On Georg Lukács' Idea of Totality in His Period of Pre-Marxism

CHEN Gaohua

Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China

After the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, the concept of totality became an important role through Georg Lukács' development of thought. Yet, this concept changed with his thinking. Indeed, totality as an idea had emerged in his critique of capitalist culture in his pre-Marxism; we can claim that the concept of totality as Marxist dialectics originated in that period. Thus, it is necessary to interpret his idea of totality in pre-Marxism in order to understand wholly the concept of totality.

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In his *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács argued that the orthodoxy of Marxism "refers exclusively to method" (1971a, p. 1) and thought that the method identified with totality, thereafter, totality became the central concept of Western Marxism or Marxism. Half of century after the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, although Lukács made self-criticism in his preface to the new edition in 1967, even regretted for its great effect, he still claimed stubbornly that

it is undoubtedly one of the great achievements of *History and Class Consciousness* to have reinstated the category of totality in the central position it had occupied throughout Marx's works and from which it had been ousted by the "scientism" of the social-democratic opportunists. (Lukács, 1971a, p. xx)

Hence one can see that totality is an important concept through his development of thought after *History and Class Consciousness*, and the development of Western Marxism after Lukács which made the concept of totality becoming a fundamental idea for comprehending diverse trends of Western Marxism. However, totality, in different thinkers, has different meaning; in effect, it was a changing concept in Lukács' thought. As the founder of Western Marxism, Lukács introduced the concept of totality in order to investigate the causes which lead to the failure of proletarian revolution. If we trace back the course of Lukács' thought, we will find that Lukács had already possessed the idea of totality in his critique of capitalist culture. Logically, the author argues that totality as Marxist dialectics was anticipated in his thought of pre-Marxism. Thus, it is necessary to illustrate the idea of totality in his pre-Marxism in order to understand wholly the concept of totality.

Cultural Crisis and the Lost of Wholeness

Obviously, Lukács as a Western Marxist focused on the issues about politics, economics, and society, whereas he almost concerned with the issues about culture, ethics, and philosophy in his pre-Marxism. Influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, Lukács claimed that modern civilization of capitalism already became a kind of "cultural tragedy", and his *Soul and Form* was "permeated by the

CHEN Gaohua, Ph.D., associate professor, Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

atmosphere of bourgeois culture in crisis" (Jay, 1984, p. 86). With the first essay which he wrote especially for the collection of essays, Lukács claimed explicitly that the style he selected, essay, represented the painful reality—"cultural tragedy", which meant the inconsistency between subjective meaning and objective meaning. That is to say, in the process of searching for a form, human being as a subject has to bear the antinomy between system and life, form and perfection, ethos and authentic existence. Faced with this antinomy, the modern subject has no solution, while the perfect whole in the pre-modern time had already gone. So, Lukács said,

Life is an anarchy of light and dark: nothing is ever completely fulfilled in life, nothing ever quite ends; new, confusing voices always mingle with the chorus of those that have been heard before. Everything flows, everything merges into another thing, and the mixture is uncontrolled and impure; everything is destroyed, everything is smashed, nothing ever flowers into real life. To live is to live something through to the end: but life means that nothing is ever fully and completely lived through to the end. (Lukács, 1974, pp. 152-153)

This impossible "perfection", although Lukács didn't announced explicitly here, in fact was what he called "totality" later. Undoubtedly, this "perfection" is not a reality which could be true in real life and scientific rationality. But, some romantics believe that it could be realized in the "fancied reality". Regarding this, Lukács denied the romantics' idea, argued that "the normative totality" in the poems which was advanced by romantics, indeed, was a renunciation of the world, an isolation from the real life, and a destruction of the tension between poetry and life. Eventually, it was at the cost of the real life. So, with respect to the romantics, Lukács said,

They looked for order, but for an order that comprised everything, an order for the sake of which no renunciation was needed; they tried to embrace the whole world in such a way that out of the unison of all dissonances might come a symphony. To combine this unity and this universality is possible only in poetry, and that is why poetry for the Romantics became the centre of the world. ... The actual reality of life vanished before their eyes and was replaced by another reality, the reality of poetry, of pure psyche. They created a homogeneous, organic world unified within itself and identified it with the real world. This gave their world the quality of something angelic, suspended between heaven and earth, incorporeally luminous; but the tremendous tension that exists between poetry and life and gives both their real, value-creating powers was lost as a result. (Lukács, 1974, pp. 48-50)

From here we see that Lukács believed that poetry could create a wholeness through form, but it was just an illusion of poetic aesthetics. Nevertheless, compared with science, Lukács still argued that art is the way toward the "soul"; in modern age, it was "the only possibility open to their longing for the great synthesis of unity and universality" (Lukács, 1974, p. 48). That is to say, although the "wholeness" emerged from the art was an illusion, it remained a desire for the "wholeness". In contrast, science forgot the perfection which originated in the historical origins in the process of growing specialization. And the reason is that there is a great difference between art and science,

The one is finite, the other infinite; the one closed in upon itself, the other open; the one is a purpose, the other is a means. The one—we are now judging by consequences—is incomparable, a first and a last, the other is rendered superfluous by a better achievement. To put it briefly, the one has form and the other has not. (Lukács, 1974, pp. 73-74)

In a word, in the *Soul and Form*, aimed at the capitalist culture in crisis, Lukács pointed out that the complete "wholeness" between "subject and object" was impossible in the modern age, while the dominant science has not had the desire for wholeness. Only in the art, there remained a memory of wholeness in the ancient time, a longing for the great synthesis, although what it could provide was only an illusion of the wholeness.

Literary Arts and the Emergence of Totality

Compared with the loss of the soul's wholeness which was irreversible, literary embodied the evolution of the longing for wholeness. It was from this perspective that Lukács examined the history of literary, and defined a historical sequence for the epic, drama, and novel; furthermore, he classified the genre of novel. Importantly, it was noted that Lukács firstly introduced the concept of totality in *Soul and Form*.

Extensive Totality: Epic

At the beginning of *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács expressed poetically his appreciation of the wholeness in Homeric age,

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. (Lukács, 1971b, p. 29)

Undoubtedly, it was a world which was consistency between subject and object, all unified together perfectly. Thus, the form was not a supplement as an imposed identity, but a representation of completely homogeneous things. Here, the true, the good, and the beautiful unified together, constituted the totality of being. "Totality of being is possible only ... where knowledge is virtue and virtue is happiness, where beauty is the meaning of the world made visible" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 34). The reason why there was a "perfect unity" in Homeric world, was that the unity of subject and object remained intact, in other words, there was not the distinction between subject and object at all. The soul in that age would not be worry about the self, because there was no loss and no need to search, indeed, no one would make the distinction between instinct and rationality, and it was natural for the ancient Greek. The bright starry sky would be the map of the human beings who travelled, and the boundless world was the home for people; because extensive totality brought the fire in deep mind and the stars over the human being together. Thus, all the actions from the soul were the creation of the world, so they were not outside of the world. Obviously, according to Lukács, Homer's epic reflected the homogeneous world of extensive totality, "In the story of the *Iliad*, which has no beginning and no end, a rounded universe blossoms into all-embracing life" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 55).

Intensive Totality: Drama

Eventually, human being stepped out of the extensive totality through self-consciousness, and the world became an object outside of self. The more human being knew and acted, the more the world became the opposite of human being, and this opposition wouldn't be reconciled; thus, the loss of extensive totality increasingly became the situation which human being couldn't escape.

Lukács claimed that, with the loss of extensive totality symbolized by epic, the genre of literary which was the symbol of time changed from epic into drama. Drama is the opposite of epic, the latter reflected the time which was harmony when the life of human beings and its representations were united, while the former reflected the time where the relationships were problematic, put it differently, where the conflict between the life of human beings and the reality was unanswerable. "Great epic writing gives form to the extensive totality of life, drama to the intensive totality of essence" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 46). According to Lukács, both human being's soul and action were harmony with the world in the epic. Even the world constituted by gods who were over the human beings, was not outside of the latter, and the human beings did not doubt the reality of real

world for the gods' world. However, in the drama, the extensive totality which was evident in the epic was problematic, because the conflict between "ought" and "be" was unanswerable in the drama. There was no place for the hero's "ought to be" and his "ideal self" in the reality. Under this background, if one wanted to remain intact, he had to withdraw into intensive totality from extensive totality, that is to say, disregarding of the totality of real life. The characters in the dramas who wanted to keep his totality had to insist upon his conceptual self and his "ought". Obviously, the intensive totality which formed by drama was consisted of rational totality, and it was completely outside of real life.

Belief in Totality: Novel

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács said "the epic and the novel [are] two major forms of great epic literature" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 56). So we can argue that novel and epic belong to the same genre, furthermore, novel is a kind of epic in the modern age. The difference between them lied in the modern world where the novel appeared was homeless for human beings. "The extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 56). That is to say, in the modern age, not only there was not the direct perfect wholeness, but also the intensive totality which appeared in the drama was no longer present. Quoted from Fichte, Lukács said the modern age was a time full of absolute evils. In the modern age, although the human beings still had the belief in totality, they knew nothing about totality; what remained for them was only desire, desire for anything, even for desire itself.

Novel has some similarities with epic for they belong to the same genre, for example, they both narrated the adventure of heroes. But, the ages which they appeared were different; the heroes in the epic lived in an age when the heroes felt at home and never lost, while the characters in the novel lived in an age when the subjects never lost the sense of lonely and felt emptiness. For that reason, there was a fundamental difference between novel and epic, among others, the key factor was time. "The greatest discrepancy between idea and reality is time: the process of time as duration" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 120). In the epic age, there was no distinction between idea and reality; moreover, theory (theoria) means "see" in Greek, so that there was no sense of time.

In the drama (and the epic) the past either does not exist or is completely present. Because these forms know nothing of the passage of time, they allow of no qualitative difference between the experiencing of past and present; time has no power of transformation, it neither intensifies nor diminishes the meaning of anything. (Lukács, 1971b, p. 126)

Within the extensive totality, epic heroes only felt the motion of space and never be conscious of time. They never be old; the aged was old from the beginning. The beginning and the end arranged by the fate constituted a closed whole, which would not changed by the time. In contrast, the human beings in the modern age lacked such an aim as the end, and the time was important in the constant progress, which was the basic rule of novel. Therefore, Lukács said "time can become constitutive only when the bond with the transcendental home has been severed". Accordingly, "the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a ruggle against the power of time" (Lukács, 1971b, p. 122). And the very reason was that the human beings in the modern age "lived in fragments"; they couldn't comprehend the life without time. Therefore, the "temporality" in the novel became the carrier of "life totality", although life totality was an unity of contradictions. Furthermore, as the time in the modern age consisted in the progress, the aim was no longer the end, and the life totality was not in perfect, in other words, incomplete was the reality for the modern. With this temporality, the hero in the novel would strive to search for the totality on the one hand, and they would never achieve this totality on the other hand.

That is to say, the finite time of life in the infinite process of progress, never had an end but a terminal. Therefore, just as Max Weber said, the modern never “died old and fulfilled by life” (Weber, 2004, p. 13). Thus, we could argue that the novel was an imitation of the subject's puzzles in the modern age; it was a representation of the tension between existence and time which the modern was caught in. With this strong tension, even the hero in the novel strives to search for the actualization of his self, he still was caught in the permanent conflict between the ought and the reality.

According to Lukács, although novel unlike epic reflected extensive totality directly, as a form which unfolded itself, it still remained a belief in totality, and even knew nothing about totality. For that reason, Lukács said that novel was “a world abandoned by God” (Lukács, 1971b, p. 92), although it could not grasp the world completely, it still keep the world intact in order to avoid the world decomposing empty reality.

Conclusion

In a word, as the discussion earlier, we could argue that the idea of totality through which Lukács criticized the capitalist culture in his *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*, followed the logic of humanism which was advanced by the enlightenment thinkers. And this logic continued in his *History and Class Consciousness* where he identified the totality with Marxist dialectics, which was correspond to the critique that the young Marx aimed at alienated labor in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Therefore, we claim rightly that later Lukács still emphasized the idea of totality; it comes from his critique of capitalist culture in his period of pre-Marxism.

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