



From Urban–Rural Antagonism to Urban–Rural Integration: A Contemporary Interpretation of Marx’s Theory of Urban–Rural Relations

Xinmeng Wang¹ and Junyu Zhu^{2*}

¹*School of Marxism, Anhui Technical College of Industry and Economy, Hefei 230051, Anhui, China*

²*School of Government, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China*

*Correspondence

Corresponding author:
miyazonokawory@gmail.com

Abstract

Urban–rural connectivity can deepen while the relations of subordination embedded in it persist. This article explains that divergence through a contemporary reconstruction of Marx’s account of town–country antagonism. Reading selected primary texts alongside scholarship on spatial justice, capabilities, and digital inequality, it distinguishes productive integration, understood as stronger economic coordination, from substantive integration, assessed through usable access, reciprocal benefit, and collective agency. Its contribution is a synthesis that connects group-specific outcomes to the institutional organization of interdependence. Property arrangements allocate assets and surplus; entitlement rules govern eligibility; fiscal systems distribute the costs of social reproduction; organizational rules shape bargaining alternatives. A bounded territorial comparison shows how service eligibility and financing can alter access under equivalent productive connections. A separate organizational proposition explains how restrictions on switching reduce credible alternatives and weaken participants’ ability to negotiate returns. These mechanisms specify why aggregate gains can coexist with exclusion and identify conditions that can interrupt it. The resulting framework treats integration as a political transformation of cooperation: its substantive direction depends on who can use collective resources, obtain a defensible share of benefits, and influence the rules sustaining them.

Keywords: Marx; urban–rural relations; spatial inequality; opportunity inequality; institutional mediation; urban–rural integration

Received: 21 August 2026
Accepted: 7 October 2026
Available online: 12 October 2026

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Urbanization changes where people live and how societies produce, exchange, and organize collective life. It can widen employment possibilities, support specialized services, and reduce the isolation of dispersed settlements. Yet movement into cities and the expansion of connections between settlements do not establish equal access to the benefits of those changes. A person may commute to an urban labour market while remaining unable to use its public services. A village may enter a national supply chain while retaining little influence over pricing. A rural household may gain an internet connection without acquiring the skills, purchasing power, or institutional support needed to benefit from online provision. These possibilities raise a political question about the relationship between interconnected development and substantive inclusion.

Contemporary research makes the inadequacy of a purely territorial answer clear. Rural communities are connected to wider networks of production and governance; they cannot be understood simply as spaces left outside modernization. Woods’s account of the global countryside identifies globalization as a reworking of rural relations, not the disappearance of rural places (Woods 2007). Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on service accessibility likewise distinguishes the presence of a service from the practical



possibility of reaching it, taking settlement size, transport, and geography into account (OECD 2024). The issue is therefore not whether rural places have contact with cities. It is how that contact organizes benefits, burdens, and the capacity to act.

Marx's analysis makes the organization of interdependence the central issue. Town and country take shape through production, property, and the division of labour; their relationship distributes both resources and authority. Contemporary public provision, citizenship regimes, settlement networks, and digital platforms reorganize that distribution. Reconstructing Marx's argument therefore requires tracing how these institutions extend, interrupt, or redirect the dependence generated through production. The enduring problem is the separation between contribution to collective wealth and control over the conditions in which that wealth is produced and used.

1.2. Research Problem and Central Argument

This article asks how Marx's account of town–country antagonism can explain the coexistence of expanding urban–rural interdependence and persistent inequalities in effective opportunity. Three subsidiary questions organize the analysis. How does the division of labour become a spatial relation of subordination? Through which institutions can contemporary resource concentration reproduce inequalities beyond the location of employment? What distinguishes integration that alters those relations from integration that merely extends exchange?

This article argues that urban–rural inequality is reproduced through the institutional conversion of unequal resource control into unequal practical opportunity. Property rights, public-service eligibility, fiscal arrangements, and participation rules determine how people benefit from economic networks. Concentration gives this process a spatial structure. Where institutions reserve the gains of specialized activity for already advantaged groups, stronger connections reinforce exclusion. Where they extend usable access and distribute the costs of reproduction, the same productive concentration can support wider opportunities. Institutional mediation explains the divergence between these trajectories.

Opportunity inequality denotes socially structured differences in the practical ability to access learning, healthcare, secure livelihoods, mobility, and participation. Income, property, and employment remain central because they shape the resources available for exercising those abilities. The contemporary transformation is cumulative: inequalities in production and income are reorganized through service access, digital resources, and institutional entitlement. Their interaction makes spatial disadvantage durable even where individual dimensions improve. Explaining that durability requires following the conversion of resources into opportunities across several institutional domains.

1.3. Existing Scholarship and the Research Gap

Marxian ecological scholarship reconstructs town–country relations through the material exchanges sustaining collective life. Foster's account of metabolic rift identifies the ecological consequences of capitalist agriculture and urban concentration (Foster 1999). The present article extends that concern with reproduction to the institutions organizing education, healthcare, mobility, and livelihoods. This extension supplies an account of how productive contribution and usable provision become separated within interdependent regions.

Relational approaches establish that rural places develop through wider networks. Woods (2007) examines their reconstitution through globalization; Brenner and Schmid (2015) analyse urbanization across settlement boundaries. These accounts direct attention to the organization of connection. Here that relational starting point supports a group-level question: how do participants connected to the same productive network acquire different claims on its resources and different capacities to influence its terms?

Spatial-justice scholarship already brings institutions, distribution, and participation into integration research. Li (2016) discusses household registration and protection for vulnerable groups; Zhu and Guo (2022) identify market and planning biases in rural restructuring. Their contribution establishes that coordinated development can distribute benefits unequally. This article synthesizes that insight with a conversion analysis, distinguishing the rules allocating resources, the processes affecting their use, and the resulting access and bargaining outcomes.

Digital-inequality scholarship supplies a related distinction. Philip et al. (2017) examine rural infrastructure in Great Britain; van Deursen and Helsper (2015) identify unequal tangible benefits among internet users in the Netherlands. Sen's capability perspective provides the evaluative basis for separating resources from what people can effectively do with them (Sen 1980). The present reconstruction connects those conversion questions to property, service financing, and authority over cooperation. Collective agency adds a judgement about participants' capacity to revise the rules producing their opportunities.

Direct integration studies provide the closest comparison. Zhu (2021) reconstructs Marx's urban–rural argument, while Zhang et al. (2024) examine digital development through a multidimensional integration index. Wang, Lu, and Zhu (2024, secs. 3, 5) model regional welfare and explicitly address distributional fairness, equal opportunities, cooperation, compensation, and oversight. Their framework already recognizes justice and institutional guarantees. This article shifts the diagnostic unit to differentiated groups within those regional systems, examining usable access and effective authority to contest the terms of interdependence.

The contribution is a theoretical synthesis with a specified diagnostic increment. Section 3.2 holds productive connections constant while varying territorial entitlement and financing: it predicts different access for a supplying population even when production and service location are unchanged. Section 5.3 varies organizational restrictions and traces credible alternatives, bargaining, and retained returns. These contrasts give causal content to the distinction between productive and substantive integration. Relative to regional welfare assessment, the framework identifies whose position changes; relative to resource conversion, it examines power over the conversion rules; relative to spatial-justice diagnoses, it specifies institutional inputs and intermediate processes. The research gap therefore concerns the joint explanation of group-specific opportunity and control within connected production. Access, reciprocity, and agency organize its evaluation, while the conditional propositions explain how particular rules can change those outcomes.

1.4. Analytical Approach and Contribution

The article uses conceptual reconstruction, selecting primary passages for four analytical functions. *The German Ideology*, Part I.C, section 2, connects labour division, property, and restricted activity (Marx and Engels 1968). *Capital*, volume I, chapter 15, section 10, connects industrial and agricultural transformation to concentration and material reproduction (Marx 1887). Volume III, chapter 47, section III, establishes historical variation in town–country dominance, making property relations central to interpreting dependence (Marx 1959). Chapter II of the *Communist Manifesto* locates the reorganization of agriculture, industry, and population within a revolutionary horizon (Marx and Engels 1969). These

passages supply the relationships used in the argument and its distinction between contingent reform and broader emancipation.

The contemporary bridge follows the problem of reproduction. Education, healthcare, and care sustain productive participation; entitlement and fiscal rules organize their present allocation. Organizational rules govern alternatives within cooperation. These domains are analytical extensions of the production–property–dependence relationship. Sen’s resource–capability distinction supplies an external evaluative lens, while the Marxian reconstruction explains the material and political organization of conversion. Primary-text citations identify the consulted editions and chapter or section locators.

The literature is selected purposively for arguments about spatial dependence, institutional injustice, resource conversion, and digital benefits. The synthesis is assessed against those named antecedents and through bounded contrasts specifying an institutional input, intermediate process, outcome, and countercondition. It develops theoretical propositions for subsequent investigation. Section 2 reconstructs the primary-text basis; Sections 3–5 develop the mechanisms and evaluative criteria; Section 6 identifies interpretive stakes and discriminating comparisons; Section 7 answers the opening question.

2. Marx’s Theory of Urban–Rural Relations

2.1. Division of Labour and the Separation of Town and Country

In *The German Ideology*, composed in 1845–46, Marx and Engels connect town–country separation to the division of material and mental labour, private property, and the restriction of individuals to prescribed activities. They also make overcoming antagonism dependent on material conditions rather than intention alone (Marx and Engels 1968, pt. I.C, sec. 2). This is a historically situated argument about social organization. The relevant separation involves differentiated control over production and constrained forms of life, not simply the physical distance between settlements.

The distinction matters for contemporary interpretation. Spatial differentiation refers to differences in settlement form and the location of activities. Economic interdependence refers to relations through which differentiated activities sustain one another. Antagonism concerns a structure in which those relations reproduce conflicting interests and unequal capacities to influence the conditions of cooperation. These concepts should not be treated as interchangeable. A society can retain differentiated settlements while reorganizing its dependencies. Conversely, greater exchange can occur without changing a subordinate participant’s position.

The division of labour allocates activities, resources, and decision-making authority together. Consider a hypothetical supply chain in which dispersed producers perform essential work while pricing and investment decisions are controlled elsewhere. The asymmetry lies in the allocation of authority within cooperation. Producers contribute to a process whose terms they have limited power to shape. A relational analysis follows how that arrangement distributes risk, surplus, and alternatives, identifying the conditions under which economic necessity becomes a source of bargaining power or a durable form of dependence.

Class relations cross settlement boundaries. Rural producers can possess substantial assets while urban workers face insecurity and exclusion. The urban–rural dimension concerns how those relations acquire a spatial organization: where command is concentrated, where resources are supplied, and how mobility affects bargaining positions. Residence becomes explanatory through its connection to ownership, entitlement, and authority. Tracing those connections reveals both disadvantages shared across settlements and the specific dependencies generated between them.

2.2. Capital Accumulation and Urban Concentration

Marx’s discussion of modern industry and agriculture links technical transformation to changes in agricultural labour, the separation of previously connected activities, and the concentration of population. It also identifies productive possibilities for reorganized cooperation alongside damage to social and ecological reproduction (Marx 1887, vol. I, chap. 15, sec. 10). Urban concentration is consequently contradictory in this account. It can develop collective productive capacities while organizing their use through relations that undermine the conditions of life.

For the present argument, the interpretive implication is that concentration must be separated from appropriation. Concentration concerns the location and coordination of activities. Appropriation concerns who controls the surplus and the gains generated through that coordination. A specialized urban hospital or research centre may require concentrated resources to function effectively. The politically decisive question is whether the resulting benefits become accessible beyond the groups and territories that host them. Physical decentralization is not the only possible response; collective access can change the distribution of benefits without eliminating specialization.

Capitalist organization extends across agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Wage labour, corporate ownership, finance, and technical systems connect activities located in different settlements. The spatial question concerns the relationship among the places where resources are produced, decisions are made, and gains become available. A rural site can host production while command and appropriation are organized elsewhere. An urban workplace can employ workers whose education and care depend on rural households. Those configurations make control and reproduction central to the analysis of location.

Capital, volume III, further complicates any timeless equation of urban power with rural weakness. Marx’s discussion of ground rent describes historically different combinations of political and economic dominance between town and country (Marx 1959, vol. III, chap. 47, sec. III). The contemporary lesson drawn here is methodological: the direction of dependence must be investigated through the relevant relations of property and exchange. It cannot be inferred from a place’s designation as urban or rural.

2.3. Antagonism, Social Reproduction, and Transformation

Antagonism is more demanding than an observed difference in income. It identifies a relationship in which cooperation is organized through conditions that reproduce unequal control and constrain the possibilities of participants. A wage difference may reflect temporary specialization, but it may also be connected to persistent exclusion from services, bargaining institutions, or collective resources. The analytical task is to identify the process that sustains the difference, rather than to assign every disparity the same explanation.

Social reproduction connects productive participation to the conditions that sustain it. Education, health, care, housing, and infrastructure support workers over time and shape their alternatives within employment. When access depends on location or institutional status, expanded

labour-market connections can reproduce the same constraints through a wider territory. This article develops that relationship as the bridge between Marx's account of production and contemporary opportunity inequality. The capacity to participate depends on collective resources whose financing and allocation are politically organized.

The *Communist Manifesto* places changes in agriculture–manufacturing relations and population distribution within historically situated proposals for revolutionary transformation, while acknowledging variation among countries (Marx and Engels 1969, chap. II). Its horizon cannot be equated with a present-day regional development programme. The framework below retains the question of reorganizing antagonistic relations but treats institutional reforms as contingent changes within existing societies. Reduced exclusion may be significant without constituting Marx's envisioned emancipation.

Integration denotes a change in the social terms of interdependence: structured subordination weakens and effective access widens. Institutional arrangements determine whether closer cooperation advances that change or entrenches dependence. The transition from antagonism to integration therefore turns on control over productive gains, the financing of collective provision, and participants' capacity to revise the terms of cooperation. These are the relationships through which modernization acquires its distributive and political consequences.

3. The Transformation of the Urban–Rural Divide in Modern Society

3.1. Traditional Dual Structures and Their Limits

The traditional urban–rural dual structure is often represented through a contrast between urban industry and rural agriculture. This is a useful starting abstraction when it identifies differences in labour productivity, capital availability, and employment. Lewis's account of development through labour transfer between capitalist and subsistence sectors remains an important reference for structural transformation (Lewis 1954). Those sectors, however, are not identical to urban and rural territories. The abstraction should not become a geographical classification in which every city represents modern production and every village represents its opposite.

A territorial dual structure also rests on institutions. Administrative residence, employment status, and property arrangements can govern access to collective resources. Chan and Buckingham's historical analysis of household-registration reforms distinguishes population movement from access to state-supported benefits (Chan and Buckingham 2008). The distinction identifies a mechanism of dualism: labour enters an economy while entitlement remains organized through a different institutional geography. Examining the connection between economic participation and rights reveals how spatial separation can persist after physical relocation.

Dualism should therefore be understood as a patterned relationship among production, entitlement, and spatial organization. A population may be economically necessary to an urban economy while remaining institutionally peripheral to the services that sustain participation in it. Alternatively, agricultural producers may be connected to sophisticated markets while lacking collective power over contracts. In either case, the relevant opposition is not an absence of connection. It is a distribution of connection in which participants occupy unequal positions.

This reading also permits variation within rural and urban categories. A village close to a prosperous metropolitan region can possess advantages unavailable to a distant town. A precarious worker in an urban core may face constraints that resemble those experienced by a rural household more closely than those of a wealthy urban neighbour. The framework must therefore identify the relevant network, group, and institutional rule before interpreting the urban–rural dimension of inequality. Administrative labels remain useful for provision and comparison, but they are not sufficient explanations.

3.2. Urbanization and Multilevel Spatial Inequality

Urbanization changes the geography of employment and specialized provision. It also reorganizes the costs of participating in them. In the analytical cases considered here, a worker enters an urban labour market while affordable housing remains distant; a family gains formal eligibility for education while admissions conditions, travel requirements, or fees restrict its use. The relevant outcome is practical access. Population counts register relocation, whereas access depends on how the resulting spatial configuration distributes time, money, and entitlement.

Territory adds explanatory force when the geography of production differs from that of rights or service financing. Consider a hypothetical urban employment centre and its rural supplying locality. Hold ownership, wage contracts, worker income, travel time, hospital location, staffing, and total service funding constant, with adequate capacity to serve both groups. Under a residence-based entitlement rule, supplying workers remain ineligible for the urban hospital's subsidized provision. Under a portable entitlement backed by pooled financing, they can obtain care from the same facility on the same terms as urban residents. The predicted access difference follows from the jurisdictional boundary and its financing consequences. Economic cooperation and property relations are identical in the two arrangements.

This comparison isolates a spatial mechanism within the broader institutional account. Production draws on workers across a territory, while eligibility and financial responsibility can stop at a municipal border. Pooling and portability align provision with the population sustaining that production. Where eligibility and financing already span the relevant region, the boundary contributes little additional explanation; affordability, capacity, or bargaining may still generate inequality through other mechanisms.

Brenner and Schmid's process-oriented account supports examining urbanization across changing spatial configurations rather than treating the city as a fixed container (Brenner and Schmid 2015). That insight does not require abandoning rural experience as an object of analysis. Wang, Maye, and Woods (2025) defend the analytical significance of rural relations and challenge an exclusively urban perspective on planetary transformation. Together, these arguments caution against both rigid territorial dualism and the disappearance of rurality into an undifferentiated urban process.

For this article, urban and rural describe changing positions within relations of production, reproduction, and governance. Those positions can include the concentration of command functions, dependence on resource extraction, or responsibility for care. They should be investigated in their concrete combinations. This preserves the possibility of identifying a rural disadvantage without assuming that all rural places share it, and of recognizing urban poverty without dissolving every spatial relation into individual differences.

3.3. A Reconfigured Divide: Resources, Access, and Opportunity

Contemporary urban–rural inequality is reproduced through the interaction of persistent material relations and changing systems of access. Land structures housing, agriculture, collateral, and collective security; employment shapes income and bargaining conditions. Digital systems reorganize information, transactions, and decision-making across these relations. The explanatory task is to trace how institutions connect them to practical opportunity. Table 1 identifies these intersections and the distributional questions they raise.

Table 1. Persistent material inequalities and contemporary mechanisms of reproduction

Material relation	Contemporary intersection	Question about effective opportunity
Land and productive property	Development rights, finance, and digital market access	Who retains control and captures gains?
Employment and wages	Credentials, transferable benefits, and platform rules	Can participation support a secure livelihood?
Transport and physical infrastructure	Broadband, devices, and assisted service access	Can a nominally available service actually be used?
Household income	Service costs, care obligations, and digital skills	What practical choices remain affordable?
Allocation of public resources	Eligibility, fiscal transfers, and territorial coordination	Does residence constrain access to essential provision?

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis of resource relations and mechanisms of opportunity formation.

Consider two hypothetical households with comparable income, located in different service environments. One can reach a school, clinic, and reliable transport without substantial additional expenditure. The other must finance travel, accommodation, or unpaid time away from work. Equal money income would not imply equal practical access. Conversely, improving transport could expand the second household's opportunities without relocating the services themselves. The distinction directs attention to the costs and institutional conditions connecting a resource to its use.

Sen's distinction between resources and basic capabilities makes conversion central to evaluating equality (Sen 1980). People differ in their ability to turn resources into effective choices. This article connects that evaluative insight to Marx's explanatory emphasis on production, property, and structured dependence. Resource control helps explain who acquires the means of action; conversion conditions explain what those means allow people to do. Their connection brings the institutional organization of opportunity into the analysis of urban–rural relations.

Digital provision exposes several stages in opportunity formation. Rural connectivity research in Great Britain identifies uneven infrastructure (Philip et al. 2017); van Deursen and Helsper's Dutch study identifies unequal benefits among internet users (van Deursen and Helsper 2015). Connection, usable participation, and beneficial outcomes are distinct. Improving infrastructure addresses the first stage, while affordability, skills, service design, and organizational terms shape the others. An account of integration must follow the process across those stages to establish whose opportunities expand.

The *new urban–rural divide* names the reassembly of inherited inequalities through changing service systems, financial arrangements, and digital networks. Education, political power, and social status become connected to new ways of organizing participation and allocating benefits. The analytical issue is how those connections make advantage cumulative: resource-rich participants gain greater capacity to use emerging opportunities, while existing constraints shape what others can obtain from the same networks. The following section identifies the institutions organizing that process.

4. Marx's Theory and Contemporary Urban–Rural Development

4.1. Capital, Spatial Concentration, and the Allocation of Gains

Differentiated production creates dependencies among places and groups. Ownership and organizational authority determine who can shape those dependencies. Investment can reinforce locations already equipped with skilled workers, infrastructure, and market access, giving concentration a cumulative dynamic. Costs, institutional arrangements, and participants' alternatives govern its strength. The political question concerns how that dynamic distributes gains and decision-making power across the groups whose work sustains it.

The World Bank's *World Development Report 2009* offers an important counterpoint: economic concentration can support development, and integration can connect people to its benefits (World Bank 2009). A critique of urban-centred development must address that argument rather than dismiss agglomeration as inherently unjust. The distinction made here is between the productivity of concentrated activity and the allocation of its gains. Efficient location does not logically establish equitable access, while geographically dispersed activity does not guarantee either efficiency or justice.

The first mechanism concerns appropriation. When producers depend on a limited set of buyers, financiers, or intermediaries, expanded sales may coexist with weak bargaining power. A hypothetical rural processing cooperative and an individually contracting producer could participate in the same market while retaining different shares of its gains. Differences in ownership and negotiation are causally relevant even if market access is identical. A framework based only on the volume of exchange would miss the distinction.

The second mechanism concerns public-resource allocation. Where locally retained revenue tracks profitable activity, service capacity can diverge between jurisdictions. Better provision can then attract further investment and residents, reinforcing the initial advantage. Fiscal arrangements govern this feedback. Transfers, national service commitments, and shared financing redistribute the capacity to provide services across places, while reliance on narrowly local revenues can connect demographic or economic decline to weaker provision. The route from capital concentration to opportunity inequality therefore runs through the organization of public finance.

The third concerns decision-making power. Organizations that coordinate circulation can determine standards, entry conditions, and risk allocation. A locality may acquire infrastructure while remaining dependent on external decisions about its operation. The presence of an asset therefore needs to be distinguished from authority over it. This distinction links spatial inequality to the political organization of interdependence: who can negotiate, contest, and revise the terms on which collective production occurs?

These mechanisms explain why similar resource flows can produce different relationships. Wider exchange may support independent producers, transfer gains to intermediaries, or combine both outcomes. The analytical object is the allocation of control and benefit within circulation. This retains the Marxian focus on relations behind apparent cooperation while adding institutions that govern contemporary production and reproduction.

4.2. Labour Mobility and a Conditional Development Trap

Migration can widen individual opportunity and relieve constraints in places with limited employment. It can produce remittances, knowledge transfers, and new connections. A theory of urban–rural inequality should recognize these possibilities and avoid treating migrants as resources that rural communities are entitled to retain. The freedom to leave matters alongside the practical possibility of remaining. Integration loses its emancipatory content if it requires people to stay in a place regardless of their preferences.

A development trap arises in the proposed model when outmigration reduces the local base for employment, demand, or collective organization, service financing contracts with that base, and declining access encourages further departure. The reinforcing link is between demographic change and the capacity to sustain social reproduction. Transfers and service reorganization can break that link; financing arrangements that transmit local decline directly into weaker provision can strengthen it. The mechanism explains how individually beneficial mobility can generate collective vulnerability under particular institutional conditions.

The relevant unit also matters. A migrant household may improve its income while a locality loses service capacity. An older resident who remains may experience the consequences differently from a return migrant or a landowner receiving rental income. There is no single rural interest that automatically summarizes these outcomes. The framework instead asks how gains from mobility and costs of reproduction are distributed among groups and jurisdictions.

Care arrangements deserve attention within that distribution. When work and household reproduction occur in different places, the time and resources required for care may remain concentrated among those who do not migrate. A model that counts labour movement while disregarding the conditions sustaining workers would overstate the completeness of integration. The theoretical implication is to examine the portability of rights and the financing of reproduction together with the portability of labour.

OECD research connects service accessibility to settlement patterns, transport, and demographic change (OECD 2024). The development-trap mechanism specifies how those conditions interact with financing: shrinking demand becomes a source of exclusion when it reduces usable provision, and that exclusion can alter subsequent migration decisions. The sequence directs empirical inquiry toward changes in access and funding over time. It also identifies why shared service systems matter: they can distribute the costs of provision across the wider economy sustained by mobile labour.

The opposite trajectory remains possible. Mobility can strengthen a locality if earnings, skills, and collective investment support accessible services and local enterprise. Return does not have to be permanent for benefits to circulate. What distinguishes the trajectories is not the existence of movement but the institutional arrangements through which movement affects those who leave, those who remain, and the places connected by it.

4.3. Institutional Mediation and Opportunity Inequality

Institutional mediation denotes the rules and organizational arrangements connecting resources to practical access and control. Four domains are central to this framework. Property arrangements affect authority over assets and proceeds. Entitlement rules affect eligibility for collective provision. Fiscal arrangements affect how the costs of interdependence are shared. Organizational rules affect bargaining and participation within markets or platforms. These domains interact, but their analytical separation identifies where a particular inequality can be reproduced or interrupted.

Consider a hypothetical region in which an urban hospital expands and rural transport improves. Productive and physical integration have increased. If patients remain unable to afford treatment or satisfy eligibility conditions, their effective opportunity may change little. A different financing arrangement could make the same hospital accessible without altering its location. Conversely, establishing a local facility without staff, medicines, or sustainable financing would create nominal access without an equivalent substantive improvement. The framework explains the difference through conversion conditions rather than distance alone.

Digital platforms reorganize access to markets and authority within them. Dispersed producers can reach customers while fees, contracts, switching costs, and information rules determine how much influence and income they retain. These arrangements govern the conversion of geographical reach into economic autonomy. Wider participation strengthens producers when it expands viable alternatives and bargaining capacity; it deepens dependence when entry into a broader market leaves its terms under concentrated external control.

Institutional intervention is correspondingly ambivalent. Zhu and Guo's analysis identifies both market and planning biases in spatial restructuring (Zhu and Guo 2022). This is a close empirical warning against treating the state as an automatic corrective to unequal markets. A planning authority can distribute services more broadly, but it can also narrow participation, reallocate land advantageously to selected actors, or prioritize aggregate gains over the security of affected residents. The framework requires examination of whose interests institutions organize.

The resulting mechanism is recursive. Unequal opportunities can affect the capacity to gain qualifications, organize collectively, obtain finance, or negotiate change. Those differences can reinforce the concentration of command and resources. Institutional mediation is therefore neither an external final step nor a neutral administrative filter. It operates throughout the relationship and can itself be shaped by the participants already advantaged within it. This is the mechanism that a contemporary interpretation must explain before proposing integration as a remedy.

5. From Urban–Rural Antagonism to Urban–Rural Integration

5.1. The Limits of Urban-Centred Development

Urban-centred development substitutes the expansion of urban activity for an account of its social consequences. Labour inflow, construction, and economic density register growth, while leaving the allocation of benefits and burdens unresolved. Workers, supplying regions, and households sustaining that growth occupy different positions within it. Treating urban expansion as a sufficient measure of modernization suppresses the distributional question at precisely the point where it becomes politically decisive: who gains secure access to the wealth generated through collective production?

Such an account can also confuse integration with administrative absorption. Reclassifying a village as part of an urban district changes jurisdiction, but its distributive consequences depend on land rights, representation, service access, and financing. It may widen residents' claims on collective provision, diminish control over assets, or do both simultaneously. Administrative incorporation is an institutional event requiring analysis; it is not by itself proof that antagonistic relations have been overcome.

Equitable interdependence requires coordination across differentiated settlements. Specialized provision and exchange support capacities that isolated places struggle to sustain. Their social value depends on arrangements that connect those capacities to usable access and protect participants' influence over cooperation. Integration therefore involves governing dependency: maintaining productive connections while widening the alternatives, rights, and collective resources through which participants can negotiate their terms.

A productive integration indicator may improve because transactions, mobility, or shared infrastructure expand. A substantive integration indicator must examine whether excluded groups gain usable access and influence. The distinction is useful when the two outcomes move differently. For instance, more sales and lower transport costs could coincide with weaker producer control; the transaction measure would improve while the agency dimension deteriorated. Conversely, collective purchasing or transferable benefits might improve security without generating a dramatic increase in aggregate flows.

The contribution to integration research lies in examining distribution within coordination. Zhang et al. (2024) measure integration across multiple dimensions. The distinction developed here adds a question within each dimension: which groups gain usable opportunities, under what institutional rules, and with what authority over the resulting relationship? Answering it explains why rising aggregate integration can coexist with persistent or intensified subordination. It also identifies institutional changes through which better coordination becomes substantively inclusive.

5.2. Integration as Substantive Access, Reciprocity, and Agency

Urban–rural integration is a process through which connected places and groups gain usable access to essential opportunities and effective influence over the relations sustaining them. The contemporary reconstruction developed here evaluates that process through substantive access, reciprocity of benefit and burden, and collective agency. These criteria connect the distribution of resources to the social terms of cooperation. Together, they specify what must change for productive interdependence to weaken structured subordination.

Substantive access concerns whether opportunities can actually be used. It requires attention to eligibility, affordability, reliability, quality, and the time necessary to reach provision. The precise threshold is domain specific. Emergency healthcare and advanced specialist treatment cannot be organized identically, and a school's nominal presence cannot substitute for teaching capacity. Equality of opportunity does not require every settlement to contain identical institutions; it requires a justified arrangement of access that does not systematically penalize people for their position in the spatial division of labour.

Reciprocity evaluates benefits and burdens against reduced subordination and secure access to the conditions of reproduction. A defensible arrangement covers participants' livelihood and reproduction costs, recognizes their contributions, and provides a practical route to contest or redistribute imposed burdens. Different roles can justify unequal shares where participants retain viable alternatives and effective influence over those terms. The benchmark is whether the distribution sustains usable opportunities and protects participants from having dependence exploited to transfer costs to them. Recognition therefore includes enforceable claims to compensation, cost sharing, or revision; merely recording a burden leaves its allocation unchanged.

Collective agency concerns effective influence over cooperation through organization, accessible procedures, and authority to challenge or negotiate decisions. A hypothetical rural supplier may accept a contract that raises cash income while transferring transport and ecological costs to the supplier. Where losing the contract would remove the only viable livelihood and objections carry a threat of exclusion, acceptance establishes constrained consent. Where suppliers can organize, obtain alternative outlets, access contract information, and enforce renegotiation or compensation, an unequal share can be defensible under the stated benchmark. The relevant difference is their capacity to alter terms while preserving secure access. Cooperatives and representative bodies provide agency when their rules give affected participants those capacities.

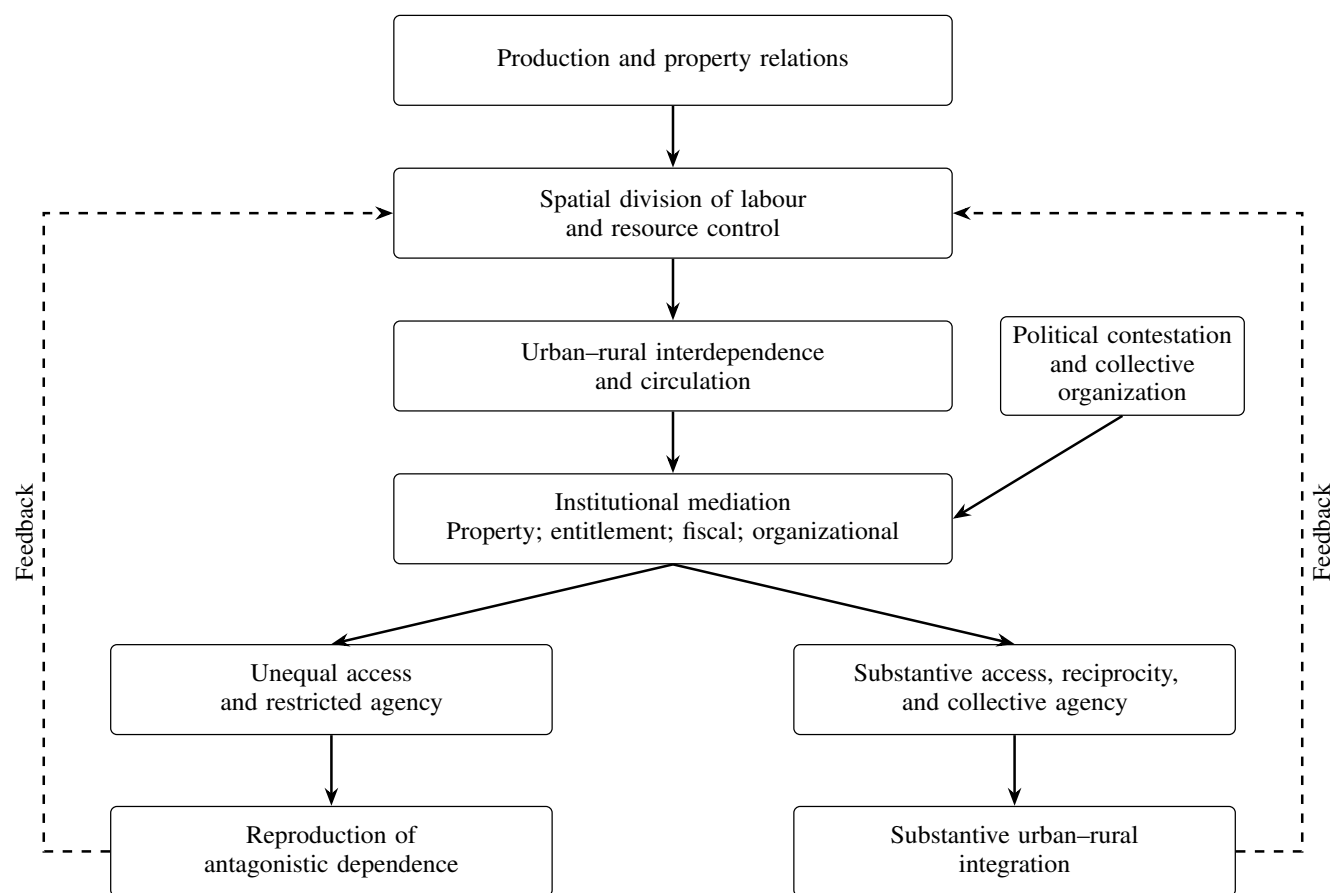
The criteria are connected but irreducible. Better services may improve access while leaving collective control unchanged. A locally controlled institution may protect agency but distribute its benefits inequitably within a village. A programme can share financial gains while imposing unrecognized ecological burdens. Integration should therefore be evaluated as a profile across dimensions rather than declared complete on the basis of one improvement. This permits recognition of partial gains without converting them into a comprehensive success claim.

Ecological reproduction places a material requirement on integration. Foster's reconstruction of metabolic rift concerns resource cycles and the conditions sustaining social life (Foster 1999). Their organization requires attention to land, resource use, waste, and the allocation of environmental burdens. Livelihood gains secured by exhausting those conditions weaken the basis of future access. Substantive integration must therefore sustain the material relations on which its social opportunities depend, making ecological responsibility part of the distribution of benefits and costs.

5.3. A Conditional Marxian Framework of Urban–Rural Transformation

Figure 1 presents the article's framework. Production and property relations shape the spatial division of labour and control over resources. Interdependence develops through flows of work, goods, finance, information, and reproductive support. Institutions mediate how participants

convert these relations into effective opportunities. The outcome depends on those arrangements and can feed back into resource control and future institutional change. Integration is one possible trajectory, not the final stage of an automatic historical sequence.



Conditional relationships; outcomes can coexist across groups.

Figure 1. A conditional framework of urban-rural transformation

Source: Author's theoretical reconstruction. Arrows indicate proposed mechanisms and feedback. Institutional mediation comprises property, entitlement, fiscal, and organizational arrangements; outcomes can differ across groups.

Three propositions follow. First, exclusionary entitlement and benefit-allocation rules reproduce opportunity inequality within expanding urban-rural connections. Under similar levels of connectivity, differences in eligibility, affordability, and bargaining conditions produce different practical access. This proposition locates the explanatory force in the rules governing participation. It directs investigation toward cases where connection improves while the ability to use collective resources or retain productive gains remains restricted.

Second, institutions that extend access to concentrated productive gains and share the costs of social reproduction allow specialization to support wider opportunities. Shared financing and portable entitlements are mechanisms through which provision can benefit people beyond its host territory. The proposition identifies an inclusive trajectory within spatial concentration. Comparing different access outcomes under similar settlement patterns would establish whether the relevant institutional changes alter the distribution of opportunity.

Third, organizational restrictions on switching can reduce the gains and influence participants obtain from expanding exchange. Exclusive dealing, non-transferable transaction records, or punitive exit costs make alternative buyers harder to use. Reduced credible alternatives then weaken negotiation over prices, fees, and risk, allowing the coordinating organization to retain a larger share of added returns and resist participants' requests to revise terms. Restrictions are the institutional input; viable alternatives and bargaining are intermediate processes; retained returns and effective influence are outcomes. The sequence is interrupted where enforceable collective negotiation, viable alternative outlets, or effective regulation counterbalances dependence. Its force depends on whether switching restrictions actually constrain alternatives in the setting examined.

A bounded hypothetical contrast demonstrates the organizational proposition. Two groups sell equivalent produce through equally connected networks, with comparable skills, finance, initial prices, and transport costs. One faces enforceable exclusivity and costly exit; the other can transfer sales records and contract with alternative buyers. When demand expands, the second group can credibly redirect supply and negotiate a share of the added gains; the first remains exposed to unilateral fee or risk changes. Equivalent connectivity therefore predicts different returns through the specified bargaining process. Sen's conversion lens identifies the difference in effective options, and digital-benefit research directs attention to realized gains. The additional judgement concerns authority over the rules sustaining those options: participants who obtain higher returns yet remain unable to challenge future contract changes improve access while retaining an agency deficit.

The institutional implications follow the identified mechanisms. Portable entitlements and pooled financing act on territorial exclusion; transferable records and enforceable negotiation act on constrained alternatives. Their effects require staffed provision, implemented rights, and sufficient organizational capacity. The framework locates intervention within the causal sequence and evaluates its consequences for the affected

groups.

The reconstruction is Marxian in its account of production, property, and unequal interdependence, and contemporary in its analysis of entitlement, fiscal coordination, and digital organization. Their connection explains how inherited relations of subordination acquire new institutional forms. It also makes reform an object of political evaluation: the relevant achievement is the change it produces in access, appropriation, and collective control. Those relationships determine the substantive direction of integration.

6. Discussion

6.1. Explanatory Continuity and Institutional Change

The reconstruction preserves Marx's question about the relationship between collective production and authority over its conditions. Contemporary reform changes particular dependencies within that relationship. Portable services can improve workers' access while ownership remains concentrated; collective negotiation can strengthen bargaining within continuing commodity production. Their political significance lies in the relations they change and the capacities they secure. Marx's revolutionary horizon and institutional reform operate at different scales of transformation.

Geographical constraints enter this account through their allocation. Remoteness raises travel costs and dispersed demand constrains specialist provision. A social explanation asks who finances those costs and who can contest the resulting arrangements. Where pooling distributes unavoidable costs across the wider productive region, spatial concentration can support inclusive provision. Where localities must absorb them through narrow revenue bases, the same geography can sustain exclusion. This distinction connects material constraints to political responsibility.

6.2. Opportunity, Power, and the Meaning of Integration

Access and agency can improve at different rates. A worker may obtain reliable care while remaining unable to influence changes in eligibility. A producer may negotiate a better price while other household members bear uncompensated care burdens. Such differences require group-specific evaluation. Regional averages cannot settle whether integration changes the position of the participants sustaining it.

The three criteria consequently generate distinct judgements. Usable access evaluates practical opportunity; reciprocity evaluates the distribution of contributions, gains, and reproduction costs; agency evaluates power to revise cooperation. An arrangement can secure a partial gain in one dimension while leaving a dependency intact in another. Their combined diagnostic value is to make those consequences visible and identify the rule sustaining each. This synthesis links capability evaluation to the Marxian concern with control over social relations.

6.3. Scope Conditions and an Empirical Research Agenda

The specifically spatial explanation applies where productive interdependence crosses a territorial boundary that governs entitlement, financing, or representation. The comparison in Section 3.2 changes that boundary while holding property and organizational relations constant. Its predicted access difference establishes what territory adds. Within a unified entitlement and financing system, contractual dependence remains relevant, but its explanation rests on organizational and property relations shared with other settings. The framework thus distinguishes territorial exclusion from a more general mechanism of unequal cooperation.

Subsequent inquiry can compare groups with comparable productive connections, initial resources, service needs, transport constraints, and conversion capacities. For the entitlement proposition, the institutional contrast must involve implemented eligibility or financing differences, with adequate administrative and provider capacity to make the rights usable. For the organizational proposition, investigators must establish that switching rules alter credible alternatives, then trace negotiation and retained returns. Buyer concentration, collective organization, regulatory enforcement, and relevant market changes must be examined because they can amplify or offset that process.

A discriminating observation would show that removing an effective eligibility restriction, with provision and other conversion conditions comparable, leaves the affected group's access unchanged. That result would weaken the bounded entitlement mechanism. Likewise, where restrictions demonstrably reduce alternatives and compensating negotiation or regulation is absent, unchanged bargaining and returns would weaken the organizational sequence. Similar outcomes under unimplemented rights, insufficient capacity, or countervailing market power leave different causal possibilities open. Longitudinal comparisons should therefore trace intermediate processes alongside outcomes. The development-trap argument in Section 4.2 remains a conditional feedback proposition, requiring evidence on financing, service access, and subsequent mobility.

7. Conclusion

Stronger urban–rural connections coexist with unequal opportunity when the rules governing eligibility, financing, and negotiation preserve dependencies within productive cooperation. Marx's account of division of labour and property supplies the basis for explaining that relationship; contemporary institutional analysis specifies how it operates through services and organizational terms.

The article contributes a synthesis that distinguishes productive integration from substantive changes in access, reciprocity, and agency. Territorial entitlement boundaries can exclude populations sustaining an urban economy, while switching restrictions can weaken bargaining within expanding markets. The bounded contrasts separate institutional inputs and intermediate processes from the outcomes being evaluated.

Urban–rural integration advances when cooperation secures usable opportunities, a defensible allocation of gains and reproduction costs, and effective influence over its rules. The transition from antagonism turns on changes in those relations. This makes the political organization of interdependence central to the contemporary interpretation of Marx's theory.

Author contributions

Xinmeng Wang contributed to conceptualization, literature review, theoretical analysis, and preparation of the original manuscript. Junyu Zhu contributed to theoretical discussion and the review and revision of the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study is a theoretical analysis based on publicly available scholarly literature and published primary texts. It involved no human participants, animal research, personal data collection, or clinical interventions. Ethics approval and informed consent were therefore not applicable. No original empirical data were collected.

Funding

This work was supported by Panorama Research Institute (Sponsorship No. PSG-PRI-SPN-2026-000024).

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests beyond the sponsorship disclosed in the funding statement.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the sponsorship provided by Panorama Research Institute. No additional acknowledgements are declared.

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