

Review Article

Viewing Lukács from the 1980s*

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The year 1985 was, among other things, the centenary of the birth of Georg Lukács. As is usually the case with centenary celebrations, there have been a number of scholarly meetings summing up Lukács's thought from historiographic or theoretical points of view. Particularly in Europe (in Germany, France, Italy, and Austria), the Lukács centenary has been linked with that of Ernst Bloch, also born in 1885—a pairing due to something more than the extrinsic coincidence of the two men's year of birth. Both in strictly academic meetings and in those of a more "militant" cast, the figures of Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács have been remembered together not only because of their fecund and fascinating youthful friendship during the second decade of this century but above all because both men were "independent Marxists" who attempted—or believed that they attempted—to keep their theoretical engagement from being manipulated by the Stalinist regime. (In connection with David Pike's book, discussed below, one might argue that Lukács was either unable or unwilling to make this sincere subjective desire become something "objective" or real.)

These international meetings have encouraged fruitful contacts and exchanges of opinion among scholars. The secondary literature on Lukács and his time—which, of course, was the era not only of Bloch but also of Brecht and Heidegger, Benjamin and Gramsci, Horkheimer and Adorno—has also been enriched by several new titles deserving of attention, including the three works discussed here.

First we need a preliminary approach to the development of Lukács's thought—a trustworthy systematic monograph that places Lukács in his intellectual context without unwittingly distorting his message. Thus we can begin with G. H. R. Parkinson's *Georg Lukács*, a work first published in 1977 and recently republished. The author states that "the aim of this book is neither to attack Lukács nor to defend him, but to contribute to an understanding of him by stating clearly what his ideas were and how

* The works reviewed in this essay are G. H. R. Parkinson, *Georg Lukács* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. viii + 205; Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. xv + 265; David Pike, *Lukács and Brecht* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. xvii + 337.

they developed” (p. 1). Parkinson declares further that “this book is an expository and not a critical study. . . . This absence of criticism may be seen as a defect, but I believe that there is a place for a purely expository book about Lukács. It is a commonplace maxim (though one that is not always followed with any determination) that one should try to understand what a writer’s views are before one criticises them” (preface, p. vii).

In the main, Parkinson’s book keeps its promise, which makes it enjoyable reading, and even scholars already acquainted with Lukács’s principal works can undoubtedly find new and interesting stimuli in Parkinson’s well thought out and well founded judgments. But while Parkinson claims that his book is merely expository, he cannot help injecting his own critical readings into his exposition. Rather than remarking on this work in detail, therefore, I would prefer to note two questions of a theoretical nature that it raises.

First, Parkinson is correct in carefully distinguishing between a “pre-Marxist” Lukács and a “Marxist” Lukács and in emphasizing Lukács’s sincere, conscious, and explicit desire, after 1919, to adhere to Marxism. To be sure, both the Hegelian formulation that Lukács gave to Marxism during the 1920s in *History and Class Consciousness* and the classical (one might almost say Aristotelian) formulation he gave it in the 1960s in the *Ontology of Social Being* remain within the “Marxist philosophical paradigm” as it has appeared during the twentieth century. In this sense, the label of “Marxist” is absolutely appropriate—as well as because Lukács himself always explicitly adopted it. Still, Lukács’s philosophical originality vis-à-vis the various simplified and dogmatic formulations of historical and dialectical materialism has always been of such qualitative importance that it leads me to make an innocent analogy with what Marx himself once said about bad “Marxists” of his own day: if by “Marxism” in the twentieth century we should primarily understand the Stalinist vulgarization known as “dialectical materialism,” then Lukács was never a “Marxist” but always represented an alternative thought. Nonetheless, he opted, for reasons having to do with the concrete historical *conjoncture*, to contract practical political alliances with the real communist movement and with the Soviet Union. This philosophical originality is described in Parkinson’s book, to be sure, but I would have liked to see it given more prominence.

Second, Parkinson has chosen to translate the German expression *Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*—the title of Lukács’s last great work—as *Ontology of Social Existence*, a decision that cannot be laid to chance alone. (An unambiguous translation, if I am not mistaken, would be *Ontology of Social Being*.) Lukács’s deliberate “swing to ontology” after 1957 (already implicit, though less visible, as early as the later 1930s) does indeed seem so novel and provocative to anyone accustomed to the linguistic codes of either Western Marxism, with its historical and humanistic leanings, or Eastern, Soviet, and Stalinist Marxism, with their scientific and naturalistic tendencies, that it engenders a sort of linguistic and psychological censorship—to the point that even a genuine expert like Par-

kinson translates *Sein* by *existence* instead of the more obvious *being*. In reality, the crowning development in Lukács's thought constitutes a leap toward ontology in which he begins to speak of "social being" rather than of "social existence." We need to avoid two potential errors in connection with this. First, *das Ganze*—the social whole of which Lukács speaks—should be translated not by *totality* but by *complexity* since it no longer has any relation to a Hegelian expressive totality arising from the unity of subject and object, proletariat and history (as in *History and Class Consciousness*) but instead refers to a totality of a new sort in which each ontological level of being is maintained in its specific autonomy (as in the thought of Nicolai Hartmann, to cite one thinker who much influenced the later Lukács). Second, the ontology of social being that Lukács wanted to construct (in explicit opposition to "dialectical materialism" as a scholastic of the Soviet party state) is intended to be an ontology of history (*Geschichte*) rather than an ontology of destiny (*Geschick*), as with Heidegger. (Thus, if I am correct, Lukács's ontology would turn out to be a *tertium datur* midway between Soviet dialectical materialism, on the one hand, and Heideggerian ontology, on the other.)

Parkinson gives a clear and balanced presentation of the *Ontology*; nevertheless, he affirms that "one may doubt whether the book will add much to Lukács's reputation. . . . Further, although the terminology may sometimes be new, the ideas seldom are, in that they remain for the most part within the orbit of classical Marxism. It is hard to see how such a work can make of Marxism (as its author hoped) a living force in philosophical development. It seems most likely that Lukács's reputation will chiefly be based, as it has been based hitherto, on *History and Class Consciousness* and his literary criticism" (pp. 161–62).

In my opinion—to repeat—a philosophical form of discourse based on the explicit assumption of an ontology of social being is, on the contrary, totally outside the traditional orbit of classical Marxism, and for that reason Parkinson's judgment could be seen as somewhat hasty. Still, we have here a typical philosophical problem of the immediate future that is impossible to resolve with certitude. It would surely be erroneous and frankly misleading to set up a "teleological" reading of Lukács reconstructing his entire thought in terms of a presumed ultimate outcome (in this case, the "happy ending" of the *Ontology of Social Being*). Such a view would be utterly ludicrous on the biographical level and would lead us away from an accurate historiographic reconstruction faithful to his milieu, his epoch, and a whole constellation of social, artistic, and moral considerations.

Mary Gluck's book, as James Wilkinson has written, "integrates Lukács with Budapest"; thus, he continues, "for once we have a non-teleological reading of Lukács's life." Such a reading obviously must show that when Lukács arrived at a position of revolutionary communism between 1918 and 1919 this was in no way an outcome fatalistically established from the start but was only *one* of many possible outcomes. Of course, the actual outcome must have had a basis in the quite specific constellation of intellectual and moral givens making up the particular antibourgeois problemat-

ics of one part of the generation of cultivated Hungarians who matured intellectually between 1900 and 1918.

Mary Gluck paints an extremely handsome and well-drawn portrait of this social and cultural climate, one that has the fascination of those sepia photographs of the beginning of the century that still make us reflect and dream. (Dream, I might add, in a sadly “teleological” manner since the historical present does not in any way seem to hold the promises of the “good life” to which the stiff smiles of those faded photographs seem to aspire.) The generation of cultivated Hungarians of the turn of the century experienced a profound crisis of the national and liberal culture of the nineteenth century—a century that Lukács was never to disown. (In the 1960s he was to write a “Lob des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts” for a collection of essays dedicated to Heinrich Böll [*In Sachen Böll: Ansichten und Einsichten*, ed. Marcel Reich-Ranicki (Cologne, 1968), pp. 325–32].) This crisis was, of course, not just cultural since the appearance of new petit bourgeois mass movements of a nationalistic and anti-Semitic nature eventually brought marginalization and even physical danger to the assimilated Jewish middle class to which Lukács himself and the greater part of his friends belonged, while the various nationalities represented in the territories of the Dual Monarchy turned their backs once and for all on any cosmopolitan cultural solution of their identity crisis, insisting instead on a last-ditch defense of their individuality and their traditions.

Still, Lukács’s cultural and social antibourgeois rebellion does not mean that he in any way resembled the young John Reed impersonated by Warren Beatty in the film *Reds*. In Lukács, the need to initiate action and to give a practical and visible dimension to his protest seems paralyzed by an awareness of the complexity of the situation, which appeared to be insoluble. From a philosophical point of view, as is well known, Lukács transfigured the dilemmas involved in the choice between authenticity as an ethical absolute and as individual liberty, on the one hand, and a conformist integration into the world of bourgeois social divisions of work and culture, on the other, making of them neo-Kantian pairs of tragic antinomies. Lukács’s philosophical vocation came young, then, inasmuch as he showed himself capable at an early age of plastic expression of these tragic existential antinomies. Gluck tells us, however, that Lukács subjectively experienced the discovery of this precocious philosophical vocation as a failure. From 1904 to 1908 he was still active in the Hungarian theatrical troupe Thàlia, where he realized that he had no artistic talent. Thinking back on those years not long before his death in 1971, he wrote of himself, “Not an artist! Only a philosopher! Only abstractions.”

In her reconstruction of the history of the so-called Sunday Circle—in which Lukács functioned as cultural leader and philosophical guide and which included persons variously destined for fame, from Béla Bâlász to Arnold Hauser, from Karl Mannheim to Anna Lesznai—Gluck speaks, quite correctly, of “revolutionary traditionalism,” an expression of Stephen

Spender's. Her analysis of this concept is, in my opinion, of enormous importance in comprehending how profoundly many of the most gifted men and women of that generation adhered to the communist utopia.

At first sight, the expression "revolutionary traditionalism" might appear contradictory. One example of it occurred in the first generation of European Romanticism, which explicitly referred to the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome to express its protest against both the residual effects of feudalism and the new, prosaic, and bourgeois world of money. Or—to suggest a second example—I might cite the so-called Frankfurt School, which declared its reliance on the cultural tradition of dialectical bourgeois identity in order to protest the new manipulations of mass capitalism in the nineteenth century (what Marcuse called a "one-dimensional society"). What we need to understand, then, is just what constituted the characteristic differential of the "revolutionary traditionalism" specific to that particular "Hungarian generation of 1914."

Gluck deals successfully with this fundamental question—on which the theoretical aspects of her book hinge—by showing in detail the early modernists' simultaneous "appropriation of primitive and native folk traditions" and direct and conscious reference to the classical European cultural tradition. (Some Italians may remember having heard Lukács speak in their country in the 1950s in a rich and fluent Latin.) Philosophically speaking, I would define this attitude as a sort of "modernism without nihilism"—that is, a modernism that can in no way be transformed philosophically into postmodernism, if I may be permitted an innocuous analogy drawn from more recent times. Gluck is quite clear on this point, and she deserves to speak for herself regarding the "common ground for discourse and communication" that was the rule among members of the Sunday Circle after 1919. "Whatever their final political and ideological destination," she writes, "they remained embedded in a common matrix of assumptions about the existence of objective truths that was instinctively hostile to relativism, existentialism, or pragmatism in any of its modern varieties. Despite their initial iconoclasm and their avowed intention to repudiate the nineteenth century in all its cultural forms, they never fully succeeded, or wished to succeed, in transcending nineteenth-century rational values and breaking through to a genuinely modernist, *avant-garde* position."

This observation is of extreme importance for an understanding of the cultural base common to these young Hungarian rebels of the beginning of the century: since they were never hippies, they never became yuppies, if I may be permitted a second innocent analogy. Another of Gluck's observations is even more important, however: "It is, of course, no novelty to point to the elements of continuity between Lukács's Marxist and pre-Marxist careers. Yet the common assumption has been that it was the radical, subversive impulses of the young Lukács that found incarnation within the more organized framework of his mature Marxist philosophy. It is, however, equally valid to argue that Marxism, which was after all a

nineteenth-century ideology, also made possible for Lukács the continuation of those rational, classicist tendencies which were equally present, though not always fully articulated, in his prewar cultural rebellion."

In this way (although, let me reiterate, Gluck's book is in no way teleological), it is possible to surmount the abstract dilemma as to whether Lukács's thought should be defined as a form of "revolutionary romanticism" (as Michael Löwy maintains) or as a form of "revolutionary classicism" (as I would tend to argue, following Nicolae Tertulian's penetrating reading). Both elements are present in him, and their articulation can be adequately understood only by studying the history of their origins in Budapest after the turn of the century. A second phase of this fascinating history was to open when Lukács encountered Ernst Bloch and his anti-academic philosophical style when he frequented Simmel's and Weber's seminars and had reached his carefully considered rejection of Simmel's cultural relativism and Weber's polytheism of values.

In advising the American reader to read Gluck's work *before* David Pike's, I mean not only to respect elementary chronology but also to make a suggestion of a theoretical and consummately philosophical nature. Pike's book is not only an ample, intelligent, accurate work on Brecht and Lukács; it is also, above all, an original work of philosophy, directly inspired by Hannah Arendt's great work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and even more by Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind*. Given that Pike has quite consciously written an original philosophical work—one that speaks, to be sure, in detail and at length of Lukács and Brecht but also one primarily intended to be a "chronicle of misinformed idealism that led hundreds of talented people to tragedy, squalor or death" (Simon Karlinsky, *New York Times Book Review*, writing on Pike's first book, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933–1945*)—his book must also be judged as a work of philosophy with a hidden agenda. Moreover, Pike himself frankly states that "the link between the two men lies in their practice of viewing reality through the prism of a rigid political dogma. This persistent inclination led to theoretical rationalizations that were incapable of acknowledging the evolving pattern of Stalinist atrocities or that classified these atrocities as historical necessity, and it likewise distorted each man's view of fascism." If this is Pike's principal thesis and the basic thread underlying his book, it is only fair to draw attention to it.

Let me avoid misunderstanding by making it clear that I hold Milosz's and Pike's ethicopolitical intentions to be fully justified and that I share them wholeheartedly. There is such a thing as the moral responsibility of intellectuals toward the younger generation of students, European and American, and this moral responsibility compels consideration of the way in which a monograph concerning men who lived and struggled in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s is written. A "genealogical" analysis of the way in which these men's minds were captured by a pseudoeschatological fascination for Stalinist communism should be an integral part of historical analysis; no academic *Wertfreiheit* can be seriously invoked against an explicit state-

ment of one's own democratic and antitotalitarian vision of the world. In short, it must be totally clear that a rejection of the world manipulated by Stalinism can and must find full treatment in a scholarly work, and in this sense Pike's study fully fills the bill.

The essential point lies elsewhere, however. It is always problematic to antedate historical consciousness—as, in this case, Pike assigns to the 1930s an awareness that actually started during the 1960s among democratic and socialist intellectuals in Europe and America that the social universe of Stalinist manipulation was absolutely indefensible. As is well known, the whole of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* can be read as one great, carefully articulated philosophical protest against this temptation. Furthermore, the problem of the fascination that totalitarianism held for major figures such as Brecht and Lukács still cannot be said to be clarified in its entirety. What one can say is that Pike gives an essentially unilateral, although philologically well-founded, interpretation of totalitarianism.

In fact, it seems proper, when speaking of the intellectuals and writers of the thirties, to distinguish between a true "fascination with totalitarianism"—an attitude manifested by a political penchant for decision making (I am thinking of Karl Schmitt), by criticism of and disrespect for the humanistic ideals derived from the Enlightenment, and, above all, by an ambiguous and masochistic connection with the "masses"—and another phenomenon that, for lack of a better term, I might define provisionally as a sort of "intellectual underevaluation" of the qualitative degradation to which Stalinist totalitarianism subjected socialist ideals. On the practical and concrete level there was undoubtedly not the slightest immediate difference between the two attitudes, inasmuch as both led to de facto political support of Stalinism backed up with arguments taken from a faulty philosophy of history. But if we place these two different attitudes in a historical perspective of several decades (even though the victims of the gulags unfortunately were not granted decades for Stalin's supporters to become aware of the difference but often survived only a matter of months of privation and mistreatment), we see that the "fascination with totalitarianism" was a phenomenon common to the "cult of the leader" on both the left and the right, whereas the "intellectual underevaluation" of the effects of Stalinism was a pathological symptom exclusive to "bad" Marxism of the time (and that this Marxism was indeed "bad" is a relatively recent discovery).

Pike shows himself thoroughly aware of this distinction, of course, and he makes ample use of it in his book. He shows little interest in what he dubs the "so-called expressionism debate of 1937 and 1938," and he asserts that "that controversy, which always comes to mind when Brecht and Lukács are mentioned in the same context, is only of peripheral interest to the following two studies." Pike's book is, in fact, composed of two separate studies devoted to Lukács and to Brecht, respectively, and the least common denominator linking them is not an examination of "their irreconcilable views on art" or a "reexamination of the history of their

well-known aesthetic differences" so much as it is an "inquiry into the workings of a dominant and dominating form of logical reasoning upon the minds of two men, Georg Lukács and Bertold Brecht, who embraced a dogma and allowed it to take over their life and work."

As I have said (it bears repeating since the point is absolutely critical), the fact that Pike explicitly discusses this "influential metaphysics" in his dual study is extremely laudable, and it would undoubtedly have much pleased Gunnar Myrdal, who argued brilliantly in his *Objectivity in Social Research* (New York, 1969) that the social scientist (and, may I add, the historian of ideas) can and should make his own metaphysical premises concerning values explicit to his reader but that he should avoid projecting these premises onto the past. I have already said that Pike's interpretive approach carries with it a danger of anachronism; specifically, that he assigns to the 1930s the awareness that spread among democratic intellectuals after the 1960s of the irremediable harm of totalitarianism. (This is clearly erroneous: to cite only one example, even Ernst Bloch, who is well known to have been a libertarian humanist and who emigrated to the United States at the end of the thirties, found no difficulty at that time in adapting his own thought to dogma and wrote openly in favor of the famous Stalinist trials of those years.) I would like to add that this approach runs the risk of being too abstract precisely when it is applied to Lukács and Brecht as philosophical and political thinkers. What does it really mean to consider their lives and work as they might have been had the two men lived, let us say, like good antidogmatic democrats à la Dewey and then to argue for a "takeover of a dogma" in their lives and works? If I may be permitted a simplistic analogy, it would be like trying to examine the lives and works of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas in the abstract, independently of the "takeover" of Christian dogma within which they consciously decided to place themselves and develop their thought. Therefore, unless I am grossly mistaken (in which case, my apologies to the reader), it is less a question of any "takeover of a dogma" than of thoroughgoing political and existential choices on Lukács's and Brecht's parts—choices that were characteristic of those irretrievable years and that we in the eighties can no longer comprehend "existentially," given the enormous differences in the historical situations then and now.

To be sure, we do have a right to say now that all too often they chose a "metaphysical communism," one abstract and foreign to all Popperian principles of falsification. Pike, for example, amply documents how "Brecht's tendency to indulge in the Stalinist mystique was not tempered in the least by his Western European or American experience." (He forgets, however, Brecht's unhappy experience before the courts for anti-American activities in the forties.) But his analysis stops short: this same sugary and often repellent Stalinist mystique was no more than the outside shell of Brecht's old avant-garde, provocative radicalism—a phenomenon absolutely endogenous to the spirit of revolt among the Western petit bourgeoisie but absolutely foreign to the greater part of Russian culture in the thirties

(as Pike clearly documents in connection with V. Aleksandrov's harsh criticism of Brecht's *Die Mutter*, a dramatic adaptation of Gorky's novel).

Given the "influential metaphysics" that characterizes his book, it is evident that the philosophical problematics of the defense and rescue of the individual in Lukács (which so interests Gluck) holds little interest for Pike. As is partially true for Parkinson, Pike is not even very interested in the philosophical works that Lukács wrote after 1956, in which his detachment from Stalinism is clear and explicit. Nevertheless, the impression that remains after putting down Pike's book is one of having read an excellent work, probably thanks to the author's skill in reproducing the cultural context of the debates of the thirties and forties and in holding his reader's interest.

To summarize, it is clear that the "critical secondary literature" on Lukács is beginning to be not only abundant but also of good quality. We now have available a range of positions, from that of Gluck—sensitive to Lukács's revolutionary classicism as a philosophical strategy for what amounts to a "communist" rescue of the individual in the modern world—to Pike, who insists instead on the fascination that dogmatic totalitarianism held for critical-minded European intellectuals. This simple fact is a healthy symptom, and it should in no way lead the reader to a sense of relativism or skepticism, as though philosophical criticism endowed all judgments and their contraries with equal legitimacy. In reality, much in the European intellectual adventure (and, to a lesser extent, the American one) between the thirties and the fifties that we might provisionally define as "critical communism" still remains to be analyzed and studied. The same is true of other great periods in Western intellectual history: we all know, for example, that much in the way of further research remains to be done on the Enlightenment. Although European "critical communism" was quite obviously a historical phenomenon of much less importance on the plane of world history than was the Enlightenment, it would be risky to dismiss it with a stereotype or two. The enriched interpretation that emerges from studies such as those of Mary Gluck and David Pike, accompanied by the necessary information to be gotten from works such as G. H. R. Parkinson's, is thus a precondition and a prerequisite to ongoing critical discussion.

There is a second point, however, that seems to me even more interesting. As everyone knows, one characteristic of the decade through which we are living—both in Europe and in the United States—is the hegemony of cultural currents that define themselves as postmodern. They are generally categorized as "posthumous" in the sense that they are "successive," not only in contrast to dogmatic and (fortunately) indefensible forms of Marxism such as Stalinism or populist Maoism but also in contrast to the more sophisticated and "independent" forms of historical materialism such as that of Georg Lukács (but also those of Bloch, Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School). In Europe, postmodernist philosophical currents are also often defined as "nihilistic" in that they argue that the "consummation" of ethical and political values founded on a "metaphysics" has al-

ready been accomplished and that we therefore need to learn to live with the death of God and the widespread existential situation of the advent of Nothingness. These philosophical currents seem to me to be “dead dogs” now, to use the term that Marx once applied to the positivists in their treatment of Hegel. Still, it seems increasingly clear that postmodernism is less a definitive and epoch-making movement destined to last for centuries than it is a movement arising out of the current *conjoncture* and as a result of the philosophical “fall from grace” of the dogmatic hopes of the radical cultures of the sixties. After the ingenuous attempt by the generation of the sixties to scale the heavens, and after the postmodernist fall of the eighties, the fundamental historical and philosophical problems of the period in which we are living remain to a great extent those of classical thought.

It would be good to see Lukács read, studied, and appreciated as a classical thinker—that is, as a thinker who attempted to translate into the language of nineteenth-century historical materialism Aristotle’s and Hegel’s broad interest in categorizing. It would also be good to see Lukács combated, if such combat were in the name of a liberal democratic vision that takes its inspiration from Benedetto Croce, Gaetano Salvemini, and Hannah Arendt. When the ingenuous eschatological passions of European and American Maoism are spent, and when we have outgrown the post-modern skepticism that is its just retaliation (Dante Alighieri’s term was *contrapasso*), the moment will return when philosophy will regain its grandeur and will arouse renewed interest. At that point, Lukács will help us.