

MARX'S VIEWS ON SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION AND THE CAUSE OF BUILDING SOCIALISM IN VIETNAM^(*)

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***Abstract:** In this paper the author try to clarify the view of K.Marx on social differentiation based on Marx's materialist conception/understanding of history. As the author shows, based on Marx's view, social differentiation will be viewed in a scientific, concrete and comprehensive manner: it will be understood in terms of materialist and dialectical views on man, society, and the historical development of human society. The author also demonstrates that Marx's theory of social differentiation encompasses his vision of the socialist and communist socio-economic formation as the superior and humane soico-economic formation that seeks to eliminate oppression, exploitation, and social inequality, while promoting the all-round development of man. Thus, in the case of Vietnam, Marx's view on social differentiation and Communism was creatively embraced and applied by President Ho Chi Minh in the process of building socialism in Vietnam.*

***Keywords:** K.Marx, Materialist conception of history, social differentiation, socialism, Vietnam.*

1. Introduction

Karl Marx's views on social differentiation have been widely recognized by many scholars, especially sociologists, as a key example of the conflict theory of society. According to sociologist T.Bilton, K.Marx provided one of the most comprehensive and powerful

theoretical approaches to modern sociology and political science. Therefore, later theories of social differentiation and class differentiation

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have often drawn upon Marx's explanation of class, even when sociologists ultimately reject Marx as a mistake overlooked by history. The reason for this debt is that Marx's theory of society is primarily based on the study of economic relationships, and these economic relationships form the foundation of class. For Marx, class relations are the key to understanding all aspects of society because "economic interests, political power, and social prestige all originate from class structure, which goes beyond income groups and (they) are created according to the way in which the mode of production is organized socially". Furthermore, "every society entails class exploitation based on production relations, which Marx calls the mode of production. The key to understanding any given society is to identify which mode of production dominates it. From there, we can understand the basic model of social and political relations and evaluate the conflicts and potential changes inherent within that society"¹.

From Marx's perspective on class differentiation, we can see that as a society is divided into opposing classes with irreconcilable conflicts, it will inevitably lead to intense

class struggle. The origins of these social conflicts are closely related to the unequal relations/accesses to the means of production. Due to the antagonistic nature of the classes, class struggle aims to eliminate these contradictions, particularly those related to ownership relations, in order to move toward a classless society that will create the conditions for the harmonious development of a new mode of production that fosters the growth of productive forces.

However, to fully understand Marx's views on social differentiation, we believe that it is necessary to approach the issue from the historical materialist perspective of the founders of Marxism. From this standpoint, social differentiation will be viewed in a scientific, concrete and comprehensive manner: it will be understood in terms of materialist and dialectical views on man, society, and the historical development of human society. Marx's theory of social differentiation, within the context of historical materialism, also encompasses his vision of the socialist and communist socio-economic formation as the superior and humane socio-economic formation that seeks to eliminate oppression, exploitation, and social inequality,

while promoting the all-round development of man. These ideas were creatively embraced and applied by President Ho Chi Minh in the process of building socialism in Vietnam.

2. Marx's view on human development, society and history

Based on a critical reception of Hegel's view on the role of labor in the creation of society and human history, Marx developed his materialist theory of history and labor. While Hegel emphasized the importance of the human labor process in creating society and history as an "objectification" or "externalization" of the Absolute Spirit, Marx pointed out that "this is not history, not the ordinary history of human beings, but a divine history—history of ideas... humans are merely tools used by ideas or eternal reason to serve their own development". In contrast to Hegel's idealist view of history and society, Marx's materialist approach is evident in his analysis of the active role of human beings through production activities, which not only transform and reshape nature but also transform human beings themselves. The creation of society and history is the result of human beings' conscious, active engagement in production, not the passive submission to supernatural

or divine forces beyond and above them. Furthermore, in Marx's view, human history is a process of realizing human nature (the unfolding or "production" of the latent essential powers of human beings) through human beings themselves, in accordance with universal laws that they recognize or discover in their practical activity. Marx affirmed: "Since human nature is the true community of men, by manifesting their nature men create, produce, the human community, the social entity, which is no abstract universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essential nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth".

With the concept of socio-economic formation, Marx scientifically explained that this process of realization of human nature (species nature), carried out by humans, occurs continuously through different socio-economic formations. In other words, different socio-economic formations can be understood as different stages in the overall process of human development; they represent the "moments" or "phases" of a development that follows internal natural laws throughout human history. Different modes of production,

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ontologically speaking, are steps that mark the gradual realization of these essential human forces through various forms of social organization in the dialectical process of human nature development. At the same time, from an epistemological standpoint, they are important milestones in the process of human understanding, a specific understanding achieved through practical activity, which not only transforms the world according to universal, internal laws but also continuously changes the very nature of human beings.

In Marx's theory of socio-economic formations, we find that although capitalism, compared to previous socio-economic formations, has brought tremendous progress in human liberation—transforming people from subjects of authority to citizens—this does not mean that all members of capitalist society have equal access to the great achievements of capitalism. In capitalist society, which prioritizes profit and private property, the right to development and autonomy is linked only to those who possess private property (capital). Ownership itself affects the freedom and autonomy of those who do not own private property (the proletariat) and “forces

them to trade their time for survival to another person”. Consequently, those without property, without education or training, are often marginalized from the development of society under capitalism. In the world of capitalism, the rights to development and self-determination for many are not guaranteed. This is because: “First, when people do not have sufficient income in the market, their existence is threatened in terms of human dignity, and in some cases, their very physical survival is endangered. This violates their basic rights and their conditions of personal autonomy. Second, those who, due to lack of private property, are forced to sign labor contracts, which violate their standards of self-determination and dignity, are essentially deprived of their basic rights. They lose political autonomy. Third, those who are disadvantaged by the unequal distribution of wealth and limited political participation are also significantly restricted in their civil rights. Their political autonomy is not guaranteed”³. Under such conditions, the proletariat is degraded and becomes a tool or object used to generate profit for property-owning capitalists. The value of human beings is determined by a dehumanizing “free” market,

evaluated according to the surplus value that their labor can generate for the capitalists. Workers, who are the direct producers of society's material wealth, are among the most destitute. This profound class differentiation is part of the picture of capitalist society—a society marked by alienation. It is a society in which both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as products of “the world of private property”, vividly embody the self-alienation of humanity. “The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognizes estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is, to use an expression of Hegel, in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature”.

As a new economic-social form that replaces capitalism, the

progressiveness and superiority of the economic form of communism is reflected in its ultimate goal, which is the comprehensive development and freedom of the individual. The individual must be the end in itself in socialism/communism, not just a tool of oppression and exploitation for PROFIT, for CAPITAL as in capitalist society. Communism must be the complete liberation of people from all forms of class differences and social inequality. This is the economic-social form that facilitates the total liberation of the “essential forces” of humanity. This was affirmed by the classical Marxist theorists in the *Communist Manifesto*, stating that “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”⁵. Thus, socialism, as a more advanced and superior society compared to capitalism, must be a society that abolishes all class distinctions and eliminates social inequality, aiming toward the highest humanistic goal: the comprehensive development and freedom of all people.

3. Marx's view on social differentiation

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From the standpoint of materialist and dialectical understanding of historical development, we can gain a fuller understanding of Marx's concept of social differentiation, where the process of the division of society into classes is embedded within and determined by the development of human productive forces. As the classics of Marxism consistently emphasized, research on the structure and operation of society must "start from the very production of material life" in order to conduct investigations of the structure and operation of a society: "The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or estates is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged". Thus, in contrast to idealist views of history, we must understand that "... the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight

into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch..."⁷.

From the materialist perspective on history, K.Marx pointed out that the division of society into different classes is historical in nature, reflecting (and depending on) the development of the productive forces within certain modes of production. The division into classes leads to inequality and sharp social polarization, which results in class struggles between opposing classes. Marx clearly affirmed in his letter to J.Weydemeyer "What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production (*historische Entwicklungsphasen der Production*), (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society". To further clarify Marx's materialist arguments, F.Engels emphasized that the division of society into classes originates from the process of the social division of labor in human history: "The law of the

division of labor is the basis for class division". The social division of labor among humans aims to improve labor productivity and develop productive forces. The relationship between the division of labor and the level of development of productive forces was elucidated by the classical Marxist theorists in *The German Ideology*: "How far the productive forces of a nation are developed is shown most manifestly by the degree to which the division of labour has been carried. Each new productive force, insofar as it is not merely a quantitative extension of productive forces already known (for instance the bringing into cultivation of fresh land), causes a further development of the division of labour"¹⁰.

The connection between the division of labor and class division within society is tied to the development of productive forces, especially in societies where the productive forces are still at a low level. In such societies, class division is inevitable: "The separation of society into an exploiting and an exploited class, a ruling and an oppressed class, was the necessary consequence of the deficient and restricted development of production in former times. So

long as the total social labour only yields a produce which but slightly exceeds that barely necessary for the existence of all; so long, therefore, as labour engages all or almost all the time of the great majority of the members of society — so long, of necessity, this society is divided into classes"¹¹. Therefore, the elimination of class division, the abolition of oppression, exploitation, and social inequality can only be achieved when the development of the society's productive forces reaches a high level within a superior and advanced social economic form, that of communist society. "Division into classes has a certain historical justification, it has this only for a given period, only under given social conditions. It was based upon the insufficiency of production. It will be swept away by the complete development of modern productive forces. And, in fact, the abolition of classes in society presupposes a degree of historical evolution at which the existence, not simply of this or that particular ruling class, but of any ruling class at all, and, therefore, the existence of class distinction itself has become an obsolete anachronism. It presupposes, therefore, the development of

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production carried out to a degree at which appropriation of the means of production and of the products, and, with this, of political domination, of the monopoly of culture, and of intellectual leadership by a particular class of society, has become not only superfluous but economically, politically, intellectually a hindrance to development”¹².

The replacement of capitalist socio-economic formation with communist socio-economic formation is also the resolution of the fundamental contradiction that cannot be solved within capitalism: the contradiction between the social nature of productive forces and private capitalist ownership of the means of production. This contradiction hinders the development of productive forces and deepens the alienation and self-alienation of people in capitalist society. Therefore, the abolition of private property plays a decisive role in resolving this fundamental contradiction of capitalism. From the materialist historical perspective on social development, the classical Marxist theorists affirmed that the objective development of productive forces necessarily leads to the need to abolish the old relations of production

and replace them with new relations that correspond to the development level of the productive forces: “At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing relations of production... in which the productive forces have been developing up to now. These relations, once they were forms of development of the productive forces, become shackles on the productive forces... At that point begins the era of social revolution”, which is the social revolution or class struggle. The primary goal of this social revolution, or class struggle, is to abolish private property, as said in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property”. The classics of Marxism also pointed out that the abolition of capitalist property is to move toward the elimination of class division and the system of exploitation of one human being by another for the purpose of increasing profit: “The characteristic of communism is not the abolition of property in general, but the abolition of private capitalist property. But the current capitalist private property is

the final and most complete form of the mode of production and ownership of products based on class antagonism, where some people exploit others”¹⁵. More specifically, “Communism does not deprive anyone of the ability to possess social products. Communism only deprives the right to use that possession to enslave the labor of others”¹⁶. Moreover, communism aims toward the highest humanistic goal: the genuine and authentic development of humanity, As Marx wrote in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* “Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development”¹⁷.

Based on historical materialism, we can see that class division and social inequality are not permanent phenomena. Through the analysis of the structure of capitalist society, K.Marx not only clarified the origins and nature of class contradictions

within capitalism but also pointed out the inevitable historical trend of replacing capitalism with communism.

While some modern Western sociologists argue that social inequality is an objective and structural form that meets the needs of the entire society, determining the formation and internal logic of social inequality, they believe that no society can eliminate the phenomenon of social inequality. For example, scholar J.A.Schumpeter argued that social inequality is universal in all human societies, determined by differences in talent and abilities of individuals, which ensure personal advancement and achievement under different circumstances and times.

4. From Marx’s view on social differentiation and communism to Vietnam’s choice of socialism

As we have seen from the above analysis, Marx’s perspective on social differentiation, especially his views on socialism and communism as systems that aim to abolish oppression, exploitation, and social inequality, were embraced and creatively applied by President Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party of Vietnam in the practice (practical conditions) of Vietnam.

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In the process of seeking independence for the nation and liberating the people from colonial and feudal oppression, Ho Chi Minh realized that “there are many theories, many ideologies, but the most righteous, certain, and revolutionary ideology is Leninism”¹⁸. For Ho Chi Minh, studying and researching Marxist-Leninist theory “is to study the spirit of handling/dealing all issues, with all people, and with oneself; to study the universal truths of Marxism-Leninism in order to creatively apply them to the specific circumstances of our country”, contributing to “the cause of building socialism and liberating humanity”. Ho Chi Minh explained why he chose Marxism-Leninism and socialism: “Initially, it was patriotism, not communism, that led me to follow Lenin and the Third International. Step by step, through struggle and theoretical study of Marxism-Leninism, along with practical work, I gradually understood that only socialism and communism could liberate oppressed nations and the working people around the world from slavery”.

Ho Chi Minh chose the revolutionary path for national liberation and human emancipation

in Vietnam after carefully studying the bourgeois revolutions in France and America. He observed that in America, “Even though the revolution had been successful for over 150 years, the working class and peasants still lived in hardship, still plotting for a second revolution. This is because the American revolution was a bourgeois revolution, and bourgeois revolutions are not truly complete”. Similarly, in France, progress was not much better: “The French revolution, like the American revolution, was a bourgeois revolution, an incomplete revolution. While it proclaimed a republic and democracy, in reality, it deprived the working class and oppressed the colonies. Even after four revolutions, the working class in France still had to struggle for a fifth revolution to free themselves from oppression”²¹. Such incomplete revolutions, which merely changed societal regimes based on exploitation, failed to liberate people, especially the working class, from oppression and exploitation. Ho Chi Minh recognized that “No regime respects human beings, considers their legitimate interests, and ensures their satisfaction better than the socialist regime”²².

After leading the successful August

Revolution of 1945, which regained independence and sovereignty for the nation and freedom for the people, Ho Chi Minh's first and most important goal was the happiness of the entire population. "The government's work must aim at one sole purpose: to bring freedom and happiness to everyone". Ho Chi Minh clearly understood that the goal of regaining independence was to bring prosperity and happiness to the people; hence, "if the country is independent but the people are not free and happy, independence has no meaning". He further added, "If we achieve independence but the people continue to starve and freeze, independence also means nothing. The people only truly understand the value of independence when they are well-fed and well-clothed". The goal of building socialism was also made clear by Ho Chi Minh: "Socialism means making every person prosperous and happy"; "The purpose of socialism is to elevate the living standards of the people"²⁶. Or "In simple terms, socialism is about helping the working people escape poverty, providing everyone with jobs, prosperity, and a happy life"²⁷.

The Communist Party of Vietnam, particularly since the beginning of

the renovation period (Đổi Mới), has continuously focused on the theoretical and practical issues of building socialism in Vietnam. In his work *Some Theoretical and Practical Issues of Socialism and the Path to Socialism in Vietnam*, the late General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng affirmed that Vietnam must go through a long transitional period to reach socialism, with many steps and forms of economic and social organization interwoven, accompanied by a struggle between the old and the new. He specifically pointed out that bypassing the capitalist system means rejecting oppression, injustice, and capitalist exploitation; it also means rejecting outdated practices, unsuitable political institutions, but not ignoring the achievements and values of civilization that humanity has achieved in the capitalist development period²⁸.

The Communist Party of Vietnam pointed out the unresolved contradictions of capitalist development. Despite the achievements in economic and technological development, many issues related to economic and social crises remain unanswered because capitalism "remains fundamentally an

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oppressive, exploitative, and unjust regime. The inherent contradictions of capitalism, particularly the contradiction between the growing social/socialization character of the forces of production and capitalist private property ownership, not only remain unresolved but are becoming more intense. Economic, political, and social crises continue to occur". The development of modern capitalism, with its inherent flaws, is "the result of an economic-social development process that prioritizes profit as the ultimate goal, viewing wealth accumulation and material consumption as measures of civilization, and making individual/private interests the cornerstone of society"³⁰. These flaws are becoming more severe. Recently, issues like the widening rich-poor gap and deepening social polarization have become pressing problems for modern capitalism. In a world where "about 60% of global GDP is held by the 10 largest economies; the gap between the top 1% of the ultra-rich and the remaining 99% is increasingly widening; 82% of the world's wealth is generated by the wealthiest 1%, who own more than twice the total wealth of the remaining 6.9 billion people. In

2022, around 207 million people were unemployed, an increase of 21 million compared to 2019; even in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, 773 million people are still illiterate. In reality, modern capitalist societies always have between 15% to 20% of the population living in poverty"³¹. This fact has also been acknowledged by Western scholars, who note that although capitalism today has achieved many successes, "modern economic growth and the spread of knowledge have helped avoid extinction from the perspective of Karl Marx, but have not helped adjust the deep capitalist structures and the state of inequality—at least not as much as was once envisioned in the optimistic decades following World War II.

In Vietnam's socialist construction, one of the strengths of socialism is its ability to effectively address social issues. Balancing economic growth with social justice highlights the superiority and humanism of socialism as a progressive, just, and superior form of social organization compared to capitalism. Rather than making profit the highest goal, which leads to alienation and contradictions between people, society, and the environment—leading to enslavement, oppression,

exploitation, rich-poor polarization, and deepening social conflict—socialism places human development at the center, aiming to resolve the contradictions that capitalism cannot resolve/deal with in order to move towards a stable, just, equitable, and happy society.

By creatively applying Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought to Vietnam's current development, the Communist Party of Vietnam has remained steadfast in its direction of leading the country towards socialism—a better and more superior society than capitalism, always centering on human beings and the happiness of the people as the highest objective. Accordingly, the Party consistently links economic development with social development, economic reform with social policy reform, and economic growth with social progress and justice. As the General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng affirmed, the socialist regime that Vietnam aims to build is “... *a society where development is genuinely for the people, not for profit that exploits and tramples on human dignity. We need economic development accompanied by social progress and justice, not an increasing gap between the rich and*

the poor and growing social inequality. We need a humane, united, and mutually supportive society, oriented towards progressive and humanistic values, not unjust competition where ‘the big fish eats the little fish’ for the selfish interests of a few individuals or groups”.

Our Party has clearly identified that the social sphere/social field is the place where the socialist-oriented nature of Vietnam's development path is most concentrated. Economic development is an important goal, but not the only one, as Vietnam has chosen the path of socialist development. The economy is the foundation, but not an end in itself. Economic development is the premise, the means, and the tool for social development and the realization of social justice, social equality, ensuring development for all. This is the message in the important argument by General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng. The essence of the socialist system is to liberate and comprehensively develop human beings/all the people. While Vietnam's economic development is still behind developed capitalist countries, achieving real justice and real equality in the social field is

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where/what we can most demonstrate the superiority of the socialist system.

The Party also clearly identifies that the relationship between economic development and achieving social justice is closely linked to the objectives of the strategy for rapid and sustainable national development. Social development based on the principles of progress and justice requires a fast-growing, efficient, and sustainable economy capable of mobilizing material resources for achieving social progress and justice. Only rapid and sustainable economic development can provide the basis for addressing social issues that arise during development, as well as for achieving the goals of social development and human development, for the benefit of the people. Conversely, a fast-growing, efficient, and sustainable economy cannot exist without a certain level of fairness in society, where the majority of the population is not impoverished, intellectually inferior, physically weak, and where a significant portion of the workforce is unemployed, impoverished, or marginalized. Thus, focusing on the goal of achieving social justice not only better meets the people's needs/interests but also

helps develop human resources—the most important internal resource and motivation for development. Properly addressing social issues will positively impact economic development goals. Investment in social issues is, therefore, an investment in development from a sustainable perspective. The Party and State of Vietnam's correct, timely, and wise handling of the dual goals—economic development and effectively addressing social issues during the recent fight against the COVID-19 pandemic—is an important lesson and a valuable experience for implementing the strategy of fast, sustainable socio-economic development.

From an international integration perspective, it can be seen that Vietnam's viewpoint on resolving the relationship between economic growth and social justice—specifically, “Resolving well the relationship between economic growth and the realization of progress and social justice at every step, in every policy, and throughout the development process”—is entirely in line with the global development trend (sustainable and inclusive development), contributing to enriching and

deepening the concept of sustainable and inclusive development, which is currently being widely discussed globally, as well as the socialist nature of the market economy that Vietnam is building and developing.

The Communist Party of Vietnam has remained steadfast in its path towards building a better and more advanced society than capitalism, always placing people at the center, with the ultimate goal being the happiness of the people. Economic development is seen as a foundation but not an end in itself. It is a means to achieve social progress, equality, and human development. In this way, the Party ensures that both economic growth and social justice are achieved simultaneously.

5. Conclusion

Thus, we can see that from a historical materialist perspective, Marx's understanding of social

differentiation is scientific, concrete, and comprehensive. The division of society into classes is seen as a historical phenomenon, shaped by the level of development of the forces of production in specific modes of production. This division leads to inequality, intense social polarization, and class struggle. The class struggle eventually leads to a social revolution, replacing the existing socio-economic formation with a more advanced, humanistic socio-economic formation. Marx's ideas about social differentiation, rooted in historical materialism, align with his vision of the communist socio-economic formation, which strives to abolish oppression, exploitation, and inequality, creating conditions for human development. These noble humanistic ideas have been creatively adopted and applied by Ho Chi Minh in the process of building socialism in Vietnam.

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