

The Anthropological Implications of Marx's Theory of Labor

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Abstract: Human existence is the result of labor, and labor is the primary basis for understanding human existence. Through labor, humanity distinguishes itself from animals and truly becomes human. In examining the connotations of Marx's theory of labor, the author discovers profound humanistic ideas embedded within Marx's perspective. Labor plays a crucial role in understanding human nature, human value, and human liberation. By grasping Marx's anthropological ideas in his theory of labor, this article aims to provide profound guidance for establishing a labor values system for people in the new era and promoting the construction of a harmonious society.

Keywords: Marx; Theory of labor; Anthropological thought; Contemporary enlightenment

1. The embodiment of anthropological thought in Marx's theory of labor

1.1 Labor as the foundation of human essence

Labor is the creation of human beings themselves. Marx believed that labor is a fundamental necessity for humans and distinguishes them from animals. While animals are driven by natural instincts, humans can create their own needs through labor. As a means for human beings to transform the world, labor is a conscious and voluntary life activity, and it is also an essential activity of humans. Only through the process of labor can individuals prove their existence as a social class. Marx stated, "In order to be able to create history, people must be able to live. However, in order to live, people first need to eat, drink, have shelter, clothing, and some other things. Therefore, a historical activity is to produce the materials that satisfy these needs, that is, to produce material life itself."^[1] According to Marx, the essential difference between humans and animals lies in labor. In this context, the humans Marx referred to are historical and concrete individuals who, through labor and practical activities, create their own relationships with nature and others within the social relations formed by the material conditions of their real lives. In other words, people, starting from the material conditions of their actual lives, can actively transform their surrounding environment through labor and simultaneously create their own essence.

Labor is both the condition and source of human survival. Marx regarded the sum total of all social relations as the inner content of human reality, but the establishment of social relations is not an instantaneous process. The formation of social relations gradually evolves through human labor practices. Due to the limitations of individual power, it is impossible for each person to survive through isolated labor. Therefore, people have to collectively face nature through cooperation, which gives rise to social relations. Marx believed that human beings are interconnected due to the need for labor, and the collective power of society surpasses the simple mechanical addition of individual labor. The process of labor gives birth to human society, which endows humans with social attributes. Labor becomes the link that connects individuals with society. Hence, social relations are both the product of labor and the prerequisite for labor. In the process of labor, isolated individuals establish connections with each other, forming social relations. It is only within certain social relations that individuals can engage in labor. Human social relations are inseparable from labor, so ultimately, the essence of being human is rooted in labor.

Labor embodies the essence of human beings and determines their nature. Marx pointed out, "As soon as people begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is determined by their physical organization, they...distinguish themselves from animals."

^[2] Therefore, it is through the practical activity of labor that human beings create human society and history. It is also through labor

practice that humans develop social interactions and the language and consciousness that arise from these interactions, which animals lack. In this sense, the essence of human beings is further deepened and generated through labor activity. Labor manifests the essence of human beings in objective objects, as it transforms the objectified objective world and objectifies its own essence in the process. At the same time, labor also transforms human beings themselves

1.2 Labor defines what it means to be human

The value of a person is not innate; it is created through labor. By engaging in labor and creating things, people simultaneously create their own value. The products of labor, when needed by society and reflecting their value, signify that the individuals who created these outcomes have also demonstrated their value to society. In the process of creating the value of things, people also create their own value. Through labor, individuals develop their personalities and find enjoyment in life. Labor acknowledges the value of individuals in society, and it also satisfies their own needs.

Labor creates the social value of individuals. Labor is the standard by which a person's value is evaluated. As Marx said, "Our production is a reflection of our essence."^[3] The value of a person is reflected and manifested through the labor products created for society. The value of a person refers to the satisfaction of social needs through their labor. Marx believed that the activities people engage in are social activities, and the materials required for these activities, including language, are provided by society. Throughout their lives, individuals form close connections with society and establish a certain value in relation to it. The realization of a person's value cannot be separated from the social context of their life. Only by dedicating oneself to society and creating value for it can one's existence be deemed valuable and meaningful. Therefore, everyone should strive to become a means of satisfying social needs, to create value for society, and then achieve the realization of their own value. It is through contributing to society through labor that social needs are met and social value is created. Without human labor, the continuation of humanity and the progress of society would be unimaginable. As Marx said, "Any nation that ceases to work, not to mention for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish."^[4] History is nothing but the birth of people through their labor, and labor determines the evolution and succession of society. Therefore, whether a person's life has value does not depend on whether their desires are fulfilled or to what extent, but on whether they can contribute to society. The realization of an individual's social value depends on the extent of their contribution to society.

Labor enables the realization of an individual's self-worth. An individual's self-worth is the value of a person as an object to the person as a subject. Self-worth can be manifested in two forms: direct self-worth and indirect self-worth. Personal activities such as eating, living, and cultural entertainment represent direct self-worth, while engaging in productive activities for society and directly creating value for society represents indirect self-worth. However, whether it is direct or indirect self-worth, both are achieved by humans through labor to satisfy themselves. Through labor, humans satisfy their own survival needs, enabling the maintenance of their existence. After fulfilling their survival needs through labor, new needs for enjoyment and personal development arise. The foundation of all these self-worth needs is labor. In creating social value, human labor also creates self-worth. This is the manifestation of a person's life value. On one hand, individuals consciously create objects, generating material and spiritual wealth for humanity and society. On the other hand, their own existence and activities hold meaning for them. Through creative activities to satisfy their own needs, they also create their own value. Humans are the creators of all value, both the value of things and the value of themselves.

1.3 Labor is the fundamental condition for human liberation.

Marx's in-depth analysis of labor aims to find the fundamental path to the liberation of labor and human beings. In Marx's view, only by abolishing private ownership and completely eliminating the alienation of labor can humanity reach the stage of communism, where human beings can transition from a dependency on "things" to a stage built upon the "free and comprehensive development of individuals." At that time, "labor will no longer be merely a means of survival but will itself become the primary need of life"^[5]. By then, individuals will achieve their full essence in a free and comprehensive manner.

Marx believes that labor is the objectification of human activity and it takes on two different forms. The first form of labor is the voluntary and conscious activity of individuals, the purposeful creation and development that individuals continuously engage in within society. The second form of labor is forced and involuntary, which Marx refers to as "alienated labor." The precondition for human liberation is that individuals can determine themselves in labor, shape themselves, and transform their social relations. Under the capitalist mode of production, the alienation and commodification of labor lead to human relationships being based on material and monetary interests. Breaking free from alienated labor means individuals can actively and willingly exert their abilities according to their own desires, and through the labor process and the products of labor, they can experience a sense of value. Labor becomes their primary need. Therefore, Marx clearly points out a way forward: "The free development of each is the condition for

the free development of all”^[6]. Hence, the proletariat must liberate themselves through their own emancipatory movement to break free. It is necessary to develop productive forces, abolish private ownership, and establish a communist socialist society in order for the proletariat to achieve liberation.

Based on the understanding of individuals’ inherent nature, Marx proposes that the mode of human existence is not predetermined but formed and can be changed through labor. Marx attaches great importance to the role of labor in human beings. Through conscious labor in the production process, individuals transform the world. The production of labor is the fundamental condition for the development and liberation of real individuals, and it is only through continuous labor practice that individuals can develop and liberate themselves.

2. The contemporary implications of Marx’s theory of labor are twofold

2.1 It helps establish the principle of respecting and valuing labor

Happiness is achieved through hard work, and the fruits of labor are the sweetest. In this prosperous era, we should respect and love labor. This is not just a slogan, but a recognition of the importance of labor. Labor is connected to human existence, as “any nation that stops working for a year, even just a few weeks, would perish.” One’s attitude towards labor directly influences their outlook on life and sense of happiness. Labor, as the essential activity through which humans create material and spiritual wealth, plays a positive role in human history and development. It is the noblest of human endeavors. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that “labor is the source of wealth and happiness. The beautiful dreams in this world can only be realized through honest labor; the various challenges in development can only be overcome through honest labor; all the brilliance in life can only be achieved through honest labor. We must firmly establish the concept that labor is the most honorable, noblest, greatest, and most beautiful, allowing all people to further ignite their enthusiasm for labor, unleash their creative potential, and create a better life through labor.”^[7]Xi Jinping’s interpretation of the new generation’s view on labor provides a concise and popular expression to explain Marx’s theory of labor. In the new era, it is essential to establish a correct view of labor and the correct labor theory of value.

2.2 It contributes to improving the labor system and achieving healthy labor.

Looking at the current situation in our country, the logic of capital has permeated all aspects of Chinese society. Regardless of the means employed by capital, with the growth of capital, workers become even more impoverished. Addressing the real issues that concern contemporary people’s interests, such as promoting fair and rational distribution of social wealth and improving the labor system, has become the most urgent task.

Under Marx’s advocacy of communism, workers achieve free labor. This is also the ultimate goal we hope to achieve in building harmonious labor relations, namely the emancipation of workers. Therefore, guided by Marx’s ideas, we need to take practical measures to realize healthy labor. The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation requires the diligent work of generation after generation. Labor is the key to unlocking the future and creating history. It is also the goal of struggle for the 1.4 billion sons and daughters of China.

As the builders and successors of the nation, establishing a correct view of labor is not only related to the future of the Chinese nation but is also a fundamental need for us as human beings. Labor is the fundamental need for our livelihood. Further scientific and systematic research on Marx’s theory of labor, including its rich anthropological ideas, not only helps us understand the essence of modern life but also provides theoretical support and practical guidance for building harmonious labor relations and establishing a correct view of labor.

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