

A Study of Marx's View of Time and Its Contemporary Value

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ABSTRACT

The problem of time is an age-old enigma, and research interest in it remains undiminished in physics and philosophy to this day. Yet more than a hundred years ago Marx had already unveiled its mystery: time is praxis-the active existence of the human being, the measure of human life, and the space for human development. "Corporealized" sensuous time constructs the human cognitive world-phenomenal nature; labor time as "living time" constructs the human existential world-actual society; and historical time realizes the human world of perpetuation-history. Marx first transposes praxis into the human being, then proceeds from real human individuals and, from a two-way open historical horizon, explores the meaning of time in social history, thereby transcending the conceptions of time in traditional philosophy and natural science. Through a deep disclosure of Marx's view of time, this paper aims to elucidate its essential content and to clarify the consistency and systematicity of his thought on time.

KEYWORDS

Marx's View of Time; Natural Time; Social Time; Historical Time; Contemporary Value.

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of time has been a fundamental issue of common concern in both philosophy and science from ancient times to the present. In the natural sciences, Newton regarded time as absolute, uniform flow, making it a cornerstone of classical physics; in philosophy, from Aristotle to Kant and Hegel, time was understood either as the measure of motion, or as a form of sensibility belonging to the subject, or as a moment in the self-development of the concept. Although these conceptions of time differ in their approaches, most of them separate time from human practical activity, turning time into a pure form or abstract category external to human beings. The distinctiveness of Marx lies in the fact that he situates the problem of time within "real individuals" and their productive practice, proposing that "time is in fact the active existence of the human being; it is not only the measure of human life, but also the space for human development" [1], thereby bringing about a fundamental transformation of the traditional view of time.

Scholarly research on Marx's view of time has already produced fairly rich results, which can be broadly summarized into three dimensions. The first is the dimension of natural time. In Anti-Dühring, Engels, proceeding from the dialectical relationship between finitude and infinity, criticizes Dühring's thesis of the finitude of time and reaffirms the objectivity of time as a form of the existence of matter. Lenin, on the basis of his criticism of Mach's subjectivist-idealist view of time, emphasizes the internal connection between time and matter in motion. The second is the dimension of social time. Liu Ben was among the first to advocate shifting the study of Marx's problem of time from the "natural sphere" to the "social sphere," arguing that in Marx, praxis is the foundation of time and time is essentially the space for human development [2]. Yu Wujin further distinguishes Marx's early view of natural time from his mature view of praxis-time, stressing that only the latter is Marx's genuine

view of time [3]. Gould, Postone and others, starting from the relation between labor and value, reveal the socio-historical content of time under capitalist conditions [4]. The third is the dimension of historical time. Althusser, Balibar and others emphasize that the concept of historical time should be established on the complex structure of the social whole [5]. Domestic scholars such as Xi Ge and Zhang Yibing explain the historical dimension of Marx's view of time from the perspective of historical materialism. These studies provide an important foundation for understanding Marx's view of time, but they also have obvious deficiencies: most achievements emphasize one dimension, or highlight the priority of social time while relatively neglecting the internal unity among natural time, social time, and historical time, and thus fail to fully clarify the overall logic of Marx's view of time.

This paper argues that Marx's view of time is not a theory of three parallel or mutually separated times, but an internally unified whole centered on praxis and composed of natural time, social time, and historical time. In his Doctoral Dissertation, Marx had already transposed time into human sensuous activity, understanding it as "the abstract form of sensuous perception" [6], which indicates that time does not belong to the essential world but is the basis on which the phenomenal world appears. In *Capital* and its manuscripts, Marx regards labor as "living time," reveals the origin of social time, its qualitative content, and its function as the measure of value, and on this basis criticizes the alienation of time under capitalist conditions. From the perspective of historical materialism, time unfolds as the historical process of human practice across generations and becomes the space for human self-development. These three are not independent types of time, but rather the unfolding of one and the same time at different levels of existence: natural time is the ontological foundation of time, social time is its actual unfolding, and historical time is its historical form in unity with human development.

Based on the above judgment, this paper seeks to clarify the three dimensions of Marx's view of time and their internal logic. With respect to textual sources, in addition to Marx's own Doctoral Dissertation, *Capital*, and the *Grundrisse*, this paper also gives full attention to the discussion of time in Engels's *Anti-Dühring*. As Engels clearly states in the prefaces to the three editions, all important parts of the relevant chapters of that work were written by Marx; therefore the view of time contained in it can be regarded as a direct expression of Marx's own thought—a point that previous studies have tended to overlook. This paper first examines the basic connotations of natural time, social time, and historical time respectively, then reveals the overall logic of their unity in "real individuals" and "praxis," and finally discusses the theoretical value and practical significance of Marx's view of time for understanding the contemporary "time famine," the alienation of labor, and the problem of free time.

2. THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF MARX'S VIEW OF TIME

2.1 Natural Time: Sensuous Time and the Construction of the Phenomenal World

Marx's earliest reflections on time are concentrated in his Doctoral Dissertation and the preparatory notebooks for it. Proceeding from atomism, he distinguishes the views of time held by Democritus and Epicurus, and thereby establishes his own distinctive understanding of natural time.

In Marx's view, since the atoms of the essential world are "eternal" and "independent," and their relation to themselves involves "no mutability and relativity," time cannot be incorporated into the essential world and "must be excluded from the concept of the atom, from the essential world"[7]. This judgment directly rejects the absolute conception of time that treats time as an independent material substance. Time is neither an eternal existence within the essential world, nor a uniform flow unrelated to material motion. Marx locates time as the principle of the phenomenal world, namely "the abstract form of sensuous perception." He points out that time is the principle that "abstracts from all determinate being, annihilates it, and leads it back into being-for-itself"[8]; in actual nature this principle is time. Thus, "the temporality of things and their appearing to the senses are posited as

one and the same thing as the things themselves”[9], namely appearance. Time thereby becomes the foundation of all existence in the phenomenal world; there is no existence outside time.

Marx further unifies time and space in the motion of the atom. In the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Nature*, he writes: “Space, that is, the continuity of time”; “time, that is, the discontinuity of time.” In its straight-line fall the atom becomes “a spatial point”; the continuity of its motion appears as space, while its discontinuity appears as time. Time and space thus cease to be mutually independent forms and become two aspects of the unfolding of material motion itself. This understanding fundamentally transcends the Newtonian absolute conception of time and also distances itself from Kant’s subjectivist approach of treating time merely as a form of sensuous intuition. It is worth noting that Marx’s early thinking on natural time is continued and reinforced in Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*. Engels explicitly states: “Existence outside time is just as absurd as existence outside space.” Engels maintains that the “pure time” remaining after all concrete events have been abstracted away is in substance precisely what Marx called “corporealized time,” namely human sensuousness. This also shows that Marx never abandoned his early understanding of natural time, but incorporated it into a more complete theory of time.

2.2 Social Time: Labor as “Living Time” and the Measure of Value

The major advance in Marx’s view of time lies in the turn from natural time to social time. The pivot of this turn is labor. In *Capital* and its manuscripts, Marx clearly states: “Labor is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, which appears as the forming of these things by living time”[10]. Here labor is understood as “living time,” that is, human practical activity itself. Social time thus obtains its origin: it is not an objective form external to human beings, but the unfolding process of human labor activity. On this basis, Gould points out that in Marx, labor is both the origin of human time-consciousness and the origin of the objective measurement of time.

Because labor is “living time,” differences in the character of labor in different social formations determine that time has different qualitative contents. In primitive society, labor directly serves survival; in slave society and feudal society, the greater part of the products of the laborer’s labor is appropriated by the exploiting classes; in capitalist society, labor is characterized by the sale of labor power, and time is abstracted into a measurable measure of value. Marx reveals that only under the capitalist mode of production does time truly become the direct measure of value. Socially necessary labor time determines the value of commodities, while surplus value derives from the surplus labor performed by workers beyond necessary labor time. Time is thereby incorporated into the logic of capital’s self-expansion: in order to obtain more surplus value, capitalists inevitably strive to lengthen or intensify workers’ labor time. Time is no longer the confirmation of the active existence of the human being, but becomes an external force that oppresses human beings, and labor is thereby alienated.

Marx does not stop at the critique of the alienation of time, but points to the possibility of liberation. Since time is alienated under capitalist conditions into an external coercive measure, the key to subverting this alienation lies in restoring the human character of time, so that labor time is no longer dominated by the logic of capital but serves the free development of human beings. This liberation points toward the attainment of free time. Marx clearly states in *Wages, Price and Profit*: “Time is in fact the active existence of the human being; it is not only the measure of human life, but also the space for human development”[11]. This sentence is both a concise summary of the human essence of time and a revelation of the emancipatory dimension of social time.

2.3 Historical Time: The Space for Human Development and the Becoming of History

The third dimension of Marx’s view of time is historical time. If natural time reveals the ontological foundation of time in the phenomenal world, and social time reveals the actual unfolding of time in

human practical activity, then historical time is the overall presentation of time in the perpetuation of human generations.

Marx always opposes understanding human beings as isolated, abstract entities. In his view, the human essence, in its reality, is the ensemble of social relations. Only by engaging in practical activity within definite social relations can human beings become concrete, real human beings, and thus become historical human beings. In praxis, human beings produce both their objects and themselves; they both presuppose existing social-historical conditions and produce new social relations. It is in this practical process that human beings become historical beings, and history becomes human history. Thus time and history are internally unified: time is not an empty framework external to human history, but the unfolding and continuation of human practical activity itself. Marx therefore emphasizes that time is “the space for human development,” that is, the space of possibility opened up by the continuous process of human practice over generations.

In examining history, Marx creates a two-way open historical horizon: he both traces back from the present to the past and looks ahead from the present to the future. He points out that bourgeois economy “goes beyond itself and traces back to earlier historical modes of production”[12], while the present conditions of production “appear as conditions of production which are in the process of subsuming themselves and thereby creating the historical presuppositions for a new social system”[13]. On the basis of this horizon, Marx puts forward a three-stage theory of the development of human society: from the stage of personal dependence, through the stage of personal independence founded on objective dependence, to the stage of free individuality founded on the all-round development of individuals. The preceding stage prepares the conditions for the following stage, and the last stage is the highest form of human development, namely the association of free individuals.

This conception of historical time differs both from the Hegelian homogeneous, empty conception of time and from a chronicle that treats history as a disorderly collection of events. It endows history with human content, reveals the inner tendency of historical development, and provides the temporal foundation for the establishment of historical materialism. Precisely for this reason, historical time is not a third kind of time juxtaposed with natural time and social time, but the unity and sublimation of natural time and social time in the course of human history. Together, the three constitute the whole of Marx’s praxis-centered view of time.

3. THE OVERALL LOGIC AND THEORETICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MARX’S VIEW OF TIME

The three dimensions of Marx’s view of time—natural time, social time, and historical time—are neither three mutually independent types of time, nor stage-products that replace one another in different periods. They are rooted together in human sensuous practical activity, constituting an organic whole with praxis as its core, with “real individuals” as its point of departure, and with human emancipation as its ultimate aim. Understanding this holistic character requires grasping it at four levels: its logical starting point, its essential determination, its dialectical nature, and its value orientation.

3.1 The Logical Starting Point: Real Individuals

Marx’s investigation of the problem of time was from the very beginning closely connected with his understanding of the human being. In the Doctoral Dissertation, Marx had already transposed time into human sensuous activity, pointing out that time is “the abstract form of sensuous perception” and the unity of “the temporality of things and their appearing to the senses.” The profundity of this judgment lies in the fact that time is no longer understood as an objective framework external to human beings, but as directly related to human sensuous existence. In the subsequent development of his thought, Marx further advanced this understanding from the sensuous level to the practical level. In *Capital* and its manuscripts, labor is explicitly called “living time”; from the perspective of

historical materialism, time in turn appears as the continuous process of human practice across generations. The logical starting point running through all of this is always “real individuals.”

The “real individuals” as understood by Marx differ both from Feuerbach’s abstract “human being” that is merely an object of sensuousness, and from Hegel’s “subject” as a moment in the unfolding of self-consciousness. Real individuals are concrete beings engaged in material production within definite social relations. This existence is not static, but continually objectifies and creates itself through practical activity. It is precisely in this sense that time is not an empty form external to human beings, but the very mode of existence of real human beings. Human existence is itself temporal, and only through human practical activity can time acquire concrete content. Hence the understanding of time must presuppose the understanding of the human being, and the understanding of the human being can likewise be deepened only through the analysis of time. This logical starting point of Marx’s view of time determines that it can be neither a purely natural-philosophical problem nor a purely epistemological problem, but an ontological problem directly related to the existence and development of the human being himself.

3.2 Essential Determination: Praxis

Praxis is the core category of Marx’s view of time and the main thread running through its three dimensions. Natural time, social time, and historical time are in fact the forms in which praxis unfolds at different levels of existence.

What corresponds to natural time is human sensuous practice. In the Doctoral Dissertation, time is defined as “the abstract form of sensuous perception.” This definition appears to belong to the epistemological sphere, but in fact already contains the germ of a theory of praxis. Time “abstracts from all determinate being, annihilates it, and leads it back into being-for-itself.” This abstraction is not the operation of pure consciousness, but is brought about by human sensuous activity. Sensuous activity makes the world appear to human beings and makes the construction of the phenomenal world possible. Natural time is therefore not a scale of material motion detached from human sensuous activity, but the form of expression of human sensuous practice in the phenomenal realm. Engels’s inquiry into “pure time” in *Anti-Dühring* ultimately returns to human sensuousness as well, which further confirms this point.

What corresponds to social time is human productive labor practice. Marx calls labor “the living, form-giving fire” and “living time.” This thesis reveals the internal identity of labor and time: labor is not only the source of time, but also its actual content. In labor, human beings objectify their own activity into natural things, endowing things with form and transforming time from an abstract sensuous form into concrete time with social content. Different modes of labor produce different forms of time, and different social relations endow time with different social characters. The specificity of capitalist society lies precisely in the fact that it abstracts labor time into a measure of value, turning time into a pure quantity that can be precisely calculated and exchanged. The analysis of social time thus leads directly to the critique of the logic of capital.

What corresponds to historical time is the overall practice of successive human generations. Human practice is not isolated individual behavior, but is carried out under definite social-historical conditions and at the same time creates new social-historical conditions. The practice of each generation is both the result of the practice of the preceding generation and the presupposition of the practice of the following generation. This continuous, cumulative practical activity constitutes history and also constitutes historical time. Historical time is not the homogeneous flow of physical time, but a temporal structure in which human practice continually generates itself through generational succession. Therefore, the unity of natural time, social time, and historical time is ultimately the unity of human sensuous practice, productive practice, and historical practice, and is the unified unfolding of praxis at the three levels of the individual, society, and humanity.

3.3 Dialectical Nature: The Inner Contradictions of Time and Their Self-Sublation

Marx's view of time possesses a distinctively dialectical character. This dialectical character manifests first in the fact that time has both objectivity and subjectivity. On the one hand, like space, time is a basic form of the existence of matter and possesses objective reality independent of human consciousness; on the other hand, time is not a purely objective flow unrelated to human activity, but the unfolding process of human practical activity, containing the creativity and activity of the subject. This dual character of time clearly demarcates it both from the absolute time described by natural science and from the subjective time understood by idealism.

More importantly, Marx reveals the inner contradictions of time in specific social formations. Under capitalist conditions, time presents itself as a profound opposition: on the one hand, labor time is extended and intensified to the greatest possible extent, becoming an instrument for the self-expansion of capital; on the other hand, the free time of the laborers themselves is continually compressed, and the space for human development is deprived. The more workers produce, the less time belongs to themselves; the faster social wealth grows, the scarcer the free time at the laborers' disposal becomes. This contradiction is not the result of backward technology or poor management, but the necessary product of capitalist relations of production. The alienation of time is the concentrated expression of the alienation of labor in the temporal dimension.

However, the significance of dialectics lies not only in revealing contradictions, but also in pointing out the direction of their movement and the possibility of their sublation. Marx holds that the capitalist mode of production, while compressing the free time of laborers to an extreme, also creates the material presuppositions for the universalization of free time. The enormous development of the productive forces makes the growth of social wealth no longer dependent on the unlimited extension of labor time, thereby providing the possibility of shortening necessary labor time and increasing free time. At the same time, in intensifying the alienation of time, capitalism also forges the historical subject capable of understanding and transforming this alienated condition. The inner contradictions of time are thereby transformed into the driving force for social change. This is precisely the profundity of Marx's dialectical view of time: it refuses to understand time as a static, eternal category, and instead grasps it as a historical process full of contradictions, whose unfolding itself contains a tendency toward self-transcendence.

The relation among past, present, and future likewise embodies the dialectical structure of time. Marx does not regard the past as something that has vanished and is irrelevant to the present, nor does he regard the future as a wholly separate beyond cut off from the present. In his view, the present is the sublation of the past and contains the positive achievements of the past; the present also, in the process of its own self-sublation, gestates the elements of the future. This two-way open temporal structure makes history not a simple linear passage, but a dialectical process of becoming.

3.4 Value Orientation: Human Character and the Aim of Emancipation

The value orientation of Marx's view of time is very clear: human emancipation. He defines time as "the active existence of the human being," "the measure of human life," and "the space for human development." These three propositions reveal the meaning of time for human beings from different angles and centrally express the human character of Marx's view of time.

Time as the active existence of the human being means that human beings do not passively exist within time, but actively create the content of time through practical activity and thereby confirm their own existence. Human existence itself is a temporal process, and the core of this process is praxis. Through labor, human beings objectify their own powers and make time the expression of their essential powers. Time as the measure of human life reveals the inner connection between the meaning of human life and time. The length of life is of course measured by time, but the value and quality of life depend even more on how time is used. In what kind of activity one spends time

determines how life realizes itself. Time as the space for human development expresses the decisive significance of free time for human emancipation. Only when human beings possess freely disposable time can they develop themselves according to their own interests and capacities, and can they cast off external compulsion and become truly free beings.

Under capitalist conditions, the human essence of time is obscured and distorted; time is alienated from the active existence of the human being into an external coercive force. Marx's critique of the alienation of time is ultimately aimed at restoring the human essence of time and making time once again the space for human development. The core of this emancipatory orientation is free time. Free time is not idle time in which one does nothing, nor is it time spent on mere consumption and entertainment; it is the real space in which human beings develop their capacities according to their own individuality and engage in free activity. Only by sublating capitalist relations of ownership, so that social production no longer takes the unlimited expansion of surplus value as its aim but takes the all-round development of human beings as its aim, can free time truly become a universal social reality. Therefore, the theoretical destination of Marx's view of time is highly consistent with his communist ideal: time is transformed from an external measure into the inner space of human development, the opposition between labor time and free time is sublated, and human beings truly become the masters of their own time.

In summary, Marx's view of time is a whole with a rigorous internal logic. It takes real individuals as its starting point, praxis as its essential determination, dialectics as its method of thought, and human emancipation as its ultimate value. Natural time, social time, and historical time are not a simple addition of three kinds of time, but the organic unfolding of one and the same view of time at different levels. It is precisely this holistic character that enables Marx's view of time to transcend the limitations of natural science and traditional philosophy, and to provide a distinctive and profound theoretical horizon for understanding the deep connections between time and human existence, time and social development, and time and historical progress.

4. THE CONTEMPORARY VALUE OF MARX'S VIEW OF TIME

Marx's view of time is not only a theoretical revolution, but also an analytical framework with real critical force. The temporal experience of contemporary society displays a high degree of contradiction: on the one hand, technological progress and rising productive efficiency have provided unprecedented material conditions for shortening labor time and increasing free time; on the other hand, time anxiety is increasingly pervasive, the penetration of labor time into the lifeworld is constantly deepening, and "time famine" has become a widespread social feeling. This contradiction precisely confirms the profundity of Marx's view of time. Reactivating Marx's theory of time helps reveal the social roots of the contemporary temporal predicament and provides theoretical resources for seeking paths of emancipation.

4.1 Contemporary Forms of the Alienation of Time: From "Time Famine" to Digital Labor

In the late 1980s, the American scholar Juliet Schor put forward the concept of "time famine" in *The Overspent American* to describe the coexistence of extended working hours and scarce leisure time that was widespread in American society. She pointed out that people were caught in a cycle of "work-consume-work again": they extended their working hours in order to sustain an ever-escalating level of consumption, and the extension of working hours in turn made them feel an even greater need to compensate for the exhaustion of life through consumption. The result of this cycle was that although material wealth continued to grow, people's sense of well-being did not rise correspondingly. To this day, "time famine" has not only failed to ease, but has further intensified on a global scale.

Marx had already revealed the structural roots of this phenomenon under capitalist conditions. In *Capital*, Marx points out that under the capitalist mode of production, the inner logic of capital's self-expansion necessarily requires the maximum compression of necessary labor time and the extension of surplus labor time. In periods when technical conditions were limited, this seizure of time mainly took the form of directly lengthening the working day; in the contemporary era, it assumes more concealed and complex forms. The widespread application of digital technology and information and communication technology has increasingly blurred the boundary between labor time and life time. The popularization of online office work and instant messaging tools has left laborers in a state of being on call even outside statutory working hours. So-called "flexible work arrangements" are often not flexibility for laborers to control their own time, but flexibility for capital to mobilize the time of laborers. The fragmentation and round-the-clock character of labor time perpetuate and deepen the alienation of time criticized by Marx in new forms. This tendency is evident in all major economies, and countries have accordingly begun to explore regulatory means such as the right to disconnect and algorithmic transparency to respond to the new challenges brought by digital labor.

Even more concealed is the fact that the development of digital platforms has given rise to new ways of occupying time. Platform enterprises use algorithmic management to regulate the work rhythm of laborers down to the minute and second; from food delivery riders to ride-hailing drivers, the time of laborers is systematically quantified and monitored. This "algorithmic time" ostensibly grants laborers a certain degree of autonomy, but in fact creates intense time pressure through ranking, rewards and punishments, and order-dispatching mechanisms. In order to maintain a basic income, laborers have no choice but to actively extend their working hours and even voluntarily give up rest. The "domination of human beings by time" revealed by Marx has acquired a new technological form in the age of algorithms. In response to this tendency, different countries have begun to explore legal regulation of algorithmic management in order to curb its unlimited encroachment on laborers' time. At the same time, a profound temporal turn has also taken place in the sphere of consumption. The attention economy develops and competes for users' time as a core resource; various platforms use algorithmic recommendation and immersive design to maximize users' online duration, transforming people's leisure time into capitalizable data flows. Thus time is not only extracted in the sphere of production, but also systematically captured in the spheres of consumption and leisure. The alienation of time has thereby extended from the sphere of labor to the whole of everyday life.

In the face of this situation, returning to Marx's critique of time is of great practical significance. Marx's analysis shows that the temporal predicament is neither a mere problem of individual time management nor an inevitable consequence of technological development, but the expression of specific social relations of production in the temporal dimension. As long as the logic of capital's self-expansion dominates social production without constraint under specific social conditions, the opposition between labor time and free time cannot be fundamentally eliminated through technical means or individual effort. Therefore, the critique of "time famine" must penetrate to the analysis of its social roots, and this is precisely the contemporary value of Marx's view of time.

4.2 The Emancipatory Meaning of Free Time: Beyond Consumerism and Passive Withdrawal

Marx's reflections on the problem of time ultimately point toward the emancipation of free time. In his view, free time is not merely rest time after labor, but a positive space in which human beings develop their capacities according to their own individuality and realize their own value. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx clearly states that true wealth is not only the accumulation of labor time, but also time that can be freely disposed of. The increase of free time means the expansion of human development and the liberation of human beings from external compulsion, enabling them to become subjects in the true sense. This understanding provides an important theoretical measure for examining the contemporary condition of free time.

In contemporary society, people's leisure time has indeed increased in absolute quantity. However, an increase in leisure time does not automatically equal the realization of free time. A tendency worthy of vigilance is that a large amount of leisure time is captured by consumerism and the entertainment industry, and is transformed into a new kind of hidden labor or passive consumption. Algorithmic recommendations on video platforms, the addictive design of online games, and the information bombardment of social media keep people's attention continuously occupied, so that time is consumed imperceptibly. This consumption of time appears to be the free choice of the subject, but is in fact carefully guided and shaped by capital. The time freed from heavy productive labor is dragged back into a cycle of consumption and entertainment dominated by capital. Free time in Marx's sense-time in which human beings engage in creative activity according to their own individuality-has not truly arrived.

At the same time, the tendency toward passive withdrawal or low desire that has emerged among some young people, as a reaction to intense competition and time exploitation, has attracted widespread attention in recent years. On the one hand, this tendency is an instinctive resistance to excessive labor and time exploitation, reflecting laborers' desire for temporal autonomy; on the other hand, it can easily slide into the abandonment of all positive activity, and is thus far removed from what Marx means by free time. In Marx's view, free time is neither time of idleness nor time of retreat into passive inactivity, but time in which human beings, after casting off the compulsion of subsistence, actively develop their essential powers. In the future association of free individuals, labor will no longer be a compulsory means of making a living, but will become the primary need of human beings; the increase of free time enables human beings to engage in creative activity that truly accords with their own individuality. Therefore, reflection on this tendency toward passive withdrawal cannot stop at moral criticism, but should discern its underlying social roots-it is precisely because the alienation of time reduces labor to a mere means of subsistence that laborers come to be weary of all labor. To transcend this passive condition, it is necessary to change the social conditions that oppose labor to freedom, rather than simply demanding that individuals re-engage in alienated labor.

Marx's theory of free time thus provides us with a double critical measure: it criticizes both the unlimited seizure of labor time by capital and the concealed appropriation of leisure time by the consumer society; it opposes both the utilitarian logic that completely instrumentalizes time and the nihilist attitude that understands free time as passive inactivity. The true realization of free time requires that the fundamental aim of social production shift from surplus value to the all-round development of human beings, and that time conditions be created for every individual to develop according to his or her own individuality.

4.3 Temporal Justice and Institutional Guarantees: The Public Regulation of Labor Time

Marx's view of time is not only a critical theory, but also provides a normative foundation for the governance of time in contemporary society. If the root of the alienation of time lies in the domination of labor time by the logic of capital, then subverting the alienation of time cannot rely solely on individual time management or moral self-awareness, but must resort to the rational regulation of labor time by public institutions. Temporal justice should therefore become an important dimension of social policy.

From historical experience, the shortening of labor time has never been a natural result of spontaneous market adjustment, but a product of social struggle and institutional intervention. Since the nineteenth century, legislative limits on the length of the working day have been an important achievement of the long struggle of the working class. From the initial restrictions on the labor time of children and women workers, to the gradual establishment of the eight-hour working day, to the contemporary exploration of a four-day working week in some countries, the public regulation of labor time has always been a key field for balancing capital's self-expansion and human development. Marx's

analysis of the working day profoundly reveals the nature of this struggle: the working day is not a natural quantity, but the result of the contest among different social forces. Under capitalist conditions, capital seeks to extend surplus labor time to the maximum, while laborers demand the minimum conditions for their own survival and development. The role of the state in this contest directly bears on the boundary between labor time and free time.

Under contemporary conditions, the public regulation of labor time faces new challenges. Traditionally, the core of labor time regulation has been the setting of the length of the working day and the limits of overtime. However, the emergence of digital labor has made this framework appear inadequate. The fragmentation of working time and the dissolution of spatial boundaries make it difficult for the traditional concept of the “working day” to encompass the labor time actually performed. Therefore, contemporary time governance needs to go beyond the traditional working-time system and develop new norms suited to the forms of digital labor. For example, some countries have begun to explore legislation on the “right to disconnect,” guaranteeing laborers freedom from the obligation to reply to work communications outside statutory working hours; other countries have attempted to regulate algorithmic management, requiring platform enterprises to disclose their order-dispatching and assessment mechanisms in order to prevent the disguised extension of labor time through algorithms. These explorations show that institutions can continue to play the role of safeguarding free time under new technological conditions.

The institutionalization of temporal justice also requires attention to distributive justice in labor time. In contemporary society, inequality in labor time exists not only between capital and laborers, but also among different groups of laborers. Some laborers are compelled to work excessive hours, while others face the predicament of underemployment and insufficient working hours. This dual inequality of time reflects a structural imbalance in the distribution of social resources. Therefore, policies aimed at realizing temporal justice must not only set upper limits on working hours, but also promote stable employment and the rationalization of the distribution of working hours, so that everyone can obtain a temporal arrangement sufficient to sustain life without exhausting body and mind.

Moreover, the guarantee of free time also requires institutional arrangements beyond the sphere of labor. The accessibility of public services directly affects the total amount of time people can freely dispose of. Improvements in public services such as education, health care, elderly care, and childcare can significantly reduce the time costs people must pay to maintain basic life. The provision of public cultural facilities and public space provides conditions for people to use free time for their own development. The soundness of public resources such as libraries, museums, sports venues, and community activity centers helps guide people from passive, consumption-oriented use of time to active, development-oriented use of time. Although these institutional arrangements cannot directly abolish the logic of capital, they can to a certain extent curb the spread of the alienation of time and create more favorable social conditions for the realization of free time.

4.4A Critical Response to the Discourse of the Acceleration Society

In contemporary social theory, the theory of the acceleration society represented by Hartmut Rosa has attracted widespread attention. Rosa argues that social acceleration is a core feature of modernity, and that technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life reinforce one another, leading to the overall tension and alienation of human temporal experience. He proposes the concept of “resonance,” advocating the establishment of responsive relations between human beings and the world as a way of overcoming the alienation of the acceleration society. The theory of the acceleration society keenly captures the experiential reality of contemporary time anxiety, but its explanatory framework and solution differ fundamentally from those of Marx.

Rosa attributes social acceleration mainly to the functional logic of modern society, that is, to the combined effects of economic competition, cultural ideas, and the autonomy of technological

development. Although this analysis describes the phenomenon of acceleration, it does not penetrate to the social relations of production underlying it, and therefore cannot truly explain the fundamental driving force of acceleration. Marx's analysis shows that the acceleration of the tempo of time and the intensification of time anxiety are rooted, under capitalist conditions, in capital's unlimited pursuit of surplus labor time. Competitive pressure, technological progress, and cultural change are all ultimately absorbed and utilized by the logic of capital. Far from liberating human beings from time pressure, technological acceleration has instead become an instrument for intensifying the exploitation of time. Therefore, the critique of the acceleration society cannot remain at the level of complaints about "fastness" and romanticized imaginings of "slowness," but must expose the logic of capital behind "fastness."

The dialectical character of Marx's view of time lies in the fact that it both points out the necessity of the alienation of time under capitalist conditions and discerns the possibility of temporal emancipation. The development of the productive forces has created conditions for shortening labor time and provided the material basis for the universalization of free time. The key question is whether the relations of production can adapt to the demands of the development of the productive forces. On the basis of this understanding, the fundamental way out of the alienation of time and time anxiety lies neither in time-management techniques or psychological adjustment at the individual level, nor in the critique of speed at the cultural level, but in the transformation of social relations. This judgment enables Marx's view of time to maintain its distinctive critical force in contemporary social theory.

In summary, Marx's view of time provides irreplaceable theoretical resources for understanding the contemporary temporal predicament. It exposes the logic of capital behind "time famine" and digital labor, clarifies the emancipatory meaning of free time and its essential difference from consumerism and passive withdrawal, proposes the institutional direction of temporal justice and the public regulation of labor time, and on this basis forcefully responds to the discourse of the acceleration society. The time problem of contemporary society is, in the final analysis, not a problem of time itself, but a problem of the social form of the relation between human beings and time. Only by proceeding from human emancipation and re-establishing the inner connection between time and human development can we truly respond to the pervasive time anxiety of modern society and provide solid theoretical support for the free and all-round development of human beings. Marx's thought on free time and human development continues to be explored and tested in contemporary practice, and it also provides important intellectual resources for humanity's pursuit of a fairer and more sustainable temporal order.

5. CONCLUSION

Marx understands time as praxis, as the active existence of the human being, the measure of life, and the space for development, thereby bringing about a fundamental transformation of the view of time. His view of time is not a patchwork simply pieced together from natural time, social time, and historical time, but an organic whole with praxis as its core, real individuals as its point of departure, and human emancipation as its ultimate aim. Natural time reveals the ontological significance of time as the foundation of the phenomenal world; social time reveals the actual unfolding of time in human labor; and historical time reveals the generative logic of time as the space for human development. The three are united in human sensuous practice and in the course of human history.

This view of time transcends the abstract understanding in traditional philosophy and natural science that separates time from human activity, and it also transcends the opposition between treating time merely as an objective form and treating it merely as a subjective category. In contemporary society, the alienation of time has not automatically disappeared with technological progress; rather, it has acquired more concealed and complex forms in new phenomena such as digital labor, the attention economy, and the acceleration society. The profundity of Marx's view of time lies in the fact that it reveals the social roots of the temporal predicament and points out the possible path to temporal

emancipation: only by transforming the social relations that oppose labor to freedom and by shifting the aim of social production from surplus value to the all-round development of human beings can free time truly become a universal social reality. Marx's thought on free time and human development provides important theoretical resources for humanity's pursuit of a fairer and more sustainable temporal order.

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