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HOW TO UNDERSTAND SO-CALLED “UNIVERSAL VALUES”

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[This article seems an anomaly in the 2008 context. It reads almost as a throw-back to Cultural Revolution rhetoric, with a stress on “class struggle” and the assertion that all morality is a reflection of class interest (which in the end would seem to be a negation of any morality whatsoever, leaving only interest and expediency). There are no abstract universal or human values, only class values (in the classless society, presumably, there can be universal values because there is only one class left). The author denounces Confucian humanism, sometimes in an arbitrary way (is there really any reason to assume that Confucius did not intend his statements about “humankindness” or whatever to apply to everyone, not simply to members of the ruling class?). He also attacks western-style liberalism. The essay is useful in giving an idea of the scope of abstract political discussion in contemporary China. The author perhaps makes a good point in refuting the notion that market rationality is some sort of spontaneous human value position, rather than itself an ideology in its own right.]

Recently, the notion of “universal values” has gradually become popular. Some people proclaim the “universal value” of western liberalism; others praise the “universal value” of democratic socialism; yet others treat the so-called classical Confucian ideas of “the mind of a sage and the understanding of a king,” or the “rationality of the Way of Heaven” as “universal values.” If there is a universal value, it seems it should respond the interests of all people in the world. Anyone who lives in the world should adhere to it; there is no way to say “no.” This cannot but give rise to a sense of mystification. What is even more interesting, some people ascribe universal value to strongly ideological concepts while at the same time praising the so-called “fading of ideology” as a universal value. People can’t help but scratch their heads. This essay attempts some analysis and discussion of the issue.

I

In order to penetrate into this issue and explain our basic concept of universal value and why we should not apply this concept in the historical sphere, we must undertake an analysis and discussion that brings together both theory and practice.

To do this, we must review [Friedrich] Engels’s analytic critique of [Eugen] Dühring’s theory of “immutable morality.”

Dühring was an apriorist and a metaphysician. In order to proclaim that in the realm of human history there were “immutable truths,” “immutable morality,” “immutable justice,” he first stipulated that his notions of morality and justice were valid for the entire world. He believed that moral principles “transcended history and the distinctions

among contemporary nations.” He would “not allow any despair concerning the propriety and usefulness of these principles.” To use the language of some people today, these principles obviously constituted a universal value. Engels made a profound dissection and critique of this kind of “immutable morality.”

First, Engels pointed out that morality has a historical character. People’s concepts of morality vary according to historical period, historical conditions, and developmental changes. Let us consider the notion that in the moral sphere there is an absolute standard of good and evil. Opposed to this is the consideration that concepts of good and evil “change according to the changes in human history.” They will vary from one nation to the next and from one time period to another. Sometimes they are mutually contradictory. Therefore, there is no such thing as a concept of good and evil appropriate to all nationalities and all historical eras.

Next, Engels pointed out that with the appearance of classes, morality also acquired a class nature. Different classes have a different morality. “Consciously or unconsciously, in the end, people always rely on their class position—through their economic relations of production and exchange they absorb their own concepts of morality.” Therefore, there is no “absolutely valid” morality that transcends class. At the same time, Engels also analyzed the concepts of morality held by the different classes, what they held in common as well as their differences. He pointed out that because of a “common historical background” the moralities of different classes also had elements in common. But if we trace things to the root, people always absorb their concepts of morality from the economic relations inherent in their class position. Therefore, “each class has its own distinct morality.” Because of the similarities or limitations of “the stage of economic development,” different societies may also have similar types of morality, but these definitely have nothing to do with any “immutable morality.” With the development of production based on private ownership, in each society in which there is private ownership there is a common rule of morality: thou shalt not steal. However, with the extinction of private property, the extinction of classes, “the motivation for theft will be removed from society.” If someone proclaims “thou shalt not steal” as an immutable moral principle, he will expose himself to mockery.

Therefore, Engels said: “I reject the notion that any moral tenet is immutable, absolute, or unchanging. Adherence to such ideas is a pretext. The moral world moves along with history and with differences in nationalities. We conclude on the contrary that all moral codes in the end are products of the economies of the societies in which they prevail. Until the present day society remains characterized by class antagonisms, so morality from beginning to end remains a class morality.” He pointed out that in the development of history in the moral aspect there “has always been progress. But we still have no morality that transcends class. It is only by eliminating class oppositions and in actual life forgetting the stage of social development pertaining to those oppositions, by transcending the class oppositions and the memory of those oppositions, that there is a possibility of building a true human morality.”

The reason for reviewing Engel's analysis of Dühring's immutable morality is that it directly pertains to the evaluation of the claim that moral principles have "absolute applicability." The pretext for Dühring's touting of immutable morality, his belief that there exist moral principles that go beyond historical or national differences, is similar to that of some people today who say that the spheres of history and morality sow "universal values." From this we may consider that Engels's use of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to carry out a profound analysis of Dühring's immutable morality provides us in fact with an important intellectual method for addressing the issue of universal values. From this, we may form our basic views of the matter.

1. In the historical and moral fields there are no universal values; talk of universal values has no foundation and no legs to stand on.

The previous analysis has shown that there is no immutable morality that transcends history or nationality. From this it logically follows that there are no universal values. To look at it from another corner, value concepts and moral concepts both have the same face. They cover the same thing and have the same limits. Thus, concepts of value, like those of morality, have a historical nature and a class nature. In historical development different classes have different interests and so their values do not coincide, and in fact may be in contradiction. We can conclude from this that there are no universal values transcending history and class. Moreover, human nature is the sum of all the relationships involved in actual social existence. Concrete human nature always depends upon certain historical conditions and certain social relations. There is no abstract, immutable, universal human nature that transcends history and class. So where can any universal values appropriate to a universal human nature come from?

To be honest, in those days the bourgeoisie was the leader of the "third estate." In its struggle against the feudal aristocracy it brought forth the value concepts of liberty, equality, justice, human rights. These represented not only the interests of that class but also the interests of the laboring class of the time. This coincidence depended on a particular historical background, in that at that time the bourgeoisie was playing a progressive role in historical development. But given all this, from the time of its formation there were different material interests in the bourgeoisie and different concepts of value. Therefore, "although generally speaking the rights fought for by the bourgeoisie in its struggle with the nobility were in accord with the interests of the laboring class, in each major movement of the bourgeoisie there also broke out independent movements led by the pioneers of those who were to come to form the proletariat of today." After the bourgeoisie achieved political power, it became even clearer that its ideal kingdom was nothing other than the ideal kingdom of capitalism, and what had been proclaimed as human rights were in fact the ownership rights of the bourgeoisie.

2. We Need a Historical and Class Analysis of the Value Perspective Proclaimed Under the Banner of Universal

Values

This is a necessary demand to recognize the historical and class nature of concepts of values and morality. It is only in this way that we can clearly understand their nature and evaluate them properly. Let's take the question of democracy as an example. Democracy is a type of state system and a form of class rule. It is not sufficient to look at similarities of form and procedures in different social systems while forgetting their actual nature. In fact, there has never been any "generic democracy," "pure democracy," "universal democracy." There are only class democracies determined by particular historical conditions. So-called "generic democracy," "universal democracy," or other such things are ways by which apologists for capitalism cover up the class nature of democracy. It is a strategy for cheating the masses and exporting the value concepts of capitalism.

Therefore, concerning democracy, Deng Xiaoping pointed out: In developing democracy there are "many ways in which our system is not perfect." The development of democracy must become "henceforth an unchanging long-term goal of the entire Party." But he also pointed out, on the other hand, that we must "still pay attention to so-called 'democrats' who publicly oppose the socialist system and the leadership of the Communist Party." "We need to be clear about the tendencies and goals of these so-called 'democrats'; we cannot be naïve." He warned: "When we proclaim democracy, we must strictly distinguish socialist democracy from bourgeois democracy or individualist democracy. We definitely must unite democracy toward the people with dictatorship toward the enemy, and unite democracy with centralization, democracy with legality, democracy with discipline, and democracy with the leadership of the Party." After entering into the new era, our country's building of socialist democracy and legality advanced by long strides. The 17th Party Congress went a step further, declaring, "The nature and core of socialist democratic politics is that the people are masters of their own house." It stressed that for the "deepening of political structural reform it is necessary to uphold the correct political direction." Its basic spirit is that we must uphold Party leadership, the people as masters of the house, to move along the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics, relying law to rule a unified state, supplying a political and legal system that will preserve the long-term security of the Party and state. This is a fresh embodiment of Marxist and socialist principles concerning democracy, not any so-called "universal value."

3. Without adopting "universal values," we must in practice encourage the absorption of useful values and morality with beneficial substance from history and abroad.

Even though people's concepts of value and morality are, when it comes down to it, products of a given society's economic situation, they must also issue originally from one's own thought. Therefore, we deny that there are trans-historical or trans-national "immutable moralities" or "universal values." There must be a historical and class analysis of moral traditions or ethical cultures. We must also stand firmly within the new practices of today, and through a process

both of rejection and absorption find what is most excellent in foreign cultures and in the cultural essence of the fatherland.

The problem of the historical cultural heritage, including that part of it that should be rejected, is an extremely complex one. Generally speaking it is a matter of looking at the attitude of the people toward such things, taking a different attitude according to how the particular tradition contributes to the progress of history, all through a process of the unification of criticism, acceptance, and creation, all based on taking a firm stance in the practice of today's new era. We must promote the transformation of traditions from what fit the old conditions to what fits the new, bringing about a critical acceptance of and transcendence of the excellent traditions of ancient times, determining whether they meet today's demands of historical development and the Chinese people. Let's speak of the moral system of Confucius, with the concept of humankindness ^[1] (ren; 仁) at its core. In his teaching on "humankindness and love," Confucius showed a generous mind and a broad moral boundary. But he also linked humankindness with ritual, ^[2] proposing that "humankindness is overcoming the self and submitting to ritual." This shows that the basic significance of humankindness is to limit the relationships between the person and others and the person and society in order to maintain the old social order and social system. This ethical concept came about at the same time as Chinese feudalism. It was a response to a particular historical period. This means that historically it had a progressive function. But for the same reason, under feudalism this theory of humankindness and love could not be separated from the conditions of that society. The idea of the exploiters' "not doing to others what they do not want done to them" could not extend to the laboring people. As class antagonisms sharpened, this theory showed ever more of its hypocritical and deceitful nature. In the practice of revolution Chinese communists made use of Marxist concepts to examine it and discovered that Confucius's "humankindness" meant "humankindness toward the ruling class and not toward the broad masses." Therefore "there must be an analysis in terms of dialectical and historical materialism toward the type of morality promoted by Confucius in order that it may be put in its proper place."

To "put it in its proper place" means there must be respect for historical development. There must be no historical nihilism that negates everything. But it also means opposing a cultural conservatism that absorbs everything wholesale. Rather, effort is put into critical acceptance and creativity. It is exactly in the great practice of the Chinese revolution. Mao Zedong argued that the ancient concept of "humankindness" should be revised and given new content while at the same time absorbing the beneficial substance of the ancient "popular roots." A dialectical materialist historical perspective should be taken toward the historical creativity of the popular masses. He proposed the brand-new theoretical perspective of "serving the people," developing in the course of the Party's protracted struggle the notion of "working for what fits with the greatest good of the broadest possible popular masses." We should uphold the banner of

the best traditions held by the popular masses. This is the glorious example of critical acceptance, inheritance, and creativity.

II

Our discussion of universal values must be based on the basic concepts and methods of the study and application of Marxism. We must dispel the confusion concerning that concept and establish our own perspective. This will allow us better to expel the erroneous ideological thought tide that underlies the outer coating of universal values. We must motivate ourselves to undertake ideological work and establish the guiding position of Marxism. To do this, we must point out the following several points.

1. The typical proclamations of universal values have a clear political direction. We must be clearly aware of this. We must now allow our comrades to treat universal value as a fashionable way of speaking and so fall into believing it.

The nature of universal values is to cheer on western liberalism and democracy. That is why we must reject that kind of so called “universal” “democracy,” “freedom,” or “human rights.” We must continue to uphold the guarantee of political development along the lines of Chinese-style socialism where the people are the masters of the house. All of this has been explained above. There are also some people who treat the western concepts in neo-liberal economics as universal values so as to advocate privatization and deregulation. For the past few years the advocacy of universal values has mainly concentrated on democracy, freedom, human rights, and privatization. This is not accidental. In our process of reform to perfect and develop the socialist system, certain domestic and foreign forces have raised the banner of “universality,” pushing onto us their program for full-scale westernization as one of the methods for changing our socialist system. Some say: “The market system is not compatible with the four basic principles,” since the “market system is a unified one.” “All countries must act in accord with the rule set by the international marketplace.” “Why should we promote reform and opening at the same time as the four basic principles?” “These do not fit with the unified demands imposed by a market system.” They also say, “To achieve modernization we must westernize. We must meet western standards.” These assertions do not use the term “universal value,” but their logic is based upon the “universal value” of the market economy and is directed at the denial of the four basic principles. ^[3] This directly touches the question of direction: what banner to raise, what road to walk. It also makes us go a step further in our perception: the support for “universal values” by some people at home and abroad has an extremely sharp political point. Our comrades definitely should not adopt universal values as a fashionable way of speaking, and so fall into believing in it. Some documents explain our Party’s Seventeenth Congress’s stress on thought liberation to mean “we should pursue universal values”; some take the mention in the documents of the Party of socialist democracy and legality; or fairness and justice; of the elimination of poverty and the achievement of modernization: explaining all of these in terms of a choice for so-

called “universal values.” Some even say that “universal values do not change in accord with the specific character of a nationality.” We must “turn to and embrace a system of universal values.” This is a confused and mistaken perspective. It is contradiction to the basic theory of the Party and also violates the spirit of the 17th Congress. We must clearly exclude the tendency to substitute a system of universal values for Marxism as our guide.

2. In order to consolidate Marxism’s guiding position we need to do a good job of ideological work strengthening in the attraction and cohesive power of socialist ideology. At the same time we must reject ideas of the “fading of ideology” in the light of “universal values.” We must clearly recognize its harmfulness and extirpate its influence.

The so-called fading of ideology or “deideologization” is a thought tide of the international bourgeoisie. Its philosophical basis is an abstract humanism and a notion of human nature. These premises lead necessarily to a rejection of the Marxist concept of class and of class analysis. They take a “common human nature” as the highest standard of value. It follows from this that a denial of class analysis in a so-called fading of ideology or deideologization became elevated to the status of universal value.

This sort of concept is indubitably hypocritical. Whether it’s a question of “fading” or “de-ing,” what is being denied is Marxist ideology, not any anti-Marxist ideologies. However, owing to a lack of study of Marxist theory, an ability to grasp the lessons of history, and the infiltration of western ideas, a tendency toward praising the fading of ideology has become fairly widespread in certain circles. A thought tide of abstract humanism and of saying “farewell to revolution” has appeared and become stronger. This ideology of the fading of ideology shows what lies beneath the cloak of universal values. It is a denial of the basic Marxist method for analyzing society. This has its own special dangers. The spread of this kind of tendency will seriously threaten the Party’s leadership in the ideological sphere. It will endanger the healthy maturation of youth and the cultivation of the next shift in socialist enterprise. It will have two bad effects on the maturation of young students. On the one hand, praise for the fading of ideology will weaken youths’ commitment to Marxist and socialist ideology. On the other hand, youths will become open to all sorts of erroneous thought tides. They will become polluted and infected. This is the consequence of the combination of the propagation of western ideas of universal values along with taking the fading of ideology as basis for promoting universal values. In this complex domestic and international environment we need a high degree of awareness and increased study.

3. The Universal Nature of Values Means Different Things in Different Spheres and on Different issues.

One sort of concept of value or morality can be applied very broadly. That is one that allows the coordination of the economic and political systems in the modern world and is beneficial for resolving the contradictions that arise from these. Given the current prominence of certain problems concerning globalization, as well as contradictions of interest or opinion, there arise a variety of different and opposing attitudes. We must take the attitude of seeking truth from facts

and respond based on the interests of the Chinese people and the people of all countries.

Engels discussed whether various undoubted facts and commonly accepted points of perspective in social life constituted “immutable truths.” He said it is not intelligent to “enjoy making a great to-do over simple facts.” This also bears on our questions about universal values. Naturally, a true universal value or morality would encompass everything. But today we have not yet transcended the value or moral perspective based on social class. Only after the extirpation of class antagonisms and after these antagonisms are forgotten in our daily life—only after we have transcended class antagonisms and the memory of class antagonisms—will there be the possibility of a true human morality. There will only then be the possibility for the formation of system of universal values and universal morality. This will be the age of communism for all human societies.

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[1] The term ren is central in Chinese philosophy, but also hard to translate. The choice here of “humankindness” involves a pun: ren refers to the kindness human beings should show each other, and the feeling of empathy each person has for others because they are all part of humankind.

[2] In Confucian thinking, li (ritual (manners, propriety)) is the outward expression of ren—the concrete way in which we relate to other people.

[3] In the late 1970s Deng Xiaoping asserted that “practice is the criterion of truth,” practice generally meaning whatever advanced economic development. He later amended this by adding the four basic principles: practice must conform to and strengthen Marxism and the Thought of Mao; socialism; “people’s democratic dictatorship”; and (probably most importantly) the leading position of the Party.