

# The Practical Materialist Origins of the Proletariat's Historical Initiative

Liying Qin

Marxism School of Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

**Abstract:** “The proletariat’s historical initiative” is a key theoretical concept introduced by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, rooted in the theoretical framework of practical materialism. From the perspective of the subjective logic of Marx’s historical dialectics, humankind will not be perpetually subject to the blind operation of historical laws; instead, the proletariat, through its practice of actively advancing historical progress, will lead humankind to evolve from passive historical subjects into conscious historical participants, and onto the communist path where every individual can achieve free and all-round development. The practical objectivity of social history is embodied in the proletariat’s active engagement in history and its revolutionary nature in changing the political status quo. Whether in the stage of the proletarian revolution or that of socialist construction, only by the objective trends of historical development and developing its own subjective strength—i.e., by unifying the objective and subjective logic of Marx’s historical dialectics through its historical initiative—can the proletariat propel historical progress and gradually lead humankind from a history of spontaneity to one of consciousness. The proletariat’s historical initiative is a key factor for the establishment of human subjectivity in the context of social history, and it vividly embodies Marx’s theory of practical materialism.

**Keywords:** Proletariat; Historical Initiative; Practical Materialism; Communist Movement



Copyright © 2026 by author (s) and SciScan Publishing Limited

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## 1 Introduction

“The proletariat’s historical initiative” is a key theoretical concept introduced by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*. He critiqued the utopian socialists, noting: “the proletariat, as yet in its infancy, offers to them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement.”(Marx, 1975a, 515) Objectively, this stems from the immature class condition of the proletariat brought about by the underdeveloped capitalist modes of production. Subjectively, this arises from the theoretical blind spot caused by the idealist conception of history. By treating consciousness, reason, wisdom, and knowledge as the decisive forces driving historical development, utopian socialists placed their hopes for social reform on individual geniuses, enlightened individuals, or even the supreme

Author Introduction: Liying Qin is a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Marxism, Central University of Finance and Economics. Her research focuses on the historical initiative of the Communist Party of China.

Article Citation: Qin, L. Y.(2026). The Practical Materialist Origins of the Proletariat’s Historical Initiative. *New Exploration of Ideology and Politics*, 8 (1), 91–102.

rulers of their era. Consequently, they were unable to recognize the proletariat's historical initiative. Marx's new worldview broke this theoretical impasse. Starting with practice, Marx developed a new worldview that revealed the laws governing human historical development based on material production, thereby gaining a profound understanding of the proletariat's unique historical position and mission. He believed that the proletariat was not a passive bearer of historical forces, but a pivotal force capable of advancing history proactively through its own practice and struggle, and of transforming the old world and forging a new one. This historical initiative is deeply rooted in the soil of practical materialism, resting on a solid theoretical foundation and realistic underpinnings.

For orthodox Marxists, the theory of Marxism reveals both the laws of human social development and the operational laws of capitalist society, while emphasizing the active role of the proletariat as the historical subject, pursuing human emancipation with a people-centered approach. Its integration of scientific and value dimensions is a distinctive feature that distinguishes it from other theories. However, in the development of Marxism, the relationship between the objectivity of historical development laws and the initiative of the proletariat as the historical subject has remained a question requiring ongoing engagement, with debates about the scientific and value dimensions of Marxist theory continuing to this day. In the 1990s, Chinese scholar Zhang Yibing introduced the concept of "the object logic and subject logic of historical dialectics" in his book *The Subjective Dimension of Marx's Historical Dialectics: The Study on Simulating Nature and Thing Enslavement*. This provided a new theoretical perspective to deepen the understanding of the dialectical relationship between historical subjects and historical laws. He argued that Marx's theory of social history reconciles both the scientific explanation of the internal objective laws of social and historical development and the initiative and dominant position of human subjects. These two dimensions constitute complementary logical threads through which Marx grasped history: the object and subject logic of historical dialectics. (Zhang, 2017: 4) The latter, that is, Marx's emphasis on the status of human subjects in the process of social and historical development, stands as "an important implicit discourse running through Marx's entire scientific theoretical research" (Zhang, 2017: 148). For this reason, the intrinsic theoretical connection between the scientific socialist movement and the subject logic of Marx's historical dialectics has long been overlooked. This article further explores the "proletariat's historical initiative" from the perspective of the subject logic of historical dialectics, aiming to make academic contributions to this field.

In fact, the subject logic of historical dialectics addresses precisely the theoretical issue of how the historical subject relates to historical laws. Marx never conceived of human history as an independent process that unfolds outside human will; instead, he depicted it as a dialectical movement shaped and propelled by human social practice. The contradictions between the productive forces and relations of production, as well as those between the economic base and the superstructure, all manifest through human practical activities. Therefore, the evolution of the social organism to a higher stage is a process of the gradual emancipation of human subjective strength in social historical practice, and one of the continuous realization of human freedom and development. The historical practice of the proletariat is the key to human history moving from spontaneity to consciousness and onto the realistic path toward communism. In this historical process, the proletariat's historical initiative is not only a recognition of and compliance with the laws of historical development, but also an affirmation and exertion of human subjectivity. It vividly embodies Marx's theory of practical materialism in the actual historical process. Exploring the practical materialist origins of the proletariat's historical initiative not only helps us understand Marxist theory from the perspective of the subject logic of historical dialectics but also enables us to accurately grasp the objective laws that guide the proletariat's active engagement in historical processes. In this sense, it thus provides essential theoretical support for the further advancement of the world

socialist movement.

## 2 The Subject Logic of Social and Historical Development and the Historical Subject Status and Mission of the Proletariat

Marx's theory of historical materialism is one of the most significant achievements in humanity's exploration of history. With this theory, he clarified the objective laws governing human historical development. He demonstrated the proletariat's role and mission as a historical subject, thus accomplishing the development of socialism from utopia to science. However, within the historical development of Marxist theory, certain interpretations have placed excessive emphasis on the scientific nature of objective historical processes and laws, at times leading to an underappreciation of the role of human subjectivity. This resulted in a somewhat one-sided understanding that treated human history as a purely objective process, which diverged from the comprehensive dialectical perspective in Marx's original theory. Zhang Yibing's proposal of the subject logic of Marx's historical dialectics aims to reaffirm the primacy of the practical initiative of the human subject and the consistent theoretical logic within Marxist theory—the establishment of human subjectivity and the ultimate emancipation of all humanity, that is, the realization of communism. The proletariat paves the practical path toward this grand goal. This constitutes the most direct theoretical connection between scientific socialism and practical materialism.

As is well known, the theoretical foundation of Marxism is built on what Marx called "practical materialism". In the process of thoroughly examining and critically appropriating the intellectual legacies of predecessors regarding the human-nature relationship, Marx transcended the theoretical limitations of old materialism, which regarded humans as passive beings governed by nature, and idealism, which viewed nature as a product of the mind's externalization. He innovatively introduced the concept of "practice" as the core category of his philosophical system. Taking this as his logical point of departure, Marx constructed a scientific worldview that takes material production practice as its fundamental basis. "All social life is essentially practical."(Marx, 1976b: 8) History is constituted by nothing other than human activity—the conscious, proactive, and creative endeavors of humans. Through material production practice, humans enter into material and energy exchanges with nature, thereby securing the essential conditions necessary for their survival. In this process, material productive forces develop, and specific relations of production emerge from the division of labor and cooperation. Together, the productive forces and the relations of production constitute the historical foundation of society. All these relations of production constitute the socio-economic base upon which a series of corresponding political superstructures and social ideologies are built. Together, these elements form a structured organic system of society. The contradictions between the productive forces and relations of production, as well as those between the economic base and the superstructure, drive the ongoing development of society. This is Marx's exposition of the objective laws governing human historical development, and it is also the most central expression of Marxism's scientific nature.

However, this historical movement also unfolds along another dimension. It should be noted that historical laws are ultimately laws governing human activity, and they can only manifest themselves through subjective, purposeful, and active human endeavors. Human subjectivity has always been the dominant factor in historical development. "The relation of the productive forces to the form of intercourse is the relation of the form of intercourse to the occupation or

activity of the individuals.”(Marx, 1975c: 82) Initially, humanity’s material productive activities and their productive relations are in harmony with their current one-sided existence; therefore, this production of material life represents a form of self-activity. As human needs continue to arise and be met, the development level of the productive forces rises accordingly. The old relations of production then become a fetter on the self-determined activity. Only those relations of production that align with the new productive forces can restore material production to an self-activity of humans. Yet, after these new relations of production have come into being, they too become a fetter on new forms of self-activity. Another form of relations of production eventually replaces them. Thus, the contradictory movement between the productive forces and the relations of production drives the evolution and development of the content of human self-activity, therefore constitutes “the history of the development of the forces of the individuals themselves” (Marx, 1975c: 82). Clearly, Marx’s theory of social history addresses not only the objective laws of material production practice and the corresponding development of social relations but also the historical development of human subjectivity and initiative. The former represents the object logic of historical dialectics, while the latter is the subject logic of historical dialectics; they respectively represent the objective and subjective dimensions of the category of “practice” as it unfolds in Marx’s theory of social history.

Marx’s new worldview completely transcended the abstract interpretations of traditional philosophy regarding the human-nature and human-society relationships. It focuses on the practical, concrete activities of humans in transforming the world, revealing the objective laws of social and historical development and their developmental trend oriented toward human emancipation. Historical laws emerge from people’s social practice, and these laws, in turn, impose constraints on people’s active engagement. “Within the framework of definite modes of production, which, of course, are not dependent on the will, alien [fremde] practical forces, which are independent not only of isolated individuals but even of all of them together, always come to stand above people.”(Marx, 1975c: 245) The practical activities of “real people” reflect their subjective consciousness and are also governed by intangible, objective historical laws. This captures the profound meaning conveyed by the statement “men as both the authors and the actors of their own drama”(Marx, 1975e: 170). Marx argued that “this development takes place spontaneously”(Marx, 1975c: 83), and this blind and spontaneous historical development carries historical necessity. At the same time, he also believed that human beings would not remain forever trapped by the blind forces of historical laws and that one day, humanity would transcend the condition of being dominated and enslaved by external objective forces. In this historical process, the material foundation of human society advances with sustained social practice, and the growth of material productive capacity and the accumulation of material wealth jointly drive the enhancement of human subjective strength and the deepening of cognitive understanding. It enables humankind to transform in social transformation from a subject that passively conforms to history into a historical participant with conscious awareness, and as a historical subject, to progressively realize the continuous remolding of social history. Marx foresaw that, by virtue of a highly developed material foundation, humankind would break free from the spontaneity and blindness inherent in the operation of historical laws—attaining a conscious grasp and active application of the laws of social development—so as to ensure that the evolution of the entire social environment and historical process is geared to the free and all-round development of every individual. And the core force that undertakes this historical mission and propels this historical process is none other than the proletariat.

According to the logic of the subject of historical dialectics, it is the people engaged in material production activities who drive historical development; under modern capitalist production relations, this subject refers to the

proletariat. Material production practice is the foundation of human society's existence and development; every step forward in history is achieved through the productive activities of the working class. The proletariat creates material wealth for the entire society, embodying social productive forces and constituting the objective material force that drives historical progress. In a capitalist society, social productive forces were initially the material power of human subjects to transform external objects, but the capitalist relations of production have turned them into objectified forces that subjugate individuals to the power of capital. The working class is enslaved and controlled by its own creations. Though subject to the historical conditions of exploitation and oppression under the capitalist relations of production, it propels progress through its unassuming endeavors, even in the absence of revolutionary movements. In the production process, the proletariat enhances its productive capacity by accumulating practical experience and upgrading production tools, continuously meeting humanity's production and living needs. The development of these needs further promotes the development of productive forces. As the level of productive forces continues to rise, it inevitably imposes higher demands on the relations of production, until a comprehensive transformation of the social form brings about new relations of production that align with the developmental level of productive forces. Therefore, when the existing relations of production can no longer accommodate the further development of productive forces, the proletariat, having been completely stripped of self-activity, will demand changes to these relations as the historical subject. The primary task of liberating the productive forces is to free the proletariat from the old relations of production. This is manifested in the proletariat's struggle against exploitation and oppression, based on spontaneous or conscious historical needs. They demand social system transformation, replacing capitalism with socialism based on public ownership of the means of production. The proletariat has not only broken the fetters of capitalist relations of production on the productive forces through its conscious revolutionary practice but also propelled a fundamental leap in humankind's subjective strength, for in transforming the old world, and in the very process of remaking itself, it has gradually forged the subjective consciousness that underpins its standing as a historical subject. After the establishment of the socialist system, the proletariat's mission as a historical subject does not come to an end; instead, it enters a new historical phase—one in which it achieves the continuous transformation of the material foundation and social institutions by consciously regulating the relationships between the productive forces and the relations of production, and between the economic base and the superstructure, thereby creating the conditions for the free and all-round development of every individual. Ultimately, with the highly advanced development of the productive forces and the continual innovation of the relations of production, humankind's subjective status vis-à-vis social history is firmly established, and history advances into a new communist epoch where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. This is precisely the historical mission of the proletariat, and it is also the ultimate culmination of the subjective logic of historical dialectics.

### **3 The Practical Objectivity of Social History and the Revolutionary Nature of the Proletarian Political Stance**

Practice is a unique form of human activity. In the process of practice, humans transform the external world by exercising their subjective initiative, continuously overcoming the limitations imposed by the external world on their activities. Human practical capabilities take shape and develop progressively throughout history. Each generation begins

its activities based on the achievements of previous generations. By integrating the practical achievements of their predecessors into their own endeavors, they enhance their practical capabilities and thereby create new history. On the one hand, human practical activities must be carried out under certain material prerequisites and conditions, determined by the objective state of material development; on the other hand, practice embodies human subjectivity, that is, the material and spiritual power of humanity. Stated differently, human beings are both dependent on existing historical conditions and constantly transcend history in accordance with their own needs. The transcendence inherent in practical activity endows humans with the possibility of attaining their free and conscious development. Marx categorized the development of social history into three forms. In the realm of “dependence on others”, human beings rely on nature in their material production, with objective natural forces determining their actions. In the realm of “dependence on things”, social productive forces transcend natural constraints but generate a vast material production system and an unconscious collective force of spontaneous subjects—an economic force independent of human beings—which enslaves them to develop in an a-subjective, quasi-natural way. The third stage is a historical phase transcending this economic force, a communist society where every individual attains freedom and all-around development. The three historical forms of social development correspond to the progressive evolution of human practical power in different historical phases. Transcending the second stage to the third requires a considerable historical period, and the key to this leap is that human beings confront the external material forces with a subjective posture and regard the social organism as the object of practice. In material production practice, humans produce their own material products alongside their own social relations. Once formed, these social relations and corresponding social laws will in turn become objects of human practice. These social laws, which regulate and constrain human activities, thus become social objects that people must surmount through practical activities, possessing practical objectivity in relation to humanity. “For the practical materialist, i.e., the Communist, it is a question of revolutionising the existing world, of practically coming to grips with and changing the things found in existence.”(Marx, 1975c: 38-39) Obviously, what Marx referred to here as the “existing world” and “things found in existence” that are to be transformed is not the natural material world, but the actual social being and its corresponding social consciousness. This is precisely where the revolutionary essence of the Marxist doctrine lies in contrast to other doctrines.

Zhang Yibing terms as “thing enslavement” the phenomenon that humans are subject to being governed and enslaved by external objective forces in their existential activities. This nature of thing enslavement stems from the production relations, independent of human will, emerging from the social division of labor in human production processes. In class societies, this takes the form of various antagonistic class relations: a small minority deprives the majority of the fruits of their labor, upholds such production relations through the political superstructure and ideologies to maintain the status quo and consolidate their class status, while the broad masses of the people—the true historical subjects—suffer from exploitation and oppression. Yet the ruling class’s status quo will not persist forever. The contradictory movement between the productive forces and the relations of production, as well as between the economic base and the superstructure, drives historical development. Thus, in eras of social upheaval and drastic transformation, the development of productive forces gives rise to a new class that breaks down the established old production relations; this new class, standing for the interests of the entire society and the progressive direction of the historical trend, crusades against the old ruling class to establish a new social order. The bourgeoisie emerged in this way from the demise of feudal society. Driven by irresistible economic forces, the bourgeoisie fully exercised their historical initiative, paving the way politically for the rapidly changing productive forces and relations of production. The historical actions

of the bourgeoisie, undertaken under the impetus of the historical tides to realize the interests of their own class, give rise to the very spontaneity inherent in their historical initiative. Capitalist society did not eliminate class antagonism; “It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.”(Marx, 1975a: 485) Therefore, like all previous ruling classes, the bourgeoisie’s historical initiative during the revolutionary period fades once it establishes a ruling order and becomes the new ruling class, because it no longer seeks to eliminate the status quo for historical progress, but rather to maintain it for the sake of class interests. The external domination and control over humans exerted by such objective economic forces determine that all ruling classes, including the bourgeoisie, cannot consciously continue to advance historical development; their ephemeral historical initiative is a spontaneous product governed by historical laws and the tides of history, and they are incapable of breaking free from the spontaneity of social history, doomed to become mere “creatures” blindly at the mercy of economic necessity. Thus, in the face of periodically occurring economic crises, “The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.”(Marx, 1975a: 490)

“Not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians.”(Marx, 1975a: 490) When the proletariat elevates the interests determined by material relations to the level of class consciousness, the practical objectivity of the productive forces and their corresponding relations of production production, as revealed through practice, becomes apparent. Their historical initiative can then manifest through collective action, acting as a unifying force of the entire class and forming a decisive power to drive social transformation. As the class most closely linked to advanced productive forces, the most revolutionary class, and the one that endures the deepest exploitation and oppression under capitalist production relations, the proletariat possesses the strongest motivation to break free from the blind domination of historical laws, eliminate the current state of bourgeois domination, and continuously liberate humanity by transforming the social organism, ultimately establishing humanity’s subject status before social history. The historical initiative of the proletariat is deeply rooted in its class nature and the social and historical conditions of its existence. Within the framework of capitalist production relations, the proletariat does not possess any means of production. It can only sell its labor power to capitalists to secure the means of subsistence. This socioeconomic position determines the existence of an irreconcilable contradiction between it and the bourgeoisie. When the fundamental contradictions of capitalist society intensify to a point where they can no longer be resolved internally, and the self-activity of the proletariat can no longer be realized within the framework of capitalist society, the proletariat emerges as an independent political force to stand before social history in the posture of an active historical subject. It is from this that the proletariat derives its political stance and revolutionary resolve. The proletariat understands full well that only by overthrowing the capitalist system and abolishing exploitation and oppression can it achieve its own emancipation and that of all humankind. Hence, it demonstrates an unprecedented resolve and thoroughness in its struggle, a revolutionary character that stands as a vivid manifestation of its political stance. At the same time, Marxist theory enables the proletariat to attain a profound grasp of historical laws and a high degree of historical consciousness, endowing it with the capacity to shoulder the historical mission of transforming the old world and forging a new one, and to propel the advancement of history to a higher stage with unwavering conviction and persistent striving. As Marx put it: “Only the proletarians of the present day, who are completely shut off from all self-activity, are in a position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity, which consists in the appropriation of a totality of productive forces and in the development of a totality of capacities entailed by this.”(Marx, 1975c: 87)

## 4 The Historical Initiative of the Proletariat Ushers in the Historical Stage for Humanity from Spontaneity to Consciousness

Marx held that the transition for humanity to break free from the domination of external necessity and achieve its own free and all-round development—namely, the transit from the first two of the three great social formations to the third—is, first and foremost, the outcome of the concrete and historical development of material production practice. In other words, only in the material production practice that generates tremendous productive forces—i.e., on the basis of objective material premises—can human subjects transcend the thing-dominated nature in historical development, reassert control over the material forces they have created themselves and their corresponding economic processes. In doing so, humans can attain a dominant position of control in social history and embark on the path of conscious and independent development leading to communism. This is not a process of passively awaiting economic development, but the proletariat's active endeavor to propel human history into the historical stage from spontaneity to consciousness through its deliberate historical practice.

The essence of the proletariat's historical initiative lies in the continuous elimination of the spontaneity of historical development, the gradual realization of humanity's active mastery of the historical process, and ultimately the attainment of the value goal of the free and all-round development of every individual. Marx pointed out: "Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all naturally evolved premises as the creatures of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals." (Marx, 1975c: 81) This assertion accurately captures the essence of the proletariat's historical initiative—no longer regarding historical premises as immutable givens, but reshaping the foundation of historical development through conscious practice. The first crucial step in achieving this breakthrough is the proletariat's unification to seize control of the total productive forces. This act marks a historic turning point in the social organism's gradual transition from spontaneity to consciousness. To achieve this goal, the proletariat must seize state power, shatter the old state apparatus, establish a dictatorship of the proletariat, and use it as a lever to transform the old economy and build a new one.

It should be made clear that the transition of human history from spontaneity to consciousness is not an instantaneous leap, but a protracted, progressive process constrained by objective laws. As the first class in human history to possess conscious historical initiative and to aim at eliminating historical spontaneity and class divisions, the proletariat's historical activities are always constrained by specific historical conditions, objective historical laws, and its own development stage. Its historical initiative is both the exercise of subjective initiative under specific historical circumstances and a product of the conditions of historical development. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx profoundly elaborated on the essence of the proletariat's historical movement: "In order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economic agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant." (Marx, 1975e: 335) This statement clearly indicates that the proletariat's historical initiative is always rooted in the objective trends of historical development, while actively advancing history toward a higher stage. This embodies an organic unity of the object and subject logic of historical dialectics.

With the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the dividing line, the proletariat's historical initiative can be categorized into two stages: the proletarian revolutionary stage and the socialist construction stage. In the revolutionary stage, the proletariat overthrows the rule of the bourgeoisie through violent revolution and establishes a state power of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx explicitly stated in *The Communist Manifesto* that "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions." (Marx, 1975a, 519) This violent revolution is not blind destruction, but rather grounded in a scientific judgment of capitalism's internal contradictions. When the contradiction between socialized production and private ownership of the means of production becomes irreconcilable, only class struggle can pave the way for a new society. In other words, the proletariat's historical actions must take account of prevailing historical conditions—specifically, the developmental state of society's fundamental contradictions. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx referred to the economic crises caused by the intensification of the fundamental social contradictions as the bourgeoisie's "weapons that bring death to itself" (Marx, 1975a: 490). He called the proletariat "the men who are to wield those weapons" (Marx, 1975a, 490). The proletariat could not achieve victory without leveraging this weapon. In particular, when the proletariat suffered defeats in the European revolutions of 1848, Marx specifically noted: "With this general prosperity, in which the productive forces of bourgeois society develop as luxuriantly as is at all possible within bourgeois relationships, there can be no talk of a real revolution." (Marx, 1975f: 135) However, he also mentioned another scenario in *The German Ideology*: "To lead to collisions in a country, this contradiction need not necessarily have reached its extreme limit in this particular country. The competition with industrially more advanced countries, brought about by the expansion of international intercourse, is sufficient to produce a similar contradiction in countries with a backward industry." (Marx, 1975c: 74-75) Marx's argument centers on the idea that international exchanges and competition can disrupt the "natural rhythm" of social development in backward countries. Internal contradictions need not spontaneously escalate to an extreme; external shocks can give rise to class contradictions and social conflicts akin to those in developed countries. Both the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution serve as typical examples that confirm Marx's judgment. Establishing the proletarian dictatorship as the governing state power is the result of the proletarian revolution. It is "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor" (Marx, 1975e: 334), and an inevitable choice for the proletariat to completely break the constraints of the old relations of production and achieve its own emancipation and social transformation. The establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat not only signifies the transformation of the proletariat from an oppressed class into the ruling class, but also marks the birth of a socio-political form in human history that, for the first time, aims to eliminate class divisions and achieve common interests. It paves the way for an era of conscious human development. This form of political power enables the proletariat to seize the social means of production by implementing public ownership, thus providing a political guarantee for the social organism to embark on a path that takes the interests of the people as its fundamental value orientation.

In the revolutionary process, the proletariat not only dismantles the old state apparatus but, more importantly, fundamentally transforms the relations of production by seizing state power, thus creating institutional prerequisites for subsequent historical development. This marks the transition to the second historical stage: socialist construction. "It is only in an order of things in which there are no more classes and class antagonisms that social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions" (Marx, 1975d: 212), but rather the self-improvement and development of socialism. At this point, the proletariat has secured the collective ownership of social material production and will gradually

eliminate the spontaneity of historical prerequisites with a more conscious historical initiative. The purpose of the proletariat seizing state power is to realize the transformation of production relations. Its core lies in breaking the shackles of capitalist private ownership of the means of production on productive forces, establishing the dominant position of public ownership of the means of production, returning the means of production to the ownership of the general public, and fundamentally eliminating the economic foundation of class exploitation and oppression. It is worth noting that Marx viewed socialism as the first stage of communism, a stage that still retains “traces of the old society” such as commodity and monetary relations. These economic forms no longer occupy a dominant position, however, but serve the overarching goal of human emancipation. This is because, under the current historical conditions, the mere realization of public ownership of the means of production cannot eliminate the domination of material forces over humans, for the existing level of productive forces is not sufficient to bring the superiority of socialist production relations into full play. Ultimately, the development of productive forces cannot be planned; the continuous emergence and fulfillment of human needs for production and life throughout society propels it. The people’s holding of the social means of production in the collective name does not enable them to achieve self-activity once and for all. Marx’s concept of “self-activity” is a historical process that is continuously realized yet constantly transcended amid the evolving development of productive forces and their corresponding contradictions. The historical practices of socialist construction have shown that at the preliminary stage of socialism, where the productive forces are not yet highly developed, overly centralized planned economic models faced certain challenges in resource allocation efficiency. Practice has demonstrated that utilizing market mechanisms can play a positive role in energizing the economy and developing productive forces during this specific historical phase, serving as a useful supplement within the overarching framework of socialist development. Meanwhile, under the socialist system, the proletarian regime can rely on state power to formulate comprehensive plans for social and economic development, concentrate resources to address major developmental challenges, promote all-around progress in education, science and technology, culture, and other social undertakings, and gradually achieve common prosperity for all people. More importantly, this transformation of the relations of production is not the end of history, but a stepping stone for human society to advance to a higher stage. Under the new institutional framework, the proletariat can continuously deepen its understanding of the laws of social development, timely adjust the specific forms of production relations in accordance with the objective requirements of the development of productive forces, and drive the persistent adaptation of the relations of production to the productive forces and of the superstructure to the economic base. This sustains the progressive development of history and lays a solid material foundation and institutional guarantee for the ultimate realization of the lofty ideal of communism.

The dialectical unity of the two historical stages constitutes a complete picture of the proletariat’s historical initiative. The power seized by the proletariat in the revolution is not an end in itself, but a tool for transforming the world; socialist construction is not merely about consolidating revolutionary achievements, but about constantly advancing toward the communist ideal through sustained social transformation. The proletariat’s historical initiative is a manifestation of human practical initiative in relation to social history, based on a profound understanding of objective realities, such as social contradictions, relations of production, and the balance of class forces, in a specific historical stage. The historical tasks and practical conditions facing the proletariat have varied significantly across different periods. From revolutionary struggles to overthrow the rule of the exploiting classes, to the construction efforts following the establishment of a new social system, and onward to the subsequent journey of reform and development,

each step forward must begin with the existing historical premises. Only by grounding itself in current historical reality and accurately grasping the trends and laws of historical development can the exercise of subjective initiative be directed onto the right path and secured on a solid foundation. In this way, the proletarian movement can continue to exercise its historical initiative to achieve human emancipation, realizing the unity of conformity to laws and conformity to purposes. In *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx described the characteristics of communism's advanced stage as follows: "after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want."(Marx, 1975g: 87) These precisely represent the ultimate value orientation of the proletariat's historical initiative.

## 5 Conclusion

Marxist theory is a doctrine of human emancipation; specifically, it is a doctrine that guides the proletariat to actively promote history toward a higher stage of development. "Even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement—and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society—it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs."(Marx, 1975h: 10) The assertion that "it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments" indicates that the course of human history is determined by objective material factors and governed by insurmountable objective laws. Any attempt to artificially skip or forcibly alter historical stages of development is inevitably doomed to failure. Meanwhile, the phrase "it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs" profoundly reveals the positive significance and great value of the proletariat's historical initiative. By virtue of its profound understanding and grasp of historical laws, the proletariat can actively exercise its subjective initiative through conscious practical actions. This enables it to effectively advance the course of history, mitigate the twists and hardships inherent in social development, and accelerate the pace of human emancipation. In the world socialist movement, the proletariat overthrows the old system and establishes a new regime through revolutionary struggles, and then proceeds to carry out socialist construction, continuously adjusting the relations of production to adapt to the development of productive forces. This series of practical activities specifically demonstrates the proletariat's historical initiative. Together, they form a magnificent picture of the proletariat promoting human society from spontaneity to consciousness, and from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. They also fully confirm the scientific nature and truth of Marxist theory regarding human emancipation, pointing out a bright direction for the progress and development of human society.

In the context of contemporary world history, re-exploring the practical materialist origins of the proletariat's historical initiative undoubtedly holds significant theoretical and practical value. At the theoretical level, it further enriches the subject dimension of Marxist historical dialectics, shedding light on how to resolve the complex relationship between historical laws and subjective initiative; at the practical level, it offers theoretical support and methodological insights for the contemporary world socialist movement. A deep understanding of the essence of the proletariat's historical initiative helps to better abide by historical laws and unleash the tremendous vitality of historical subjects under new historical conditions, thus continuously advancing the cause of human emancipation and social progress.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Marx, K. (1975a). Manifesto of the communist party. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 6)*. International Publishers.
- [2] Marx, K. (1975b). Theses on Feuerbach. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 5)*. International Publishers.
- [3] Marx, K. (1975c). The German Ideology. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 5)*. International Publishers.
- [4] Marx, K. (1975d). The poverty of philosophy. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 6)*. International Publishers.
- [5] Marx, K. (1975e). The civil war in France. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 22)*. International Publishers.
- [6] Marx, K. (1975f). The class struggles in France: 1848-1850. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 10)*. International Publishers.
- [7] Marx, K. (1975g). The critique of the Gotha programme. In Marx, K. & Engels, F. (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 24)*. International Publishers.
- [8] Marx, K. (1975h). Capital Vol.I. In K. Marx & F. Engels (Eds.), *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works (Vol. 35)*. International Publishers.
- [9] Zhang, Y. (2017). *The subjective dimension of Marxian historical dialectics: The study on simulating nature and thing enslavement*. Beijing Normal University Press.