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Article

The Discourse and Logic of the Concretisation Turn: A Critical Assessment of Professor Min Chao's Article 'Marx's Study of the French Revolution of 1848 and the Concretisation Turn in the Materialist Conception of History'

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Abstract

Professor Min Chao of Zhejiang University, in his paper 'Marx's Study of the French Revolution of 1848 and the Concrete Turn of the Materialist Conception of History' published in the January 2025 issue of *Marxism Studies*, reinterprets Marx's texts on the French Revolution before and after 1848, centring on the core proposition of 'the concrete turn of the materialist conception of history' and its 'triple dimensions' (Min Chao, 2025). This article conducts a systematic review and critical assessment of the aforementioned paper within the framework of the four axiomatic laws of formal logic (the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, the law of the excluded middle, and the law of sufficient reason), alongside the fundamental facts of Marxism's development and world historical realities. The article identifies three principal issues: Firstly, the core proposition of the 'concrete turn of the materialist conception of history' exhibits evident circular reasoning within its argumentative structure, lacking sufficient justification. Secondly, key concepts such as 'historical concreteness' versus 'living history' and 'social formation' versus 'state formation' are defined inconsistently throughout, constituting self-negation in terms of the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction. Thirdly, the absolute elevation of the study of the 1848 French Revolution as a watershed moment for the 'concretisation of the materialist conception of history' contradicts the temporal logic and textual context of works such as *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx & Engels, 1845/1968; Marx & Engels, 1848/1969; Marx, 1857/1976); Fourthly, while methodologically professing opposition to abstract dogmatism, the paper in practice repackages established historical facts through abstract discourses such as the 'triple dimension,' presenting a self-irony of 'naming the concrete with the abstract.' Taken together, the paper exhibits fatal flaws in logical rigour, historical accuracy, and Marxist theoretical coherence that cannot be overlooked. Its narrative of a 'concretisation turn' is untenable.

Keywords: Marx; French Revolution of 1848; historical materialism; concretisation; logical critique

1. Research Subject and Problem Awareness

Min Chao's paper, published in the January 2025 issue of *Marxism Studies* under the title 'Marx's Study of the French Revolution of 1848 and the Concrete Turn in the Materialist Conception of History', has recently garnered significant attention within domestic academic and public discourse (Min Chao, 2025; School of Marxism, Zhejiang University, 2025). The paper contends that Marx's historical examination of the 1848 French Revolution prompted a 'concrete turn' in the materialist

conception of history, proposing three corresponding dimensions: the metamorphosis of the overarching narrative, the shift in theoretical perspective, and the deepening of the mechanism of action (Min Chao, 2025).

In terms of its subject matter, the author seeks to assign new theoretical labels through reinterpretation of classical texts, addressing the prevalent issues of 'over-abstraction' and "labelling" in contemporary Marxist studies. This stance possesses inherent legitimacy. However, precisely because it positions itself as a corrective to 'abstract dogmatism,' such claims warrant rigorous scrutiny both in terms of formal logic and within the developmental history of Marxism.

The research questions of this paper may be summarised as follows:

1. Does the core proposition of the 'concrete turn in the materialist conception of history' hold logically? Does it satisfy the requirement of the law of sufficient reason?

2. Do the definitions and usage of concepts such as 'historical concreteness,' 'social formation,' and 'state formation' within the text adhere to the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction?

3. Does the absolutisation of the study of the 1848 French Revolution as a historical turning point in the 'concretisation of the materialist conception of history' align with the fundamental facts of Marxist development and world history?

To address these questions, this paper directly examines Min Chao's thesis while drawing upon Marx's *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1845/1968), *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1848/1969), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx, 1852/2000), and *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1857/1976) as fundamental references, supplemented by existing research on the relevant historical context.

2. The Core Structure and Self-Positioning of Min Chao's Thesis

The argumentative structure of Min Chao's thesis may be broadly summarised in three steps: (Min Chao, 2025)

1. Problem definition: Existing research often treats the materialist conception of history as a set of abstract principles, neglecting its unfolding within concrete historical studies. It is therefore necessary to examine the genuine path of the materialist conception of history's "concretisation" by beginning with Marx's writings on the French Revolution of 1848.

2. Core Thesis: Proposes the overarching conclusion of 'the concretisation turn in the materialist conception of history,' elaborating it into three dimensions:

(1) The transformative shift in overall narrative from 'general principles' to 'historical particulars';

(2) The theoretical perspective shift from 'social formations' to 'state formations';

(3) The deepening of its operational mechanism from 'critiquing erroneous trends' to 'engaging in revolutionary struggle'.

3. Textual Synthesis: Through excerpts and analysis of texts such as *The Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the study repeatedly emphasises the manifestation of these three dimensions in Marx's 1848 research on the French Revolution. It concludes that the materialist conception of history achieved its 'concretisation' through the process of 'facing reality and the proletarian revolution'.

This structure appears formally coherent: posing the question—constructing the concept—returning to the texts for 'verification.' However, from a formal logical perspective, the article effectively treats the 'concretisation turn of the materialist conception of history' as a presupposition rather than a conclusion derived through argumentation. It subsequently 'reinforces' this presupposition's validity through repeated invocation. This approach directly contravenes the principle of sufficient reason, constituting a classic instance of circular reasoning.

3. Examination of Logical Structure: Circular Reasoning and Conceptual Confusion

3.1. Circular Reasoning in the Proposition of the 'Concretisation Turn'

The principle of sufficient reason in formal logic stipulates that any judgement must be supported by sufficient grounds to be recognised as true.

In Min Chao's thesis, the 'concrete turn of the materialist conception of history' is treated as an established fact rather than a proposition requiring demonstration. This is manifested as follows:

(1) The article opens by asserting that Marx 'achieved the concrete turn of the materialist conception of history' in his study of the 1848 French Revolution, immediately followed by the delineation of its 'threefold dimensions' (Min Chao, 2025).

(2) The subsequent 'argumentation' section fails to systematically compare Marx's theoretical framework before and after 1848. Instead, it selectively cites classic passages—such as analyses of class struggle, the state apparatus, and causes of revolutionary failure—presenting them as direct evidence of 'concretisation.'

(3) In the conclusion, the author reiterates the proposition of a 'concrete turn in historical materialism,' emphasising that the study of the French Revolution of 1848 'confirmed' the concrete application of historical materialism to reality.

In truth, acknowledging Marx's extensive analysis of contemporary politics around 1848 and the theoretical conclusions drawn therefrom would readily permit characterising these developments as any desired 'turn': be it a 'turn towards realism,' a 'turn towards state theory,' or a 'turn towards crisis theory.' The reason Min Chao's thesis attributes this to a 'concrete turn' is not because the text contains definitive evidence pointing to this concept, but because the proposition was predetermined, with selected passages then 'backfilled' to provide examples.

Logically, this constitutes a circular argument: 'presupposing a conclusion—selecting material—returning to the conclusion.' The proposition lacks external, independent justification, instead proving itself through discursive structure. This circular reasoning undermines the theoretical persuasiveness of the entire article.

3.2. The Self-Contradiction Between 'Historical Specificity' and 'Living History'

The principle of identity demands that within a single argumentative process, the intension and extension of a concept must remain consistent, without vacillation.

In defining 'historical specificity,' Min Chao's thesis tightly binds it to 'recently occurred or currently unfolding real history,' emphasising its distinction from general research into 'past history' (Min Chao, 2025). Subsequently, the article asserts that grasping 'historical specificity' necessitates the internalised absorption of insights from past history. This generates the following tensions:

(1) On the one hand, the scope of 'historical specificity' is confined to 'the living reality of 1848' to distinguish it from general examinations of 'past history' such as the French Revolution or the genesis of capitalism;

(2) On the other hand, the theoretical content of 'historical concreteness' is declared to be 'grounded in profound insights into past history,' meaning it cannot be separated from a comprehensive grasp of long-term historical development.

This inconsistent definition results in 'historical concreteness' being employed as two distinct concepts within the article:

In the temporal dimension, it is narrowly understood as 'present and unfolding';

Methodologically, it is broadly interpreted as 'a totality encompassing multiple historical determinations.'

However, Marx's classic definition of 'concrete' in the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy precisely emphasises 'the unity of multiple determinations.' That is, the concrete is a rich

totality reconstructed in thought through abstraction, not a mere synonym for 'just having occurred' (Marx, 1857/1976).

Min Chao's thesis temporalises and newsifies 'historical concreteness,' effectively substituting 'event recency' for Marx's 'determined totality.' This conceptual violation of the law of identity renders all subsequent arguments unstable: oscillating between emphasising the immediacy of 'living history' and invoking the necessity of 'long-term historical insight.'

3.3. *The 'Social Form', 'State Form' and the Issue of First Appearance*

Min Chao's thesis asserts that Marx classified 'social forms' according to modes of production in *The German Ideology*, while the term 'social form' itself 'first appeared in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*' (Min Chao, 2025).

If the author merely intended to state that the concept of classifying historical formations by mode of production already existed in *The German Ideology*, while the term 'social formation' was first explicitly used in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, he must clearly distinguish between the 'embryonic form of theoretical content' and the 'first appearance of the term' within the text. Otherwise, it risks creating a semantic contradiction: 'already existing yet simultaneously appearing for the first time'.

The current formulation confuses these two aspects: it both emphasises that *The German Ideology* already employed the classification of socio-historical stages by 'forms of ownership,' and simultaneously asserts that the term 'social formation' first appeared in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. If the latter refers not to the narrowly defined term but to the overall concept, it directly contradicts the preceding statement. If it refers to the term itself, then the logical distinction between 'the first use of the term' and 'the first proposal of the theory' must be explicitly articulated. Min Chao's paper maintains ambiguity on this point, leaving his purported 'theoretical shift in perspective from social formation to state formation' lacking clear starting and ending points.

From a formal logical perspective, this ambiguity undermines the constancy of key terms within the argument, violating the fundamental requirements of the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction.

3.4. *Confusion in the Application of the 'Triple Orientation' Classification Criteria*

The three 'orientations' proposed in Min Chao's thesis are:

- (1) The overarching narrative transformation from 'general principles' to 'historical particulars';
- (2) The theoretical shift in perspective from 'social formations' to 'state formations';
- (3) The deepening of functional mechanisms from 'critiquing erroneous ideologies' to 'engaging in revolutionary struggles' (Min Chao, 2025).

At first glance, this appears structurally coherent. However, closer analysis reveals:

The first orientation represents a distinction at the epistemological level (abstract/concrete);

The second dimension represents a distinction at the level of research objects (society/state);

The third dimension signifies a distinction at the level of practical function or social role (critique/struggle).

In other words, these three aspects belong to distinct classificatory dimensions rather than being mutually exclusive and isomorphic subcategories. Treating them as parallel 'three dimensions' logically equates to classifying commodities by 'colour,' 'purpose,' and 'price' at the same level, inevitably leading to: substantial overlap between dimensions: for instance, analysing state forms inherently involves progressing from abstract principles to historical particulars, while also constituting practical engagement in real-world political struggles; cross-referencing of classification criteria, necessitating repeated citation of identical texts to substantiate each 'dimension,' resulting in argumentative redundancy characterised by 'three seemingly distinct sections horizontally, yet nearly identical content vertically.'

In formal logic, classifying the same object requires a single criterion; otherwise, the resulting 'subcategories' are not parallel but merely redundant descriptions of the same object from different

perspectives. Min Chao's 'triple dimensions' fall into the latter category, yet are rhetorically packaged as 'three parallel dimensions,' thus constituting a logical fallacy of 'misplaced category.'

4. Tensions with Fundamental Facts of Marxist Development

4.1. *The Theoretical Phases and 'Turn' Around 1848*

Regarding the fundamental trajectory of Marx's intellectual development, academia typically divides it into three major stages:

(1) Around 1843: Transition from Young Hegelian critique to critique of real society, exemplified by works such as *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and *The Jewish Question* (Marx, 1843/1844).

(2) 1845–1846: Systematic formulation of the basic framework of 'historical materialism' in *The German Ideology*, undertaking a fundamental critique of the old philosophical ideologies (Marx & Engels, 1845/1968; Marx, 1845/1888).

(3) After 1848: Applied the principles of historical materialism to the analysis of concrete historical events and the economic structure of capitalism in works such as *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and *Capital*, continually refining and deepening these insights (Marx & Engels, 1848/1969; Marx, 1852/2000; Marx, 1857/1976).

Viewed through this lens, 1848 indeed marked a pivotal juncture in Marx's political practice and theoretical application. Yet to assert that the 'concretisation' of the materialist conception of history was solely signalled by his study of the French Revolution of 1848 would be to exaggerate the significance of this period relative to others.

More significantly, if the core of 'concretisation' lies in grounding abstract principles within historical particulars, then the substantial analysis in *The German Ideology* concerning the actual mode of production, structures of division of labour, and relations between state and civil society already exhibits considerable 'concreteness.' Moreover, the intricate analysis in *Capital* of capitalist production, exchange, reproduction processes, and their historical genesis represents a paradigm of re-embedding abstract categories within real historical motion. Against this backdrop, emphasising solely the 'concretisation turn' of 1848 while downplaying or overlooking the concrete analyses preceding and following this period constitutes a distinctly selective narrative.

In other words, Min Chao's thesis fails to provide sufficient justification for why:

the 'concretisation' of the materialist conception of history should not be marked by *The German Ideology* or *Capital*, but must instead be pinned to the study of the French Revolution of 1848?

Why 1848 constitutes not merely 'an important stage in the concretisation process' but rather 'the decisive turning point in the shift towards concretisation'?

In the absence of such justification, elevating the study of the 1848 French Revolution to an absolute 'turning point' amounts to a discursive 'manufacture of nodes' rather than rigorous periodisation grounded in historical fact.

4.2. *The Narrative Bias of 'From Social Form to State Form'*

Min Chao's thesis characterises Marx's shift in research focus around 1848 as a 'theoretical shift in perspective from social form to state form,' aiming to highlight the prominence of state issues during this period (Min Chao, 2025).

However, textual historical evidence reveals:

(1) From *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* onwards, Marx maintained intense focus on the relationship between state and civil society, with critiques of the Prussian state apparatus permeating his early political writings (Marx, 1843/1844).

(2) In *The German Ideology*, the state is explicitly situated within a specific mode of production and class structure, understood as the concentrated expression of civil society rather than a mere external coercive force (Marx & Engels, 1845/1968).

(3) The Communist Manifesto further engages repeatedly with diverse forms of state and the varied manifestations of bourgeois rule within its grand narrative of 'social formations' (Marx & Engels, 1848/1969).

Thus, prior to 1848, Marx did not merely 'discuss social formations while neglecting state formations'; rather, he had long engaged with state issues within the framework of historical materialism. His analyses of the Second Republic, the Second Empire, the state apparatus, and the bureaucratic system in 1848 and thereafter constituted a deepening of existing theoretical foundations, not a shift in perspective 'from social formations to state formations'.

Min Chao's thesis characterises this 'deepening' as a 'shift in perspective,' effectively obscuring the continuity and gradualism inherent in theoretical development. This risks creating a misleading impression: as if Marx had neglected the state prior to 1848, only suddenly recognising its significance thereafter. This not only contradicts textual evidence but also runs counter to historical materialism's own emphasis on 'concrete analysis of concrete circumstances.'

4.3. *The Overly Simplistic Dichotomy of 'From Interpretation to Transformation'*

In the third dimension of his thesis, Min Chao depicts the mechanism of historical materialism as evolving from 'criticising erroneous ideologies' to 'engaging in revolutionary struggle.' He further contends that the study of the 1848 French Revolution marked a significant leap from 'interpreting the world' to 'unifying interpretation with transformation' (Min Chao, 2025).

However, Marx had already articulated in his Theses on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' This proposition itself constitutes a foundational principle established at the inception of historical materialism, rather than an 'upgraded version' emerging after 1848 (Marx, 1845/1888).

To simplistically categorise 'critique of erroneous ideologies' as merely 'interpretation' and 'engagement in revolutionary struggle' as solely "transformation" constitutes a flattening of Marx's dialectical thinking. For Marx, the critique of flawed ideological systems was itself an integral part of real-world struggle—a practical intervention in class relations and ideological structures—rather than mere 'explanation'.

Consequently, when Min Chao's thesis acknowledges that the materialist conception of history possessed dual dimensions of explanation and transformation from its inception, yet simultaneously attempts to narrate a developmental narrative of 'transition from explanation to the unity of explanation and transformation,' it creates an inherent tension within its narrative structure:

To maintain theoretical consistency, one cannot exaggerate the significance of 1848 as a rupture point 'from explanation to transformation';

To emphasise the 'deepening of the mechanism of action' in 1848 necessitates artificially amplifying the 'explanatory' nature of earlier stages while downplaying their practicality.

The result is that the article simultaneously highlights the revolutionary nature of the materialist conception of history through propositions from the classic outline, while simultaneously 'reinventing' the same propositions through a 'development-deepening' narrative structure, creating a latent conflict between factual evidence and narrative logic.

5. Methodological Reflection: Re-abstraction within the Discourse of 'Anti-Abstraction'

Min Chao's thesis emphasises, in its self-positioning, the need to oppose the rigidification of the materialist conception of history into a set of 'abstract principles'. It advocates grasping the "concretisation" of historical materialism by starting from the study of 'living history' (Min Chao, 2025). This starting point possesses a certain degree of rationality. However, when contrasted with its actual implementation, a phenomenon worthy of vigilance becomes apparent:

1. At the material level, the article largely remains confined to re-narrating several well-known classical passages, without undertaking detailed close reading, conceptual genealogical analysis, or cross-period comparative studies.

2. At the discursive level, the article repeatedly introduces highly abstracted new 'labels'—such as the 'concretisation turn,' 'triple dimensions,' 'metamorphosis of overarching narratives,' 'theoretical perspective shifts,' and 'deepening of operational mechanisms'—to synthesise and rename these already widely recognised concepts.

3. At the conclusion level, the article repackages these highly abstract discourses as 'new theoretical contributions' to the development of historical materialism, rather than presenting them dispassionately as interpretative frameworks or hypotheses.

This approach creates a logical paradox:

on the one hand, it criticises others for the 'abstract dogmatisation' of historical materialism; while simultaneously re-abstracting the same historical texts through a fresh set of abstract terminology, thereby enacting a form of 'secondary abstraction.'

From the perspective of historical materialism, if 'concretisation' fundamentally entails returning to the complex network of multiple social relations and practical processes, then replacing old abstract concepts with new ones does not constitute genuine 'concretisation.' Genuine 'concretisation' ought to manifest as follows: theoretically, revealing the inherent contradictions and developmental trajectories between different texts; historically, meticulously analysing the specific class forces, economic structures, and international context surrounding the 1848 Revolution and its defeat; methodologically, demonstrating how abstract categories are revised, expanded, or reflected upon in interpreting these concrete historical situations.

Min Chao's thesis lacks this process of 'returning from abstraction to a rich whole,' remaining instead at the level of 'renaming an existing whole with new abstract concepts.' Consequently, the 'concretisation turn' manifests more as a discursive label than as a genuinely empirically verifiable process in theory and practice.

6. Conclusions: Fatal Flaws and Constructive Solutions

In summary, based on the axiomatic laws of formal logic and the fundamental facts of Marxism's development alongside world historical realities, a systematic review of Min Chao's thesis 'Marx's Study of the 1848 French Revolution and the Concrete Turn in the Materialist Conception of History' yields the following conclusions:

1. The core proposition lacks falsifiability and sufficient justification. The 'concrete turn of the materialist conception of history' is presented in the article as an established fact, with related arguments largely consisting of selectively curated textual quotations and discursive restatements rather than systematic comparisons across different historical phases. The proposition is difficult to refute with empirical evidence, rendering it more akin to a meta-label than a testable theoretical judgement.

2. Key concepts exhibit internal contradictions, undermining logical coherence. Definitions of concepts such as 'historical specificity,' 'social formation,' and 'state formation' are inconsistent. The text simultaneously emphasises distinguishing these from 'past history' while appealing to 'insights into past history.' It acknowledges that social formation classifications existed in The German Ideology yet claims the term 'social formation' first appeared in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon. These contradictions violate the fundamental principles of the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction.

3. The conflation of three distinct dimensions within the 'triple perspective' classification undermines the rigour of the argument. Equating cognitive levels, research subjects, and practical functions as parallel 'perspectives' constitutes a conceptual misalignment. This results in overlapping and mutually reinforcing elements across the three components, yet fails to establish clearly delineated theoretical distinctions.

4. The treatment of Marxist historical development exhibits marked selectivity and exaggeration. By magnifying the significance of research on the 1848 French Revolution, it is presented as the sole marker of the 'concrete turn' in historical materialism, while downplaying the foundational contributions of texts such as *The German Ideology* and *Capital* to 'historically concrete' analysis. This contradicts existing scholarly consensus on the developmental phases of Marx's thought.

5. The 'anti-abstract' discourse is supplanted by new abstract encapsulations. While criticising abstract dogmatism, the article itself re-abstracts classical texts through discourses such as the 'triple dimension.' From the perspective of historical materialist methodology, this approach fails to genuinely achieve a return to the 'concrete totality,' instead constituting a self-irony of 'naming the concrete with the abstract.'

To achieve genuine theoretical advancement in this research direction, a possible constructive path lies in:

Abandoning the notion of treating the "concretisation turn" as an established "conclusion", instead regarding it as a "hypothesis" requiring verification through comparative research;

Through rigorous cross-textual and cross-period comparative analysis, meticulously trace the historical evolution of Marx's understanding of the relationship between 'social formation, state formation, and world system';

Using the classic exposition on the relationship between 'concrete' and 'abstract' in the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy as a benchmark, re-examine precisely where the 'concreteness' of historical analysis manifests at each stage, rather than simplistically substituting "contemporaneity" for 'determined unity'.

Only on this foundation can reinterpretations of the 1848 French Revolution truly escape the trap of 'discourse labelling,' returning to the scientific approach demanded by historical materialism itself—one that respects historical facts while rigorously upholding logic.

Synthesising the quantitative evaluation and itemised analysis above, the following overarching conclusion emerges:

Min Chao's article *Marx's Study of the French Revolution of 1848 and the Concrete Turn in the Materialist Conception of History* has been successfully published in the January 2025 issue of *Marxism Studies* within the prevailing academic system and discourse environment. From the perspective of 'institutional fact,' it undoubtedly meets the formal and stylistic requirements of a CSCI top-tier source journal (an established fact that cannot be altered). However, when scrutinised against rigorous academic substance and logical standards, its overall scholarly calibre falls within the 'moderate-marginal' range of approximately 55–60 points. Specifically: its innovation primarily manifests as 'discourse labelling' and tagging of existing content, lacking substantive, testable problem awareness and theoretical breakthroughs; Regarding theoretical depth and historical accuracy, its grasp of Marx's classic texts and the historical facts of the 1848 French Revolution remains confined to textbook-style summaries, failing to propose new interpretative frameworks on key issues such as the phasing of the materialist conception of history or the relationship between state and social formations; Regarding logical rigour, structural flaws such as circular reasoning, inconsistent terminology, and the conflation of the 'triple-aspect' classification criteria undermine the persuasiveness of the argumentation. The literature review and scholarly dialogue also lean towards background enumeration, lacking a distinct positional stance and analytical distinction of academic trajectories. In other words, while the article meets the formal and discursive thresholds for CSCI journal acceptance, its theoretical coherence, logical rigour, and academic contribution fall significantly short of the idealised high standards expected of CSCI publications. Consequently, it serves more aptly as a representative case study for critical reflection within contemporary Marxist scholarship, exemplifying a tendency towards 'discourse innovation over theoretical innovation'.

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