowledge, any treatment of comparative Marxist philosophy. This study is then a position statement, a foundational effort to define and describe what such a practice entails.

I will do so by means of two topics. The first topic concerns the reasons why one should undertake comparative Marxist philosophy, which arises from the reality of

distinct “characteristics” in the developments of Marxism in many parts of the world – Russia, China, Latin America, Africa, and so on – in light of specific histories, cultures, and economic levels. This treatment also replies to those who may see Marxist philosophy as simply a branch of Western philosophy. It may have been so briefly, but already by the 1880s this philosophical tradition had begun to take on regional forms, initially in Russia. Here I focus on the exchange of correspondence between Marx and Vera Zasulich, which marks the moment when this process of developing distinct characteristics began. The second topic concerns the potential content of comparative Marxist philosophy, where I argue that all of the categories of Marxist philosophy – even its basic principles – may be compared. Out of many potential examples, I focus on two key questions. The first concerns the definition of a “Communist.” Here we find distinctly different emphases between the existential assumptions of Western Marxism and the collective assumptions concerning Party members in Chinese Marxism. The second question concerns the definition of socialism as a the long preparatory stage before communism. Is socialism defined as the ownership of the means (and forces) of production or as the liberation of productive forces? Or is it a dialectical relation, as the texts of Marx and Engels indicate? The conclusion returns to the question of how we may understand the relation between the basic principles of Marxism and contingent judgements.

### **The Reasons for Comparative Marxist Philosophy**

Let us begin by asking how Marxist comparative philosophy relates to comparative philosophy per se. They do share an important methodological requirement: thorough familiarity with the debates and positions developed in the various forms and traditions. In terms of Marxist philosophy, these include Russia and Eastern Europe, China, Latin America, and Africa. Needless to say, one must be able to work in the respective languages so as to engage with primary material. For example, if one seeks to compare Chinese Marxism and Western Marxism, then one must be able to study texts in Chinese, German, French, and English. Further, we need to keep in mind the relative importance of Marxist philosophy. In the few Western countries, for example, Marxist philosophy is quite marginal to the liberal “mainstream”; in Russia and Eastern Europe, it used to be the main form of philosophy; in Latin American countries Marxist philosophy is in a much better position, especially in countries like Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and also Brazil; in countries such as China, Vietnam, Laos, and the DPRK, Marxist philosophy is the major framework of philosophy itself.

*Basic Principles and Specific Judgements*

At the same time, there is a major feature that distinguishes comparative philosophy and comparative Marxist philosophy. The former begins with difference and seeks in some way to find common ground, whether in methodology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, definitions of the self, and so on. The traditions compared have usually developed in relative isolation from one another, and comparison so often takes the form of comparing older moments with one another – Confucius and Aristotle, for example.<sup>1</sup> In a Western framework, we may characterise these efforts as the search for the *tertium comparationis*, ranging all the way from not being able to find such a third term to seeing it everywhere, from arguing that nothing can be compared to finding comparison everywhere.<sup>2</sup> In a Chinese context, we may speak – following Sun Xiangchen (2015; 2020; Sun X. and Lu 2017)<sup>3</sup> – of “dual ontologies” or indeed multiple ontologies, which then require a “mutual coordination” by means of a “framework contrast” that enables engagement while maintaining respect for cultural sovereignty.

Marxist comparative philosophy is different: it begins with common ground, with basic principles, and then examines the way differences emerge. The *tertium comparationis* – to use such terminology – is in effect “pre-comparative,” a philosophical and historical prerequisite for the engaging with the *comparata* (Weber 2014, 162–66).<sup>4</sup> The basic principles are indeed “universals,” or a common “set of problems” that need to be addressed anew. Or as Engels (1895, 428) formulated it: “Marx’s whole way of conceptualising [*Auffassungsweise*] is not so much a doctrine [*Doctrin*] as a method. It provides not so much ready-made dogmas [*Dogmen*], as reference points [*Anhaltspunkte*] for further investigation and the method *for* such investigation.” We may also call to mind Mao Zedong’s observations: “The basic principles of Marxism-Leninism remain unchanged, but individual conclusions can be changed... This is a question of the unity of the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism and the concrete situation in China” (Mao 1959).

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1 Much of this comparative exercise operates asymmetrically, moving from Western concerns to address Chinese philosophy (Shun 2009).

2 Debates over this question seem interminable, so I can cite only a few of the most representative works (Pannikar 1988; MacIntyre 1989; Wong 1989; 2009; Hall and Ames 1995; Weber 2014; Van Norden 2017).

3 Intriguingly, Sun Xiangchen does not describe his philosophical work as “comparative philosophy.” The terminology itself is Western, with initial studies in China influenced by the works and lecture tours of the expat philosopher Mou Bo (Mou and Yao 2003; Guo S. 2008; Li 2016; Sun W. 2016).

4 Weber identifies the origin and early history of the terminology of *tertium comparationis* in German philosophy from the late seventeenth century.

In each situation, new problems arise that require new solutions, albeit in light of a Marxist method.

What are the risks? Unlike comparative philosophy, the risk of emphasising difference to the point of no common ground is relatively small. By contrast, the risk of asserting sameness is far greater, although it takes a specific form in Marxist philosophy. This form is what may be called “hegemonic Marxism,” in the sense that the Marxism one espouses is seen normatively exclusive, dismissing any other development or local tradition as a “deviation.” This hegemonic tendency may be expressed in various ways: a) claims to origins: using the original texts of Marx alone to determine what is true and false Marxism, with no sense of a tradition of development; b) univocal assertions based on supposed origins and an either-or framework, stating that there is only one meaning of Marx’s texts; c) “betrayal narratives,” in which someone later “betrays” Marx (the candidates are many, beginning with Engels). These hegemonic assertions are not mutually exclusive, but they are infused with Christian theological assumptions concerning origins, singular truths, and Judas-like betrayals (Losurdo 2017). Clearly, these risks need to be avoided if one is to engage in fruitful comparison.

#### *Marx and Vera Zasulich*

This is all very well, but one may object that the method in question, or indeed the guide for action, is ultimately Western. In fact, the period when a Marxist approach was restricted to Western contexts is very brief, coming to an end already in the 1880s with the rise of Russian Marxism. Since then, it has taken root and developed in distinct ways in most parts of world, especially those that can be seen as “developing.” We may identify the moment when this turn took place with the exchange of letters between Marx and the Russian socialist Vera Zasulich. The specific question Zasulich<sup>5</sup> had asked Marx concerned a topic of significant debate among the various socialist circles in Russia at the time: would the agricultural or village commune, with its relics of collective property and practices of field shares, enable a different path to socialism, or did Russia too have to undergo all of the stages of capitalism found in Western Europe before the possibility of a proletarian revolution arose and the construction of socialism might begin.

It is the second part of the question that Marx found the most difficult to answer: did all countries of the world have to pass through all of the phases of capitalist

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<sup>5</sup> The letter from Zasulich was published in Russian in 1924, with an English translation eventually available (Zasulich 1881b; 1881a).

development before a proletarian revolution and thus socialism became possible. Marx struggled mightily over this question. Four drafts he wrote in reply (1881g; 1881a; 1881i; 1881h), beginning with a long exposition on the nature and history of the agricultural or village commune, drawing on material Engels was researching at the time in relation to Germany (Engels 1882). Initially, Marx suggests that such a commune would inevitably be absorbed and overcome by capitalist relations of private property; only later does he begin to see that its collective element may offer – if given the opportunity in specific historical circumstances – a “fulcrum for historical regeneration” in Russia.

As the drafts progressed, Marx realised that the village commune was only a specific example and that the deeper question concerned the normative status of the method and analysis he and Engels had hammered out over some three or four decades. Do all countries of the world have to follow the same path as those analysed by Marx and Engels in Western Europe? Marx was, after all, a good old German philosopher and it was an inbuilt assumption that this tradition, if not Western European philosophy, was philosophy per se. Finally, Marx realises that this is not the case. Drawing from *Capital* – which was widely studied in Russia at the time – and the thorough expropriation of the agricultural producer that had been and was still being undertaken in Western Europe, Marx comes to his conclusion: no, these capitalist processes and so his insights are “expressly limited [*expressément restreinte*] to the countries of Western Europe” (Marx 1881f, 241, 71).

The implication is that economic and social conditions, in light of their histories, are in fact not the same. This means that their potential paths to socialism will also have distinct differences. It should be no surprise that these letter drafts and the succinct letter itself are the subject of continuing study in China since there has always been a great awareness of the distinctness of Chinese history, political development, and culture (Marx 1881b; 1881c; 1881d; 1881e; Feng 2009; Sha 2010; Yu 2013, Wang J. 2019). From a Chinese Marxist perspective it is of great consequence that towards the end of life Marx came face to face with different historical and cultural traditions, and so began to realise that “in different economic and social environments, people produce different thoughts and cultures” (Xi 2018, 9).

From a relatively small beginning – a brief letter written in French to a Russian Communist – immense developments have followed. As a guide to action, Marxism took root in many different parts of the world, each with their own distinct cultural, historical, and social histories. From Africa to Eastern Asia, from Russia to Latin America, we find

developments of distinct characteristics in the Marxist tradition. Of course, these developments are what one would expect, as also the convoluted and indeed dialectical path of such a process – think for a moment of the “collapse” of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the renaissance of China today. But let me draw this grand historical scenario back to the more mundane question of Marxist philosophy: as I write, there is no singular Marxist philosophy (even though some still try assert such), but rather a multiplicity that must be taken into account.

### **What Is a Communist?**

In terms of the content of comparative Marxist philosophy, it would be tempting to assume that such comparison applies merely to the “regional variations,” a version of “area studies” if you will. By contrast, I propose that all of the categories or problems that come under the purview of Marxist philosophy comprise potential content for comparison. Many are the topics, ranging across planned and market economies, labour theory of value, working class, class struggle, socialist democracy, human rights, “one country – two systems,” and the socialist system that emerges during the stages of the construction of socialism, but I would like to focus here on two key question: the definition of “Communist” in terms of existential and collective dimensions; and the definition of socialism.

#### *The Existential “Marxist”*

Let me deal with this question by postulating two people. One is a person cognisant of the Marxist tradition in a Western context and may be described as a Western Marxist; the other comes from a context where a socialist system has a history and a present reality. I would like to ask each of these people the question: “what is a Communist?”

“It is a matter of political persuasion, of personal choice,” says our Western Marxist. The prism through which such an answer is framed is inescapably in terms set by the Western liberal tradition, which infuses so much of Western Marxism: one makes a personal choice to take up a political position. One decides to vote for a particular political party due to a range of factors, but ultimately it is a personal choice that is often kept private. One votes in such an election in private, unseen by other voters. Indeed, this is the key to the whole framework for defining a political preference: the private individual’s “free choice” is paramount.

The result is that the definition of “Communist” is an existential definition: one “is” a Communist as a result of private decision. It may move this Communist to think and act in a certain way, to read preferred literature, to mix with others who share similar views. Thus, the claim “I am a Communist” is seen as an existential reality, and may even see that this is enough to be called a “comrade” (as I have experienced from time to time). In sum, the key lies in “subjective intentions,” with existential Communists “thinking that so long as they have ‘good will’ in the abstract, they can transform reality, society and themselves” (Liu 1939b, 108; 1939a, 118).

Let us go a step further: the actual situation now in Western countries is that few would call themselves a “Communist” at an existential level, since the preferred self-descriptor is for one to be a “Marxist.” To see how this practice developed, let us consider Perry Anderson’s classic work, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976). Anderson points out that what became known as Western Marxism developed distinctive ideological assumptions and practices in the context of defeat of Communist movements in Western countries. I cannot go into all of the features here,<sup>6</sup> since I have a specific concern: for Anderson, this situation entailed a retreat from engagement with working class politics into universities and colleges (rather than the practice of an earlier generation who taught in Communist Party Schools), and a crucial decision that these Marxists had to make. The decision related to Communist Parties in Western European countries: “Either the theorist could enrol in a Communist Party and accept the rigour of its discipline ... The opposite option was to remain outside any party organization whatever, as an intellectual freelance” (Anderson 1976, 42). Many chose the latter option, working as freelance intellectuals (*ziyou zhishifenzi* 自由知识分子). Notable here is the way Anderson himself characterises the nature of democratic centralism in Communist Parties. Democratic centralism is, of course, a well-established practice and dates back to 1904-1905 in Russia (Lenin 1906), but in Anderson’s view this common practice becomes a manifestation of the “Stalinisation” of European Communist Parties. The outcome is that such “Marxists” preferred to seek the relative “freedom” of individual intellectual life. The caricature of democratic centralism indicates Anderson’s preferences for Trotsky, but it also – crucially – indicates Anderson’s own status as a “freelance intellectual.”

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6 These include reductions of Marxist-Leninism to: social processes (and not nature); Marx (and not Engels); intellectual pursuits (and not Communist Parties); historical materialism (and not dialectical materialism). We may also include the determinations of a situation of seeking power (and so siding with Trotsky), Western liberalism, and Western imperialism; the negotiations with utopianism, Western religion, and Western “Maoism”; and the suspicion of the role of the state, of the value of science and technology, and of the forces of production.

It is in this situation that the practice of calling oneself a “Marxist” arose. The word became a noun and could include a range of possible positions. To be a “Marxist” may simply have meant that one deployed some Marxist methods in one’s work as an intellectual, or it may have meant some existential commitment to an acceptable form of socialist politics (usually of a milder form), or it could be combined with other assumptions, whether religious or liberal or anarchist.

### *The Party Member*

Let us now compare a different approach: one is a comrade, a Communist, if one is a Party member. I would like to use Liu Shaoqi’s famous and definitive text – from which I have already quoted earlier – to fill out this answer. Liu’s text was originally delivered as a lecture during the immensely creative period in Yan’an, after the Long March, and the title is translated in English as “How to Be a Good Communist” (Liu 1939a). Read through a Western lens, “to be” can be seen as an existential condition that defines how one may be a “good Communist.” However, the Chinese title actually says, “*Lun gongchandangyuan de xiuyang* 论共产党员的修养,” which may be translated as “Concerning the Cultivation of Communist Party Members” (Liu 1939b). The difference is revealing: the semantic field of the term “cultivation” (*xiuyang* 修养) includes the senses of training, understanding, mastery, and accomplishment. And the one who is to undergo this cultivation is not an existential “Communist,” but a “Communist Party Member” (*gongchandangyuan* 共产党员) – or *dangyuan* 党员 as a shorthand. Obviously, the primary reference is collective, to being part of a Communist Party, which defines who one is as an individual.

It is beyond my remit to analyse every detail of Liu Shaoqi’s careful treatment of a Party member’s cultivation, but I would like to emphasise a couple of points. To begin with, a few items can also be seen as tasks of our existential Communist: shedding old feudal and bourgeois liberal ideas and practices, such as individual selfishness, conceit, vacillation, pettiness, and advancing oneself at the expense and ruin of others; constantly developing one’s knowledge of Marxism-Leninism; examining one’s own ideas and behaviour and correcting them in light of a Communist world outlook; keeping a firm control over one’s thought, speech, and action. These could conceivably be undertaken through private study and self-discipline in isolation.

But not for Liu Shaoqi. Again and again, he emphasises that the inescapable context is revolutionary practice, before and especially after the attainment of political power. Such cultivation is not simply a benign process, but includes tempering through

arduous struggle. Further, a Party member must subordinate his or her individual interest to that of the Party, and thus to the needs of the masses and of society: “Personal interests must be subordinated to the Party’s interests, the interests of the local Party organization to those of the entire Party, the interests of the part to those of the whole, and temporary to long-term interests” (Liu 1939b, 129; 1939a, 135–36).<sup>7</sup> Those infused within a Western liberal context may quail at such a stern stipulation, sacrificing one’s personal interest and “freedom” for the sake of the greater good. But the point here is that it is only through the collective that an individual comes to full fruition. How is this flourishing manifested? In high Communist morality, the greatest revolutionary courage, a clearer grasp of Marxist-Leninist theory and method, in sincerity, candidness, and happiness, and in the greatest self-respect and self-esteem. In sum, a fully-rounded individual Communist acquires through this process Communist virtue (*meide* 美德), devoted to the rural and urban working class.

Impossible, one might say; no human being can achieve such a level. Yes indeed, Liu Shaoqi replies. It is an arduous and lifelong struggle, with internalised class-struggle manifested in dispensing with non-proletarian and non-Communist assumptions and practices (whether feudal or liberal), engaging in genuine criticism and self-criticism, and in constant study and revolutionary practice. No-one is a born genius, and no-one is a born Communist, but one can improve only within a collective context.

By now the differences between the existential Communist and the Party member should be obvious. Distinct cultural and philosophical traditions play an important role, with Western liberalism framing the meaning of an existential Communist and an Eastern Confucian emphasis on “continuous regeneration” (*shengshengbuxi* 生生不息) in a collective context framing the Chinese Marxist emphasis on being a Party member and thus comrade.<sup>8</sup> However, it would be a mistake to assume that the opposition is a simple one of individual versus collective. Instead, each entails a recalibration of the individual-collective relation. In a Western liberal context, the private individual is primary and the

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7 Here Liu Shaoqi quotes Mao Zedong: “At no time and in no circumstances should a Communist place his personal interests first; he should subordinate them to the interests of the nation and of the masses. Hence, selfishness, slacking, corruption, seeking the limelight, and so on, are most contemptible, while selflessness, working with all one’s energy, wholehearted devotion to public duty, and quiet hard work will command respect” (Mao 1938, 522).

8 It may also be argued that “continuous regeneration” within a social context and the importance of virtue and self-cultivation, or *xiushen* 修身 (Sun X. 2014; 2018; 2019; see also Hall and Ames 1998), enables a more direct connection with the Communist emphasis that the individual comes to fulfilment only through the collective.

social becomes an implicitly contracted aggregate of such individuals; in a Chinese Communist situation, the collective is the determining framework, albeit not in an either-or (or zero-sum) relation with the individual, but in the sense that the individual flourishes best through the collective.

To conclude this section on a more personal note: the difference between these two emphases was first brought home to me some years ago. I was in the habit of addressing Chinese colleagues whom I knew to be Party members as “comrade.” But they would not reciprocate. Finally, one of my colleagues asked, “are you a Party member?” I replied that I was not as yet a member. “When you are,” he said, “I can call you a comrade.”

### What is Socialism?

The second foundational question concerns the definition of socialism, as the preliminary stage before communism.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Western Marxism’s Emphasis on the Ownership of Productive Forces*

Let me begin by returning our Western Marxist and asking for a definition of socialism: “socialism is the ownership of the means of production by the working class.” Again and again I encounter this definition when speaking with people in Western countries. But is it a correct answer? It is only partially correct, and actually imbalanced.

In order to see why, we need to go back to “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, where Marx and Engels look forward to the exercise of power by a Communist Party after a successful proletarian revolution for the sake of socialist construction:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production [*Produktionsinstrumente*] in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces [*Produktionskräfte*] as rapidly as possible (&&Marx and Engels [1848] 1974, 481).

To understand the implications of this sentence for the definition of socialism, we need some careful analysis. This sentence from the Communist Manifesto has two main parts. The first part concerns the gradual – “by degrees” – seizure of capital and the centralisation of all the instruments or means of production in the hands of a proletariat

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<sup>9</sup> The need for such a definition assumes the mainstream Marxist distinction – since Lenin (1917a; 1917b) – between socialism and communism as two distinct but related phases, with the former being a rather lengthy transition and preparation for the latter.

that now controls the reigns of power. In short, this is the centralised ownership of the means of production by the proletariat embodied – at this point – in the state. The second part concerns the accelerated increase of productive forces, or what we may call, following Chinese practice, the liberation of productive forces (解放生产力 *jiefang shengchanli*).<sup>10</sup> Clearly, for Marx and Engels both ownership of the means of production and liberation of productive forces are needed for the process of socialist construction.

A further question concerning ownership: does such ownership pertain only to the instruments or means of production? Here Engels's overview in "Karl Marx" is revealing:

The productive forces of society [*gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte*], which have outgrown the control of the bourgeoisie, are only waiting for the taking possession [*Besitzergreifung*] of them by the associated proletariat in order to bring about a state of things in which every member of society will be enabled to participate not only in production but also in the distribution and administration of social wealth, and which so increases [*steigert*] the productive forces of society [*gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte*] and their yield by planned operation of the whole of production that the satisfaction of all reasonable needs will be assured to everyone in an ever-increasing measure (Engels 1877, 109; see also 1847, 377; 1894, 263–64).

Notably, Engels takes a step further than the "Manifesto," speaking here of "productive forces" (*Produktivkräfte* 生产力) in regard to both ownership and liberation. Thus, the productive forces require a seizure, a taking possession (*Besitzergreifung*) by the proletariat, with the outcome that the productive forces will increase (*steigert*). Thus, for Engels, ownership – entailing a range of meanings that includes seizure, possession, and control – applies to both the means of production and the forces of production.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We already see this terminology emerging in the 1950s (Mao 1956), and it became a signature emphasis of Deng Xiaoping.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the terminology was not fully clarified in the works of Marx and Engels (see especially Engels 1894, 263–64), and it would take later developments to achieve such clarity. Most of the terminology was developed and established in the Soviet Union, and one may usefully compare the three editions of the authoritative *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* to see how the terminology was clarified (Berestnei 1940; Malyshev 1955; Vasilchuk 1975). Here we find that the productive forces are defined as the combination of human labour power with the means of production so as to transform the raw materials of nature in the creation of socio-economic well-being (and thereby determine the level of society). In this definition, the means of production are a subset of the forces of production, but the term has a specific meaning: the means of production constitute all of the materials necessary for human beings to engage in production. Or, as Marx suggests in the first volume of *Capital* (1867, 131), labour resources (劳动资料 *laodong ziliao*) and the objects of labour (劳动对象 *laodong duixiang*) together constitute the means of production.

To return to our Western Marxist and the definition of socialism as the ownership of the means (and forces) of production. Clearly, this definition is one-sided and even distorts what Marx and Engels says. But why do Marxists in Western countries tend to make this definition. I would suggest that historical conditions play a role. It is perhaps understandable that in Western Marxism one finds a definition of socialism in terms of ownership of the means of production. Why? Generally in Western countries – 15 or so – the productive forces have been highly developed until relatively recently.<sup>12</sup> In this light, seizure of control of the means of production by the rural and urban working class entails taking over reasonably developed productive forces. There is a further reason that has been identified by Domenico Losurdo (2008), who points out that Western Marxism developed a suspicion of the state due to the experience of the capitalist state, a suspicion of science and technology since they had led to the production of nuclear weapons, and – most important for our purposes – a suspicion of productive forces. The reason for this suspicion is that Western Marxists had experienced the development of capitalist productive forces, which had exploited workers even more and suppressed the working class movement. Thus, one can expect that a Western Marxist would tend to ignore the part of “Manifesto” where it speaks of the need to accelerate the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible.

*Eastern Marxism’s Emphasis on the Liberation of Productive Forces*

To turn our Eastern Marxist, and in fact Marxists in all developing countries. In countries where productive forces were relatively undeveloped at the time of a proletarian revolution – think of Russia and China, for example – the emphasis has tended to be on liberating the productive forces. Indeed, successful Communist revolutions have taken place overwhelmingly in economically under-developed parts of the world, and the concern of Communist Parties in power has been to alleviate chronic poverty. Poor socialism, they argued, is not socialism at all, for socialism should improve the socio-economic well-being of all and lead to common prosperity.

We find this emphasis again and again, but I would like to discuss another country with the same initial problem as China: Vietnam. Here too was a poverty-stricken country seeking a socialist path of development, but Vietnam was able to enter into this path somewhat later and thus benefited from the experiences and insights of others. In Vietnam, the emphasis on productive forces never really slipped into the background. For

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<sup>12</sup> The historical background to this development was based on colonialism, slavery, drug trafficking (opium), genocide of indigenous populations, and what are now known as crimes against humanity.

example, a consistent theme of Le Duan's speeches from the 1960s – before the success of the revolutionary struggle that united north and south – is that the new production relations require an adequate content through the advancement of productive forces. More concretely, this means building “a material and technical basis for socialism” that is embodied in “large-scale industry capable of providing all branches of the national economy” with the necessary technical equipment. The reason: “*only on this basis* can we carry out a rational new division of labour in our society, a rational utilisation of our country's labour power and resources, and attain a high labour productivity” (Le 1963, 180, emphasis added; see also 1960, 22–23). In Vietnam, this dialectical coordination of the forces and relations of production was seen as the only way to satisfy the people's material and cultural needs. Clearly, the lessons from China, and indeed from Eastern Europe, had pressed upon Vietnam the need for economic development, of emphasising the inescapable importance of productive forces and their liberation, so as to provide content for the relations of production.

This was, of course, the signature emphasis of Deng Xiaoping. While he acknowledged the fact that Mao Zedong too had wanted to develop productive forces, Deng pointed out that “not all of the methods Mao used were correct” (Deng 1985, 116). For Deng the “development of the productive forces ... is the most fundamental [最根本 *zui genben*] revolution from the viewpoint of historical development” (Deng 1980, 31). “Poor socialism” is not socialism; instead, socialism should seek develop productive forces, improve the country's strength and the lives of the people (Deng 1986, 172; 1992, 372).

For the sake clarity, I have presented these two approaches in terms of an emphasis on ownership or on liberation of productive forces. In reality, of course, the two are inescapably related in a dialectical manner. To see how, let us return to the text from the “Manifesto” (quoted above) and address some questions that arise or are unclear. Are these relatively brief programmatic statements relevant only after the initial seizure of power through a proletarian revolution? Is there a causal relationship between one or the other term?<sup>13</sup> How will the dialectic of liberation and ownership unfold over the long process of socialist construction? Marx and Engels were very careful to note that they had no experience of the construction of socialism, with a Communist Party in power, so they stressed that the actual results could be determined only from experience and “only scientifically [*nur wissenschaftlich*]” (Marx 1875, 22), and that to “attempt to answer such a question in advance and for all cases would be utopia-making” (Engels 1873, 77).

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<sup>13</sup> Engels in particular suggests that there is a causal relation, as the text quoted above indicates, as also his fuller statement in *Anti-Dühring* (1894, 263–64).

I suggest that best approach is dialectical, in light of the actual experience of constructing socialism. In fact, we find this emphasis at least by the 1950s in the Soviet Union. Here they pointed out that certain economic laws apply during socialist construction, especially the contradictions between the forces and relations of production. On the one hand, the radical shift in relations of production – public ownership and collectivisation – had a profound effect on unleashing productive forces after the October Revolution; on the other hand, the dialectic of forces and relations of production changes in light of specific conditions. In a certain situation, the forces of production lag and become a fetter on production relations, while in another situation the reverse applies. The solution: the laggard needs to be brought up to speed (Stalin 1952, 196–205). Thus, the Western tendency to emphasise ownership of the means of production is clearly one-sided and imbalanced; but so also is an over-emphasis on liberating the productive forces.

To put it this way, however, suggests a “golden mean” between either emphasis. This may at times be the case, although historically we find – especially in the period immediately after the seizure of power through a proletarian revolution – that an initial centralisation of ownership of the means of production leads to an immense burst of economic development. That such development began to slow down and stagnate after a few decades is also the historical experience, leading to projects such as the reform and opening-up in China. It is precisely the latter experience and its results that leads me to propose a dialectical formulation: only when productive forces have attained a level of lifting everyone out of poverty, and indeed achieving moderate prosperity, can we speak of a substantive common ownership. I mean this in the sense that everyone is able to share in the economic gains of liberating the productive forces, although this outcome of necessity requires a distinct focus of economic policy.

### **Conclusion: Innovation of the Basic Principles**

Through these two foundational questions – concerning the understanding of a Communist and the definition of socialism – I have attempted to show how comparative Marxist philosophy works. As mentioned earlier, many are the topics that may become the subjects of this type of comparative analysis, but it is precisely in the light of the exercise of comparison that we may return to methodological considerations. Earlier, I took the position that all features of Marxism can be topics of comparison, and this should include the basic principles. How may this work? Earlier, I mentioned that the basic principles remain universal but that judgements or solutions arising from concrete problems may

change. The latter are obviously contingent, although they may contribute to a storehouse of potential solutions, as lessons to be learned but not applied mechanically elsewhere.

We may go further and ask: do the basic principles remain forever the same, or can these basic principles be developed, deepened, and expanded? Obviously, the answer is that they do they require further development and innovation in light of practice and the deepening of theoretical understanding. Examples include how the core category of contradiction in Marxist philosophy may be antagonistic or non-antagonistic, indeed how the process of dialectical analysis is manifested in different contexts. By now the role of a market economy – and even the labour theory of value – within a socialist system has also become a basic principle, requiring careful analysis of how it has been understood in Eastern Europe, and now in China, Vietnam, and so on. My current research concerns the history and theory of socialist governance and indeed the nature of socialist democracy. This research includes a study of the different types of democracy through human history (baseline, ancient Greek, feudal, capitalist and socialist), and focuses on how socialist democracy developed in the Soviet Union, DPRK, and China. These developments are not regional variations or contingent solutions, since they are part of the process of innovating and enriching the basic principles.

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