

THE DIALECTICS OF DEVELOPMENT: A MARXIST PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE AND LIMITS OF THE CONTEMPORARY MARKET ECONOMY

[A DIALÉTICA DO DESENVOLVIMENTO: UMA ANÁLISE FILOSÓFICO-MARXISTA DO PAPEL E DOS LIMITES DA ECONOMIA DE MERCADO CONTEMPORÂNEA]

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ABSTRACT : The development of the market economy in nations pursuing a “Socialist” orientation has created an academic paradox: how can a philosophical system founded upon a critique of capitalism be reconciled with the market mechanism, which is the primary driver of capitalism? This research aims to analyze “Marxist dialectics” as a theoretical framework to address and manage this inherent contradiction. We argue that Marxist philosophy offers a dual perspective: firstly, it recognizes the market economy as a “historically necessary instrument” for the development of productive forces to a high level; secondly, it clearly identifies the market’s “immanent contradictions” (exploitation, alienation, inequality). Based on this, Marxist philosophy provides the foundation for the model of the “Socialist-Oriented Market Economy” by maintaining the crucial controlling role of the Socialist State in regulating inequality and guiding development toward humanitarian goals. The analysis demonstrates that the development of the market economy within the Socialist context is not an abandonment of Marxism, but rather a creative application of dialectics to historical reality, transforming the market instrument from a spontaneous system into a goal-oriented means, serving the comprehensive development of humanity. Future research is proposed to quantitatively analyze the effectiveness of these controlling instruments.

KEYWORDS: Dialectics; Marxist Philosophy; Contemporary Market Economy; Socialist oriented market economy.

RESUMO: O desenvolvimento da economia de mercado em nações que seguem uma orientação “socialista” criou um paradoxo acadêmico: como um sistema filosófico fundado em uma crítica ao capitalismo pode ser reconciliado com o mecanismo de mercado, sendo este o principal motor do capitalismo? Esta pesquisa objetiva analisar a “dialética marxista” como um referencial teórico para abordar e gerenciar essa contradição inerente. Argumentamos que a filosofia marxista oferece uma perspectiva dupla: primeiramente, reconhece a economia de mercado como um “instrumento historicamente necessário” para o desenvolvimento das forças produtivas a um nível elevado; em segundo lugar, identifica claramente as “contradições inerentes” do mercado (exploração, alienação, desigualdade). Com base nisso, a filosofia marxista fornece a fundação para o modelo da “Economia de Mercado de Orientação Socialista”, mantendo o papel crucial de controle do Estado Socialista na regulação da desigualdade e na orientação do desenvolvimento para objetivos humanitários. A análise demonstra que o desenvolvimento da economia de mercado dentro do contexto socialista não é um abandono do marxismo, mas sim uma aplicação criativa da dialética à realidade histórica, transformando o instrumento de mercado de um sistema espontâneo em um meio orientado a fins, servindo ao desenvolvimento integral da humanidade. Propõem-se pesquisas futuras para analisar quantitativamente a eficácia desses instrumentos de controle. **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Dialética; Filosofia Marxista; Economia de Mercado Contemporânea; Economia de mercado de orientação socialista

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1. INTRODUCTION

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The end of the Cold War and the collapse of “centralized planning economic models” in the late twentieth century generated a profound historical and theoretical turning point globally. For nations that remained committed to “Socialist” goals, especially those economies that had not undergone a full phase of capitalist development, the challenge was not merely the necessity of economic reform but also the need to “renew and reposition their own philosophical foundation”. Failures in production management, stagnation in technological innovation, and shortages of consumer goods clearly exposed the incompatibility between the old “productive relations” (centralized planning) and the requirements for developing modern “productive forces”. This crisis compelled these nations to implement profound, structurally groundbreaking reforms, shifting toward the adoption of the market economy mechanism. This transition, most prominent in large economies like the “People’s Republic of China” and the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam”, yielded spectacular growth achievements. By activating competitive dynamics, encouraging private ownership, and opening up to international integration, these nations achieved impressive Gross Domestic Product growth rates, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty and significantly enhancing their global economic standing. These achievements demonstrated the superior efficiency of the market mechanism in “liberating productive forces” and generating material wealth in the modern industrial and technological era. The acknowledgment of the market economy’s role is a practical and dialectical approach.

However, this very policy choice presented a major “theoretical challenge” and created an “academic paradox” that must be addressed: the simultaneous existence of Marxist philosophy, an ideology built upon a “profound critique of capitalism” and free market mechanisms, on one side, and economic development relying precisely on those mechanisms on the other. Marxist philosophy exposes the free market as the birthplace of “Surplus Value”, “labor exploitation”, “class inequality”, and “human alienation”. Philosophically, Marxism has always asserted that the ultimate goal is the emancipation of humanity from the alienation created by the market and private ownership. Therefore, how can a regime that claims to be founded on Marxist principles accept the use of a tool that its fundamental ideology has thoroughly critiqued? This is the central problem that any serious study of economic development in Socialist countries must confront.

This paradox has given rise to two main opposing viewpoints in international academia. On one hand, the “extremist view” holds that the adoption of the market economy represents the “total failure and abandonment” of Marxist philosophy. They argue that these nations have, in

fact, become state-capitalist economies, where the interests of a new ruling class have superseded the original Socialist goals. On the other hand, the “defensive view” emphasizes the “strategic and flexible nature” of adopting the market mechanism. They see it as a “sound strategic step”, a “creative application of Marxist philosophy” to specific historical conditions, aiming to create the necessary material basis for a higher stage of Socialism.

This research aligns with the second perspective but retains the “philosophical rigor and critique” inherent in Marxism. It not only justifies the policy choice but also explores how Marxist philosophy, with its “dialectical analytical tool”, has been used as a “theoretical framework” to identify, manage, and regulate the inevitable contradictions arising from the market economy, thereby preserving the Socialist orientation. Clarifying the interaction between “Marxist theory” and “market practice” is the core focus of this work.

This research rejects the simplistic binary opposition and argues that Marxist philosophy is not merely a system of critique but also a “dialectical methodology” for analyzing and managing development. Karl Marx’s theoretical framework, particularly the theory regarding the “relationship between productive forces and productive relations”, provides a solid foundation to explain why the Market Economy, despite containing Capitalist elements, is accepted as an “historically necessary instrument” during the transitional period. Marx’s thorough critique of capitalism is precisely the basis for establishing the mechanism to control and guide the market, preventing its negative consequences. Therefore, Marxist philosophy serves as the guiding principle for constructing the model of the “Socialist-Oriented Market Economy”. The primary objective of this research is to utilize the core concepts of Marxist philosophy (such as Surplus Value, Alienation, the historical necessity of productive relations) to analyze the dual role of the market economy: as both a driver of developing productive forces and a source of social contradictions that require regulation.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS: MARXIST CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM AND THE HISTORICAL NECESSITY OF THE MARKET

2.1. Analysis of Surplus Value and the Exploitative Nature of the Free Market

Karl Marx’s political economy is a fundamental critique of the free market economy mechanism, which he equated with capitalism. Central to this critique is the theory of “Surplus Value”, a concept that is not only economic but also deeply philosophical, exposing the nature of capitalist productive relations. Marx asserted that profit does not arise from the circulation of commodities in the market, nor from the exchange

of equivalent values, but from the production process itself through the “exploitation of the worker’s labor power” (Freeman, 1996). Labor is the sole source of new value creation, yet in capitalism, the worker receives only a wage equivalent to the value necessary to reproduce their labor power (food, housing, etc.). The remaining value, created during the surplus labor time and legally appropriated by the capitalist as profit, is precisely “Surplus Value”.

The existence of Surplus Value is evidence of the “fundamental injustice” deeply rooted in the free market economy. Marx argued that capitalist productive relations are not relations of cooperation or equal exchange, but relations of “domination and subjugation”, where the bourgeoisie owns the means of production and compels the proletariat to sell its labor power to survive. This very mechanism of exploitation leads to ever-deepening “polarization of wealth and poverty”, because the process of “capital accumulation” at one pole (the capitalist’s accumulation of profit) is always accompanied by the “accumulation of misery” at the opposite pole (the poverty and precariousness of the workers). This accumulation of capital is boundless; it becomes the sole and relentless driving force propelling the entire market economy system.

In an uncontrolled market economy system, the absolute priority given to profit leads to the “distortion of economic goals” away from meeting social needs toward the pursuit of “Exchange Value”. Natural resources, labor power, and even social services are transformed into commodities, treated merely as means to maximize Surplus Value. Therefore, Marxist philosophy warns that if Socialist nations adopt the market economy without thorough control mechanisms to eliminate or mitigate the process of Surplus Value appropriation, then the social contradictions and inequalities of capitalism will “resurface” inevitably. The critique of Surplus Value is not merely an economic critique, but a “philosophical standard” to assess whether an economic model genuinely serves humanity or simply serves the accumulation of material wealth.

2.2. The Phenomenon of Alienation and the Fetishism of Commodities

Marxist philosophy’s critique of the market economy extends beyond political economy, delving into the “philosophy of humanity” through the concepts of “Alienation” and the “Fetishism of Commodities”. Marx argued that capitalism not only exploits labor power but also “harms the humanitarian essence” of people. Alienation, according to Marx, is a multidimensional phenomenon describing the worker’s separation from what they create and from their own human nature (McCarthy, 2017).

Specifically, alienation manifests in four key aspects. “Firstly”, the worker is alienated from the “product of their labor”, because the product belongs to the capitalist and returns to dominate them in the form

of accumulated capital. “Secondly”, they are alienated from the “labor process” itself because the work is fragmented, repetitive, and fails to provide creative satisfaction. Labor becomes a means to an end, no longer an expression of human essence. “Thirdly”, the worker is alienated from “human nature” (i.e., conscious and creative activity) because they are forced to work as a component of a machine. “Fourthly”, they are alienated from “social relations” because the relationship between human beings is mediated through the relationship between commodities.

The second important philosophical aspect is the “Fetishism of Commodities”. This is the phenomenon where social relations in the market economy are disguised by the material relations between commodities. People believe that the value of a commodity is an inherent, natural property, similar to its physical traits, instead of realizing that value is the product of a specific “social and historical relationship” (social labor). The Fetishism of Commodities causes people to perceive the market and economic laws as natural, unchangeable forces, like a powerful deity governing their lives. This reinforces capitalist ideology, making workers accept exploitation and alienation as self-evident.

For Socialist nations, the adoption of the market economy carries the risk of recreating these forms of alienation. Increased competition and the prioritization of profit can lead to the “materialization” of social relations, undermining communal and humanitarian values, contradicting the ultimate goal of Marxist philosophy: the “emancipation and comprehensive development of humanity”. The analysis of Alienation and the Fetishism of Commodities serves as a philosophical warning that market economy development must be controlled to ensure it does not destroy human essence and dignity.

2.3. The Market as an Optimal Productive Forces Development Stage and Historical Necessity

Despite the profound critique of the free market economy’s flaws, Marxist philosophy does not deny its “historical and revolutionary role”. This perspective stems from Marx’s “historical materialism dialectics”, particularly the theory regarding the “relationship between productive forces and productive relations”. Marx asserted that the history of human society develops through the movement of socio-economic formations, and each formation has a specific historical mission.

The historical mission of capitalism (and the market economy) is the “development of productive forces” to the highest level, creating an unprecedented abundance of material and technological basis in history. Marx and Engels praised capitalism in “The Communist Manifesto”, acknowledging it as a revolutionary force that shattered the stagnation of previous feudal economic formations. The market, with its competitive drive and capital accumulation, compels producers to constantly innovate,

generating outstanding advancements in technology, management, and productivity (Wise and Niell, 2021).

For Socialist nations starting from a low economic base, bypassing the full stage of capitalist development led to a situation where the productive relations (centralized planning) were no longer suitable, but became a “fetter” holding back the development of productive forces. According to Marxist dialectical logic, when productive relations become incompatible with the level of productive forces, they must be changed to “liberate” production potential.

This very acknowledgment of historical necessity provided the theoretical basis for Socialist nations to accept the market economy” as an essential “intermediary instrument”. This is a strategic adjustment: utilizing the superior efficiency of the market mechanism to rapidly modernize productive forces, creating the necessary material wealth. This wealth was seen by Marx as a “prerequisite” for building a higher Socialist society, where material abundance allows for the elimination of existential competition and the implementation of equitable distribution principles. Thus, the adoption of the market economy is dialectically justified as a “strategic retreat” in a greater forward march, a strict adherence to the Marxist dialectical principle of the “unity between means and ends” in history.

3. DIALECTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE AND LIMITS OF THE MARKET ECONOMY IN SOCIALISM

3.1. The Positive Aspect: A Driver for Productive Forces Development

The acceptance of the market economy mechanism in nations with a Socialist orientation is dialectically justified as a powerful and necessary force to promote the development of productive forces. According to Marxist logic, material development is the fundamental basis for all social progress and is the prerequisite for building a communist society in the future, where the abundance of material wealth eliminates the need for competition and exploitation. The market, with its fierce competitive principles and profit pursuit, has demonstrated superior efficiency in achieving this goal compared to centralized planning models (Tan, 2024).

Specifically, “competition” among economic entities compels them to constantly seek and implement “technological innovations” and improve management processes. Natural selection in the market environment promotes the “allocation of resources” in a more optimal and flexible manner. Capital, labor, and land will shift to sectors with high social demand and the greatest profit potential, something rigid planning mechanisms could not achieve. This flexibility is key to enhancing “social labor productivity”

and reducing production costs, thereby increasing the total national product value. Furthermore, the market economy provides an effective mechanism for “international integration”. By opening up the market and attracting foreign investment, Socialist nations can access vast capital, advanced technology, and modern management experience from developed countries. This helps accelerate the pace of industrialization and modernization, overcoming the slow stages of development witnessed historically.

The development of productive forces through the market mechanism is seen as a process of “liberation”, liberating society’s production capacity from outdated productive relations. This is a practical application of the Marxist principle that productive relations must always correspond to the level of productive forces development. By accepting the market, Socialist countries have allowed productive forces to surge, creating a solid material foundation for political and social stability. Viewing the market economy as a “means” to achieve material abundance is a “dialectical and practical” approach that helps enrich material resources, a necessary condition for subsequently fulfilling the humanitarian and equitable goals of Socialism.

3.2. Internal Contradictions: The Re-emergence of Inequality and Crises

Despite its role as a powerful driver for material development, the adoption of the market economy inevitably leads to the re-emergence of the “internal contradictions” that Marxist philosophy warned about concerning capitalism. This is an inseparable opposing aspect in the dialectics of development.

Firstly and most prominently is the re-emergence of “social inequality” and the “polarization of wealth and poverty”. When the profit motive and the law of “Surplus Value” are activated, the exploitation of labor power and the appropriation of surplus value occur in various forms. Whether economic entities are nominally privately owned or mixed ownership, the goal of profit maximization remains the governing motive. This leads to the rapid accumulation of capital among a small segment of the population (a new capitalist class or elite management stratum), while the majority of workers receive only a small portion of the value in the form of wages. This polarization not only causes social conflict but also contradicts the basic goal of Socialism: the elimination of exploitation and the pursuit of equity. If left uncontrolled, this inequality can erode development achievements and threaten political stability, leading to the dissolution of the Socialist orientation.

Secondly, “cyclical crisis” and capital waste are an unavoidable consequence of the market. Marx pointed out that capitalist production is “anarchical production”, meaning it lacks social planning. Producers operate independently, relying solely on market signals and pursuing profit, leading to localized overproduction or shortages. This imbalance between

production and consumption causes “cyclical economic crises” (recessions, mass unemployment, asset bubbles) (Horwitz, 1996). These crises cause immense waste of capital, resources, and labor power, severely disrupting the process of productive forces development. This inherent instability of the market is an “objective limitation”, demanding conscious and planned intervention and control from the State to mitigate chaos and protect achieved economic gains.

The re-emergence of these contradictions indicates that the market economy, despite being a development driver, cannot be a self-regulating system. Marxist philosophy warns that adopting the market without a consistent and resolute dialectical control strategy will lead to the system’s self-destruction.

3.3. The Tension between Use Value and Exchange Value

Another profound philosophical contradiction arising from the adoption of the market economy is the absolute prioritization of “Exchange Value” (profit) over “Use Value” (the genuine needs of human beings and society). According to Marxist theory, the essence of a commodity has two sides: “Use Value” is its ability to satisfy a human need, while “Exchange Value” is the ratio at which this commodity is exchanged for others in the market (determined by the amount of socially necessary labor).

In the free market economy, production decisions are not based on identifying urgent social needs, but on the commodity’s potential to be sold for the highest profit. This dominance leads to the “distortion of society’s production goals”. For instance, investment may flow into the production of luxury goods or highly speculative financial services (generating large profits), while sectors essential for human and social development (such as affordable housing, preventive healthcare, mass education) face shortages or operate at high costs due to low profitability. This distortion creates social injustice and undermines general welfare (Röpke, 2014).

This tension completely contradicts the ultimate goal of Marxist philosophy: to create a society that produces for “humanitarian purposes”, where production is organized to “meet the needs” of all members, rather than to enrich a few individuals. Allowing “Exchange Value” to dominate “Use Value” leads to profound “Fetishism of Commodities”, where money and profit become the sole measure for all social activities, undermining ethical and humanitarian values. Therefore, the “intervention and guidance” of the Socialist State are necessary to regulate this tension. The State must use macro-management tools to ensure that basic social needs (Use Value) are adequately met, even when they do not yield the highest profits according to market logic. Marxist philosophy provides the theoretical basis for “political control” over economic dynamics, ensuring that the development of productive forces is always directed to serve the objective of “humanity” rather than the objective of “capital”.

4. APPLICATION OF MARXIST PHILOSOPHY TO THE “SOCIALIST-ORIENTED MARKET ECONOMY” MODEL

4.1. The Philosophy of Orientation: The Dialectical Unity

The model of the “Socialist-Oriented Market Economy” is not a random mixture of opposing factors, but the realization of “Marxist dialectics” in practical development. This is a “unity of opposites”, where the “Market” (representing the dynamics of development and economic efficiency) and “Socialist Orientation” (representing the goal of equity and political control) coexist and interact in a tense but inseparable relationship. This philosophy of orientation is based on the Marxist recognition that the market economy, while an effective historical instrument, cannot be left to spontaneous development but must be controlled by political and philosophical consciousness.

The goal of this dialectical unity is to transform the essence of the market economy. In traditional “Capitalism”, the market is a spontaneous system, governed by the law of “capital accumulation” and individual interest, leading to alienation and crises. In the “Socialist Orientation” model, the market is viewed as a strategic “means” to generate wealth and develop productive forces, but it must comply with the guidance of Socialist productive relations. This guidance is implemented by prioritizing the “comprehensive development of humanity” over the profit motive. This necessitates continuous and conscious intervention by the “Superstructure” (Marxist ideology, the State) into the “Economic Base” (the market economy) to regulate the contradictions arising from the market mechanism (Westra, 2012).

This dialectical unity does not completely eliminate contradictions like Surplus Value or inequality, but rather “manages and controls” them, transforming them into a driving force for development. For example, individual profit is still encouraged to generate efficiency, but it must be regulated to serve social reinvestment and reduce the wealth gap. This is a dynamic process, continuously restructured to ensure that capitalist elements do not overwhelm and derail the Socialist objective. This philosophy affirms that the strength of Marxism lies in its ability to analyze the movement of contradictions and utilize those very contradictions to advance toward a higher socio-economic formation.

4.2. The Leading Role of Public Ownership and the State Economy

To implement the philosophy of the “Socialist-Oriented Market Economy”, Marxist philosophy provides a solid foundation for maintaining the “leading role of the State” through public ownership and the State

economy. Marxist theory regarding capitalism pointed out that private ownership of the means of production is the source of exploitation and inequality. Therefore, holding the means of production and key economic sectors is the core mechanism to prevent the absolute dominance of the law of capital accumulation.

Public ownership is not limited to land and natural resources but also extends to “strategic” industries and services such as energy, telecommunications, finance, and major economic groups. The State’s control over these sectors ensures that macroeconomic decisions on investment, pricing, and distribution are not solely driven by the short-term profit motive of private entities, but must adhere to long-term social development goals. The State economy, while required to operate according to market mechanisms to achieve efficiency, has the duty to act as the “leading and stabilizing force” of the economy.

This role is evident in three aspects. Firstly, the State economy plays a “balancing and macroeconomic regulating role”, intervening during crises to protect social and economic stability. Secondly, it is the vanguard force in “investing in high-risk or low-profit sectors” that have high social foundational value (such as basic scientific research, infrastructure development). Thirdly, the existence of public ownership creates healthy “competitive pressure”, encouraging other economic sectors to operate efficiently while adhering to social and environmental standards.

In summary, public ownership” and the State economy are the material manifestation of Marxist political and philosophical superiority within the market economy. It ensures that, even when utilizing capitalist tools, ultimate economic power remains in the hands of the working people through the representation of the Socialist State, helping to protect the Socialist “orientation” from the erosion of spontaneous capitalism.

4.3. Intervention and Redistribution Policies Based on Marxism

“Intervention” and “Redistribution Policies” are action tools constructed upon Marxist philosophy’s critique of the inherent injustice of the market economy. If the market economy is the mechanism that generates “Surplus Value” and inequality, then the State must use intervention policies to “recover and redistribute” a portion of that surplus value, aiming to achieve social equity.

Firstly, “progressive taxation policy” is considered the basic and rational redistribution tool. Marxist philosophy supports higher taxes on large incomes and wealth to reduce the polarization of wealth created by the market. The goal is not merely to cover the budget but also to implement the Marxist ethical principle: “preventing the accumulation of misery” that accompanies the accumulation of capital. Secondly, the development of a “comprehensive social security system” (healthcare insurance, high-quality public education, unemployment insurance, pensions) is seen as the

realization of Marx's "Use Value" objective. By providing these essential services free or at a low cost, the State ensures that all citizens have their basic needs met, regardless of their income. This transforms a portion of the profit generated by the market into social welfare.

Thirdly, maintaining "strategic planning" and "macroeconomic regulation" is the application of Marxist principles regarding "conscious and planned" management in the economy. Strategic planning helps the State direct capital toward priority industries and geographical areas that need development (e.g., rural areas, high technology), thereby reducing the chaos and waste of the spontaneous market. This intervention is not a return to centralized planning, but the use of modern economic tools (monetary policy, fiscal policy, public investment) to mitigate the "cyclical crisis characteristic" that Marx analyzed as typical of capitalism.

In summary, these intervention and redistribution policies function as a "philosophical safety net", ensuring that market economy development does not lead to the overthrow of the Socialist objective, but conversely, becomes the material resource for advancing toward the goal of the "comprehensive development of humanity" and social equity.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that Marxist philosophy is not obsolete; conversely, it provides an indispensable "dialectical and critical theoretical framework" for addressing the problem of market economy development in the Socialist context. The choice of the market economy is justified by Marx's principle of developing productive forces, but it is precisely Marxist philosophy that warned about the contradictions and indicated the methods to control them. The successful application of the "Socialist-Oriented Market Economy" model depends on the ability of the Socialist State to maintain its "leading role", continuously adjusting productive relations to prevent the re-emergence of deep-seated exploitation, alienation, and inequality.

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