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Harmonious Society, Industrial Relations and Class Struggles

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Abstract: A harmonious society is one that has delivered equity, democracy, prosperity, high efficiency and sustained development. It is in such a state that industrial relations and the conflicts of interests between owners and employees of private enterprises, though still exist, are smoothly coordinated and that the reasonable rights and interests of both parties are protected, their contradiction relieved and reduced to prevent strong opposition, conflicts and confrontation. The theories of class and class struggles are not completely denied by the concept of “harmonious society”, while the focus has been deviated from armed struggles to reform and coordination so as to correct and prevent the oversimplification and one-sidedness of the past treatment of the problems of class and class struggles.

Key Words: socialism; harmonious society; industrial relations; class struggle

It is pointed out by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels in their coauthored *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. It is an objective that China has set for itself when entering the new century to construct a socialist harmonious society. The problems are, then, do industrial relations exist in socialism and in a harmonious society? If yes, what’s its character? What about classes and class struggles and what are the main forms of these struggles? Can a society where classes and class struggles exist become harmonious? Do the concept of “harmonious society” and the theory of class struggles contradict each other, the former being the negation of the latter? The paper explores all these theoretical as well as practical problems of great significance that partly determine whether or not a socialist harmonious

society can be constructed in China.

I. Background and Basis of the Conception of “Harmonious Society”

In today’s world, peace and development are the two major themes of concern to people in different countries. At the times when human existence are menaced by nuclear wars with the weapons whose incredible number and huge destructive force are enough to have mankind damaged for several times, neither capitalist nor socialist countries expect another world war, especially nuclear wars. In fact, all kinds of countries aspire to a sound international developmental environment, following the general trend towards peace, development and cooperation. These are the major international background against which the ideology of the construction of a socialist harmonious society was introduced.

Inside the country, despite the great achievements of economic development and rapid economic growth, there is a list of social problems: the huge and growing income gulf between the rich and the poor; the unfair distribution of the benefits of development; the insufficient supply of public goods; inadequate access to medical care, housing, education and jobs; grave problems of production safety and public security; the shortage of resources and severe pollution; the lack of democratic rights and the rule of law; the glaring loss of credibility and the decline in moral standards; widespread corruption, etc. It is under these circumstances that China declared the significant task of constructing a socialist harmonious society. Social harmony is the essential requirement of socialism, the crucial conditions of reform, development and stability, the important content of modernization and a high-level relatively prosperous society, and the pressing desire of the broad masses of the people.

II. The Meaning and Character of “Harmonious Society”

In the concept of “harmonious society” (pinyin: *He Xie She Hui*), “He” means stability and peacefulness and “Xie” means coordination. Another way of interpretation is that “He” indicates that everyone has food to eat whereas “Xie” implies that everyone has the right of speech. In my opinion, a harmonious society is one that has delivered equity, democracy, prosperity, high efficiency and sustained development. It includes the harmony of interpersonal relationship on the one hand and that of the relationship between man and nature on the other hand. The first aspect implies that every citizen does his/her own bit and gets along well with others. The basic requirements of a harmonious interpersonal relationship include the development of democracy, the rule of law, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality, the lack of which must result in interpersonal disharmony characterized by inequality, insincerity, instability as well as sharp contradiction, strong opposition, violent

clashes and an unsettled state of affairs.

The harmony between man and nature also comprises two aspects: the harmony between man and resources and that between man and environment. The former is the character of a resource-saving society; the latter an environment-friendly society. It indicates a state in which resources are exploited and used with high efficiency, and environment is protected and improved by the people so that they can support the sustainable development of social economy. The disharmony between man and nature, on the other hand, leads to the shortage and inefficient use of resources, waste and damage, environmental pollution and ecological disequilibrium that make the development of social economy unsustainable and the construction of a harmonious society impossible. This kind of society is both resource-wasting and environment-damaging.

Does the whole concept also include the harmony between man and society? My understanding is that it is in fact one aspect of the harmony of interpersonal relationship, or the relationship between one man and another, the other aspect being the harmony between individuals. The reason is that the word “man” refers not only to individuals but also to people in general and that a society made up of a particular large group of people is the total of interpersonal relationships.

The idea of constructing a socialist harmonious society has brought changes in the understanding of social development, including its objective, its motive force as well as the mode of development: from the philosophy of class struggles to that of the harmony of interpersonal relationship; from the idea of “man can conquer nature” to that of the harmony between man and nature; from the opposition between one man and another, and between man and nature to the coordination between population, resources, environment, economy and social development. At the primitive times, there was no oppression, no rulers. When it came to the autocratic society where private ownership was formed, it is a small group of people that governed and oppressed the majority. The situation has been reversed in the society with democracy and rule of law, as well as in the premature socialist society, where the majority governs the minority. The objective of a harmonious society, however, is to revert to the initial state, but at a much higher level, by eliminating oppression and the ruling class.

III. Industrial Relations in a Harmonious Society

Wage labor and industrial relations are reasonable phenomena in the socialist market economy at the primary stage of socialism due to the existence of private enterprises as well as the non-public sectors of the economy. According to the statistics from China’s State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC), the number of private enterprises reached 4.301million in 2005, with 11.099million employers and 47.141million employees.

Although it might not be reasonable to tell just from these extraordinary numbers that the country has returned to the times with two completely opposing classes called “the bourgeoisie” and “the proletariat”, since in a country still dominated by the state-owned economy that is from the legal perspective owned by all the citizens, the workers in private enterprises are not out-and-out proletarians, but rather, the owners and beneficiaries of the state-owned economy; moreover, the private sector of economy operated in the framework of the socialist legal system and governed by the socialist government serves as an important part of the socialist market economy, it should be recognized at least that the two parties differ considerably in their interests and has even formed two social strata that to some degree conflict with each other. For instance, according to the data from National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC), since the initiation of the reform and opening-up policies, the ratio of the total wage to the country’s GDP has witnessed a downward trend, falling considerably from 17% or so in the 1980s to about 11% in the first few years of the new century, which has been accompanied by the increased return on assets. This is how the interests of the two parties conflict. Their relationship is, on the one hand, industrial relations with one side employing and exploiting the other, which determines the opposition of their interests; on the other hand, they can be coordinated to form a cooperative relationship on the basis of the internal unity of their interests, since the fact that the private sector of the economy also pays taxes to the socialist government, provides products and services to satisfy the market demand and increases employment opportunities is favorable to the laborers in private enterprises.

At present, the blind pursuit of the maximization of self-interests by owners of private enterprises, the flawed institutions and ineffective policies have resulted in unreasonable wage cuts and deliberate default on wages, inadequate labor protection, long working hours, strong intensity of labor and constant work accidents. The workers’ lawful rights and interests and even the right to life are not guaranteed. This is one of the reasons for which the incumbent government put forward the conception of constructing a harmonious society. The industrial relations, as well as the conflicts of interests between owners and employees of private enterprises, will not disappear provided that the country is still at the primary stage of socialism and still practices market economy, even if the harmonious society has seen its rudimentary form. They can, however, be smoothly coordinated in a harmonious society, with the reasonable rights and interests of both parties protected, their contradiction relieved and reduced so that strong opposition, conflicts and confrontation can be prevented.

IV. Approaches to the Paradox between “Harmonious Society” and “Class Struggle”

Is there a paradox between “harmonious society” and “class struggle”? Is it possible to justify the necessity and correctness of constructing a harmonious society while adhering to the theories of class and class struggles? What is the relationship between “harmonious society” and Khrushchev’s theories of peaceful coexistence, peaceful competition and peaceful transition, as well as his ideas about all-people’s party and all-people’s state? How does the concept of “harmonious society” differ from the thoughts such as “class compromise” and “the disappearance of class struggles”? Is it the end of the conception to deny the theories of class and class struggles? These are all problems of great theoretical significance that must be answered appropriately for an in-depth exploration and a reasonable understanding of “harmonious society” so that the great theory can one day become a reality.

From my point of view, the seemingly reasonable understanding that class struggles focus on armed suppression whereas the harmonious society emphasizes peaceful coordination and that in the veritable harmonious society there must be neither sharp conflicts of interests nor fierce class struggles is in fact misleading. The harmonious society is not a society without contradiction, conflicts, classes or social strata and struggles, but quite the contrary. It is merely the final goal of the society to eliminate the opposition and differences between urban and rural areas, between industry and agriculture and between manual labor and mental labor, delivering a harmonious relationship between one man and another, as well as between man and nature. At the current times, the major criterion that distinguishes “harmonious society” from “disharmonious society” is not whether there is contradiction, conflicts, classes or social strata and struggles, but rather, the approaches to the problems, the forms of struggles and whether the opposition and clashes can be relieved and finally eliminated. Class contradiction and class struggles do not necessarily mean armed suppression and life-and-death struggles. There are basically two kinds of approaches to class contradiction as well as other forms of social contradiction: one is violent compulsion, the other peaceful guidance. The two correspondent forms of class struggles are armed struggles and reform and coordination respectively. Such non-violent or peaceful means, which is easier, less costly and perhaps more efficient than the violent means, was not ruled out by Marxism despite its emphasis on armed struggles and violent revolutions at the times when revolutions were ruthlessly suppressed by the ruling class. In the socialist society the principle contradiction is non-antagonistic in character. Even antagonistic contradiction can be solved with non-antagonistic approaches and not necessarily with fierce struggles, compulsion, armed forces and elimination. Therefore, the construction of a socialist harmonious society should, under the protection of the socialist system and people’s regime, mainly adopt the peaceful means including reform and coordination, improvements of the institutions, democracy and rule of law, etc., and should appropriately deal with the problems of contradiction, conflicts, classes and struggles, mitigating and resolving contradiction and delivering social harmony, which better reflects

the trend of the times, the nature of contradiction in a socialist country and the essential requirement of socialism. The theories of class and class struggles are not completely denied by the objective of the harmonious society, while the focus has been deviated from armed struggles to reform and coordination so as to correct and prevent the oversimplification and one-sidedness of the past treatment of the problems of class and class struggles.

Overall, the harmonious society that China is going to construct differs both from that advocated by Khrushchev and from the erroneous arguments list above. While the latter two are, by nature, the negation of contradiction, classes or social strata and class struggles, the harmonious society, as hitherto discussed, is not.

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