

What Is Comparative Marxist Philosophy?

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What does ‘comparative Marxist philosophy’ actually mean. It is not such a common approach at all, so I would like to examine three initial questions: Why comparative Marxist philosophy? What is the content of comparative Marxist philosophy? How should we undertake such an approach?

Why Comparative Marxist Philosophy?

The answer to the first question – why comparative Marxist philosophy? – is relatively straightforward. Marxism has its basic principles, but it takes root in distinct contexts, with their own histories and cultures. These basic principles may also be called ‘universals’ or a common ‘set of problems’ that need to be addressed anew. Perhaps it is better to use Engels’s well-known formulation: Marxism is not a dogma, not a fixed set of beliefs, but a guide to analysis and action. In each situation, new problems arise that require new solutions, albeit in light of a Marxist method. This point is well-known and I do not need to discuss it further here.

Some may be reminded of comparative philosophy as such, which by now is reasonably well-established. It seems to me that comparative philosophy – in which one compares, for example, Chinese and Western philosophy – begins with difference and seeks in some way to find common ground or at least common questions. Examples include methodology, epistemology, ethics, and so on. By contrast, comparative Marxist philosophy begins with common ground, with basic principles, and then examines the way differences emerge.

Perhaps we can use an example from Marx himself. In early 1881, the Russian socialist Vera Zasulich wrote (in French) to Marx concerning a significant debate in Russia at the time:

You are not unaware that your *Capital* is enjoying great popularity in Russia ... But what you probably do not know is the role which your *Capital* plays in our discussions of the agrarian question in Russia and our rural commune. You know better than anyone else how important and urgent this question is in Russia ..., especially for our socialist party ...

You will therefore understand, Citizen, to what extent we are interested in your opinion on this question and what great service you will be rendering us by conveying your ideas on the possible future of our rural commune and the theory of the historical inevitability for all countries of the world to pass through all the phases of capitalist production.

The specific question was the role of the Russian ‘village commune [*mir*]’, in which common ownership prevailed in many areas; but the more general question was whether all countries of the world had to pass through all of the phases of capitalist development before a proletarian revolution and thus socialism became possible.

Marx’s effort to reply is very instructive. Four drafts he wrote, beginning with a long exposition on the nature and history of the agricultural or village commune (Engels was at the time also examining this history in relation to Germany). Initially, he 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 a 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 was philosophy per se.

Finally, by the third draft, Marx comes to the realisation: ‘the “historical inevitability” of this process [of the capitalist system] is *expressly* limited to the *countries of Western Europe*’. He would repeat this observation in the final version of the letter when he sent it to Vera Zasulich in early March of 1881.

I understand that this exchange of letters is well-known in China, for obvious reasons: here the older Marx comes face to face with different historical and cultural traditions. He begins to realise that ‘in different economic and social environments, people produce different thoughts and cultures’. The implications for comparative Marxist philosophy should be obvious.

What is the Content of Comparative Marxist Philosophy?

The second main question concerns the content of comparative Marxist philosophy. Rather than distinguishing between some aspects that are universally applicable and others that can be identified as regional variations, I argue that all the

categories of Marxist philosophy comprise potential content for comparison. Let me use a specific example to show what I mean: the core question of the relation between ownership of the means of production and liberating the means of production.

Let me put it this way: if you ask someone from a Western country for an informed definition of socialism, they will usually say, 'socialism is the ownership of the means of production by the working class'. By 'informed definition' I refer to someone who is perhaps a communist (whether a party member or an existential communist) or at least a person who knows something about Marxism. Again and again I encounter this definition when speaking with people in Western countries – and occasionally in China.

In itself, such a definition is not incorrect. Let us remind ourselves of no less a text than the Communist Manifesto:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production 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.*

Here, of course, is the clear stipulation that one of the first acts of a Communist Party after a proletarian revolution is for the proletariat – as the ruling class – to take over all instruments of production. But note also: the purpose is to *increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.*

What has happened to the default definition of socialism in terms of ownership of the means of production, a definition that is extremely common in Western Marxism? It is clearly a one-sided definition, emphasising one dimension at the expense of another. A better definition is – according to the Manifesto – in terms of both ownership of the means of production and liberation of the forces of production. Ownership and liberation: both are necessary. This is all very well, but a question remains: what is the relevance of this core question for comparative Marxist philosophy? There are a number of levels:

First, ownership concerns the relations of production, while liberation concerns the means of production. These two parts – ownership and liberation – deal with two related but distinct realities. Clearly, if we emphasise one at the expense of the other, we end up with an imbalanced socialism.

Second, historical conditions will influence one or another emphasis. It is perhaps understandable that in Western Marxism one would tend to find a definition in terms of ownership. Why? Generally in Western countries – 15 or so – the productive forces have been *until recently* highly developed. 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. By contrast, in countries where productive forces were relatively undeveloped at the time of a proletarian revolution – think of Russia and China, for example – the emphasis tends to be on liberating the productive forces. To allude to a well-known observation in China: poor socialism is not socialism, for socialism should improve the socio-economic well-being of all, especially the rural and urban workers.

Third, history becomes important in another sense, now in terms of the history of the construction of socialism. Let me put it this way, in light of extensive research: in all cases where there has been a successful proletarian revolution, the productive forces have been socialised; that is, they have been made collective, centralised and nationalised. This has resulted in an economic surge – in all cases. In other words, the focus on ownership of the productive forces has enabled an initial liberation of those forces. However, after two or three decades, this approach has led to a stagnation of production. Now productive forces were being held back by relations of production, and so new approaches were needed. This is when we find initial experiments in what they called ‘market socialism’ in Eastern Europe (especially Hungary and Yugoslavia) and then a full development of what we know as a ‘socialist market economy’ in China, and indeed in Vietnam and in its own way in the DPRK.

Perhaps you are beginning to see how comparative Marxist philosophy may work, and how involved the question of ownership and liberation of productive forces may become. Here we have a core question of Marxism, but one that has distinct emphases in different contexts. Indeed, I suggest that it is precisely through such comparisons that we may advance dialogue between Chinese and Western Marxism, or indeed Latin American and Russian Marxism.

How Do We Undertake Comparative Marxist Philosophy?

This brings me to my final reflections: how do we undertake comparative Marxist philosophy? Some points are obvious: thorough familiarity with the debates and positions developed in – for example – Western Europe, Russia and Eastern Europe, and China. This includes ability to work in the languages so as to engage with primary material.

But I would to close by addressing the potential risks of comparison. The first is that one stresses difference to such an extent that there is no common ground at all. As the old saying has it: ‘East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet’. To my mind, this is more of a problem in comparative philosophy rather than with Marxism, for we do share common assumptions and principles.

The second risk is to emphasise sameness, which can lead to the assumption that one's own approach is best or indeed the only one ('normative exclusivism'). Much could be said about this problem, but I do encounter it reasonably frequently in terms of Marxism. It may take different forms, such as: a) claims to origins: using the original texts of Marx alone to determine what is true and false Marxism; b) 'betrayal narratives', in which someone later 'betrays' Marx (the candidates are many, beginning with Engels); c) univocal assertions, stating that there is only one meaning of the texts of Marx and Engels.

This point leads me to the problem of communication and dialogue. My reflections arise in part from specific experiences: when I or others attempt to present factual and verifiable information on Chinese Marxism, we are often accused of being 'partisan', of being one-sided in China's favour. It may concern significant achievements in poverty alleviation, ecological civilisation, rule of law, or – more recently – in epidemic control as a reflection of China's socialist system. Why is this seen as 'partisan'? In some corners of Western countries, and – I am afraid to say – in some corners of Western Marxism, the only acceptable stance is one that completely dismisses the Chinese approach. This position, they assume, is 'critical' and 'objective'. Obviously it is not a 'critical' and 'objective' position at all, but this is a problem some of us face.

My proposals concerning comparative Marxist philosophy are an effort to overcome such a problem. Thankfully, there are many others – especially younger people – in Western contexts who are dissatisfied with Western caricatures and misrepresentation, and are keen to know more about socialist systems and developments of Marxism in contexts such as China. And I am encouraged by this cloud workshop on Marxism and by the level of international involvement across seven time zones – a workshop taking place towards the close of what is by far the most extraordinary year of my now rather long life.