

The People-Oriented Stance in Marx and Engels' Thought on Modernization

Diren Zhou, Tianrui Zhao*

Changchun Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, China

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Abstract: Although Marx and Engels did not explicitly formulate the concept of “modernization,” their discussions of the development of productive forces, the transformation of social relations, human emancipation, and the future form of society constitute important theoretical resources for understanding modernization. In examining modern society, Marx and Engels did not proceed from abstract principles, but grounded their analysis in real human beings and their material conditions of life. They thereby revealed that while capitalist modernization advances productive forces and expands global interaction, it also produces the domination of things over human beings, the subordination of labor to capital, and the one-sided development of the individual. In this sense, the people-oriented stance constitutes the fundamental position of Marx and Engels' thought on modernization. Its core lies not in the mere pursuit of wealth growth and technological expansion, but in truly translating the achievements of modernization into improvements in the living conditions, the establishment of subjectivity, and the all-round development of the broad masses of working people. Marx and Engels' critique of capitalist modernization is, in the final analysis, a critique of the way capital accumulation overwhelms human development; their vision of future society points to a new form of modernization that takes the people as its subjects and regards the free and all-round development of human beings as its value destination. A renewed grasp of the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization is of important theoretical significance for deepening research on modernization theory and for understanding the value orientation of Chinese modernization.

Key words: Marx and Engels; thought on modernization; people-oriented stance; all-round human development

1. Introduction

Modernization has been an important theme in the development of human society since modern times. Although Marx and Engels did not directly use the fixed concept of “thought on modernization,” their discussions of the development of productive forces, the transformation of social relations, the critique of capitalism, and human emancipation already contain rich content concerning modernization. Unlike views that understand modernization merely as economic growth and technological progress, Marx and Engels consistently examined social development from the standpoint of real human beings and their historical conditions, emphasizing that modernization cannot be separated from the actual situation and fundamental interests of the broad masses of working people. The people-oriented stance thus becomes an important entry point for understanding Marx and Engels' thought on modernization. A systematic examination of the theoretical connotations and value orientation of this stance not only helps deepen the understanding of Marxist modernization theory, but also helps better grasp the correct direction of modernization development.

2. The Theoretical Basis of the People-Oriented Stance in Marx and Engels' Thought on Modernization

The people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization is not a political slogan added later; rather, it was formed through their direct observation of the realities of modern capitalist society. With the advance of the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of the world market, and the establishment of the capitalist mode of production, social productive forces developed rapidly. At the same time, however, workers' living conditions, interpersonal relations, and the state of human development were also reshaped. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels clearly stated that "we set out from real, active people" and emphasized that "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."[]This shows that, when examining questions of social development, their concern was not "modernity" in abstract ideas, but the life, labor, and development of real human beings within real social relations. It is also in this sense that the people-oriented stance constitutes the underlying tone of Marx and Engels' thought on modernization: modernization should not be judged only by the growth of wealth and the advance of technology, but more importantly by whether it is truly directed toward the real interests of the broad masses of working people and toward human development.

2.1 Taking Real Human Beings as the Point of Departure for Examining Modernization

An important reason why Marx and Engels were able to move beyond the narrow view that understands modern society merely as institutional change or technological progress is that they always placed real human beings at the center of theoretical analysis. In their view, social history is neither the unfolding of abstract "human nature" nor the self-movement of ideas, but the process in which real human beings produce, interact, and live under specific historical conditions. In criticizing Feuerbach in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels clearly pointed out that Feuerbach posited "man" rather than "real, historical man"; they further emphasized that the sensuous world itself is "the product of industry and of the state of society," "a historical product," and "the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations."[]This shows that, from the very beginning, Marx and Engels' understanding of social development did not stop at the abstract notion of "man," but was grounded in human beings in real history and in their actual lifeworld.

For this reason, the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization first appears as a realistic turn in their method of observation. For them, modernization is not an independent process detached from human beings, but is closely connected with people's living conditions, labor practice, and social relations. To discuss modernization apart from real human beings ultimately reduces modernization to wealth accumulation or institutional renewal led by a small number of people. Only by returning real human beings, especially the working masses within specific social relations, to the center of analysis can the question of modernization be genuinely transformed into a question of improving people's lives, enhancing their capacities, and expanding their development. In this respect, the people-oriented stance is not an external supplement to the thought on modernization, but a basic premise of Marx and Engels' understanding of social transformation.[]

2.2 Taking the Working Masses as the Subjective Force Driving Modernization

In Marx and Engels' view, modernization is not the result of designs produced by a small number of people through ideas; rather, it is a social process that unfolds continuously in real historical activity. The further this process advances, the more inseparable it becomes from the participation and practice of the broad masses of working people. The Holy Family states: "Historical activity is the activity of the masses; as historical activity deepens, the ranks of the masses are bound to expand."[]What this sentence emphasizes is not the subordinate role of the masses on the margins of history, but that the people themselves are the real force through which social transformation continually deepens. In this respect, the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization is not merely value-based sympathy or moral concern, but a basic judgment about the subject of history.

Further considered, the fundamental significance of the working masses in the process of modernization also lies in the fact that the development of capitalist society itself is built upon the actual labor of workers. The growth of wealth, the

expansion of industry, and the rise of social productive forces all depend, in the final analysis, on the productive practice of the working masses. Under the domination of the logic of capital, however, workers often cannot possess the fruits of their own labor; instead, they endure deeper oppression and alienation in the process of modernization. Marx and Engels never understood modernization as a mere expansion of wealth or material growth. Rather, they regarded the working masses as the fundamental force that promotes social progress, corrects deviations in modernization, and ultimately realizes social transformation.

2.3 Taking the Free and All-Round Development of Human Beings as the Fundamental Aim of Modernization

Where modernization is ultimately headed cannot, in the final analysis, be judged only by how much wealth has increased or how far technology has advanced, but by whether it truly opens broader space for human development. Marx and Engels' vision of future society did not stop at the level of material abundance; rather, they further regarded the development of human capacities, the unfolding of individuality, and the realization of freedom as higher measures of social progress. In *Principles of Communism*, Engels stated that communist society, by abolishing the old division of labor, changing forms of work, and enabling all to share in the benefits created by society, would allow "the talents of all members of society to develop in an all-round way." This shows that, for Marx and Engels, the true value of modernization lies not in the one-way expansion of things, but in enabling human beings to break free from one-sided existence and obtain fuller conditions for development.

Viewed from today, the all-round development of human beings remains a value direction from which modernization must not deviate. The new quality productive forces take "the leap in laborers, means of labor, objects of labor, and their optimized combination" as their basic connotation. He also proposed "unblocking the virtuous cycle of education, science and technology, and talent," strengthening workers' skills training, and continuously improving the quality of all types of talent. Such statements do not discuss development from a purely technological perspective, but place the improvement of human quality and the growth of human capabilities at the core of the modernization process. From this perspective, the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization ultimately does not stop at safeguarding the people's real interests; rather, it further requires that the achievements of modernization be continually transformed into the enhancement of the people's development capabilities, the expansion of their development opportunities, and the improvement of their development quality. Only when modernization is truly implemented in the all-round development of human beings is it not merely progress in the sense of productive forces, but also historical progress that conforms to the people-oriented stance.

3. The Main Manifestations of the People-Oriented Stance in Marx and Engels' Thought on Modernization

If the first part discusses why the people-oriented stance becomes the internal basis of Marx and Engels' thought on modernization, the next question that must be answered is in what concrete respects this stance is embodied. Marx and Engels did not regard modern society as a historical process of simple and continuous progress. On the contrary, while affirming the development of modern productive forces, the expansion of social interaction, and the forward movement of history, they consistently revealed the deepening contradictions within capitalist modernization. The key issue is not whether modernization itself has promoted social development, but whom such development serves, who leads it, and where it ultimately takes human beings. It is precisely at this level that the people-oriented stance is no longer merely a theoretical point of departure, but is further manifested as a critique of the logic of capital, a defense of the people's rights, and a pursuit of a genuine social community. This part therefore no longer remains at the level of explaining principles, but turns to the concrete unfolding of the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization.

3.1 Criticizing the Domination of Human Beings by the Logic of Capital and Revealing the Anti-People Character of Capitalist Modernization

Marx and Engels did not simply negate modernization; instead, they always examined modernization within specific social relations.[]In their view, capitalist modernization did indeed promote the development of productive forces, expand social interaction, and break the closed state of traditional society, but such development did not naturally stand on the side of the people. Once modernization operates under the domination of the logic of capital, the expansion of production, technological progress, and efficiency improvement do not automatically become a process that broadly benefits the people. Instead, they can easily become a process of continuous capital valorization and sustained pressure on workers.[]As a result, modernization appears on the surface as a rapid increase in social wealth, but in essence it may continually deepen workers' dependence on capital, producing a divergence between "the growth of things" and "human development."

The key to Marx and Engels' critique of capitalist modernization lies in revealing the internal mechanism of this divergence. Modernization under the domination of capital does not unfold around the real needs of human beings, but around the valorization of capital. Although workers are the direct creators of social wealth, they cannot possess the achievements of modernization on an equal basis. Instead, they are increasingly instrumentalized in the processes of refined division of labor, the spread of machinery, and intensified market competition. The further modernization advances, the more easily labor is compressed into a means of livelihood, while human subjectivity, creativity, and integrity are restricted. In other words, the problem of capitalist modernization lies not only in the gap between rich and poor or in imbalanced distribution, but more fundamentally in the fact that it places human development after the expansion of capital, leaving the people in a passive and subordinate position within the process of modernization.

For this reason, Marx and Engels did not confine the criteria for evaluating modernization to the total amount of wealth, the scale of industry, or the speed of economic growth. Instead, they paid greater attention to whether modernization truly improved the living conditions of the working masses and truly advanced human emancipation and development. Here, the people-oriented stance first appears as a critical standard: any modernization achieved at the cost of the development opportunities, real interests, and subject status of the majority cannot be modernization in the complete sense. In this sense, Marx and Engels' critique of the logic of capital is in fact a reestablishment of the value benchmark for modernization: modernization should not be merely a history of capital's success, but should more importantly become a history of human development.

3.2 Emphasizing the People's Basic Rights and Opposing the Concealment of Particular Interests by Abstract Universality

Marx and Engels did not deny that modern society, in political form, put forward universal principles such as freedom, equality, and rights. What they cared more about, however, was how these principles were actually implemented in capitalist society and to what extent they were limited by existing class relations. In their view, the issue was not whether these principles themselves were important, but that they often appeared in the name of universality while in reality serving the interests of a particular class. In this way, rights discourse that seems to be directed toward everyone can easily become an ideological form that obscures social differences and conceals the differentiation of interests.

This point is stated very directly in *The German Ideology*. Marx and Engels wrote that, in order to achieve its own ends, a new ruling class often has to "present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society" and "give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones."[]The meaning of this statement is clear: abstract universality does not naturally represent all the people; it may also be only an expanded expression of particular interests. For this reason, when Marx and Engels analyzed modern society, they did not remain at the level of formally affirming general political rights. Instead, they further asked whether such rights truly responded to the real situation of the broad masses of working people and whether they truly touched upon the question of real human emancipation.

It is precisely in this sense that the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization is not a simple

negation of the concept of “rights,” but a demand to bring the people’s basic rights back from abstract forms into real life. If rights remain only at the level of legal texts and political declarations, and cannot enter into the processes of the people’s labor, life, interaction, and development, then such rights remain one-sided. If modernization merely packages the interests of a minority class as universal interests and treats formal equality as real justice, it cannot truly embody a people-oriented stance. Modernization that genuinely conforms to the people-oriented stance should take the people as the real subjects of rights, enabling them not only to be recognized conceptually as “citizens,” but also, in reality, to share in development achievements, participate in social life, and safeguard their own interests. Only in this way can the universal principles within modernization avoid degenerating into a cloak that conceals particular interests and instead truly become real rights oriented toward the people.

3.3 Upholding the Reconstruction of Community and Transcending the Modernization Dilemma of the Split Between Community and the Individual

When examining modern society, Marx and Engels did not understand modernization as a one-way process in which individuals continually free themselves from the constraints of community. On the contrary, they noticed that although capitalist modernization broke traditional relations of dependence and promoted the growth of individual consciousness and the expansion of social interaction, it also produced a new split between the individual and the community. On the surface, individuals seem to have gained more freedom; in reality, however, such freedom is often only a limited freedom built upon competition, isolation, and conflicts of interest. The more people in modern society are shaped as independent individuals, the more easily they fall into an atomized condition, and relations between people are more easily dominated by relations of exchange and utilitarian logic. In this way, modernization does not truly realize human emancipation. Instead, after breaking away from the old community, individuals are drawn into a new form of social dependence mediated by capital. For this reason, Marx and Engels did not simply understand the people-oriented stance as the scattered protection of individual interests; rather, they further directed it toward the construction of a new social community.[1]In their view, modernization that genuinely conforms to the people’s interests does not mean allowing individuals to pursue the maximization of their own interests while remaining separated from one another. Rather, it requires rebuilding social relations that can unite individual development with the overall interest on the basis of overcoming capital domination and the differentiation of interests. Such a community is no longer an external force that suppresses the individual, but should become the real foundation for safeguarding the conditions for the development of everyone. Individual development no longer presupposes the restriction of others, and the progress of society as a whole is no longer built on the domination of the majority. From this perspective, the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels’ thought on modernization is also reflected in its transcendence of the divided condition of modern society. If modernization only expands continuously at the material level but cannot solve the problems of community disintegration, individual isolation, and the fragmentation of social relations, then such modernization remains incomplete. Only by incorporating the reconstruction of community into the value goal of modernization, so that the people become both participants in modernization and sharers of its achievements, can modernization truly break free from the dilemma of the separation between the individual and society under the domination of capital and move toward a higher level of social integration and human development.

4. The Value Orientation of the People-Oriented Stance in Marx and Engels’ Thought on Modernization

The preceding two parts have mainly addressed the questions of why Marx and Engels formed a people-oriented stance and how this stance unfolds in their thought on modernization. Today, the significance of this thought does not remain only at the level of theoretical clarification. More importantly, it can still provide methodological and value references for understanding Chinese modernization. At the present stage, modernization can no longer be understood simply as an expansion of speed and total volume; it must further answer the questions of who shares the fruits of development, what the development process is for, and where development ultimately takes root. It is in this sense that the people-oriented

stance is not only an internal requirement of Marx and Engels' thought on modernization, but also a value coordinate that contemporary China must not deviate from in advancing modernization. Far from losing its explanatory power in the contemporary era, the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization has shown an even clearer practical orientation as Chinese modernization continues to advance in depth and substance.

4.1 Shifting the Criteria for Evaluating Modernization from the Growth of Things to Human Development

Since the beginning of the new era, the connotation of modernization can no longer remain simply at indicators such as the expansion of output value, the increase of speed, and the growth of scale. Development certainly cannot be separated from its material foundation, but if modernization ultimately manifests only as constant technological renewal and continuous industrial upgrading, while opportunities for human development, the enhancement of capabilities, and a real sense of gain do not increase correspondingly, then such modernization is incomplete. It is precisely in this sense that the people-oriented stance in contemporary Chinese modernization practice is first manifested as a transformation of evaluation criteria: modernization is no longer measured solely by the growth of "things," but is assessed with greater attention to whether modernization can truly be implemented in human development.

This shift is clearly reflected in important documents of the new era. high-quality development is the hard truth of the new era, that new quality productive forces take "the leap in laborers, means of labor, objects of labor, and their optimized combination" as their basic connotation, and that we must "unblock the virtuous cycle of education, science and technology, and talent," strengthen workers' skills training, and continuously improve the quality of all types of talent. Such statements have in fact already shown that the focus of modernization is not only the change of production tools and industrial forms, but, more importantly, the overall improvement of human quality, capabilities, and creative vitality.

From this perspective, the important contemporary implication of the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization is that modernization must not pursue only "visible" material achievements, but must also continually transform development achievements into real progress that the people can "feel." To measure whether modernization is truly moving forward, one must look not only at economic aggregate and technological level, but also at whether the conditions for human development are more sufficient, whether development pathways are smoother, and whether development achievements benefit all the people in a more equitable way. Only when modernization truly settles on human development is it not merely progress in the sense of productive forces, but also modernization that conforms to the people-oriented stance.

4.2 Shifting the Mode of Modernization Development from Capital Domination to the People as Subjects

If the previous subsection emphasizes changes in the criteria for evaluating modernization, the further issue that must be addressed is by what mode of development modernization should move forward. The important contemporary implication of the people-oriented stance in Marx and Engels' thought on modernization is not only that development achievements should benefit the people more fully and more fairly, but also that modernization itself should not continue to operate along the old path of simply pursuing capital expansion and efficiency above all else. Instead, it should truly release people's initiative, creativity, and subject role. In other words, modernization should not simply incorporate people into a predetermined logic of growth; rather, it should enable people, as subjects of development, to enter the process of modernization more deeply.

This point is clearly reflected in important expositions on high-quality development in the new era. Xi Jinping emphasized that high-quality development is the hard truth of the new era, that new quality productive forces take "the leap in laborers, means of labor, objects of labor, and their optimized combination" as their basic connotation, and that their essence is advanced productive forces. At the same time, he clearly stated that "relations of production must adapt to the requirements of the development of productive forces," that we must "further comprehensively deepen reform and form new-type relations of production compatible with them," and that we must "improve the mechanism by which

factors participate in income distribution,” so as to better reflect the market value of knowledge, technology, and talent. This shows that the mode of modernization development cannot revolve only around capital, but must unfold more around people’s development capabilities, innovative vitality, and actual contributions. Only by truly placing workers, talents, and innovation subjects in a more important position, and by better combining institutional reform, factor allocation, and income distribution with the subject role of the people, can modernization avoid remaining at the level of material expansion and instead be truly transformed into a development process in which the people participate broadly, advance together, and benefit together. Such modernization better embodies the practical requirements of the people-oriented stance.

4.3 Orienting the Future Vision of Modernization Toward Common Prosperity and the All-Round Development of All People

In the final analysis, the people-oriented stance concerns not only who advances modernization and for whom modernization is advanced, but also what kind of developmental outcome modernization ultimately leads to. One important lesson that Marx and Engels’ thought on modernization offers today is that modernization must not remain in a pattern in which a small number of people are the first to possess its achievements while the majority passively bear its costs. Instead, it should continually move toward the sharing of achievements on a wider scale and toward a higher level of human development. If modernization only creates higher production efficiency, a larger economic scale, and faster technological iteration, but does not truly transform these into improvements in the quality of people’s lives, the expansion of development opportunities, and the enhancement of subject capabilities, then such modernization is one-sided and can hardly truly embody the people-oriented stance.

It is precisely in this sense that Chinese modernization, from the very beginning, has not taken wealth accumulation itself as the endpoint, but has clearly placed the value destination of modernization on all the people. Taken together, these two meanings are not merely general political expressions, but a concentrated summary of the future vision of modernization. The former emphasizes that the achievements of modernization must not be monopolized by a small number of people, but must continually move toward a more balanced, more inclusive, and more sustainable pattern of sharing. The latter further shows that modernization cannot be satisfied with improvements at the material level alone, but must continuously promote the improvement of people’s qualities, the enhancement of capabilities, the development of personality, and progress in ways of life. In other words, what Chinese modernization pursues is not simply “becoming rich,” but the realization of a higher level of human development on the basis of common prosperity.

Common prosperity cannot be understood simply as a technical adjustment of income distribution. It certainly includes the reasonable regulation of income gaps, the balanced provision of public services, and the continuous improvement of basic living guarantees, but its deeper significance lies in enabling the achievements of modernization to truly enter the people’s real lives, giving them more stable expectations and broader development space in education, employment, medical care, culture, social security, and other fields. Only on this basis can modernization avoid remaining at the level of “things” and continue to be transformed into the progress of “human beings.” Only by unifying common prosperity with the all-round development of human beings can the people-oriented stance avoid remaining a partial requirement at the level of distribution and rise to become a value principle running through the entire process of modernization.

From the perspective of practical advancement, this is also consistent with the overall arrangements for Chinese modernization since the new era. Modernization must adhere to the people-centered development philosophy and take the realization of the people’s aspirations for a better life as its point of departure and ultimate goal. This shows that the future vision shaped by Chinese modernization is not one in which one group of people modernizes first while another group remains on the margins for a long time, nor one in which material achievements grow while human development is set aside. Rather, it is to continually expand the depth of the people’s participation in modernization, the breadth with which they share modernization achievements, and the possibility of realizing their own development through high-quality development. Viewed along this direction, the ultimate destination of the people-oriented stance on the question of modernization is precisely the unity of common prosperity and the all-round development of human beings. Without common prosperity, modernization can easily slide toward an imbalance in the distribution of achievements; without all-

round human development, modernization may remain a one-way advance that “values things while neglecting people.” Only by unifying the two can modernization be reflected both in the enhancement of the country’s overall strength and in the continuous progress of the people’s overall quality, quality of life, and development capabilities.

5. Conclusion

Modernization is not a process that merely pursues speed, scale, and technological renewal; it always involves the fundamental questions of for whom development is carried out, on whom it relies, and by whom its achievements are shared. Returning to Marx and Engels’ relevant discussions, we can see that although they did not directly use the concept of “modernization,” they always placed human development and the people’s real situation in an important position. Whether in revealing the internal contradictions of capitalist modernization or in reflecting on the future direction of social development, their focus was not the unlimited expansion of things, but human development.

The people-oriented stance is not a subordinate element in Marx and Engels’ thought on modernization, but a basic thread running through it. Today, a renewed grasp of this point still has clear practical significance. If modernization cannot continually be transformed into development achievements that the people can truly perceive and access, it can hardly be called modernization in the complete sense. In the final analysis, modernization should be people-centered modernization, modernization leading toward common prosperity and the all-round development of human beings.

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Author Biography:

1. First Author: Diren Zhou, male, born in May 1998, Han ethnicity, native of Songyuan, Jilin Province. He holds a Master’s degree. His research focuses on the Basic Principles of Marxism.
2. Corresponding Author: Tianrui Zhao, female, born in June 1989, Hui ethnicity, native of Siping, Jilin Province. She is a Professor with a Doctoral degree, and her main research direction is Basic Principles of Marxism.