

Critique of Mechanistic Materialism from Engels' Letters in His Late Years

-- Taking "to Paul Ernst" as an Example

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Abstract

Engels is one of the main founders of Marxism and its theory. He has an important historical position in the history of the development of Marxism and has made great contributions to the spread and development of Marxism. Especially in the aspect of historical materialism, Engels promoted the establishment of historical materialism with his unique theoretical views, He devoted his whole life to defending and developing historical materialism. In his later years, Engels systematically interpreted historical materialism in the way of letters, resorting to "more coherent forms than ever". At the same time, he criticized the "youth school" of vulgar materialism which distorted historical materialism at that time. Based on the study of the letter to Paul Ernst, this paper discusses three historical facts reflected in the letter and their historical significance: one is to explore his attitude towards Ernst's vulgar historical materialism, The second is to discuss Ibsen's basic views and attitudes in the literary controversy at that time and how he reconstructed the "scattered" state of Marxist Philosophy in a systematic and complete way. The third is to explore the final significance and Enlightenment of Engels' criticism of Ernst's vulgar historical materialism.

Keywords

Engels; Paul Ernst; literary criticism; vulgar materialism; historical materialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Engels' birth. In order to commemorate this great thinker and founder of Marxism, we should constantly and carefully study these great works left by Engels in his life. In history, although Engels was positioned as "the second violinist", he made great contributions to Marxist theory. In the process of the formation and development of his theory, we can not forget his great achievements and contributions. Engels' letters in his later years are of high research value and significance. To find out the contents and writing intention of Engels' letters in his later years will help us to define Engels' true "portrait" and to improve and develop Marxism.

2. BACKGROUND OF LETTER WRITING

Paul Ernst (1866-1933) is the leader of the "youth group" in the center left of the German Social Democratic Party and an anarchist. Friedrich Engels (German: Friedrich Engels, 1820-1895), German thinker, philosopher, revolutionary, educator, military theorist, the great mentor of the proletariat and working people in the world, is one of the founders of Marxism. This letter was written by Engels to Paul Ernst on June 5, 1890. Paul once advocated aestheticism and neoclassicism in literature. At that time, he was arguing with Austrian political commentators,

writers such as Marguer and Barr on women's issues in Ibsen's works. In his reply, Ernst emphasized that the concept of women was related to environmental and genetic factors, and he tried to take the materialist method as a ready-made "public formula" and tailor various historical facts according to it. At that time, Engels thought it was an obvious tendency of dogmatism and mechanical materialism. In addition, he was seized by Barr and others to vilify materialism, believing that women's issue is an abstract gender issue. Ernst wrote a letter to Engels asking for support, but this support was rejected by Engels and responded to Ernst's views in this letter.

3. PAUL ERNST'S ATTITUDE IN IBSEN'S DRAMATIC LITERATURE

In his dramatic literary work *The Doll's House*, Ibsen successfully portrays Nora, an educated and awakening housewife. She was lively and lovely, brave and strong. After the storm of "borrowing money", she was more mature. She pursued the equality and independence that women at that time did not have, broke through the moral and legal customs of the bourgeoisie, and realized "the spiritual rebellion of human beings". It is obvious that Mr. Hai Bar and others hold a totally different attitude towards Ibsen's literary works and attack his works fiercely in literary criticism. They think that Ibsen has not examined the historical characteristics of the characters in literature with the specific historical development and environmental characteristics. Mr. Barr believes that "women's issues" are the characteristics of historical development. "A woman is a female ape if she removes all the historical things from her body, along with her skin and hair." It is obvious that Mr. Bar thinks that women are women with all the characteristics combined with historical things. However, this seems to cause Ernst's great dissatisfaction. Ernst's attitude in this literary debate mainly includes two points: one is that Ernst holds his own position with the method of materialism, and tries to fight back with the methodology of "materialism". When he emphasizes that women are related to genetic environment, Ernst's attitude is mainly in two aspects. He regards all the facts that happened in the Norwegian petty citizen class as the historical facts of Norway. In this way, he thinks that all the history in Norwegian sociology is the history of the petty citizen class. Second, Ernst believes that the history of the German petty citizen class is equivalent to that of the Norwegian petty citizen class, and that there is no difference between them from a historical point of view. On this point, Ernst seems to be caught by Barr and others. "Whatever the shortcomings of Ibsen's plays, they reflect a world that, even for the middle and small bourgeoisie, is far different from that of Germany; in this world, people still have their own personalities and pioneering and independent spirits, which are often strange to foreigners." [1]

4. PAUL ERNST DISTORTED THE ESSENCE OF MATERIALISM

In his reply, Engels also made clear his attitude and position on Ibsen's literary controversy. Engels thought: materialism is a guide to the study of history, not a ready-made "formula". If we only regard it as the form of the latter, then materialism will eventually go to its opposite. This is Engels' first attitude and view on Ernst's "materialism" mentioned in his letter. The first mistake Ernst made in the literary debate was to attribute all the petty citizen classes to Norway and all the facts that happened there. On this false fact, Engels pointed out two difficult facts: first, the liberal constitution of Norway. The Norwegian constitution of 1814 is the oldest written constitution still in force in Europe. Solidarity and equality are the terms with great political influence in Norway. Norway has the most thorough economic equality policy. One of the important factors is that the Norwegian legal system has been developing relatively independently for centuries. While other countries in Europe are having to enact bourgeois liberal constitutions, Norway is not like other countries. Moreover, Norway was at a time when the victory of the rest of Europe over Napoleon became the victory of the reactionary

revolution throughout Europe. It seems to have found an opportunity to fight for "a constitution that is much more democratic than any other constitution in Europe at that time. [1]" Its essence is that Ernst mistakenly regards all historical facts as the historical facts of some people, neglecting that the development of human society is realized by the process of a historical subject's activity, rather than a history or a person's history, a one-sided historical subject or historical activity. This view is wrong in the basic principles of Marxist philosophy, which violates the basic principles of historical materialism. It is the error of vulgar historical materialism and the manifestation of mechanical materialism. Although the letter did not directly mention this point of view, according to Engels' article "Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of German classical philosophy" in 1886, the dialectics of human cognition and human social development: "human society is also a process of unlimited development, a process of continuous progress and rise from low level to high level, and each historical stage is temporary, But the development of human society is an endless process." (Engels. Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of German Classical Philosophy [M]. Beijing: People's publishing house, 2014) It can be seen that Engels always insisted on historical dialectics in the basic exposition of historical materialism, rather than ignoring the dialectical method to look at history. Secondly, Paul Ernst's second mistake in the literary debate is that he equates everything that happens to the whole Norwegian petty citizen class with that of the German petty citizen class. At that time, it ignored the difference between the ordinary citizen class in Norway and Germany, which was deficient and incomplete in dialectical materialism at that time. Ernst only explains the individual phenomenon from the perspective of human history.

5. THE CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CRITICIZING ERNST'S VULGAR MATERIALISM

In his later years, Engels made a "systematic" interpretation and "systematic" expression of Marxist philosophy, especially historical materialism, which is of great significance for us to study the systematicness and integrity of Marxism and to improve the development of Marxist philosophy. The conclusion and practical significance of this chapter will start from the two points of view stated in Paul Ernst's letter to Engels. One is to explore the nature of the wrong nature of Engels' two views in his reply. The other is to continue to explore the wrong nature of his views for us to learn and master Marxist materialism. His first point of view is that he put "the whole of Norway and what happened there under the category of the petty citizens". Engels himself has clearly stated that his wrong view and its nature are totally inconsistent with Marxism, although Engels did not seem to elaborate in detail what the final conclusion of Paul Ernst's view was in his letter, or in other words, Engels did not explain at that time what the nature of his views and methodology was. But we can still get a conclusion about this view: Paul Ernst's literary criticism on Ibsen's literature has finally moved to the position of "mechanical materialism". In his explanation of historical phenomena, he took the social material conditions such as productivity and production relations as the only reason for history. Therefore, historical factors such as culture, politics, philosophy and religion are excluded. The lack of flexibility in the process of application, like mechanically copying, eventually moved to mechanical materialism. Secondly, Ernst equates what happened in the German petty citizen class to the category of the German petty citizen class, thus putting the two in the same perspective. Excluding other research methods and perspectives to study history, Ernst only studies the individual, physiological and other objective factors of human beings, thus neglecting that the historical situation and view of history reflected by the citizen class with different historical backgrounds in a certain historical period are also very different. Ernst apparently did not distinguish the history of the two in his letter. In this regard, Engels is obviously critical of Ernst's attitude and views in Ibsen's literary debate. Or its direction, as

Engels said: "no matter what the shortcomings of Ibsen's plays, they reflect a world that is far different from that of Germany, even if it is of the middle and small bourgeoisie." [1]

Historical materialism is a theoretical guiding tool for the proletariat and the proletarian party to correctly understand social phenomena and the laws of social and historical development. The correct understanding and application of Marxist historical materialism is the necessary premise for us to adhere to the development and dissemination of Marxism. At the end of the 19th century, especially after Marx's death, some of the so-called "new Marxists" who claimed to believe in Marxism at that time generally used historical materialism as dogma and formula, denied dialectics and advocated eclecticism. Paul Ernst, as a typical character among them, obviously went to the crowd of mechanical materialism. In his later years, Engels devoted a lot of energy to fight back by writing letters. This is of great theoretical research value for us to study and discuss Marxist historical materialism, especially Engels' contribution to historical materialism in his later years. At the same time, this letter also has important methodological enlightenment for us to observe and analyze the concept of history. We are proud to have such a great predecessor in the field of sociology and philosophy.

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