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The views of Karl Marx and Erich Fromm on human nature and their application to human education in Vietnam today

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Abstract---This paper deeply analyzes and compares the views on human nature of Karl Marx and Erich Fromm, thereby explaining the applicability of these theories to the practice of human education in contemporary Vietnam. Marx, with his foundation in historical materialism, emphasizes practicality, the role of labor, and the liberation of humans from alienation. Fromm develops the Marxist legacy, highlighting humanistic aspects, existential needs, the desire for authenticity, and the development of creative individuality. The synthesis of these two thinkers' perspectives helps to illuminate the nature of humans in a transforming society, while also suggesting modern educational solutions in Vietnam: aiming at autonomy, creativity, and the harmonious development of individual capacity aligned with community values. Through practical surveys, the article proposes several educational reform directions to maximize the qualities of Vietnamese people in the era of integration.

Keywords---Marx, Fromm, human nature, alienation, education, Vietnam, humanism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the dialectical materialist methodology in combination with comparative analysis of philosophical ideologies. The approach is carried out through the examination of original texts by Karl Marx and Erich Fromm, focusing on theoretical aspects of human nature, as well as interpreting the practical application of these viewpoints in contemporary Vietnamese education. Additionally, the author adopts a synthetic method, comparing existing educational models and conducting field surveys at several educational institutions in Vietnam. Through this, the study evaluates the feasibility,



effectiveness, and limitations of applying these theories to improve human education.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION RESULTS

1. Introduction

In the history of modern philosophical thought, the issue of human nature has always held a central position as the axis for all social value systems and developmental theories. An in-depth analysis of Karl Marx and Erich Fromm's views on humanity is not only a theoretical necessity but also has practical implications for educational reform in Vietnam today. Marx laid the foundation for understanding human nature through the lens of historical materialism, emphasizing the decisive role of labor, social practice, and the process of liberation from alienation. From this base, Fromm developed an existential humanistic model, focusing on psychological dimensions, inner freedom, and the potential for self-actualization.

The synthesis between these two schools of thought offers a multidimensional approach that explains human essence through social relationships while exploring the psychological depths and creative aspirations of individuals. In the context of Vietnam's integration and modernization challenges, revisiting, comparing, and applying the theories of Marx and Fromm becomes an urgent requirement. This theoretical foundation can guide the creation of a comprehensive educational model that nurtures creative capacity, humanistic values, and social responsibility.

2. Discussion and Analysis

2.1. Karl Marx's Views on Human Nature and Their Educational Implications

Karl Marx's view on human nature represents a fundamental contribution to the history of philosophy, not only redefining the understanding of human essence but also establishing a theoretical framework with a profound impact on modern educational reform. What distinguishes Marx from his predecessors is his shift from a metaphysical to a concrete socio-historical perspective, asserting that human nature is not an immutable entity existing outside of objective conditions, but rather a dynamic product of societal and historical development.

According to Marx, an individual can only realize their qualities and potential through participation in specific social relationships. These include economic, political, cultural, and ethical connections, which both shape human identity and drive the development of personality. The core idea is that a person does not exist in isolation; their essence is the sum of their social relations. Marx thus rejects metaphysical claims that human nature is an abstract, unchanging category reduced to biological or spiritual dimensions. Instead, he offers a dialectical and dynamic approach to studying, educating, and developing human beings.

Marx places particular emphasis on the decisive role of practice, specifically productive labor, as both the origin and transformer of social relations. Labor is not merely a means of producing material goods but is a manifestation of human

creativity and the capacity to transform both nature and oneself. Through participation in production, individuals reshape the external world and simultaneously develop their own intellect, will, cooperation skills, creativity, and adaptability. Therefore, education cannot be separated from the living environment of social practice. Education that is limited to knowledge transmission and detached from productive labor produces passive individuals who struggle to adapt and lack creative agency. In contrast, education must be organized as a practical space where individuals are trained, experience real life complexities, and thereby grow intellectually, skillfully, and ethically.

Marx also delves deeply into the phenomenon of alienation as a distinctive dynamic of capitalist society. Alienation, in Marx's thought, is the process by which people become estranged from the products of their labor, dominated by the very material forces they have created, losing control over their lives and the authentic meaning of labor and creativity. He identifies three key dimensions of alienation: economic, social, and spiritual. Economically, under capitalism, products no longer belong to the producer and instead become alien forces that oppress and exploit them. Labor, ideally a free and creative act, becomes a survival tool that reduces workers to mere cogs in a vast machine.

Social alienation emerges when interpersonal relationships become objectified, and moral values and humanistic traditions erode in the face of competition, selfishness, and lack of communal support. Spiritual alienation, meanwhile, is the diminishing of self-awareness, loss of life purpose, and decline in creative aspirations, leaving individuals apathetic and lacking the drive for self-betterment.

Marx's critique of alienation is not just a condemnation of injustice but a roadmap for human liberation through comprehensive reform in economics, society, and education. He argues that only by radically transforming production relations and building a new foundation of cooperation, equity, and creativity can people overcome alienation and fully realize their inherent qualities. Education plays a crucial role in this process, serving both as a tool for raising awareness of alienation and a space for cultivating values of freedom, initiative, cooperation, and creativity.

Marx contends that education must be tightly linked to social practice, encouraging learners to engage in productive labor, collective work, research, and real life experiences. These practices develop problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and moral character. Furthermore, education should inspire the fight for social justice, promote innovation, and enrich the momentum for human emancipation from all forms of oppression and exploitation.

Ultimately, Marx sees the highest aim of education and social development as the comprehensive and free development of every individual within a community. In his ideal society, the "free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." This vision asserts that personal freedom is inseparable from communal freedom; the growth of the individual must align with the prosperity and harmony of society.

Thus, education should not only provide professional knowledge but also nurture creativity, independent thinking, a willingness to innovate, and social responsibility. Creativity should not be the privilege of a few but a universal force cultivated in everyone through a democratic, egalitarian education system that encourages individuality and independent thought while promoting collaboration and shared values.

2.2. Erich Fromm's Views on Human Nature and Their Educational Implications

In the history of modern philosophy, Erich Fromm stands out as a thinker who synthesized and expanded upon the tradition of social criticism from Marx, while also integrating Western existential humanism of the twentieth century. Fromm's greatest contribution was the establishment of an existential humanistic model, viewing human beings as both social entities and free subjects, constantly striving to actualize themselves in a world of change and uncertainty.

Moving beyond the shadows of economic materialism, Fromm shifted analytical focus from socio-economic structures to the inner realm of the individual where each person faces existential choices, defines their own life's meaning, and resists being absorbed by the anonymity of modern society.

At the core, Fromm defined the human being as a free subject with inherent capacities for value orientation, self-creation, and development. He argued that true freedom is not merely the absence of external constraints but involves the individual's capacity to define values, chart a path of internal development, and actively choose a way of life aligned with personal aspirations. For Fromm, human beings are not finalized products of history or merely outcomes of social conditions but are beings in a continual process of becoming - actively shaping identity and actualizing inner potential. This process is essentially existential: through each decision and act, individuals "become themselves," transcending limitations and personal anxieties in search of deeper meaning.

However, Fromm also identified a psychological paradox in modern society: the fear of freedom. In his work "Escape from Freedom," he described how, as individuals are increasingly liberated from traditional constraints, they also experience profound insecurity, disorientation, and dependency on impersonal forces such as consumer culture, bureaucracy, and public opinion. The demand for freedom must be matched by the ability to confront its challenges. Individuals must learn to take initiative, accept responsibility, and resist conforming to systems that threaten authenticity.

Fromm also analyzed alienation, not just from a socio-economic standpoint like Marx, but through the lens of social psychology. He claimed that modern society produces "anonymous humans," "consumer-driven individuals" who lose their personal identity and become dependent on technocratic systems, mass media, and pre-programmed value standards. In "The Sane Society," Fromm portrayed a world in which people live in assimilation and spiritual emptiness, keep chasing material success, consumer goods, and power while neglecting emotional,

spiritual, and humanistic values. This leads to collective psychological crises such as loneliness, depression, and a loss of life's purpose.

Above all, Fromm emphasized education as a key mechanism to help individuals escape psychological and social alienation. For him, education was not just the transmission of knowledge and skills, but the creation of an environment that awakens emotional intelligence, critical thinking, creativity, compassion, and a cooperative spirit. Only when individuals are encouraged to grow emotionally, empathize, love, question, and challenge outdated models, can they truly liberate themselves from alienating systems.

Fromm's vision of humanistic education involves nurturing authentic values where individuals not only integrate into the community but also feel inspired to live meaningfully, creatively, and contribute. This process must integrate emotion, reason, and action. Education should provide democratic learning spaces that encourage discussion, debate, and experience where success is measured not only by external achievements but also by the capacity for self-mastery, empathy, acceptance of difference, and co-creation of shared values.

Fromm also believed a healthy society is one that maximizes such humanistic virtues as love, empathy, cooperation, creativity, and social responsibility. If these are properly cultivated, they become the driving force for both individual and social development. He especially stressed the inseparability of education from cultural identity formation, arguing that only within cultural frameworks can humanistic values be planted, nurtured, and sustainably developed. Ultimately, humanistic education is the journey by which individuals realize their worth, roles, and responsibilities to family, community, and humanity at large.

2.3. Commonalities and Differences Between Marx and Fromm on Human Nature

Comparing Karl Marx and Erich Fromm's conceptions of human nature reveals a compelling dialogue in modern philosophy, highlighting both shared values and fundamental differences in approach. This comparison opens pathways for contemporary educational theory by showcasing how different philosophical traditions can mutually enrich our understanding of the human condition.

At the core, Marx and Fromm both emphasize the decisive role of society in shaping, developing, and realizing human nature. Despite emerging from different philosophical backgrounds, both thinkers reject the notion of a purely isolated, biologically determined, or metaphysically fixed human essence. Instead, they argue that human beings evolve within dynamic interactions with the community, institutions, cultural settings, and history.

Marx posits that human nature is the ensemble of social relations. The individual fully becomes human through engagement in diverse societal connections. Similarly, Fromm believes that personal development can only occur when one is integrated into a community, living and creating within a truly humanized environment. For both, society is not a limiting barrier but a vital atmosphere that nurtures or inhibits human growth. Their shared emphasis on historical and

relational dimensions places the human being in a continuous process of transformation and co-creation of their own identity.

Another shared principle is the centrality of human liberation. For Marx, this liberation entails freeing individuals from all forms of economic, social, and spiritual alienation through a radical restructuring of society. It is not merely the eradication of material inequality but the creation of a world in which every person can develop freely and creatively within a just community. Fromm, influenced by Marxist tradition, reinterprets liberation through an existential-psychological lens: freeing individuals from fear, conformity, and internalized oppression, enabling them to become their authentic selves.

In Fromm's view, freedom is not simply the absence of constraints but the ability to courageously live according to one's convictions, to choose, and to assume responsibility. In both perspectives, the transformation from passive object to active subject is essential: individuals must move from being controlled by external systems to becoming autonomous, creative contributors to society.

Despite these convergences, there are marked differences in method and focus. Marx's analysis is rooted in objective social, economic, and historical conditions. He sees labor, production relations, and social structures as the primary forces shaping human nature. Even personal consciousness, will, or values are ultimately shaped by material conditions. In contrast, Fromm shifts attention inward to psychological drives, existential needs, emotional health, and the individual's search for meaning. For him, modern societal problems stem not only from economic injustice but also from identity crises, emotional alienation, and spiritual emptiness.

Therefore, while Marx prioritizes the transformation of social structures as the key to human liberation, Fromm believes that inner transformation - empowerment of the self - is equally vital. Marx's path to change is through social revolution; Fromm's is through the cultivation of love, empathy, emotional maturity, and critical consciousness.

These differences naturally extend to their educational philosophies. Marx advocates an education tightly integrated with practical life-labor, cooperation, and critical engagement with the material world. It should empower learners to become agents of social transformation. Fromm, on the other hand, envisions education as a liberating space for emotional growth, self-reflection, and moral development. His ideal school fosters compassion, independent thinking, and the courage to challenge societal norms.

Combining these views yields profound implications: education should not only transmit knowledge and skills but also nurture values, feelings, creative autonomy, and social responsibility. A truly holistic education bridges Marx's emphasis on practice, labor, and structure with Fromm's focus on psychology, emotion, and existential freedom.

In the Vietnamese context, creatively applying both Marx and Fromm can help overcome two extremes: one of excessive standardization and conformity, which

stifles individuality; and another of individualism devoid of communal responsibility. The future of education lies in balancing personal autonomy with social engagement, encouraging students to realize their intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities within a cooperative, culturally rooted, and forward thinking environment.

This synthesis of Marx's structural insights and Fromm's psychological depth offers a roadmap for cultivating individuals who are both socially responsible and personally fulfilled. It is capable of navigating the challenges of modernity while preserving humanity's shared values.

2.4. Applying Marx and Fromm's Views to Human Education in Contemporary Vietnam

Applying the perspectives of Karl Marx and Erich Fromm to human education in contemporary Vietnam is not merely a systematic task, but a creative process aimed at establishing a solid theoretical foundation to support the sustainable development of national education amid deep globalization and multidimensional cultural integration. Bridging the values and approaches of Marx and Fromm opens a path that is both scientific and humanistic, allowing for the emergence of a generation of proactive, creative, autonomous citizens with a strong sense of community.

To begin recognizing the status quo of human education in Vietnam, we must first acknowledge the notable achievements of the past decades. Since the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) period, Vietnamese education has seen significant progress in both scale and quality. Literacy rates have increased; universal education at the primary and lower secondary levels has expanded; and universities, colleges, and vocational institutions have grown to meet the demands of national modernization and industrialization. Additionally, Vietnam's education has increasingly integrated into international knowledge flows by adopting advanced pedagogical models and methods from developed countries. The shift from rote memorization to competency-based learning, and the inclusion of life skills, foreign languages, information technology, and experiential learning signal a determined effort to innovate.

However, the education system still faces numerous limitations and complex challenges. A reality we must confront is that many schools still operate on a traditional model heavily focused on academic instruction while neglecting moral and human development. The pressure for achievements and exams overshadows efforts to foster emotional intelligence, critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills. Assessments often rely on written tests, overlooking problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and social interactions. Examination pressure, achievement obsession, pedagogical standardization, infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, and weak educational management remain barriers that inhibit students' creativity, autonomy, and community engagement. Many learners are still passive, lack real world experience, and become disconnected from community values and the drive for self-improvement.

In the context of Vietnam's rapidly transforming society under the influence of technology, globalization, and cultural pluralism, the need for fundamental and comprehensive educational reform is more urgent than ever. At this point, creatively applying the educational insights of Marx and Fromm offers a valuable theoretical framework for constructing a philosophy of education centered on comprehensive, humanistic, and creative development.

Marx's conception of human beings as the totality of social relations, his emphasis on practice and labor, and his vision of liberation from alienation call for an education that closely connects theory with practice and cultivates active, creative citizens who contribute to community building. Meanwhile, Fromm's existential-humanistic outlook highlights inner freedom, personal creativity, love, empathy, and critical consciousness. The synthesis of these two dimensions forms the foundation for a Vietnamese education system that does not simply produce "functional human capital" for the economy, but develops "subjective human beings" who live meaningfully, with awareness and responsibility.

To realize this vision, the first essential principle is to reform the educational philosophy toward holistic, humanistic, and creative development. Vietnamese education must go beyond knowledge transmission to integrate training in skills, values, and moral character. This requires a shift from a "knowledge-cramming" model to a "liberating" one, where learners are central agents who are encouraged to self-learn, explore, experience, and self-regulate their thinking and behavior. Only when learners are empowered to take charge of their learning does education become a real catalyst for personal transformation.

Simultaneously, the curriculum must integrate academic knowledge, practical skills, life values, and soft skills, creating a balanced development between intellect, practice, emotion, ethics, and culture. This not only responds to labor market demands but also trains global citizens capable of integrating, collaborating, creating, and contributing positively to social progress. In the era of the knowledge economy, soft skills like critical thinking, communication, emotional regulation, conflict resolution are increasingly becoming core conditions for success. Hence, educational programs must go beyond outdated patterns, instead designing experiential learning, group projects, cross-cultural exchanges, artistic expression, community service, and volunteer activities to build a rich developmental environment for students.

To make integrated curricula effective, a diverse range of teaching methods is indispensable. While Marx emphasized education tied to productive labor and social practice, Fromm stressed emotional cultivation, creativity, cooperation, and critical thinking. Therefore, active learning methods including experience-based learning, project-based learning, group collaboration, open discussion, and real world scenarios need to be expanded and institutionalized in Vietnamese schools. Replacing passive, lecture-based teaching with open, participatory environments where students are encouraged to express opinions, ask questions, experiment, self-evaluate, and learn from mistakes will foster independence and self-direction. Learning should also extend outside the classroom through extracurricular activities, small research projects, community initiatives, entrepreneurship, and

artistic expression. This approach not only enhances creativity and initiative but also cultivates social skills, cooperation, empathy, and shared responsibility.

A foundational element in this process is the enhancement of emotional education, helping students develop self-awareness, empathy, critical reflection, and practical problem-solving. The rapid evolution of modern life presents numerous psychological challenges and emotional pressures. Therefore, education must care for students' "emotional immune systems" by teaching them to identify, manage, and transform negative emotions, while promoting positive, optimistic, compassionate values. Emotional intelligence, self-assessment, self-regulation, creativity, and the ability to solve complex problems must be prioritized to prepare learners for international integration, career competition, and fulfilling lives.

Alongside these strategic changes, teachers play a pivotal role as guides, inspirers, and companions in the development of learners. Teachers are no longer "absolute truth tellers," but facilitators of growth who unlock potential, encourage creativity, and support students in self-discovery. Strengthening teacher capacity in modern pedagogy, emotional support, creativity, and motivational techniques is vital for transitioning from traditional to liberating education. The teacher - student relationship must be grounded in respect, collaboration, and trust, creating space for students to learn actively, assert themselves confidently, and contribute to community building.

Nevertheless, many difficulties and challenges remain in implementing these principles. Among the largest barriers is a social mindset overly focused on exams, achievements, and diplomas, alongside standardized teaching methods and rigid school administration that limit creative freedom. Furthermore, regional disparities in facilities, teacher quality, management capacity, and student socioeconomic background create developmental inequality. The disconnect between families, schools, and society also contributes to confusion among learners regarding identity, motivation, and balanced development of individual and community consciousness

In addition, the rise of digital technology, social media, and diverse information sources creates serious challenges in terms of knowledge quality control, information security, critical evaluation skills, and cultural identity preservation. Addressing these issues requires an integrated and consistent policy framework, with inter-sectoral cooperation. While education must be at the center, it must also coordinate closely with economic, cultural, media, labor, and social welfare systems. The state must increase investment in education, particularly in disadvantaged regions, modernize infrastructure and teaching technology, retrain and upskill teachers, expand international cooperation, and learn from successful educational models globally. It must also reform admission, assessment, and certification policies; encourage innovation, research, and entrepreneurship; and build educational values and culture that promote creativity, altruism, and service.

In conclusion, creatively applying the views of Marx and Fromm to human education in Vietnam today is a process of both inheritance and innovation,

integration and identity preservation. The harmonious combination of Marx's critical, structural approach with Fromm's humanistic and creative spirit provides a solid foundation for building a modern, sustainable, and human-centered education system. Such system will foster not only knowledge and skills, but also character, values, and social responsibility. It helps produce a high-quality human resource capable of leading national development in the new era.

3. Conclusion

Karl Marx and Erich Fromm established two foundational pillars in modern philosophy regarding human nature: one emphasized the material and social basis of personality development, while the other illuminated the psychological depth, inner values, and the desire for personal freedom. The integration of Marx's objective theories with Fromm's existential humanism provides a comprehensive lens through which to view humans not only as products of their circumstances but also as free, creative subjects capable of transcending constraints.

Applying these theoretical points in Vietnamese education today invites a fundamental restructuring of the educational system from a uniform, one-way model to a humanistic system that respects individuality, fosters creativity, encourages independent thinking, and nurtures cooperation. Only by fully unleashing human potential, inspiring self-improvement, cultivating social responsibility, and love can educational reform achieve lasting depth and truly produce a generation of citizens capable of shaping the future and contributing to the global community.

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