

The Collision of Marxism and Derrida's Deconstruction in China

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I. Western Marxism was introduced into China after 1978

Since 1978, when the Chinese economic reform began, the open door policy has spread from economics to culture, and also, to some extent, into the ideological arena. At the same time, almost all of Western Marxism was introduced into China. When the Chinese think of Western Marxism, we have in mind such figures as A. Gramsci, K. Korsch, and K. Lukács. There are many disagreements about how to interpret Western Marxism, but there is no disagreement that these are some of the central figures. By the term “Frankfurt school” Chinese scholars refer to such writers as Horkheimer, Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Adorno, and so on. Structuralist Marxism is normally represented by Althusser, and existentialist Marxism includes Sartre and so on. Analytical Marxism is represented by G. A. Cohen, J. Elster, and J. E. Roemer. Jacques Derrida, as a deconstructionist philosopher, normally is not regarded as a Marxist. But after his book *Specters of Marx* was published (Derrida 2006), his ideas are now usually regarded as belonging to so-called post-Marxism. Habermas is usually regarded as belonging to the third generation of the Frankfurt school, and now also regarded by some scholars as belonging to post-Marxism. Some scholars name all those Western Marxists which appeared after the 1970s as new Marxists, in order to distinguish their views from traditional Western Marxism.

As soon as Western Marxism was introduced into China, it immediately attracted Chinese Marxist scholars, especially middle aged or younger scholars. Some students begin to take Western Marxism as their main theme, which in turn, enlarged the influence of Western Marxism in China. We can understand the reason why Western Marxist research attracts Chinese Marxist scholars mainly in terms of two points:

Firstly, the combination of economic globalization and the fact that China has made a historical transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with a Chinese character means that China's Marxists need to face the same problems as Western Marxist scholars. While Western Marxist scholars have faced the problems of capitalism and the market economy for a long time, Chinese Marxist scholars have been facing those problems directly only for a very short time; previously they were required to confront different situations. Before they often dealt with those problems discussed or criticized by Marx for the most part indirectly, but since the

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historical transition in China at the end of the 20th century Western Marxist thinking has become closer to the actual situation that Chinese Marxist scholars are facing.

Secondly, compared with traditional Chinese Marxist research, the research work of Western Marxists is mainly organized and carried out by individuals. Even if their research in some sense reflects the current practical political situation, it is not guided by official political criteria or governments.

In any case, Western Marxist research is strongly affected by different historical backgrounds and different schools of philosophy, as well as the general atmosphere of academic disciplines, such as different Western philosophical schools, and so on. In this respect, generally speaking, Chinese Marxists are less affected by different schools or different academic disciplines, but more affected by official political considerations, including official ideology. But during the past 30 years, alongside so-called official Marxism, there has also appeared academic Marxism, which could be divided into two parts: one is concerned with researching Western Marxism, and the other with researching the ideas of Marx based on the texts.

Strictly speaking Derrida's deconstructive method has interested and been studied mainly by those scholars and students who study Western Marxism, and can be understood as belonging to the Chinese schools of Academic Marxism.

II. What can we expect from the collision of Derrida's deconstructionism with Chinese academic Marxist research?

The result of the fact that Derrida only turns to Marxism after working out his view of deconstruction is perhaps similar to those Marxist philosophers who are influenced by the third generation of the Frankfurt school or so-called culture critical theory. Both of them, together with some others, such as Laclau, Mouffe, and Jameson, to name only a few, are now regarded as belonging to post-Marxism, which is a very confusing concept.

Now the question is how to understand post-Marxism? For instance, what is the relationship between post-Marxism and post-modernism? If deconstruction could be regarded as belonging to post-modernism, then there could be a point through which to connect critical theory with deconstruction by regarding both as sharing some common view in the current historical situation between them, with very different philosophical methods and cultural backgrounds.

Maybe they share the desire of some Chinese Marxist scholars to give up orthodox Marxism, or we could also call it dogmatist Marxism while still insisting on the critical spirit of Marx. Critical theory which did not only take place within the Frankfurt school has gone beyond the way that Marx criticized capitalism from an economic perspective while also introducing culture in a very wide sense, including politics as well.

But the concept of "after Marxism" which appeared at the end of last century also has another meaning: it means to understand Marx by reading the original works of Marx, hence not through text books produced in the Soviet Union and distributed to other traditional socialist countries. The book *Marx after Marxism* written by Rockmore (2002), to some extent expressed this kind of situation, that also could be called "A return to Marx" from Marxism, which is now, to some degree, regarded as orthodox Marxism and differs in that respect from Western Marxism.

Besides the same points shared by deconstructionism and critical theory, and the deconstructive philosophical method that Derrida used to read Marx, Derrida has two points of view that interest Chinese Marxist Scholars: One is his criticism of the view of "the end of history" expressed by Francis Fukuyama (2006) in his book *The End of History and the Last Man*. The

other is Derrida's discussion of a contradiction in the theory of Marx, which, for different reasons, is difficult for Chinese scholars to discuss.

Derrida criticizes the view of "the end of history" through deconstructing the logic of the view of Fukuyama: Firstly, according to Fukuyama, there is always a distance between an idea and all those problems of reality that could be explained by it. In disagreeing with this point of view, Derrida says that it is just the place that the critical spirit of Marx can play its role.

Secondly, Derrida says that ideas that have been criticized by Marx could be suspect, such as the market economy, the law of capital, the freedom of legislative democracy, and human rights. Derrida insists on the value of the critical spirit of Marx. In this way Derrida has separated the critical spirit of Marx from the "specters" of Marx, which Derrida thinks are full of contradictions.

The spirit of Marx according to Derrida is a kind of radical critical spirit, compared with those philosophical principles of dialectical materialism and historical materialism expressed in the Soviet Marxist text books, which follow a very different model: The radical spirit aims to criticize the current world of capitalism. But Derrida has retreated from its concrete contents, when he treats them as "specters." The philosophical principle of Soviet Marxism aims to set up a new proletarian ideology in place of older bourgeois ideology, because the main task of the Soviet Union is not to criticize recent events, but to build up the cultural superstructure to match the new world of the Soviet Union. In other words, the different interpretations of Marx are related to different historical backgrounds, and the different historical background influences observers to accept different interpretations of Marx. By virtue of a similar historical background, China accepted the interpretation of Soviet Marxism.

After the economic reform which began in the 1970s, especially after the historical transition which happened in the 1990s, we saw the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the context of the current situation of China, what appeared is close to what Marx criticized in his time, and at this moment Derrida's Marx arrived in China.

The change of historical background makes Derrida's concept of deconstruction more attractive to Chinese Marxist scholars. Further, what Derrida understands is that Marx's critical spirit could also be critical towards his own specters. This would probably annoy dogmatist "Marxists," but it has usefully led to some common sense about "rethinking Marxism."

Unlike the project of a "return to Marx" which mainly means going away from the Marxist model as it was routinely interpreted in the Soviet Union in order to read Marx through his own texts, "rethinking Marxism" mainly means rethinking the general theory of Marx by reading the text of Marx from an independent but critical perspective.

Both a "return to Marx" and a "rethinking of Marx" demand that we understand Marx through reading his texts. For that reason academic Marxists mainly do research on the documents concerning Western Marxism. In addition, there is now a MEGA study group or text research group, which also includes philological study, and in which a group of scholars mainly conducts research on the texts of Marx and Engels. Both of these two academic schools, in some sense, belong to the current trends of a "return to Marx" and a "rethinking of Marx."

Perhaps it is impossible to make a clear distinction among all these different trends, such as "post-Marxism," "after-Marxism," or a "return to Marx" and "rethinking Marx." Each of them represents a special attitude taken by scholars towards Marx or Marxism. Some of these attitudes are actually inter-related: Though we normally regard Derrida as a "post-Modernist," or as a "post-Marxist" he at the same time expresses the need of "rethinking Marx." No matter what his philosophic thinking is called, there remains the question of the influence of his way of thinking on Chinese Marxist scholars. This question is especially interesting if we consider the

different historical backgrounds between Derrida's Western philosophy and Chinese Marxist scholars' Marxist philosophical approach.

The sharp difference is that Derrida's post-modernism emerged in a post-industrial period; maybe it is in this sense that Terrell Carver (1998) regards him as The Postmodern Marx, while China is currently in the period of industrialization or modernization. This points to the following question:

III. Why are some Chinese Marxist scholars interested in post-modernism while the country is still in the process of modernization?

In order to answer this question, it will be useful not only to further distinguish "after-Marxism" from "post-Marxism," but also to understand the necessity of the general process of historical transition which has occurred since the end of the 20th century.

"After Marxism" mainly means go back to Marx from the popular Marxism of traditional socialist or so-called communist countries, which give up the orthodox interpretation of Marxism as the combination of three parts: philosophy, political economics, and scientific socialism. By the parts of philosophy, I have in mind the constitution of an approach combining dialectical materialism and historical materialism. On the contrary, in "after Marxism" we try to re-understand Marx from the text of Marx and to revive the critical spirit of Marx. It is in this sense that Derrida's way of interpreting Marx runs parallel to some Chinese Marxists' way of thinking, and is accepted by them as what could also be regarded as close to the trends of a "return to Marx" or in another formulation "going back to Marx."

"Post-Marxism" is mainly connected with so-called post-modernization in the situation of post-industrialization. This leads to two sociological challenges to Marxism: one is the decrease in the numbers of the working class at the same time as the increase in the income of working class. If this is compared historically but not horizontally, we know that the social difference in the developed capitalist countries (maybe excluding some north European countries) normally continues to increase. The other is that the social difference comes not only from the economic sector, but also from the cultural sector, and the big income difference derives not only from capital investment, but also from such factors as management and technology.

It is only 30 years since China began its economic reform. But under the influence of the advanced Western countries and affected by the trends of globalization, both of these characteristics of post-industrialization have appeared to some extent in certain areas of China. This explains why "post-Marxism" could also be spread in China's Marxist research area while the whole country is still on the way to modernization.

It is clear that "Marx after Marxism" and "Post-Marxism" represent very different points of view about Marxism. But both reflect the historical transition which happened at the end of the last century and both express the demand of "rethinking Marx" in the current historical period.

Differences with respect to "Post-Marxism," the historical transition, as well as what has happened in present-day China, are also brought out through the trend of a "return to Marx," which in China mainly has two meanings. One is close to the meaning of "Marx after Marxism," that is a return from a Soviet approach to Marxism back to Marx's texts. The other is to reflect on the current situation of China.

Since 1978, especially since 1990, the socialist market economy has increasingly encountered those problems discussed and criticized by Marx in his political and economic manuscripts and in *Capital*. What Derrida regarded as Marx's "specters" could be understood from two perspectives,

or cases, so to speak, one of which is slowly disappearing and the other of which is now in the process of arriving.

As concerns the first case, the typical character of a historical transition is to introduce a market economy into a traditional socialist system which is a centrally planned economy with public ownership. The introduction of a market economy has, by increasing economic motivation and competition, greatly increased the speed of economic development. The result is clear; China's economic reform has resulted in a relatively quicker economic speed of development. But at the same time the social difference between rich and poor has increased to an unbelievable extent in such a short time. In many cases the owners of private enterprises have gone from nothing or almost nothing to a situation in which they have become millionaires. Meanwhile the market has engaged in various trends of privatization, which in turn further increases social differences, accompanied by huge new unemployment.

Therefore those characteristics of socialism or so-called communism, such as public ownership, income equality, and social community, which are regarded by Derrida as kinds of "specters," now may be also accepted by some Chinese, because they come and go, just like "specters."

As concerns the second case, those "specters" of capitalism which were criticized by Marx, such as private ownership, income differences, and social conflict, and which are regarded by Derrida as kinds of "specters," have now appeared. They also behaved as "specters," because they did not really disappear under certain circumstances and return again under other circumstances. Rather they just like hang around like "specters."

In the first case, the term "specter" is understood in a positive sense. Although it is difficult to apply it to reality, it also differs from Fukuyama's view. And in this sense, Derrida said that the specters of Marx could not die as Fukuyama said. They are always in some place before us, although they would never be in being (*Dasein*). In the second case, the "specters" are understood in a negative sense, and it is difficult for them be annihilated completely. For Derrida the critical spirit of Marx could incline either towards the second case or towards the first case, which could be understood as "rethinking Marx."

Considering the situation of reform in China, we could say, when the traditional model of socialism has been replaced by a socialist market economy with a Chinese character, that as a result the negative "specters" have taken the place of the positive "specters." The critical spirit of Marx does not only concern treating negative "specters" which are now haunting us, but also, so to speak, treating positive "specters."

It is clear that the other "specters" that "post-Marxism" points to have challenged both of these types of "specters." For example, when "post-Marxists" say that the main social differences are not derived from the economic base, and that the big income differences are not the result of capital investment, maybe their "specters" are more difficult to comprehend. But, to some extent, this represents the actual situation, not only in developed countries, but also in China. It is in this sense that Derrida's deconstruction interests some Chinese Marxist scholars.

IV. Where should the critical spirit of Marx point?

If contemporary negative "specters" are different from those "specters" criticized by Marx, what should the critical spirit of Marx point at? I think, today, it really confuses many Marxists in China as well as in Western countries. But Chinese Marxists may be even more concerned about these questions, not only because Marxism is the dominant ideology of Chinese reform, but

also in that the negative “specters,” even in the new form, are still regarded as negative elements which need to be criticized. Therefore the actual situation for Chinese Marxists is more complicated.

China is a huge country on the way to industrialization or modernization. But as it is a huge country, after the historical transition which has been taking place since the end of the 20th century, it has mixed different periods of history in its different areas. Most of its Western rural areas are still in the period of pre-industrialization. Most of its areas are in the period of ongoing industrialization. Some seaside areas already have the character of post-industrialization or post-modernization. In this kind of situation, and also in regard to the situation in advanced capitalist countries (southern – middle European and northern American countries) or the capitalist countries with a social democratic character (northern European countries), those “specters” that Marx has criticized are more disputed today than in the time of Marx.

To give a simple example, the market was refused by Marx for the period of socialism (or the first stage of communism). But now even most Marxist scholars agree that some form of market is necessary for economic activity.

One could criticize the negative results of a market economy, but even those negative results have a different meaning compared with the time of Marx. Together with some form of market mechanism, private ownership is one of the other much disputed points. It has been accepted to some extent by some post-Marxists, by some analytical Marxists, and by critical theorists, when they consider that in the situation of post-industrialization the huge income is not derived from or not only the result of an investment in private property. Therefore income differences which come from economic power have now been expanded with cultural power, political power, and the power of the sciences.

No matter whether we agree with them or not, the essence of this phenomenon has disclosed the fact that cultural ability (which may be more reliant on an individual’s gift and genetic inheritance), political power, and so on, at present could play out in the same way in the process of acquiring material value or social value rather than simply owning money (capital), all of which shows that the causation of social inequality could be understood in a wider sense. Meanwhile social difference not only within one country but also in the whole world is continually being enlarged.

Besides this, the traditional fetishism criticized by Marx has been supplemented with a dummy materialism. The phenomenon of alienation criticized by Marx has intruded further into people’s spiritual life, which means the basic alienation deriving from the fact that, as Marx pointed out, the worker’s production is confiscated by the capitalist, now has acquired an even wider sense. The most disputed point is perhaps as concerns the concept of exploitation. Marx’s theory of labor value not only has been challenged from the side of economic calculation, such as the relations between value and price, but also from the side of the social sciences, such as the production of surplus value. The question is whether it is due to the labor force or the knowledge of science, management, and so on.

Based on this, the central concept of equality, which, for left-wing liberals, could be achieved by redistribution or for critical theorists, should also be understood from political, cultural, and moral sides, differs from what Marx thinks. For Marx equality must be achieved through the reform of the relations of production. It is in this sense that the concept of equality really becomes a “specter,” not only because it is difficult to realize in a real situation, but also because the concept itself is difficult to master.

There is no problem in Derrida’s eyes that the spirit of Marx is still alive, well, and necessary. At the present, when the whole world is in the shadow of a huge financial crisis which is typically

caused by the “specters” of capitalism, the answer to the question about what the critical spirit of Marx should point to is clearer, and it is in this sense that the “specters,” both negative and positive, need to be re-thought and understood further.

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