

THE DIVERSITY OF PHILOSOPHY AND THE SIMILARITY OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

Europe in my eyes

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What in Europe is mostly impressive for me is its diversity of philosophy and similarity of social system, politically a kind of democratic system and economically a kind of capitalistic market system accompanied by some sense of social welfare, although it is different in extent in different areas and in different times. We could say that there is a decrease from North to South, from early to later (after the Second World War until now), but in principle they are the same.

During the past 15 years as a visiting scholar and a visiting professor, I have been doing research work in the different parts of Europe many times and over many years. What in Europe is mostly impressive for me is its diversity of philosophy and similarity of social system, politically a kind of democratic system and economically a kind of capitalistic market system accompanied by some sense of social welfare, although it is different in extent in different areas and in different times. We could say that there is a decrease from North to South, from early to later (after the Second World War until now), but in principle they are the same.

Philosophically, we see a great difference not only between England and the continent of Europe, but also within the continent. In England, the most popular philosophy is analytical philosophy. The main trend of Germany is from classic philosophy to linguistic philosophy and Frankfurt critical theory which is also influenced by linguistic philosophy. The situation of France is very complicated: existentialism exists both in Germany and France, while France displays a line from structuralism, de-structuralism and post-structuralism, the last one being related with post-modernism, to name only a few.

If we look at the imbalance between the diversity of philosophy and the similarity of social system, maybe we would have come to the conclusion that there is no relationship between people's philosophical thinking and

their daily life behavior. But this could be a superficial impression since when we consider the deep thinking of philosophy we could see that it is related to the actual world in a very abstract way. Following this clue, I try to interpret the phenomenon of the co-existence of the diversity and similarity in Europe.

Any kind of philosophic thinking, no matter how complicated and how abstract it is, is trying to interpret, represent, re-think and be self-reflexive of social existence and social relations which include the relationship between man and things and man and man. This basic philosophic thinking provides the principle for social sciences as people try to understand and interpret the actual world, and further guide their behavior.

There are some connections between the philosophic thinking, ideology and social system. In Europe, there were very different points of view to interpret the relationship between the two: the theory of Marx and the theory of Hegelian philosophy. Marx tries to understand the thinking of human beings from their social existence, while Hegelian philosophy starts from the point of human thinking. It seems that neither of them could interpret the phenomenon of the diversity of philosophy and the similarity of social system. But if we see the central meaning of the different philosophies, we can see the definite connection between the diversity of philosophy and the similarity of social system.

What I mean by the central meaning of philosophy is not the method of philosophy, the appearance of philosophy, but the basic social value the philosophy tries to express, such values as individual freedom or common wealth, social justice or social equality. No matter how different they are, all kinds of philosophy have to deal with these values to some extent. It is in this sense we can see that, behind the diversity of philosophy in Europe, there are some basic social values that are shared by all these philosophies, i.e., individual freedom and social justice, and also the justice of distribution.

It is in the sense of basic social values, what it is really means, how to guarantee it in the actual society, we see the opposite points of view between Marxism and liberalism, which is beyond the diversity of philosophy, the opposite of the points of view exists in almost all kinds of different philosophy. But the difference between European philosophy and those of other Western countries, such as the USA, is that the demarcation of the opposite of the points of view in Europe is not as clear as that in other Western countries. In Europe, the tradition of the Social Democrats together with the tradition of Democratic Socialism has blurred the difference between Marxism and liberalism, especially when scholars take the Soviet Union as representative of Marxism. They are more interested in Social Democracy or Democratic Socialism, because for

them Soviet Union was a typical example of the suppression of individual freedom and political freedom, which it cannot accept.

Both Social Democrats and Democratic Socialism stress more political democracy and individual freedom and in this sense they are close to the Left of Liberalism. It is out of question no matter for Social Democrats or for Democratic Socialism, both of them have problems in interpreting social justice and the justice of distribution, where social welfare is a re-adjusting policy to make up for the unavoidable result of social differentials under the market economy. The relative equality achieved by the policy of social welfare is actually based on the distribution of inequality, either coming from different subjective effort or coming from different capital investment, the latter regarded by Marxists as injustice. Social Democrats have no consistent concept for distributive justice.

If we take into consideration the transformation of modern industry to post-industry, which has resulted in transforming the traditional conflicts of industrial areas to the areas of cultural, administrative or political sector, the basic paradox of distributive justice and exploitation has been replaced by the social conflicts coming from economic hegemony (owning capital) or political hegemony (in the international sense). The problems are there, no matter under what kind of situation, and it continues, although under a different appearance.

Therefore, we see behind the diversity of philosophy there are similarities of social values, which match the similarity of social system. Actually, under the condition of capitalism all these social values are full of paradox, although in northern Europe, the modified capitalism has reduced social conflicts of capitalism, but it did not and cannot change the tendency of capitalism that is social wealthy accumulated in the few hands, and produces a relative poverty for most, which deeply threatens these social values, although the paradox of these social values is hidden behind the phenomenon of the diversity of philosophy, but they are there.

The diversity of European philosophy which entered China in the 1980s, following the 'reform and open the door' policy, influenced Chinese thought to a great extent. But the actual effects were different according as to whether we are considering Western philosophy itself or Western Marxist philosophy. The latter had a specific role in challenging the Soviet interpretation of Marxism – an interpretation which had been the dominant model in China. By contrast, during the 1990s, Western liberal philosophy, particularly the liberalism of the USA, had a big impact on the economic sector in China. In opposition to this type of liberalism, the Northern European model of social democratic welfare has attracted some Chinese scholars and its principles have to some extent been put into practice in Chinese social policy. Thus, apart from the dominant official ideology of Chinese Marxism, both Western liberalism, particularly that of

the USA, and European social welfare ideas – especially those of Northern Europe – have had a noticeable influence on Chinese thought.

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