

Historical Consciousness under the Postmodern Context

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Abstract: Human historical consciousness has undergone fundamental changes after multi-dimensional interactions with postmodern context. After analysing the conditions for the formation of such postmodern historical consciousness and its impact on human beings, obviously, postmodernism engendered great impact on historical ontology, historical epistemology and historical methodology which resulted in postmodern-contextualization of historical consciousness.

Keywords: historical consciousness, postmodern context, historical discourse, historical narrative, postmodernism

1. Introduction

Post-Enlightenment evolutionary theoretical innovations-such as Marx's surplus value theory[1], Nietzsche's moral genealogy, Freud's psychoanalysis, Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum mechanics co-founded by numerous physicists-prefigured the emergence of postmodernism, Croce's "all history is contemporary history" and Collingwood's "All history is a history of thought" were omens of philosophization of historical consciousness[2]. Postmodernism can not be accurately defined partly because of peculiar erratic argumentations and inenarrable conceptual connotations. With the disillusionment of the social progressive conviction under the postwar context of perilous American-Soviet relations, tumultuous anti-colonial revolutions and nihilistic internal atmosphere of western society, scholars from various realms all involved in discussions of new existential significance while speculated methods for social amelioration, under such postmodern context, overwhelming cultural insurgency "postmodernism" suspected oppressive hegemonic modernity and criticized dominant philosophical concepts such as truth, essence, justice, centrality, certainty, objectivity and continuity. Nevertheless, skeptical perspectives are as the shadows follow the history of western philosophy. As far back as ancient Greek, Pyrrho demonstrated objects are indistinguishable, unpredictable and undecidable, Gorgias demonstrated "nothing exists; even if there is something, it is unknowable; even if we can know something, we can't tell others about it". After Plato conceived dominant idealism, skeptical theories-such as Hume's skepticism [3], Huxley's agnosticism and Husserl's phenomenology-always developed along with dominant theories. Iconoclastic postmodernism flourished under the influence of accumulative relativism, nihilism and scepticism.

British historical philosopher Keith Jenkins published a series of theoretical books between 1990 and 2010 to repudiate objectivist historical consciousness [4]. Jenkins even advocated "history is no longer needed" in his last book[5]. In recent years, great transformations occurred in the world thus the discussion of postmodernism today is somewhat distinct from that of Jenkins' age. No one can

live a normal life without memory, no civilization can exist without history, all collective consciousness of human groups are constructed through history, so it is crucial for us to comprehend historical consciousness under the postmodern context. This thesis targets at supplying an overview of postmodern historical consciousness from three perspectives, first about linguistics and hermeneutics influence historical consciousness, second about postmodern social conditions influence historical consciousness, third about ideology and power influence historical consciousness.

2. Linguistics and hermeneutics influence historical consciousness

The thing-in-itself is meaningless, human beings created language to conceptualize multifarious objects so as to express meanings after which the world can be comprehended, if there is no language, the world undoubtedly reverts chaotic and inscrutability. Hermeneutic revolution generated constantly changing historical consciousness of interactions of objectivity, subjectivity and spatiotemporal. Orthodox objective authenticity of historical narrative has been deconstructed at the gradation of linguistic philosophy and modern hermeneutics. This section analyzes the influence of linguistics and hermeneutics on the formation of postmodern historical consciousness.

2.1. Linguistic turn influences historical consciousness

In the early 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure created structural linguistics who demonstrated that language is a symbol system in which objects represented by language symbols will convert over time instead of maintaining immutable meanings[6]. Wittgenstein reduced philosophical problems to language problems and denied metaphysics who believed that diverse philosophical schools just adopted distinct paradigms of representation[7]. Wittgenstein also created "language game" which emphasized that language and activities should be considered together at the same time[8]. After "linguistics turn", historical research can no longer be separated from syntactic analysis and semantic analysis. The apotheosis of such momentum of textualization is linguistic idealism which places language on the transcendental gradation, historical noumenon under the context of linguistic idealism become narration thus historians should not focus on objective past but on syntactic construction and rhetorical device of historical narrative. In order to get rid of such historical dilemma, Ankersmit emphasized "sublime historical experience" who hoped to cast off the impasse of overemphasize text and language[9]. New research fields such as scientific history have enhanced the vitality of history and prevented historical consciousness from being completely textualized, for instance, Kuhn's great accomplishment in scientific history who constructed significant concepts of scientific philosophy such as "paradigm" and "incommensurability"[10], if scientific history is textualized, physics, chemistry and biology will lose connection with substances because of textualization, which is undoubtedly absurd.

2.2. Hermeneutic reform influences historical consciousness

Heidegger founded modern hermeneutics that upgraded hermeneutics from methodological dimension of classical hermeneutics represented by Schleiermacher and Dilthey to ontological dimension [11]. Hans-Georg Gadamer caused the formation of philosophical elevation of hermeneutics, modern hermeneutics also benefited from Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics and Habermas' critical hermeneutics [12]. Gadamer's theory "fusion of horizons" indicated that the horizon of comprehending the same object is not closed but open and constantly generated, horizon of expositor contacts with existing horizon in history resulting in the fusion of both [13]. Under Gadamer's effect, the interpretations of texts are no longer affirmatory and quiescent while truth must be inspected in diverse contexts. Hans Robert Jauss was influenced by hermeneutics who created reception aesthetics which indicates textual analysis should show solicitude for readers'

aesthetic experience and emphasize the dynamic interflow process among authors, texts and readers to oppose rigescent textual analysis [14]. Derrida's deconstruction opposed logos-centrism which targeted to crush unitary hermeneutic order thereupon then smash the inhibition of vitality [15].

3. Postmodern social conditions influence historical consciousness

Some objectivists or materialists still believe that "truth of past" can be restored through historical methodology or ideological construction, but "truth of past" doesn't have epistemological foundation. Inside postmodern context of nihilism proliferation, worldwide predicament, kaleidoscopic phenomenon, and information explosion, we require brand new philosophy based on brand new historical consciousness to confront unprecedented global crises. This section analyzes the impact of nihilism on historical consciousness and the fragmentation and integration of historical consciousness.

3.1. Nihilism influences historical consciousness

Conventional authorities such as Christianity in West and Confucianism in China have far less intervention over secular life than in ancient times. Albert Camus revealed absurdity, insipidity, and malice of abominable world who directly referred to alienation, inquietude, loneliness and hopelessness of moderns. Sartre argued "existence precedes essence" which rendered new implication for freedom [16]. Lacan declared "self is just illusion", the concept of "human nature" was impacted by psychoanalysis, psychology and neuroscience, humanism lost solid foundation which continuously strengthened since the Renaissance, nevertheless, it's impossible to substitute humanity for God as new supreme authority. Baudrillard announced the implosion of society, reality no longer existed, subject lost its dominance over object, such a simulation society dominated by simulacrum [17], truth, meaning and even entire society have imploded, the lifeless numbness of public as if everything involved in a black hole. Lyotard explicated the variation of knowledge under the postmodern condition [18], Jameson regarded postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism[19], diffusive postmodern nihilism is an interactive upheaval of perceptible dysphoric backdrop and devastated ideological order. The modern historical consciousness of nationalism, liberalism and socialism is replaced by the postmodern historical consciousness of nihilism, relativism and skepticism.

3.2. Fragmentation and integration of historical consciousness

Regardless of whoever exists inside whatever human society, possessing a measure of discourse right is an integral condition to guarantee his or her own benefits. The binary opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat cannot describe contemporary society well, the coexistence of multifarious purposeful groups-such as blacks, women, workers, left-wingers, right-wingers, pagans, ethnic minorities, veterans, immigrants, environmentalists, homosexuals-resulted in diverse histories that reflected ideologies of diverse groups afterwards the same past always accompany multiple narratives which indicates the rulers no longer control all utterances, meanwhile, the separation of historical schools and the popularization of interdisciplinary methodology resulted in diversification of historical consciousness. To attenuate discourses of exclusivism, Yuval Harari promoted global consciousness by generalizing the macro history of Homo sapiens by synthesizing various scientific research results [20], prognosticated the earthshaking possibilities of future of humanity[21], emphasized 21 most significant universal issues facing us today[22]. Yuval's miraculous perspectives really alert us because the most momentous issues-such as technology alienation, nuclear weapons, genetic modification, data hegemony, information explosion, artificial intelligence, global warming, energy crisis and epidemic-are undoubtedly involving all civilizations, consequently, we cannot just focus on micro social topics.

4. Ideology and power affect historical consciousness

Since the 21st century, historical discourse has become more diversified, but momentous issues encircle historical interpretation spawned numerous arguments but there are no generally confirmed answers. Social groups or individuals in some countries have already lost into chaos in polyphyletic ideologies. Confronting explosive historical discourse, we must be vigilant to covert elements-such as ideology, power, standpoint, prejudice, benefit, motivation, parochialism and camouflage-inside omnifarious historical interpretations and persevere introspection on arguments around history thereupon then prevent privileged stratum from completely monopolizing historical interpretation. This section analyzes historical consciousness influenced by covert ideological purport and ubiquitous power.

4.1. Covert ideological purport influences historical consciousness

Philosophical reflection of history was ceaselessly transforming, speculative historical philosophy-for instance, Hegel regarded the "World Spirit" as fundamental impetus of historical progress[23]-was dominant in the 19th century, critical or analytical historical philosophy-such as Popper's criticism of historical determinism[24]-was engendered in the first half of the 20th century, narrative historical philosophy-represented by Hayden White's "metahistory"[25]-was dominant in the second half of the 20th century. White opposed objectivism historical methodology which completely separated history from literature and politics who believed that the past can't be discovered which had already disappeared and historians can only create historical narratives through various linguistic techniques such as formal argument and plot narrative. Historical narratives ineluctable possess theoretical foundations-Platonism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Augustinism, humanism, rationalism, Kantism, Hegelism, Marxism, nationalism, liberalism, positivism, realism, romanticism, fascism, Stalinism, Maoism, structuralism, postcolonialism and so on-thus histories are all essentially various ideological constructions. Governors of human society always employ grand-narrative historical discourses to consolidate dominant social ideology to safeguard their privileged status. Jenkins criticized some obstinate professional historians who completely ignored theoretical reflection but focused on restoration of historical truth and avoidance of ideology, because of these vain purposes, history gradually lost practical significance and became literal game inside academic circle[26]. It is futile to deliberately evade politics and ideology by professionalization, the result is that avoiding ideology becomes a delusion and history loses its realistic meaning. Historians apply rhetorical methods such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or allegory to create historical legendary, historical comedy, historical tragedy or historical satire, the literariness of history is precisely why histories are infectious.

4.2. Power's intervention in historical consciousness

Globalization is advancing, affluent and powerful elites in dominant countries continue to consolidate their control over the world thereupon then become "world nobles" who control worldwide commerce, cutting edge technology. But the masses can no longer revolt world nobles like ancient peasant uprising because high-tech army supporting modern countries can easily eliminate all rebellions, simultaneously, governors of dominant countries control nuclear weapons, but it is unable to guarantee that they will not launch a nuclear war for their own interests one day. World nobles also shouted slogans based on historical stories-such as national interests, economic development, liberal democracy, evil foreigners and historical law-to deceive support. It is the specialty of the world nobles to master the power of historical interpretation to create historical discourse to reinforce domination and transfer contradiction. Foucault said "discourse is power" who believed power determines knowledge on account of the underlying logic of knowledge is power instead of glamorous concepts

such as truth, justice and morality [27]. Governors marginalize, calumniate and demonize opponents thereupon then legitimize their prerogatives. Systems, laws, educations, customs and ethics of human society are all stuck with political power. With the unprecedented expansion of world nobles' power in the 21st century, it is self-evident that their power interferes everywhere in fashionable historical discourse, we must persevere sagacious ponderation of ubiquitous machinations inside historical interpretation.

5. Conclusion

Historical narrative is inevitably influenced by conceptual categories, syntactic structure, ideological orientation and power relations while elucidators from distinct ages have diverse interpretations owing to their own horizons, histories of multifarious genres reflected the will of heterogeneous society thus pulverized absolutism but caused nihilistic impact on our inherent convictions, grand narratives constructed by governors' power are manufactured extensively but global consciousness which focus on prospect of humanity is also prevailing around the world, although there is an insurmountable chasm between past and history, histories still engender tremendous influence on our perceptions of past, present and future. The above is historical consciousness under the postmodern context.

Finally, we need to ponder the enlightenment of this conclusion dialectically. Nietzsche declared that the arrival of Übermensch can crush mediocrity, contradiction and self-deception[28], fanatical ideas are always the synthesis of destruction and reconstruction, and so is postmodernism, which is both radically repudiation and prophetic perspectives. Postmodern historical consciousness is inexorable under the context of amalgamation of Apollonian and Dionysian, substance and illusion, divergence and consensus. Radical postmodernism is antirepresentationalism[29], but individuals construct identities through their memories while diverse human societies cohere through distinct fictitious intersubjective shared histories, so at least up to now, it is unimaginable for humanity to existence without memory and history. If we want to overcome alienation and one-dimensional idea[30], we need unparalleled spiritual power which have to be conceived by unprecedented philosophy based on unprecedented historical consciousness. Release metapower to confront the volatile world ingeniously, never stop marching towards emancipation.

References

- [1] Surplus value theory undoubtedly denied freedom and justice of modern liberal society from material angle. See, Marx, Karl. *Capital: A critique of political economy*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- [2] Collingwood opposed historical research to imitate natural science blindly while proposed that historians should repeat past ideas in their minds. See, Collingwood, Robin George, and Robin George Collingwood. *The idea of history*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 1994.
- [3] It is worth noting that Hume's negation of causality. See, Hume, David. *A treatise of human nature*. Courier Corporation, 2003.
- [4] Jenkins once ingeniously defined history who was a supporter of postmodern historiography, see, Jenkins, Keith. *Rethinking history*. Routledge, 2003. Jenkins, Keith, ed. *This book introduced historical reflection from modern to postmodern*, see, Jenkins, Keith. *On 'What is history?': from Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. Routledge, 2005. *This anthology selected by Jenkins was an introduction to the impact of postmodernism on historical debate*, see, *The postmodern history reader*. Psychology Press, 1997. *This book discussed history and ethics*, see, Jenkins, Keith. *Why history?* Routledge, 2005.
- [5] Jenkins believed that historical epistemology is fragile, histories often become tools for ideological propaganda, postmodern philosophers are not necessarily get enlightenment through history, consequently, history is redundant, getting rid of the shackles of traditional histories and even surpassing postmodern historiography will be more conducive to human emancipation. See, Jenkins, Keith. *At the limits of history: Essays on theory and practice*. Routledge, 2013.
- [6] Saussure divided a series of concepts, such as "langue" and "parole", "signifier" and "signified", "synchrony" and "diachrony". See, De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

- [7] Wittgenstein tended to research artificial language in his early stage, see, Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Routledge, 2013.
- [8] Wittgenstein tended to research ordinary language in his later period, see, Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical investigations*. John Wiley & Sons, 2010.
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- [10] Kuhn, Thomas. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Princeton University Press, 2021.
- [11] Heidegger mainly interpreted spatiality according to temporality and the nature of surrounding world. See, Heidegger, Martin, John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. "Being and time." (1962).
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- [14] Jauss, Hans Robert, and Paul De Man. "Toward an aesthetic of reception." (1982).
- [15] Derrida, Jacques. *Of grammatology*. Jhu Press, 2016.
- [16] Sartre's freedom was a purely conscious activity characterized by human subjectivity and transcendency. See, Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and nothingness: An essay in phenomenological ontology*. Citadel Press, 2001.
- [17] Through his analysis of multilevel social and cultural phenomena such as labor, fashion, body, death and poetic language, Baudrillard pointed out that the simulation principle had replaced reality principle then dominated everything. See, Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic exchange and death*. Sage, 2016. You can also refer to Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press, 1994.
- [18] Lyotard expounded the variation of capitalism from the perspective of pragmatics. See, Lyotard, Jean-François. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Vol. 10. U of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- [19] Jameson combined post-structuralism with Marxism, see, Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke university press, 1991.
- [20] Yuval mainly focused on "cognitive revolution", "agricultural revolution" and "scientific revolution" that affected human history. See, Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Random House, 2014.
- [21] Yuval proposed three topics about future: immortality, happiness and incarnation as God. See, Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow*. Random House, 2016.
- [22] Yuval believed that the world is information exploded but mostly useless, clear insight becomes more momentous. See, Harari, Yuval Noah. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. Random House, 2018.
- [23] Hegel demonstrated that human history was just stage for world spirit to show itself and realize itself, individuals and nations were agents for world spirit to realize its purpose. See, Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, and John Sibree. *The philosophy of history*. Courier Corporation, 2004.
- [24] Popper, Karl. *The poverty of historicism*. Routledge, 2013.
- [25] Hayden White analyzed eight representative historians (Hegel, Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce) to prove the poetic nature of historical narrative by his own conceptual framework. See, White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. JHU Press, 2014.
- [26] Ideology is not necessarily negative, philosophical idea carried by history is also construction of ideology, but such philosophical speculation determines the spirit of historical works. Not all modern historians lost such spirit, for example, Jaspers carried out philosophical reflection about history, his "Axial Age" triggered global academic discussion. See, Jaspers, Karl. *The Origin and Goal of History (Routledge Revivals)*. Routledge, 2014.
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- [30] Marcuse deemed that under the totalitarian oppression of the developed industrial society, people become one-dimensional man with one-dimensional idea. See, Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Routledge, 2013.