

# The Psychology of Friedrich Engels

From the Materialist Theory  
of Manual Labor to the Critique  
of Empiricism and Ideology<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: Engels as a Marxist Psychologist

Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) was a Marxist, but only to the extent that Marx was also an Engelsian. The two men followed each other, they learned together and forged their ideas together, including those of a psychological nature. Substantive parts of the psychology that we attribute to Marx, presented and explained recently,<sup>2</sup> are also attributable to Engels. Hence, some authors prefer to speak of the psychology of Marx and Engels.<sup>3</sup> However, there are also original Engelsian contributions that must be considered separately, not because they contradict Marxian theory but because they preceded Marx's theory and advanced it through new avenues that paved the way for a Marxian psychology, stabilizing concepts that were still volatile in Marx.

As we shall see, it is to the young Engels that we owe some of the first psychological formulations of Marx's psychologies of material and historical determination, economic personifications, bourgeois individuality, and resistance and rebellion. We also know the original mature Engelsian theories about psychic life: about its origin in manual work,

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1 The present chapter is a translation of »La psicología de Friedrich Engels: de las teorías materialistas del trabajo manual y del reflejo a la crítica del empirismo y de la ideología«, *Dialectus* 2(6) (2015): 150–162. The editor would like to thank the author and the publisher of the original work for the possibility to include it in the present volume.

2 »Las dieciocho psicologías de Karl Marx,« *Teoría y Crítica de la Psicología* 5 (2015): 105–132.

3 See Samuel P. Coe, *Contemporary Psychology in Marx and Engels* (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1978).

its constitution as a reflection of the real, its mediating function between subject and mundane-corporeal reality, and its immaterial figuration as a primitive form of understanding dream phenomena. Engels offers us an interesting theoretical-methodological critique of empiricist materialism in his elucidation of the psyche, as well as a denunciation of the psychological operation in the essence of ideology and the expansion of the horizon of the psychological-materialist explanation, beyond the productive, social basis and towards the foundations of sexual reproduction.

Considering the importance of the articulations of Marxism and psychoanalysis in the various intellectual movements of the last 150 years, we will pay close attention to co-incidences between the Engelsian and Freudian perspectives. We will see Engels agree with Freud in his emphasis on sexuality and family, as well as in the valorization of symptoms, the problematization of individuality, the consideration of corporeal materiality (and not only the mundane form), and the redirection of the abstract dualism of soul-body to the concrete monism of the body, and even the demonstration of psychic determination through hypnotic suggestion. With regard to the commonalities with Marx, we will also see how they are permanent and tend to systematize into a unitary theory, which will justify our assertion that Engels's is the first of the Marxist psychologies. However, this does not exclude the existence of a critical tension between the psychological discipline and Engels's perspective.

### The Soul of the English Workers: The First Materialist Psychology

In his early work *The Condition of the Working Class in England*,<sup>4</sup> Engels presents some psychological reflections that Marx later develops. The psychology of material determination was already delineated in

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4 Friedrich Engels, *La situación de la clase obrera en Inglaterra* (Moscow: Progreso, 1980 [1845]).

his dialectical characterization of the workers, who were both harmed by as well as beneficiaries of economic exploitation: deprived of »intellectual activity« and »degraded« to »the condition of beasts,« they were nonetheless favored with »completely developed feelings« and »strong passions« thanks, precisely, to their lack of bourgeois »intellectual culture« that »makes selfishness the main passion« and »concentrates all strength on money.«<sup>5</sup> In terms of economic personification, the bourgeois man is a »money-man« who only seeks »accumulation,« whereas the worker is »more social« and his eyes are open more widely since he does not relate to the world with selfishness and prejudices, from which he is protected by his »imperfect culture.«<sup>6</sup>

In the Engelsian psychology of the English workers, as well as in the later perspectives of Marx and Freud,<sup>7</sup> the cultural disadvantage implies, dialectically, a vital advantage. The workers' lack of culture allows them to develop their sociability, knowledge, passions and feelings. Their fortune lies in their misery. Analogously, the misery of the bourgeois individual is rooted in his wealth, which isolates him in his prejudiced and selfish individuality.

Anticipating the theory of mass society, Engels transforms the psyche of bourgeois individuality into the hegemonic model of modern cities that promotes »sordid egotism,« the »isolation of each individual in his private interests,« and the fragmentation of society into »atoms« or »monads.«<sup>8</sup> The »great cities« would discover the »disease of the social body,« and this was positive for Engels and his revalorization of the symptom because this enabled him to learn the »appropriate means to heal it.«<sup>9</sup> This same Engelsian dialectic, a precursor of the Freudian principle of abstinence and of the Marxian psychology

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5 Ibid., 89.

6 Ibid., 53.

7 Karl Marx, *Manuscritos: economía y filosofía* (Madrid: Alianza, 1997 [1844]); S. Freud, »El porvenir de una ilusión,« in *Obras completas*, vol. XXI (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1998 [1927]), 1–56.

8 Engels, *La situación de la clase obrera en Inglaterra*, 11–12.

9 Ibid., 52.

of resistance and rebellion, also operates in the conviction that the workers, »treated like beasts,« are able to »save the consciousness and feelings of their humanity« in their »continuous internal rebellion.«<sup>10</sup>

The young Engels preceded Marx and Freud in the revalorization of the symptom, in the discovery of vital misery in cultural wealth, in problematizing individuality, in envisioning economic personification, and in underscoring material determination. The same young Engels was also a pioneer when he delineated a psychology of the historical determination of the English workers, in whose psyche he found the vestiges of past migrations, cultural fusions, economic changes, etc. Engels criticized those who »only recognize psychological development, the development of the abstract man, outside any connection to the past, when, in fact, the world depends on the past.«<sup>11</sup> Such dependency, contradicting the amnesic tendencies of psychology, shows the presence of the past in everything that is present in the world, since everything depends on the past.

### Materialism of the Hands: The Origins of Corporeal Psyche

Considerations of the present and the past are constant in the thought of Engels, and this makes him delve into the most remote, pre-historic and even pre-human times. These explorations always have a materialistic character. He is searching for the historical material determination, which, once discovered, serves to critique the idealistic and amnesic affectations of our knowledge.

If man now tends to explain »his acts through his thoughts« psychologically, it is because previously there were those who made the work »planned by their heads« be »executed by the hands of others.«<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Engels, »El papel del trabajo en el proceso de transformación del mono en hombre,« in *Obras filosóficas* (Mexico: FCE, 1876), 418.

It was in this way that the mental-intellectual, the future subject of psychology, was abstracted from the corporeal-manual, distancing itself from it in order to devalue it, exploit it, marginalize it, dominate it, and repress it. Such an exercise of power, as a dominant-repressive material determination, allowed the powerful to acquire his apparently elevated and independent existence as spirit, ideal, refined soul, and the psychic, distinct from the somatic and susceptible to being studied by psychology. Like Marx and Freud, Engels redirects the soul-body duality towards the concrete material totality in which it originates through a process of abstraction. Such abstraction is idealization and psychologization, and it is also social dissociation and a cultural-economic division between two parts of the body: the heads that do the planning, the powerful, and the obedient hands that do the work, the exploited. In the Engelsian explanation of the origin of humanity, it is the body that adopts an »erect posture« and thus frees the hands, which, thanks to their lack of occupation, can then turn towards work that becomes progressively more complicated and collectivized, which in turn incentivizes the development of language, the transformation of the senses, and the conversion of the »monkey brain« into a »human brain,« which ends up thinking of itself as an incorporeal, spiritual, ethereal soul.<sup>13</sup> It is true, then, that the psyche of Engels, as well as that of Marx and Freud, comes from the body and owes everything it is to the body. Humanity stands out, in the end, because of its erect body with its manual work and because of its rational soul with its intellectual work. If the intellect became free from the hands, it is because the hands freed themselves from the erect body. It was »with the hands« that »the head developed« and »consciousness emerged.«<sup>14</sup>

Engels's explanation, just like Marx's and Freud's, is perfectly materialistic. Matter is the first, most decisive and most fundamental element. The development of the human psyche is founded on the

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13 Ibid., 412–418.

14 Friedrich Engels, »Dialéctica de la naturaleza,« in *Obras filosóficas* (Mexico: FCE, 1883), 299.

development of language, the brain and the senses. This development is grounded in complex and collective work rooted in turn in the corporeal materiality of the hands, which become independent as they detach themselves from the ground.

### Materialism of Reflection: The Unreal Object of Psychology

In Engels's materialistic approaches to psychology, the theory of corporeal-manual humanization (the material origin of human psychism) is complemented with conceptions of the socio-economic material bases of the historical psychic configurations. The »moral ideas« of each epoch, for example, are ultimately explained by the »economic relationships« from which they come, »consciously or unconsciously.«<sup>15</sup> The existence of private property imposes the moral precept of »thou shall not steal,« as well as other contents of our consciousness, thoughts and feelings, invariably »determined by our current realities.«<sup>16</sup>

The Engelsian notion of the historical material determination tends to be schematized in a theory of reflection that ends up establishing itself as the guiding principle of the Leninist perspective<sup>17</sup> and some of the main currents of Soviet Marxist psychology,<sup>18</sup> but which originates in Marx's ideas such as the one that defines »the ideal« as »the material translated and transposed into the head of a man.«<sup>19</sup> In

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15 Friedrich Engels, »La subversión de la ciencia por el señor Eugen Dühring («Anti-Dühring»),« in *Obras filosóficas* (Mexico: FCE, 1878), 81.

16 Ibid., 158.

17 Vladimir I. Lenin, *Materialismo y empiriocriticismo* (Beijing: Ediciones en Lenguas Extranjeras, 1975 [1908]).

18 See Sergei L. Rubinstein, *Principios de psicología general* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1982 [1940]); Alexis N. Leontiev, *Actividad, conciencia y personalidad* (Mexico: Cartago, 1984 [1977]).

19 Karl Marx, »Postfacio a la segunda edición,« in *El Capital* (Mexico: FCE, 2008 [1873]), xxiii.

the Engelsian development of reflex theory, we begin with the metaphor of the idealist consciousness critically conceived as a »concave mirror« that inverts things into a »deformed image« of »historical reality,«<sup>20</sup> but, very rapidly, through »religious reflections« of the »real foundation,«<sup>21</sup> we arrive at the representation of ideas and other mental contents as »more or less abstract images of real things and phenomena,«<sup>22</sup> as »reflections in our thought« of the »real conflicts,«<sup>23</sup> and as »refracted images of the real things.«<sup>24</sup>

The reflected images, identified with the psyche, constitute well-defined and limited objects that apparently allow us to preserve psychology, preventing its object from becoming dissolved in the world and in the body, as happens with the young Marx<sup>25</sup> and the old Freud.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Marxist and Freudian theories (which end up assimilating psychism into its economic-industrial and somatic-impulsive material determination), Engels maintains the object of psychology on the superficial field of the mirror that reminds us of the surface to which Freud reduced the ego and its psychology.<sup>27</sup> The mirror creates a psychic world, deformed and sometimes inverted, that distinguishes itself from the world but does not stop being purely superficial, apparent, and imaginary. If we dig deeper into this world, we will go through it and we'll leave it behind.

It is true that reflection theory preserves psychology, not exactly as a positive science, but rather as a negative study of an unreal

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20 Engels, »Anti-Dühring,« 83–84.

21 Ibid., 276.

22 Friedrich Engels, »Del socialismo utópico al socialismo científico,« in *Obras filosóficas* (Mexico: FCE, 1880), 593.

23 Ibid., 597.

24 Friedrich Engels, »Ludwig Feuerbach y el fin de la filosofía clásica alemana,« in *Obras filosóficas* (Mexico: FCE, 1888), p. 562.

25 Marx, *Manuscritos*.

26 Sigmund Freud, »Esquema del psicoanálisis,« in *Obras completas*, vol. XXIII (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1998 [1938]), 133–210.

27 Sigmund Freud, »El yo y el ello,« in *Obras completas*, vol. XIX (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1998 [1923]), 1–66; Sigmund Freud, »El malestar en la cultura,« in *Obras completas*, vol. XXI (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1998 [1929]), 57–140.

object. And if it seems that we are falling into a certain dualism, this no longer divides the world into two realities, physical and psychic, but into the physical reality and the psychic unreality, into the imaginary and the real, into what is reflected and its deformed reflection. Psychology must adhere to the unreal reflection, which is the only psychic thing, which can only be explained by what is real, by what is reflected, by the non-psychic, which, besides being what is reflected, is also the socio-economic thing by which its reflection is deformed on the ideological plane through »inversions« and other »complications.«<sup>28</sup>

The deformation of the psychic reflection (the difference that resists its assimilation into the physical-material reality) is determined and constituted by this same reality, by the economic system, by social classes and interests. What is reflected is what deforms itself ideologically, internally, in its own conscious exterior reflection. If men make history unconsciously and not only consciously, it is because their »ideal motives« exist interiorly and do not just reflect exteriorly the real »historical causes« that »determine them« and that »in the minds of the acting men are transformed into those motives.«<sup>29</sup>

The Engelsian psychic motive, like the Freudian one, is not just a figuration of its immanent cause but transformation. In other words, what psychology is concerned with is not only the reflection of reality, its conscious deformed representation, but also its unconscious deforming presence, that is, the presence of what reflects itself in knowledge, deforms itself in ideology, and transforms itself in history. The whole deformed psychic reflection, the object of psychology, continues assimilating itself, monistically, to the deforming, reflecting and reflected non-psychic.

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28 Engels, »Ludwig Feuerbach,« 562–574.

29 Ibid., 566.



## From Empiricism to Mysticism: A Critique of Observational and Experimental Psychology

We have already seen that Engels's materialism does not lead, through reflection theory, either to the old body-soul duality or to a positive psychological science. We will now be able to observe that the Engelian materialist psychology is not compatible with either an exclusively cerebral, cranial, neuronal materialism or with a purely observational or experimental empiricism. Engels makes this very clear in his critique of the phrenological projections of psychism on the shapes and parts of the cranium.

In order to arrive at his critique of the empiricist materialism of phrenology, Engels chose a path similar to the one that Freud would choose when distancing himself from the empiricist materialism of the scientificist medicine of the nineteenth century. Both used hypnosis, which, in both cases, demonstrated the mental determination of the physical and the necessity to theorize observation, allowing them to go beyond a series of empiricist excesses and materialist illusions. In the case of Engels, the hypnosis of an adolescent from Manchester, in the winter of 1843–44, allowed him to refute the supposed phrenological location of certain psychic functions in certain parts of the cranium when he demonstrated that the location could be modified when the subject, in a hypnotic state, was induced to respond to the stimulation of other parts of the body and head. It was in this way that Engels, in his own words, discovered »a series of phenomena as the basis of the phrenological charlatanry, the majority of which were only different in a certain degree to the ones manifested in a waking state.«<sup>30</sup>

Many years before Freud admitted the influence of a sort of hypnosis in social life, specifically in mass phenomena, Engels recognized that the same type of suggestion exists in the waking state and studied it in order to explore the psychic causality of body responses. This cau-

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30 Engels, »Dialéctica de la naturaleza,« 315.

sality would not be perceived in the empirical investigations that limited themselves to observation and experimentation, thus condemning themselves to »the chimera, credulity and superstition,« that science often incurs when it »emphasizes simple experience« and »treats thought with contempt.«<sup>31</sup> Do we not have here a sort of premonition of what would be a significant part of the modern psychological discipline? Our psychology, in fact, falls into the »most trivial empiricism« that »despises everything that is theory« and thus leads us to »mysticism.«<sup>32</sup> The mystical delusion would serve to establish those relationships that we have not established through »theoretical thought,« which, according to Engels, exists precisely to »relate [the facts] to each other« or to »penetrate the relationship that exists between them.«<sup>33</sup>

### The Origin of the Family and Sexual Love: Beyond Psychology

When readdressing Marx's ethnological notes, Engels<sup>34</sup> elaborated an intricate structure of theoretical relationships between scarce and doubtful empirical facts related to the pre-historic origins of the family and sexual love. The result was an enormous construct that not only reminds us of the fascinating interpretative excesses of Freud<sup>35</sup> regarding the primordial horde but also contains valuable ideas that can serve as a bridge between Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Many of these ideas come from Marx and, in particular, from his reading of Morgan,<sup>36</sup> as in the case of the cardinal theses of primitive communism and its »in-

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31 Ibid., 313.

32 Ibid., 320.

33 Ibid., 321.

34 Friedrich Engels, *El origen de la familia, de la propiedad privada y del Estado* (Mexico: Colofón, 2011 [1884]).

35 Sigmund Freud, »Tótem y Tabú,« in *Obras completas*, vol. XIII (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1998 [1913]), 1–164.

36 Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society, or: Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: Holt, 1877).

comparably superior vitality« over advanced societies<sup>37</sup> and the (almost Freudian) conception of the monogamous family as a »microcosm of all the antagonisms that would later develop in society and the State.«<sup>38</sup>

In the work of Engels, based on that of Marx,<sup>39</sup> we see an expansion of the Marxist field of research from the »means of production« to the »means of reproduction«<sup>40</sup> and from the »class struggle« to the »struggle between man and woman.«<sup>41</sup> In this way, the socio-economic sphere, emphasized by Marxism, gives way to the familial-sexual sphere, emphasized by Freudian psychoanalysis. Like Freud,<sup>42</sup> Engels did not separate both spheres but instead perceived a close relationship between the two: the familial-sexual transition from matriarchate to patriarchy represents the socio-economic victory of »individual property over spontaneous primitive communism,«<sup>43</sup> the first »class oppression« was the oppression of »the feminine sex by the masculine sex,«<sup>44</sup> and in modern society, »the family man is the bourgeoisie within the family« while »the woman represents the proletariat.«<sup>45</sup>

If the bourgeoisie is condemned to the monogamous family as a space for the exploitation of women, then the »oppressed classes« can aspire to equality between the sexes and to »marriage for love« and not »for convenience.«<sup>46</sup> The authentic sexual-loving feeling, the core of psychism in Freudian theory, turns into a privilege of the oppressed in the Engelsian representation of the society of classes. Besides being a social and classist phenomenon, this feeling is historically fixed in the barbarian invasions at the end of the Roman Empire. Engels searched

37 Karl Marx, »Proyecto de respuesta a la carta de V.I. Zasulich,« in *Obras escogidas de Marx y Engels*, vol. III (Moscow: Progreso, 1980 [1881]), 86.

38 Karl Marx, *Los apuntes etnológicos de Karl Marx* (Madrid: Siglo XXI y Pablo Iglesias, 1988 [1882]), 94–95.

39 Marx, »Proyecto de respuesta«; Marx, *Los apuntes etnológicos*.

40 Marx, *Manuscritos*, 35.

41 Ibid., 74–75.

42 Freud, »Tótem y Tabú.«

43 Engels, *El origen de la familia*, 62–74.

44 Ibid., 74.

45 Ibid., 84.

46 Ibid., 81–93.

for the pre-historic origin of a *gens* that emerged from »group marriage« in which »whole groups of men and whole groups of women possess each other reciprocally,« thereby »shutting out jealousy« and ensuring the »union of forces« necessary for the »evolution from animality to humanity.«<sup>47</sup> This group-social origin of being human, of the family and of sexuality contrasts with the familial-sexual origin of humans and social groups in Freud.<sup>48</sup> However, outside of this contrast, Freud and Engels agree on the historical problematization-relativization of feelings of love, monogamous sexuality and the nuclear family in its modern Western versions. Neither of them accepts universal and eternal categories. Both insist on going beyond psychology, refraining from psychologizing social and cultural institutions.

### The Soul Apart: Psychology as the Essence of Ideology

Engels went all the way back to pre-history in order to explain not only the origins of humanity, the family and sexual love, but also the human psyche as an entity separate from the human body. We have already seen that such an irruption of the object of psychology was explained through the development of the hand, language and brain, with the resulting division between the manual work of the slave and the intellectual work of the master. This Engelsian idea, compatible with the Marxian view, would later give way to the hypothesis that the pre-historic man, »excited by dreams, started to believe that his thought and his sensations were not activities of his body but of a separate soul that lived inside him.« And »since that day, man has not been able to stop thinking about the relationship between the soul and the external world.«<sup>49</sup>

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47 Ibid., 40.

48 Freud, »Tótem y Tabú«; Sigmund Freud, »Psicología de las masas y análisis del yo,« in *Obras completas*, vol. XVIII (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1998 [1921]), 63–136.

49 Engels, »Ludwig Feuerbach,« 546.

The idealistic abstraction of the soul existing apart is reconnected with the concrete, mundane-corporeal totality in the Engelsian approach to psychology. This reconnection compares psychism to a mediating function between the human subject and everything that acts upon him and »moves his life« and must »manifest« itself psychically in his »head«: on the one hand, there is the body that manifests itself in sensations like »hunger and thirst«; on the other hand, there is the »external world« that »reflects« itself in the »shape of sensations, thoughts, impulses and willful determinations.«<sup>50</sup> It is in this way that the psychological, individualist dualism of body-and-soul is transformed in a sort of monism in which we can only distinguish two expressions of the same mundane-corporeal totality: its presence in the »propelling or determinant causes« and its representation through psychic reflections in the »ideological forms« of the »ideal or conscious motives.«<sup>51</sup>

In Engelsian theory, the object of psychology is reduced to an ideological reflection, ideal and conscious, of the world and the body. The psychological abstraction for which this reflection sees itself as a soul apart is the essential mechanism of ideology understood as »an activity that is in charge of thoughts, considered as entities with their own existence and developed in an independent manner, subject only to their own specific laws.«<sup>52</sup> This Engelsian definition of ideology is in itself a definition of psychology. However, more than being a precedent for a future critical Marxist conception of psychology as ideology,<sup>53</sup> it is also an original representation that is also critical of ideology as psychology.

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50 Ibid., 553.

51 Ibid., 566–567.

52 Ibid., 571.

53 Carlos L. Sastre, *La psicología, red ideológica* (Buenos Aires: Tiempo contemporáneo, 1974); Néstor A. Braunstein et al. *Psicología: Ideología y ciencia* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1975); Ian Parker, *La psicología como ideología* (Madrid: Catarata, 2010).

## Conclusion: Engels as a Marxist Critic of Psychology

The Engelsian critique of ideology is also a critique of the psychological mechanism through which a psychic, ideal or intellectual object abstracts itself from the concrete reality, conceived as relatively independent and ruled by its own laws. This mechanism is psychology itself and, consequently, when he criticized it, Engels also criticized psychology. In contrast with what is criticized, Engelsian research incorporates the psychic object in its concrete social, economic and historical reality on which it depends and by whose laws it is ruled. We can say, in this sense, that Engels was not so much a psychologist as a critic of psychology.

The Engelsian critique of psychology began early on in his investigations of English workers, in which the psyche spreads out of its own domain and dissipates through society, the economy and history. Then, this object of psychology is presented as a product of the classist division between head and hands, a division upon which psychology would be founded and which would be fought by the communist in his struggle against classism. In his fight against class society and its psychological product, Engels would reduce the psychic to an unreal, apparent and superficial condition, a reflection in which there is only the reflected non-psychic and its distortion, which, ultimately, will be explained by the real reflected and not by the unreal reflection.

As we have seen, Engels's Marxist critique does not stop at a strictly empirical psychology in which he alerts us to the dangers of a mysticism that would compensate for the lack of theory. Theoretical reflection, in the direction that Engels sets, can only take us beyond the boundaries of psychology, even when dealing with the more intimate and personal elements (such as sexual love), which are redirected to their historical, group-social origins. How can we not go past the psychology that we investigate when Engels conceives it as a simple surface, the appearance and representation of that which hides from us?

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