

SOME THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCTIVE FORCE DEVELOPMENT AND GRADUAL ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIALIST RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION IN VIETNAM TODAY

TRAN VAN PHONG *

Abstract: This article provides some theoretical arguments on the relationship between developing productive forces and gradually establishing socialist relations of production in Vietnam nowadays. The problems include: theoretical understanding of productive forces, relations of production, the modernity of productive forces; specific characteristics of socialist relations of production, criteria determining the advanced or outdated nature of relations of production. According to the author, the economic features of socialism comprise of: a highly developed economy based on modern productive forces and adequate, advanced relations of production; the worker is the real owner of the production process; the fruits of labour are distributed fairly, contributing to social welfare and benefits.

Key words: Productive forces, relations of production, socialist, socialism, Vietnam.

1. Theoretical understanding of productive forces and relations of production

Different socio-economic regimes have different productive forces, relations of production and hierarchical structures. Productive force is a part of the previous society that is maintained and further developed in the later society, illustrating the “continuity” of social history. Meanwhile, previous relations of production are replaced by new ones; relations of production “are *temporary and historical in nature*”⁽¹⁾, representing the “segmental” nature of history; and therefore, *relations of production depict the outstanding feature of a socio-economic regime*. This explains why improvements in relations of production are regarded as the

general rule in establishing socialism, while socialist industrialization for productive force development is only a characteristic of the transitional pathway towards socialism without undergoing capitalism. Aware of this fact, we understand why Vietnam needs to carry out industrialization and modernization to develop a modern productive force, and particularly why we need to focus on creating and perfecting socialist relations of production.

Understanding the modernity of productive forces is not an easy task as this modernity goes in hand with its historical feature, for

(*) Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy.

⁽¹⁾ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1996), *Completed Works*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol.27, p.659.

which there is no constant benchmark. However, the modernity of socialist productive forces should be illustrated in 4 aspects: firstly, *the advanced level of workers* (workers are highly skilled; capable of creative thinking and creative work; capable of adjusting quickly to changes in the market economy; have good ethics and discipline, a modern working spirit, high productivity and efficiency); secondly, *the modernity of production tools* (the modernity of the tools of production is also historical in nature, depending on the technology level of the world and the ability to utilize them in each particular country); thirdly, *the modernity of the subjects of labour and means of production* (this is shown in the fast and direct transition of social intellect into productive forces of social production); fourthly, *the harmonious modernity between workers, tools of production and subjects, means of production*.

It should be noted that, according to Karl Marx's argument on socio-economic regimes, compatibility with the advanced level of productive forces requires for correspondingly modern relations of production. That is, if there is a modern productive force, relations of production should be modern as well. The modernity of relations of production is shown in all three relations: ownership of factors of production; management of production; distribution of labour products. Criteria determining the modernity of such relations should address the following: suitability with the development tendency of productive

forces of mankind; suitability with the development level of productive forces and which enhances such development; creation of a healthy production environment; fostering, encouraging workers to innovate and contribute their best to achieve higher efficiency and productivity. After all, modern relations of production should be worker-cantered, only then it can maximize the role of workers as well as of technology and machineries.

2. Distinct characteristics of socialist relations of production (different from other relations of production, especially the capitalist ones)

The *Political programme of Vietnam's Communist Party in 2011* has pointed out the specific characteristics of socialist relations of production created by the people as "advanced relations of production" suitable with modern productive forces. The suitability of relations of production here means *suitability with the development level of productive forces*. This is manifested in increasing social labour productivity; improved living standards of workers; that working conditions of workers are ensured and constantly enhanced; that production technology, production lines, equipment, working tools are constantly modernized and innovated... However, compatibility between relations of production and the level of development of productive forces alone is not enough to determine the distinct features of socialist societies. Therefore, the Party's *Political programme of 2011* went one step further from previous

perceptions on this issue because it emphasized and specified that relations of production should “advance in a suitable manner”. *Advanced relations of production should be manifested foremost in the purpose of social production, which is, in the first place, for the worker’s wellbeing, and not for profit maximization.* This is the fundamental distinction between socialist and capitalist relations of production. In practice, the current capitalist relations of production are still adequate with the development level of productive forces in capitalist countries. Without this compatibility, capitalist economies would not have been able to develop. But capitalist relations of production have lost their advanced position, as in essence, they are against the advanced development trend of productive forces. Furthermore, relations of production should have the same purpose with social production. History shows that the ultimate purpose of capitalist production has always been profit maximisation and not for the benefit of humankind in general and of workers in particular. This was thoroughly analysed by Karl Marx in his book “*Capital*”. Even though compared to capitalism back in the early days when Karl Marx lived, today’s capitalism has adopted many advanced changes, nevertheless, its profit maximisation nature has remained unchanged: “Creating surplus value or profit is the absolute principle of this mode of production”⁽²⁾. Investment poured into modern productive forces aims for profit maximisation alone.

At the same time, capitalists adjust relations of production not only for these to match with the development level of productive forces but also for specific “advancement” purposes. Regarding the ownership of production materials, capitalists carry out equitization plans; a few workers will be able to purchase shares of their own companies. However, this has failed to prove that the socialisation characteristic of capitalist relations of production has elevated in accordance with the advanced socialisation characteristic of modern productive forces. Furthermore, as the amount of shares owned by workers is very limited, workers in fact have no rights with regards to the production process. Ever since 1916, in his book “*Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*”, V.I.Lenin pointed out that corporate equitization with low priced shares affordable to workers “are merely one of the ways to empower the financial tycoons”⁽³⁾. This is a way to mobilize capital from workers, though not abundant in volume, and also a psychological solution that helps mitigate the conflict between capitalists and workers. With regards to organisational relations, the capitalist production management style also made certain adjustments to promote the expertise, skills and competence of workers, through

⁽²⁾ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1993), *Completed Works*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 23, p. 872.

⁽³⁾ V.I.Lenin (1985), *Completed Works*, Tien Bo Publishing House, Moscow, Vol. 27, p. 439.

which production efficiency and revenues can be improved. Simultaneously, capitalists also apply advanced science and technology to the organisation and management of production activities. This might have negative repercussions on human-to-human relationship in relations of production, but it reduces direct confrontation between capital owners and paid workers. On distributional relation, capitalists also carry out adjustments on income distribution, creating more favourable working conditions for workers. But of course, compared to the labour that workers actually perform to capitalist employers, the compensation that they receive in return is negligible. It has been shown in reality that the adjustments made are limited. This is due to the fact that capitalist employers cannot overcome their own limitations.

In the *2011 Political programme*, the Party put the emphasis on the *advanced nature* of socialist relations of production that Vietnamese people have built. However, we cannot neglect the “suitability” feature. This is because, “suitability” means following strictly the objectivity rule (relations of production have to match with the development level of productive forces); while referring to advancement means addressing the social characteristic of relations of production. Advancement - suitability, suitability - advancement have to go hand in hand with each other for there have been cases when relations of production were appropriate with the development level of productive

forces but which was not advanced. The capitalist relations of production of nowadays is like that, or in mountainous and especially poor areas, the primitive tools used for corn-planting while being suitable, they are not advanced. Also shown in practice, relations of production may be advanced but not in line with the development level of productive forces. This was what happened to Vietnam’s relations of production before the renewal period of 1986. In both cases, productive forces were hindered from development.

3. Criteria for determining the advanced or outdated nature of relations of production

Classic supporters of Marxism-Leninism have pointed out that ownership relations in relations of production are the basis for this distinction. In terms of history, relations of production based on private ownership of production materials have different development stages, and relations of production in later stages are always more advanced than those in the ones before (imperialist relations of production are more advanced than those in the slavery era; and capitalist relations of production are more advanced than imperialist ones). Nevertheless, relations of production based on private ownership of production materials cannot be more advanced in that meaning.

Specific characteristics of future societies were presented differently in various works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir I. Lenin, however, a common feature emphasized by the three have always been the *public ownership regime*. Hence, in theory as well as in the practice of realistic socialism, public

ownership is regarded as the fundamental feature of socialist relations of production, and relations of production based on public ownership of production materials is the fundamental feature of socialist societies. But then, reality has forced us to reconsider the theoretical understanding of socialist public ownership. It can be asserted that, the shortcomings of public ownership in the socialist regime before the renewal era of 1986 were one of the causes of the socialist crisis. The problem was intensified when the private sector became a component within the national economy and even more, it is now the driving force for establishing and developing a socialist-oriented market economy in Vietnam today. Meanwhile, the limitations of the public ownership regime not only hindered the development of productive forces, but also allowed for exploitative behaviour that stole away national resources, resulting in severe social conflicts and clashes.

During the renewal period, so as to overcome the previously incorrect, subjective and voluntarist understanding (going against the rule of suitability between relations of production and development level of productive forces), the Communist Party of Vietnam put forward two advancement in theory (prior to the 10th Party Congress): *Firstly*, the Party continued to regard public ownership as the distinct feature of socialist relations of production, however, it considered that public ownership would be applicable only to main production materials. *Secondly*, the

Party asserted that those are relations of production of socialist societies which should be the goal to aim to in the future. This way, relations of production are established and developed not by eliminating “non-socialist” economic sectors but through creating and developing a socialist-oriented market economy. As there is the need to ensure compatibility between relations of production and the development level of productive forces, it is imperative that in the socialist - oriented market economy, many ownership types should co-exist. *From the theoretical point of view, it can be said that, relations of production based on private ownership cannot have as their objective advancement for the workers. Due to historical conditions and contexts, we might interpret socialist relations of production as in the Party’s Political programme of 2011.* However, by affirming that socialist relations of production once established are not only in line with the development level of productive forces but also advanced in nature, we are *insinuating that such relations of production should be based on public ownership of production materials (even if that were the main ones)*. Only by relying on public ownership of (main) production materials, we can really ensure advanced relations of production. Many argue that, not asserting that public ownership is the characteristic of socialist relations of production is the revised perception, suitable with Vietnam’s current conditions. It also eliminates discrimination against the private sector and

allows this sector to grow. This argument, though groundless, has been accepted by many. The Political programme of 1991 and official documents of Party Congresses before the 10th Party Congress have distinguished the feature of relations of production in future socialist societies as the co-existence of different ownership types, and equality between economic sectors in the socialist-oriented market economy currently built and developed today. It is worth noting that the official documents of the 10th and 11th Party Congresses gave no indication of public ownership of main production materials in future societies' relations of production, but indirectly confirmed that regime in the currently running socialist-oriented economy of today: "Develop a socialist-oriented market economy... The state sector maintains its leading role. The collective sector should be enhanced and developed. The state and collective sector should gradually become the solid foundation for the national economy"⁽⁴⁾; "To understand thoroughly the socialist orientation of the country's market economy means: (...) To develop an economy with many ownership types, many economic sectors, in which the state keeps the leading role; the state sector and the collective sector should gradually become the solid foundation for the national economy"⁽⁵⁾.

In his book "*Principles of Communism*", Engels warned that one cannot abolish private ownership and adopt public ownership in a subjective and voluntarist manner. The

question is: are the principles behind *The Communist Manifesto* on eliminating private ownership still valid? Some argue that private ownership will always exist, even in future communist societies, because public ownership applies only to main production materials. Others say that, the message of abolishing private ownership in *The Communist Manifesto* should be understood as elimination of private ownership of capital and not of private ownership in general. The basis for the latter argument is that, before presenting the formula of private ownership elimination, *The Communist Manifesto* said: "The elimination of ownership relations previously formed is not an inherent characteristic of communism", "The characteristic of communism is not eliminating ownership regime in general, but getting rid of the capital ownership regime"⁽⁶⁾.

This interpretation is unfair and against Karl Marx explanation because: *firstly*, *The Communist Manifesto* said not to eliminate "ownership regime in general" (and not "private ownership regime in general"); *secondly*, *The Communist Manifesto* clearly stated that: "But the current private ownership of capital is the ultimate and most comprehensive indication of modes of production and

⁽⁴⁾ Vietnam Communist Party (2006), *Official Documents of the 10th National Congress*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, pp.73-74.

⁽⁵⁾ Vietnam Communist Party (2011), *Official Documents of the 11th Party Congress*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p.77.

⁽⁶⁾ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2004), *Completed Works*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 4, p. 615.

ownership of products based on class conflicts, on one person exploiting another one”⁽⁷⁾. Whereas regarding ownership regimes prior to private ownership, there is no need for communism to abolish them, as “industrial development has been eliminating them on a daily basis”⁽⁸⁾. Hence, when eliminating capital ownership, the “ultimate and most comprehensive indication” of private ownership, communism has got rid of private ownership in general. The formula “eliminating private ownership” is understood in that way. This message of *The Communist Manifesto* was further explained by Engels in *Principles of Communism*: a proletarian can only free himself after eliminating private ownership in general⁽⁹⁾. A similar response was provided when replying to a question on “eliminating thoroughly private ownership”⁽¹⁰⁾. In the *Charter of the Federation of Communists*, the objective of the federation was specified as “to build a new society where there is no class and no private ownership”⁽¹¹⁾.

Of course, the mind-set of the founders of communism on eliminating private ownership was not always constant. They also had shortcomings in terms of historical value and also expressed spontaneously a certain subjective desire. Clearly, they could not have foreseen the disastrous consequences of the distorted public ownership regime that followed afterwards. However, *they never stopped advocating for a society without private ownership*, thanks to which there can be no exploitative

regime; even though they also never denied the historical role of private ownership that went in hand with exploitative regime, including the ancient Greek slavery era. More than that, they even highly regarded the historical value of capitalist production.

The problem is, the private ownership regime that needs to be abolished does not include private ownership of workers but it is the kind of ownership based on which exploitation can take place. It is “the production and ownership means based on social conflicts, on the fact that one person can exploit another one”, as mentioned before. Karl Marx has clarified the different nature of personal ownership and private ownership. *Personal ownership* is “ownership generated by an individual, his labour, the ownership that is the basis for all personal freedoms, activities and independence”⁽¹²⁾. Whereas according to Marx, *private ownership* does not refer to ownership of a sole individual, but only as private ownership, based on which the owner can appropriate the fruits of labour of another person. This prevails only in a few types of ownership, different private ownership regimes, involving “the production and ownership means based on social conflicts, based on the fact that one person can exploit another one”. Therefore, capitalist ownership is private

⁽⁷⁾ *Ibid*, p.615.

⁽⁸⁾ *Ibid*, p.616.

⁽⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p.461.

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p.473.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p.732.

⁽¹²⁾ *Ibid.*, p.616.

ownership and not personal ownership. Thus, Marx wrote that: “If capitalism involves collective ownership, belonging to all members of society, then it is not personal ownership converting into social ownership. Only the social aspect of ownership has changed. Ownership has lost the element of class”⁽¹³⁾.

In his work *Capital*, Karl Marx considered capital ownership as the denial of personal ownership of the working mass and all private ownership regimes before capital ownership are *the first denial*, while the denial of capital ownership by public ownership (socialist ownership) is *the denial of denial*. This denial “does not restore private ownership, but it does revive personal ownership”⁽¹⁴⁾. But the thing is, this personal ownership is created based on socialisation of production materials and land that capitalism brought about. Therefore, as mentioned in *The Communist Manifesto*, “personal ownership cannot turn into capital ownership anymore”⁽¹⁵⁾.

Thus, in communist societies, there is not only public ownership (public ownership and common ownership – Marx used these terms more frequently) but also personal ownership, especially, personal ownership plays a very important role. Personal ownership not only involves individual ownership, but it is also restored in common ownership, social ownership, meaning even in public ownership.

4. Distinct features of socialist relations of production

First of all, it should be noted that, the

distinct feature of socialist relations of production is the characteristic of the socialist society that Vietnamese people has successfully created, and not of the society of today’s socialist-oriented market economy. In this aspect, we can adopt the interpretation of the 9th Party Congress, and include additional features related to relations in management, production planning and distribution of products to clarify the outstanding characteristics of socialist relations of production. Specifically, we can conclude that, in socialism with already built-in management and production planning relations, “workers are the real owners of the production process”; while on relations of product distribution, it is “the equal distribution of the product of labour together with social benefits and welfare”. Thus, the economic characteristics of socialism can be summarized in the following phrase: “*a highly developed economy based on modern productive forces and adequate, advanced relations of production; the worker is the real owner of the production process; the fruits of labour are fairly distributed for social welfare and benefits*”. This summary indirectly implies that socialist relations of production should be based on public ownership of (main) production materials.

⁽¹³⁾ *Ibid.*, pp.616-617.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Completed Works*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol.23, pp.1059-1060.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Completed Works*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol.1, p.561.

