

A Review of the Research on Marx's and Engels's Social Psychology*

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Abstract—There is no special and systematic exposition of it, but Marx's and Engels's social psychology has become an important part of Marx's and Engels's theoretical system and plays an extremely important role in Marx's and Engels's social consciousness theory. In the development of Marx's and Engels's social psychology, Engels made profound reflection and summarization, and a large number of firm Marxists such as Plekhanov, Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping developed and enriched this idea, by which an extremely rich source of Marxist psychosocial thoughts formed. However, in the academic research with the joint development and contention of a hundred schools of thought, domestic research on social psychology still needs to improve and strengthen the systemic arrangement of social and psychological thought, the clarification of important research contents, and the application of practices.

Keywords—Marx; Engels; social and psychological thought; connotation; development

I. INTRODUCTION

"Marx is a never-satisfied and creative thinker. He has put forward many ideas in many aspects, but he has no time, no will, or no serenity of the study to sort and arrange all these thoughts." [1] This is a description of Marx by Cohen, a famous British Marx research expert. Indeed, Marx has many valuable intellectual resources, but neither he nor Engels has a systematic discourse of these as well as their thoughts on social psychology.

II. THE CONNOTATION OF "SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY" OF MARX AND ENGELS

Although Marx and Engels did not specifically use the term "social psychology", they used such other specific terms such as "feeling", "passion", "enthusiasm", "fantasy", "emotion", "will", "universal consciousness", "emotion", "class demand", "wish", "motivation" and "concept" to substitute the expression of "social psychology", and although

they did not distinguish social consciousness into two specific forms of social psychology and ideology, it does not mean that Marx and Engels have no social psychological thoughts, and on the contrary, Marx and Engels have many expositions of social Psychology, for example, Marx's exposition on the "Universal Consciousness" in "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts in 1844", on the "Emotions" of the Masses in the "Civil War in France", and on the class psychology of the peasants in "The 18th of Brumaire for Louis Bonaparte"; Engels's exposition on the "Original Concepts" in "The Origins of Family, Private Ownership, and the State", on the "Intermediate Links" in "Ludwig · Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy", and on the "Historical Resultant Forces" in the letter to Yeuk · Bloch in 1890 Bloch, and so on. From these discourses, we can see the rich ideas and theoretical interests of Marx and Engels on social psychology. They constitute an important part of Marx's and Engels's theoretical system and occupy an extremely important position in Marx's and Engels's social consciousness theory.

III. THE MAIN CONTENT OF MARX'S AND ENGELS' SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Marx and Engels studied "the law of development of the entire human society." Their criticism for Hegel's idealism and Feuerbach's old materialism means that the old philosophy has a serious crisis in the exploration of the laws governing the development of human society, and Marx's and Engels's philosophical mission is just to explain and resolve this crisis under the same theme as the old philosophy, and their psychosocial thought is just emerging gradually in this process. Due to the limitations of the times, Marx and Engels could not make sampling and investigation among tens of thousands of social individuals like modern social psychologists who can use modern technological means to conduct data analysis and obtain realistic and extremely concrete data conclusions; in fact, modern social psychologists pay attention to only the individuals' psychological changes and adaptations in society, and the problems they want to solve are mostly about how "individuals" or "a certain group of people" have a better life in a single real social environment, which is only a very narrow area of social development. But Marx's and Engels' social psychology thoughts are different, and they start from the theoretical point of "real people" to explore the development of human society as a whole; The field involved by Marx's and Engels' psychosocial thought is far broader than

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that researched by modern social psychologists. Therefore, Marx's and Engels' social psychology can be called general social psychology, different from modern narrow social psychology. The nature of Marx's and Engels's general social psychology determines that we must understand their social and psychological thoughts from their overall thinking and based on the principle of integrity rather than limited to partial textual details. In the rational critique for the interpretation of Hegel's "absolute spirit" idealism and in the practice transcendence for Feuerbach's old materialist view of history, combined with the overall thought of Marx and Engels, the interpretation of Marx's and Engels' social psychology mainly includes four aspects.

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THOUGHTS OF MARX AND ENGELS

Any theory is constantly developed and perfected, so is Marx doctrine. Such perfection is manifested as the reflection and summary of its initiators, Marx and Engels, as well as the supplement and development of successors. The development and enrichment of social psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels also follow such a theoretical and practical path. In the process of developing the social psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels, Engels has made profound reflections and conclusions, while a large number of staunch Marxists, such as Plekhanov, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and so on, have developed and enriched this thought, forming an extremely rich resource of Marxist social psychological thoughts.

As we all know, in the process of creating historical materialism, to refute various criticisms put forward by idealism against the main principles of historical materialism in the field of history, Marx and Engels had to concentrate their main theoretical energy on explaining "how the economic basis determines the superstructure". As Engels said, at that time, Marx and his researches on human development "focused on exploring political concepts, legal rights and other ideas from the economic facts that the researches were based on, as well as actions restricted by those ideas"[2]. However, the discussion on "how superstructure reacts to economic basis" is not detailed enough. The controversy on the latter has been deliberately distorted, denigrated and magnified by idealists in the way of "interpreting out of context" in discourse of Marx and Engels, thus deepening people's misunderstanding of historical materialism and even regarding historical materialism as "economic materialism". Misunderstandings from the outside world can be clarified by theory. However, as the current situation changes, the tendency of wrong thinking began to appear within the Marxist camp. The most serious is the emergence of the trend of "vulgar materialism".

After the 1880s, as the capitalism moved towards monopoly and developed towards European labor movement, the production and living conditions of workers were improved relative to the previous condition, and some workers began to change their attitude towards the bourgeoisie. At this time, the ideological trend of opportunism began to flourish within the Marxist camp. In practice, opportunists advocated reformism and class cooperation; in theory, they willfully distorted the

basic principles of historical materialism. With great confusability, these wrong ideological trends seriously twisted the basic principles of Marxist historical materialism and brought extremely negative impact on the workers, especially some young intellectuals, at that time. Meanwhile, some bourgeois scholars have even publicly added the name of "vulgar economic determinism" to historical materialism. The opportunism within the labor movement, together with the attacks of bourgeois scholars, had caused many misunderstandings in the labor movement, and even "amazing chaos". Engels himself had summed up the reasons why "vulgar economic determinism" had a greater impact on young intellectuals at the time: "when we refute our opponents, we often have to emphasize the main principles that they deny, and we don't always have time, place, and opportunity to give due attention to other factors involved in interaction".[3] As a result, the enemy was given a "righteous reason" to misinterpret and distort the historical materialism.

In order to criticize various forms of idealism and correct the mistakes of opportunism within the Marxist camp, it was particularly important to reveal the essence of historical materialism in the theoretical struggle and revolutionary practice at that time. But at this point, Marx had passed away, and this historic task fell on Engels's shoulders. In his later years, Engels, took Marx's Preface of Critique of Political Economy in a series of letters on historical materialism as an outline, and profoundly criticized the "vulgar economic determinism" while clarifying the materialistic principle that the various factors of superstructure reacted on economic foundation. Engels clearly pointed out: "the decisive factor in the historical process is ultimately the production and reproduction of real life. ... The economic situation is the foundation, but various factors of the superstructure also affect the course of the historical struggle and mainly determine the form of this struggle in many cases". [4] That is to say, when people create history, although the economy is a decisive factor, "preconditions and conditions including politics, and even the traditions that exist in people's minds play a certain role, not a decisive role". [5] It can be seen that Engels has realized that he and Marx have neglected the "formal aspects" of some theories in the theoretical construction of the social consciousness field because of the need of struggle, that is, "these concepts are produced by what ways and means". [6]

V. RESEARCH STATUS AT HOME AND ABROAD

A. Research Status at Abroad

There are two tendencies in the study of social psychology in the field of philosophy: one is teasing-out research and the other is constructive research.

1) *Teasing-out research*: On the one hand, some scholars have devoted all their energy to sorting out and integrating various schools of social psychology according to their own system from the past to the present. Among them, the famous modern monograph is the History and System of Social Psychology by Sahakian, an American social psychology historian. Based on the development of other related disciplines, Sahakian has adopted the method of

‘philosophical historian’ and conducted a pedigree survey and evaluation on the main schools and viewpoints of social psychology from the ancient Greek period to the 1980s in the west by using a relatively macro perspective. On the other hand, some scholars have tended to interpret the social psychological thoughts of the previous famous philosophers, such as, H. Cohen’s *Ideology and Unconsciousness*; Reich, Freud and Marx, Richard Dien Winfield’s *Hegel and Mind: Rethinking Philosophical Psychology*, etc.

2) *Constructive research*: This is which most foreign scholars are keen on. In the field of philosophy, foreign scholars study social psychology from a broader perspective. While studying social psychology, scholars generally extend their research perspectives to more detailed fields, such as “social subconscious”. Scholars with extensive influence in this area are almost all representatives of the Frankfurt School. Their common feature is to combine the Marxist theory of social consciousness with Freud’s psychoanalysis, and then put forward their own relevant theories to analyze the mental state of people in society, so as to achieve the purpose of strong criticism of the society at that time. These western scholars have a lot of works, and there are many translations in China, such as Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* and Sane Society.

Of course, some western scholars have published the relevant works in recent years, but the influence is far from comparable to the works of the above figures, such as, Earl. Hopper’s *The Social Unconscious*, .M.Tripathi’s *Human Ecology and Social Consciousness*, etc.

B. Research Status at Home

In China, social psychology research in the field of philosophy originated from the reform and opening up, early 1980s to be exact. With the booming of social psychology in the fields of sociology and psychology, social psychology research in the field of philosophy also has kicked off. The reasons for this mainly lie in the fact that the social reality of reform and opening up in China has had a strong impact on people’s thoughts and concepts, as well as the mutual influence of the development of disciplines. Under the influence of social psychology in the fields of sociology and psychology, in philosophical circles, some scholars also have gradually started to reflect on the underlying causes of various social psychological states that have emerged in the reform of the real society and its far-reaching impact on economic construction. It is in this realistic context that social psychology research in the field of philosophy is in the ascendant.

In terms of achievements, social psychology research in philosophy is mainly guided by Marxist philosophy. For this reason, social psychology research in the field of philosophy after the reform and opening up mainly begins with teasing out the social psychological thoughts of classical Marxist writers.

From the perspective of research process, social psychological research in the philosophical field presents two obvious situations: one is the interpretation of classic texts and the other is the deep refinement and application.

1) *Interpretation of classic texts*: This situation mainly emerged in the 1980s to the early and mid-1990s. The researchers focused their researches on classical texts of Marxism, especially on the interpretation of Plekhanov’s social psychological thoughts. As is known to all, Plekhanov is the first person to clearly put forward the concept of “social psychology” in the development of Marxism. In his book *Basic Issues of Marxism*, he clearly divides social consciousness into two basic forms: social psychology and ideological system. He regards social psychology as the intermediary link between the economic basis and the superstructure. Undoubtedly, Plekhanov’s thought is a creative contribution to historical materialism, which greatly enriches Marxist theory of social consciousness. However, due to Plekhanov’s political mistakes in his later years in Russia, his social psychological thoughts have been not given due attention for a long time. It was not until the early 1960s that Soviet scholars began to study it objectively. The social psychology research in the field of philosophy in China also focuses on Plekhanov’s social psychology thoughts. At this stage, scholars mainly discuss the meaning, mechanism, characteristics, status and function of social psychology, as well as the relationship between social consciousness and ideological system, among which the most representative achievements are mainly papers, such as, *A Review of Plekhanov’s Theory of Social Psychology* by Pan Chunbao, *Plekhanov’s Basic Theory of Social Psychological Problems* by Wu Xiaoming and An Yanming, *On the Social Psychological Category of Historical Materialism* by Li Li, *Social Psychology Regarded as Social Consciousness* by Li Minghua, *On the Important Position and Action Of the Social Psychology from the View of the Point of the “Five-Factors-Formula”* by Wang Jirong, etc. It is particularly worth mentioning that Professor Wang Yinting’s monograph *Plekhanov’s New Theory of Philosophy*, in which the author interprets Plekhanov’s social psychological thoughts in great detail. This is a works that comprehensively interprets Plekhanov’s social psychological thoughts in China at present.

In addition to Plekhanov, scholars have been passionate about the works of Fromm, an important representative of the Marxist-Freudian school. Most of Fromm’s works have Chinese translations (even some have multiple translations), such as, *The Heart of Man* by Sun Yuecai and Zhang Yan, *Escape from Freedom* by Liu Linhai, *To Have or to Be* by Guan Shanze, *Marx’s Concept of Man* by Chen Shifu and Zhang Shiguang, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* by Sun Xiangchen, etc. The research results of Fromm mainly appear in the form of monographs, such as such as Zhang Wei’s *Fromm Thought Research*, Guo Yongyu’s *Isolated Helpless Modern Man*, etc.

2) *Deep refinement and application*: This stage mainly refers to the period after the mid-to-late 1990s. Although the text interpretation during this period is still going on, the quantity and popularity are greatly reduced. Under the guidance of Marxist theory, scholars expand their research perspectives of philosophy with the help of the research

results of empirical science, sociology and social psychology in the fields of sociology and psychology. Many researches directly involve specific aspects of social psychology such as social will, social mentality and customs.

From the perspective of the continuity of research, this kind of meticulous research has a deepening trend, and it is more and more closely related to the social psychological research in the field of sociology, and an overlap tendency emerges. This trend is more obvious after entering the 21st century. From the current research results, the researches in philosophical theory have been far from able to meet the needs of reality for discipline development. Based on the actual situation of China's social development, current scholars actively explore the social psychological problems in the current social reality, and strive to make the theoretical construction fully serve the cause of China's socialist construction, reflecting theory's strong attention to the reality. In this period, there are many works on social psychological theory, all of which are related to reality and closely integrated with the researches on social psychological theory in the field of sociology. Due to space limitations, only some monographs are listed: Market Economy and Social Mentality of Ban Daoming, Wang Baofu and Liang Lvqi, Socio-psychological Theory of Wu Kechang, Psychological Harmony and Harmonious Society of Yang Desen, Zhao Xudong and Xiao Shuiyuan, Study on the Transformation of Social Mentality and the Construction of A Harmonious Society of Research Group on the transformation of social mentality and the construction of a harmonious society in Henan Federation of Social Science, An Analysis of the Spirit-Misled Phenomena in Social Transformation Period of Yang Guihua, Research on the Social Psychology of Contemporary Chinese Farmers of Cheng Guiming and Zhu Qizhen, The Course of Chinese Mentality of He Yunfeng, Li Jing and Feng Xiancheng, Humanity, Society, Mind - Research on Social Subconsciousness of Wang Jiazhong, Modern Technology and Social Psychology of Gu Chunming, etc.

It is necessary to point out that there is an important path in the study of social psychology: the study of history, especially the study of social psychology history. French Annales School is an important representative, such as, L. Faivre, M. Volfer, etc. This kind of research mainly analyzes well-known historical figures, major historical events and spiritual activities of the general public, aims at revealing the social mental state in a specific historical background, and successively puts forward spiritual equipment, mental state theory, etc., thus greatly expanding the field of historical research.

VI. LACK OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is no denying that abundant achievements have been made in the research of social psychology in the fields of sociology, psychology and philosophy. However, in the academic research atmosphere of a hundred schools and flowers in bloom, there is still something to be improved in the domestic research of social psychology.

A. *The Systematic Review of Marxist Social Psychology Still Needs to Be Strengthened*

At present, most of the discussions in the theoretical circle are concentrated on the thoughts of scholars such as Plekhanov and Fromm, but the researches on social psychology of Marx and Engels are relatively insufficient and not deep enough. Some scholars either explain the theory in a single word and in one stroke, or stay on the surface of the text which discusses the social and psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels, and fail to interpret it deeply from the overall perspective of theory of Marx and Engels. At the same time, in the course of the development of Marxism, Plekhanov, and a large number of outstanding Marxists, such as, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and so on, have inherited and developed social psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels, while the arrangement and research of their social psychological thoughts are still very weak. Moreover, when interpreting the social psychological thoughts of Marxist theorists, domestic scholars only conduct scattered researches, and most of them are loosely discussed in the form of papers. At present, there is no monograph on the social psychological thoughts of Marxism. From this situation, it can be seen that research in this aspect is far from forming an organic system, which is much inferior to the research on other Marxist thoughts and also inconsistent with the richness of Marxism itself. Therefore, it is an urgent historical task to systematically sort out Marxist social psychological thoughts.

B. *Research on Some Important Aspects of the Social Psychology Field Still Needs to Be Clarified*

For example, there are four kinds of representative understandings about the level of social psychology. The first is the "two-layer theory". Some scholars believe that social psychology can be divided into the social psychology at the level of consciousness and social psychology at the level of unconsciousness according to the level of consciousness at all levels of social psychology[7]. Some scholars believe that social psychology includes the "external psychology" generated by the effect and stimulation of actual social relations on people and the "internal psychology" generated by the effect and stimulation of human psychology on human psychology. Among them, "external psychology" is an externalization form of "internal psychology". Both are restricted by the surrounding social environment. The second is the "three-layer theory". Some scholars believe that "two-layer theory" is essentially a static division, and does not stratified by the dynamic balance between the content and nature of social psychology. Therefore, social psychology can be roughly divided into three basic levels, namely, social fashion psychological layer, social compelling psychological layer and social inertia psychological layer, according to different nature, manifestation mode and different internal mechanisms of changes and development of social psychology. The third is the "multi-layer theory". Some scholars think that social psychology can be divided into several different levels according to the differences of the group layer, mainly including family psychology, professional psychology, class psychology, class psychology, national psychology, etc. The fourth is "three-dimensional theory". Some scholars believe that social psychology should be a three-dimensional level

from horizontal and vertical intersections. From the vertical level, it is composed of factors such as social motivation, social attitude, social interest and social custom. All these factors are also attached to different types of social groups to form different types of group social psychology, such as national psychology, class psychology, occupational psychology, etc., thus constituting the horizontal type structure of social psychology.

In the meantime, it can be seen that there are more discussions on social psychology and ideology in theoretical circle, but the theoretical discussions on the factors affecting the emergence, development and evolution of social psychology and the relationship between social psychology and self-regulation of social individual are still insufficient, while the discussions on these issues are often the basic research that must be carried out to study social psychology.

C. The Practical Application of Marxist Social Psychology Needs to Be Further Strengthened

The research results of social psychology must serve the reality of socialist construction in China and must be used to guide and solve the problems of social psychology in China's realities. However, in the past research, most of scholars borrowed from the achievements of social psychology in the field of western sociology to put forward the solutions to the Chinese realities. It is still relatively rare to analyze China's social psychological problems by using Marxist social psychological thoughts and to propose targeted and operable countermeasures according to the principles of Marxism. This has formed a kind of "fire fighting" phenomenon, and most of the proposed countermeasures are "post-event" remedies and lack necessary foresight and prevention. Therefore, how to strengthen the concrete application of Marxist social psychological thoughts in practice is also an important task for China.

VII. CONCLUSION

As an important part of their theoretical system, social psychology thoughts of Marx and Engels have an essential role in their theory of social consciousness. A large number of determined Marxists have occupied an important role in forming the abundant Marxist social psychological thoughts. But the social psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels should keep pace with the development of the times.

From a philosophical point of view, social psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels have criticized the reality that traditional mental and psychology in the West countries and even in the whole world follows the leader of empiricism and stereotyped objectivism. From the perspective of historical materialism, social psychological thoughts of Marx and Engels have put forward a clear direction for the development of psychology, and promoted a new direction of psychology towards value commitment, social justice and people's thoughts with historical practice as the main subject, so that individual and society are no longer indulged in the ideological demons of self-transformation, self-restraint and self-understanding. These thoughts shine with the value brilliance

of history and the future, and are worthwhile for future generations to further summarize and research.

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