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Karl Marx's Theory of Productive Forces and Their Significance for Human Development in Contemporary Vietnam

[A teoria das forças produtivas de Karl Marx e seu significado para o desenvolvimento humano no Vietnã contemporâneo]

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Abstract: This study examines Karl Marx's theory of productive forces, grounded in historical materialism, which posits that social progress depends on labor instruments, human capabilities, and technological advancements. The research aims to analyze their impact on human development in Vietnam within the context of the Industry 4.0 and the Globalization era. Following a dialectical and historical materialist method, the article researches the impact of modern technologies, artificial intelligence, and automation on the capacity and skills of labor, as well as the social consciousness. The results have shown that on one hand, these productive forces further enhance education, health, and living standards. However, they also intensify rural-urban disparities in inequality, industrial worker alienation, and excessive dependence on foreign technology. These findings guide the alteration of the production relations which stems from Marx's theory to ensure that all members of the society equally benefit from the changes Ultimately, this theory supports a holistic approach to human development in Vietnam, necessitating robust foreign investment alongside technological education, labor relation reforms, and the enhancement of collective consciousness amid industrialization and globalization.
Keywords: Productive forces; Karl Marx; Human Development; Historical Materialism; Globalization; Industry 4.0; Vietnam

Resumo: Este estudo examina a teoria das forças produtivas de Karl Marx, fundamentada no materialismo histórico, a qual postula que o progresso social depende dos instrumentos de trabalho, das capacidades humanas e dos avanços tecnológicos. A pesquisa visa analisar o impacto desses elementos no desenvolvimento humano no Vietnã, no contexto da Indústria 4.0 e da era da globalização. Utilizando o método dialético e do materialismo histórico, o artigo investiga o impacto das tecnologias modernas, da inteligência artificial e da automação na capacidade e nas habilidades da força de trabalho, bem como na consciência social. Os resultados demonstram que, por um lado, essas forças produtivas impulsionam a educação, a saúde e os padrões de vida. Por outro lado, intensificam as desigualdades entre áreas rurais e urbanas, a alienação dos trabalhadores industriais e a dependência excessiva de tecnologia estrangeira. Essas constatações orientam a transformação das relações de produção — com base na teoria de Marx — para assegurar que todos os membros da sociedade se beneficiem igualmente das mudanças. Em última análise, essa teoria fundamenta uma abordagem holística para o desenvolvimento humano no Vietnã, exigindo investimentos estrangeiros robustos aliados à educação tecnológica, a reformas nas relações de trabalho e ao fortalecimento da consciência coletiva em meio aos processos de industrialização e globalização.
Palavras-chave: Forças produtivas; Karl Marx; Desenvolvimento humano; Materialismo histórico; Globalização; Indústria 4.0; Vietnã

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1. Introduction

The theory of productive forces put forward by Karl Marx remains critical to understanding the phenomenon of historical materialism, providing a detailed account of the social forces behind material change. Per Marx, the productive forces encompass the instruments of labor, the level of technology, and the work the society is able to put forth in order to alter nature and generate wealth (Smart, 2013). He contends that these factors reveal at what level of technology a society is and they also determine social relations and the social structure of a society. This perspective makes clear that the primary outcome of historical changes, such as the Industrial Revolution, which enhanced productivity within the society, was fostered by the development of productive forces and the change from a feudalistic system to a capitalistic one. This transformation not only alters the role of the human race in history but also paves the way of comprehending social advancement from a material standpoint. Yet even so, in the context of today's society with the emergence of Industry 4.0, dominated by artificial intelligence (AI), automation and comprehensive globalization, Marx's thesis remains relevant but needs readaptation to the so called new reality.

Human development today extends beyond mere improvements in material conditions, encompassing the expansion of knowledge, skills, and global social consciousness. New productive forces, like robotics, big data or biotechnology, have increased human capabilities to unbounded proportions, beyond even what Marx predicted during the nineteenth century. In addition to raising productivity in the manufacturing sector, robots automate the production line, which reduces reliance on human unskilled labor. These achievements also come with multidimensional repercussions. They promote economic disparity because wealth generated from these technologies is concentrated among a small group of people, deepen the alienation of labor as humans are supplanted by machines, and amplify the social inequality gap. The question that arises is, how can Marx's productive forces theory be modified in a way that it not only accounts for, but also directs the development of humanity in the modern world?

This research explores a theory of Karl Marx on the productive forces with regards to its usefulness in fostering human progress in today's society. The paper will analyze the importance of the productive forces in modern human formation building through the lens of dialectical and historical materialism and simultaneously provide recommendations that seek to direct social changes to equity and sustainability.

The reality of Industry 4.0 marks a departure from the historical epochs Marx examined. While steam machines transformed the socio-economic framework in his era, AI and big data are modifying how humans relate to the world and with each other today. This change is more than a problem of technology; it is a social problem as well because productive forces are altering the relations of production which brings forth new issues of

conflict between labor and capital. In Vietnam, for instance, a developing country that is industrializing and globalizing, the use of automation in the textile and electronics industry did increase productivity but it also resulted in greater unemployment for the working class. Therefore, these issues highlight the necessity for reexamining Marx's theory not just for understanding the boundaries of productive forces, but also for figuring out how to harness them so that entire society reaps the benefits.

The aim of the study is not just to reaffirm the applicability of the Marxian theory, but also to broaden its applicability. This paper will recommend ways to ameliorate problems such as inequalities, alienation, and at the same time, provide a model of development which is more human-centered. These recommendations will stem out of Marx's existing theory but be integrated with practical realities to guarantee that the development of the productive forces will not only meet economic objectives, but will also improve the living conditions and social awareness of people, particularly in an interconnected world.

2. Literature review

Marx's theory sheds light on the evolution of society based on changes in material conditions from a historical materialist approach. In Capital, Marx defined productive forces as the combination of living labor (human skills and knowledge) and instruments of labor (tools and machinery) that transform raw materials into wealth. Marx contended that productive forces develop to a point, they collide with productive relations such as the social construction of production and wealth, causing social revolutions (Marx & Engels, 1967). For instance, the introduction of mechanization during industrial revolution destroyed feudal systems of production, enabling the rise of capitalism.

In the context of Marxism, the progression of human society goes beyond social economic issues to include social emancipation as well. Marx maintained that the optimum exploitation of productive forces would provide the material conditions for the free development of people as children, adults, and in general, as civilized and cultured people. Nonetheless, capitalism transforms this through the fragmentation from a person's work. Individual employees become un-tethered from the outcome of their efforts and turned into mere instruments of capitalism. This alienation is not limited to the working population alone; it has consequences on social consciousness and one's ability to grow as an individual.

Contemporary researchers have built upon Marx's theory to study modern society. During the time of globalization, the information systems alongside automation increased labor productivity tremendously, but they have also accentuated economic disparity since the profits are channeled

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to huge corporations. Many contemporary scholars argue that modern development should focus on expanding human capabilities through education, technology, and social opportunities rather than solely pursuing economic growth. Furthermore, Brynjolfsson, E., & McAfee, A. (2014) study indicates, industrial revolution 4.0, of AI and Robots, is shifting the nature of work and raises a concern on how humans evolve to enable themselves in a world of automation.

Even Though Marxist theory has been applied extensively in studying history and capitalist society, the impact of globalization and Industry 4.0 on productive forces have not been examined. Most investigations of social or technical are one sided, that is they do not consider the social consciousness and individual freedom which directly affects the very spirit of Marxism. This attempt is meant to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between productive forces as they exist today and human development in the contemporary world.

3. Research methods

The study relies on dialectical materialism and historical materialism, within the context of the Marxist tradition, as the primary theoretical perspective. The dialectical materialist approach pays attention to the analysis of contradictions of contemporary society and how they facilitate or obstruct human progress. The historical materialist method is used to pinpoint the productive forces in certain developmental phases of today's society within the framework of industry 4.0 and globalization. Data was obtained from various secondary sources, including *Capital*, *Theses on Feuerbach*, and contemporary studies on productive forces and human development. The influence modern technology such as AI and automation gives on the labor capacities, skills, and social consciousness is analyzed through a qualitative lens. The research strives to juxtapose the historical periods of Marx and the current day to elucidate the changing importance of different productive forces in the context of human progress.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The evolution of the productive forces in modern society

During the lifetime of Karl Marx, steam engines and mechanical tools represented the highest level of technology. Today, productive forces on a grand scale utilize AI, robotics, and big data to achieve their goals. The

Fourth Industrial Revolution has greatly increased productivity, including work that was typically done by humans. Many industries, including retail and banking, have adopted AI, robotics, and big data, transforming the traditional production processes. Tasks in the services sector that were repetitive, low level, and shallow in value has been replaced by automation, as described by Brynjolfsson, E., & McAfee, A.. Consider the example of the automotive industry. Today, robotics in factories such as tesla helps to dramatically increase accuracy and productivity. Assembly lines that used to take days for an entire construction of a factory to be built can now be put together in a matter of hours. While a considerable number of workers see this type of automation as a problem, it gives rise to new types of employment opportunities such as AI engineering, data science, and robotic maintenance.

For instance, the advancement in biotechnology and the development of modern medicine have positively enhanced health and life expectancy while increasing the capacity to work. Modern medical technologies, including genetic engineering and mRNA vaccines, have contributed significantly to improvements in global life expectancy over the past century. In particular, Viet Nam has seen a decline in infant mortality rates from 32.8 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 16.5 per 1,000 live births in 2020 because of the national immunization program and the use of modern foreign health technology. This boosts not only the physiological welfare of the workers but also their active population life, thus raising the productivity of the nation. In addition, reflecting what Marx prophesized regarding the internal contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the rapid advancement of the productive forces is not so evenly distributed throughout the world. As Harvey (2010) points out, the advanced productive forces in contemporary society, especially new technology, tend to be centrally located in developed countries and operated by multinationals, resulting in widening global disparity.

Take Amazon and Google as an example. They possess AI and Big data systems that are beyond the reach of developing economies. This creates a wide gap in productivity and economic benefit. In Vietnam, while the high-tech industry is expanding considerably with the presence of Samsung and Intel electronic component factories the majority of the workforce only does manual assembly work and earns low incomes, especially when compared to the more advanced technology, which is controlled by foreign multinational corporations. The proportion of workers employed in high-technology sectors remains relatively limited in Vietnam compared with traditional sectors.

Limited access to technology in developing countries, including Vietnam, has slowed the process of improving people's labor capacity. For example, in the field of agriculture – a key industry of Vietnam – automated machines such as pesticide spraying drones or smart irrigation systems are still only applied on a small scale in the Mekong Delta provinces, while the majority of farmers still rely on traditional manual labor. Robotic

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planting and harvesting is the standard in advance nations like Japan, where productivity has increased multifold owing to the adoption of smart agriculture. According to Harvey (2010), the disparity mentioned is not simply a technical issue; it is a consequence of contemporary capitalist relations which has resulted in an imbalanced distribution of wealth among countries, whereby a handful of wealthy corporations and countries are the primary beneficiaries (Kien, 2025).

Another example is in the illustration of the world of e-learning where technology helps in increasing human intelligence. These trends vividly portray the Harvey (2010) thesis about modern productive forces' unequal application and their blunt discrimination towards mobility and opportunity equality. In addition, the evolution of the productive force is not only limited to the technical aspect, but also extends to fields such as renewable energy and smart transportation, creating profound changes in social life. For example, Tesla's deployment of solar charging stations and self-driving electric vehicles not only reduces dependence on fossil fuels but also improves transportation efficiency, thereby improving the quality of life in big cities such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Where traffic is a painful issue. There is also a problem in Vietnam where the application of these technologies is almost non existent and relied on foreign investment which in itself shows dependence on developed nations for manufacturing.

The productive force in modern society is dramatically changing due to the advancement of technology in the form of Industry 4.0 which can significantly raise productivity while enhancing the living standards of the people. Practical examples such as robotics in manufacturing, medical technology, and online education show a qualitative shift in the way humans interact with the physical world. However, as Marx predicted, this uneven development, especially between developed and developing countries such as Vietnam, requires a review of production relations to ensure that the benefits of the productive forces are distributed fairly, thereby optimizing human development in today's globalized context.

4.2. Impact on human development

Materially

Modern productive forces have advanced to a remarkable extent with the advent of Industry 4.0, significantly enhancing material living conditions. Karl Marx regarded this as a foundation for social development. The existence of AI, automation, and new production lines has led to an astounding increase in goods and services due to advancements in productivity. If in the time of Marx, mass production by steam machines marked the transition from manual labor to industry, today, automation systems not only improve efficiency but also create a wide range of products

for life. For example, in developed countries such as Germany and Japan, smart factories using robots and big data have increased the productivity of car production by many times compared to the last century, and at the same time reduced costs, making cars a popular vehicle instead of a luxury product like in the time of Marx. In Vietnam, the textile and garment industry, one of the key export sectors, has seen an increase in output thanks to automatic looms imported from China and Europe, significantly improving the living conditions of millions of workers through increased income and access to consumer goods.

As Marx predicted in Das Kapital (Marx, 1976), the development of productive forces does not uniformly benefit humanity if capitalist production relations persist. In modern society, the dominance of major technology corporations, such as Amazon, Google, and Tesla, over advanced productive forces has intensified economic inequality on a global scale. Economic inequality remains a major concern in contemporary society, with wealth increasingly concentrated among a small proportion of the population.. On one hand, employment opportunities are created as high-tech industrial parks, like Tan Thuan export processing zone in Ho Chi Minh City, come into Vietnam. On the other hand, foreign corporations get most of the profits, such as Samsung, while local workers are compensated with low wages and minimal improvement in quality of life. This demonstrates the contradiction of wealth distribution that Marx pointed out; material development and the productive forces can grow tremendously, but the capitalist relations of production ensures that only the few in power reap the rewards.

This example from Vietnam demonstrates this disparity in the agricultural sphere. In regions of the Mekong Delta, smart irrigation systems and automatic harvesters are put to use, although only affluent farmers or large cooperatives can invest in this technology. A large proportion of farmers still rely primarily on manual labor and have limited access to advanced agricultural technologies. Rational agricultural biotechnology firms, like Monsanto, produce and sell patented genetically modified seeds to the farmers and monopolize the market, pushing emerging farmers into deeper dependency (FAO, 2021). This fully exemplifies Marx's concept of alienation in labor where people do not have control over the products that they create. Rather a person becomes a tool that's used for the capital gains of another, while foregoing the value the person in fact is capable of.

Modern productive forces, online education, AI, and big data, have significantly expanded opportunities to enhance skills and knowledge, which Marx deemed fundamental to unleashing human potential. For Multi-Tool Users With Good Memory People Manifestos, Marx maintained that the advancement of the productive forces can propel people out of the shackles of monotonous and boring manual work to concentrating on the thinkers and builders within. Now, tools like Coursera, Khan Academy, or Zoom have allowed people from all over the world to gain advanced knowledge without the need for a conventional university system –

geography and economics are no longer barriers. Faster than ever – In Vietnam, students in remote areas have always been at a disadvantage when it comes to reaching the top-tier lectures, but with the development of applications like Viettel Study, their education and skills are on par with big cities.

Technology and education are increasingly recognized as important factors in enhancing human capacities, creativity, and opportunities for personal development. For instance, in India, the Digital India campaign has contributed free online courses, enabling millions of youth to learn programming and data analytics, and increasing their employability in the global tech market. Similarly, Vietnam has trained thousands of software engineers through technology training centers such as FPT Software Academy to meet the requirements of industry 4.0 and cultivate the youth's intellectual potential. These transformations widen knowledge, but also expand reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity, skills that Marx viewed as essential for the all-round development of a person.

The hindrance to the evolution of contemporary productive forces is the alienation of labor and the automation of work, just as Marx foresaw. With automation becoming the norm, a portion of the workforce, who are not technologically educated, might lose their ability for creative problem solving. For example, in Vietnam's manufacturing industry, workers at electronic assembly plants such as Foxconn are employed as machine operators. These workers perform basic, tedious, and mechanically repetitive activities that require no original thought or skill. The International Labour Organization estimates that 70% of jobs in poor countries, including Vietnam, will suffer automation over the next decade, methodically dispossessing low-skilled workers, or forcing them into dull and mind-numbing work that ultimately destroys their intellect. This resembles what Marx described as alienation, which refers to a situation whereby an individual loses autonomy over the work process and instead becomes a mere appendage to the machine.

Additionally, there exists a vital problem regarding the gap in accessing technological information. In major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, students and young professionals can learn programming and AI from online courses and training institutions, but rural areas, such as Cao Bang or Dien Bien, are cut off from the internet and the necessary equipment. Students in remote and mountainous areas often face difficulties in accessing online learning resources and digital infrastructure, which may contribute to inequalities in educational opportunities. It indicates that, while the productive forces of modern times are unprecedented in power, without changes in the social relations of production – such as fair education policies – human knowledge expansion will be asymmetric and a significant proportion of people are bound to suffer in the era of technology. Modern productive forces have greatly improved material conditions and opened up opportunities for intellectual development for humans, but inequality and alienation remain major barriers. Marx's view

of the relationship between the productive forces and human development remains the same, requiring practical solutions to optimize human potential in today's society.

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Socially

The combination of globalization, internet expansion, and the advancement of communication technologies have irrevocably altered the form and manner in which we interact with one another. These changes present their own set of obstacles and benefits to societal progress. Productive forces, in the eyes of Karl Marx, not only construct material structures, but also determine the form of consciousness in society. This, in retrospect, is a critical factor in the overall evolution of a human being. Today, the internet alongside social media applications like facebook, twitter, and tikok, has opened channels for communication for billions of people globally.

On the other hand, as Harvey (2010) suggests, technology is not a neutral instrument of connectivity as it simultaneously fosters, a false sense of belonging as individualism and commodification take over. The internet and globalization, although they broaden social networks, nurture a culture of isolated living where the magnification of self takes priority over the dissolution of values cherished by society. For example, in major cities in Vietnam such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, the popularity of e-commerce apps such as Shopee and Lazada has changed traditional shopping habits, reducing face-to-face interactions at local markets, a space that plays an important role in maintaining a sense of community. Instead of meeting, talking, and sharing as before, people now prioritize the convenience of home delivery, leading to the gradual decline of direct social relationships.

Moreover, the commercialization of cultural life, a consequence of the modern productive force, has turned many community values into goods for profit. Harvey (2010) points out that in the global capitalist economy, big tech corporations exploit user data to optimize advertising and consumption, thereby obscuring the collective consciousness. This raises an important question: how to take advantage of the technological progress of the modern productive forces while maintaining the social consciousness, which Marx considered essential for human development to be free from corruption?

In fact, the weakening of the sense of community is not only a global problem in Vietnam. In the US, the popularity of streaming services such as Netflix has reduced the frequency of family gatherings or friends to watch movies together, instead of a personal experience in front of a private screen. In Vietnam, online volunteer movements, such as donations via ZaloPay or Momo to support the poor, are effective in terms of scale, but lack direct interaction between the giver and the recipient, diminishing the

spiritual value of compassion, a social quality that Marx valued. Therefore, in order to balance technical progress and social awareness, it is necessary to have policies that encourage in-person community activities in parallel with the use of technology, such as organizing local cultural events in combination with livestreams to both maintain the collective spirit and reach a global audience.

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4.3. Challenges and solutions

The emergence of new productive forces in Vietnam societies can actively threaten human development in two separate ways, which are alienated labor in the whole automation industry, and the inequality of technological availabilities. According to Zuboff (2023), contemporary productive forces under surveillance capitalism have evolved beyond the traditional physical assembly line. So, for instance, in the Bac Ninh province electronics assembly factories, employees are mere cogs in the machine. Employees in Vietnam are passive - both is detrimental to society. “Viet Nam is currently facing the challenge of rampant automation of low-skilled jobs”, as the ILO (2021) states, “This will greatly increase unemployment of low-educated people and banish them to low-activity jobs”. The second challenge is inequality in access to technology, especially between urban and rural areas. In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, young workers can learn programming through centers such as FPT Software. Students in remote and mountainous areas continue to face difficulties in accessing online learning resources and digital infrastructure.

To address these challenges, three main solutions were proposed, based on Marx’s ideas of regulating production relations and integral human development. First, it is necessary to invest heavily in technology education for all levels of society, especially in rural and mountainous areas. As an illustration, Viettel’s “Online School” model serves as a notable example, where students in remote regions are provided with devices and internet access free of charge, analogous to the One Laptop per Child initiative in Rwanda, which provides millions of children with technology at a young age. Internet access in many rural areas remains limited compared with major urban centers, highlighting the need for further investment in digital infrastructure.

Third, targeting the alienation of social classes and inequality with the help of tech management is a good way to integrate automation and the capitalist environment. As Marx noted a low level of economic development and a lack of modern technology obstructs productivity in Vietnam, so a more sophisticated approach to technology has to be adopted for distributing its benefits. Currently, foreign corporations such as Foxconn or LG control most of the high-tech value chain, while domestic enterprises only participate in the outsourcing stage. A practical solution

is to increase taxes on multinational corporations and use the revenue to finance domestic technology enterprises, such as VinAI or Bkav, to develop independent technology. Also, models of technology co-ownership – such as agricultural cooperatives operating in the Mekong Delta that have sprayed pesticides by drone – allow workers to engage actively in the production process which lessens reliance on foreign capital and mitigates alienation. The case from China, where the government backs agritech cooperatives, suggests a 30% increase in production and substantial boost in farmers' income; A lesson Vietnam can learn.

Third, throughout cultural and civic education and other community activities, the enhancement of social consciousness serves as a policy direction that seeks to deal with the imbalance between technological advancement and human development. Marx (1970) argued in *Theses on Feuerbach* that man needs to be educated socially in order not to serve as a mere machine tool. In Vietnam, the erosion of community consciousness due to personalization from technology, such as young people's preference for social media over traditional village meetings, requires more effective cultural education programs.

These solutions not only address the challenge of alienation and inequality, but also reflect Marx's spirit of putting people at the center of development. In Vietnam, the application of these measures can help optimize the modern production force, thereby improving labor capacity, reducing the gap between rich and poor, and strengthening social consciousness. For example, the "National Digital Transformation" program, if implemented synchronously with policies to support remote areas and community education, will not only promote industrialization but also ensure comprehensive human development, in line with the country's sustainable development goals in the period of international integration.

5. Conclusion

Karl Marx's productive forces approach provides one of the most potent theoretical human development paradigms in the modern world. During the period of Industry 4.0 and Globalization, the contemporary productive forces have transformed the potential to enhance the material, intellectual, and social capacities of a human being, but also embraced inequality and alien bondage. A Marxist approach necessitates the modification of the production relations to distribute the benefits of technological advancements and community investment in education to us all. In the case of Vietnam, the theory not only assists in the formulation ofa sustainable development strategy, but it also enhances the contributions of citizens in the processes of constructing a fair and forward-looking society amidst international integration.

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