

The Theoretical Construction of Marx's Concept of Distributive Justice in Critique of the Gotha Programme

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Abstract: In Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx systematically critiqued Lasalle's conception of distributive justice, revealing the theoretical flaws in the proposition of 'the equitable distribution of the fruits of labour'. Taking the historical materialist principle that 'production determines distribution' as its starting point, this paper examines, in turn, the dominant role of production in distribution, the inherent contradictions of distribution according to labour, and the historical inevitability of the transition to distribution according to need. The study argues that Marx's fundamental transcendence of Lasallianism lies not in proposing a fairer distribution scheme, but in accomplishing a paradigm shift from 'distributive justice' to 'productive justice'. The ultimate resolution of distribution issues does not lie in technical adjustments within the sphere of distribution, but in the continuous transformation of relations of production and the ceaseless development of productive forces.

Keywords: Marx; Critique of the Gotha Programme; distributive justice; productive justice

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1. Introduction

In the 1870s, Lasalle posited the 'equitable distribution of the fruits of labour' as the core tenet of socialism, whilst Marx offered a profound refutation of this view in his Critique of the Gotha Programme. The crux of this debate lay in whether distributive justice could be achieved independently of a transformation of the mode of production. This paper revisits this classic debate, revealing how Marx liberated the question of distribution from the discourse of legal rights, thereby achieving a theoretical transcendence from 'distributive justice' to 'productive justice'.

2. Marx's Critique of Lasalle's Concept of Distributive Justice

Firstly, applying a scientific theory of the sources of wealth to analyse the claim that 'labour is the sole source of wealth'. In response to Lasalle's view that 'labour is the source of all wealth and all culture'^[1], Marx critiqued Lasalle's position by analysing both the preconditions for the production of wealth and its sources. Firstly, Marx argued that 'nature, like labour, is also a source of use-value'^[1], labour is indeed one of the sources of wealth, and labour itself must be combined with

natural resources to create wealth. Labour and natural resources together constitute the sources of wealth, with workers serving as the active agents of wealth creation, whilst natural resources provide the material preconditions and objective foundation for such creation. Through the application of labour power in material production, humankind continuously transforms nature in the sense of ‘nature-in-itself’ into ‘nature-by-human-hand’, ceaselessly producing the means of production and means of subsistence required by society, creating abundant material and spiritual wealth, and driving the overall development of society. Secondly, labour is not the sole source of wealth, but merely one of its many sources; nature is equally an indispensable condition for the constitution of wealth. As William Petty observed, labour is the father of wealth, whilst land is its mother. Labour is one of the sources of wealth, but not the sole one. Labour represents the human aspect, whilst natural resources such as land represent the material aspect. To realise Lasalle’s assertion that labour is the sole source of wealth, all objects of labour and means of production would need to be privately owned by a single individual, thereby uniting the material and human aspects of wealth creation. This undoubtedly overlooks the decisive role of the ownership of the means of production in the distribution of wealth; it tacitly acknowledges the legitimacy of bourgeois material ownership; it conceals a logic that upholds capitalist private ownership; and it endorses the legitimacy of capitalism’s exploitation of the people to extract surplus value. This stands in complete contradiction to the socialist view that all objects of labour and means of production should be held in common by the entire people.

Secondly, drawing on the principle of social reproduction, we refute the claim that ‘the fruits of labour should belong to all members of society in full and on the basis of equal rights’^[1]. First, Marx defined the concept of ‘the fruits of labour’ as follows: ‘The fruits of collective labour may be understood as the “total social product”’^[2]. When distributing the products of labour, it is necessary to deduct the funds required to sustain production and reproduction. Marx pointed out that, after making the aforementioned deductions, administrative costs, public welfare expenditure and funds for the relief of the poor must also be deducted; only what remains constitutes the fruits of labour. This demonstrates that the distribution of the products of labour cannot be, as Lasalle put it, ‘in full’, but rather involves ‘deductions and adjustments’. Secondly, Lasalle’s so-called ‘equal rights’ are in essence the rights of the bourgeoisie, representing a form of equality specific to the capitalist historical stage. Under the capitalist system of production, the means of production are owned by capitalists, whilst workers possess none; they can only exchange their labour power with capitalists to obtain a meagre ‘wage’ sufficient to sustain themselves and their families, whilst the majority of the value generated by workers is disguised as ‘profit’—a term used by capitalists to mask its true nature as ‘surplus value’. Equal rights are measured in terms of labour, yet a worker’s capacity for labour is influenced by multiple factors. Differences in workers’ natural endowments are one of the key factors; in manual labour, those who are physically strong can complete more tasks in the same amount of time than those who are frail, thereby earning a higher income. It is clearly unreasonable for Lasalle to discuss ‘equal rights’ whilst ignoring the impact of these factors on workers.

Thirdly, a critique of the pathways to achieving distributive justice. Lasalle proposed two pathways to achieving distributive justice: the first was ‘the abolition of the wage system together with the iron law of wages’^[1]; the second was ‘relying on state assistance to establish production cooperatives’^[1]. Lasalle endorsed Malthus’s theory of population, arguing that the rate of growth in the means of subsistence required by humankind is far lower than the rate of population growth; human poverty is therefore inevitable, and no matter how the wage system is altered—even under a socialist system—the ‘iron law of wages’ cannot be overturned. In his analysis of the unfair distribution of the fruits of labour, Lasalle believed that reforming the existing wage system could achieve fair distribution. He failed to recognise that the root cause of the inability to achieve fair distribution lies in the wage-labour relationship formed between workers and capitalists under the capitalist system, which leads to the exploitation of surplus value by capitalists. Overthrowing the wage-labour system of capitalist society is the only way for workers to achieve fair distribution. As for Lasalle’s proposal that the Prussian government should establish production cooperatives under the supervision of the working people to achieve fair distribution, this too is unworkable. Firstly, Lasalle regards the state as supra-class, serving not the bourgeoisie but the working people. Marx incisively pointed out that the modern state is ‘founded upon modern bourgeois society’^[3]. It is utterly impossible for the Prussian government to voluntarily abandon the bourgeois system and uphold the interests

of the working people without resorting to revolutionary means. Secondly, the idea of the working people supervising these cooperatives is fundamentally unworkable. The ‘working people’ referred to here are primarily peasants, rather than workers—who are subjected to even more severe exploitation by capital. Peasants cannot represent the interests of the working class; moreover, they are not sufficiently mature to hold positions of power, lack sufficient influence, and would therefore be unable to exercise effective oversight.

3. The Dominant Role of Production in Distribution

Lasalle goes round in circles within the realm of distribution; by discussing distribution in isolation from the realm of production, he can never achieve distributive justice. It is therefore necessary to return to Marx’s historical materialism in order to elucidate the relationship between production and distribution.

Firstly, the principle that production determines distribution is a fundamental tenet of Marx’s theory of distribution. Marx argued that ‘the structure of distribution is entirely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself is a product of production, not only in terms of its objects but also in terms of its form’^[4]. With regard to the objects of distribution, the social product must first be produced before it can enter the sphere of distribution. As regards the form of distribution, workers exchange their labour power for wages, capitalists obtain profits, and landowners receive rent; whilst capitalists and landowners respectively possess all the means of production and large estates, among other factors of production. The specific manner in which these factors of production participate in production determines the form of wealth distribution. The relations and modes of distribution are merely the external manifestation of the relations of ownership of the factors of production. ‘A given mode of production determines a given mode of consumption, distribution, exchange, and the specific relations between these various factors’^[4]. Social reproduction constitutes an organic whole comprising the four stages of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Production occupies a fundamental and dominant position within the entire economic activity; it fundamentally determines the nature, scale, form and interrelationships of the other three stages. Production determines distribution first and foremost. On the one hand, the form of ownership of the means of production directly determines the nature of distribution; who owns the means of production determines the principles according to which social products are distributed. On the other hand, the scale and structure of production determine the quantity and variety of products available for distribution; without material production, distribution would lack its object. Different social systems each possess modes of distribution that correspond to their own forms of ownership of the means of production; changes in the productive forces lead to shifts in the relations of production, and the relations of distribution inevitably change accordingly.

Secondly, a re-examination of Lasalle based on the sphere of production. ‘Any distribution of means of consumption is merely the result of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves; and the distribution of the conditions of production reflects the nature of the mode of production itself. For example, the basis of the capitalist mode of production is that the material conditions of production are held by non-workers in the form of capital and land, whilst the masses possess only the personal conditions of production, namely labour power. Given that the factors of production are distributed in this way, the current distribution of means of consumption naturally follows.’^[3] The crux of the distribution issue does not lie in how the products of labour are ‘fairly’ distributed amongst workers, but in the distribution of ‘the conditions of production themselves’: capital and land are appropriated by capitalists and landowners, whilst workers possess nothing but their labour power. The pattern of distribution of the means of production determines the pattern of distribution of the means of consumption. By setting aside specific modes of production and historical conditions to speak in abstract terms of ‘fair distribution’, Lasalle treats distribution as a decisive factor independent of production, disregards the fundamental issue of ownership of the means of production, and reverses the relationship between production and distribution. Consequently, his theory is flawed, and ‘distributive justice’ is impossible to achieve in practice.

Through Marx’s principle that production determines distribution, this not only reveals the utopian nature of Lasalle’s conception of distributive justice, but also provides an analytical basis for understanding the transitional nature and

limitations of distribution according to work.

4. The Internal Contradictions and Transitional Nature of Distribution According to Work

Distribution according to work is the principle of distribution of personal consumer goods for the first stage of communist society, as conceived by Marx in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. It uses the worker's contribution to labour as the sole yardstick for measuring distribution, thereby representing a historic advance in distributional relations in terms of the abolition of exploitation. However, this approach fails to take into account differences in workers' contributions arising from non-voluntary factors such as natural endowments and family circumstances. Consequently, 'distribution according to work' can only be described as a principle that appears fair on the surface; the equal rights it enshrines remain, in principle, 'bourgeois rights', and applying a single yardstick to all workers inevitably results in de facto inequality.

Firstly, distribution according to work is a historically progressive form of distribution. The realisation of distribution according to work marks the dissolution of private ownership of the means of production; workers collectively own the means of production and hold a dominant position in social production, whilst socially necessary labour time becomes the yardstick for distribution. Every producer receives a certain amount of means of consumption from society in proportion to the amount of labour they have contributed; these means of consumption are the result of the distribution of surplus labour, calculated on the basis of the total labour contributed, after deducting the costs of reproduction and various public expenditures. Marx clearly described this as follows: 'He receives from society a certificate attesting to the amount of labour he has provided (after deducting the labour he has performed for the public fund); on the basis of this certificate, he receives from the social store a share of means of consumption equivalent to that amount of labour. He gives to society a quantity of labour in one form, and receives it back in another^[3].' By taking labour as the sole criterion for distribution, distribution according to labour rejects the exploitative model under private ownership, whereby capital owners appropriate the surplus labour of others through their possession of the means of production. Public ownership of the means of production ensures that no one can appropriate the labour of others by virtue of their ownership of the means of production.

Secondly, distribution according to work has certain limitations, stemming from the fact that it adheres to the principle of equal rights to the exchange of labour in a commodity economy. Although distribution according to work eliminates class exploitation, Marx pointed out that 'here, equal rights remain, in principle, bourgeois rights' ^[3]. Distribution according to work takes the quantity of labour performed within a given period as the sole measure of a producer's entitlement; this establishes only formal equality. In substance, however, due to differences in individual natural endowments, using the quantity of labour provided by producers within the same period as the criterion for distribution cannot achieve substantive equality. Marx analysed the limitations of this principle in detail from two perspectives. Firstly, it tacitly accepts inequality in actual earnings among workers resulting from differences in individual natural endowments. Marx pointed out that, whilst distribution according to work uses labour as a uniform measure, 'one person may be physically or intellectually superior to another, and thus provide more labour in the same period of time, or be able to labour for a longer period'^[3]; consequently, 'such equal rights are unequal rights for unequal labour' ^[3]. In reality, there are inherent disparities in workers' physical and intellectual capacities. Distribution according to work accepts these innate differences as a given fact of nature; this effectively treats workers' labour capacity and natural endowments as inherent privileges, without questioning the moral legitimacy of these differences themselves. In the context of equal distribution, individuals should not be held responsible for innate differences in their natural endowments; yet distribution according to work institutionalises these undeserved endowment differences as inequalities in the outcomes of distribution. Secondly, under distribution according to work, there are disparities in actual income amongst workers due to differences in family circumstances: 'One worker is married, whilst another is not; one has many children, whilst another has few, and so on. Consequently, where the time spent in labour is the same—and thus the share drawn from the social fund of

consumption is the same—one person in fact receives more than another, and is therefore wealthier than the other, and so on.’^[3] Although both derive their income from labour, their actual standards of living differ markedly due to variations in the number of dependants each worker supports. Marx regarded this situation as one of the limitations of distribution according to work.

The common root of the two limitations of distribution according to work lies in the fact that it adopts the principle of the right to an equal exchange of labour, as found in a commodity economy. This principle measures different individuals solely by the yardstick of labour, reducing workers to undifferentiated labourers, and recognises only differences in labour contributions, whilst overlooking the differences in natural aptitude and ability between individuals, as well as objective differences in practical needs such as family responsibilities and dependants. Some scholars have astutely pointed out that, since distribution according to work ‘whilst affirming the equal rights of individuals within one relationship (the labour relationship), tacitly acknowledges the inequality of rights in other relationships; therefore, this equal right, like all rights, remains in substance an unequal right’^[5].

In summary, distribution according to work represents a tremendous historical advance in terms of eliminating class exploitation; however, the equality it entails remains formal and incomplete. Marx’s critique of the inherent contradictions in distribution according to work not only reveals the transitional nature of the socialist principle of distribution, but also provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the historical inevitability of the transition to distribution according to need.

5. The Transition from Distribution According to Work to Distribution According to Need

Distribution according to work has eliminated exploitation and achieved formal equality; however, it still bears the limitations of the bourgeois legal principle of ‘formal equality, substantive inequality’ and is incapable of achieving absolute fairness. It is therefore a transitional form of distribution during the socialist stage, ultimately to be replaced by distribution according to need. In Marx’s view, distribution according to work is merely a stepping stone towards a higher form of distribution; as communist society develops, it will inevitably be superseded by the principles of a higher stage. This transition is not based on some abstract moral ideal, but is rooted in the objective historical laws governing the transformation of the mode of production.

Firstly, the transition from ‘distribution according to work’ to ‘distribution according to need’ requires certain historical conditions. Marx clearly identified the historical conditions necessary for the realisation of distribution according to need: ‘In the higher stage of communist society, when the circumstances that compel individuals to submit to the division of labour in a slave-like manner have disappeared, and with them the opposition between mental and physical labour; when labour is no longer merely a means of subsistence but has itself become the primary necessity of life; when, with the all-round development of the individual, their productive forces have grown, and all the sources of collective wealth are flowing abundantly—only then will it be possible to move completely beyond the narrow horizons of bourgeois rights, and society will be able to inscribe on its banner: ‘From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs!’^[3] Here, three conditions for the realisation of distribution according to need are mentioned. Firstly, the abolition of the old division of labour in capitalist society. This means that people are no longer confined to a specific occupation, alienated labour under private ownership ceases to exist, the opposition between mental and physical labour disappears, and people are no longer moulded into one-sided, distorted beings by the old division of labour. Secondly, labour becomes the primary necessity of life. With highly developed productive forces, labour is no longer a means of subsistence, but rather a free and conscious life activity, the realisation of human essence. Thirdly, the high level of development of productive forces allows all sources of collective wealth to flow abundantly, thereby fundamentally eliminating the material root cause of why ‘distribution’ has become such an acute social problem.

Secondly, Marx revealed the essence of distribution according to need. ‘From each according to his ability, to each

according to his needs' is the principle governing the distribution of consumer goods at the higher stage of communism. The realisation of this principle depends on the highly developed state of social productive forces and the immense abundance of material wealth, whereby labour ceases to be a means of subsistence and becomes an intrinsic human need and a source of life's enjoyment. 'In a communist society, no one has a specific sphere of activity; rather, everyone can develop within any sector, society regulates the whole of production, thus making it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow according to my interests—hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, tending livestock in the evening, and engaging in critical thought after supper—so that I do not remain forever a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman or a critic' ^[6]. 'The "needs" in "distribution according to needs" are not subjective, arbitrary desires, but the full range of genuine, objective needs arising from the all-round development of the individual. It encompasses not only the satisfaction of basic survival needs, but also, and more importantly, the fulfilment of developmental and spiritual needs. The personalisation of the criteria for distribution is the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes distribution according to need in the higher stage of communist society from distribution according to work; differences in human endowments no longer constitute a factor leading to distributional inequality, whilst the diversity and richness of human needs become the ultimate basis for the allocation of resources. In this sense, the ultimate concern of Marx's theory of distribution is that 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' ^[7].

Thirdly, distribution according to need represents a complete transcendence of the 'distributive justice' paradigm. When society develops to the advanced stage of implementing distribution according to need, the issue of distribution is thoroughly liberated from the discourse of rights, thereby completing a radical shift from 'distributive justice' to 'productive justice', and from the 'rights paradigm' to the 'needs paradigm'. Marx argued that traditional distributive justice tacitly accepts the existing mode of production and system of ownership; in reality, issues of distribution cannot be resolved within the sphere of distribution itself. Distribution is merely the result of the conditions of production and the relations of production; what truly needs to be changed is the mode of ownership of the conditions of production themselves. At the advanced stage of communist society, with distribution according to need in place, the means of production are collectively owned by society as a whole, and labour becomes humanity's primary need. The measurement of distribution no longer requires recourse to metrics such as capital or labour input; every individual's reasonable needs are given equal consideration. Marx's critique of Lasallianism ultimately points towards a social formation in which the very concept of justice and its institutional framework have been abolished.

6. Conclusion

Starting from Marx's critique of Lasalle's conception of distributive justice, this paper examines, in turn, the fundamental principle that production determines distribution, the inherent contradictions of distribution according to labour, and the historical inevitability of the transition to distribution according to need. Marx's fundamental transcendence of Lasalleanism lies not in proposing a fairer distribution scheme, but in accomplishing a paradigm shift from 'distributive justice' to 'productive justice'. Lasalle's pursuit of fairness within the realm of distribution overlooked precisely the decisive role of the mode of production in determining distributive relations. When society develops to the point where it can 'completely transcend the narrow horizons of bourgeois rights' ^[3], distribution will cease to exist as an independent social problem, and the needs of every individual will be genuinely satisfied. Marx's theory of distribution reveals that the ultimate solution to the problem of distribution does not lie in technical adjustments to distribution policies, but in the continuous transformation of relations of production and the ceaseless development of the productive forces.

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Disclosure statement

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