



# Marx and Engels' idea of "real man" and its contemporary value

## - Using the German Morphology as a reference

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**Abstract:** As the theoretical cornerstone of historical materialism, Marx and Engels systematically constructed the theory of "real man" in German Ideology through the critical transcendence of Hegel's speculative philosophy, Feuerbach's humanism and Stirner's individualism. The theory establishes its ontological provisions from three dimensions: the practical subject engaged in material production, the historical bearer of social relations, and the successor of life reproduction, thus constituting a scientific basis for analyzing the law of human social development. In contemporary practice, this theory presents three value dimensions: transforming into people-centered institutional design at the governance level, guiding the construction of a community of life between man and nature at the level of civilization, and promoting the practice of a community with a shared future for mankind at the global level, all of which jointly point to the ultimate value goal of "all-round human development". Its theoretical construction and practical extension provide fundamental value coordinates and practical guidelines for the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

**Keywords:** realistic people; "The German Form"; Anthropological thought

Marxist thought takes people's conscious activities as the theoretical starting point, and takes people's freedom and all-round development as the ultimate goal, and the concrete and practical "real man" embedded in the historical background is an important driving force for the construction of social development (Shen & Hou, 2023). The real existence of human beings also

makes it possible for human history to change and develop. Before Marx and Engels, the Renaissance and Enlightenment in the Western world had liberated human beings from the idea of "theocracy", and emphasized people's conscious initiative and active creativity, successfully promoting the transformation of the focus of philosophical thought from "God" to

"man" (Gan & Bai, 2023). Hegel attributed the origin of the world to the absolute spirit, and everything is only its manifestation, reversing the logical relationship between subject and object, and then Marx and Engels' reflection and criticism of the Young Hegelians, the concern and reflection on Feuerbach's "abstract man", and the dialectical rejection of the "one" in Stirner's thought, all greatly contributed to the liberation of man from the shackles of abstract conceptual categories in the German Form (hereinafter referred to as "Form"). As another important work of Marx and Engels after *The Holy Family*, "Morphology" profoundly expounded the idea of "real man" and pointed out that "real man" is the logical beginning of social history. As an important part of Ma'en's humanistic thought, "Morphology" is a representative work for the establishment of historical materialism, with "Morphology" as the main reference book, tracing the formation of Marxist "realistic man" thought, and then to the specific content of Marxist "realistic man" thought, and finally the three-dimensional analysis of the contemporary value of this thought, which has important reference significance for analyzing and studying the value concept of contemporary anthropological thought, exploring and guiding the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Li & Ma, 2023).

### **1. The rationale of Marx and Engels' idea of "real man"**

Thinking about the question of "man" has always been an important question that philosophers cannot avoid. The philosophical idea of "realistic man" advocated by Marx in "The German Form" was developed on the basis of criticizing and inheriting German classical philosophy, and

through the discarding of the ideas of representative figures such as Hegel, Feuerbach and Stirner, the Marxist idea of "real man" was truly constructed (Rosenberg, 2023). New materialism has restored the true appearance of "real man", thus realizing a great change in the history of philosophy, which is of great significance for understanding the essence of "man", realizing the transcendence and development of "man", and showing the vitality and vitality of Marxism in contemporary times.

#### **1. 1 Reflections on Hegel's "self-conscious" man**

The whole starting point of Hegel's philosophy is the idealist agnosticism that the mind determines existence, and thus his interpretation of "man" is also based on the philosophy of spirit (Hunter, 2025). As the master of German classical idealistic philosophy, he founded the most abundant objective idealism system in the history of European philosophy, and greatly perfected the idea of dialectics (Moore, 2023). In Hegel's view, man is always higher than the material of nature and reality, and he believes that the essence of man is a spiritual entity that can "think about himself" and have self-consciousness, and is a spiritual entity that can get rid of the shackles of material necessity and realize independent consciousness and freedom. Hegel upheld the absoluteness of the spiritual movement, and he always emphasized that the spirit originates from man and is the ultimate decisive force governing human activity. Therefore, Hegel's "self-conscious" human thought spiritualizes the essence of man, deprives him of his true essence, and speculative mental activity becomes the key to revealing the phenomenon of human activity, and at the same time

conceals the essence of man in the absolute spirit.

Marx was one of the important participants of the Young Hegelians, and many of his "anthropological ideas" were germinated under the influence of Hegel's ideas (Halikias, 2024). Marx, together with other participants of the Young Hegelians, explored human subjectivity from different aspects such as individual, spiritual, social, and natural, thus opening up the study of the nature of "real man" and its correct path of development. Later, after experiencing the "problem of material interests", Marx realized that he should not pursue "absolute and meaningless freedom" in an evasive way, but should strive for the freedom of human reality by changing the existing material basis and environment. His unique understanding of the critique of the religion of reality also shows that he has become aware of the interrelationship between man and reality, and lays a solid foundation for later reflection and criticism of Hegel's absolute spiritual thought.

## 1.2 A critique of Feuerbach's "abstract man"

Feuerbach's humanistic thought is an intermediate link in the formation of Marxist philosophy. Marx noted: "Feuerbach was the only one who took a serious, critical attitude towards the Hegelian dialectic, and only he really made discoveries in this field, in short, he really overcame the old philosophy." Marx also transcended his humanist ideas under the inheritance of Feuerbach's humanist materialist stance, perceptual existence, and the basic cognition and quasi-nature of religion (Peters, Neilson, et al., 2022). Marx's humanist thought is based on two cornerstones: dialectical materialism and historical materialism, and at the same time, it is based on the practice of

social production, continues to advance on the intuitive materialism of Feuerbach's humanism, overcomes the intuitiveness of human understanding, enriches and innovates Feuerbach's humanistic theory, and forms its own humanistic ideological system.

The Marxist idea of the "realistic man" is closely related to Feuerbach's humanistic thought, but there are many differences (Peters, Wang, et al., 2022). On the one hand, the connection between the two is manifested in the fact that Marx inherited the basic position of Feuerbach's materialism and clearly put forward the basic problem of philosophy, that is, the relationship between thinking and existence, and at the same time affirmed and inherited Feuerbach's humanist perceptual thought, his religious outlook and the idea of the alienation of human nature, Engels also said: "Feuerbach has influenced us more than any philosopher since Hegel." This shows the great influence of Feuerbach's own ideas on Marx. On the other hand, of course, this influence only existed for a period of time, and the critique and transcendence of Feuerbach's humanist thought was the essence of Marxism. Marx was skeptical of Feuerbach's intuitive materialism, and he believed that human activities should not only be limited to the natural world or only a single category, but should also be viewed in society and actively, so as to open up a source for the discovery of historical materialism. In particular, the advent of the concept of practice and the idea of historical materialism has brought about a great change in the history of philosophical thought, and also shows the maturity and perfection of Marx's ideological system of "realistic man".

It is precisely because of the criticism and liquidation of Feuerbach's

"abstract man" thought that Marx and Engels opened up a new vision in the field of "anthropology", they overcame the wrong trend of thought of idealism transcendentalism, materialist intuitive reflection theory and historical idealism, found a new paradigm of anthropological thinking reform based on materialism and practical outlook, and further drew the correct conclusion in "Form" that the "real man" engaged in social production and practical activities in the real society is the logical basis of all activities. It marks the basic formation of the scientific logic system of Marxism's "humanistic thought".

### **1.3 The rejection of Stirner's "sole egoism"**

Stirner is also one of the important sources that influenced the development of Marx's "realistic man" thought, Marx's rejection of Stirner's "sole egoism" made a big step forward in the stagnant "humanology" thought, and we can see the development and change of his "humanist thought" from Marx's critique of Stirner's metaphysical thought (Magness & Makovi, 2023). Stirner was a late German thinker, and his book "The One and His Belongings" has sparked mixed reviews for his posterity, and his main idea of the "One Man" is mainly reflected in this book. Stirner argues that if everything is justified for itself, then it is justified. However, the "I" in Stirner's thought is not the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit in Feuerbach's thought, the key to his thought is that I am the center of this world, everything must be dominated by me, I am the origin of this world, when the self develops to a certain extent, it becomes the solips, and the solips are necessarily free, and when this freedom develops to the extreme, it forms Stirner's onlyism, that is, anarchism. In Stirner's view, the devout attitude of human beings towards

religion and morality is nothing more than egoism, and he points out that "the individual is contrary to pure love, because he is 'egoistic', because he is not a human being, he is not this idea". Stirner also said that everything people do should serve themselves, and emphasized that only by thinking about oneself can self-worth and the meaning of one's existence be truly highlighted. Although Stirner pointed out Feuerbach's theoretical dilemma to a certain extent, it was still a rational idea and could not be truly implemented in reality, but Stirner's radical thought also shifted the focus of public opinion to the problem of "human dualism" and its dissolution, opening the way for Marx's idea of "real man".

Marx and Engels creatively put forward their own views on the basis of summing up experience. In Morphology, they ascribe the definition of the individual to: "German philosophy descends from heaven to earth; Contrary to it, here we ascend from earth to heaven (Ostrowski, 2024). That is to say, we do not start from what people have heard, conceived, or imagined, nor from people who have spoken, thought, conceived, or imagined, to understand flesh and blood, but we start from people who are engaged in practical activities", "that is, these individuals are engaged in activities, engaged in material production, and are therefore active within certain material boundaries, preconditions and conditions that are not arbitrarily dominated by them." There is no doubt that this was raised in response to the inadequacies and flaws in the ideas of Feuerbach and Stirner. Not only that, Marx also believed that Stirner's description of "individual egoism" was too superficial, that social relations were not simply egoistic, that "real man" constituted the most basic part of social production activities, and that Marx's

concept of "real man" also laid the cornerstone for his establishment of historical materialism. Stirner's thought deeply touched Marx, and Marx was inspired by it to form the logical framework of the Marxist idea of "real man".

## **2. The main content of the idea of the "realistic man" in the German Form**

The rationale for the formation of the Marxist idea of "realistic man" is not a simple superposition of the ideas of predecessors, but is obtained by critically inheriting, transforming, and innovating on the basis of fully absorbing some of the rational ideas of the former (Garlitz & Zompetti, 2023). Finally, in Morphology, Marx and Engels defined the nature of human beings for the first time, and took this idea as the logical premise for their study of social history and historical materialism. Here, the "real person" is not a simple and isolated individual, but an individual who is engaged in material means of production under certain social conditions and in a certain social relationship, and is subject to a certain social relationship, and can only achieve the creation of higher value by giving full play to his own subjective initiative. The "realistic man" has an important position in the intellectual history of Marx and Engels, which not only realizes the transformation of the philosophical way of thinking in a new sense, but also determines the ultimate goal of man's all-round development.

### **2.1 A "realistic person" is an individual engaged in the production of material materials**

The production of material materials is the most basic practical activity of human beings, which solves the contradiction between man and nature, and is used to meet the needs of people's material means of subsistence and means of production and labor, and

at the same time produces and reproduces the basic economic relations of society, determines the basic nature and appearance of society, and is a direct practical activity of creating material wealth. Marx and Engels also clarified in "Morphology": "These realistic individuals are their activities and their material living conditions, including those they already have and those created by their own activities (Arboleda, 2025). It can be seen that Marx clearly emphasized that the "real man" must be engaged in the production activities of material materials as the premise, and its essence is completely different from the "abstract man", the real man is engaged in the specific production event activities and thus more "concrete", and at the same time forms social relations on this basis and is more dependent on the real environment, so it also has authenticity. Marx and Engels discovered the theoretical origin of the "real man" in their criticism of the Young Hegelians, and at the same time actively absorbed the rational part of Feuerbach's concept, established the basic position of materialism, and determined that "man created religion, not that religion is limited to human beings", and finally made a deep reflection on Stirner's questioning of Feuerbach, established the reality of "man", and the individual engaged in the material means of production constitutes the basis of social life, that is, the basic condition of "real man". All aspects of Marxist philosophical thinking are also based on this. Marx thinks about the production and practice of "real man" from different dimensions from Feuerbach and Stirner's thoughts, and the anthropological thought in Marxism overcomes the defects of the two, and the "real man" based on the material means of production replaces the abstract human or biological

anthropological thought, which makes the study of anthropological thought turn to the realistic dimension, and the extended various theories also contain rich and profound dialectical thinking, and also promote the anthropological thought to open up a new realm of development.

## **2.2 The "real man" is the individual in the social relations of production**

Social relations of production are also an important factor that cannot be separated from the "real man". Marx believed that the various "relationships" between the various elements in real activities constitute the so-called "real man". These relations include not only the economic relations between economic elements, but also the political relations formed under certain social and historical backgrounds and social conditions, the ideological relations formed by the relations of ideological elements, and a series of other social relations (Brixel, 2024). Marx pointed out in "Form" that the "real man" is first of all an individual in the process of material production, and the first premise of human existence is food, clothing, shelter and everything else, which is the basic condition of all history. Therefore, the "real man" first of all exists a certain economic relationship, that is, an individual in the social production relationship, although this production relationship is a relationship between people, but it must be mediated and relied on by the natural relationship between people and things, and other political relations, cultural relations, ideological relations, etc. are derived from social production relations. Marx pointed out that "each stage of the division of labor also determines the mutual relations of individuals in terms of the materials of labor, the tools of

labor, and the products of labor", and at the same time, real people are subject to "their own productive forces" and "a certain development of communication". It was through the critique of Stirner's "oneness" and Feuerbach's thought that Marx and Engels concluded that the "real man" was not a "one" or "self-consciousness" living in isolation, but the social activity of many "real individuals" in social relations. Marx overcame the shortcomings in his previous thoughts, and distinguished the difference between humans and animals from the perspective of social relations, and the humanist thought of "real man" comes from the logical derivation of history, which has important reference value for reconstructing and understanding the way of thinking of "man" and constructing the value system of philosophical thought of "man".

## **2.3 A "real person" is an individual in the history of society**

As the foundation work of Marx's historical materialism, "Form" exists as a "realistic individual" in social history, and is an important source of Marx's exploration of history. Marx and Engels said: "The 'real individual' is their activity and their material living conditions, including those they already have and those created by their own activities. " The productive activity of the individual is its manifestation in the historical conditions, and their performance is consistent with the conditions of the material level, and the creation of history by the "realistic individual" ultimately depends on the material conditions of the practical activity they carry out (Leonid & Anton, 2023). On this basis, with the continuous improvement of the level of productive forces and the continuous change and development of social relations, different social production

conditions constitute different social production relations, and "man is the sum of all social relations", therefore, the "real individual" is always in social history, and a separate real individual who completely abandons history will not exist. Marx and Engels divided the "real individual" in social history into "human dependence", "material dependence", and "free individuality" according to different social conditions and factors such as the relations of production and the way of thinking in each era, corresponding to the three major forms in the development of human history, namely, pre-capitalist society, capitalist society, and communist society. Therefore, we have a history of how individuals behave in history, and Marx said: "History is nothing more than the successive succession of generations." Each generation makes use of materials, funds, and productivity left over from previous generations; For this reason, each generation continues to carry out the inherited activities in a completely changed environment, and on the other hand, it changes the old environment through completely changed activities". The realistic individual thought in "Form" reveals the development framework of historical materialism, and points out that the "real man" is not a purely abstract existence, and finds a realistic direction for the all-round progress and development of man.

#### **2.4 A "real person" is an individual in the history of society**

The production and continuity of life is an important factor in the continuous development of human beings over thousands of years, and Marx and Engels also highlighted the important condition of human reproduction when they examined the conditions and principles of "real man". The production and succession of life,

whether it is through labor to produce one's own life or through procreation to produce the life of others, constitutes a "real person" (Zhen, 2023). It can be seen that real people are inseparable from the production process of life, which is both the result of natural evolution and the premise of historical development. As the premise of all the ideas of Marx and Engels, it opens up the smallest perspective for us to observe human society.

Marx and Engels started from the problems and dilemmas of "real people" and thought about the more important future and destiny of mankind behind them, which was a great creation in the history of Marx and Engels' thought, which realized the transcendence of the old philosophical worldview from the philosophical dimension, and found the basic point of human social history in the historical dimension. It provides a unique perspective for the rational construction and optimization of the relationship between people and society in the new era, and it is still of reference significance.

#### **3. The contemporary value and practical essence of the idea of "real man".**

Marx and Engels' exposition of the idea of "realistic man" in "Form" all shows the scientific and truthful nature of Marxism and the true spirit of Marxism (Buissink, 2023). Over the past 100 years since Marxism was introduced into China, no matter how the times change, how the material living conditions change, and how the ideological concepts are innovated, it still has an important position. In the new era, we are facing new challenges and tasks, and the Marxist ideology in the new journey of realizing a modern and powerful country is still fresh and shining, and it has also pointed out the

direction for us to resolve a series of contradictions.

### **3.1 Always adhere to the "people-centered"**

Since socialism with Chinese characteristics entered a new era, realizing a strong socialist modernization is the dream of every Chinese, and the people's dream is the goal that communists have constantly worked hard for (He & Wang, 2024). Marx and Engels' thinking on "realistic people" is also an important theory that generations of communists internalize in their hearts and externalize in their actions.

The glorious history of the Communist Party of China is inseparable from the masses of the people, and always putting the masses first has also become an important key for the communists to achieve their goals over the past century (Gong, 2023). Whether it was fighting local tyrants and dividing up land during the Revolutionary War, or throwing away their heads and shedding blood during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, to the establishment of New China and the realization of Chinese-style modernization, the original intention and mission of the Chinese Communists have always been to serve the people and take the people as the center. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has insisted on taking the beautiful yearning of the people as our goal, and emphasized: "Born for the people, prosperous because of the people, always with the people, and striving for the interests of the people are the fundamental starting point and foothold of our party to build the party, rejuvenate the party, and strengthen the party." " In the new era, to build a modern socialist country, we must stand

firmly on the people's position, consciously achieve the people-centered, for the people to relieve worries, for the people's interests, the whole party must implement the mass line, respect the people's initiative, maintain flesh-and-blood ties with the people, and breathe with the people, share the same fate, and connect hearts. Contemporary China is experiencing the most ambitious and unique practice and innovation in human history, the people as the main force in the front line of practical change, the perception of the changes of the times is more real and keen, in the context of such an era, we must guide the cause of the party and the people with the people's theory, and similarly, we must also use this concept to promote the full manifestation of human subjectivity in China, so as to continue to move towards the ultimate goal of social progress and all-round human development.

### **3.2 Realize the harmonious coexistence of man and nature**

In "Form", Marx and Engels took "real man" as the logical starting point of all social history, and proposed that people engaged in the production of material materials in a certain social production relationship constitute "real man", which created human history in the process of continuous change, and at the same time saw the important role of practice, and completed the reform of historical materialism on this basis, which has important guiding significance for realizing the dialectical unity and harmonious coexistence of man and nature today (Ling, 2024).

With the development and progress of productive forces, the power of man is awakened, the original ecological balance is broken, the opposition and conflict between man and nature are increasingly prominent, and the huge benefits obtained by human beings in

the short term cannot make up for the harm we have caused to the natural world. Engels noted: "Let us not revel too much in the triumph of our human beings over nature. With each such victory, nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, at first, did achieve the results we expected, but later on, there were completely different and unexpected effects, often erasing the initial results. Marx and Engels profoundly emphasized the important position of the natural world in the development of human society, and provided important reflection and reference for our practical activities today. The Chinese people uphold their belief in Marxism and have made a completely different path choice from Western countries when facing the problem of the relationship between man and nature. Since the beginning of the new era, the representatives of the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core have included the modernization of ecological civilization as one of the important goals of Chinese modernization, emphasizing the implementation of the Marxist view of nature into practice. Therefore, it is particularly important to realize the construction of ecological civilization through the scale of human nature, green life is the development of human nature and self-restraint activities, we can only integrate green thinking into modern production activities, ways of thinking and behavioral habits, and integrate ecological civilization with the all-round development of human beings, in order to truly realize the dialectical unity of the all-round development of nature and man.

### **3.3 Promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind**

The era is the mother of thought, and scientific theories lead the

development of the times. Marx and Engels pointed out in "Morphology" that the emancipation of human beings first begins with the emancipation of the individual and depends on the emancipation of each individual in life; From the perspective of the form of the social system, the emancipation of all mankind is the aspiration and goal of communism, and the communist society will realize the emancipation of all mankind (Liu, 2024).

In today's era, the world is undergoing unprecedented changes, and human society is facing huge risks and challenges everywhere. As firm believers in Marxism, the Chinese Communists have always kept the world in mind, resolutely rejected national parochialism, and regarded the common development of all mankind as a beautiful vision. In the face of the complex, volatile and turbulent international situation, General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward the concept of jointly building a community with a shared future for mankind with his outstanding political vision, extraordinary courage as a strategist, and strong mission and responsibility, which is the innovation and development of the Marxist idea of "realistic man" in the contemporary world. The concept of a community with a shared future for mankind is an important theoretical achievement of the Sinicization and modernization of Marxism in the new era, which not only comes from the long-standing excellent traditional Chinese culture, contains the essence of Chinese culture, but also shows the mission and responsibility spirit of contemporary Chinese. The community we want to build is a five-in-one common development path, advocating peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, freedom of all human values, the concept and system of building a community with a shared

future for mankind is becoming more and more perfect, and has been supported by more and more countries and people, with the development of the times and practice, the "community of shared future for mankind" this realistic and futuristic ideology will show strong vitality, in order to overcome many world problems, to meet the risks and challenges of diversity, Achieving the common and beautiful development of all mankind guides the direction and enables us to move towards a brighter future.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Marx and Engels thought about and expounded a series of concepts on "real man", which are rooted in the practical activities of human social production and stand at the forefront of historical

development to carry out conceptual innovation from shallow to deep, from the surface to the inside, not only from the content and form of in-depth excavation, but also the concept of practice into the consideration of "real man", to criticize and discard the dross of the times. Marx's idea of "real man" shows the characteristics of human beings from a new perspective, and real people can overcome alienation through practice, so as to achieve a transcendent existence of all-round development . In the new era, we attach more importance to the role of the people, take root in concrete practice to realize the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, and achieve all-round progress in the world in promoting the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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