

# The Practical Study of Marx's Theory of Ownership

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**Abstract.** The communist movement aims to achieve the liberation of the proletariat and the free and comprehensive development of human beings. From the perspective of the methodology of historical materialism, this goal also constitutes the core of Marx's theory of ownership. As an important part of Marxist political economy, the theory of ownership, with its strong correlation with productive forces and production relations, has continuously deepened and evolved in theory and practice, adapting to the times. This requires us to grasp its characteristics in different stages of development to achieve a scientific understanding. At the same time, Marx's theory of ownership, as an organic unity of scientific and value standards, points to the historical development of real people and shows strong practical significance. Analyzing and studying the theory of ownership in Marxism helps us to achieve the comprehensive and free development of people on the basis of a better grasp of the laws of development of ownership forms.

**Keywords:** Marx, theory of ownership, human liberation, scientific standards, value standards

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## 1. Introduction

Marx's theory of ownership has consistently been a focal point of attention within the academic community in China. As the stages of development have evolved, research on Marx's theory of ownership has become increasingly profound and has developed into a multi-dimensional perspective. Domestic academia has conducted research on the evolution of Marx's theory of ownership by analyzing his works; it has carried out characteristic research on different aspects of the nature and function of ownership within Marx's theory; and it has discussed and analyzed Marx's grand concept of "reconstructing individual ownership" in the context of the communist goal of "abolishing private property." International academia has sorted out and studied Marx's theory of ownership from the perspectives of reflection on classical ownership theory and practice, evaluation of China's exploration of ownership reform, and speculation on the future development of ownership.[1] By analyzing the current state of research in both domestic and international academia, a common characteristic can be distilled: "reality." Theoretical guidance of reality serves the practice of reality, with the aim of serving "real people." This requires us to start from reality to grasp the key issues in Marx's theory of ownership.

## 2. The Development, Establishment, and Conceptual Positioning of Marx's Theory of Ownership

Since the "material interests dilemma" encountered during the Rheinische Zeitung period, the germination of Marx's theory of ownership began. In the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," Marx took alienated labor as the key point of analysis. He pointed out that the recognition and establishment of so-called "private property" denied the individual ownership premised on labor, allowing the possession of the product of labor and the labor process by the proletariat to be alienated into a property relationship between the laborer and the non-laborer, leading to the fact that the laborer's individuality was lost and became living capital. Starting from the issue of private property, the decisive role of economic interests in the development of human society is confirmed. Subsequently, in "The German Ideology," Marx revealed the contradictory movement of productive forces and production relations, and made a clear regulation of "ownership," distinguishing different specific forms of ownership. Through the critique of Proudhon in "The Poverty of Philosophy," Marx further proposed the method of dividing ownership according to the subject and object, and the perspective of looking at ownership was further developed. The publication of "The Communist Manifesto" is an important node in the development of Marx's theory of ownership. During this period, Marx had already clearly pointed out the relationship between ownership and social development, and by studying the development of ownership, he found the way out for the proletarian revolution. The theory of ownership began to take shape. By the time of "Critique of Political Economy" and "Capital," Marx's theory of ownership was formed. Marked by the construction of the system of means of

production ownership, the basic questions of the theory of ownership were answered, and the overall framework of Marx's theory of ownership was established.[2]

The ownership of the means of production is the foundation of the relations of production and represents the economic relationships regarding how production means are possessed, distributed, and utilized in the production process. From the perspective of its manifested form, the ownership of the means of production delineates the relationships between "users" as individuals within the production process. From an intrinsic logical standpoint, the ownership of the means of production essentially delineates material relationships that are carried by human relationships—the right of possession of production means directly determines the distribution relationships, exchange relationships, and consumption relationships. On this basis, a qualitative analysis of ownership needs to be conducted from two aspects: the ownership rights of the production means and the form in which the production means are combined with laborers.

The labor process encompasses three elements: labor power, means of labor, and objects of labor, with the means of production including the means of labor and the objects of labor. Throughout the evolution of social forms, slave owners, feudal lords, and capitalists have successively become the possessors of the means of production, occupying a dominant position in the distribution structure. The ownership of the means of production is important because its impact on the outcome of distribution directly affects the course of social development. Marx discussed the essence of the ownership issue from a subject perspective by answering the question "Who owns the means of production?" Just as described in the manifesto, "Capital is not an individual force, but a social force." [3]

Who produces and how is it produced? Only by resolving the issue of how production means are combined with labor can the entire foundation of social life be established. Marx did not isolate the means of production in the theoretical realm for a singular discussion of ownership rights but always conducted a holistic analysis of the ownership issue from the perspective of the entire production process—the existence of laborers ensures that there is no absence of "people" in the theory of ownership, and it pre-envisions a realistic way out for "people." "The proletariat will use its political rule to gradually seize all the capital of the bourgeoisie, concentrate all the means of production in the hands of the state, which is the proletariat organized as the ruling class, and as quickly as possible increase the total amount of productive forces." [4] The transformation of the combination of production means and laborers is not only a change in the subject of production relations but also a complete revolution in the relationship between capital and labor. After the abolition of private ownership, the goal is to achieve a "union of free individuals." From these two aspects of analysis, Marx's theory of ownership demonstrates a clear proletarian stance, which is also the basic positioning for an overall grasp of the theoretical standard.

### 3. Basic Content of Marx's Theory of Ownership from the Perspective of Dual Standards

Against the backdrop of the development of social history and the operation of economic production, Marx's theory of ownership first analyzes the logic of the development of capitalist society. Philosophy, as the unity of worldview and methodology, must first grasp reality in its entirety, which is the path of action for Marx's theory of ownership—first understand the problem, and then under the regulation and guidance of objective laws, build an overall picture of the forms and content of ownership, and then use this as a basis for evaluation and transformation. The inherent scientific nature determines the possession of reality. The realization of reality cannot be separated from the scientific analysis of economic facts; only through practice can a scientific theory achieve its practical value. Therefore, the basic content of Marx's theory of ownership can be divided into two major aspects according to the dual standards.

#### 3.1. Scientific Standard: How Ownership Theory Becomes a Law

Ownership relations are not categories external to production relations, but are realized through the four economic processes of production, exchange, consumption, and distribution, representing the sum total of production relations. This concept of "sum total" is a manifestation of its close connection with social relations and also a demonstration of the holistic nature of Marx's theory of ownership. Marx believed that "in every historical epoch, ownership develops in various ways and under completely different social relations. Therefore, defining bourgeois ownership is nothing more than describing all the social relations of bourgeois production." [5] He summarizes ownership as the relationship between humans and the production means they need, and at the same time, this relationship is also an economic form through which humans realize social labor. This economic form essentially encompasses the entire process of production relations and their own transformation. Taking Marx's understanding of private property as an example, he proposed that "property means: the individual belongs to a certain tribe (community) (which implies the existence of subject and object within it), and through this community's relationship of considering the land as its inorganic body, the individual regards the land, the external original conditions of production (because land is both material and tool and fruit at the same time), as the premise of his individual existence, as the mode of existence of his individuality. We summarize this kind of property as a relationship to the conditions of production." [6] He characterizes property as "a relationship to the conditions of production," thereby clarifying that the existence of private property is an inevitable product of the operation of the private ownership system.

Marx, in his study of the evolution of social historical forms, regarded social division of labor as an important manifestation of the different stages of productive forces development, pointing out that "the various stages of development of the division of labor are also the various forms of ownership." He also summarized the development of productive forces and different historical stages

of social development as significant factors influencing the various forms of ownership. Ownership and its realization are thus automatically categorized into historical terms, determining the different natures of social production relations in the process of dynamic evolution—the economic relationships between people change under the influence of different forms of ownership and directly affect the social and economic form.

Marx placed the focus of his theory of ownership on the ownership of the means of production. In this sense, he continued the discussion on the issue of the ownership of production means and the combination of production means with laborers. The ownership of production means determines the form in which production means are combined with laborers, which in turn determines the nature of the production relations. By using the vivid example of property, he believed that "since property is merely a conscious relationship that regards the conditions of production as one's own (for an individual, this relationship is caused by the community, declared as law, and guaranteed), in other words, since the existence of the producer appears as an existence within the objective conditions that belong to him, then property is only realized through production itself." [7] Property ownership and its nature reflect the distribution of the material conditions of production, and this distribution determines the forms and conditions under which social production is carried out.

Marx scrutinized the entire capitalist mode of production and distilled the essence of social and historical development through a comprehensive analysis of the nature, scope, and key content of ownership: The product of the transformation of ownership relations. The development of productive forces is predicated on the change and development of production relations. When the productive forces grow beyond the maximum capacity of the production relations to accommodate them, the critical point of social development becomes the transformation of these relations. In this sense, the transformation of ownership forms is directly related to the change or transformation of production relations. In the process of human social development, the natural law of the continuous improvement of productive forces inevitably leads to the spontaneous transformation of production relations. Ownership governs the interconnections between all aspects of social production, and this applicability and scientific nature are precisely the key reasons why the theory of ownership becomes a law.

### 3.2. Value Standard: How Ownership Theory Points to Human liberation

Since the development of productive forces is matched by corresponding forms of ownership, capitalist society must also follow this law. In the feudal society, the later it developed, the more rapidly the productive forces improved with the development of the commodity economy, and the more the narrowness of the feudal society was exposed. People represented by small craftsmen took the lead in breaking through the shackles of the feudal society, accumulating wealth by expanding the scale of production, and on this basis, they turned apprentices and others into wage laborers. They became the earliest capitalists. After the birth of the capitalist mode of production, large-scale socialized production promoted the emergence and popularity of the wage labor system, which, under the condition of the liberation of productive forces, disintegrated the various remnants of the feudal economy. Objectively speaking, capitalist society has indeed created a major milestone in the development of human civilization, but it also harbors crises that cannot be ignored. The monopoly of capital has become a fetter to the mode of production that has flourished along with and under this monopoly. The concentration of the means of production and the socialization of labor have reached a point where they are incompatible with their capitalist shell. This shell is about to be shattered. The death knell of capitalist private ownership is about to ring." [8] Marx's theory of ownership reveals the inevitable fate of the demise of capitalist private ownership from a historical perspective. "No social formation will perish before all the productive forces it can accommodate have been developed; and new, higher relations of production will never appear before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the womb of the old society." [9] Different forms of private ownership must be abolished in different ways, just as the bourgeoisie historically abolished the feudal landlord ownership, the proletariat has historically ushered in its emergence.

Marx envisioned the form of ownership in future society. In a communist society, public ownership becomes the basis of the social and economic system, with the individual ownership of the means of production being transformed into social ownership. All members of society collectively form a community, and the ownership in the future society is correspondingly social ownership. In such a society, each laborer is directly connected and combined with the means of production. The abolition of bourgeois private ownership aims to restore individual ownership premised on labor. However, this kind of individual ownership is not a return to the old forms of ownership of the pre-capitalist era, but rather the construction of a "union of free individuals," with the means of production being collectively owned by the "united individuals." [10]

Thus, the proletariat, having grasped the laws, has obtained a guide for its own liberation. With the pursuit of overthrowing alienated labor and exploitation, it strives to eliminate class antagonisms, distribute the results of labor according to work, abolish production for the sake of production, and achieve free liberation in collaborative development. "Only at the higher stage of communist society, when the circumstances forcing individuals into a slavish submission to the division of labor have disappeared, and with them the opposition between mental and physical labor; when labor has become not only a means of livelihood but also the primary need of life; when, with the all-around development of individuals, their productive forces have increased and all sources of collective wealth are fully flowing—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights be completely surpassed, and society can inscribe on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" [11]

## 4. The Contemporary Significance of Marx's Theory of Ownership

In the perspective of historical materialism, Marx's examination and description of the trend of changes in ownership forms have always been closely linked to the reality, and his theory of ownership has always been in line with the value pursuit of "seeking benefits for the vast majority of people." From a methodological point of view, Marx's theory of ownership is worthy of its status as the primary issue in Marx's political economy. It continuously integrates with the times in the process of historical development, demonstrating the inherent meanings of "scientific theory," "practical theory," and "people's theory." Based on the research perspectives of scientific and value standards, Marx's theory of ownership has significant practical significance for the development of people in reality.

### 4.1. The "Human" Perspective in the Subject-Object View of Ownership Theory

Starting from Marx's discussion and answers on the two issues concerning the means of production, Marx's study of the overall development of ownership is essentially carried out by studying the relationship between people and things. The relationship of ownership between laborers and the objects of labor reflects the relationship between subject and subject, and subject and object. This shows that Marx's concern for human liberation and development is analyzed in conjunction with the changes in the form of ownership.

From the perspective of the subject of ownership, the process of the development of ownership forms depicts the process of human development. Under the natural economy of the pre-capitalist period, personal ownership created a "perfect realm" for human development, where individuals were not bound by the limits of domination and could express themselves actively. During this period, human production was not for the accumulation of wealth, but to complete one's own production and reproduction under the ideal model of self-sufficiency. With the development of productive forces, personal ownership was replaced by capitalist private ownership. However, Marx keenly found the hidden counteracting force in the development of capitalist private ownership itself, "In the relationship of capital to wage labor, the extreme form of alienation that labor, i.e., productive activity, shows to its own conditions and its own products is an inevitable transition point. Therefore, it already contains, in a distorted and inverted form, the disintegration of all narrow production premises, and it also creates and establishes unconditional production premises, thereby creating and establishing sufficient material conditions for the comprehensive and universal development of individual productive forces." [12]

From the perspective of the object of ownership, the development of social division of labor leads to the separation of productive forces from the individual, who loses all real content and becomes an abstract individual. The social division of labor also restricts individual capabilities, fragmenting them into parts needed by the industry and making individuals subordinate to the division of labor and limited production tools. To break through this predicament, individuals must eliminate the old division of labor, take possession of all productive forces, and thus exert their full potential. In this way, the "autonomous activity of the individual becomes consistent with material life, which in turn is adapted to the development of the individual into a complete person and the elimination of all spontaneity." Starting from reality, the basic path guided by the subject and object of ownership provides a basic follow-up for the liberation and development of real people. The theory of ownership emphasizes "people" as the subject to control and adjust the relationship of ownership, thereby realizing the historical form of human independence evolving to a higher stage. [13] The theory of ownership emphasizes "people" as the subject to control and regulate the relationships of ownership, thereby achieving the evolution of the historical form of human independence to a higher stage.

### 4.2. "Free Association of Producers" and the Role of "People"

Marx, through his discussion of the inevitable demise of the bourgeoisie and the inevitable victory of the proletariat, proposed the replacement of the form of capital enslavement with a free association of individuals. This is both a noble ideal pursued by individuals and society alike and a fundamental condition for individuals to achieve comprehensive development and personal freedom. The "free association of producers" is based on the individual, essentially different from naturally formed associations and the "illusory community" of capitalism. Individuals always exist in the "free association of producers" in an independent and autonomous state, and collectively own the means of production and products. For this state, individuals are not appendages of the association; the association is an expression of individual freedom and conscious will, "society has been organized into a conscious and planned association." [14]

In such an association, the distorted real division of labor is also eliminated, and individuals can fully exercise their intelligence, abilities, and creativity according to their own will. The expression of individuality is allowed, and the limitations on individuals under the old ownership conditions are completely broken. In this sense, the ideal of individual development has presented a higher-level form in the association after going through several different forms of social development. The pursuit of individuals has evolved from simple self-sufficiency without participating in economic relations to the free use of production tools, free sharing, and full exchange of individuality under the condition of "common interests." In other words, the ownership of the "united individuals" realizes the harmony between individuals and society, and represents a spiral ascent of ownership and social development.

Marx's theory of ownership solves problems while analyzing them. If the scientific standard in its theory reveals the basic laws of economic operation and social forms, then its value standard is closely connected with specific people, forming one practical method after another. In summary, Marx's theory of ownership continues the main line of "reality," providing a basic theoretical and practical approach for the proletariat's self-liberation path, leading power, and methods adopted. It not only lays the foundation for scientific socialism but also guides the international communist movement on a scientific path. As a scientific and realistic theoretical system, Marx's theory of ownership will surely promote every specific individual to become "the conscious and true master of nature" and "the master of their own social structure," truly achieving the leap of "humanity's transition from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom."

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