

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS OF MODERNIZATION IN VIETNAM

Tran Tuan Phong^(*)

***Abstract:** In this article, we aim to show that in socialist countries, the process of modernisation is a form of modernisation based on the Marxist-Leninist theory of socialism as the most progressive and advanced socio-economic formation in human history. The process of modernisation, in various specific historical contexts, represents the creative application and development of Marxism-Leninism. In Vietnam's current developmental context, the process of modernization, which is associated closely with industrialization, is a process of humane and sustainable modernization under the leadership of the Communist Party, grounded on three fundamental pillars: a socialist-oriented market economy, a socialist rule-of-law state, and socialist democracy.*

***Keywords:** Modernisation, Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, socialism, Vietnam*

1. Modernisation: Capitalist and Socialist Modernisation

Throughout human history, the modern era has been marked by revolutionary transformations associated with the emergence and development of capitalism, which began in the 16th century. This involved the formation and development of the capitalist mode of production, the rise of major economic centres, and the mechanisation of dynamic large-scale factories that applied scientific and technological knowledge. These developments replaced the closed and rudimentary feudal guilds, which relied

mainly on human and animal labour. There was also a shift from subsistence agriculture to commercial agricultural production. Traditional kinship ties gave way to work relationships, the caste system was dismantled, and the moralised political status quo was broken. As a result, interpersonal relations became simplified, people migrated from traditional rural villages to urban areas for work and residence, and state-level political institutions replaced rural communal power

^(*) Dr., Institute of Philosophy, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

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structures.

Some significant changes occurred in the spiritual life of humans. Humanist ideas from the Renaissance and Enlightenment demonstrated new perceptions of man and their role in society and nature. As a new bourgeois social order replaced the old theocratic order, the Church gradually ceded its dominant position to the secular bourgeois state. This state prioritised rationality and individual freedom. Proposals for social and human reform shifted focus from God to the world of man, proclaiming “man is the centre of the universe” and aiming to build ideal social institutions for human well-being. The liberation of the individual from feudal ideology and the “spiritual dictatorship” of the Church paved the way for cultural and scientific creativity. It gradually fostered the creation of a society conducive to human flourishing. The humanism of this period not only reflected contemporary aspirations but also charted a path for historical progress. Instead of passively accepting a divinely ordained world order, humans were intellectually liberated and actively used reason to explore nature and realise new models of social life. This proactive spirit expanded the scope of human creativity, visible in literature, art, science, philosophy, politics, and religion. The development of the capitalist mode of production transformed science from a form of “pure knowledge” into a direct

productive force and social institution. The wide application of scientific achievements changed human life, transformed nature, and advanced social progress. The successes of the French Bourgeois Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England during the 17th century enabled the rise of capitalism as a global system. Modernisation during this period is often referred to as capitalist modernisation, starting with the 18th-century Industrial Revolution in England, which replaced agricultural civilisation with industrial civilisation, substituting simple manual labour with mechanised production. Concurrently, an intellectual revolution transformed people from mere consumers of material goods into seekers of spiritual fulfilment, ushering in the age of knowledge civilisation. The great achievements of capitalist modernisation—particularly in liberating and developing the productive forces, science, and technology—are undeniable. In many developed capitalist countries, high economic conditions and the labour movement led to reforms that introduced progressive social welfare regimes.

However, capitalist modernisation, as “a socio-economic development process driven by profit, focused on wealth accumulation and material consumption as the benchmark for civilisation, with individual interests as society’s foundation”, has exposed “*its unsustainability in the economic, social, and ecological spheres*”¹. Capitalist

modernisation was accompanied by market expansion, colonial exploitation, and imperialist wars that destroyed material wealth, cultural heritage, and countless human lives. It failed to eliminate injustice and instead deepened social polarisation. Countries following this model could not avoid cyclical economic crises or resolve inherent contradictions, especially the growing mismatch between increasingly socialised production forces and private ownership. Under the profit-maximising logic of capitalism, both people and nature remained tools/instruments for capital accumulation. Human and natural exploitation grew increasingly sophisticated. Private ownership led to stark social divisions and the dehumanisation and impoverishment of workers. Western scholar Allen W. Wood acknowledged this disparity: “Most people believe the U.S. is the richest country in the world, but it is also the most unequal: the 400 wealthiest Americans hold more wealth than the bottom 150 million. The richest 1% own more than a third of the total wealth, exceeding the combined wealth of the bottom 95%”².

With the establishment and the development of the Soviet Union and socialist countries in Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, and Laos, a different path of modernisation emerged: a process of modernisation closely associated with socialist model(s). One can argue that the

realisation of socialism/socialist model in these countries involved undertaking socialist modernisation. This process entailed the creative application of Marxism to the specific historical, cultural, and social conditions of each nation.

Compared to earlier socio-economic formations, particularly that of capitalism, the superiority of socialism (as a part of the communist socio-economic formation) lies in its ultimate goal: the comprehensive and free development of all men. Under socialism, human beings are no longer tools for exploitation in the service of capital and profit, but ends in themselves. Socialism must fully liberate human potential and essential nature. This was affirmed in *The Communist Manifesto*: “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”³. Thus, socialism, as a more advanced and humane society, must aim to provide conditions and opportunities for comprehensive human development.

V.I. Lenin’s creative and flexible application of Marx and Engels’ scientific socialism to Russia’s specific conditions led to the success of the 1917 Great October Revolution. The emergence and development of real socialism after this revolution validated the Marxist-Leninist proposition about scientific socialism. Lenin’s creative

adaptation was evident in the practice of wartime communism, nationalisation, and later the New Economic Policy (NEP), which embraced transitional economic forms after the civil war of 1921. These measures helped transform a war-ravaged and economically backwards Russia into a socialist state with growing industrial power. Gradually, real socialism took shape in the Soviet Union based on socialist principles. Before 1991, it was known as the Soviet model. During its existence, it succeeded in eliminating exploitative classes and gradually empowering the working people. The Soviet State managed all social resources, promoted heavy industry, developed basic infrastructure, universalised education, and addressed healthcare and social welfare. It rapidly modernised and industrialised to withstand intervention by 14 imperialist countries after its founding and defeated fascism in World War II. The USSR also stood as a counterbalance to capitalist imperialism and a supporter of national liberation, peace, and progressive democratic movements worldwide.

The collapse of socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the 1990s marked the failure of a specific socialist model—the Soviet one—not the end of socialism as a socio-economic formation. Even with its limitations, this model achieved significant economic, cultural, and social progress and contributed to global human liberation. Historically, it

elevated the USSR and socialist Eastern Europe to the ranks of leading industrial nations. It profoundly influenced global politics and played a key role in dismantling colonialism, inaugurating a new era of national independence and global socialist transition. This collapse compelled the remaining socialist countries to implement vigorous reforms and innovations. By creatively adapting Marxism-Leninism to each nation's specific context, these countries must find their path to socialism and suitable modernisation in new historical conditions. Practice has shown that only comprehensive reform and innovation can ensure the survival and continued development of socialism. Vietnam's *Doi Moi* (Renovation), China's reform and opening-up policy, and emerging 21st-century socialist models in other countries reaffirm the inevitability and great potential of socialism in humanity's historical journey. These models, as creative applications of Marxism-Leninism to specific historical contexts, reflect the diversity of the modernisation process in specific historical contexts.

2. Some Fundamental Characteristics of the Process of Modernisation in Vietnam

The process of modernisation, which is closely associated with industrialization, in Vietnam is the creative application and development of Marxism-Leninism within the specific historical context of the country.

The materialist dialectic helped the founders of Marxism affirm that: “For us, communism is not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust. We call communism the real movement that abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence”⁴.

The current global context shows that capitalism has yet to escape the cycle of recurring crises. In contrast, socialism increasingly shows signs of recovery and development through new, diverse, and innovative models. This innovation is closely linked to the creative application of Marxism-Leninism. As Lenin emphasised, “We do not regard Marx’s theory as something complete and inviolable. On the contrary, we believe that it only laid the foundations for the science that socialists must continue to develop in all directions, if they do not want to fall behind life.” President Hồ Chí Minh also affirmed: “We cannot be like the Soviet Union, because the Soviet Union has different customs, traditions, history, and geography... We may take a different path toward socialism”⁵.

Process of Modernisation in Vietnam Embodies Humanism and Sustainability

Within Vietnam’s development context, the distinction between capitalist modernisation and the process of modernisation (and industrialization) is clearly recognised by the Party and Government. The process of

modernisation in the Vietnamese context, as a form of continuous innovation and creativity, is a real movement aimed at humanistic goals (for the people), striving to eliminate alienation, oppression, exploitation, and injustice, enabling everyone to develop freely and comprehensively. Party documents and government policies clearly demonstrate the close connection between our specific process of modernisation and the goals of humanistic and sustainable social development. The process of modernisation must be people-centred and carried out by the people. The *Vietnam Sustainable Development Strategy for 2011–2020* emphasised that people are at the heart of sustainable development: “People are both the subject, the primary resource, and the goal of sustainable development.” The strategy highlights the need to: “Create conditions for all individuals and communities to have equal opportunities for development, access to shared resources, and participate in, contribute to, and benefit from development, building a sound material, intellectual, and cultural foundation for future generations. Use resources efficiently, especially non-renewable ones, protect and enhance the living environment; build a learning society and promote environmentally friendly lifestyles and sustainable production and consumption”⁶. The overarching goal of the Sustainable Development

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Strategy is:

“Sustainable and effective growth in parallel with progress and social equity, environmental protection, political and social stability, and strong national independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity”⁷. In Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW (November 17, 2022), on promoting national industrialization and modernization through 2030, with a vision to 2045, the Party asserts that: “Modernizing the country is a fundamental and comprehensive transformation of the economy and social life... the central task of the socio-economic development strategy, aimed at building an independent, self-reliant economy with proactive and deep international integration, rapid and sustainable development, becoming a high-income, developed country along the process of orientation”⁸. “Accelerating industrialisation and modernisation is the mission of all people and the political system, placing people at the centre... ensuring a harmonious balance between economic development, social progress and equity, and environmental protection”⁹.

Process of Modernisation Led by the Communist Party of Vietnam.

The leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is the foremost factor determining all revolutionary successes, including the success of the process of modernisation (and industrialization). As the late General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng

emphasised: “Over the past century, no political force in Vietnam other than the CPV has demonstrated sufficient bravery, intelligence, experience, prestige, and capability to lead the country through hardships to glory and continuous success”¹⁰. The Party ensures the success of process of modernization because: “Only the Communist Party, with the nature of the working class — the vanguard of the proletariat, laboring people, and the nation — is the most genuine and radical revolutionary force, bravely striving and sacrificing for the people and the country; fully loyal to ideals and devoted to serving the people”¹¹. President Hồ Chí Minh also affirmed: “Outside the interests of the country and people, our Party has no other interests”¹². He viewed people’s interests as the revolution’s goal and the Party’s ideal: “The Party is not a place to seek personal gain or power. It must fulfil its mission of national liberation, making the country prosperous and people happy”¹³.

Modernisation in the Context of a Socialist-Oriented Market Economy.

The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam clarified: “The socialist-oriented market economy is our general economic model during the transition to socialism. It is a modern market economy, integrated internationally, operating fully and synchronously according to market laws, under the management of a socialist rule-of-law state led by the

Communist Party of Vietnam, ensuring the socialist orientation for the goal of ‘a prosperous people, a strong country, democracy, justice, and civilization’¹⁴. As General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng emphasised, “Introducing the concept of a socialist-oriented market economy is a fundamental theoretical breakthrough of our Party, stemming from Vietnam’s realities and selectively learning from global experiences”¹⁵. A key goal of the socialist orientation is to address social issues effectively. The harmonious relationship between economic growth and social justice clearly demonstrates the superiority and humanity of socialism as a more advanced and equitable economic model than capitalism, rather than placing profit as the ultimate goal, which often results in alienation, inequality, exploitation, and social conflicts. Socialism centres on people and human development. It seeks to resolve the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalism, aiming for a fair, stable, and happy society.

Clearly, based on the creative application of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought to Vietnam’s current development reality, the Communist Party of Vietnam has remained steadfast in its path of leading the country toward socialism — a society that is better and more advanced than capitalism, where human beings are always placed at the center and the happiness of the people is the highest goal. Accordingly, the Party has consistently emphasised

that economic development must go hand in hand with social development, economic innovation must be aligned with innovation in social policy, and economic growth must be linked to social progress and justice. As the late General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng affirmed, the socialist society that Vietnam is striving to build is: “...a society in which development truly serves human beings, not one that exploits and tramples on human dignity for profit. We need economic development accompanied by social progress and equity, not increasing wealth disparity and social inequality. We need a compassionate society built on solidarity and mutual support, oriented toward progressive and humanitarian values, not one driven by unfair competition and a ‘big fish eats small fish’ mentality for the selfish interests of a few individuals and factions”¹⁶.

The Party has also clearly defined that the relationship between economic development and the realisation of social equity is closely tied to the goal of Vietnam’s rapid and sustainable development strategy. Social development, based on the principles of progress and fairness, requires a rapidly growing, highly efficient, and sustainable economy capable of mobilising material resources to achieve social progress and justice. Only with fast and sustainable economic development can the country address emerging social issues during the development process, and fulfil the

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goal of social development and human development, for the people, by the people.

State Management under a Socialist Rule-of-Law System.

The process of modernisation (and industrialization) in Vietnam is conducted under the management of a socialist rule-of-law state of the people, by the people, and for the people. With people at the centre, the goal is to serve their legitimate interests, and they are the true subjects of this process. As the late General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng noted: “We advocate building a socialist rule-of-law state truly of the people, by the people, and for the people, based on the alliance of workers, peasants, and intellectuals under the leadership of the Communist Party. The State represents the people’s sovereignty, organises the implementation of Party guidelines, and establishes mechanisms for direct and representative democracy”. The socialist rule-of-law state serves as: “A tool to realise and enforce people’s sovereignty, ensuring and protecting the interests of the vast majority”¹⁷.

Process of Modernisation in the Context of Socialist Democracy.

Vietnam’s political system operates on the following mechanisms: Party leadership, state management, and people’s ownership. As emphasised by General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng: “Democracy is the essence of socialism, both its goal and its driving force. Building socialist democracy, ensuring

real power for the people, is a crucial and long-term task of the revolution”. Socialist democracy ensures people’s rights and enables their active participation in social development. The 2011 amended Platform for National Construction during the Transition to Socialism emphasised the need to: “Build and gradually perfect socialist democracy, ensuring that democracy is realised in practice at all levels and across all sectors. Democracy must be associated with discipline and law, institutionalised, and legally guaranteed”. The 13th Party Congress added the concept of “people as beneficiaries” to the motto: “People know, people discuss, people do, people inspect, people supervise, and people benefit”. This inclusion strengthens the principle of people’s sovereignty and the essence of socialist democracy as both the goal and motivation for building a new society. Broad democratic practice, both within the Party and in society, is also a mechanism for power oversight.

3. Conclusion

Today’s global context shows that capitalism remains mired in cyclical crises, while socialism shows signs of recovery and innovation. The process of modernisation (and industrialization) in socialist countries, including that of Vietnam, is a real movement aimed at overcoming capitalism’s present state. It is continuous innovation focused on humanistic goals and the comprehensive development of human nature.

For Vietnam, the CPV has clearly stated that modernisation and industrialisation are central to the country's socio-economic development strategy, aiming to: "Build an independent, self-reliant economy that integrates deeply and effectively with the world, develops rapidly and sustainably, and becomes a high-income, developed country with a socialist orientation".

In Vietnam's current context,

the process of modernisation (and industrialization) is identified as "a national endeavour, involving the entire political system, putting people at the centre, businesses as key actors, and ensuring harmony between economic development, social progress, equity, environmental protection, urbanisation, rural development, economic restructuring, and labour transformation"¹⁸.

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