

The Idea of Distributive Justice in the Critique of Goethe's Program and Its Practical Implications

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Abstract: The Critique of the Gotha Program is an important embodiment of Marxist distributive justice. In this article, Marx profoundly criticized Lassalle's "fair distribution" as an impractical utopia and conducted an in-depth analysis of understanding and realizing fairness. Marxist distributive justice theory is a distribution theory based on the development of productive forces, premised on social equity, and aims to unify fairness with efficiency. It embodies the dialectical unity between productive forces and production relations, as well as between economic foundations and superstructures, forming the core content of Marxist political economy. This theory provides ideological guidance for the international proletariat to effectively engage in fair struggles and lays a theoretical foundation for building and advancing equitable societies in socialist countries. Marx's distributive theory carries substantial practical significance. It helps us understand the basic economic system, facilitates comprehension of the relationship between this system and the market economy, and aids scientific understanding of the distributive principles. Consequently, it offers crucial intellectual resources for achieving common prosperity.

Keywords: Marx; Critique of the Gotha Program; Fair Distribution; Socialism

1. Introduction

In his "Critique of the Gotha Program," Marx not only proposed important principles for correctly building a proletarian, but also profoundly expounded on Marx's theory of distributive justice. The Gotha Program emerged from the merger movement between two German workers' parties—the Lassalle and Eisenach factions—filled with Lassalle's opportunistic errors. While ill, Marx wrote the

"Critique of the Gotha Program," which thoroughly criticized Lassalle's main errors and provided specific analysis and refutation of his distributional views. This work elucidated Marxism's perspective on distributive justice. It holds significant theoretical guiding significance for people to scientifically understand fairness, correctly comprehend the distribution principles, and ultimately achieve common prosperity.

2. The Critique of the Gotha Program Refutes Lassalle's Idea of Distribution

During their merger with the Lassalleist faction, the Eisenach School abandoned essential Marxist principles and unprincipledly embraced bourgeois ideas from the Lassalleists. In 1875, both factions convened a congress in Gotha, where they formally adopted the "Gotha Program"—a document steeped in opportunism. That same year, while battling illness, Marx penned his "Critique of the Gotha Program," rigorously exposing its ideological flaws and successfully defending the core tenets of Marxist distributive justice.

First, it exposes the absurdity of Lassalle's detachment from productive modes when advocating for "fair distribution." Marx pointed out that "it is fundamentally erroneous to overemphasize and focus on so-called distribution issues" [1]. Marx maintained that fair distribution is never an abstract concept—it must be closely tied to specific historical productive modes and faithfully reflect the production methods of particular eras. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie's notion of "fairness" demands equitable allocation of means of production and subsistence resources according to capital standards. Consequently, labor alienation and class polarization become inevitable. Even though these dehumanizing phenomena force workers to abandon their humanity, we must acknowledge that this distribution principle remains practical and grounded in the capitalist mode of production.

In the Goda Program, the Lassalle School asserted that the total social product should "belong to all members of society." Marx pointed out: "'Belong to all members of society'? Does this include non-laborers? Then where is 'uncompromised labor income'? Is it exclusively for working members? If so, where are the 'equal rights' of all members?" This self-contradictory statement reveals that "the notions of 'all members of society' and 'equal rights' are clearly empty rhetoric." [2] Marx argued that distribution methods in any given period depend on the prevailing mode of production. Any discourse about distribution divorced from production realities is nothing but impractical fantasy.

Secondly, it critiques Lassalle's interpretation of "fairness and justice" as an abstract concept. Marx consistently upheld his historical materialism, explicitly stating that "fairness and justice" is never an abstract notion but rather a concrete historical category that evolves with social development. Under specific historical conditions, "fairness and justice" can never transcend the particular framework of its historical context. The concept of "fairness and justice" within private ownership remains bound by capitalist production modes. Lassallean theorists attempting to conceptualize distribution systems without considering capitalist production modes present their so-called "ideal blueprint for fairness and justice" as nothing more than impractical utopian fantasies.

In the "Goda Program," Lassalleists proposed an idealistic distribution principle stating that "the fruits of labor should be fully and equally distributed to all members of society" [4]. Marx pointed out that equality itself is historically specific and limited, and that the notion of "equal rights" here still corresponds to bourgeois privileges under capitalist private ownership. While workers might appear to receive fair compensation through their labor, Marx sharply observed that beneath this illusion of "equal rights" lay the ruthless exploitation and oppression of the bourgeoisie. As long as bourgeois private ownership persists on Earth, true "justice and fairness" will never materialize. The concept of "justice and fairness" as an ideology is fundamentally determined by the economic foundation upon which it is built—this constitutes one of the key principles of historical materialism.

Thirdly, it refutes Lassalle's petty-bourgeois

ideology of abolishing the "iron law of wages" and relying on state assistance to achieve "just distribution." Lassalle argued that workers' wages should not exceed the average minimum required for basic necessities. He contended: "If workers 'living conditions improve, productivity increases and the working population grows, thereby increasing the supply of laborers whose wages would drop back to previous levels or even below. Wages cannot remain below subsistence costs indefinitely, as this would lead to refugee populations, unmarried unions, and family planning practices. Ultimately, the reduction in impoverished industrial workers would decrease the labor supply again, causing wages to rebound to previous levels. Therefore, real average wages fluctuate constantly, always hovering around their inevitable decline – sometimes higher... sometimes lower..." [3]. Thus, Lassalle believed that eliminating poverty required abandoning wage laws rather than pursuing higher wages. Marx pointed out that Lassalle's advocacy for abolishing the "iron law of wages" essentially concealed the exploitative nature of wages under capitalism.

Lassalle sought to implement his "just distribution" system under capitalism through state intervention, but Marx viewed this vision as a mirage—like trying to catch the moon in water. Marx argued that workers seeking liberation must not rely on existing state apparatuses, but instead wield their own weapons to overthrow these institutions and establish self-governed power. Building upon this new regime, they would vigorously develop productive forces to ultimately eliminate class distinctions and achieve human liberation.

3. Critique of Goda's Program on the Interpretation of Marx's View of Distributive Justice

Marx established the close connection between "justice in distribution" and modes of production. In his **Critique of the Gotha Program**, he divided communism into two distinct phases: while emphasizing that distribution principles correspond to "distribution according to labor" and "distribution according to need." Rooted in historical materialism, Marx's theory of distributive justice adheres to the objective laws of social development. It maintains both grand objectives and practical considerations, standing as a shining gem in the Marxist theoretical treasury.

First, Marx posited that the essence of distributive justice lies in production modes. "Distributive justice encompasses not only specific allocation criteria, operational protocols, and evaluation methods, but also embodies the value pursuit of developing productive forces, transforming social relations of production, and establishing just social institutions." [5] Marx maintained that discussions on distribution should avoid circular reasoning about distribution itself, instead focusing on exploring the corresponding productive forces and production relations. The economic base determines the superstructure, thereby defining what constitutes justice. In slave societies, slave owners 'physical possession of slaves was deemed just; in feudal societies, feudal landlords' oppression of peasants was considered justified; and in capitalist societies, capitalists exploiting the proletariat was also regarded as just.

Marx therefore argued that for the proletariat to escape this "inhuman" condition, it must unite all forces, wield its weapons, and personally break the chains that bind them. They must dismantle the state apparatus that exploits them and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. Only through such action can the working class truly claim the right to discuss "justice in distribution".

Secondly, Marx posited that distributive justice evolves through a gradual process. He viewed communism as a long-term developmental journey. In his critique of the Gotha Program, Marx emphasized that during the initial communist phase, social productive forces require substantial advancement, and the bourgeoisie would inevitably attempt "resistance." Therefore, the primary task at this stage is to vigorously develop productive forces. In alignment with the level of productive forces, Marx proposed the principle of "distribution according to labor" as the corresponding distributive mechanism.

While "distribution according to labor" represents a relatively equitable principle that disregards individual and familial differences, assuming innate labor capacity as the standard for distributing society's total product, we must acknowledge its historical advancement over capitalism's "distribution according to capital." As the text states: "Under this system, no one can provide anything beyond their own labor, nor can personal property be acquired except

through consumption. The distribution of consumption goods among producers follows the same principle as commodity exchange—specifically, the exchange of equivalent forms of labor." [6] This principle aligns with and is an inevitable stage in the first phase of communist production.

Thirdly, Marx maintained that genuine "equitable distribution" could only be achieved in the advanced stage of communism. He emphasized that during the primary stage, where productive forces were not yet developed enough to realize distribution according to need, the principle of distribution according to labor must be adopted. This approach not only reflects workers' ownership of their labor outcomes but also demonstrates equality among them. However, the principle of distribution according to labor isn't absolute—it remains subject to historical conditions. Marx pointed out that even in socialist society, realizing distributive justice requires a prolonged historical process.

Marx painted a visionary blueprint: "In the advanced stage of communist society, when the enslavement of individuals by division of labor ceases and the opposition between mental and physical labor dissolves; when labor transcends mere subsistence to become life's primary need; when collective productivity grows with individual development and all sources of wealth flow abundantly—only then can we transcend the bourgeois perspective, inscribing on our banner: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!'" [7]

Marx's principle of "distribution according to need" fundamentally differs from the distribution views of the Lassalle School. Marx emphasized that realizing this principle requires two essential conditions: first, ensuring everyone achieves free and comprehensive development; second, achieving complete elimination of class distinctions and opposition, making labor the primary necessity of life. To fulfill these requirements, it is crucial to vigorously develop productive forces and attain highly advanced productivity. A sophisticated distribution system must be built upon highly developed productive forces as its foundation, and only in the advanced stage of communism can a truly equitable distribution principle be realized[8].

4. The Practical Implication of Marx's Thought on Justice to the Realization of Common Prosperity

Since the beginning of the new era, the principal contradiction in China has evolved into that between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development. The new era marks a new historical juncture, indicating that China's economic development should not be confined to high-speed growth but should instead boldly shift toward high-quality transformation. It also represents a new developmental stage within the primary phase, requiring steady efforts to enhance both material and spiritual wealth for the people. These strategic decisions are all rooted in the practical insights provided by the Critique of the Gotha Program[9].

First, we must recognize the basic national conditions of the primary stage. The realization of common prosperity cannot be achieved overnight; it is a gradual process. In the new era, on the path to achieving common prosperity, we must always recognize China's fundamental national conditions as being in the primary stage, and unwaveringly adhere to the basic economic system that prioritizes public ownership as the mainstay and distribution according to labor. At the same time, we must clearly understand the immense value of private ownership for contemporary China. "In modern China, private ownership remains an essential component of the socialist economic structure. Private capital plays a significant role in driving the creation of social wealth in contemporary China." Only by adhering to the "two unwavering principles" can we achieve continuous development of productive forces and improvement in people's living standards, advancing toward the grand goal of common prosperity[10].

Second, adapting to the evolving primary contradictions of the new era and advancing high-quality economic development. The "gradual realization of common prosperity" requires vigorous development of productive forces and continuous promotion of high-quality growth. In his **Critique of the Gotha Program**, Marx profoundly elucidated the importance of developing productive forces in socialist construction while explicitly revealing the phased nature of socialist development. To achieve the goal of common prosperity, we must continue addressing critical bottlenecks and accelerate the transformation of economic development models. Fundamentally, this relies on scientific innovation. Whether we can fully build a modern socialist country as scheduled

hinges on achieving self-reliance and strength in science and technology." High-quality development is both an essential requirement to meet people's aspirations for a better life and an indispensable component of "gradually realizing common prosperity".

Thirdly, improving the social security system to enhance people's wellbeing. Marx's theory of distributive justice emphasizes that true justice requires striving for the free and comprehensive development of individuals. The principal contradiction in the new era highlights the need to elevate living standards. "Common prosperity and human development reinforce each other – where everyone has opportunities to excel and grow, this vividly demonstrates the superiority of China's modernization path." [11] Establishing a robust social security framework is not only essential for ensuring people's well-being but also crucial for achieving both human development and shared prosperity.

5. Conclusion

In his critique of the Gotha Program, Marx not only exposed opportunistic tendencies within Germany's SPD but also profoundly articulated the concept of distributive justice. Grounded in historical materialism, Marx conducted an in-depth analysis of distributive justice, demonstrating that it is not an abstract moral principle but rather a historical category deeply intertwined with productive forces and production relations. He argued that unequal distribution in capitalist societies becomes inevitable due to the existence of private ownership of the means of production. Conversely, socialist and communist systems would establish the foundation for genuine distributive justice through public ownership of the means of production.

The Critique of the Gotha Program remains profoundly relevant for contemporary understanding of distributive justice. It underscores that distributive justice is not an isolated concept but inherently linked to the development of social productive forces. While advancing economic growth, we must prioritize addressing distributional issues to ensure equitable sharing of developmental gains among all citizens. This analysis reveals that realizing distributive justice requires a sustained historical process rather than hasty implementation. We should continuously explore distribution systems suited to China's national conditions as

social-historical circumstances evolve. Distributive justice must be rooted in public ownership. Studying The Critique of the Gotha Program provides theoretical support for upholding and improving the socialist basic economic system.

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