



## The Three Contexts of Adorno's Discourse on the Development of Production Forces -- Comments Based on Marx's Perspective

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**Abstract:** Adorno is frequently engaged in dialogue with Marx when examining the unleashing of production forces, which, in his writings, Adorno presents mainly in three contexts. First, Adorno affirms, from a technological perspective, that the unleashed production forces lay the material foundation for "contemplation without inhumanity", which provides the possibility for human liberation. For this possibility to become a reality, Adorno states further, all exploitative systems must be eliminated absolutely. Secondly, Adorno cogitates on productivity in the interrelationship between production forces and production relationships. Based on his study of late capitalist society which he regards as "all of a piece", Adorno argues that production forces have been reduced to a defender to preserve capitalist relationships, rather than performing a revolutionary role. However, as evidenced by the law of declining rate of general profit, the micro-foundation of the essential contradiction of historical materialism, the development of production forces remains the underlying obstacle that cannot be overcome by capitalist production relationships. Finally, Adorno criticizes Marx for not going beyond industrialism; while, he endorses the abolition of production for production's sake and the primacy of practice. However, Adorno is guilty of the intellectual error of simply equating productivism, the primacy of practice, and industrialism.

**Keywords:** The development of production forces; Adorno; Marx; the technological perspective; the perspective of power relationships

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Material production, originally articulated as a purely economic concept, is as a matter of course not likely to be appreciated in the philosophical mainstream. Whereas, it must be made clear, from the outset, that Marx does not just examine the material production process from a technological perspective; in addition, he endeavors to delve into the analysis of the social form of material production from a perspective of power relationships. Material production is not only the production of wealth, but also the production of the immanent contradiction between production forces and production relationships. It is the socio-historical development driven by the movement of immanent contradiction that bridges the gap between "production" and "freedom". Unfortunately, the two-fold perspective of material production has not been accurately grasped by later generations. The first misconception may be attributed to the traditional Marxists of the former Soviet Union, who elucidate material production simply in terms of the development of production forces. Subsequently, Adorno, a Western Marxist, straightforwardly equates the Soviet-style reading with Marx's own understanding of material production, arguing that Marx remains a productionist in the framework of enlightenment thought and condemning Marx for trying to turn the world into a vast workhouse. The prevailing standpoint on the question of how Adorno views the development of production forces in the current academic research rests largely on this judgment, that is, Adorno questions and criticizes the progression of production forces.

When Adorno's texts are reviewed, they will reveal that Adorno's attitude to production forces is complex and contextually diverse. First, influenced by Marx, Adorno endorses the thought that, from a technological perspective, the unleashed production forces provide the possibility for men to engage in "contemplation without inhumanity" and are conducive to the substantial happiness of human

beings. Secondly, he considers productivity in the context of the interrelationship between production forces and production relationships. In light of the reality of late capitalism, Adorno argues that the production forces have already become the conservative forces for the preservation of capitalist production relationships, rather than maintaining a revolutionary role for the dismantling of capitalist power relationships, as Marx anticipates. Finally, productivity obscures real social confrontations, as well as contains a deeper level of identity violence in the process of conquering nature. Consequently, Adorno cries out against productivism and the primacy of praxis. It is a fact patent that Adorno is always in dialogue with Marx when analyzing the issue of production forces, therefore, it is exceedingly vital to comment on it from Marx's perspective.

## **2. THE UNLEASHING OF PRODUCTION FORCES PROVIDES AN UNDERLYING MATERIAL FOUNDATION FOR "CONTEMPLATION WITHOUT INHUMANITY"**

As Marx's successor, Adorno is equipped with a profound perception of Marx and agrees with him that the achievement of freedom in the future "presupposes a great increase in productive power, a high degree of its development."<sup>1</sup> In Adorno's opinion, society forging ahead is inseparable from the enhancement of production forces. "It would be possible to have contemplation without inhumanity as soon as the production forces are freed to the point where men will no longer be engulfed in a practice that want exacts from them."<sup>2</sup> As he approves of Alfred Sohn-Rethel: "this reality, conceived by Marx as a work process, must always be assumed as the underlying basis of human history."<sup>3</sup> "Contemplation without inhumanity" is diametrically opposed to the contemplation that is reduced to a method or an instrumentality and then is tightly confined to the obtuse praxis. To this day, however, under the pressure of the narrow praxis, there exists nothing but the "contemplation that contents itself this side of practice," i.e., contemplation as "a piece of obtuse practice."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it should make "the possible reduction of labour to a minimum,"<sup>5</sup> and the material created by the unleashed production forces offers the possibility for spiritual happiness and human freedom; without the development of production forces, "want is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored."<sup>6</sup>

It should be especially noted that Adorno emphasizes that the precondition for people to "tend to be associated with the unleashing of productive forces" is the "periods of harmony with the world spirit, of a happiness more substantial than the individual's."<sup>7</sup> In order for individuals to achieve substantial happiness rather than abstract, false, or formal happiness, the control of individuals by the social totality must be deconstructed, and the conflicts between the social forms and the individuals must be eliminated. These "periods", therefore, refer to the time when there is no longer social antagonism or class oppression. In a word, Adorno penetrates the connection between the unleashing of the production forces and the liberation from the bondage of scarce material production, and thus the universal development as well as the substantial happiness of the individuals.

Firstly, human time consists of labour time and free time. Labour time is for people to carry out production performances, the purpose of which is to obtain material goods that satisfy people's survival and livelihood. In contrast, free time is the "time not absorbed in the direct production of subsistence."<sup>8</sup> In the process of the free disposal and choice, people's abilities and talents are brought

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 244.

<sup>3</sup>This quote is from a letter written by Alfred Sohn-Rethel to Adorno in 1936. According to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, "Adorno's reply to the letter was an expression of spontaneous approval and a request for oral discussion of the matter". Cf. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit: zur Epistemologie der abendländischen Geschichte* (Weinheim: VCH, Acta Humaniora, 1989), S. 131, S. 140.

<sup>4</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 244.

<sup>5</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 244.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), p. 49.

<sup>7</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 306.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 30 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), p. 192.

into full play, and the free development of the subject is fulfilled. Specifically, in the free time without the burden of direct material productive labour, on the one hand, people "will be available for enjoyment, for leisure, thus giving scope for free activity and development."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, people can sufficiently deploy their ingenuity and wisdom to engage in more advanced activities, such as "the production of science, art, etc.,"<sup>10</sup> and the "contemplation without inhumanity" proposed by Adorno precisely belongs to this category. The kind of leisure and contemplation, which is categorically dissimilar from material production, offers the possibility of free individuality and substantial happiness for each person. How can we talk about substantial happiness in the operation of material labour dominated by external natural necessity and social pressure?

Secondly, the tendentially and potentially universal development of the productive forces -- of wealth in general -- is the basis<sup>11</sup>. The unleashing of the production forces of labour, driven by the progressively scientific revolution and technological amelioration, has considerably speeded up the productive efficiency of social labour, and the quantity of material goods produced per unit by living labour is rising, which lays the material foundation for meeting the material, cultural, and spiritual needs of labourers. The creation of this huge material wealth, on the one hand, depends less on the amount of labour expended, that is, "with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature."<sup>12</sup> Maximum labour efficiency means that abundant social wealth can be realized with zero labour input, and the improvement of labour productivity itself implies the historical demand for eliminating labour and liberating production forces of labour.

On the other hand, the achievement of rich wealth consumes only a minimal amount of labour time. "The saving of labour time is equivalent to the increase of free time, i.e., time for the full development of the individual, which itself, as the greatest productive force, in turn reacts upon the productive power of labour."<sup>13</sup> This opens up the possibility for binding material productive labour with immaterial productive labour such as spiritual happiness, and for the free and universal development of the human being. It is precisely in this sense that Adorno affirms the vital position of the development of production forces: to free people from the scanty material praxis and to make "contemplation without inhumanity" possible.

Thirdly, the material basis contributed by the enhancement of the production forces merely supplies the possibility bearing on human liberation, and for this potentiality to become a reality it is imperative to eradicate all exploitative systems and class relationships, so that the productive capacity of society belongs to the people rather than being dominated, controlled, and monopolized by a few members of the privileged classes. In the capitalist society, for example, the tremendous forwarding of the production forces has furnished the material and technological conditions for the fully all-around cultivation of man: "a system of general social exchange of matter, a system of universal relations, universal requirements and universal capacities."<sup>14</sup> Whereas, due to the existence of capitalist production relationships, a kind of power relationships, the necessary labour time and the surplus labour time of wage labour are diametrically opposite, and thus labour time and free time are divided and antagonistic. "The surplus labour of the workers is the condition of existence" of the class that does not immediately participate in material production, and "they (the non-workers) receive two things from this surplus labour. Firstly: the material conditions of life ..... Secondly: The free time they have at their disposal."<sup>15</sup>

The revolution in production relationships pushes the alteration of distribution relationships. Labour is able to be distributed equivalently among all members of society, and the labour of all people partakes in and completes the material production process, without situations in which some people are direct labourers while others are detached from material production. The socialization or universalization of labour constantly shortens the time necessary for production, free time, therefore, is rescued and

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<sup>9</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 32 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), p. 390.

<sup>10</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), p. 328.

<sup>11</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), p. 465.

<sup>12</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 807.

<sup>13</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), p. 95.

<sup>15</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 30 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), p. 190.

lengthened. "The intensity and productiveness of labour being given, the time which society is bound to devote to material production is shorter, and as a consequence, the time at its disposal for the free development, intellectual and social, of the individual is greater, in proportion as the work is more and more evenly divided among all the ablebodied members of society, and as a particular class is more and more deprived of the power to shift the natural burden of labour from its own shoulders to those of another layer of society. In this direction, the shortening of the working day finds at last a limit in the generalisation of labour."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Adorno correctly and acutely picks up on Marx's reasoning. When affirming that people associate with the released production forces, he particularly underlines a premise, namely, the abolishment of social domination or social power relationships. Free time depends on the social totality<sup>17</sup>.

### **3. SECOND, THE UNLEASHED PRODUCTION FORCES HAVE BECOME AN ACCOMPLICE WITH THE CAPITALIST PRODUCTION RELATIONSHIPS**

Adorno endorses the material foundation laid by the unleashing of the production forces from the technological perspective, but he does not cogitate on the production forces in isolation, and places it in interrelation with the power perspective represented by the production relationships. "The unleashing of forces no sooner parts with the sustaining human relations than it comes to be as fetishized as the orders,"<sup>18</sup> in fact, "the forces of production are, now more than ever, mediated by the relations of production."<sup>19</sup> Based on the reality of late capitalism, Adorno confronts a series of refreshingly emerging transformations: the magnificent progress of technology and the unprecedentedly tremendous uplift of production forces motivated by it. Industrial procedure or the economic logic of industrialism has reached comprehensively to the aspects of material production, politics, administration as well as culture, and society has become an all-encompassing totality, that is, "it is all of a piece."<sup>20</sup> Production forces, with rationality as the core principle, seem to independently shape society in an unproblematic and straightforward way.

As Marx's successor, Adorno resolutely opposes the empiricist common view: the production forces have gained autonomy, by contrast, the production relationships are treated as an obsolete category, and accordingly, are ignored. Adorno answers "that contemporary society is most certainly an 'industrial society' from the point of view of the forces of production." But "contemporary society is 'capitalistic' in terms of the relations of production. People are still what they were according to Marx's analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century: appendages of machines. No longer merely literally, in the sense that industrial workers have to arrange their lives in accordance with the dictates of the machines they serve, but in a much wider, metaphoric sense: they are forced to obey -- as role-bearers -- an abstract social mechanism without demur, and that right down to their most intimate feelings. Production needs the profit motive as much as ever."<sup>21</sup> What does matter, if we are to accurately define the current society, is still the definitive thinking of Karl Marx on capitalist production relationships.

Technology is not autonomous, but is restricted by profit-seeking capitalist production relationships. "In the final analysis, however, it is only the relationships between human beings that lie buried beneath the relations of production which have been rendered autonomous."<sup>22</sup> When the production forces penetrate the whole society, what is presented appears to be a mastery of the abstract subject over all, rather than the rule of man over man, which obscures the power relationships between people

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<sup>16</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), pp. 530-531.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis*, in *Critical models: interventions and catchwords*, transl. Henry W. Pickford Stichworte (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 307.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 245.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 238.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 246.

of actual experience. Technology and productive forces have been reduced to complicity in capitalist production relationships and become the conservative forces of social development. In the interim, capitalist production relationships constantly assimilating the uplifting productive forces have doubtlessly become more flexible and resilient. Furthermore, "the impotence and pliability of the masses grow with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them,"<sup>23</sup> unconsciously confirming and obeying the given order. Consequently, the capitalist production relationships hidden become more and more stable and consolidated.

"Marx's faith in the historical primacy of the forces of production, which were to dissolve the relations of production, has been far too optimistic. To this extent Marx, the avowed opponent of German idealism, remained true to idealism's affirmative theory of history."<sup>24</sup> Instead of dismantling capitalist production relationships as Marx predicts, the advancement of production forces has further preserved the objective tension and antagonistic aspects of persons over persons. In this regard, Bonfeld formulates that "Adorno's critical theory holds that the forces of production ..... manifest 'congealed relationships, which have become autonomous, objectified vis-à-vis human beings'."<sup>25</sup> This also means that the freeing of the production forces "has prevented the realization of the original goal, namely uncurtailed and genuine freedom."<sup>26</sup> It follows that, on the one hand, Adorno inherits Marx's analytical clue that unites the production forces and the production relationships to investigate their shaping of social formation. On the other hand, he dismisses the revolutionary role of the technological production forces conceived by Marx insofar as disintegrating capitalist production relationships, i.e., they "work in fixed productive conditions without exerting much influence on those conditions."<sup>27</sup>

Rather than inclining to the direct facts of industry and technology, as the empiricists do, Adorno adheres to the contradictory perspective of production forces and production relationships: Fast-moving technology, in reality, is motivated by the profit-driven capitalist production relationships: "one should bear in mind, for instance, that technological development has been channeled in a certain direction in deference to profit and power interests."<sup>28</sup> This analysis really deserves appreciation. But whether the promoted technology and enhanced production forces are the defenders and supporters of capitalist production relationships, as Adorno declares, but not the disintegrators and revolutionaries?

With the establishment of the capitalist mode of production, real subsumption of labour under capital springs up and all production is for the surplus value. Since the value of commodities is calculated by the socially necessary labour time rather than by its individual labour time, capitalists compete to resort to leading-edge scientific technology and forward-looking equipment to stand above the social average productive, so that the individual labour time would be less than the socially necessary labour time and accordingly the inner value of these commodities would be lower than their social value. In this way, the capitalists who introduce cutting-edge technology can sell commodities at a price lower than social value and higher than individual value, to pocket the difference, or, more accurately, the surplus profit, and then to capture an advantageous position in the fierce market competition. The capitalist is not an individual but a class as a whole. When each capitalist intending to cheapen the commodities elevates his production forces of labour, the ultimate result is the continuous improvement of the production forces of labour of society wholly. Although Adorno believes that late capitalist society has become a totality, he is not dulled by the non-essential appearance of the vanishment bearing on the proletarian class consciousness, as the commonly held view would have it, but holds that class still exists from the essential level of the production relationships.

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<sup>23</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 240.

<sup>25</sup> Bonfeld, W, *Negative dialectics and the critique of economic objectivity*, *History of the human sciences*, 29(2), p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 307.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 239.

The key point is that the production forces unconsciously raised by the capitalist class in pursuit of profit not only do not shield capitalist production relationships, but gradually impact and dissolve labour time and living labour. These two factors are the basic prerequisites on which capitalist production must rest and which play a decisive role in the survival and continuing endurance of the capitalist mode of production. The capitalist production relationship is a kind of unequal power relationship, with the unidirectional mastery of dead labour over living labour through the wage labour system, which prescribes the essence of capitalist production, that is, to unceasingly chase surplus value as abstract wealth. By drawing the living labour of the wage workers into the production process, the capitalists appropriate the surplus value created by the workers free of charge. Living labour is the source of surplus value, and the workers' labour time counts as the amount of wealth. Nevertheless, with the upheaving of production forces, "real wealth manifests itself rather ..... in the immense disproportion between the labour time employed and its product."<sup>29</sup> More and more material wealth and less and less labour time.

The organic composition of capital is something about a typically prominent sign of the level of production forces. Technological growth means the ever-growing portion of capital invested into constant capital, and the organic composition of individual capital is progressively higher, which, correspondingly, brings about a gradual fall of the individual rate of profit. "But competition makes it general and subject to the general law."<sup>30</sup> It is followed by a continuously rising organic composition of social capital in its average, and a continually falling general rate of profit. The mass of the employed living labour power in the production process tends to shrink constantly in comparison with the mass of labour objects, labour materials, and other material resources, etc. When profit, the underlying basis of the capitalist mode of production, infinitely tends to zero, the death knell of the capitalist production relationships will sound.

Capitalists may block the law of declining rate of profit by expanding the scale of production, or temporarily restoring the balance of various economic relations through the economic crisis. But the destiny of history to move forward, without any doubt, is the elevation of production forces, which means the amount of labour time and living labour necessary to produce a certain amount of use value will become less and less. This situation gradually extends from the local agricultural sector to all fields of material production, from the central country to the whole world, and eventually becomes a universal phenomenon of the whole society. The progressive tendency of the general rate of profit to fall, as a law, is "wholly independent of the will of the capitalist."<sup>31</sup> Because "from the nature of the capitalist mode of production, it is thereby proved a logical necessity,"<sup>32</sup> and it is also the micro-basis or concrete embodiment of the contradictory movement between the capitalist production relationships and the production forces of labour.

On the one hand, bourgeois production is "to develop the productive forces as if production did not take place on a narrow restricted social foundation, while, on the other hand, it can develop these forces only within these narrow limits."<sup>33</sup> "These limits come continually into conflict with the methods of production employed by capital for its purposes, which drive towards unlimited extension of production, towards production as an end in itself, towards unconditional development of the social productivity of labour. The means -- unconditional development of the productive forces of society -- comes continually into conflict with the limited purpose, the self-expansion of the existing capital. The capitalist mode of production is, for this reason, a historical means of developing the material forces of production and creating an appropriate world market and is, at the same time, a continual conflict between this its historical task and its corresponding social relations of production."<sup>34</sup> The contradiction between the purpose of capital accumulation and the means of vigorously developing production forces is the boundary that capitalist production can never cross.

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<sup>29</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), pp. 90-91.

<sup>30</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 264.

<sup>31</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 264.

<sup>32</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 211.

<sup>33</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 32 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), p. 274.

<sup>34</sup>Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 249.

Therefore, even though the fact that in the phase of state capitalism, the state is able to coordinate to maintain a reasonable ratio between the various sectors. "Organized capitalism", seemingly, could efficaciously overcome the shortcomings of free competition and eliminate the capitalist crisis. In fact, this cannot fundamentally prevent the universal trend and the law as such of the falling rate of general profit. The history of capitalist reality has substantiated with the iron-clad fact that the intervention of political power in the economy to avoid disproportions cannot escape and surmount the crisis. In the 1970s, accompanied by the outbreak of the oil crisis, the welfare state became unsustainable, and potentially internal contradictions within societies were brought to the surface and erupted, then capitalism was plunged into a peculiar circle of economic stagnation and inflation, which led to a new round of economic crisis.

The temporary relief and partial equilibrium achieved by the reform measures of state intervention cannot justify the law -- the tendency of general rate of profit to fall -- in a malfunctioning condition, quite the contrary, it is the form of manifestation of the intrinsic essence or the form in which the law as such asserts itself in a condition of society in which "control of economic processes is increasingly becoming a function of political power."<sup>35</sup> To comprehensively and scientifically dissect the operational mechanism of the capitalist mode of production and its developmental trend, we must put the empirical phenomena into the context of laws and internal essence for consideration in order. What is reflected behind is Marx's scientific method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete. If one were to confront the reality of late capitalism directly from a static perspective, as Adorno does, one would be enmeshed into empirical concrete and doubt the general laws. In a nutshell, it can be proved by reference to the law of declining rate of general profit (which is the micro-foundation of the essential contradiction of historical materialism) that Adorno's view, -- that the ongoing promoted production forces do not dissolve but rather strengthen the capitalist production relationship, -- should be rejected.

#### **4. THE ABOLITION OF PRODUCTION FOR PRODUCTION'S SAKE AND THE PRIMACY OF PRACTICE**

The reality of late capitalism has apparently demonstrated that production forces not only do not disintegrate capitalist power relationships, but conceal the "divisive and antagonistic aspects of actual experience."<sup>36</sup> It cannot supply a bridge to the realm of freedom, worse still, it incorporates a more profound level of identity logic in the process of reigning nature. Adorno, consequently, reproaches Marx for turning the whole world into a giant workhouse and shouts out the slogan against productionism.

Firstly, Adorno's ambition is to thoroughly and firmly deconstruct all the identity violence of equality-mongering, and he further deepens the critical insight into the production forces with the embodiment of man's domination over nature, from the production relationships dissected and criticized eminently by Marx. "The unleashing of productive forces, an act of the spirit that controls nature, has an affinity to the violent domination of nature. Temporarily that domination may recede, but the concept of productive force is not thinkable without it, and even less is that of an unleashed productive force. The very word 'unleashed' has undertones of menace."<sup>37</sup> In this context, Schweppenhaeuser comments on the idea that "in the victory march of the Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno perceive the Enlightenment's antithesis ..... The most highly developed condition of modern productive forces serves the highest imaginable degree of destruction, namely, war and the industrially organized mass murder of human beings."<sup>38</sup> The infinitely uplifting production is essentially a short-winded intellectual habit of anthropocentrism to violently conquer nature, which must engender wars and massacres.

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<sup>35</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 237.

<sup>36</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?* in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. V. Meja, D. Misgeld, N. Stehr (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 245.

<sup>37</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), pp. 306-307.

<sup>38</sup> Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno zur Einführung*, transl. James Rolleston Theodor W. Adorno: *an introduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 30.

Secondly, Adorno argues that productivism is substantially the praxis ontology, and that to abolish praxis is to abolish production for production's sake<sup>39</sup>. The primacy of praxis arouses a kind of conquering subjectivity, and any control or rule over other things cannot actualize genuine freedom and substantial happiness of human beings. More than that, to push praxis, simply and roughly, up to the position as the all-governing bustle would ignore and disparage the theoretical analysis that carries weight. "Praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail ..... False praxis is no praxis,"<sup>40</sup> which entails horribly dangerous consequences. Adorno cites the Stalinist socialist reality as an example: the slogan of primal praxis makes theory become the prey of power<sup>41</sup>. The paralyzed and impotent theory appears to be in oblivion concerning its function and mission of critical reflection upon actual life, and degenerates into a political tool for rationally positive argumentation for various policies.

Thirdly, the praxis limitlessly governing nature is inherent in the Enlightenment, is an inevitable product of the peculiar civilization of industrialization, and is a representative of the interests of the big bourgeoisie. "Marx received the thesis of the primacy of practical reason from Kant and the German idealists, and he sharpened it into a challenge to change the world instead of merely interpreting it. He thus underwrote something as arch-bourgeois as the program of an absolute control of nature."<sup>42</sup> Adorno takes the view that Marx can be regarded as not going beyond industrialism.

Adorno's delving into the underlying root of identity is off-puttingly profound, and his stance of anti-identity is considerably resolute, whereas it is tangibly evident that he, in a simplistic and crude manner, equates productivism, praxis first, and industrial civilization.

First, Adorno's mental error in making an effortless equivalence of productivism and praxis first from the perspective of anti-anthropocentrism and anti-identity needs to be questioned. On the one hand, it is Marx's general principle that everything starts from praxis or praxis first. Praxis is the objective sensuous activity of humans, which is the existential ground of society and the intrinsic motivation of historical development. How shall we cognize this general principle specifically? The principle of determination of production forces is a specific description of social history, and production forces are the specific grasp of the existence and advancement of social history on the basis of practical activities. The principle of determination of production forces, as a product of subject activities, is the concrete content of social praxis; and comprehending social history according to praxis inherently contains the bearing of comprehending social history from the determinant role of production forces. If there is no real material production linking man and nature, praxis will be reduced to an abstract concept, and the general principle -- everything starts from praxis -- is nothing but an abstract determination.

On the other hand, the concept of praxis, which is the overall summary of specifically diverse forms of subjective deeds, is more abstract than the concept of production forces. The objective laws or general trends of social history can solely be constructed in various practical actions of the subject, and the former can solely function in the latter. Man is the subject of social existence and historical development forever, and the objective laws are nothing but the ones of man and their performances. In other words, in the process of socio-historical development, on the one hand, it is the practical deeds of the subject carried out in manifold methods, and on the other hand, it is the formation and function of the objective laws, like, the determination of the production forces. The practical activities of the subject and the objective law of the determination of the production forces are inextricably connected, rather than two independently separate processes. Nevertheless, these are two aspects in the same historically operational process, with distinctive theoretical functions, and cannot be simply equated in a general manner, as Adorno does.

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 389.

<sup>40</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, Marginalia to Theory and Praxis, in *Critical models: interventions and catchwords*, transl. Henry W. Pickford Stichworte (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 265.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 143.

<sup>42</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966); transl. E. B. Ashton *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 244.



Secondly, the rejection of capitalist industrialism and the negation of praxis as the foundation of social history are substantially different issues at dissimilar levels, and the two should not be confused with each other. In this regard, Adorno can not clearly perceive the point<sup>43</sup>. The former is at the level of concrete appearance, while the latter is at the level of abstract essence. In accordance with this criterion, productivism is at the level of abstract essence as well. There is no abstract praxis i.e., praxis is definite, concrete, and historical. The law of determination of production forces, which is a specific explanation of the primacy of praxis, is also particular and temporal. As a general law, it is an objective abstraction of social reality and historically developmental process, and an objective comprehension of the overall trend of social motion. In terms of space, in different countries, nations, or regions, the modes of development of production forces, and the modes in which production forces modify production relationships are diverse. With regard to time, when the same country, nation, or region is at different stages of the historical procedure, the specific manifestation of the determinant role of production forces is not set in concrete, that is, it is also varied or even completely heterogeneous; for example, the tools of labour, which mark the developing level of production forces, have historical specificity. Based on the historical sequence, from the geographical environment of early human society, to the population of ancient times, then to the land of agrarian civilization, via the science and technology of industrial civilization, and to the information and data of the post-industrial era, all have led or are now leading the advancement of productivity.

For example, in the early days of human civilization when independent individuals had not yet emerged, communities such as families, and tribes located in various kinds of natural environments have prominent disparities in the means of production and means of living that are obtained from nature, and it is remarkably distinctive in the forms of production, ways of life, and products<sup>44</sup>. Another example is that in ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome, where science and technology have not yet been applied for material production, the population must be strictly restrained to maintain the civilization. Both are the specific grasp of the forms of manifestation or the differential historical characteristics of the determinant role of the production forces, which should not be confused with the determinant role of the production forces as the immanent essence and general law of social history. They are two issues at radically different levels. It is the failure to explicitly distinguish the abstract essence and the concrete appearance that renders Adorno's reasoning erroneous. Adorno thereby falls into the error of equating or assuming an equivalence between the specific forms of manifestation of capitalist industrialism driven by science and technology with the inner laws of social history, that is, the determination of production forces as well as the praxis first, and this error leads him then to discard, in an abstract, general and simplistic manner, the material production forces connected with nature.

Once Adorno adopts a negative attitude towards material production and praxis, how can real human beings survive and endure, thrive and prosper? How can negative dialectics be re-oriented and changed from being a thinking standpoint to becoming an item of real social history? How should reason, redeemed through art, care for reality? The negative dialectics is the specific path chosen by Adorno as the way to realize the ultimate liberation and freedom of humanity, which dooms him to do nothing but talk about it.

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<sup>43</sup>Cf. Zhang Yibing, *Dialectical imagination of atonality*(Jiangsu Province: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2016), p. 203.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), p. 357.