

Marxist-Leninist Philosophy and the Development of Critical Thinking in Contemporary Learners

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and the rapid development of the knowledge economy, modern education places urgent demands on fostering critical thinking competence among learners. This paper analyzes the role of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in shaping critical thinking and critical thinking skills for students today. Based on an overview of key concepts of thinking, critical thinking, and critical thinking skills, the study clarifies the dialectical relationship between content (critical thinking) and form (critical thinking skills). It argues that learning Marxist–Leninist philosophy not only provides a foundation of worldview and scientific methodology but also contributes to developing analytical, argumentative, reflective, and creative capacities. The paper demonstrates that the teaching and learning of Marxist–Leninist philosophy help students establish a comprehensive and systematic perspective, enhance language and reasoning abilities, stimulate creativity, and cultivate resilience in addressing practical situations. Furthermore, to maximize effectiveness, philosophy education must closely integrate theory with practice, innovate pedagogical methods, and encourage self-learning, self-reflection, and independent thinking. Accordingly, the paper reaffirms the crucial role of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in fostering high-quality human resources to meet the requirements of the new era.

Keywords: Marxist–Leninist Philosophy; Critical Thinking; Critical Thinking Skills; Political Education; Higher Education; Human Resource Development

INTRODUCTION

At present, the global, regional, and domestic context is undergoing profound changes. The development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the digital era, together with the trends of globalization, regional integration, and the knowledge economy, has created opportunities as well as challenges for nations in all fields, especially education (Schwab, 2016; Marginson, 2019). Modern education aspires to cultivate global citizens who are capable of autonomy and equipped with strong cognitive capacities to adapt to and solve the emerging problems of the era (UNESCO, 2015).

Accordingly, from the beginning of their studies at undergraduate, postgraduate, or political training institutions, learners are not only required to acquire specialized disciplinary knowledge but also to engage with a foundational subject: Marxist–Leninist philosophy. This discipline has an inseparable relationship with other sciences, representing the connection between the universal and the particular (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2021). The teaching of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in universities across Vietnam in general, and in Party schools in particular, plays a crucial role in building a scientific worldview and methodology for learners, thereby fostering individuals with the capacity to master, adapt, and respond effectively to the demands of the modern era (Communist Party of Vietnam [CPV], 2021).

Such mastery demands essential cognitive competences, among which critical thinking is one of the most vital skills for the global workforce in the 21st century (Facione, 2015; Paul & Elder, 2012). As former Minister of Information and Communications of Vietnam Lê Doãn Hợp famously remarked, “The 20th century was about learning to obey, while the 21st century is about learning to think critically—because only through critical reflection can truth be discovered” (quoted in CPV, 2021, p. 20). For students, especially those enrolled in Party schools, the cultivation of critical thinking is particularly significant, as their work involves not only data and technical tasks but also direct interactions with people.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that critical thinking without the skills to articulate and apply it may result in limited outcomes in both study and professional practice (Brookfield, 2017). Therefore, this paper examines the role of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in shaping critical thinking and critical thinking skills among students today. The aim is to contribute to the development of human resources, especially high-quality personnel, with priority given to leadership, management, and key sectors—based on enhancing and creating fundamental, comprehensive, and robust improvements in education and training quality, in close connection with mechanisms of recruitment, utilization, and talent management.

However, it must also be acknowledged that having critical thinking without the accompanying skills of critical engagement often results in limited effectiveness and unsuccessful outcomes in both learning and professional practice. Therefore, this paper delves into “the role of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in shaping critical thinking and critical thinking skills among students today.” The aim is to contribute to the development of human resources, especially high-quality personnel, with priority given to leadership, management, and key sectors—based on enhancing and creating fundamental, comprehensive, and robust improvements in education and training quality, in close connection with mechanisms of recruitment, utilization, and talent management (Communist Party of Vietnam. 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of fundamental research methods in the social sciences and humanities, specifically:

Documentary analysis and synthesis: The author inherits, analyzes, and synthesizes domestic and international research works related to thinking, critical thinking, critical thinking skills, and the role of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in education. This approach provides the theoretical foundation and systematizes scientific perspectives for the analysis of the research problem.

Historical–logical method: Applied to examine the formation and development of Marxist–Leninist philosophy and critical thinking, thereby clarifying their necessity and role in the educational process, particularly for students at universities and political academies today.

Comparative analysis: The author compares the views of Marxist–Leninist philosophy with other philosophical perspectives on thinking, while also contrasting the actual practice of critical thinking training among students in the context of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Inductive–deductive method: Arguments are constructed on the basis of moving from empirical evidence and specific learning situations to theoretical generalizations, while also applying deductive reasoning from Marxist–Leninist philosophical theory to highlight its role and significance in shaping and developing students’ critical thinking skills.

Interdisciplinary approach: Beyond the philosophical perspective, the paper draws on research findings from education, psychology, and management sciences to further clarify the mechanisms underlying the development of critical thinking and critical thinking skills.

Through the integration of these methods, the study ensures a comprehensive, objective, and scientific basis in reaffirming the crucial role of Marxist–Leninist philosophy in fostering critical thinking and critical thinking skills among students today.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some Basic Concepts

The study of “thinking” has long been a central issue in philosophy. Throughout history, philosophers have investigated its origin, nature, characteristics, and laws of development. Socrates (469–399 BC), the great Athenian philosopher, laid the foundations for dialectical reasoning and rhetoric through systematic questioning of political leaders to test the validity of their policies (Brickhouse & Smith, 1994). In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels emphasized that thought and consciousness are products of the human brain and of human beings themselves, who, in turn, are products of nature shaped by their environment (Engels, 1878/1977). From this perspective, human thinking develops with each historical epoch, becoming more advanced through reflective and critical engagement.

Critical thinking has been defined in various ways. Paul and Elder (2012) describe it as “the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.” Michalko (2001) regards it as the ability to understand and evaluate data collected through observation, communication, and argument. In Vietnam, Giang (2011) stresses that “critical” should not be seen as mere opposition but rather as an evaluative process aimed at testing assumptions and enhancing reliability. Similarly, Huong (2011) defines critical thinking as a dialectical process of analyzing and evaluating existing information from multiple perspectives to clarify accuracy, requiring reasoning that is clear, logical, evidence-based, and impartial.

Critical thinking skills are closely related to reasoning and problem-solving (Facione, 2015). According to the Vietnamese Dictionary, “skills” are the ability to apply acquired knowledge to practical contexts. Phan and Oai (2010) define critical thinking skills as a sequence of well-practiced activities enabling individuals to analyze information, present arguments, and persuade others to reconsider issues from alternative perspectives. Facione (2015) further identifies core skills of critical thinking, including interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation.

From the standpoint of dialectical materialism, thinking is a process by which the human brain reflects objective reality, rooted in practical activity. As Engels noted, human thought arises from labor and the transformation of nature (Engels, 1878/1977). Thus, while critical thinking refers to the internal cognitive process of questioning and reasoning, critical thinking skills represent its external expression through language and action. In dialectical terms, content (critical thinking) determines form (skills). Without critical thinking, skills cannot be effectively developed; conversely, skills give concrete form to thought (Marx & Engels, 1976).

Based on these perspectives, the author proposes a working definition: Critical thinking skills in Marxist–Leninist philosophy are a set of well-practiced activities by which learners analyze information, collect evidence, and construct arguments to affirm or refute philosophical problems, viewpoints, or theories, particularly those of Marxism–Leninism.

Marxist–Leninist Philosophy and Critical Thinking and Critical Thinking Skills

Philosophy emerged in both the East and the West between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE. But what is philosophy? According to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, the shortest and perhaps most adequate definition is that philosophy is “thought about thought; it is critical reflection based on reason, conducted in a

systematic manner concerning the general nature of the world” (Honderich, 2005, p. 666). From the perspective of Marxism–Leninism, philosophy is understood as “a system of the most general theoretical views about the world and the position of human beings within it; the science of the most general laws of motion and development of nature, society, and thought” (Marx & Engels, 1976).

Philosophy differs from other sciences in the specificity of its knowledge system and its research methods. Unlike specialized sciences, philosophy does not examine a single, isolated aspect of reality but rather considers reality in its entirety, providing learners with a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the world and of human beings (Kenny, 2012). Unlike religion or art, philosophy approaches the world through reason, expressed in a system of logically structured and highly abstract concepts and categories, supported by evidence and explanation (Blackburn, 2016). While philosophical perspectives are diverse and sometimes contradictory, they must all be logically justified, empirically grounded, and validated in practice—through material production, political and social activities, and scientific experimentation (Honderich, 2005). In this sense, philosophy is not only a source of knowledge about the world but also a discipline that enables humans to understand themselves, recognize the processes of their own thought, and evaluate their knowledge. Philosophy, therefore, is “thought about thought,” and it plays a key role in cultivating different modes of reasoning, including dialectical reasoning, theoretical reasoning, creative reasoning, and critical thinking (Brookfield, 2017).

Within the broader system of philosophy, Marxist–Leninist philosophy was established on the theoretical foundations laid by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 1840s and further developed creatively by V.I. Lenin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Marx & Engels, 1976; Lenin, 1972). Marxist–Leninist philosophy investigates the general laws of motion and development in nature, society, and thought. It provides a worldview and methodology for scientific cognition and revolutionary practice, with the aim of liberating the working class and humanity as a whole from oppression and exploitation, thereby achieving human emancipation (Draper, 1986).

A core component of Marxist–Leninist philosophy is its theory of knowledge and historical materialism. Knowledge is the reflection of objective reality by human beings—not in a simple, direct, or complete way, but through a continuous process in which thought constantly moves closer to the object (Marx & Engels, 1976). Lenin summarized this dialectical path of cognition as: “From living perception to abstract thought, and from abstract thought to practice—that is the dialectical path to the knowledge of truth, to the cognition of objective reality” (Lenin, 1972, p. 170). In this process of cognition, critical thinking operates as a dialectical activity of reasoning. Dialectical thinking consists of principles and requirements derived from the laws of dialectics, especially the dialectics of thought. These include: the principle of objectivity (considering phenomena objectively), the principle of comprehensiveness (considering phenomena in all aspects and interconnections), the principle of development, the principle of contradiction, and the principle of the interrelation between quantity and quality (Ilyenkov, 1977). These principles form the methodological basis of critical thinking.

Critical thinking, therefore, is indispensable for learners. Paul and Elder (2012) define it as “the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.” Michalko (2001) describes it as “the ability and the act of understanding and evaluating data collected through observation, communication, and discussion.” Brooker (2010) considers it “a cognitive process that questions assumptions or hypotheses—an approach to confirm whether an assumption is correct, incorrect, or partially correct.” At its core, critical thinking involves analyzing and evaluating in order to clarify and confirm the accuracy of information before applying it in practice (Facione, 2015). The object of reflection here is not external reality itself but the very products of thought—concepts, judgments, and inferences (Brookfield, 2017).

As a higher-order cognitive skill, critical thinking enables individuals to detect problems, explore solutions, and approach reality in a systematic and reasoned way (Ennis, 2011). For students, especially those in political schools, the lack of critical thinking and critical skills can lead to passive learning, superficial knowledge, and vulnerability to distorted arguments, including those propagated by hostile forces (CPV, 2021). In contrast, students who cultivate critical thinking through the study of Marxist–Leninist philosophy will be able to think independently, evaluate opposing viewpoints, and defend the path of revolutionary development chosen by the nation (Nguyen, 2020).

The Role of Marxist–Leninist Philosophy in Shaping Students’ Critical Thinking

For students, during their studies as well as after graduation, work does not only involve machines or numbers but also direct interaction with people—both domestic and international—especially in the context of globalization and integration. Therefore, critical thinking skills are indispensable, and the critical thinking acquired through Marxist–Leninist philosophy plays an essential role for students in the 21st century (Facione, 2011; Ennis, 2018).

First, studying Marxist–Leninist philosophy fosters critical thinking and critical thinking skills because the subject requires learners to constantly question—from lower levels of cognition (remembering) to higher levels (application, analysis, and evaluation). For example: What is a connection? Why do phenomena have interrelations?

How do they manifest? Why does a phenomenon develop in one way and not another? These questions reflect a continuous demand for critical reflection, similar to the Socratic tradition emphasized in modern critical thinking education (Paul & Elder, 2019). Marx, Engels, and Lenin themselves employed critical thinking extensively in dialectical reasoning, developing philosophical insights through debate and refutation (Marx & Engels, 2010; Lenin, 1961). Without critical debate, their theories could not have matured. Historically, for instance, metaphysical materialists of the 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., Newton, Bacon, and French materialists) argued that natural phenomena existed in isolation, in static forms, without internal development. Marxism–Leninism critically opposed this view, proposing instead that development is upward movement, involving qualitative leaps, contradictions, and constant transformation driven by internal dynamics (Marx & Engels, 1976/2010).

Second, the study of Marxist–Leninist philosophy trains students to think more systematically and comprehensively, thereby enhancing their ability to analyze and synthesize. This fosters objectivity and guards against one-sided reasoning (Brookfield, 2012).

Third, philosophy education cultivates language, argumentation, and presentation skills, which are integral to critical thinking. Students—especially in technical and economic disciplines—often find abstract subjects difficult. However, when they are trained in critical debate, they improve their communication abilities, develop precise argumentation, and present ideas more persuasively (Abrami et al., 2015).

Fourth, Marxist–Leninist philosophy promotes creativity, since philosophy and specific sciences are dialectically connected. While sciences provide empirical foundations, philosophy offers methodological guidance for innovation. Thus, students can critically evaluate new ideas, inherit the most valuable insights, and discard one-sided perspectives, contributing to comprehensive knowledge creation (Halpern, 2014).

Fifth, given its high level of abstraction, Marxist–Leninist philosophy cannot be fully comprehended without linking theory to practice. When students test philosophical reasoning against real-life experiences, they strengthen their practical critical thinking. This equips them to handle academic, professional, and personal challenges more effectively, fostering reasoned decision-making even under emotional stress (Bailin & Battersby, 2016).

In sum, Marxist–Leninist philosophy plays a crucial role in developing students' critical thinking and critical thinking skills, helping them become independent, analytical, and creative thinkers. This is particularly vital in the digital age and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where complex problem-solving and high adaptability are required for high-quality human resource development.

The Role of Teaching Marxist–Leninist Philosophy in Developing Critical Thinking

In the contemporary era, intellect is regarded as a primary source of power, determining the role and position of a nation. Therefore, any country seeking sustainable socio-economic development must prioritize and invest in education. The Communist Party of Vietnam emphasizes that “Education and training development is one of the most important driving forces to accelerate industrialization and modernization, as well as a condition for unleashing human potential—the fundamental factor for social development and rapid, sustainable economic growth” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021).

With the rapid advancement of science and technology and the deepening trend of globalization across political, economic, cultural, and social domains, societies face profound transformations. At the same time, hostile forces continue to employ “peaceful evolution” strategies, targeting youth, students, and intellectuals to erode trust in Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought (Vu, 2020). Moreover, the reality in political schools still reveals issues such as superficial learning, lack of motivation, and the perception of Marxist–Leninist philosophy as abstract and dry. Some students remain indifferent or skeptical, affecting their learning outcomes and, more importantly, their development of critical thinking (Nguyen, 2018).

Teaching Marxist–Leninist philosophy therefore plays a vital role in cultivating critical thinking. This is reflected in several aspects:

First, it provides students with a scientific worldview and methodological foundation, equipping them with principles of dialectical materialism—such as the principles of development, comprehensiveness, historicity, and practice. These help learners evaluate phenomena systematically and avoid subjective or one-sided judgments (Marx & Engels, 2010; Lenin, 1961). Teaching Marxist–Leninist philosophy plays a vital role in strengthening students' critical capacities. As UNESCO (2015) emphasizes, modern education must prepare learners for lifelong adaptability and reflective problem-solving. In Vietnam, however, challenges remain: some students perceive philosophy as overly abstract, while hostile forces attempt to undermine trust in Marxism–Leninism.

Second, the teaching of Marxist–Leninist philosophy strengthens theoretical and analytical thinking, encouraging learners to identify contradictions, evaluate arguments, and understand relationships between elements in a system. This enables them to construct independent positions and defend their reasoning responsibly, aligning with modern definitions of critical thinking as “reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 2018).

Third, it fosters logical reasoning and dialectical thinking, helping students overcome dogmatism and experiential or one-sided reasoning. By studying key categories, principles, and laws of dialectical materialism, students can analyze reality objectively and critically, thereby enhancing both their cognitive rigor and practical application skills (Facione, 2011). Through such innovations, teaching Marxist–Leninist philosophy can transform from rote learning into an active process of cultivating critical thinking, self-reflection, and intellectual independence—key capacities for high-quality human resources in the contemporary era (Marginson, 2019).

Fourth, teaching philosophy develops students' ability to generalize and abstract, thereby elevating their capacity for theoretical reasoning. This provides the basis for applying theory to solve real-life problems effectively, contributing to both academic success and professional competence in an era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Halpern, 2014).

Fifth, instruction must avoid dogmatism and instead link theory to practice. Teaching should guide learners to critically assess real-life issues, encouraging independent judgment rather than rote acceptance. As Ho Chi Minh stressed: "We must study the spirit of Marxism–Leninism—its positions, viewpoints, and methods—and apply them to effectively solve real problems in our revolutionary practice" (Ho Chi Minh, 1995, p. 302). To address this, pedagogy must be reformed toward practicality and learner engagement. Teaching should not only transmit knowledge but also foster independent reasoning, dialectical thinking, and problem-solving competence (Phan & Oai, 2010). As Ho Chi Minh stressed: "We must learn the spirit, standpoint, and methodology of Marxism–Leninism in order to apply them to the practical problems of our revolutionary work" (Ho Chi Minh, 1960/2011, p. 455).

In conclusion, teaching Marxist–Leninist philosophy not only nurtures critical thinking skills but also equips students with independent, creative, and practical reasoning abilities, enabling them to confront challenges of globalization, resist hostile ideological influences, and contribute effectively to national development.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of field of study, occupation, or workplace, critical thinking is an indispensable competence for individuals in the 21st century. However, even when learners possess critical thinking, without the accompanying skills to articulate and apply it effectively, their outcomes in learning and work will remain limited. Given the abstract and highly generalized nature of philosophy, particularly Marxist–Leninist philosophy, students can only fully internalize its insights when theory is connected with personal experience and social practice.

Therefore, in teaching, instructors must always integrate theory with real-life situations, using practical and contemporary examples that resonate with learners and with current social concerns. Such an approach enhances engagement and effectiveness. Assigning students research topics and experiential projects also helps them derive philosophical insights independently, thereby deepening understanding and fostering critical reflection.

For teaching and learning to succeed, educators must constantly innovate in pedagogy. Students, in turn, must cultivate and strengthen their critical thinking and critical thinking skills from the outset. Only in this way can they acquire both the knowledge and the methodological competence necessary for success in study, work, and life in the modern era.

At the same time, instructors should deliberately orient students toward developing these skills, fostering autonomy in learning, self-confidence, independent reasoning, creativity, and an attitude of respect for objective truth. In doing so, Marxist–Leninist philosophy not only contributes to intellectual formation but also serves as a vital foundation for preparing high-quality human resources capable of meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world.

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