

How to Interpret Labor-based Human Rights

From the perspective of Marxist value philosophy

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Abstract—Labor falls under the category of social existence while human rights fit into the category of social consciousness. Unlike the human rights deriving directly from the thought of God-based natural rights, labor-based human rights need a sequence of intermediary transitions on the path of interpretation to be possible. According to value philosophy, labor constructs the useful value relation and purposeful value relation. In the social existence level, productivity is included in the useful value system and production relations are part of the purposeful value system. In the field of social consciousness, both political and ideological superstructures belong to the value system constructed by labor. Therefore, labor has constructed the relations of law at the class level and national level. Labor is the source of rights, which is the very concrete reflection of the labor value system in the superstructure. As recognized by law, human rights are, in form, the product built by all classes through labor; and in content, they as an ideology reflect the value relation between man and nature as well as between man and man. Therefore, it can be said that human rights come from labor.

Keywords—value philosophy; human rights; labor; labor-based human rights

I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of labor-based human rights is increasingly rising among the thoughts on human rights in China. In recent years, two academic conferences on labor-based human rights have been held and one of the advocates of labor-based human rights, Professor He Yunfeng of Shanghai Normal University, believes that labor-based human rights are not labor rights in human rights, but refer to labor being the fundamental source of human rights. The concepts of labor-based human rights and God-based natural rights can be looked at by comparison. Labor takes God's place and moves directly to human rights without a sequence of intermediary transitions, namely "justification by labor"[1]. This view discords with the basic concepts of Marxist philosophy. From the perspective of Marxist philosophy, human rights can be thought to originate from labor, but as man's rights, human rights fit into the category of social consciousness; while as man's essential activity, labor falls under the category of social existence. Linking the labor concept in the field of social existence with the human rights concept in the field of social consciousness, in other words, making the concept of labor-based human rights possible requires a sequence of intermediary transitions. Labor and human rights cannot be directly connected. The connection between them can be interpreted from different routes. This

paper intends to explain it by starting from labor which goes through a series of intermediary transitions and gradually moves to human rights.

II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE "TWO-FOLD CHARACTER OF THE LABOR" THEORY IN VALUE PHILOSOPHY

In the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx proposed the well-known theory on the two-fold character of the labor aimed at solving the problem about origins of the exchange value of commodities and thoroughly sticking with the labor theory of value. According to Marx, concrete labor "produces" the "use-value" of commodities, and abstract labor "forms the commodity value"[2](P123). The concrete labor and abstract labor here are both activities in the production of commodities. As an economic form of production, commodity production frames the "two-fold character of the labor" in field of political economy, which conceals the philosophical meaning of the "two-fold character of the labor".

Philosophically, if putting the limitation of commodity production aside, we can learn that labor not only produces use-value but also forms value. The former shows that labor constructs the useful value relation between man and nature as well as between man and man; the latter indicates that labor constructs the purposeful value relation between man and man.

Marx pointed out, "the usefulness of things gives things use-value"[3](P48). In the annotation, he quoted John Rock, as saying, "the natural worth (value) of any thing is its capability to meet the necessary needs"[3](P48). In this sense, Marx and Rock here interpreted the use-value or the usefulness of things as the satisfaction of needs. In value philosophy, the nature or relation of objects and their attributes meeting the needs of subjects is defined as value or value relation. This value relation of use-value is neither the social relation between people nor the exchange value relation between commodities; it refers to the relation between thing as object and its attributes meeting the needs of man as subject.

Labor producing use-value means labor creates things as well as the value relation between them (as objects) and subjects. Of course, labor is not the only element for the establishment of such value relation; natural resources and labor together constitute the productive factors of use-value. As William Petty noted: "Land is mother of wealth; labor is father of wealth and positive factor"[4](P66). However, labor and natural resources take different positions and roles in the

production of use-value. Labor is, "first of all, a course between man and nature, a process of man mediating, adjusting and controlling the material change between man and nature by his own activities"[2](P207). Labor brings use-value to natural things and is the dominant factor for the production of use-value. Natural resources are the raw materials of use-value. "The nature has no mercy. It shows everything the same"[5]. Nature is equal to man and other creatures and it does not deliver the "Garden of Eden" to humanity, so it is the non-dominant factor for the production of use-value. The reason why mankind is able to create such a colorful world is that human being are remaking and utilizing the natural resources through labor.

Human's remaking and utilizing nature is not only about the change of nature itself but also about the value relation between nature and man. From the perspective of the usefulness of man changing nature to the humanity, human beings immensely intensify and increase the human needs to be met by nature in numbers and extent. Human beings created automobile, space shuttle, computer and network, and with the continuous development of productivity, human needs to be met have been dramatically improved both in kind and degree.

Labor changes the useful value relation not only between man and nature but also between man and man. Man himself is a natural thing, which means that a person is of usefulness or use-value to himself or others. In the slave society, slaves were "talking tools", which was actually a sign that slave owners treated slaves as useful things. The change in labor with regard to people's usefulness mainly refers to the improvement of labor capacity. Labor capacity or labor force is the "aggregation of physical and intellectual power that exists in one's body and is used whenever he produces some kind of use-value"[3](P195). For instance, as a way to improve one's physical and intellectual power, learning or exercising is also a kind of labor through which people change their labor capacity, therefore creating and changing their own use-value or usefulness.

In a word, philosophically speaking, labor producing use-value means labor changing the useful value relation between man and nature as well as between man and man.

Regarding value, Marx made a qualitative analysis from two aspects. On the one hand, he stated, "The common substance that manifests itself in the exchange value of commodities, whenever they are exchanged, is their value"[3](P51). That is to say, value first is the "common substance" that manifests itself in the exchange relation of commodities, while commodity exchange itself is a kind of exchange relation between things. Thus, it is evident that value is the common substance of the commodity exchange relation between things. On the other hand, Marx pointed out, "Not even one atom of matter enters into the composition of the value of commodities... Commodity has value only when it is a unified social unit, namely the manifestation of human labor. Therefore, the value of commodities is purely social"[3](P61). It thus appears that the value itself is not the relation between things but the expression of a sort of social relation between people.

The relation between things can only be a natural tie, which cannot even form the useful value relation, let alone social relation. Then, how does value connect social relations with natural relations? This is the great mystery of commodity form—the commodity exchange relation represents a "social relation between things"[3](P89). Marx explained it with materialization of labor: "this fetish character of commodity...is the social nature peculiar to the labor which originates in commodity production"[3](P90). Labor itself is not the commodity value, and its materialization coagulates into commodity value. The unique social nature of labor is the root of the formation of commodity exchange as social relations between things. Namely, labor creating value in fact is that the labor-specific social nature is transformed into value.

Marx's revelation that value is the product of the materialization of labor's social nature has significant implications: it shows that, in the process of labor forming value, the object of labor is no longer a thing but a person, "once people labor for each other in some way, their labor is taking the social form"[3](P89). Therefore, labor is a bond that forms and changes the social relations between people. In this sense, labor changes society.

If labor changes nature, what it changes is the useful value relation between man and nature; thus, what labor changes about society is the dual value relation between people. The social relations between people actually include two types: one is the useful value relation between people, in which people are seen as things and essentially used as tools. In this case, the social relation takes the form of useful value relation being changed by labor, therefore it's actually the relation between man as subject and man as object. Here what labor changes is the usefulness of human beings. The other type is the purposeful value relation between people. This is the true meaning of what commodity value is for. Kant noted, "Anyone at no time shall treat others or himself as the means only, but as the self of his aim"[6](P53). The essence of this value relation is to serve people and view people as subjects. In this case, the purposeful value relation is in fact the relation between man as one subject and man as the other subject.

The purposeful value relation refers to the relation between individual and the common nature of humanity. Kant stated "man is the end itself" because everyone has common "rationality"[6](P53). As far as he was concerned, rationality is the essential character commonly owned by human beings. For Hegel, the purposeful value relation means the relation between the individual and the common. Hegel believed: "the superior value of individual parts lies in their relation to the whole", "the meaningful element in history is the relation and connection to the universal"[7](P13). By contrast, Marx applied the concept of "value" more explicitly to the relation between individual labor and human labor: "By an exchange they equate as values their different products, thereby equating as human labors their different labors"[3](P91). The purposeful value relation is clearly a more fundamental social relation between people. Marx regards labor as the essential character of human beings, which reveals the intrinsic implication of labor changing the purposeful value relation.

What worth mentioning is that both purposeful and useful value relations are the "self-benefiting relation" constructed by people. The "self-benefiting" feature of usefulness value relation is actually the nature of meeting the needs of subjects. While that in purposeful value relation comes from the individuality of people. What individuals mean to the common nature of humanity manifests as the purposeful value, and what this common nature means to individuals appears to be the self-benefiting feature. For example, a piece of food satisfies Tom's and Harry's appetite, which, of course, shows the "self-benefiting" feature of the two constructing the useful value relation. Meanwhile, whether the food belongs to Tom or Harry reflects the "self-benefiting" feature of the purposeful value relation between the two ".

III. THE VALUE SYSTEM CONSTRUCTED BY LABOR IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL EXISTENCE

On the one hand, labor changes the useful value relation between man and nature as well as between man and man; on the other hand, it changes the purposeful value relation between man and man. Therefore, it can be said that labor changes the world of value forms created by man. The world of value forms refers to the aggregation of all value relations constructed by human individuals, groups and society and with certain hierarchy and structure, and "the system constituted by value is the world of value forms" [8] (P11).

Correspondingly, the world formed by the "infinitely diverse physical realities"[8](P13) is the world of physical forms. The world of physical forms and the world of value forms both belong to the material world. The former consists mainly of the interactions between natural things as well as between natural thing and man as natural thing; the latter mainly refers to the total of the useful value relations between man and nature as well as between man and man as a nature thing and the purposeful value relations between man and man. As stated previously, the changes labor makes to the world of physical forms is actually much more subtle for nature itself, and labor mainly forms and changes the human world of value forms.

In the world of value forms, "all things of value with structure, from the smallest structural thing of value to the whole world of value forms", can form a value system. The value system constructed by people through labor is called the labor value system which is fundamentally composed of three elements: subject of value, standard of value and object of value. The subject of value refers to the constructor and initiator of the value system, that is, the "actor"[9] (P41) who builds the value system. Individual subject, group subject, class and even state subject all can construct a labor value system within their respective realm. The standard of value is a yardstick or basis by which subjects can normalize things of value in the value system. It is "the objective needs and interests of the subject"[9] (P259). Subject constructs the value system through labor, and what this means is that labor becomes the fundamental yardstick that subjects use to normalize things of value, namely, the basic standard of value. As the basic standard, labor not only normalizes the things of value themselves, but also other standards of value. The object of value is also known as the target of value, which is the

"object of behavior"[9] (P41) in the construction of value system by the subject of value.

The value system constructed by labor can be categorized into the useful value system and the purposeful value system. In the field of social existence, the useful value system constructed by labor can be seen as productivity system and the purposeful value system as production relation system.

In *Das Kapital*, Marx connected the productivity with the concrete labor that produces use-value, pointing out: "productivity is certainly the useful and concrete productive forces of labor all along", "the changes in productivity don't have any effect on the labor which manifests itself as value", "productivity is a concretely useful form of labor"[3] (P59—60). As explained above, concrete labor produces use-value, which, in philosophy, refers to the value relation of labor creating and changing usefulness. Therefore, the improvement of productivity means the improvement of the ability to meet our needs, rather than the simple improvement of the production capacity of labor products. We used to interpret the productivity as the "ability" to produce labor products, namely, "the ability of human beings to make use of and transform nature and acquire material subsistence from nature"[10] (P320). In fact, however, productivity is the ability of human beings to make use of and transform nature to meet the living needs of mankind. If a thing with high production capacity is not what we need, it has no productivity as we wouldn't produce it at all. The modern technology of fire making by drilling wood is far superior to that in ancient times, however, this technology is no longer a social productive force. It may be used in some adventure shows, but it has been of no usefulness for today's human society, therefore having lost its productivity. Without doubt, the new productive forces displacing the old ones is the development and advancement of productivity, however, it's also the birth of new productive forces and the demise of old ones. Productivity is not only reflected in the ability of human beings to remake nature to meet human needs, but also in the ability of man to remold his useful value relation. In *The German Ideology*, Marx labeled "interaction and productivity"[11] (P88) beside the sentence "man reforms man". Here if we see "interaction" as production relation, then the productivity is the ability of man to remold his useful value relation. For instance, the average human knowledge level and literacy rate in nowadays have been greatly improved in comparison with ancient society, and the labor capacity of human beings has been significantly enhanced, which is also a manifestation of the huge progress in productivity. Thus, from a philosophical perspective, productivity is the ability to produce or construct the useful value relation. Labor constructing the useful value system is actually constructing the productivity system.

Unlike establishing a connection between productivity and useful value relation, Marx denied that the production relation was connected with use-value: "though use-value is in social connection for it is the object of social needs, it doesn't reflect any social production relation"[12](P430). That is, Marx excluded the connection between production relation and useful value relation. Therefore, it is only concerned with the purposeful value system.

The production relation system as a purposeful value system is not established on the premise of putting the useful value system aside. It's built precisely around the useful value system namely around the productivity system. Marx noted, "The first historical activity is to produce the materials that meet these needs, that is, the production of material life itself"[3](P79). Material subsistence meets people's needs and benefits thus come into being. These interests exist as a product of people's joint activity (labor) in the beginning. In the joint activity and the distribution of these products, everyone involved acknowledges the common nature in each other, thereby the purposeful value relation is constructed. For example, people's possession of an article is seemingly the relation between man and thing, but in fact it is the purposeful value relation between man and man. This is because the possessive relationship indicates someone's ownership to the article and therefore excludes other people's possession of this article. The exclusivity stems from the self-benefiting feature of purposeful value relation. This initial relation with the common nature constructed at the same time when the useful value relation is established is the production relation. The acknowledgement of the common nature shared by people is actually the original source of the idea of human rights generated.

IV. THE VIEW OF LABOR-BASED HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The construction of the productivity and production relation systems in the field of social existence by labor reveals that the social consciousness determined by social existence, such as superstructure, relations of law and especially the rights and human rights, also comes from labor.

Initially, everyone is a laborer who constructs both his useful value relation and his purposeful value relation. People gradually develop the social consciousness about facts and values in social interaction. With the development of productive forces and the emergence of classes, the ruling class seeks to maintain its economic dominance and broadens its social consciousness into the common consciousness of all the social members, thus forming the ideological superstructure. "The value system based on things of spiritual form" in ideological superstructure is "more fundamental than that based on things of physical form in political superstructure"[8](P35). Hence, in general, the whole superstructure falls under the category of social consciousness and it is the subject of social consciousness.

The relation between superstructure and labor can be interpreted from two aspects: form and content. In form, superstructure is a value system constructed by class's labor. For instance, Lenin viewed Parliament as "working mechanism"[13] (P43), which means the work of law-making itself is a kind of labor. This kind of labor certainly cannot be fulfilled through parliamentarian's personal labor; it is the product of the labor of the whole class. Therefore, the relations of law in the superstructure are also the direct product of the labor of class subject. Parliament is one of the cores of political superstructure. Like Parliament, administration, jurisdiction and even the ideological superstructure are all the fruits of the joint labor of the whole class rather than of the individual.

Superstructure is the product of class's or people's labor. It is a "narrowly-defined value system"[8] (P28) constructed by labor in form. In content, as social consciousness, the superstructure is a dynamic reflection of the economic foundation which is the dominant production relation constructed by labor in itself. As Lenin said, "Politics is the integrated embodiment of economy"[14] (P407). Therefore, the content reflected by the superstructure is in fact the productivity system and the production relation system constructed by labor as well as the social interaction system formed therefrom. In the third volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx and Engels deduced the three classes in modern society (including land owner, capital owner and wage laborer) step by step, starting from the abstract labor coagulating into value, through the process of capital production and circulation, to the logic evolution of the overall process and this series of production relations. While the superstructure is precisely the product of the movement of social conflicts between these classes.

Since superstructure is constructed by labor in form and is the dynamic reflection of the value system constructed by labor in content, the superstructure itself as well as the relations of law actually also comes from labor. It means that as "the core category of law"[15] (P139), rights also come from labor, namely the view of labor rights that indicates that all rights are derived from labor. The right itself is a complex concept. Zhang Wenxian has summarized eight meanings of it: "entitlement-theory, the claiming-theory, the liberty-theory, the interest-theory, the power-theory, the possibility-theory, the norm-theory, and the choice-theory"[15] (P141). However, no matter how to interpret right, as the relations of law, it is always the reflection of the purposeful value relation between man and man constructed by labor. Right is endowed to subject by law, and the class nature of law indicates that right also has a class nature. As Marx demonstrated in *Das Kapital*, the changes in production relation form the generation and differentiation of classes, and the production relation itself is the purposeful value relation. Therefore, the right itself fits into the category of social consciousness regarding the purposeful value relation. The view of labor-based human rights is "the interpretation of the theories about human rights and social rationality with labor"[1]. Different from the concept of "God-based natural rights" in western society, the view of labor-based human rights emphasizes the value standard of labor and that labor is the basis for the construction of the relations of law between man and man.

Human rights include the rights recognized by law, namely "the personal liberty rights and democratic rights in politics, economics, social cultural and other aspects recognized by law and enjoyed by citizens under certain historical conditions"[16](P1179). The thought of "God-based natural rights" is in fact the product of modern methodology. It stresses that human rights are inherent, which actually sees human rights as a self-evident concept. Such methodology constructing knowledge in a "self-evident" way can be traced to the axiom system of Euclidean Geometry in which five basic axioms are regarded as self-evident premises and the whole axiom system is derived therefrom. Descartes promoted this methodology and applied it to mathematics and philosophy. In analytic geometry, Descartes took the coordinate origin as self-

evident starting point, thus constructing the indispensable coordinate model in modern geometry. In philosophy, by universal doubt, Descartes considered "cogito" as something self-evident, which led to his philosophy of rationalism. In fact, this methodology is the mindset that makes the initial source of knowledge direct and uses it as basis to construct the theoretical system. The bourgeoisie sees human rights as a self-evident concept, thus constructing the whole bourgeois ideology. Therefore, as something self-evident, the idea of human rights is not to be discussed in western context.

Marxist concept of human rights is based on materialist dialectics which emphasizes the intermediary nature of cognition. From the perspective of Marxist philosophy, the idea of human rights is not a direct and self-evident concept but a reflection of social existence as an ideology and the relations of law. Therefore, the understanding of human rights cannot just remain at the level of social consciousness. We shall find its root in the field of social existence. Marx argued that the idea of human rights is the product of civil society reflecting the social relations at the economic level: "The buying and selling of labor is performed within the boundaries of the circulation or commodity exchange field which is indeed the real Garden of Eden of God-based natural rights"[3](P204). In Marx's opinion, the human rights of bourgeois are fundamentally egoism: "Feudal society has collapsed, leaving only its foundation – people, who as its true basis are self-interest...These people, members of civil society, are the base and premise of political state; they are the people recognized by the nation through human rights"[17](P187-188). This egoism treats all things as a useful value relation, which becomes the common nature shared by all, and thus the relation between man and man turns into a useful relation.

Unlike the thought of God-based natural rights, the concept of labor-based human rights holds that human rights are social consciousness's reflection of the value relation constructed by labor, so what it reflects comes from labor. As a social ideology, human rights are directly constructed in the ideological superstructure by classes or people, therefore it is directly derived from labor in form. Since human rights root in labor both in form and content, we can say that human rights come from labor.

Given that labor constructs the purposeful value relation and the useful value relation, we can classify labor-based human rights into two categories. One is the natural rights that reflect the useful value relation between man and nature as well as between man and man, such as rights to subsistence, development, work and education, custody, guardianship, etc. The other category is the social rights reflecting the purposeful value relation between man and man, such as ownership, equality, liberty, democracy, mutual respect and so on. Human's natural rights and social rights depend on the usefulness or purposefulness of the value relations reflected by them. Hence, just like use-value and value, the two cannot be confused with each other.

According to the thought of God-based natural rights, human rights are the birthrights of people, so both the human rights reflecting the useful value relation and those reflecting the purposeful value relation are human's natural rights.

Therefore, man becomes a "natural person". This is actually the result of the essence of "egoism" distorting the social nature of man as mentioned by Marx. Marxist philosophy maintains that human rights are endowed by society. Robinson adrift on an isolated island had no human rights. Just as eating sheep is not a right of lion endowed by God, the life of Robinson on the island is a life without any right until the presence of "Friday".

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