On the Relationship Between Marxism and Philosophy—Based on the Interpretation of Kirsch’s Marxism and Philosophy

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Abstract. Karl Korsch published Marxism and philosophy in 1923, which paid great attention to and deeply discussed the problems of Marxism and philosophy. He criticized the three manifestations of negating the relationship between Marxism and philosophy and deeply explored the root of neglecting the relationship between Marxism and philosophy. Korsch pointed out that Marxist philosophy is the inheritance and transcendence of German classical philosophy. The essential characteristic of Marxist philosophy is the unification of theory and practice. At the same time, Korsch emphasized that Marxist philosophy is the theory of critical revolution, which is its inherent character. Reviewing Marxism and philosophy is of great significance for us to face up to the relationship between Marxism and philosophy and accurately grasp the nature and character of Marxist philosophy.

1. Introduction

Korsch is one of the founders of western Marxism, the philosophy and Marxism which he published in 1923 laid him the important position in the history of western Marxism. His theory has suffered strong attacks from the third international orthodox Marxists, and in practice, he was expelled from the communist party in Germany. Korsch’s suffering could not hide the light of his theory, when we studied and discussed the relationship between Marxism and philosophy, we cannot bypass Korsch’s insights. It is undoubtedly necessary and important for us to further study the problems of Marxist philosophy by correctly interpreting and viewing kirsch’s insights into the relationship between Marxism and philosophy in the context of that time, and digging out the beneficial part of Korsch’s theory.

2. The Three Negations of the Relationship Between Marxism and Philosophy and Their Underlying Causes

2.1 Three Tendencies to Negate the Relationship Between Marxism and Philosophy and Their Causes

Korsch put forward the problems of Marxism and philosophy from the realistic theory and the experience of Marxist theory in practice. He found that by the early 20th century, both bourgeois philosophers and Marxist theorists showed a kind of attitude of indifference and negation to the philosophical aspect of Marxist theory. Bourgeois professors dismissed Marxism as “the aftermath of Hegel”, and the Marxists of the time were less inclined to highlight the “philosophical aspects” of Marxist theory. Korsch concluded that there were three negative tendencies towards the relationship between Marxism and philosophy. First, the bourgeois philosophy professors believe that Marxism has no philosophical content of its own. Second, orthodox Marxists emphasize that Marxism has nothing to do with philosophy in nature. Third, the “socialist who studies philosophy”, who was more thoroughly concerned about the tendency of socialist philosophy, held that the Marxist system needed philosophical supplement. Therefore, it can be seen that these three tendencies basically negate the relationship between Marxism and philosophy, and argue that Marxism itself lacks philosophical content.

After proposing several tendencies to negate the relationship between Marxism and philosophy, Korsch went on to ask the causes that led the bourgeois scholars and the orthodox Marxists to
ignore and deny the relationship between Marxism and philosophy. He pointed to “very superficial and incomplete analyses of the development of history and logic” as the crux of the matter. The specific reasons for the failure of bourgeois scholars and orthodox Marxists to deeply and comprehensively analyze the historical and logical development are different. Therefore, starting from the two aspects of criticizing bourgeois scholars and orthodox Marxists, Korsch expounded the specific reasons why neither of them could correctly view Marxism and philosophy, and also laid a foundation for analyzing the important relationship between Marxism and philosophy.

2.2 Korsch’s Criticism of Bourgeois Philosophers’ Negation of the Relationship Between Marxism and Philosophy

Korsch pointed out that “since the mid-19th century, all bourgeois philosophy, especially the philosophical history of the bourgeoisie, has abandoned Hegel’s philosophy and dialectical methods for socio-economic reasons.” In Korsch’s view, the bourgeois philosophers fully grasped the development of philosophical thought in a purely ideological and non-dialectic way. Therefore, the history of philosophy must show three limitations.

First, the limitations of “pure philosophy”, that theorists do not realize the ideas contained in philosophy are equally alive in empirical science and social practice.

Second, the limitations of the “region”. German philosophy professors cannot see other philosophers outside of Germany who also made important contributions to the revival of the Hegelian system in terms of content, system and method. “In Italy, for example, Croce’s reinterpretation of Hegel’s philosophy gave rise to Gramsci’s philosophy of practice.”

Third, the limitations of the bourgeois class position. If the first two limitations have been overcome with the development of the history of philosophy, then this third limitation is the gap that bourgeois scholars cannot cross.

Korsch pointed out that philosophers who consider problems from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie cannot relate “conceptual” philosophical development to the specific historical development of bourgeois society, and thus “cannot study this relationship cautiously and fairly.”

Koersch believed that the development of philosophical thought after Hegel and the philosophical evolution from Kant to Hegel before reflected the connection between “ideological movement” and contemporary “revolutionary movement” rather than the pure chain of ideas. In Hegel’s case, there is an account of this philosophical principle, in which he states that each philosophy is but “its own time in thought”. Koersch believes that Hegel reveals the dialectical relationship between philosophy and reality, which is essential for truly understanding the development of philosophical thought. In the middle of the 19th century, the decline and cessation of the bourgeois revolutionary development were inevitably reflected in the fact that bourgeois philosophy could not grasp the dialectical relationship between philosophy and revolution in the concept.

2.3 Korsch’s Criticism of Orthodox Marxists

Korsch argues that orthodox Marxists’ neglect of Marxism and philosophical problems corresponds to Marxism and the state. Since Lenin had criticized the second international theorists and statesmen for paying little attention to the problems of Marxism and the state, did Korsch raise the question of whether the less attention paid to the problems of revolution led them to ignore philosophy? In order to trace this, it is necessary to analyze the causes of major crises in Marxist theory. The crisis of Marxist theory lies in the attitude of the social revolution to the state. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, capitalist development entered the monopoly stage from the stage of free competition, and the economic crisis broke out periodically. As the contradiction between capitalists and workers deepened, the workers’ movement developed further. In this period, the workers’ movement was mainly manifested as the parliamentary struggle. “The victory of the parliamentary struggle led by the social Democratic Party of Germany encouraged the conservatism of the second international in the face of capitalism, and the revolution gradually faded.” This explains the second international’s neglect of the revolutionary struggle from one aspect, which has caused the neglect of Marxist philosophy to a great extent.
3. Marxist Philosophy is the Inheritance and Transcendence of German Classical Philosophy

Korsch believes that Marxist theory not only contains the content of philosophy, but also inherits and abandons and surpasses German classical philosophy, especially Hegel’s philosophy. At the same time, he also stressed the importance of accurately understanding the meaning of Marx and Engels “abolishing philosophy”.

3.1 Korsch Emphasized to Study the Relationship Between Marxist Philosophy and Hegel Philosophy in a Dialectical Way

Korsch thinks that classical German philosophy did not leave the scene after the 1840s, but experienced a profound and significant change, that is, transformed into a new kind of science, namely “scientific socialism” theory. He pointed out that the connection must be found “in a direct and dialectical way in the sense of Hegel and Marx”. Korsch thought Marxist theoretical system as the theoretical expression of the proletarian revolutionary movement and German idealism as the theoretical expression of the bourgeois revolutionary movement are inevitably in spirit and in contact with each other in history. The movement of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie movement also in the social practice under contact each other, and these are in the history of a unified process. It can be seen from the dialectical method that the Marxist theory is the manifestation of the realistic proletarian revolutionary movement, and its materialist philosophy is inevitably generated from “the most advanced revolutionary bourgeois idealism system”. This strongly proves that Marxist theory contains philosophical content, and Marxist philosophy is the inheritance of the rational part of German classical philosophy, especially Hegel’s philosophy.

3.2 Marxist Philosophy has Achieved the Transcendence of Hegel’s Philosophy

Korsch further explained that Marxist philosophy has achieved philosophical transcendence after discussing the characteristics of Marxism. He pointed out that Marx’s theoretical view was not a partial rejection of all existing German philosophy, but a total rejection of its premises. What Marx is opposed to is not the philosophy which is merely a supplement to the mind or idea of the existing world, but the whole existing world. This opposition is not only theoretical, but also practical and operational. This answers from one aspect the purpose of Marxist philosophy is to oppose the existing world through philosophical criticism, eliminate bourgeois philosophy through battles in philosophy, and finally make the whole world revolutionary.

3.3 We Should Correctly Interpret Marx’s and Engels’ Attitudes Towards Philosophy

In particular, Korsch emphasized the importance of grasping and understanding the arguments of Marx and Engels about “abolishing philosophy”. In their context, the aim was to overcome and replace philosophy with scientific socialism, just as communism was to achieve the goal of abolishing the state. On this question, however, Korsch argues that one cannot simply understand the views of Marx and Engels, but to further examine “how should this process of abolishing philosophy be accomplished? Or is it done? By what action? At what speed? To whom?” If these problems are discussed, you will find that the abolition of the philosophy is not simple as words in theory, it shows the need of practice, more to see the scientific socialism is the theory of the revolutionary process, this process will end with all the abolition of bourgeois philosophy and science, and the abolition of capitalism material relationships. Marx and Engels argued that “to abolish philosophy” is not to abandon philosophy. At the same time, the abolition of philosophy cannot replace bourgeois philosophy with non-dialectic and abstract philosophy, as the vulgar Marxists believe.

4. The Essential Characteristic of Marxist Philosophy is the Dialectical Unity of Theory and Practice

Korsch affirmed the relationship between Marxism and philosophy, but he thought it would be more beneficial to develop Marxist theory in a positive sense and correct the wrong tendency of vulgarization and substantiation of Marxism if we further explain the relationship and thoroughly clarify the essence of Marxist philosophy.
By applying the principle of dialectical materialism to the development of Marxist theory itself, Korsch divided the whole history of Marxism into three stages and argued that “in every period it and philosophy have changed in a particular way”.

4.1 The First and the Third Stages of the Development of Marxism: Basically Present the Characteristic of Unification of Theory and Practice

The first phase began around 1843 and ended with the 1848 revolution. Korsch pointed out that Marxism understood and grasped social development as a living whole, and it was loyal to history. In this period, the vigorous development of theory and the proletarian movement are accompanied. The third phase began in the early 20th century and ended in an uncertain future. The victory of the socialist revolution in Russia and the development of the international workers’ movement require the communist theory that represents these practices to take a definite form of revolution. The practice of revolutionary struggle makes the third international leaders to consciously reconstruct the inner connection between Marxist theory and practice. However, Korsch argued that the Russian party’s promotion of the ideological “bolshevization” movement at this stage, by claiming to have restored the ideology of the complete philosophy of the real and unmodified Marxist philosophy, was more antagonistic to the revolutionary task of the Marxist philosophy that he wanted to emphasize.

4.2 The Second Stage of the Development of Marxism: Vulgar Marxists Split the Unity of Theory and Practice

The second phase began in June 1848 and ended in the late 19th century. During this period, the failure of the Paris commune movement and the low tide of the international workers’ revolutionary movement, Marx preferred to study the general class history of the proletariat at this stage. Korsch says this is more developed than previous theories that emphasized direct revolutionary communism. Korsch emphasized that the late Marxism still remained as the whole of the social revolution theory. The component part of Marxist theory as a whole, such as economic, political and ideological elements, scientific theory and social practice, further separated out, Korsch emphasize that this is “Another combination of the components of the system began to accuracy with a lot of scientific development, and established on the basis of the critique of political economy.” Marxism as a whole has never been dissolved in the summation of each branch of knowledge. Marxism always follows the unification of history and logic, and its theory and practice are closely related. This essential feature runs through the development of Marxist theory. The revolutionary will revealed by Marxism is latent in Marx’s works.

At the same time, kirsch pointed out pointedly that the orthodox Marxists of the second international, although they agreed with historical materialism in theory and method, in fact, they cut the theory of social revolution into pieces. They fail to see the close relationship between theory and practice, and turn Marxist theory into “criticism of the economic order of the bourgeoisie, the state of the bourgeoisie, the education system of the bourgeoisie, the religion, art, science and culture of the bourgeoisie”. In practice, these criticisms developed into various attempts for improvement, which remained within the boundaries of bourgeois society and bourgeois state. Korsch criticized the second international orthodox Marxists in theory of dialectical, provincial science theory and the practice of Marxism in various reformism, made the scientific socialism in them off the unity of theory and practice of social revolutionary, has brought the crisis of Marxism.

5. The Characteristic of Critical Revolution is the Inherent Character of Marxist Philosophy

Korsch believes that the difference between Marxism’s new materialism and old materialism and idealism is precisely that it emphasizes the way of understanding the existing world through practice, emphasizes the use of concrete and dialectical methods to examine the entire historical development and the existing world, and actively participates in the revolutionary practice. The Marxist theory holds that economy and politics are the relationship of dialectical unity. The economic foundation determines the superstructure and the superstructure plays a role in the
economic foundation. At the same time, the existence and development of society should be studied in combination with the social consciousness, which is a real but also an integral part of the general historical process and has many different manifestations. Since the various forms of social consciousness are determined by the economic foundation of the society, it is necessary to criticize the political economy which reflects the social and economic relations of the bourgeoisie to complete the task of thoroughly criticizing the bourgeois society. Korsch argues that Marx and Engels’ critique of political economy actually “developed their philosophical critique in a deeper and more thorough direction.” It is because the criticism of philosophy first laid the foundation for the criticism of political economy. “Because the oneness of consciousness and reality is a feature of every dialectic, including Marx’s dialectical materialism.”

Korsch emphasized that Marx’s new materialism was different from the old materialism and philosophical idealism. Marxist philosophy was revolutionary. In “the theses on Feuerbach”, Marx set forth his philosophical attitude, believing that the philosophers of the past only explained the world in different ways, and that the key to the problem was to change the world. Marxism think that social being determines social consciousness, social consciousness is the reaction of social existence, and the ability to react on social existence, and therefore, Marxist theory will be through the fight in the field of philosophy and overthrow the bourgeois philosophy, Marx’s thought was against reality is an important part of the capitalist society, in other words, the materialism of Marxism “theory to know the society and history in general, and its practice was overturned the whole.”

6. Conclusion

To sum up, Korsch has clarified the relationship between Marxism and philosophy thoroughly, and emphasized that Marxist philosophy is “the guiding principle of theoretical—practical and critical—revolutionary activities”. We should be good at grasping the depth and rationality of Korsch’s analysis of Marxist philosophy and examine some of his assertions with critical view. Firstly, Korsch’s division of Marxist historical development is not scientific and correct. Second, Korsch’s reference to the essential difference between Marx and Hegel is “vague, ambiguous and unintelligible.” At the same time, the concept of “wholeness” proposed by Korsch is still unclear. “When the ‘wholeness’ or ‘wholeness’ has to be essentially attached to Hegel’s philosophy, Korsch” has to fundamentally follow the direction of hegelianism”. Finally, “Korsch’s overemphasis on ideology gives his philosophy an idealism while belittling the second international and Leninist contributions to the unique theory of Marxism.” Therefore, we should pay great attention to the profound opinions expressed by Korsch on Marxism and philosophical issues and see the defects and deficiencies in his theory, which is especially important for further promoting the study of Marxist philosophy.

References
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