

The critique of Peffer—theory of morality and society

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Constructing harmonious society which treated human beings as essential position is just building a society which can guarantee the economical justice. Social justice is a issue which Marxist should certainly concern. However, people usually cited directly from the western political philosophy and ethical philosophy when exploring the issue of justice, especially from Rawls' **On Justice**. Can we find Marx's thoughts on social justice directly from his works which have value to our construction on the harmonious society? Many theories and ideas which are advanced by western Marxists are worth using for reference.

Rodney. G. Peffer, who is one of typical representatives of analytical Marxism, is the professor of University of San Diego, the USA. His main magnum opus which was published in 1990, is **Marxism, Morality and Social Justice**. In his working, he put forwards a moral and social theory which he thinks sufficient to Marxism. He has advanced a set of normative rules and/or criteria in his theory to judge whether a social arrangement is valid, and therefore posed a set of criteria to choose the social arrangements which have real historical possibility from alternative ones. Peffer thinks this theory is sufficient for it is in reflective equilibrium and most consistent with the considerate moral judgement, (1) is informed by the spirit of Marx's radical humanism and equalitarianism; (2) is based on the empirical theses centrally important to the Marxist political perspective (particularly Marx's theory of classes and class struggle and his analysis of capitalism); and (3) attempts to defend the Marxist's basic normative political positions. The first of these positions is that socialism—that is, democratic, self-managing socialism—is morally preferable to any form of capitalism as well as to any other form of society possible under the conditions of moderate scarcity and moderate egoism. By this article, I intend to give a critique of Peffer's 'Marxist moral and social theory' in order to get valuable facts for us.

A Rational Reconstruction of Marxist Theory of Morality and Social Justice

Peffer's "moral and social theory" consists of three parts: A rational reconstruction of Marxist theory of morality and social justice; the empirical confirmation on moral advantages of democratic, self-managing socialism; a defense of Marxist moral and social theory.

It is usually considered that there aren't normative moral theory in Marx's works. Just for this reason if someone would intend to develop a set of Marxist moral theory, he had to give a reasonable interpretation with the relative section of classical Marxist works, that is, give a rational reconstruction to the moral theory within Marx's works implicitly.

Peffer argued that although Marx does not have a fully developed philosophical theory about

Morality, he does have a normative moral perspective since in his manuscript in 1844. This view is based on three primary moral values: freedom (as self-determination) human community, and self-realization. By freedom, we can express it with a normative discourse: one ought to have the right to decide something by oneself, others cannot interfere it without adequate reason. This freedom is taken to designate both negative freedom (i.e., freedom from undue interference in one's personal affairs) and positive (i.e., freedom to control one's control own life). Marx implicitly approved of a relative equalitarianism. Because there still exist scarcity in society, the right of equal access to the means of self-realization must be interpreted as entailing, (1) the right to an equal opportunity to attain social offices and positions; (2) the right to an equal opportunity to acquire other social primary goods (income, wealth, leisure time, etc.). Marx never explicitly defined "community" in his works, we can take it as designating a group of persons who have common ends, who know they have common ends, and who take deep satisfaction in this fact. All the three goods are internal, ultimate, and constitute Marx's theory of goods. But among the three goods, freedom is most essential (i.e. once the conflict occurred between the three, take freedom in consideration first). If everyone can obtain his or her maximized freedom, the goods of human community and self-realization can also be realized. This sort of Maximums equality in liberty and equal opportunity would provide the foundation for legitimate social coercing or justice society.

Marx implicitly approve of a distributing principle of relative egalitarianism, he not only seek the maximization of the three nonmoral goods, but require, at least to freedom or the right of freedom, the egalitarian distribution to them. Without the relative egalitarianism, there wouldn't be the principle of equality in liberty. However, the principle of relative egalitarianism can't be interpreted by consequentialism, for example, the principle of utilitarian or the demand that be realized. It can only be interpreted by the principle of human's dignity and self-respect. According to the principle of dignity, we should regard human as the objective rather than only the means by which one part of people intend to realize their objective, i.e. the fulfillment of one portion of society at the expense of the other are eliminated without sufficient reasons. This requires that individuals should treat one another equally, including the distribution of their right. Therefore, Peffer argued that Marx's moral perspective is not a species of hedonistic utilitarianism or eudaemonistic utilitarianism (i.e., those hold that the top principle of morality is secure the maximum happiness for the broadest masses of the people), but a mixed deontology. Marx regards nonconsequentialist notion of human dignity rather than happiness, welfare or perfection of people, as the ultimate court or final principle.

In Peffer's opinion, Marx's concept of alienation and exploitation are central to his moral perspective, they can be analyzed in terms of other, more basic moral values and principles. The three principles are typically embodied in his concept of alienation. Alienation imply not only the scarcity of freedom but also the deprivation of becoming a member of human community, which is the precondition of which one develops his potentials and self-realization.

Marx's concept of exploitation also contains the thought of "ought not to be so", which can be reverted to the principle of equality in liberty. Peffer argued that Marx has never given a clear definition of exploitation, so he defined economical exploitation as essentially forced, unpaid, surplus labor that is transferred by one mechanism or another from economically productive to economic nonproductive classes. Economic exploitation is unjust because of its violating Marx's principle of maximum equal freedom. On this analysis, economic exploitation is always prima

facie wrong, and on Marx's empirical assumptions, almost always all-things-considered wrong in actual societies.

Peffer emphasized that the importance is not to develop the general Marxist moral and social theory but to develop a theory of the rules of social justice. These principles have many overlappings with Rawls' principles of justice. He argued that on Marx's view, even Rawls's principles are not sufficient and need to be modified. He proposed the modified principles as follows:

(1) Everyone's security rights and subsistence rights shall be respected.

(2) There is to be a maximum system of equal basic liberties, including freedom of speech and assembly; liberty of conscience and freedom of thought; freedom of the person along with the right to hold (personal) property; and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law.

(3) There is to be (a) a right to an equal opportunity to attain social positions and offices and (b) an equal right to participate in all social decision-making processes within institutions of which one is a part.

(4) Social and economic inequalities are justified if, and only if, they benefit the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, but are not to exceed levels that will seriously undermine equal worth of liberty or the good of self-respect.

Compared with Rawls's principles of justice, Peffer's first principle is the accessorial, and in terms of the principle, no one ought to live under the condition of certain level of living. Furthermore, there are extra differences in Peffer's principles as follows: besides strict equality in liberty they also contain equality in the worth of liberty; besides the democracy in political realm, they must be implemented in the social and economic realms as well. Peffer argued that his theory is consistent with Marx's normative moral principles, for example, his second principle of justice contains the negative freedom rules, and the third one contains the positive freedom rules. But he contended his theory is more complete and, therefore, more adequate.

The Empirical demonstration of the moral superiority of Democratic, Self-managing Socialism

Peffer thought that if we had not the analysis of capitalism and Marxist empirical theory about the moral superiority of socialism, the project of developing Marxist moral and social theory would not be successful. In terms of classical Marxist writers such as Marx, socialist society ought to have more extensive democracy and more broad freedom than any other existed form of societies. In **The Civil War in France** he goes into considerable detail in describing safeguards against the bureaucratization of post-capitalist societies, including direct representational democracy, the right of immediate recall, and—most importantly—the requirement that no representative or person holding public office earn more than an average worker. In terms of Marx's relative discourse, Peffer concluded that the socialism should be democratic, self-managed one. His description of the Marxist's basic normative political positions is: Socialism—i.e., democratic self-managing socialism—is morally preferable to any form of capitalism and any other form of society possible in the present historical epoch. Revolution, if necessary and sufficient to effect the appropriate transformations, is *prima facie* morally justified.

Peffer attempted to demonstrate democratic self-managing socialism is morally preferable to any form of capitalism and any other form of society possible in the present historical epoch. Here we introduce only his comparison between his socialist society and capitalist society. He thought it is obvious that the former is preferable to the latter, even to the capitalist countries such as Sweden. Although both his so-called socialism and capitalism can meet his proposed first and second principles (i.e., security and subsistence right and the right of maximum equality in liberty), socialist society can very well better meet the third and fourth principles while capitalist society can't. Therefore socialism is morally preferable to any form of capitalism. It does not, however, immediately follow that socialist revolution would be justified to transform a capitalist society like Sweden into a democratic, self-managing socialist society since, presumably, revolutions are justified only if the injustices of a society surpass certain limits (more on this presently).

Peffer emphasized in a strain of Classical Marxist rather than himself that revolution, including from post-capitalist society (especially those as former Soviet and Eastern Europe) to democratic, self-managing socialist society, if necessary and sufficient to effect the appropriate transformations, is *prima facie* morally justified. But he pointed out that the revolutions called for are not social revolutions designed to change the mode of production or class power but, rather, political revolutions designed to make political and social institutions more democratic and less repressive. In fact the Classical Marxists always oppose a social revolution designed to return such post-capitalist societies to capitalism since such counter-revolutions would be viewed as severe blows to the long-term process of creating a world socialist society. In addition, since peaceful evolution is always preferable to violent revolution, proponents of the position to Classical Marxism will advocate such political revolutions only if there is no viable reformist alternative.

Peffer took an opening attitude towards whether a command or market socialism should be adapted. On the one hand, he pointed out that a growing number of Marxists—having observed the historical experience of Yugoslavia's market socialist society, which has existed since the early 1950's—have come to the conclusion that market socialism is a viable and perhaps preferable historical alternative, on the other hand, he also specialized the crises former Yugoslavia was facing. For example, it has currently suffered its worst economic crisis of the post-war period. Foreign debt rose from \$ 4 billion to \$ 20 billion between 1972 and 1981. Inflation was running 200% annually, with wage increases restricted to 139 percent. Unemployment stands at 15 %, and the annual growth rate was less than 2% per year. However Peffer hasn't concluded that market socialism is untenable. It rests on whether market socialism can meet the criteria of a just society more effectively and avoid those defects in capitalist society.

Defending Marxist “Moral and Social Theory”

Peffer has defended his Marxist “moral and social theory” from two ways. First, he attempts to demonstrate the consistence between Marxism and morality. Second, he has defended Marxist theory of justice.

Does Marx actually have his own moral theory? There is a violent controversy between Marxists and scholars in the west. One of the opinions is that Marxism is a form of anti-moralism or immoralism in nature. In terms of moralism, perfect moral argument and explicit moral ideals and that be the state of human nature could change the world. However Marx and his followers

reject this form of morality or moralism. Marx abandoned the way to comment or approve a social system or mode of production by moral appeal, or moral consideration in political decision. Instead, he argued that class interest is the main concern in class society and the valid action in certain historical epoch. The utopian socialists appeal to moral ideals, while Marx seek a socialist society on scientific foundation. Marx expressed his contempt to morality. For example, in **The German Ideology**, he said “The communists do not preach morality at all.” According Marx’s historical materialism, existence determines consciousness, and economic foundation determines superstructure. Morality is a form of ideology (i.e., it is essentially determined by economic foundation and class interest). The moral notions which have been generally accepted in certain society are determined by the mode of production and the ruling class’s interests in this society. The function of existing morality is just to enhance the ruling class’s interests and to make them legitimate. In a word, Marxism opposites moral preaching and also defend the superiority of socialism to capitalism by any reasons of morality because this defense is not scientific. This ideas are mostly held by classical Marxists, especially those of the Second International.

Another opinion which gives tit for fat against above thinks that Marx and Marxists do not reject moral theories. Marx has implicit moral thoughts within his works. Peffer supports this opinion. He has particularly examined to the development of Marx’s moral perspective and concluded that although Marx’s thoughts have changed obviously, for example, from his radical liberalism to revolutionary humanism through to his maturation, his normative thoughts or value (i.e., freedom as self-determination, human community and self-realization) have not changed. Peffer has also analyzed and rebutted some supposed incompatibilities between Marxism and morality.

It is necessary to cite the opinion of British scholar Lawrence Wilde. Wilde thought Marx’s anti-moralism is just a strategy. It is necessary to cite the opinion of British scholar Lawrence Wilde. Wilde thought Marx’s anti-moralism is just a strategy. He proponed as follows: (1) Marx opposed the demonstrations of approval of socialism against capitalism by moral discourse which would blur the clarity of scientific analysis. (2) In *Communist Manifesto*, Marx indicated his critiques of utopian socialism while praising its predominance in criticizing the rules of existing societies, which offered valuable materials for the enlightening of working class. (3) Somebody holds that in **The Civic War in France**, Marx insisted that working class haven’t ideals to realize, they can liberate themselves and society merely on the base of their own interests. However, Wilde has given another interpretation about Marx’s work: working class don’t indeed abandon moral ideals, instead, they have discovered the actual means of realizing their ideals.

Peffer’s “moral and social theory” faces a doubt, that is, his notion of equality in liberty is not that of Marxism because his notion bases on the concepts of justice and right which are not accepted by Marx. To this doubt, Peffer has given his response: Marx’s objections to the notion of justice in the distribution of goods and his criticisms of human rights are, for the most part, based on misconceptions and fail as indictments against all theories of social justice and human rights. Peffer further emphasized that if Marxists want to prove that socialism is preferable to any form of capitalism and its governments have legitimacy to administration, it has to develop a theory on rights, especially social justice and human rights. Socialist society is merely first stage of communism and a pluralistic society, by this reason we can expect different individuals would identify with competing conceptions of wonderful lives and of the path to its attainment. It is almost inevitable for individuals to have different and even conflictive opinions (especially in

circumstance of material scarcity). Therefore, in order to demonstrate that socialism is morally preferable to capitalism we construct the theory of equality in liberty and its distributing justice. The moral superiority of socialism consists in its ability of realizing freedom (as self-determination) human community, and self-realization better than capitalism.

Critique and enlightenment

It is not occasional for Peffer to propose “moral and social theory”. In 1960’s to 1970’s, the movements of civil rights and anti-Vietnam War have inspired a large number of young people in English speaking countries to criticize and reflect on the reality. They try to bring ethical philosophy into exercise of social problems, some of them attempt to find arms of thoughts from Marx’s theory and Marxism. Once this critique and reflection have combined together with the popular analytical philosophy, especially with analytical ethical philosophy, the movements and theories of analytical Marxism have formed. Peffer’s theory was just the result of those times.

Peffer emphasized equality in liberty in his theory. Any slogans which require economical and political equality usually stand in the interests of disadvantaged group, which can benefit from the social arrangement with economical equality. Marxism is regarded as the theory in the interest of proletariat just because it insisted that the full development of every individual is the final action objective. Just in this sense, Peffer’s theory has followed Marxist tradition.

Liberty, equality, human right, democracy and so on, all these indicate the general values of the whole human being. These values constitute the core of just societies, and also the criteria to judge if a society is making progress. If Marxism were incompatible with these values, then its legitimacy and validity would be confronted with serious challenges. The result of this incompatibility would bring Marxism into discomfiture and also result in disaster (it was proved from the previous experience). On the other hand, if we have introduced theories directly from the west or set up a theory separately, then named them Marxism, meanwhile we cannot demonstrate their any relations with Marx or Marx’s works, then the word “Marxism” would lose its objectivity and solemnity. This would not benefit to the publicizing and spreading of Marxism. Peffer’s theory and his work have laid the wonderful foundation for the relation between Marxism and these values such as liberty and equality.

The times which Marx lived have passed for over 100 years. It is no secret that his many theses can meet the current situation. On the one hand, we need to hold the basic principle of Marxism, on the other, we also have to modify many of his theses by breaking the dogmatic insistence. But how do we do this? Peffer’s theory has given us some revelation: we must make distinction between Marx’s normative judgments (especially those of final values) and the empirical judgments by the means of realizing the final objectives. The latter may become wrong or be changed according to transferred situation, while the former will be more stable, more important and more exactly regulate the nature of Marxism which constitute Marxist basic principle.

One of the problems in Peffer’s theory is that he focused on the rational reconstruction of Marxist normative contents while short of research and argument for the means of obtaining objectives, especially he ignored the study of improving production to increase the material welfare. Also did he ignore the function by which market economy will realize social justice. There is another problem in his theory. He emphasizes liberty and equality, while the action

objectives which the two values separately regulate will conflict in the real world. For example, keeping the equality in economical realm would interfere the freedom of certain part of people. When the contradiction occurred, Peffer seemed to prefer to equality and fairness rather than the efficiency.