

Marx's Distrust on Human Rights: The Jewish Question, Political Emancipation, and Human Emancipation

Jiajia Chen*

Lincoln School, Providence, Rhode Island, 02906, United States of America

*Corresponding author. Email: chenjiajia2006@126.com

ABSTRACT

This work examines Marx's attitude toward human rights, finding that Marx distrusted human rights. Marx's work, "On the Jewish Question," will be used to further analyze the argument which has been made in this paper. Firstly, this work will include a literature review of Steven Lukes' opinion on the topic, followed by Bauer's original opinion about the Jewish Question and Marx's response. Secondly, this article is about the concepts of Political Emancipation and Human Emancipation, discussed by Marx in the article On the Jewish Question. The conclusion is that the limited result of political emancipation and human rights only apply to individual rights and cannot, therefore, achieve the social nature of emancipation. This research paper could further explain the different attitudes about human rights language in capitalist and communist countries.

Keywords: *political emancipation, emancipation, human rights, Marx, On the Jewish Question*

1. INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx is well known as a critic of capitalism, and as a thinker who sought to find ways for all human beings to thrive in equality. It is surprising, therefore, to find that Marx was skeptical of the idea of 'human rights.' How could this be? Through an analysis of Marx's controversy with Bruno Bauer, and his early text "On the Jewish Question" (1844) which entails Marx's interpretation among the topic of rights and emancipation, this paper will elucidate Marx's critique of human rights. The problem, from Marx's perspective, is that human rights discourse, because it only privileges the individual human being based on political emancipation, is unable to address the social causes of oppression to achieve the social nature of emancipation, and therefore the "rights languages" itself is contradicted on the concept of equality.

2. BODY PARAGRAPHS

2.1 Literature review

Many have pointed out Marx's skepticism of human rights discourse. Perhaps the most prominent scholar who analyzed Marx's skepticism toward the human rights

language is Steven Lukes, a political theorist at NYU. He thinks that for a true Marxist, class revolution is more important than defending human rights, as human rights will naturally emerge from such a revolution. Lukes believes Marxists built up a system of skepticism toward human rights discourse based on an understated concept of human rights without seeing rights as a systematic concept that could engage with morality and have practical uses. In Lukes' opinion, the most commonly accepted concept of rights discourse in Marxist tradition is viewing human rights as bourgeoisie rights [1][2]. More importantly, for the Marxists who believe in human rights, the human rights ideology will easily lead them to the path of revisionism [3]. Lukes is aware that many self-professed Marxists do believe in human rights; he simply thinks that they are inconsistent with the Marxist intellectual tradition (hence "revisionist"). Lukes' analysis is based on a wide reading of Marx and the Marxist tradition: in one short essay, he analyzed numerous writings from Marx as well as from followers like Leon Trotsky [4].

2.2 Background

This essay will expand Lukes' analysis by focusing on the central text where Marx grapples with the tradition of "human rights," "On the Jewish Question," a dense

and short article from 1844. This text is also a response to Bruno Bauer from Marx about Bauer's idea on the Jewish question. Understanding the context of *On the Jewish Question* before turning to Bauer's essay itself is essential. There was a long period before World War II during which German Jews were not considered a part of mainstream German society. They were second-class citizens and lived separately in their own community and experienced a long hard time without acceptance [5][6]. Bauer sensed that the Jews are being treated as second-class citizens and brought the topic of political emancipation and human rights into his work which mainly discussed how Jews in Germany can fully access the rights of being citizens.

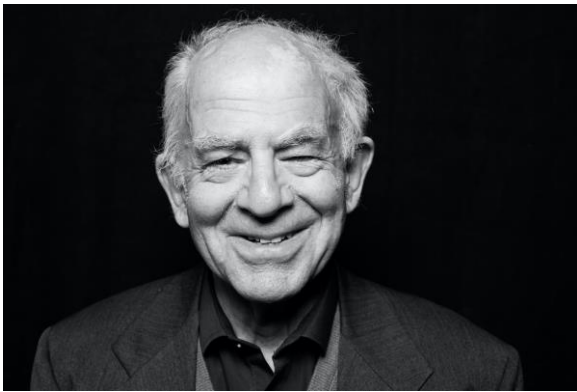


Fig.1. a picture of Steven Lukes

This paper will further elaborate on the relationship between political emancipation and human rights discourse: one needs to acquire political rights to fully access human rights. Lynn Hunt explains how women in the French Revolution were seen as passive citizens without political rights, which could explain the correlation between political emancipation and human rights. It is reasonable to conclude that getting political rights and going through political emancipation is a vital process for one to acquire human rights [7]. Bauer recognized the lack of political rights for Jews, but he also argued that Christian Germans, especially some so-called passive citizens, weren't fully granted political rights either. Building upon this logic, Bauer made an argument that the lack of political rights and human rights should not be the reason why the Jews are seen as the secondary citizens in Germany. Instead, he explained that the Jews should abandon their beliefs and blend into society like other Christian Germans.[8] Bauer believes in assimilation, and he sees each citizen entitled to human rights as the final stage of emancipation. But Marx rejected both of Bauer's arguments about rights as the final stage of emancipation and also for Jews to assimilate. Marx argued that political emancipation didn't reach the social nature of full emancipation. Since human rights fall under the rubric of political emancipation, Marx thinks achieving human rights is not enough for full emancipation.



Fig.2. An oil-painting of Bruno Bauer

2.3 Main Arguments

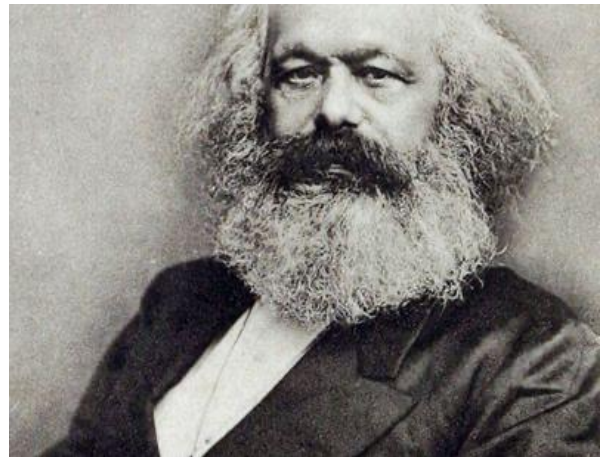


Fig.3. a picture of Karl Marx

2.3.1 *political emancipation and social nature of emancipation*

Bauer, in essence, wanted the Jews to assimilate. Marx, though, refused to see assimilation as emancipation, because Marx saw mainstream society itself as deeply corrupt and repressive. Jews might gain human rights, but they would not truly be free because they would still be living under capitalism which is a different form of oppression.

In Marx's work, "On the Jewish Question," he categorized emancipation into two different stages: political and true human emancipation. Marx indicates that emancipation for political purposes is only the way for citizens to get rights protected by the state. On the contrary, human emancipation enables human beings to gain the access to true freedom which means to live in a classless society and enjoy communal rights [9].

One of the first arguments made by Marx is that he believed in religious emancipation just as Bauer suggested. However, Marx thinks Jews cannot achieve religious emancipation through assimilation (simply abandoning or converting to the Christian religion) because assimilationism could neither achieve political emancipation nor the human nature of full emancipation.

Marx further elaborated on the inconsistency between religious emancipation and political emancipation. Marx stated that “Political emancipation is, of course, a big step forward. True, it is not the final form of human emancipation in general, but it is the final form of human emancipation within the hitherto existing world order” [9]. In this quote, Marx is stating that without a socialist revolution achieving political emancipation is the most we can do. However, Marx is not satisfied with political emancipation, and it should not be the final goal to achieve even when we talk about the hitherto situation even though political emancipation could be a stage toward fuller human emancipation.

On page 4 of Marx’s work *On the Jewish Question*, he stated that “It was by no means sufficient to investigate: Who is to emancipate? Who is to be emancipated? Criticism had to investigate a third point. It had to inquire: What kind of emancipation is in question?” [9] Marx pointed out Bauer ignored the relationship between religious emancipation, which is the proposal he offered for solving the Jewish Question, and political emancipation. From Marx’s standpoint, German Jews and German Christians practicing different religions could be one of the factors that cause the Jewish question but should not be the main focus of finding the solution to the Jewish question. Therefore, for Marx, Jews expecting to be emancipated politically and offering rights discourse according to Bauer’s solution is a spurious proposition.

2.3.2 Individual Rights, Civic Rights, and Communal Rights

In Marx’s article, *On the Jewish Question*, he used multiple governments’ documents outlining human rights, including the *United States’ Constitution* and French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, to prove that rights discourse contradicts itself. This paper’s analysis of the quotes in the text *On the Jewish Question* can explain the contradiction of the human rights language itself when it comes to the general applicability of individual rights in the existing world with different states.

Marx stated his interpretation of political rights established within a certain nation on page 15 of *On the Jewish Question*: “Let us examine, for a moment, the so-called rights of man – to be precise, the rights of man in their authentic form, in the form which they have among those who *discovered* them, the North Americans and the French. These rights of man are, in part, *political* rights, rights which can only be exercised in community with others.” [9] Marx believed the human rights idea in this context is only an extension of civic rights which is based on the political structure of a certain state and only certain citizens in that specific state can fully exercise such political rights. The lack of adjustment in the general applicability in the international rights system failed the

basic human rights ideal of the rights to be enjoyed by all human beings which led Marx to question the practicability in many international (or common society) circumstances.

Marx then talks about his idea about the limit of rights as an extension of civil rights: “Above all, we note the fact that the so-called rights of man, the *droits de l’homme* as distinct from the *droits du citoyen*, are nothing but the rights of a member of civil society – i.e., the rights of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community [9]”. Marx believed human rights discourse endows rights to individuals and could furthermore cause separation between the individuals and between individuals and society. Human rights have the potential to cause separation among people because once the rights of a man are endowed based on individuality, an individual can only see the others as the barrier that prevents them from exercising their individual rights.

Lastly, Marx gives his conclusion about his analysis of the individuality of rights on page 18 of *On the Jewish Question*: “None of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society – that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community.” [9] Marx’s conclusion here is: firstly, the human rights language only focuses on individuality. Secondly, the practice of rights is restricted in the state to which one belongs. Even if all humans were in a conjunct society, they were still separate from one another for seeing each other as potential threats.

3. CONCLUSION

Marx believed human rights discourse endowed by political emancipation cannot achieve the complete social nature of emancipation and it offers true freedom. To recap, this paper argues how human rights language fails: firstly, the rights languages only apply to individuals, and the focus on individuality reinforces divisions within the broader community; secondly, political emancipation does not achieve the social nature of emancipation, as people still live under an unfair society structure (capitalism) even after the accomplishment of political emancipation and people gained rights; last but not least, political emancipation can only be a stage of the social nature of emancipation. This is because political emancipation lacks the force to abolish religion, but human emancipation requires the abolishment of religious belief.

In the very end, it is important to further elaborate on the meaning of rights. Nowadays, there is a tremendous gap between how capitalist countries and communist countries interpret human rights. This paper offers an argument about how the immense ideological difference based on the rights discourse formed. More specifically,

communist countries often have Marxism as the fundamental theorem and arguably inherited Marx's skeptical view about human rights. Marx's skepticism of the rights language in a way helps us to understand the formation of distrust about human rights in communist countries and the western capitalist countries' contradicted rights language.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baxter, D. (1989) Marx, Lukes, and Human Rights. Florida State University Department of Philosophy, 15: 355-373.
- [2] Marx, K. (1848) Bourgeois and Proletarians. In: Manifesto of the Communist Party. Kommunistischer Arbeiterbildungsverein., London. Chapter 1.
- [3] Roth, B.R. (2004) Retrieving Marx for the Human Rights Project. *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 17: 31–66.
- [4] Lukes, S. (1981) Can a Marxist Believe in Human Rights? *PRAXIS International*, 4: 334–345.
- [5] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (2019) The "Jewish Question." <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-jewish-question>.
- [6] Auerbach, R., R., ed. (1994) The 'Jewish Question' in German Speaking Countries, 1848-1914, A Bibliography.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20051125164845/http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/bibkulka.html>.
- [7] Hunt, L. (2008) *Inventing Human Rights*. W.W.Norton, p.67.
- [8] Bauer, B. (1843) The Capacity of Present-day Jews and Christians to Become Free. *Einundzwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz*, pp.56-71.
- [9] Marx, K. (1844) On the Jewish Question. *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Paris.