

# A Study of the Origin and Development of Marxist Poverty Ideology in Japan

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**Abstract:** When it comes to poverty, many people think that it is only a problem of developing countries, but in Japan, poverty is also a social problem that cannot be ignored. By citing the studies of different Japanese sociologists on poverty and wealth disparity in Japan, this paper uses the Marxist worldview and methodology to analyze the development of the idea of poverty and wealth in Japanese society along the time line, thus providing a study of this proposition.

## 1. Introduction

The problem of wealth involves both poverty and the wealth gap. The two major problems of poverty and the wealth gap are closely related to each other. When the distribution of wealth in a society is excessively concentrated in the hands of a few people, it will inevitably bring about an excessive wealth gap and poverty for the majority. Japan has had a serious problem of social poverty since modern times. Since then, even during the period of rapid economic growth, Japanese society has never eliminated poverty, and since the 1990s, the problem of social disparity between the rich and the poor has become more prominent. The changes in social and economic conditions in different periods have brought about different problems of poverty and wealth, and have also produced a wealth of ideas about poverty and wealth.

## 2. The Historical Origin of Marxist Ideology of Wealth and Poverty - The Marxist View of Wealth and Poverty by Kawakami Hajime

From World War I to World War II, poverty has been a very prominent socio-economic problem in wartime. Gennosuke Yokoyama, a leading Japanese social scientist, made an early study of poverty in modern Japan. Iwasaburo Takano became a pioneer in Japanese social statistics by focusing on the living conditions of the lower classes in Tokyo through his famous "Tsukishima Survey". These early studies of poverty inspired Hajime Kawakami, a leading Japanese Marxist scholar, to apply a Marxist worldview and methodology to develop his view of poverty based on the social reality of Japan at the time, centering on the definition of poverty, the causes of poverty, and measures to help the poor.

### 2.1 Analysis of the perception of poverty and the causes of its formation

Hajime Kawakami begins his view of poverty by recognizing the term "poor". He divides "poor people" into three categories and characterizes these three types of "poor people" as follows: the first sense of poor people is poverty in relation to the rich, which means "economic inequality". The second sense of poverty emphasizes the receipt of "assistance" and implies "economic dependence"; the third sense of poverty is the inability to enjoy the necessities of life, which implies "economic inadequacy". It is the third category of "poor people" that Kawakami is concerned with.

Hajime Kawakami criticized the Malthusian "demographic theory" that attributed the root cause of poverty to rapid population growth. He analyzed the current state of consumption in Japanese society at the time, arguing that defects in the organization of the economy had resulted in insufficient production of the necessities of life, resulting in a severe shortage of supply, and an oversupply of various luxuries. According to him, the current economic organization of Japanese society is characterized by the fact that although production is based on needs, the need to produce luxury goods prevails over the need for necessities, so that the raw materials used to produce the

necessities of life for most people are used to produce a large number of useless luxury goods. This is the root cause of the existence of a large number of "poor people" in Japanese society, which is called "the productivity of the world is deprived of luxury goods".

## **2.2 Solutions to Poverty**

Hajime Kawakami proposes three major responses to poverty. First, the rich people of the world should abolish the production of all luxury goods; second, every effort should be made to correct the excessive gap between the rich and the poor, so that the income of the general population of society would be more balanced; third, instead of entrusting various production businesses to private individuals for profit, such as armaments and education, the country should undertake the production businesses itself, and at the same time carry out a radical transformation of the current economic organization.

From the point of view of abolishing the luxury consumption of the rich, he pointed out that there are not only manufacturers and sellers of luxury goods, but also buyers. If no one buys these luxury goods, the merchants will give up the production of these products because they suffer losses. At the same time, he believed that the increasing wealth of the rich should be curbed on the one hand, and the status of the "poor" should be gradually raised on the other, so that the gap between the rich and the poor could be reduced. Based on this, he proposed a second policy to combat poverty, that is, to do everything possible to correct the excessive gap between the rich and the poor and to make the income of the general population more balanced. He believed that the second policy to combat poverty was actually a social policy to solve the problem of excessive disparity between the rich and the poor. Hajime Kawakami believed that the state should be responsible for the production and distribution of all kinds of production, especially the production of the necessities of life, and that the fundamental solution to poverty was to transform the existing economic organization from one in which private profit-making was the center of production to one in which the state (or society) was the center. This idea of reforming the economic organization and bringing into play the role of the state in the production of goods is in fact a change from economic "individualism" to "statism".

## **2.3 A new Marxist view of poverty management**

Hajime Kawakami serialized *Daini Binbo Monogatari* in the magazine *Renovation*, which was officially released as a single volume in 1930. From a position of faithful adherence to Marxism-Leninism, *Daini Binbo Monogatari* explored how to rescue the majority of people in capitalist society from poverty. He believes that capitalist production has formed two trends of concentration: first, a large amount of social wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few people, thus causing an excessive concentration of capital; second, a large number of workers are left with nothing and become a proletariat in the real sense, and these proletarian masses are mainly concentrated in large cities. The reason for the formation of these two trends of concentration lies in the extremely unreasonable wealth distribution system of capitalism, which is the main reason for the excessive gap between the rich and the poor and the poverty of the vast proletariat. In *Daini Binbo Monogatari*, he clearly recognized that it is not always feasible to blame the moral level alone or to ask the rich to voluntarily and consciously reduce their possession of wealth or consumption of luxury goods, and that the only way to fundamentally resolve this conflict is through social revolution. Hajime Kawakami recognizes that social change requires a process of quantitative to qualitative change. That is why he sees the emerging social ills as the inevitable result of the existing mode of production, but also as a precursor to its inevitable collapse. Moreover, this collapse is the result of continuous changes within the form of economic movement, which, at some point in the future, will eliminate the social evils and produce a new organization of production and exchange.

### 3. The Development of Marxist Ideas on Wealth and Poverty in the Postwar Period of Economic Growth

During this period, Japan benefited from rapid economic development and moved into the ranks of developed capitalist countries. The improvement of people's living standards and the gradual improvement of the social security system led to a more harmonious social situation of "100 million people in the middle of the stream". However, the problem of poverty in Japanese society was still prominent during this period. In 1952, the Institute of Social Science of the University of Tokyo conducted a study on the urban poor class. The study focused on the process of social class changes and the movement of classes between age groups through the division of social classes, and grasped the formation of the poor class from a dynamic perspective. Professor Eiichi Eguchi, who conducted the study, is a well-known Japanese sociologist who has been working on the issue of poverty in Japan.

Eiichi Eguchi argues that the current Japanese society does not guarantee the equality of all people at the legal level, but in reality, the social and economic status of each person varies greatly, so inequality exists widely. He believes that it is necessary to divide and understand all members of society from the standpoint of class, and to pay attention to the economic power and social status of the research subjects by selecting them from the standpoint of class. Eiichi Eguchi takes the low-income and unstable class as the object of his research, focusing on the lowest-income workers, especially the daily-employed workers and those who are nominally self-employed, and considers the low-income group as the ordinary workers who support their families under unstable employment. The most important point of Eiichi Eguchi's research is the "social stratification approach". He believes that social stratification is not solely based on the amount of income and standard of living, nor does it only refer to occupation, but is a more complex concept that must emphasize the symbiosis between human and social relations. Eiichi Eguchi defines the composition of "social class" as six elements, one of which is "the difference brought about by social class." He differs from the general classification of capitalism into the "two major classes" of capitalists and workers, and divides it into "three major classes" of capitalists, workers, and self-employed people. The second is the "difference by industry", such as the difference between manufacturing workers and commercial workers. The third is the "difference in employment status", for example, there is a difference between leaders and ordinary employees. The fourth is the "difference in the nature and characteristics of labor", such as the difference between manual labor and mental labor. The fifth is "the difference in social status and employment pattern", such as the difference between senior craftsmen and ordinary craftsmen. The sixth is the "rules of income based on the rules of employment", such as the difference in social status and income between formally employed workers and informally employed workers. It is based on these six elements that Eguchi classifies social classes.

The first scholar to use the concept of "working poor" in Japan was Eiichi Eguchi, who introduced the concept in 1960 and argued that "working poor" was "the poor who have jobs". It is a generic term for the "low-income precarious employment class. There is a group called the "working poor" that is widely concerned in Japanese society. Eiichi Eguchi is the scholar who first used the concept of "working poor" in Japan. He put forward this concept in 1960 and thought that the "working poor" is the "poor people who are working". It is an umbrella term for low-income and unstable workers. This class has two common characteristics: the first is a very low level of consumer living, even below the physiological limit; the second is a state of "poverty" where the basic living cannot be guaranteed. In the opinion of Eiichi Eguchi, the bottom 30% of the employed population in Japan is the "low-income precarious employment class", of which the typical representatives are the "daily wage laborers" and the "nominal self-employed". Eiichi Eguchi surveyed "daily wage workers" and "nominal self-employed workers" in Shizuoka Prefecture, looking dynamically at how they became poor and whether the social security system played a positive role in solving their poverty problem from several perspectives: their past occupation, their occupation when they fell into poverty, their occupation when they received assistance, and their

current occupation.

#### **4. The Development of Marxist Ideas on Wealth and Poverty in Japan after the 21st Century**

After the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s, the economic and social downturn brought about a large number of unemployed people. The "results-based" reforms based on "neoliberal economics" are considered to be the main cause of the wide gap between the rich and the poor in Japanese society. This has been studied by such scholars as Tachibanaki Toshiaki, Kouji Kuroeda, and Uren Hiroyuki. The 2007 annual meeting of the Japan Society for Economic Theory, a leading Marxist economics organization in Japan, also included "How to View the Rich-Poor Society" as its "common theme", which was widely discussed by scholars. Masao Watanabe is a leading Japanese sociologist and Marxist scholar, a professor of sociology at Hitotsubashi University, and a professor at the Marx Institute of Tsinghua University. He has devoted himself to the study of various socio-economic issues in modern Japan using Marxist theoretical methods, and is particularly well versed in theories of class and stratification, and in the study of poverty.

There are three major misconceptions about poverty in Japanese society. One of them is that Japan is a developed country and poverty no longer exists, but in fact, Japanese scholars have never stopped studying the problem of poverty from the modern society to the modern society. From the results of these studies, Japan has never eliminated poverty, whether during the period of rapid economic growth or the collapse of the bubble economy. Second, it is argued that poverty stems from one's own lack of effort. Masao Watanabe clearly attributes the problem of poverty to a social problem rather than an individual problem. He believes that if it is the social structure that causes a certain number of people living in poverty to appear in the form of social classes within a certain period of time, or if it becomes a social problem, then what is important is not the personal problem of what kind of people fall into the ranks of people living in poverty, but the primary problem should be the social structure that causes such poverty. Third, the inherent image of poverty in people's minds is hunger, lack of clothing, lack of shelter, etc. If one looks at modern society with this absolute impression of poverty, one will find that there seems to be not many poor people and will mistakenly believe that Japan, as a developed capitalist country, has eliminated poverty. However, Masao Watanabe points out that the characteristics of poverty in modern society have changed, and that the understanding of poverty should start from the broader space of the perspective of human development and globalization.

The Human Poverty Index (HPI), based on the idea of "latent capacity" by the famous economist Amartya Sen, takes as indicators of poverty four variables: deprivation of life expectancy (the proportion of people who die before the age of 40), deprivation of knowledge (the illiteracy rate of the adult population), deprivation of the general standard of living, and "social exclusion" (the proportion of people unemployed for more than one or two months). ), deprivation of the general standard of living, and "social exclusion" (i.e., the proportion of people who have been unemployed for more than one or two months) are the four variables considered as indicators of poverty. Thus, Masao Watanabe argues that poverty in the modern sense is not only material deprivation, but also not only income poverty and food poverty in terms of deprivation of the most basic opportunities and choices for human development, and that "human poverty" should be considered in terms of deprivation of opportunities for human development.

Masao Watanabe argues that the "fundamentalist" policy system based on the "neoliberal" economic ideology inevitably brought about the gap between the rich and the poor in Japanese society. However, if we are to analyze the root causes of poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor, class analysis is necessary. He believes that class analysis is a tool for re-cognizing and analyzing phenomena with the mind, and that the essence behind the phenomena that people do not recognize in the sense of common sense, that is, social phenomena, must be recognized through the tool of class. He points out that Koizumi's reform ideas and his policy system represent the interests of the bourgeoisie, so the damage to the interests of the middle and working classes becomes inevitable, and they are the victims of the widening social differences created by the structural reforms.

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