

## Marxism and the Subsidy Period in Vietnam (1975-1986)

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Marxism was spread into Vietnam by patriotic intellectuals from the 20s of the 20th century and still exists until today. The presence of Marxism in Vietnam through such a long history is enough to prove its importance and strong influence in the socio-political life of Vietnam. First of all, Marxism is closely related to the movement of national liberation revolutions in Vietnam from the 20s to the mid 70s of the 20th century: Marxism, with its outright revolutionary nature, had most adequately and effectively met the urgent needs of national liberation revolutions in Vietnam at that time, and at the same time evoked the fierce belief of patriotic revolutionists in a noble ideal—the ideal of communist society, and encouraged them to devote themselves to national liberation revolutions. It can be said that Marxism has become the soul of national liberation revolutions in Vietnam; hence, the victory of such revolutions in the mid 70s of the 20th century is also the victory of Marxism in an Eastern country that was very obsolete then. Furthermore, Marxism is also associated with the reforming of old society and building of new society—the socialist society in Vietnam: after winning national independence and unification for the country in the mid-70s of the 20th century, Vietnamese patriotic revolutionists posed the question of “What new model of society should be built in Vietnam to match the country’s history context?” This question is not only related to the fate of of everyone, but also related to the fate of Vietnamese people as a whole. Marxism had brought to patriotic revolutionists and all Vietnamese people a very clear answer: the socialist society (the first phase of communist society), where there will no longer be capitalist ownership, no people exploiting people, no rich and poor, from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs, all resources are of common ownership, etc. Thus, from 1975 to 1986 (the subsidy period in Vietnam), the Communist Party of Vietnam had led the people to begin reforming the old society and building new one nationwide with a very happy attitude and a strong belief in the future of socialist society. However, only when embarking on the construction of a new society did our party notice that the realization of an ideal model of society according to Marxism in an obsolete country which had just been out of war like Vietnam (without any initial material premises, except a political party of the working class and labor population—the Communist Party of Vietnam) is a very difficult job. Therefore, the construction of socialist society in Vietnam in the early stage, from 1975 to 1986, ended in a severe social-economic crisis. Thus, Marxism had capitalized on its strengths in national liberation revolutions in Vietnam, helping Vietnamese people

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to be free from the domination of colonial countries and empires, but it also had adverse impacts on the reforming of old society and building of new society, which was reflected in the socioeconomic crisis in Vietnam during the 1975-1986 period. Here, the questions to be posed are, “Has Marxism ended its historic mission for Vietnamese people?”, or “How should Marxism be adjusted to be appropriate to the new historical context of Vietnam?” and “If such adjustments are needed, what will the prospects of Marxism in Vietnam be like?” This article will focus on answering those questions.

*Keywords:* Marxism, VietNam, Philosophy, Planned economy period

### **Marx’s Thought on Communist Society**

Let’s revisit some classic and important works of Marx to learn about his thought on Communist society. In “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, Marx had analyzed the real life of workers working for the capitalists. Marx said that, workers are engaged in the process of production only to enrich capitalists, and the workers themselves got nothing except for a little amount of wage to sustain their so-called “life of an animal”. Workers not only lose their products of labor and their labor to the hands of capitalists, but also lose their freedom and personality; thus they always lead a miserable and exploitative life. Marx also said that, working is intended to be the basic activity that helps workers to improve their lives and develop their capacities, but when they work for the capitalists, their labor “mortifies their body and ruins their mind”. Marx stressed that, the worker’s labor now is no longer voluntary, but forced, meaning that the worker has to work to sustain his physical body, if it’s not for that reason, labor would be “shunned like the plague”. Marx called the worker’s labor under capitalism alienated labor. Marx realized that the alienation of labor is a real socioeconomic phenomenon of human society rather than an abstract point in textbooks or in the mind of the German idealists at that time; thus, he referred to the liberation of workers from their alienated labor and the life of an animal, bringing them back to the life of human. Marx also pointed out that private ownership is what alienates worker’s labor, pushing him into the life of an animal; thus, liberating the worker from alienated labor means abolishing private ownership. Here we see that, the communist society that Marx wanted to build in this world must be a society that overcomes those inherent defects of capitalism, meaning a society with “positive expression of annulled private property—human corruption—thus truly capture human nature and bring human to his true self as a social being”<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, in the view of Marx, the abolition of private property had become the core of communist society.

Marx also referred to necessary conditions to realize the communist revolution towards the establishment of communist society in reality. In “The German Ideology”, Marx pointed out that, communist revolutions need an increasing force of revolutionists, who are the proletariat (the social class with completely no property), as well as the growing development of the productive force and the increasingly common relations of production, etc. To a time when all these necessary conditions are ripen, the proletariat will carry out a violent revolution to overthrow the ruling class, erase all remnants of the old society, and establish a new social order. He wrote: “If millions of proletarians do not feel satisfied about any of their living conditions[...] then all the problems lie with revolutionizing the existing world, practically attacking and changing the current state”<sup>2</sup>. Marx asserted that the

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<sup>1</sup> Full works of K. Marx and Engels, Vol. 42. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p. 167

<sup>2</sup> Full works of K. Marx and Engels, Vol. 03. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, p. 61.

communist revolution is the most radical of all previous revolutions—it abolishes labor alienation, private property, all social classes, and heads towards establishment of a new model of society which can bring freedom, equality, prosperity and happiness to all humanity. In “The German Ideology,” Marx also outlined the basic features of communist society. He argued that communist society would no longer have private property, division of labor, or distinction between individual and common interests; the society would regulate the entire production, and human would completely master his life and the process of production. Now, human labor is no longer forced labor, but becomes free labor, which means human himself will provide labor according to his needs, capacity and hobby, thus being able to fully develop in terms of physical body, spirit and personality. Marxist communist society is formed when social production has been highly developed and material life is full, so, it can give people a free life: “[...] each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes [...], thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.”<sup>3</sup> Marx also said that, the communist society, with such noble ideals, is a realist model of society which frees people by realistic means and brings people true happiness instead of the elusive one as in the conception of religion. Therefore, Marx believed that all movements of human social history would finally head towards the establishment of communist society.

### **Realization of Marxist Communist Society in Vietnam from 1975 to 1986—The Subsidy Period**

The 1975-1986 period was the first stage in the construction of socialist society in Vietnam. In this period, Vietnamese government had outlined concrete plans to gradually build a model of socialist society like Marx’s ideal model of society. In Vietnam, this stage is also called the subsidy period. Nguyen Ngoc Quang, a scholar, wrote about this period as follows: “the resistance war against the Americans of our people ended successfully [...] A brilliant era of development for Vietnamese revolution has been opened: The era of independence, unification and advance to socialism.”<sup>4</sup>

In the subsidy period, with the goal of reforming old society and quickly and successfully building socialist society across the nation, the State of Vietnam had put efforts in the building of socialist production, socialist relations of production, public ownership of means of production; and at the same time proceeded to abolish private ownership, private economy, individual economy, and only recognized the existence of two basic economic components: State economy and collective economy (in subsidy period, many state economic premises had been restored and expanded, especially in the northern provinces of Vietnam). In this period, the State also did not recognize productions of goods and market mechanism, thus all economic activities in Vietnam occurred under planned economic model (which is the characteristic of communist society). In other words, the State manages all economic activities of the country according to its specific plans and policies. In the field of trade, the State erased previous private commercial premises, and established state-run ones. The State did not recognize the activities of freely trading and transporting goods in the market, but had full control in the distribution of goods, determined value of goods, limited cash transactions, and distributed goods mainly on the basis of coupon

<sup>3</sup> Full works of K. Marx and Engels, Vol. 03. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen Quang Ngoc, *The Progress of Vietnamese History*. Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006, p. 365.

system. It can be said that goods in this period were very scarce, and it was difficult to buy necessities even if one had money. The State also had full control over import and export, with trade partners mainly are fellow socialist countries. In subsidy period, the State always advocated the stronger and faster progress of building new society—socialist society, thus “the State must be in control of goods and money, manage the price, abolish free market of important cereal, agricultural products and seafood, ensure adequate supply of goods with correct quantity to paid workers, establish stores to provide goods, etc.”<sup>5</sup> In the field of industry, the State gradually abolished comprador bourgeoisies, reformed formerly capitalist industrial premises, and transformed formerly public-managed factories into state-run ones. In parallel with these works, the State also promoted the socialist industrialization within the country in order to build technical infrastructure as good as possible for the development of socialism. During this period, state-run factories had no autonomy in production and business, and were only allowed to operate depending on administrative decisions of competent State authorities; everything from production orientation, sources of materials, capital, organizational structure, staffing, salaries and wages, product pricing, etc. of State-run factories were also decided by competent State authorities. State-run enterprises didn't even have to be responsible for their business performance: the State plans to provide capital and materials for them, and in turn they handed their products over to the State. If these enterprises earned profits, the State had income; if not, the State would make up for their losses. In the field of agriculture, the State “advocates the abolition of exploitation in the countryside, brings farmers to the path of agricultural cooperation and advance to socialism, promotes the right to lead the collective of working class”<sup>6</sup>; therefore, most of farm-households had been put into agricultural cooperatives. During this period, the State adjusted rural agricultural land in order to “completely abolish forms of capitalist exploitation regarding agricultural land”. The State would buy part of agricultural land from farm-households with abundant land, then those households would have to participate in agricultural collectives; for those who didn't have land to farm, the State would provide the land; after receiving, these households would be encouraged to join agricultural collectives. The State also carried out the collectivization of all agricultural machinery and organization of mechanic machinery cooperatives or agricultural machinery corporations managed by the people's committee of the district; thus, all agricultural machinery is of collective ownership, etc. By doing so, it can be said that agricultural cooperatives and collective production model in the rural area of Vietnam during subsidy period had the most vibrant and quick development ever.

During subsidy period, the State of Vietnam not only intervened in economic activities, but also intervene in the entire socio-cultural life of the people. In the field of culture and ideology, the State's policy was to unify the ideas of people towards the ideal of socialism, therefore, the State controlled all books, newspapers, movies, music, etc. of Western countries (the capitalist countries) and only allowed people to be exposed to books, newspapers, movies, music, etc. of the socialist countries, especially of the Soviet Union. At that time, Russian literature, the literature of socialist realism, left-wing literature and critical realistic literature were considered to contain pure and artistic thoughts, hence, they were widely circulated in the life of people; on the other hands, other schools of literature and arts of Western countries were considered to contain negative thoughts and thus were not allowed to be circulated. All newspapers were subsidized by the State and had the State orient the

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<sup>5</sup> Nguyen Tri Dinh. *History of National Economy*. Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2001, p.318.

<sup>6</sup> The Communist Party of Vietnam. Directive No. 43, 1976.

content; there were no competitions between newspapers and no race for profit. All artists worked in State agencies and organizations, and were paid by the State as a civil servant; there were absolutely no artists who could freely work. Socially, the State controlled all activities of the people, especially the exit and entry from and to the country. Most of Vietnamese people in subsidy period were not allowed to have contact with foreigners, especially Westerners, since the State was afraid that the difference in ideology, culture and security would affect the socialist life of people back then. The State subsidized all social services, so people could visit hospitals for examination free of charge (however most medical equipment at that time were very obsolete and scarce), students could go to colleges without having to pay tuition fees, and were assigned jobs by the State after graduation, etc. Since the State subsidized all fields of socioeconomic life, people in subsidy period had almost no pressure from work and material needs, there was no rich and poor, the spirit of the community was strongly promoted, etc.

Therefore, in 10 years of subsidy period, the State of Vietnam had abolished private ownership and all remnants of colonial society to establish public ownership of means of production and head towards the construction of socialist society, where there is no oppression, no exploitation, no ruling class, no distinction between the rich and the poor, no difference between individual and common interests—everything is of common ownership and material life is full, etc.—which is also Marx’s ideal model of society. The State of Vietnam, with a cumbersome management apparatus, tried to intervene in all activities and aspects of economic, political, cultural and social life to ensure that all such activities and aspects went in the correct direction of socialism, which means following Marx’s ideal model of society. However, Vietnamese economy in subsidy period was still very poor and obsolete; the life of people still had a lot of difficulties and have not yet stabilized. Taking such socioeconomic situation as the stepping stone was truly too arduous and difficult, even impossible for the State of Vietnam to pursuit Marx’s ideal model of society.

### **The Severe Socioeconomic Crisis in Vietnam During the 1975-1986 Period (the Crisis During Subsidy Period in Vietnam)**

During subsidy period, the State of Vietnam had tried to realize Marx’s ideal model of society—communist society, with the aim to bring to people a better life than the ones they lived before (a life of poverty and misery during the years of resistance war against the oppression and exploitation of colonialism); however, after two 5-years plans (the second 5-year plan during 1976-1980 and the third during 1981-1985), not only Vietnam was unable to be closer to Marx’s communist ideal, but also fell into a serious crisis. Scholar Tran Van Tho wrote about the crisis during subsidy period in Vietnam as follows: the 1975-1986 period “was one of the darkest periods in the history of Vietnam .... Being an agricultural country, but Vietnam always had a shortage of food. Many people had to mix rice with various of cereals to eat, and the amount of food per person constantly decreased ... The industry and trade were also stagnant, production stalled, daily necessities were lacked, and the life of people was extremely difficult ... The main cause of the above said condition was the mistake in development policy and strategy, of which the most prominent was the hastiness in applying fundamental principles of socialist society in resolving socioeconomic issues in Vietnam ...”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tran Van Tho. *Vietnam in the last 40 years and the years to come: The need for a development-oriented market economy*. Thoi Dai Newspaper, Vol. 33, 2015.

In order to build solid material and technical infrastructure for socialist society, during the subsidy period, the State of Vietnam had prioritized the development of heavy industry; however, due to the lack of means of production and electricity to operate machines, and the machine themselves were very obsolete without spare parts to repair when they were broken, etc., heavy industry became stagnant and could not be the leverage for the economy. Meanwhile, light industry and agriculture were not properly invested in by the State, thus were unable to meet consumption needs of people; most commodities were imported, including those which could have been produced domestically such as rice, fabric, etc. Furthermore, the prohibition of free trade in the market also made the scarcity of food and consumption goods more severe; the State-run trading system could not meet the need of distribution to the economy, which further led the scarcity of goods to last. In general, labor productivity of the entire economy during subsidy period was very low, thus the State was not able to save capital for production expansion and development, the State budget completely depended on borrowings and aids from overseas. The State apparatus during this period was too cumbersome, with many intermediate ranks and levels, the management team had weak capacity but bureaucratic working style; administrative agencies can intervene in all activities of production and business operations of enterprises, and did not have to be responsible for their decisions; the State budget suffered from material damages caused by decisions of administrative agencies, etc. Therefore, the State apparatus did not work effectively and could not undertake the role of commanding the entire economy. All economic difficulties, along with the State closely controlling the field of culture and ideals, made the life of people during subsidy period very miserable, suffocating and discontent; as a consequence, nearly one million people had fled the country in hopes of finding a life which is better than the life they led back in their own country.

During subsidy period, the State of Vietnam, with the goal of “fastly, strongly and stably advance to socialism” had quickly erased private ownership, private economy, individual economy, proceeded to nationalization of means of production, then developed the country’s economy according to preset plans. However, this way clearly revealed its downside, which were abolition of competition, thus did not stimulate the dynamics and creativity of workers in manufacture and business, and hindered the development of science, technology and social progress. In other words, this had pushed the whole society into a state of stagnation and underdevelopment with no escape. The crisis during subsidy period in Vietnam became more severe when the State carried out price and salary reforms in 1985. The aim of these reform was to bring the old pricing system (which had been existing for decades) to be close to the market price at that time, and at the same time to build salary system according to new prices. However, these reforms did not succeed because in the end, the price still remained in the framework regulated by the State. After this reform, free market price soared up again, further increasing the difference between the State price and the market price; therefore, budget overspending increased more and more, and the State must compensate for such by printing more cash, leading to the hyperinflation in 1986. It can be said that the price and salary reform in 1985 had caused chaos in the market, exacerbating socioeconomic instability, and making life difficult for people more than ever.

Here, it can be said that Vietnam during 1975-1986 period was a country that had just come out of war, with a weak and underdeveloped economy, and the life of people was poor and unstable. Under such circumstances, the State was supposed to have practical policies to gradually remedy the consequences left by the war, stabilize people’s lives and build a strong economy instead of hastily applying Marxist theory of the model of communist

society to the construction of new society in Vietnam and even used administrative orders to force people to follow that ideal stereotype. Socioeconomic difficulties and the over-impatience of the communist party and the State of Vietnam in building new society had pushed the country into a severe crisis. This crisis was not only simply a crisis in socioeconomic life of the people, but also a crisis in the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam at that time, and was also a crisis in Marxist ideal model of society. While during the 20s to the mid-70s of the 20th, Marxism and the ideal of a good future society had become a tremendous motivation for Vietnamese patriots to sacrifice themselves in the struggle for independence and freedom of the people, Marxism and such ideal of model of society had no longer had positive meanings to the construction of new society in Vietnam. However, we also want to say that, in the 70s, Marxist model of communist society was actually the Soviet-style model of communist society (Stalinist model of communist society) and other variations of that model. The 1975-1986 socioeconomic crisis in Vietnam is the evidence that Soviet-style model of communist society and its variations had officially gone bankrupt and went into recession.

### **The National Renovation of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986 (the End of Subsidy Period in Vietnam)**

At the height of the 1975-1986 socioeconomic crisis, when the whole society found itself at a dead end, the communist party and the State of Vietnam had led the people to carry out a comprehensive renovation, bringing the country out of the crisis. At the 6th national congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1986, “the consensus of people “from below” combined with the sobriety and courage of leaders “from above” had helped the party and the State to come up with historic reform policies for the country. During the national renovation in 1986, the communist party and the State of Vietnam had clearly shown their determination in adjusting Marxism to be in line with the demands of the country and recognized the crisis during subsidy period as a lesson learned to avoid making the same mistake.

The 1986 national renovation in Vietnam was marked by a significant event, which was the implementation of “Directive 100” in the agricultural sector. This policy allowed farmers to plow and harvest products from their own farming plots, meaning they would enjoy the products created from their labor and would be self-responsible for all of their products of labor. During subsidy period, farmers must contribute all means of production to cooperatives, and the cooperatives managed and distributed their labor and products, thus farmers did not see their part of interests on the common field of cooperatives or pay attention to work quality and in the end, production became stagnant. However, now with the “Directive 100”, farmers can decide by themselves the cultivation on the assigned land area and freely trade the products they made with those that give the best profit, at the same time pay tax obligations to the State. Farmers can clearly see their interest in production and business, thus they would want to put all of their efforts in achieving the highest productivity and promoting production and business. Some Vietnamese scholars wrote about changes of the country after implementing “Directive 100” as follows: “Regarding food, from the state of constant shortage ..., Vietnam has rose to meet domestic needs, has reserves and exports, which significantly contributed to the stabilization of people’s life and change of import-export balance ...”<sup>8</sup> It can be seen that, with this policy, the State has gradually abolished the centralized

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<sup>8</sup> Truong Huu Quynh, Dinh Xuan Lam, Le Mau Han. *General History of Vietnam*. Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, p. 1132.

bureaucracy in production and business, starting the process of democratization of the economy, thus the economy is restored with stronger growth than in the past.

From “Directive 100”, the State of Vietnam started to be more open to national development policies. For the career of building new society, the party and the State also applied Marxist theory of model of communist society in a flexible and creative way instead of copying in a rigid way as before. The Communist Party of Vietnam has clearly defined that “Vietnam’s persistence in the current socialist path does not mean that the socialist model remains the same as before . . . , the national renovation, in fact, is the renovation of the path for the development of socialism, both theoretically and practically”<sup>9</sup>. In fact, it can be seen that the State of Vietnam no longer considers private ownership and private economy as hostile forces which need to be abolish as it did before, but instead recognizes private ownership, farm-household economy, private economy and individual economy as integral part of the national economy. The State also gradually transformed the self-sufficient economy in subsidy period to goods production economy with many agents and operating under market mechanism with State management toward socialist orientation (also called socialist-oriented market economy); thanks to that, consumer goods are no longer scarce as before, but become abundant and diverse, and circulation of goods is also relatively smooth. The previous viewpoint of the State regarding the distinction between socialism and capitalism has been replaced by a rather flexible one, which is acquiring civil and progressive values as well as scientific and technical achievements of capitalism to continue to tread the socialist path. The old perspective of class struggle, in which one class overthrows the domination of the other also ceases to exist. Now, the State opts to strengthen solidarity among people, consolidate the union of workers, farmers and intellectuals, in order to successfully carry out the industrialization and modernization for the country and bring the country out of the state of underdevelopment. The concept of “dictatorship of the proletariat” has been replaced by the concept of “socialist rule-of-law state of the people, by the people, for the people.” Regarding foreign affairs: previously, the State of Vietnam only established relationships with fellow socialist countries; but now, with the implementation of openness policy, “Vietnam wants to make friends with all countries worldwide and strives for peace, independence and development”. Regarding socio-cultural life: Marxism no longer holds the unique position as it did before, and other doctrines in philosophy, literature and art also have impacts on socio-cultural life of the people.

Clearly, the 1986 national renovation in Vietnam is associated with the State’s gradual replacement of rigid Marxist dogmas regarding the model of communist society by more flexible, harmonious and effective arguments, in order to promote the country’s economic developments and constantly improve life quality for people. After the 1975-1986 crisis, the communist party and the State of Vietnam are still determined to pursuit Marxist ideal of communist society—a society with equality, fairness, freedom, prosperity and happiness. However, the road to that society no longer has violent and hostile factors, or closed doors and mutual doubts, but reforms, openness, integration and development. In Vietnam, the transition to communism not only has public ownership of means of production, but also has private ownership and other factors of capitalism; however, the State of Vietnam only inherits the rational values of capitalism rather than accepting capitalism as an official socio-political system. Currently, the communist party and the State of Vietnam still continue adjusting the

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted from: Pham Van Chung. *Marxist theory on socioeconomic form and arguments about the path of socialist development in Vietnam*. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2005, pp. 174-175.



theory of Marxism to be appropriate to the development trend of the country and the era.

### Conclusion

After vicissitudes of time, the Communist Party of Vietnam still confirms, in its instruments, that Vietnam persists in pursuing Marxist communist ideal. In essence, Marxism and communist ideal had asserted their power in movements of working class and the movement of national liberation in the 19th and 20th century, not only in Vietnam, but also in many countries around the world. However, at the turn to a new century, when the context of human history has changed, and science and technology has had strong developments, the theory of Marxism seems to be obsolete and needs to be adjusted or substituted. I suppose, without regard to the way in which it is done, Marx's ideal of a good society for mankind (a society without oppression and exploitation, but justice, equality, liberty, prosperity and happiness) contains profound human values. In the future, whether Vietnam continues to adjust Marxism or substitute it with another doctrine will become a topic that needs lots of discussions and considerations; however, the renovation and development of the country toward such good ideals reflect a completely legitimate desire of an independent and autonomous people.

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