

Edited by  
Michael J. Thompson

# Georg Lukács Reconsidered

Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy  
and Aesthetics

# Georg Lukács Reconsidered

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# Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	vii
Introduction: Recovering Lukács' Relevance for the Present <i>Michael J. Thompson</i>	1
<b>Part I: Lukács' Philosophical Legacy</b>	
Chapter 1 Lukács and the Dialectic: Contributions to a Theory of Practice <i>Stephen Eric Bronner</i>	13
Chapter 2 Lukács and the Recovery of Marx after Marxism <i>Tom Rockmore</i>	33
Chapter 3 Georg Lukács' <i>Destruction of Reason</i> <i>Stanley Aronowitz</i>	50
Chapter 4 Revolutionary Dialectics against "Tailism": Lukács' Answer to the Criticisms of <i>History and Class Consciousness</i> <i>Michael Löwy</i>	65
<b>Part II: Extending Aesthetic Theory</b>	
Chapter 5 The Theory of the Novel and the Concept of Realism in Lukács and Adorno <i>Peter Uwe Hohendahl</i>	75
Chapter 6 Time—The Corrupting Principle: A Short Apology for Georg Lukács' Poetics of the Novel <i>Werner Jung</i>	99
Chapter 7 Art's Struggle for Freedom: Lukács, the Literary Historian <i>János Keleman</i>	110
Chapter 8 The Modern Meaning of Georg Lukács' Reconstruction of Walter Scott's Novels of Premodern Political Ethics <i>Norman Arthur Fischer</i>	128

**Part III: Perspectives on Critical Theory**

Chapter 9	Back to History? Reinterpreting Lukács' Early Marxist Work in Light of the Antinomies of Contemporary Critical Theory <i>Konstantinos Kavoulakos</i>	151
Chapter 10	Reification and its Critics <i>Andrew Feenberg</i>	172
Chapter 11	Returning to Lukács: Honneth's Critical Reconstruction of Lukács' Concepts of Reification and Praxis <i>Timothy Hall</i>	195
Chapter 12	Living Form and Living Criticism <i>Katie Terezakis</i>	211
Chapter 13	Ontology and Totality: Reconstructing Lukács' Concept of Critical Theory <i>Michael J. Thompson</i>	229
	<i>Index</i>	251

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# Introduction: Recovering Lukács' Relevance for the Present

Michael J. Thompson

It is perhaps one of the great losses of contemporary intellectual life that the writings of Georg Lukács have fallen into almost total neglect. Once hailed as one of the great figures of twentieth-century thought and a central theorist of radical politics, he has earned the name once used to describe Hegel in the decades after his death: that of a “dead dog.” Throughout the middle of the twentieth century he was seen by many proponents of Western Marxism as a central figure of radical thought even as others, such as Leszek Kolakowski, referred to his oeuvre as “reason in the service of dogma.”<sup>1</sup> But there is something deeply mistaken about this blind spot in contemporary intellectual and theoretical discourse. With the collapse of communism and the disintegration of Marxism in Western intellectual circles it is time to look anew at the unique ideas that Lukács put forth and to assess his contributions to the overall project of critical thought. This book attempts to recover Lukács’ importance for radical thought but in a way that seeks to reshape his relevance for the present.

Today, with futility, an atrophied left searches for ethical and political coherence in writers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and others that epitomize the essence of what Lukács saw as the great pathology of modern thought: the detachment of consciousness from its social and material context. A genuinely radical politics requires a rational confrontation with the mechanisms of the modern social order, and Lukács was consistent in seeing the material base that leads to an exaggerated subjectivity and its concurrent irrationalism as well as the political and ethical motivational paralysis that results from its reifying tendencies. As a partial response to this situation, the central purpose of the essays collected here is to work toward a project of intellectual recovery, to reconstruct some of the more compelling, salient features of Lukács’ ideas and his intellectual relevance for the present. What continues to make Lukács’ ideas unique, powerful, and compelling is the way they deepen our conception of critical theory but also, and more importantly, the way he forces us to consider the nature of politics through a synthesis of realist and humanist lenses. An heir to the great tradition of German humanistic thinking, Lukács was able to forge a theoretical corpus of work which allows us access to

a philosophical vocabulary singularly powerful in its ability to generate new insights in political theory, social thought, moral philosophy, and aesthetics. This is because his humanism was fused to a Marxian conception of social process, of history, of change. Lukács' critical theory is premised on the need to change the mechanisms of social power so as to liberate the deeper, more genuinely human potentialities of man.

Perhaps what makes Lukács so deeply relevant today is the way his ideas run so hard against the grain of contemporary thought and theoretical self-understanding. Lukács was, more than most of those who constitute the loose-fitting title of Western Marxists, one who sought to preserve the insights of Hegel and Marx against what he saw as the onslaught of expanded subjectivity and ethical-political relativism. A firm believer in the conviction that human society can now glimpse an ontologically superior form of human existence on the horizon of historical development, he was concerned with protecting a particular vision of human social life, ethics, and a normative vision that placed emphasis on the objective dimensions of human existence and thought as opposed to the subjective elements that had gained ascendancy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a theoretician of Marx, he was able to give Marxism philosophical depth and sophistication; as a literary critic, he was able to construct a series of categories about the nature of artworks which held them accountable to the political context of their time; and as a philosopher, his concern with the humanistic potential of the socialist tradition was read through the major thinkers of German Idealism even as he scorned the partial conceptions of man that lay at the heart of existentialism, phenomenology, psychologism, and other forms of what he considered the irrationalism of "bourgeois thought."

\* \* \*

Born in 1883 in Budapest to a wealthy Jewish banking family, Lukács was perhaps better poised than any of his contemporaries to absorb the critical and the humanistic currents of his time. From the German tradition of humanistic learning came the central ideal that was at the heart of much of German high culture: the formation through our cultural products of a genuinely whole culture (*Kultur*) and personality (*Persönlichkeit*). This was the aim of the literary and artistic achievements of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Germany, of Goethe and Schiller, Hölderlin and Novalis, not to mention Hegel and Marx. It placed great emphasis on the cultivation of the personality, its capacities, sensibilities, and skills. Although the roots of this neo-humanism were in sixteenth-century religious Pietism, it became gradually secularized during the eighteenth century and exercised a powerful force on the generation of thinkers and artists that emerged during the time of the French Revolution. Christian religious elements were replaced by the ideal of classical Greece and the romantic vision of its unalienated, integrated culture where man was able

to develop to his fullest completion. This was an impulse that would have an enduring impact on the German reconceptualization of a coherent humanist doctrine for modern man.<sup>2</sup> Central was the notion of *Bildung*, the “cultivation” of the person, but through a process of development, of shaping; a process of growth through education, through the self-directed formation of the personality through culture. “To become a god, to be a man, to educate oneself—all these are different ways of expressing the same meaning,” wrote Friedrich Schlegel in his *Athenaeum*, and it was this process of development, of education, of formation that was a central ideal for German neo-humanists. The concept of *Bildung* would remain a crucial means by which later radical thinkers—from Marx to Lukács—would come to see the ontological nature of human beings. Lukács saw this process of development as a central value, one he sought to protect and exalt in his work, seeing it as a definitive struggle of modern man to realize his full potential as a fully integrated personality.

In his early, pre-Marxist collection, *Soul and Form* (1910), Lukács returns to this theme again and again in different ways. In these essays Lukács gives voice to what he saw to be the central problem of modern culture: the petrification of the dynamic potentiality of man, of the cutting down of man’s development to its most utilitarian, most base needs. The legacy of *Bildung* was to be found in art, in the ways it was able to shape and educate individuals. *Soul and Form* would take this tradition and frame it within the vitalism of the early twentieth century. Lukács singles out the structure of bourgeois life as the central symptom of cultural decline: “The bourgeois way of life is a kind of forced labor, a hateful servitude, a constraint against which every life-instinct must rebel, a constraint which can be accepted only through an immense effort of all—in the hope, perhaps, that the ecstasy of the struggle will create that extreme intensity of feeling which the working of art demands.”<sup>3</sup> Bourgeois culture becomes the central limiting factor to the potentialities of man in the modern world, and art’s ability to transcend it was always met with frustration.<sup>4</sup> The enemy of Lukács’ humanist impulses was laid bare in terms of culture, but he would also seek to grasp it intellectually, through a theory of culture as well.

The intellectual state of the art during this period was neo-Kantianism, particularly the Southwest or Baden School of neo-Kantianism. Members of this school such as Heinrich Rickert, Ernst Troeltsch, and Wilhelm Windelband sought to formulate a concept of values that would be able to give coherence to cultural life. Although they saw an intrinsic distinction within the realm of knowledge between the aims of science and the process of history and culture (between *Natur* and *Geist*), they sought to show that values were transcendent in nature and that “the empirical or existence is subordinate to this transcendent realm of value.”<sup>5</sup> Although thinkers such as Max Weber would be deeply influenced by the neo-Kantian idea of a separation between facts and values, between the nature of reality on the one hand and timeless values on the other, Georg Simmel sought to go against this trend by arguing that values were inherent in the vitalism of life itself, a life determined by sociation. For Simmel,

there was an inherent antagonism in each of us since we could know ourselves as both a subject and an object: “The fundamental activity of our mind, which determines its form as a whole, is that we can observe, know and judge ourselves just like any other ‘object’; that we dissect the Ego, experienced as a unity, but on the contrary with its becoming aware of its unity through this inner antagonism.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the knowledge of man had to be approached from a point of view that brought together subjective and objective moments of understanding. By leaving these two realms apart, we would be left with only a partial understanding of man and culture. This would be an important problem for Lukács’ intellectual and philosophical development, one that would mark his ideas even into the later phase of his life.<sup>7</sup>

Lukács was decidedly influenced by these debates in neo-Kantianism and its theories of modern culture.<sup>8</sup> He saw that the ideas of Weber—specifically his thesis of rationalization of modern society—needed to be understood in conjunction with Simmel’s thesis concerning the crisis of modern culture. For Weber, the modern world with its core feature of the emergence of mass society necessitated new forms of social rationality: bureaucracy, rational forms of authority, and a subjective penchant toward an “obedience” (*Gehorsam*) to these rational structures and laws, were all markers of modern society and culture. For his part, Simmel saw a “tragedy of culture” resulting from a growing disconnect between the cultural products of individuals (what he termed “subjective culture”) and the complexity of the sum total of social products in the form of modern technology, laws, the quantification of value through money, and so on (what he called “objective culture”) which had become unbridgeable. As a result, both were conceptualizing the dawn of modernity in pessimistic tones—a way out was scarcely visible.

This created a great tension in the young Lukács. On the one hand, the neo-humanistic impulse that had nourished his ethical and aesthetic sensibilities, and given voice in *Soul and Form* as well as his *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), had filled him with the yearning for a more genuine, more integrated social and cultural life. On the other hand, the idea that the modern, bourgeois world was unable to provide such a culture was becoming intellectually clear through the theoretical advances of Weber and Simmel. He turned again to literary criticism to find an answer to this problem. His history of drama, *Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Dramas* (1911), sought to show how the fragmentation of modern culture—a theme he took directly from his studies with Simmel in Berlin in 1906 and 1907—had disabled the genre of modern theater to serve as a means of self-understanding for modern society. Whereas cultures of the past had been able to experience theater as an integral part of a cohesive, authentic culture, modern drama had been gutted of this ability.<sup>9</sup> The fault was to be found in the fragmentation of culture brought on by modernity. Art alone was seen as increasingly unable to produce the coherently integrated culture that Lukács’ neo-humanistic leanings desired.<sup>10</sup> The break with this phase of his development would come with his turn to Marxism.

Simmel and Weber had been able to diagnose many of the surface problems of modern society and culture, but they were unable to locate an agent of transformation, a way out of the “iron cage” of modernity. In Marxism, Lukács believed he had found a way out of this dilemma. With this turn in his intellectual development, Lukács was able to translate his humanistic and intellectual concerns into a new language. In place of the neo-Kantian traces in his thought, he conjures Hegel in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) to provide a more comprehensive account of the ability of consciousness to grasp the totality of social being and transform social reality. Now the Hegelian-Marxian vantage point would direct the way toward exploding the problems that had plagued him in his youth: the chasm between fact and value, what *is* and what *ought to be*, the acceptance of social fragmentation as a form of modern fate, the dwindling hope for genuine self-realization—all could be overcome. Marx’s thought was now seen as the end process of a series of historical struggles in German thought to posit a path toward an authentically free society where human development could be rid of the impediments of capitalism. The point of origin for modern fragmentation could be located in the category of *labor*. Both Marx and Hegel had argued for the centrality of labor as a crucial means to dialectically sublimate theory and praxis. For Hegel, the nature of labor was such that it served as a mediating mechanism between subjectivity and objectivity; it was the very means by which the individual was able to give coherence to his own personality through creation, through the externalization (*Entäußerung*) of a predefined idea (*Vorbild*) into the objective world. In the process, this kind of praxis, this intentional activity, would also transform his environment and, as a result, become the very basis of human progress.<sup>11</sup> In Marx, it was clear that capitalism was premised on the debasement of labor; the misappropriation of it not for the needs of the community as a whole, but perverted for the interests of the minority of owners. In either case, labor was the central variable in the path to man’s self-realization.

*History and Class Consciousness* could now locate the problem of modernity in the relation of economic structure and organization of society and the consciousness of those that inhabited it. Since labor was seen as a rudimentary kind of praxis connecting the consciousness and personality of the worker with the objective world, the fragmentation of the division of labor and the rationalization of the production process would have disintegrating effects upon modern man. When workers were able to see themselves for what they were, gain a true self-understanding of their actual position within the structural system of capitalism (to be *an und für sich*, in Hegelian terms) as commodities, then the very nature of the objective world would be changed as well since working people would now have a glimpse into the structure of the totality and their place in it—a consciousness which was essential for political action.<sup>12</sup> “When the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practical. *That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge.*” The set of submerged categories that determine the structure of



the modern world then “awakens and becomes *social reality*.”<sup>13</sup> His celebrated category of “reification” (*Verdinglichung*) was an epistemological, not a cultural category, from the beginning: it was the distorted form of cognition—shaped by the nature of the commodity form and exchange relations under capitalism—which hid the pathological shape of modern society from its own participants. Consciousness of the totality would therefore be an act of revealing the true collective nature of consciousness. We do not think or act as individual subjects but as integral parts of a social group, and once we become conscious of this so will the way we know and assess our world also begin to transform.<sup>14</sup> History was now to be seen as the culmination of collective human praxis, and an “expressive totality”—where the working class would now, through collective agency, transform society in its own interests, the interests identical with all of humankind—would now be able to fuse together the fragmented world left by capitalism into an authentic modernity under socialism.

Against the Marxist orthodoxy of the time, Lukács rejected the notion that human beings lacked agency in the act of transforming their world. What was required was a new kind of consciousness (what Lukács refers to as *bezogenes Bewusstsein*) which would be able to relate *existing* conditions of the proletariat under capitalist conditions to the *potential* reality that can be brought into being, lying dormant in the present, once consciousness is properly directed toward itself as the subject-object of history.<sup>15</sup> But he would come to reject the basic thesis of *History and Class Consciousness*—first in bowing to the conformist pressure of the Comintern in 1924 and then, even later in life in 1967, referring to it as a “superseded work.” Nevertheless, he never abandoned the central theme of achieving wholeness and overcoming alienation that had guided his earliest interventions in modern culture and criticism. In his preface to *Balzac und der französische Realismus* (1951), he would therefore write that:

The goal of proletarian humanism is man in his wholeness, the restoration of human existence in its totality in actual life, the practical real abolition of the crippling fragmentation of our existence caused by class-society. These theoretical and practical perspectives determine the criteria on the basis of which Marxist aesthetics recaptures the classics. The Greeks, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorki are at the same time adequate presentations (*Bilder*) of distinct great stages in the evolution of mankind, and signposts in the ideological struggle for the totality of man.<sup>16</sup>

Understanding that this problem of fragmentation was *objective* in nature was crucial. Without it, we would be reliant upon what Lukács saw as irrationalist ideas diagnosing the pathologies of the present age. Existentialism or phenomenology in philosophy, psychologism or behaviorism in the human sciences, liberalism in the realm of politics, abstract expressionism or naturalism in art and literature, were all to be seen as defective for their inability to conceptualize the whole, the totality. They reflected merely moments of a fragmented

totality that were unable to perform the crucial task of *mediation* (*Vermittlung*), of serving as a mechanism to reveal the real causes that shape and reproduce the pathologies of the modern age. Only then would man be able to achieve a consciousness of an aspiration toward a more humane existence and the means to realize it whether through the transformation of consciousness toward the ontological nature of human sociality or to the capacity of realist art to portray the totality of society.<sup>17</sup> In his later projects on aesthetics, ontology, and ethics, he was concerned with systematizing this structure of thought into a unified whole when he died in 1971.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

The twin concerns that run through Lukács' work—of the problem of social/personal fragmentation and the desire for human wholeness on the one hand and the methodological commitment to an objectivist-materialist understanding of the nature of man and his sociality—express, I think, Lukács' true contributions to modern thought, contributions which retain their salience today. In the face of postmodernism and poststructuralism—themselves simply expressions of an irrationalism that could have been taken straight from the pages of Lukács' *Destruction of Reason*—as well as an ascendant capitalism and neo-liberal ideology, we are faced once again with constructing a radical yet coherent alternative to the present social order. But one is needed that can also be satisfying in a moral sense as well as in social-theoretic terms. The essays collected here are unified in the belief that Lukács—despite his errors and political misjudgments—can help provide such an alternative structure of thought. Trends in contemporary political and social theory as well as moral philosophy, literary criticism, and aesthetics have seen a return to various philosophical traditions to compensate for the collapse of Marxism: communitarianism, Kantianism, vitalism, phenomenology, existentialism, mystical ontology, religion and theology, as well as identity politics—all speak to this breakdown. Perhaps a reconsideration of Lukács' ideas can serve as a corrective to these trends and give foundation once again to a humanist ethical tradition with an objective understanding of social reality. This book makes such a suggestion and, in the process, recalls and hopefully revives the ideas of one of the truly great thinkers of modern times.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 253–307.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent discussion is found in Lukács' analysis of Schiller and Hölderlin. See *Goethe und Seine Zeit* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1947), 78–126. Commenting on Schiller's immediate period, Lukács remarks that “Der humanistische Kampf

gegen die Degradation des Menschen durch die kapitalistische Arbeitsteilung findet gerade auf literarisch-künstlerischem Gebiet ein leuchtendes Vorbild in der griechischen Literatur und Kunst, die tatsächlich der Ausdruck einer Gesellschaft waren, welche—für ihre freien Bürger, die hier allein in Betracht kamen—noch diesseits dieser gesellschaftlichen Struktur stand,” 81.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*. Trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1974), 56.

<sup>4</sup> See the excellent discussion of the roots of Lukács’ aesthetic views by Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 158–172.

<sup>5</sup> Gillian Rose, *Hegel: Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 9. For an excellent discussion of the development of neo-Kantianism and its relevance for thinkers like Lukács, see Andrew Arato, “The Neo-Idealist Defense of Subjectivity.” *Telos*, vol. 21 (1974), 108–161.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*. Trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 1990), 64. Also see the discussion by Jonathan H. Turner, “Simmel and Weber on Money, Exchange, and Structural Differentiation,” in David Frisby (ed.) *Georg Simmel: Critical Assessments* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 317–324.

<sup>7</sup> See the excellent discussion by George Lichtheim, *George Lukács* (New York: Viking, 1970), 1–28.

<sup>8</sup> See Hartmut Rosshoff’s thorough study on this theme, *Emil Lask als Lehrer von Georg Lukács* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> See Werner Jung, *Georg Lukács* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989), 37–43.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion, see Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology: 1870–1923* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 159–175.

<sup>11</sup> See the crucial discussion in *Der junge Hegel und die Probleme der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1986), 389–419.

<sup>12</sup> See the excellent discussion by Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács et Heidegger* (Paris: Éditions Denöel, 1973). In particular Goldmann points to Lukács’ insight that “la structure mentale du groupe détermine son action et fait en sorte que certaines choses, certains projets ne sont pas pensables et que le groupe ne peut pas les vouloir, non seulement au niveau de la conscience, mais également au niveau non conscient essentiel pour l’action; cet élément de structuration mentale est tout aussi important pour caractériser une possibilité objective que l’est la situation extérieure,” 124.

<sup>13</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 169.

<sup>14</sup> Lucien Goldmann insightfully remarks on this thesis by Lukács: “We have simply to imagine three removal men moving a piano in order to see the total impossibility of understanding what is happening if we suppose that one of them has the status of subject, since this would mean that we assimilate the two others to the piano as objects of the thought and action of the first. . . . Clearly the only way of understanding the facts and restoring the link between consciousness and action is to admit that the three removal men make up together the subject of an action which has the piano as its object and the removal as its result.”

“Reflections on *History and Class Consciousness*,” in István Mészáros (ed.) *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 72.

<sup>15</sup> See the useful discussion by Jörg Kammler, *Politische Theorie von Georg Lukács* (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterland, 1974), 71–101.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Roy Pascal, “Georg Lukács: The Concept of Totality,” in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas* (New York: Random House, 1970), 155.

<sup>17</sup> See the interesting discussion by J. M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism, and the Dialectics of Form* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 228–267.

<sup>18</sup> Note Werner Jung’s discussion of this last phase of Lukács’ work in *Georg Lukács*, 1–32.

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Part I

# Lukács' Philosophical Legacy

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## Chapter 1

# Lukács and the Dialectic: Contributions to a Theory of Practice

Stephen Eric Bronner

Georg Lukács (1885–1971) was perhaps the most recognized intellectual of the communist world. His writings contributed mightily toward the development of modern aesthetics, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and politics. They transformed historical materialism and laid the basis for critical theory.<sup>1</sup> Leaders of the European student movement like Rudi Dutschke admired him, avant-garde thinkers confronted him, and many members of what Martin Jay termed “the generation of ‘68” in the United States were inspired by his efforts.<sup>2</sup> He was a star. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, his writings fell into a kind of academic limbo. The end of history was upon us. The neo-liberal state had triumphed and, as the slogan coined by Margaret Thatcher proclaimed, “there is no alternative.” The impact upon philosophy was palpable—if usually unacknowledged. Master narratives and their master theorists came under attack. The holocaust was seen as a product of the Enlightenment, liberal political thought, and scientific rationality. Pursuit of the totality was seen as presaging totalitarianism. Marxism was not only historically discredited, but deemed intellectually disreputable. Those few still interested in Lukács’ writings looked more acceptable sources for inspiration. Post-structuralist philosophers embraced *Soul and Form* (1911) with its Neo-Kantian emphasis upon subjectivity; literary critics applauded the mixture of pessimism and apocalypse that marked *The Theory of the Novel* (1920). Even as literary and philosophical works were regularly reduced to the sexual or ethnic identity of their authors, ironically, Lukács’ later (more reductionist) literary criticism was tactfully ignored.

Most agreed grudgingly that Lukács’ masterpiece, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) was a remarkable scholarly feat. It turned alienation (*Entfremdung*) with its anthropological roots in the division of labor into a core concern. Alienation was the experience of the worker engaged in the mechanical repetition of tasks, separated from other workers, and with little concern from the completed product of his efforts. Even worse, so the argument ran, the worker actually engaged in producing commodities was treated by capitalism as a commodity. The worker was little more than a cost of production to be quantified,



objectified, and turned into a “thing.” Alienation was not the only product of the commodity form: there was also reification (*Verdingliching*). Treated as an object the worker could only see himself as an object. Transforming that situation became the purpose of class consciousness. Revolution would now involve not merely the abolition of capitalism but the anthropological foundations of repression associated with prehistory.

Such concerns and others occupied the young Marx. Nevertheless, *Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* was only published in 1932.<sup>3</sup>

Lukács anticipated these themes and, in the process, changed the meaning of Marxism. The implications of his arguments run deep—arguably deeper than those formulated by Marx himself. They project a utopian mission for the working class and an apocalyptic understanding of revolution that even the young Hegelian probably would not have embraced. From the dialectical standpoint, however, that doesn't really matter. *History and Class Consciousness* was concerned with precisely those ideas of political resistance, organization, and utopian possibility that mainstream academics find so irritating. A few of their number have actually sought to deal with alienation and reification in philosophical terms by noting the importance of reciprocity and rehabilitating Martin Heidegger's ontological notion of “care.”<sup>4</sup> Liberal academics and intellectual historians have thus found ways of preserving Lukács' heritage from conservatives who (if they ever heard his name) dismissed him quickly enough. In the process, however, Lukács' legacy lost its critical character and its political bite. Restoring its radical quality is the purpose of this essay.

*From Science to Method*: Marxism was very different prior to the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*. It was intended for activists and mass education rather than for intellectuals. Marxism in its early days mirrored the conditions of Europe during the second industrial revolution (1875–1914). Monopolies and trusts were increasingly dominating the market under a set of continental monarchies and, as capital was congealing into fewer yet mightier firms, the industrial proletariat was growing at a rapid rate. Social democratic parties were emerging with this class as its mass base. These organizations required a clear and comprehensible ideology. They found it in scientific socialism, or “orthodox” Marxism, which was conceived as a unified schema encompassing both the natural and the social world. Criteria for verifying the truth or falsity of its claims were seen as deriving from the natural sciences: universal laws were considered operative and, when dealing with capitalism, class conflict in the economic sphere was viewed as driving the inevitable triumph of the proletariat. Revolution was considered inevitable. Organizing the proletariat was merely a way of speeding up the process and preparing for an efficient seizure of power when the time was ripe. Marxists believed that their science predicated on economic determinism, with its empirical claims and teleological predictions, provided the proletariat with its sense of historical purpose.

History was believed to develop in stages. Its motivating force, especially under capitalism, was class conflict over the economic surplus not state politics

or an epiphenomenal ideology. Each historical stage would build on the progressive accomplishments of its predecessor and only when the contradictions of a given stage were resolved would the next appear. Economically underdeveloped nations would experience first a bourgeois revolution and then a second socialist transformation after capitalism had flourished. Socialism could only present itself as a meaningful possibility when capitalism had transformed the vast majority of the population into a proletariat conscious of its political priorities and ideological goals. The larger the proletarian majority the more peaceful socialist revolution and the more developed the economy the easier to deal with scarcity. Social democracy proved strongest where monarchies ruled:<sup>5</sup> its appeal was, ironically, generated as much by its democratic commitments as its economic demands. Given the assumption that the proletariat was growing, and that its interests were unified, it only made sense that all Marxists should have been committed to securing universal suffrage and instituting republics. And they were. Revolutionary goals no less than reformist demands were clearly articulated in works like *The Erfurt Program* (1891). Workers everywhere in Europe embraced social democratic parties committed to creating a republic under the liberal rule of law, privileging the economic interests of workers through nationalizing industry and municipal forms of control, and fostering a belief in the internationalist, secular, and scientific values first generated by the Enlightenment.

All major figures of the Second International (including Lenin) believed in this rough sketch of Marxism. Where differences arose they were over the contingent implications of the theory for socialist practice. It was thus always a matter of assessing the constraints on political practice and impact of new conditions on tactics. Following Hegel and Marx, indeed, freedom was understood as the insight into necessity. What Karl Kautsky called the “social revolution” was seen as integrating all noncapitalist classes into the proletariat and, thus, it only made sense for socialist parties to garner reforms in practice while building consciousness in anticipation of the political seizure of power. Eduard Bernstein—often called the “father of revisionism”—differed only to the extent that he believed the proletariat had ceased to grow. Revolution under these circumstances could produce only dictatorship by a minority. According to Bernstein, then, better to embrace the prospect of economic reform and engage in partnership with other classes even if this meant jettisoning the precepts of Marxism. Social democracy was doing this anyway. From the standpoint of a theory of practice, indeed, it was actually Bernstein (rather than Kautsky) whose thinking best incarnated the historical reality of the Second International.<sup>6</sup> He, too, rested his political arguments on an empirical (or “scientific”) analysis of the economic workings of capitalism. Bernstein’s famous call to “give up cant and return to Kant” was as much meant to protect scientific investigation from the intrusion of ideology as to substitute a vague socialist ethic for a flawed teleology. Rosa Luxemburg based her critique of revisionism no less than her theory of the mass strike and imperialism upon

empirical investigations into the transnational workings of the capitalist economy. Even Lenin prior to World War I accepted a theory of historical stages in which the socialist revolution was predicated on the preconditions generated by a full-blown capitalism. Both Luxemburg and Lenin also identified the purpose of the revolution with the introduction of a republic. Orthodox Marxism, in short, provided a common interpretive framework that Lukács exploded with the famous challenge that transformed its meaning:

Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious "orthodox" Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation. . . . Orthodox Marxism does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the "belief" in this or that thesis, or the exegesis of a "sacred" book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method.

What was new then is now the standard position for those concerned with salvaging the legacy of Marx. Various structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers have, admittedly, attempted to redefine science in order to deal with new philosophical exigencies. But that doesn't change matters. No intellectual of standing any longer interprets Marxism in terms of the natural sciences or as a unified system. Only a few blinkered academics and dogmatic sectarians still treat *Das Kapital* (1867) in exegetical terms or as the principal source for dealing with contemporary issues ranging from sexism to environmentalism. Turning Marxism into a critical method set the stage for integrating non-Marxist ideas in order to deal with issues that Marx could not possibly have envisioned. The growing influx of new concerns and new perspectives would, of course, eviscerate the original coherence of Marxism. But it was a choice between preserving its status as a science or subjecting it to history—and the dialectic. Lukács chose the latter: Marxism was thereby transformed into a theory of practice.

*R-inventing the Dialectic:* Lukács was not the first to link Hegel with Marx. In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), Friedrich Engels already noted that German Idealism in general and Hegel in particular was one of the three fundamental influences on his friend—along with English political economy and French utopian socialism. Not much later Jean Jaures, the great leader of French social democracy, sought to explain the idealist core of Marx's outlook for a broad audience. Max Adler—the Austro-Marxist philosopher—offered a more scholarly account in *Marx und Hegel* (1911). But these activist intellectuals still viewed philosophical idealism as one influence among others on the inventor of scientific socialism. Lukács' interpretation was far more radical: he insisted that idealism was *the* primary source of historical materialism. With its emphasis upon action, indeed, he insisted that philosophical idealism privileged the problem of how humanity constitutes itself—and thus, by

implication, how it constitutes reality. This step explicitly identified Marxism with a transformative purpose. It highlighted the moment of revolutionary political practice within what had popularly been considered an economic science with fatalistic implications.

Lukács placed what I would call the *constitution problem* at the center of the dialectical discourse. Human creativity, he believed, had always driven the historical process. Lukács liked to quote Vico who had noted that “the difference between history and nature is that man has created the one but not the other.” Two worlds confront one another. The unified schema of scientific socialism breaks down. The criteria for understanding nature are different than those for interpreting society. The workings of nature require fixed and trans-historical forms of value-free, instrumental, scientific rationality. Society needs to be understood as a historical phenomenon with an eye on the freedom it provides for its citizens. That is also the case for capitalism. As the exploited producer of capitalist social relations, the working class has an objective interest in asserting its control, its autonomy, and its freedom. The externalization (*Entäußerung*) of its subjectivity, its creative powers, takes place within an increasingly prefabricated and ever more deadening form of everyday life. Its activity is manipulated by the mathematic laws guiding capitalist accumulation that assure maximum output for minimum costs. The worker becomes a mechanical part of a mechanical system that demands both attitudinal and intellectual accommodation. Its division of labor increasingly undermines the ability of the individual to grasp society and all organic relations become fragmented. Restoring these organic relations in a new form, and breaking through the “second nature” of humanity, thus becomes the purpose of revolutionary action.

Philosophical idealism is the primary influence on historical materialism, according to Lukács, because it highlights the immanent “self-knowledge of reality.”<sup>7</sup> Kant and Hegel broke with ancient and medieval forms of thought by refusing to accept the world as the product of God or destiny or in any terms independent of the knowing subject.<sup>8</sup> Modern idealism contested the religiously ordained worldview of the aristocracy and the church from a positive and ethical standpoint that reflected the existential and practical values of the bourgeoisie. It highlighted concerns pertaining to alienation and reification, the “inverted world” of commodity relations, and the manner in which history had escaped the conscious control of humanity. Idealism confronted this reality with a form of speculative reason whose purpose lay in articulating the universal preconditions for the exercise of individuality. This ideal would provide both a reason for subaltern classes to support the bourgeoisie and an ethical justification for opposing the given order. The bourgeois revolutions would have been unthinkable without it. Idealism justified capitalism even as it projected a critique of its arbitrary exercise of class power. Insofar as idealism was the most radical philosophical expression of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, according to Lukács, a revolutionary theory of proletarian class consciousness should not

simply be built upon it but, rather, stand in coherent relation to its problematic. Consciousness of freedom and the ability to act as a historical agent is thus the “decisive moment” for the proletariat in the revolutionary process. But that is what bourgeois idealism cannot provide. It is incapable of understanding how capitalism generates its gravediggers or the impediments to the realization of freedom: alienation and reification. Such knowledge would deny the legitimacy of the very class with which philosophical idealism is intertwined. As a consequence, the un-freedom—alienation and reification—of bourgeois practice is reproduced in its most advanced philosophical expressions.<sup>9</sup>

Knowledge that capitalism has been historically constituted as a system is the precondition for its being transformed. Norms are inextinguishable elements of this undertaking. But that is precisely what scientific rationality is incapable of grasping.<sup>10</sup> Empirical inquiry becomes valuable only insofar as it aids a transformative project. Forms of thought that reflect the criteria and categories of capitalist accumulation obviously cannot call its structure into question. Revolutionary practice requires a revolutionary theory: or, better, a theory that focuses upon the historically constituted “ensemble of social relations” (Marx) in which the proletariat is embedded. If that is the case, however, then its practice as well as its theory must also be understood in historical terms. Both lend themselves to revision in order to deal with new problems posed by new historical conditions.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge requisite to the revolutionary enterprise is, therefore, neither purely empirical nor purely formulaic: it fosters instead the connection between history and class consciousness.

Not capitalism but history: Confronting capitalism calls for confronting the history of exploitation while confronting the history of exploitation requires class consciousness.

A link is fashioned between the historical critique of capitalism and the anthropological critique of exploitation. “Revolution is now directed against prehistory whose teleological end is prescribed when subjects have most fully been transformed into objects by the commodity form under capitalism (in its supposed ‘last stage’ of imperialism”). The idea is messianic in character: the followers of Sabbatai Sevi, the “false messiah” of the Jews in the seventeenth century, insisted that only after every sin was performed would the messiah come. *History and Class Consciousness* is informed by the same logic. Of course, Lukács did not mean that the revolution would have to wait for the moment in which reification defined every person on the planet. That is why he claimed that “the objective theory of class consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility.”<sup>12</sup> It is a matter of recognizing the historical stage at which society is learning to satisfy all its needs in terms of the commodity. The point is not whether more or less commodities exist in capitalist society but whether the commodity form dominates all other possible forms of production. Anthropological tendencies from the past become newly rationalized insofar as the ever more powerful market transforms the subject of production into an object for consumption.<sup>13</sup> The “compulsion” toward objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*)

under capitalism, however, makes it possible for a worker to become “conscious” of the class context. The commodity is the form in which objectification takes place in modernity—and that is the key to the revolutionary project. For Marxism, therefore, it is no longer a matter of proving or verifying how the “transformation” of value into prices has taken place. The “labor theory of value” now assumes phenomenological form,<sup>14</sup> and the empirical investigation into the commodity dissolves into a critical analysis of the constitutive social relations that it hides. The famous “fetish” of the commodity is dispelled by bringing reality under the control of its producer, the subject-object of history, or the proletariat.

Such an outlook highlights the “inverted world” (*verkehrte Welt*) of the commodity from wherein capital is the subject of the system and the proletariat its object even though, in reality, it is the other way around. The implication of retaining this inverted outlook on reality is dramatic. Scientific rationality never questions it. The totality is thereby left intact along with the effects of alienation: the separation of the worker from knowledge of the final product, other workers engaged in different tasks, and ultimately his own intellectual and practical possibilities. Solidarity is thereby undermined along with the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. It can view itself only in the way that capital does: as a cost of production. Its existence as the object of exploitation prevents recognition of itself as the subject of liberation.

Transforming history rests upon class consciousness. Meant here, however, is neither some utopian vision disconnected from practice nor a purely empirical consciousness that defines itself from the perspective of capital, its own product, and the priorities of capitalist accumulation. Lenin insisted in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) that if left to itself the working class can only seek economic reforms, or “trade union consciousness,” and that a vanguard of “professional revolutionary intellectuals” was required to inject it with revolutionary consciousness from the “outside.” But Lukács changed a tactical argument into a reinterpretation of Marxism. The relation between theory and practice takes on a new character. Workers are now seen as thinking insofar as they objectively create a world of reification and intellectuals act insofar as they subjectively think about the conditions for changing it. Linking the two is the precondition for revolution. But it is impossible to offer guarantees. Genuine class consciousness does not simply emanate from the class or the production process: the communist vanguard must “impute” its existence upon the actual proletariat. To put it another way, ultimately, revolutionary action is a gamble.

*A Politics of the Will:* With the exception of Rosa Luxemburg, and even in her case only following the Russian Revolution of 1905, few leading figures of orthodox Marxism were overly concerned with establishing new forms for empowering the working class and privileging its consciousness in the struggle. They emphasized the growth of the party and the achievement of reforms rather than the seizure of power and the construction of soviets or workers’ councils. Bureaucracy was generally understood as a necessary expression of

the party's transformation from a small sect numbering in the tens of thousands to a mass organization of millions. If only for these reasons, therefore, social democracy never dealt with alienation or reification. Outside the party, however, these phenomena were causes of concern. Bohemian artists and critical intellectuals began to take them quite seriously around the turn of the century. This was when the young Lukács began frequenting Max Weber's famous salon where he encountered thinkers like Emil Lask (1875–1915), Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), and Georg Simmel (1858–1918). All of them were concerned with the alienated character of modern society and the impact of reification. Kant's ethical maxim that individuals should never be treated as means to an end, but only as ends unto themselves, was apparently being turned on its head. People were not literally turned into things, of course, but understood within the calculus of costs and benefits. Matters of quality were being transformed into determinations of quantity. Human concerns were becoming subordinate to efficiency, viewed in terms of the mathematical formula that stressed maximum output with minimum input, and the creation of a hierarchic chain of command in which tasks were clearly delineated, expertise was prized, and responsibility was transparent. The ability to grasp the whole would vanish; the expert would supplant the intellectual; and ethics would be relegated to a domain outside of science and political life. The future was taking the shape of a bureaucratic "iron cage"—a term, incidentally, that Weber never used—whose workings would increasingly produce "specialists without spirit" and "sensualists without heart."

World War I seemed to confirm an apocalyptic agenda. Lenin initially didn't believe it when he heard that European social democracy supported its various nation-states in the conflict. He thought it was bourgeois propaganda. In *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), admittedly, Lenin prophesized that the proletariat would succumb to narrow economic temptations and that revolutionary consciousness would need to be brought to it "from the outside" by a vanguard of "professional revolutionary intellectuals." But social democracy had passed numerous resolutions opposing war. One had actually been co-sponsored in 1907 by Lenin, Luxemburg, and Julius Martov. That international and anti-imperialist outlook collapsed in 1914, however, as an upsurge of chauvinist propaganda demonized the enemy; national rallies of workers were organized; governmental action against dissent was feared; imperialist ambitions swept the opposition; and the lure of future influence on policy infected the social democratic leadership.<sup>15</sup> When Lenin learned that the "great betrayal" had actually taken place, he suffered a kind of nervous breakdown. He recovered, or so the story goes, by going to a library in Zurich and engaging in a new reading of Hegel. This led him to reevaluate his still orthodox understanding of Marxism. "Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than vulgar materialism."<sup>16</sup> He clearly meant that the attenuation of revolutionary practice by social democracy in order to let the proletariat grow, strengthen its organization, and garner reforms was a perversion of the real spirit of Marxism.

Lenin called for transforming the international war into an international class war. He reached the conclusion that imperialism was not merely a function of capitalist accumulation but its supposed “last stage”; the new view helped make sense of the war and justify the possibility for revolution at the “weakest link in the chain.” The notion of “permanent revolution” came to justify compressing the bourgeois and the proletarian stages of revolution into one ongoing action; it had hardly been mentioned by Marx, let alone the leaders of European social democracy, but it was championed by Trotsky in 1905. Lenin embraced it in 1917 as a way of justifying revolution in a backward nation like Imperial Russia. He thereby severed the connection between the socialist revolution and not only the need for capitalist development, but a proletarian majority to serve as its base. The bourgeois republic, indeed, ceased to serve as the point of revolutionary reference as Lenin confronted the Provisional Government of February 1917 with the cry for a direct form of proletarian democracy: “all power to the soviets.” A daring *politics of the will* now dispensed with concern for the objective preconditions of revolutionary action. The Bolsheviks seemed to offer much more than a revolution. Their daring utopian experiment threatened to purge a decadent civilization that had culminated in a total war whose sheer barbarity no one had anticipated. Lenin and Trotsky appeared to usher in a new world of freedom. The communist vanguard took on a heroic aura especially following its triumph waged against reactionary forces (supported by the Western democracies) in a horrible civil war. The authoritarian structure of Lenin’s party, which had originated as an organizational adaptation to specific historical conditions, quickly turned into a nonnegotiable demand for any party seeking to join the new Communist International of 1919.

Communism was greeted in those early days as “the wind from the East”—and Lukács was carried away by its fury. Forgotten today are the uprisings—the workers councils and soviets—that it inspired in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and elsewhere. Lukács actually participated in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet of 1919, regrettably killing a number of hostages, before going into exile following the triumph of Admiral Horthy and the creation of the first fascist regime in Europe.<sup>17</sup> The defeat of these working-class uprisings was not a foregone conclusion and, following their defeat, the aura emanating from the Bolsheviks—who had, after all, conducted the only successful revolution—only shined more brightly. Undeterred by economic scarcity, sharply critical of bureaucracy, and blind to political constraints, a *politics of the will* confronted the realm of necessity.

The Russian Revolution in its early years was marked by the abolition of money and military rank, cultural experiments and gender equality, cosmopolitanism and a heroism born of utter destitution and civil war. It seemed that everything was possible.

Its opposition to capitalism was launched not merely against its imperialism, or its materially exploitative character, but its treatment of individuals as potential



competitors and its destruction of solidarity. At issue was both the mechanized society over which humanity had lost control, but the inner passivity and mental dullness that prehistory fostered. Or, better, it was now a matter of how the commodity form and reification penetrated every moment of the totality. *History and Consciousness* envisioned the creation of new organic relations between people within a society liberated from all forms that objectify individuals and prevent the full emergence of their subjectivity. Such a society would maximize autonomy and empowerment. It would bring about the end of prehistory or all conditions that allow history to escape the conscious control of its producers. Lukács claimed in 1920 that the ability to form workers' councils should be seen as "an index of the progress of the revolution."<sup>18</sup> Its instantiation of revolutionary solidarity would finally allow humanity to control its fate equitably and democratically without the distorting effects generated by imbalances of economic, political, and cultural power. Alienation became the object of revolutionary practice. *History and Class Consciousness* offered what Ernst Bloch termed a "utopian surplus."

With the publication of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in 1932, indeed, many of its themes raised by Lukács' masterpiece received belated justification. These writings of the young Marx revived interest in what most intellectuals tended to consider a rigid and unyielding political ideology. They projected the vision of a world that had overcome the division of labor. Their emphasis upon consciousness as the motivating factor for historical change was obvious along with the importance of alienation. These writings of the young Marx substituted the ideal of substantive "human" for the liberal forms of merely "political" emancipation. Their utopian vision of a new man freed from egotism and cruelty, and unburdened by the legacy of alienation, later played an important role in the identification of Marxism with the bleak reality of communist society. In the context, however, the appearance of the early manuscripts was a cause of embarrassment (and potential danger) for Lukács. Whatever acclaim he received was complicated by his earlier renunciation of *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>19</sup>

Anticipating the introduction of even more stringent discipline on communist parties abroad, and the new emphasis upon industrial progress in the homeland of the revolution, Georgi Zinoviev attacked Lukács' philosophical idealism and "ultra-leftism" in what became known as his "professors' speech" of 1924. Not all the criticisms were unwarranted. The Bolsheviks had already crushed the Kronstadt Soviet in 1921 and introduced the New Economic Program that called for capitalism in the countryside in conjunction with party control over "the commanding heights" of heavy industry. The workers' councils had landed in the dustbin of history. Calling upon the proletariat to abolish alienation did liken it to Hegel's world spirit. Its inflation of revolutionary expectations, moreover, subjected actually existing socialism to an impossible utopian standard of judgment. Only the dictatorship of the proletariat remained along with its agent, the communist party. Liberal democracy was never an

option. Not the communist party, but the *party-state* now served as what Lukács had earlier termed “the organizational expression of the revolutionary will of the proletariat.”

As the 1920s wore on, he saw the communist movement becoming more bureaucratic, more provincial, more repressive, and more politically irresponsible. The communist experiment had surrendered any connections it might once have had with proletarian empowerment. Opposition from within the movement was impossible and, following the demise of the workers’ councils, any internal lever for criticism was lacking. He might have supported Trotsky against Stalin. By 1925, however, it was already too late. Stalin was tightening his grip on absolute power. Repression of supposedly counterrevolutionary elements within the communist party was supported by all factions—at least until they came under attack.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, by 1928, Stalin was seemingly taking over Trotsky’s program for industrializing the Soviet Union and, in what most saw as a purely tactical maneuver, equating social democracy with Nazism. Yet it was clear by 1934 that a shift in policy was in the works. Communism seemed on the rebound in 1936 with its support for a Popular Front composed of all anti-fascist forces. In spite of the Moscow Trials, (and perhaps because of them), communists saw no alternative to Stalin. His pact with Hitler in 1939, which unleashed World War II, seemed yet another tactical compromise in the face of Western appeasement. Once Hitler turned against his former ally in 1941, in any event, it was no time to jump ship. And, when the Soviet Union survived Stalingrad, Stalin became a hero. In for a penny in for a pound: one compromise followed another. History was too cunning for Lukács. The worst form of socialism, he would write somewhat half-heartedly, is better than the best form of capitalism. Ernst Bloch offered the appropriate response: the worst form of socialism is not socialism at all.

*The Struggle Continues*: Lukács was sincere in his support for communism even in its darkest hours. His later works provided an attempt to correct his earlier reliance on the politics of will. But they also affirmed the communist experiment even as they opened it to immanent critique. Lukács was prodigious in his efforts. He completed a four-volume *Aesthetic* (1963) and much of what would remain an unfinished *Ontology*. Both involved a confrontation with his intellectual past and, for better or worse, a more pragmatic view of communism and its prospects. With their attack on cultural modernism, and their abandonment of utopian aspirations, these works became targets of withering criticism.

Lukács was condemned by many as a sell-out. But he was not completely subservient. He led the Petofi circle, which included many of his students, and he served as Minister of Education in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet of 1956. Too critical for the apparatchiks, and too orthodox for the dissidents, Lukács ultimately found himself in the unenviable position of being an intellectual icon held in suspicion.

But that judgment was tainted by the Cold War. Now perhaps it is finally possible to reconsider this chapter in the story of a great thinker. It begins

with what became known as the “Blum Theses” of 1928.<sup>21</sup> (The title derived from Lukács’ party name.) Embracing democratic ideals but not the uncoordinated and disorganized form of the workers’ council, accepting the need for revolutionary dictatorship but not the arbitrary exercise of power by Stalin, it called for a “democratic dictatorship.” There should be no misunderstanding. Lukács was not advocating a republic under the liberal rule of law that would place the civil rights of the individual over those of the state. He was concerned only with extending democracy to different tendencies within the working class. To that end he saw the democratic dictatorship as realizing the original idea of bourgeois democracy. He envisioned an institutional form that would foster radical participatory experiments in proletarian rule and that would be judged from the standpoint of “mobilizing the masses and disorganizing the bourgeoisie.” The idea of a democratic dictatorship was vague from the start. It never entertained questions concerned the institutional preconditions for democracy (or communist party rule). It was unclear on the matter of civil liberties, legal authority, and the separation of powers. It also refused to deal with how the new regime could respond to other states. The Blum Theses wavered between what the young Marx would have termed “political” as against “human” emancipation. In any case, the official attack on the “anti-party” document came quickly and Lukács made his public apology.

Yet the Blum Theses would remain the cornerstone of Lukács’ future political outlook. Utopian thinking took a back seat along with the critique of the totality, and the abolition of prehistory. The Blum Theses helped set the stage for his support of the all-inclusive anti-fascist coalition, known as the Popular Front, in 1936.<sup>22</sup> Stalin saw the new policy as a useful tactic. Lukács took it more seriously. He believed that the new culture of solidarity between the progressive bourgeoisie and the communist movement would help defeat Hitler and—not necessarily then but perhaps later—also serve as a corrective for an increasingly degenerate revolution. All of Lukács’ later work was theoretically informed by an ongoing attempt to connect the liberal and progressive heritage of the revolutionary bourgeoisie with communism. That goal inspired the most important literary controversy of the interwar period. Various critics have noted that the notorious “expressionism debate,” which challenged the assumptions of modernism, took place long after Expressionism was a radical cultural force. Nevertheless, few have noticed that it began precisely at the time when rumblings inside and outside the Communist International were calling for a popular front policy.

Essays like “Greatness and Decline of Expressionism” (1934) and “Realism in the Balance” (1938) maintained that fashionable avant-garde trends had helped create the cultural preconditions in which fascism could thrive. These pieces condemned modernist literature for its “romantic anticapitalism,” its utopian outlook, its irrationalism, and its subjectivism. Lukács could just as easily have been talking about his own youth when he was a leading figure

of the Central European avant-garde. He had little sympathy left over for the bohemian life and its “romantic anti-capitalism.”<sup>23</sup> His alternative to James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Robert Musil was a form of “critical realism” perhaps best exemplified in the works of Honore de Balzac (1799–1850), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and Thomas Mann. Literature of this sort, according to Lukács, provided a realistic mirroring of society (*Widerspiegelung*) through its depiction of a mediated totality in which “atypically typical” characters are formed by social circumstances. Ideology is stripped away as the realist artist reveals the difference between the way in which society actually functions and the way it merely appears to function.<sup>24</sup> Lukács called upon writers to produce the style he deemed appropriate and the books that he wished to read. He was looking to the past rather than the future. Old understandings of realism would no longer serve explicitly political writers, and particularly anti-imperialist writers, like Chinua Achebe, Andre Schwarz-Bart, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Doris Lessing, and Ousmene Sembene. To be sure: Lukács’ standpoint was not that of a genuine Stalinist hack like Andrei Zhdanov. Nevertheless, it harbored more than a whiff of dogmatism.

All major contributors to the expressionism debate had a political axe to grind. Too few contemporary commentators have noted that Lukács’ most important critics were also critical of the Popular Front. That was certainly the case with Ernst Bloch (no less a Stalinist than Lukács yet still committed to the utopian project) and Brecht (another Stalinist who wished to reintroduce the ultra-revolutionary stance of Lenin in 1917). More accepting of diverse styles, and less rigid than Lukács, they also had their aesthetic biases. Neither of them had much use for bourgeois realism in general or Thomas Mann in particular. That was also the case for much of the dissident underground cultural scene in postwar communist nations. Fighting the totalitarian legacy, its rebels mostly embraced the imaginative freedom and emphasis upon subjectivity generated by modernism. In fact, following his release from prison for participating in the Hungarian uprising of 1956, Lukács himself was famously heard to remark “perhaps Kafka was right after all.” He was referring, of course, to the great Czech novelist’s depiction of a world dominated by an unaccountable bureaucracy and the arbitrary exercise of law. Such off-the-cuff remarks, however, only go so far. The two towering authors of postwar communism, Vassily Grossmann and Alexander Solzhenitsyn,<sup>25</sup> stand within the tradition of critical realism. Nevertheless, for Lukács, more was involved than choosing between the style of Kafka and that of Thomas Mann.

Aesthetics was the form in which he talked politics. For better or worse, indeed, it was the only form in which he could. Works like *Goethe and His Age* (1969) evinced not merely an assault upon romantic anticapitalism, but the importance of the enlightenment legacy. Often forgotten today is the literary civil war that was being fought in the 1930s over Goethe’s legacy by Nazis and their enemies. While reviewing Thomas Mann’s wonderful novel about

him, *Lotte in Weimar* (1939), Lukács alludes to the purpose of his enterprise by noting:

It is only with the deepest reverence and love that one can treat this book. It saved Germany's honor in the hour of its most dreadful degradation. But this novel of Goethe is more than a monumental song of consolation for a drunken people hurling itself nihilistically into the abyss of fascism. It returns to the past in order to give promise for the future. By re-creating the best that German bourgeois culture had achieved, Mann seeks to awaken its buried, aberrant and brutalized potentialities. Mann's appeal rang with a primal moral optimism; what was possible once could always be realized again.<sup>26</sup>

Lukács admittedly praised certain “socialist realists” intent upon currying favor not merely by using their literature to support the revolution but specific policies like the Five Year Plan. But it was clearly a cover. His real aim was to smuggle the liberal and progressive cultural values into a totalitarian society. This is not to deny that he was intellectually sincere in his critique of modernism. Just as Expressionism had supposedly helped create the cultural preconditions for Nazism, however, realism might help create the preconditions for a more humane socialism. Substitute for decadent and petty bourgeois and fascist terms like “degenerate” and “provincial” and “authoritarian”—so often employed by left wing Marxists critical of Stalinism—and the politics behind Lukács' aesthetic enterprise becomes clear. His advocacy of critical realism was a kind of guerrilla action intent upon correcting a revolution gone astray.<sup>27</sup> It came explicit in his public support for cultural tolerance within the Hungarian Communist Party in 1948–49. It was crushed by Matyas Rakosi in what became known as the “Lukács purge” that led to yet another cycle of repentance, reintegration, and dissatisfaction.

*The Destruction of Reason* (1954) was the philosophical complement to Lukács' literary theory. It exhibits his exceptional erudition and it is, actually, undervalued. Lukács is certainly not alone in arguing that Nazism has its intellectual roots in political romanticism and the nineteenth-century counter-enlightenment. He is also surely correct in noting that fascism is irreducible to racism. The philosophical foundation of fascism, according to Lukács, is irrationalism. He identifies it with a standpoint that privileges intuition over reason, contempt for history, and the assault on democracy and socialism. Irrationalism is seen as objectively reflecting the interests of an anachronistic “petty bourgeoisie” and “reactionary” elements of the bourgeoisie. Often this is, indeed, the case. Lukács is also sometimes strikingly on target in his criticisms.<sup>28</sup> But the execution of his general critique is undertaken with a sledgehammer (rather than a scalpel). Many crucial interpretations are incredibly strained and its tendentious communist style is hard to bear. The book also lacks generosity and political self-reflection.

Written at the height of the Cold War, *The Destruction of Reason* is a sprawling work. It sees the philosophical preconditions for Nazism generated by a tradition that includes reactionary romantics like the elder Schelling, apolitical proto-existentialists like Kierkegaard, liberal nationalists who were major intellectuals like Max Weber and Karl Jaspers, half-baked racists like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, third-rate sociologists like Carl Freyer and Othmar Spann, unquestionably brilliant thinkers aligned with the Nazis like Carl Schmitt and Heidegger, and—at the core of the entire enterprise—a towering cosmopolitan, Nietzsche, who was simultaneously a cultural radical and a political reactionary. Off-the-cuff references to the reactionary influence of, say, Bergson on (his cousin) Proust or to the supposedly debilitating implications of cultural pessimism of Freud in undermining resistance to fascism don't help matters. Intentions fall by the wayside as each thinker is held responsible for the way in which history employs his thought. If the thought can be made to fit the irrationalist paradigm then that is enough to condemn it as what communists liked to call an “objective apology” for fascism. Whether the philosophical content might not be reducible to politics is never entertained. Lukács is content to claim that there is “no innocent worldview.” If that is the case, however, the same can be said for Marx as well as Lenin, Stalin, (and, of course, Lukács himself).

Communist politics of the 1920s was complicit in bringing Hitler to power. Ongoing attacks upon the Weimar Republic, steady refusals to engage in a common front against the reaction, and strikes undertaken in common with the Nazis in 1929 were all tactics employed by the Comintern. Practice was supplemented by theory. Ethical relativism born of teleological claims was employed to justify political murder, unabashed opportunism, and a stance that left the communist leadership immune from criticism and self-reflection.<sup>29</sup> There is a communist intellectual tradition that also provided an objective apology for fascism. It too contributed to the attack upon democracy and, certainly, the degeneration of socialism. Not a word is said by Lukács about any of this—or, in concrete terms, what kind of political theory best resists totalitarianism. Striking is the way in which politics is invoked. But the connection between theory and practice is completely lacking. Ideas are mechanically reduced to class positions that are then, in turn, again mechanically identified with political interests. For all the talk about a mediated totality, its moments lose their integrity or what Hegel termed the immanent dynamic (*Eigendynamik*). Art, philosophy, and politics are defined by the same political logic. And the point of reference for that logic is the communist party. The result is an oxymoron: what another Stalinist sympathizer, and the greatest of historical novelists, Lion Feuchtwanger once called a “dictatorship of reason.”

Communism had been introduced by an innovative theory of revolution that soon became conflated with a theory of rule. Lukács fell into the trap. After joining the communist movement he identified ethics with the “categorical imperative of revolution”: what serves the revolution is good and what hinders

it is bad. To the extent that the party identifies itself with the revolution, even once in power, the same logic holds. *History and Consciousness* also justified a purely tactical and expeditious treatment of bourgeois economic, legal, and social institutions. Communist ethics had always rested upon the principle of partisanship and, if Lukács tried to mitigate its absolute character, he never endorsed its liberal counterpart. His politics lacked any meaningful perspective on what norms and rules might render the communist party accountable to either its membership or its base. Once the prospect of workers' councils had been crushed, and Stalin retreated from pursuing a revolutionary politics first in China in 1927 and then in Spain in 1936, Marxism lost its ability to link transcendence with immanence. Insisting upon the former through a critique of the totality would have led Lukács back into idealism. Embracing the latter would have turned him into an apparatchik. Lukács was left with no philosophical option other than to recast Marxism yet again and generate its ethic from within a new ontological frame of reference.<sup>30</sup>

His later philosophical writings treat alienation soberly as a multi-faceted phenomenon mediated by a variety of institutional and social forms.<sup>31</sup> As an ontological construct, however, it is intrinsic within labor and the historical constitution of reality.<sup>32</sup> Alienation is ineradicable and, if only for this reason, too much can no longer be asked from communism. The apocalyptic view of revolution falls by the wayside. A philosophical modesty concerning practical ambitions takes its place. Communist shortcomings can now be understood as generated by the encounter with reality (or historical necessity). If Leninism is interpreted as an expression of historical backwardness,<sup>33</sup> however, the theory loses its universal salience and thus its ethical privilege. Mitigation of economic exploitation and the social disempowerment of workers might take on value in their own right. But, then, Western social democracy has a far better deal to make the working class. It offers a more sophisticated welfare state with less authoritarianism, dogmatism, and terror. Lukács' ontology provides neither a new vision nor a new form of agency. He died before he could complete his proposed ethics. But there is no reason to think it would have proven successful. Neither critique nor resistance can be stripped of their historical character, fit into fixed and prescribed categories, and have their meaning determined a priori. Lukács' ontology provides only the most forced linkage between transcendence and immanence. It thereby compromises the critical method and the redefinition of philosophy as a theory of practice. Lukács' outlook becomes what Marx would have called "contemplative" and Hegel would have considered metaphysical or "abstract." Historical materialism turns into just another philosophy plagued by traditional philosophical problems. Not until the Czech Rebellion of 1968, shortly before his death, could Lukács wonder whether god might have failed—and that liberation might require a totally new approach.

*Concluding Remarks:* Lukács always claimed that he had remained loyal to Hegel.<sup>34</sup> *History and Class Consciousness* insisted that philosophy respond to new

problems raised by new conditions—and that the totality is the point of reference. New perspectives on institutions and the system in which they are embedded require the “imputation” of new possibilities for progressive change. Freezing the institutional assumptions and imposing the categories of former times recreates reification in the theory seeking to contest it. It readies philosophy for the classroom and art for the museum. But Lukács never recognized the political implications deriving from the Blum Theses or his later defense of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and its progressive heritage. He never came to terms with the original communist contempt for republicanism: outdated authoritarian residues from the aftermath of World War I remained with him until the end of his life. Lukács identified the communist party with the interests of those it claimed to represent. He was blind to its bureaucratic interests and hegemonic ambitions. He mistakenly thought the communist party had solved the problem of alienation. For that very reason, however, the alienation generated by its practice found expression in his theory. In spite of his constant emphasis upon understanding phenomena in terms of its historical constitution, he never really applied that dialectical insight to his own situation.

Lukács was not alone in making that mistake, and he is still not alone. Contemporary socialist theory is still nostalgic for the old days when labor was on the rise and rife with outmoded concepts. Too many activists lack even the most elementary knowledge of socialist political history. Academics usually treat socialism, meanwhile, either from an abstract or contemplative standpoint or with an eye on empirical bean-counting. None of this has much in common with his implicit demand for a permanent revolution in radical thinking. Lukács rendered historical materialism historical. A Marxist perspective emerged that refused to reduce philosophy to the prejudices of its advocates or the practices carried on in its name. His worldview floundered on the reef of alienation and reification. Lukács treated them almost interchangeably. But he always understood alienation and reification as something more than merely philosophical ideas or psychological problems that require philosophical and psychological solutions. Lukács responded to them first with the specter of apocalypse and then, later, with caution and acceptance: it was basically a matter of all or nothing. He found himself at cross purposes. Lukács’ later thinking was defined by the utopianism it opposed.

Overcoming this situation requires immanent critique. Distinguishing alienation from reification is the place to begin. Emanating from the division of labor, which reaches back to the beginnings of civilization, alienation has an elusive existential as well as anthropological quality. Lukács was right: its abolition demands utopia. But the classless society has lost its proletarian agent. The subject-object of history was always a figment of the philosophical imagination. But the quest for human dignity (that utopia projects) is real: it provides a regulative ideal to inspire *practical* resistance. The question is: resistance against what? The answer is: reification. The theory of practice thus needs to change its self-understanding and focus more on its target. Reification



has something more contextually concrete about it than alienation. Fixed categories that naturalize phenomena are susceptible to critical reflection and processes that reduce people to things, or a cost of production, are susceptible to political legislation and social policy. Mechanically identifying objectification with alienation and instrumental rationality with reification was thus a mistake from the beginning. Objectification takes the most diverse forms and science can serve many masters. The task for a theory of practice is to judge—or perhaps “impute”—the potential impact of social action and political legislation on individual autonomy and the arbitrary exercise of institutional power.

Freedom remains what it always was: the insight into necessity. Critique should speak truth to power. But that is as much an ethical decision as the choice to link theory and practice in the first place. Normative categories and ideals now float about in the academic stratosphere where they become objects of scrupulous commentary in terms of their philological origins or contextual sources. Behaviorists, positivists, and analytic Marxists shunt ideals to the sidelines. As one former President of the American Political Science Association, Nelson Polsby, once put the matter: “There are those who criticize politics and those who study politics—and we engage in the latter.” No wonder that both social theory and social science are mired in a crisis of purpose. Evaluating theory in relation to the practice of actual movements and organizations would call for making genuinely political judgments and knowledge of the contradictory and interest-laden constitution of historical events. Better to insist upon the separation of principles and interests. To his credit: Lukács never fell for that. He sought to resolve the contradiction between principles and interests first through teleology and then ontology. Neither solution worked: the tension between them remained. Reconnecting principle with interest in the shadow of history, however, is *the* primary task for a reinvigorated dialectic. Lukács was right—if not quite the way in which he envisioned it. Consciousness remains the decisive moment: ethical commitment fuels the theory of practice.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “The Foundations of Historical Materialism” in *The Essential Marcuse*, ed. Andrew Feenberg (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 72ff.
- <sup>4</sup> Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> Note the discussion by Karl Kautsky, *Karl Kautsky: Marxism, Revolution & Democracy* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> Georg Lukács, “Bernstein’s Triumph: Notes on the Essays Written in Honour of Karl Kautsky’s Seventieth Birthday” on Kautsky’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday” in *Political*

*Writings, 1919–1929: The Question of Parliamentarism and Other Essays*, ed. Rodney Livingstone and trans. Michael McColgan (London: New Left Books, 1972), 127ff.

<sup>7</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Modern idealist philosophy, in short, “sets itself the following problem: it refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product.” *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Note the discussion in Stephen Eric Bronner, “Sketching the Lineage: The Critical Method and the Idealist Tradition” in *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11ff.

<sup>10</sup> “When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie.” Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), 10.

<sup>11</sup> That is also the core idea of Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*. Trans. Fred Halliday (London: New Left Books, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 79; also, Iring Fetscher, “Aum Begriff der ‘Objektiven Möglichkeit’ bei Max Weber and Georg Lukacs” in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 106 (1973).

<sup>13</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Isaak Ilych Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*. Trans. Milos Somardziga and Fredy Perlman (Montreal, 1982) and Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx’s Capital*. Trans. Pete Burgess (London: Pluto, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, “In the Cradle of Modernity: The Labor Movement and the First World War” in *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism* (New York: Routledge: New York, 1992), 13ff.

<sup>16</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Notebooks on Hegel” in *Collected Works* (London: International Publishers, 1963) 38: 276.

<sup>17</sup> Arpad Kadarky, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, Politics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 202ff.

<sup>18</sup> Lukács, “The Question of Parliamentarism” in *Political Writings*, 53ff.

<sup>19</sup> A more spirited response, however, can be found in Georg Lukács, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*. Trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> The willingness to employ terror was for the communists a badge of revolutionary commitment that separated them from social democracy. Cf. Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> Georg Lukács, “Blum Theses” in *Political Writings*, 227ff. Also see Peter Gibbon, “Lukacs: The Road to the Blum Theses” in *Economy and Society* Vol. 14; Issue 4; November, 1985, 474ff.

<sup>22</sup> Bronner, “Leon Blum and the Legacy of the Popular Front” in *Moments of Decision*, 57ff.

<sup>23</sup> See Lukács’ “Introduction” written for the 1962 edition of *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974).

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, “Expressionism and Marxism: Toward an Aesthetic of Emancipation” in *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage* eds. Stephen

- Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 411ff.
- <sup>25</sup> Georg Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*. Trans. William D. Graf (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969).
- <sup>26</sup> Georg Lukács, "In Search of Bourgeois Man" in *Essays on Thomas Mann*. Trans. Stanley Mitchell (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 40–41.
- <sup>27</sup> Henry Pachter, "Orthodox Heretic, Romantic Stalinist: On the Ninetieth Birthday of Georg Lukacs" in *Socialism in History*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 295ff.
- <sup>28</sup> Chapters that set the historical context for the emergence of irrationalism and those dealing with Chamberlain, Freyer, and Spann, are excellent. His discussion of Heidegger's theory and practice anticipates (with greater nuance) than contemporary works by Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) and, especially, Emmanuel Faye, *The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in the Light of the Unpublished Seminars 1933–1935*. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Tom Rockmore (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- <sup>29</sup> It's even possible that Stalin wanted Hitler in power precisely in order to create trouble in Europe and provide a breathing space for the industrialization process of the Soviet Union that began in 1929. See the discussion in Bronner, "Working Class Politics and the Nazi Triumph" in *Moments of Decision*, 33ff.
- <sup>30</sup> "An adequate treatment of the question of freedom can only be given in our Ethics." Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Labour*. Trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980), 113.
- <sup>31</sup> Georg Lukács, "The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action" in Ernest Joós, *Lukács's Last Autocriticism: The Ontology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983).
- <sup>32</sup> Georg Lukács: *The Ontology of Social Being: Labour*. Trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980).
- <sup>33</sup> Note the prophetic discussions in 1918 by Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution" (1918) in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 365ff. and Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971).
- <sup>34</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Hegel*. Trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980).

## Chapter 2

# Lukács and the Recovery of Marx after Marxism

Tom Rockmore

The Marxist thinker Georg Lukács made important contributions in a large number of fields, including the interpretation of Marx's position in the context of the invention of Hegelian Marxism. Since Engels invented Marxism, Marxism has always featured a political approach to philosophical questions comparable in many respects to a scholastic approach to philosophical themes within the limits of Christian revelation. Both rely on nonphilosophical criteria as a presupposed framework for addressing philosophical themes. This practice, which may once upon a time have appeared acceptable, especially to those Marxists who believed they were living in a moment of revolutionary change, now appears to be unacceptable to all or at least most observers. The success of Marxism as a political movement was important in political revolutions in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The latter continues to proclaim its Marxist faith even as it has turned to a form of capitalism of its own devising. But the disappearance of the Soviet Union and of the Soviet bloc removed political support for Marxism in the West, which nearly immediately collapsed like a house of cards. Today, after the end of political Marxism in the West, hence after the end of Hegelian Marxism, Lukács' importance lies less in contributing to Marxism, which is clearly moribund and unlikely like a phoenix to rise again, in helping to recover Marx after Marxism. Marxism belonged to a historical period in which it was deemed appropriate to approach philosophical questions from a political commitment on the implicit assumption that no angle of vision is neutral. Now, after Marxism, we need to find a way to recover Marx, who must not be allowed to disappear with the political movement he inspired and has so often claimed to speak in his name.

## Lukács and Marx beyond Marxism

It is not easy but difficult to come to grips with genuinely innovative thinkers. The Western philosophical tradition consists in understanding and taking the measure of a few central figures, figures whose views are repeatedly interpreted

in different ways in an ongoing discussion sometimes lasting centuries. Marx is one of the most important modern figures, but one who has so far mainly been read in terms of Marxism. Marxism routinely presents itself as the authorized interpretation of his thought, which draws political sustenance from a claim for a special relation to Marx. Whenever possible, Marxism has routinely utilized and still utilizes its political power to thwart politically unacceptable forms of philosophy. In P. R. China, “official” Marxism represents the Chinese Communist Party, which perpetuates itself as a leading form of contemporary ideology at the expense of free and fair debate.

There was a time when a Marxist approach to Marx pleased just about everyone. It pleased Marxists, who claimed a monopoly in the interpretation of Marx, which they conducted from a political perspective incompatible with philosophical argument, which they approached through political criteria. And it pleased non-Marxists as well as anti-Marxists, who reacted against an often flagrant conflation of political and philosophical criteria to reject Marx, whose ideas they often failed to take into consideration, as a serious thinker.

Now, after the precipitous decline of Marxism, which began with the unforeseen disappearance of the Soviet Union in 1989, Marx remains as a centrally important modern thinker, someone whose insights are still crucial to our understanding of the modern world. It is likely that Marx will be an indispensable conceptual guide as long as capitalism endures. The recent upsurge of interest in his writings during the severe financial crisis, which emerged in the United States and then rapidly spread throughout the world in the second half of 2008, reminds us that, in the early twenty-first century, modern industrial capitalism is clearly still prey to the difficulties Marx already diagnosed toward the middle of the nineteenth century, and for which his theories remain relevant.

Classical Marxism as it existed before Lukács entered the debate as a way of reading Marx in the process of transforming his theories into a political force. The Marxist approach to Marx centers on interpreting Marx in relation to Hegel. This approach consists in denigrating Hegel and philosophy in general, which it links to modern capitalism, while insisting that Marx’s theories alone provide a true analysis of modern industrial society. Hegel mainly figures negatively in Engels’ pioneer form of capitalism. Lukács (with Korsch) developed Hegelian Marxism as a way of reading Marx in terms of a more positive appreciation of Hegel and philosophy in general.

The problem of understanding Marx is intimately connected to working out an appropriate reading of his thought. Important thinkers are not understood quickly but over long periods of time. We are still in the process of interpreting the few central thinkers in the history of philosophy. It is perhaps false to say that the history of Western philosophy is no more than a series of footnotes to Plato. But it is correct to say that it is an extended effort over the many intervening centuries to understand his writings.

In any effort to recover Marx, Lukács has a key role to play. From a philosophical perspective, Lukács is an outstanding Marxist thinker, a Marxist philosopher of great power and originality, arguably the only one capable of constructing a philosophical argument on the same level as the views he opposes. When he turned to Marxism at the end of World War I, Lukács, like Marx before him, had already received a strong education in modern German philosophy. This is an enormous exception in Marxism, whose main figures are typically uninformed about the theories, which they so vehemently reject. If, as I think, Marx is in some ways a classical German philosopher, the last great German Idealist, then it is false that, as Engels suggests, Hegel shows the way out of classical German philosophy. I believe that, on the contrary, Lukács shows us the way out of classical orthodox Marxism, the way to a post-Marxist interpretation of Marx. In his coinvention of Hegelian Marxism, Lukács made enormous contributions to Marxism in providing it with an intellectual level it did not have before he intervened in the debate. It is not too much to say that at the end of Marxism Lukács remains important in showing us the way beyond a Marxist interpretation of Marx in helping to determine what is still living in his thought.

The problem of understanding Marx, which is inseparable from the problem of understanding any important figure, is further complicated by the ideological status of Marxism itself. Many philosophers, for instance Kant, treat thought as separable from time. For Kant the subject is the source of time but is not in time. But even if thought were separable from time, it would not be separable from history, nor again separable from the historical context.

Marxism is only the first and arguably false interpretation of Marxism. Marxism mainly proposes ideologically distorted interpretations of Marx with the aim of supporting its political legitimacy through philosophical interpretation it is usually ill prepared to carry out. An example is Althusser, whose reading of Marx and Marxism, despite its undoubted charms, is most interesting against the background of the obvious political need, in light of the publication of early Marxian texts, which clearly contradicted the "official" Marxist view of Marx, counts as a determined effort to defend the politically inspired Marxist reading of Marx, not in saving the phenomena, but rather in explaining them away.

Idealism's many opponents rarely know much about it. Kant, who was an idealist, criticized other forms of idealism he attributed to Descartes and Berkeley, whose theories he did not know well. Marxists as well as Anglo-American analytic philosophers are opposed to what they call "idealism," but roughly equally ignorant of what they reject. Lukács, who also opposes idealism, differs from most of its critics, and certainly all its Marxist critics, in his strong command of the entire range of German Idealist thought, particularly Hegel. It is not surprising that, like Engels, with some exceptions the vast majority of Marxists know little about philosophy. In Marxism Marx was considered to be a political economist and Engels was taken as a philosopher. Yet his grasp

of philosophy, in which he was mainly self-taught, was very weak. Lukács, on the contrary, who was one of the most acute philosophical observers of the twentieth century, had a sure grasp of an extraordinarily wide range of philosophical theories ranging over the whole width and breadth of the modern Western tradition.

Lukács' Hegelian Marxism differs basically from Marxism prior to that point in its concern to grasp Marx as taking up and carrying forward central Hegelian insights, hence as participating in the further development of German Idealism after Hegel in whose thought by implication the tradition may have come to a high point but not to an end. Engels and many other Marxists were mainly concerned to disqualify Hegel and other idealist thinkers with respect to their supposed incapacity to come to grips with the social world. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), where he independently but at the same time as Korsch invented Hegelian Marxism, Lukács provides pioneer Marxist interpretations of Marx, Hegel, and the German Idealist tradition while pointing the way toward a non-Marxist or post-Marxist interpretation of Marx after Marxism, that is an interpretation which depends on the text itself in independence of the political criteria utilized by Marxism to support its politically inspired claim for a seamless relation to Marxism.

### Marxism as an Approach to Marx

The central theme in classical Marxism is that Marx can be understood in terms of Hegel, whom, in leaving idealism for materialism, Marx allegedly leaves behind. Engels, who does not know philosophy, German Idealism or Hegel well, simply dismisses both German philosophy and Hegel, which he considers together under the heading of classical German philosophy, as uninteresting from a Marxist perspective. The main figures in Engels' account, which turns on the relation of Marx to Hegel, are Marx and Feuerbach, not Hegel, since Engels, who is self-taught in philosophy, and who is not able to come to grips with or otherwise interpret Hegel, is rather constrained to dismiss him in a polite but firm way, but dismiss him nonetheless. In Engels' telling of the tale, the central figure is Feuerbach, who is a crucial element to the formulation of Marx's position. According to Engels, Feuerbach for a brief moment loomed very large, large enough to be a legitimate rival to Hegel, the dominant philosophical figure in the post-Kantian debate. This is highly inaccurate since Feuerbach, who was a minor contemporary critic of Hegel, was not only less significant than Hegel as a philosopher, but also less important as a philosopher than as a religious thinker. Yet Engels, who is not well placed to distinguish good philosophy from bad philosophy, accords Feuerbach a crucial role in the origin of Marx's thought. He argues that Feuerbach showed Marx the way from idealism to materialism, from philosophy to science, from theories, which were no more than ideological reflections of the surrounding social context,

dominated then as now by modern industrial capitalism, to theories that went beyond ideology, hence beyond the limits of capitalism, to grasp the social world as it really is.

Lukács follows Engels in taking the relation of Marx to Hegel as central to the formulation of his theories while downplaying Feuerbach, who, for Lukács, plays at most a minor role, and adding a number of other more significant figures to his account. Though Lukács largely subscribes to Engels' views of Marx and Marxism, the contrast with Engels' grasp of philosophy is startling and important. It is fair to say that Engels, who invented Marxism, has a weak grasp of Marx's more philosophical writings, in part because a number of them, including the *Paris Manuscripts* (1844) and the *Grundrisse* (1857–58), were still unpublished during his lifetime, a weaker grasp of Marx's philosophical background in German Idealism, Aristotle and the pre-Socratics i. A., and a still weaker grasp of Hegel, who is obviously a crucial figure for any interpretation of Marx, including his own. On the contrary, Lukács, who knows Marx, German philosophy, and Hegel well, provides a comparatively richer, in fact rich analysis of both the classical German philosophical tradition and Hegel's position. His approach to both contrasts favorably with Engels' own approach. The founder of Marxism criticizes and finally dismisses both classical German philosophy and Hegel. Like Engels, Lukács is also critical of both. But he dismisses neither of them, and both figure in important ways in his understanding of Marx.

## On Classical Marxism

According to the standard Marxist approach invented by Engels: idealism is false and materialism is true; Hegel is an idealist and Marx is a materialist; the road from idealism to materialism runs through Feuerbach; and Marx addresses the problems of philosophy from outside philosophy.

It is central to Marxism that Marx can be grasped through his triple relation to German philosophy, British economics, and French socialism. Engels has a reductionist attitude toward classical German philosophy, which he reduces to Hegel in claiming that it comes to a high point and an unsatisfactory end in his thought, but is completed from a place beyond philosophy in Marx. This approach is based on six presuppositions: first, philosophy can in fact come to an end through a decisive philosophical contribution; second, it did come to an end in Hegel; third, it ended in an unsatisfactory way; fourth, in his book on religion Feuerbach has defeated the mighty Hegel; fifth, Feuerbach's defeat of Hegel is based on the transition from idealism to materialism; and, sixth, Marx, who profits from this transition, has solved the philosophical problems on the materialist plane.

All six presuppositions, on which classical Marxism rest, are arguably false. First, philosophy has not already and arguably other than through sheer lassitude



due to the ennui of endless debate never come to an end, hence never comes to an end through a decisive philosophical contribution. Any philosophical theory, insight, or argument calls forth a series of competing theories, insights and arguments, hence continues the tradition beyond the present stage.

Second, the philosophical tradition did not end in Hegel and Hegel never claims that it did. The thinker who is closest to making this kind of claim in the German Idealist tradition is Kant, who asserts that at any given time there can only be a single true theory, and that his theory is in fact true, which in turn suggests that in the critical philosophy, philosophy itself comes to an end. Hegel, who insisted his own position belonged to the ongoing philosophical tradition, regarded the tradition as open, not closed, not as reaching an end in his thought. The young Hegelian view that in Hegel philosophy comes to a peak and to an end reflects their evaluation of their giant contemporary more than any claim he himself makes or could possibly make.

Third, if philosophy has not reached the end, then it cannot have reached an unsatisfactory end. In a sense the present state of philosophy is always unsatisfactory since it is never the case that it cannot go further as extant theories are criticized, old questions are reformulated in different ways, and new concerns appear. If there are still philosophical questions to discuss, if certain concerns still remain on the table as it were, then it is intrinsic to philosophy that it does not and cannot succeed. Engels seems to think of the philosopher as someone who has a finite task to carry out, such as building a bridge, and whose task can be completed in a finite period of time. This may be the case for an engineer, but it is not so for a philosopher, and it was not so for Hegel.

Fourth, it is implausible that, as Engels claims, in the *Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach “pulverized” Hegel in enfranchising materialism in place of idealism. Engels is operating with a view of idealism whose proximal source, one may speculate, is Fichte’s semi-popular “First Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre” (1797). According to Fichte, idealism and materialism are incompatible, and only the former can possibly be true. Engels applies this simplistic binary model to Hegelian idealism, which, since it overlooks nature, is false, hence must give way to idealism, which acknowledges that nature precedes spirit, which derives from nature. This way of reading Hegel is obviously false. He did not and could overlook nature. Rather he followed his erstwhile colleague Schelling in formulating a philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*), which later inspired Engels’ effort to work out a Marxist theory of nature. Engels merely assumes but does not show this incompatibility, an incompatibility between materialism (or realism) and idealism, which is widely assumed in Marxism and analytic philosophy, both of which reject idealism for materialism. Yet this supposed incompatibility, in Engels’ terms the contrast between nature and spirit, is denied by other observers, including Leibniz, apparently the first observer to use the term “idealism” in a philosophical context, as well as Kant, who is a transcendental idealist, but an empirical realist, argues for the existence of the external world.

Fifth, if Feuerbach did not “defeat” Hegel, then he cannot have done so on the basis of a distinction between materialism and idealism. That distinction has never been clearly drawn, and was not drawn by Engels, hence has little or no diagnostic weight in a philosophical context. In his study of *Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels points to the so-called watershed problem of beginning either from nature to reach spirit or from spirit to reach nature. As a follower of Darwin, he contends the former is correct and the latter is a fantastic error committed by idealist thinkers, who, as Moore will later say, are guilty of denying the existence of the external world. Yet this is false, since no one who claims to be or is regarded as an idealist denies the world outside the mind exists. Indeed, Berkeley contends that philosophers are very curious folks who argue for positions that run against common sense. The deeper problem, as Fichte points out, but Engels does not grasp, lies in the explanatory power of approaching knowledge of the world and oneself through a causal framework, which Engels favors but Fichte rejects, or rather from the point of view of the subject, which Fichte and then Marx contend, but which Engels rejects.

Sixth, it is improbable that Marx has solved philosophical concerns from an extra-philosophical vantage point. Variant forms of this claim are often advanced, for instance in Piaget’s view that epistemological questions are resolved or at least can potentially be resolved through psychology. Yet if philosophical questions can be solved, resolved, or otherwise brought to an end than through sheer exhaustion, this cannot be on merely empirical grounds, though empirical information is not therefore irrelevant. It can only be through argument, which several thousand years after philosophy emerged in the West, remains the single philosophical tool. If this is true, it follows that Engels’ depiction of Marx’s accomplishment cannot be correct.

## Hegelian Marxism Reacts to Classical Marxism

Hegelian Marxism was invented simultaneously by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and Korsch in *Marxism and Philosophy*, two books which appeared independently in 1923. It came into being to provide a comparatively more serious account of the role of philosophy in Marx and Marxism. In reacting against the dismissive attitude toward philosophy by such contemporary Marxists as Franz Mehring, who had a reputation as a Marxist philosophical expert in the Second International, but defended a crude reductionist view of Marxism, Korsch gives great weight to philosophy in interpreting Marx. His grasp of Hegel is not strong. Lukács, who also takes the philosophical tradition seriously as a clue to interpret Marx, already has a strong grasp of Hegel, which he continued to deepen throughout his Marxist period.

Lukács’ Hegelian Marxism perfects the Marxist approach to Marx in bringing it to a higher level, but also undermines it. In inventing Hegelian Marxism,

Lukács simultaneously brought Marxist philosophy to an acceptable philosophical level it did not have in Engels while bringing out the relation of Marx to Hegel more clearly, but also undermining a reading of Marx in terms of Hegel in pointing beyond it to other figures such as Fichte. Lukács' grasp not only of Hegel but of the entire German philosophical tradition contrasts clearly with the primitive, uninformed, dismissive reading one finds in Engels' writings. This kind of practice, which finds its root in Engels' uninformed but sweeping statements about what he calls classical German Idealism, is as philosophically ruinous as it was widespread in Marxism. The two most significant examples are the Soviet and the P. R. China where philosophical questions were and in the case of the latter are still routinely addressed on political grounds. It is then no surprise that in the latter the theme of alienation, which is so important for Marx, was discussed and the question then deemed closed in the 1980s by representatives of the Chinese Communist Party. The main difference as concerns Russian and Chinese Marxism is that Lenin, the founder of the former, had a small, but real grasp of philosophy in virtue of his study with Plekhanov, and his efforts to understand materialism, and Hegel, but Mao, the founder of the latter, had no or almost no philosophical background at all.

Lukács gave no ground to Engels or anyone else in depth of his Marxist conviction. Though at the end of his life, in his enormous, unfinished study of *The Ontology of Social Being*, when times had changed, he was finally willing to accept the existence of a difference in kind between Marx and Marxism. But he was unwilling to do this half a century earlier when *History and Class Consciousness* appeared. Here he affirmed his Marxist faith when, in reference to the Marxian theory of commodities, in a stunning sentence he wrote: "For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure."<sup>1</sup>

At the time, he understood Marxism on a Kantian model. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant contends that in each case the transition to a mature form of cognition requires the discovery of a basic methodological innovation. Lukács makes a similar claim with respect to orthodox Marxism, which is not based on accepting any particular idea but rather in following the Marxist method, which he identifies, following Stalin's intervention in the debate between the mechanists and the Deborinists, as dialectical materialism. "Orthodox Marxism," Lukács writes, ". . . does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders. It is the conviction, moreover that all attempts to surpass or 'improve' it have led and must lead to over-simplification, triviality and eclecticism."<sup>2</sup> The difference is that Kant specifies his view of the method that in each case

transforms a particular field of cognition into a science. But Lukács, who was concerned, early in his Marxist career with political orthodoxy, affirms his acceptance of Marxist method while writing a blank check as it were in leaving entirely open what that is supposed to consist in, hence what in accepting Marxist method he understands that to be.

Despite Lukács' unfettered proclamation of Marxist orthodoxy, his interpretation of Marx, Hegel, and German Idealism in *History and Class Consciousness* not only contributes to Marxism, but further points beyond it. He contributes to Marxism in surpassing Engels and other "vulgar" Marxists through a comprehensive analysis of German Idealism understood as the ongoing consideration of a single central theme, Hegel as contributing to that theme, and Marx as making a further, decisive contribution. In place of Engels' foreshortened account of German Idealism through the claim that Feuerbach overcomes Hegel, Lukács concentrates on the post-Kantian effort to solve the enigma of Kant's thing-in-itself. This enigma culminates in Hegel's conception of the subject, which fails to explain the human world, and which can allegedly only be explained on the basis of the Marxian conception of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of human history. In pointing to the concept of the subject as crucial, Lukács interprets Marx as standing not outside of but rather within classical German philosophy, or perhaps as both outside and inside simultaneously, outside as a materialist, who takes into account material phenomena, but inside as an idealist, which Lukács never concedes, but which he clearly implies, since in revising the conception of the subject, Marx revises a key element in modern German philosophy.

Lukács' analysis lies in working out what Marxism calls bourgeois philosophy through the relation of Marx to the so-called Kantian Copernican revolution. Kant famously indicates in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that a necessary condition of knowledge is that the subject construct its cognitive object. This constructivist claim is a form of what as early as the *Differenzschrift* Hegel calls the philosophy of identity (*Identitätsphilosophie*). At the point of knowledge, there must be an identity, based in the subject's activity, between subject and object, knower and known. This view requires a change in the conception of the subject, which is no longer transcendent to but rather immanent in the world. Kant famously depicts the subject as a cognitive placeholder, the highest point of the critical philosophy, which answers the problem of knowledge through an account of the a priori activity through which it constructs what it knows.

According to Lukács, this problem, which runs throughout the thought of this period, is finally only solved in Marx's early writings in rethinking the subject through the conception of the identical subject-object. Marx's contribution lies in rethinking the subject through the transition from the problem of existence to the field of historical inquiry in his very first writings. Hegel's view of the absolute as the subject of history is a form of "conceptual mythology" since it only seems to make history.<sup>3</sup> Marx surpasses Hegel as early as his

doctoral dissertation in reaching historical reality and concrete praxis.<sup>4</sup> He rethinks the subject as an identical subject-object. The solution to the real historical subject lies in the problem of the self-knowledge of the proletariat. In knowing itself, then the genesis and history coincide.<sup>5</sup> In understanding itself, the proletariat, which is the motor of history, understands its emergence as a class.<sup>6</sup> This view surpasses Hegel in replacing the categories of reflection by a truly historical analysis.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the problem of reality is transformed into a historical process in which historical tendencies take the place of empirical facts.<sup>8</sup>

### Lukács' Hegelian Marxism and the Humanist Reading of Marx

In calling attention to reification, Lukács isolates the theme of the human individual in Marx's early writings in undermining the dominant "scientific," positivistic reading pioneered by Engels that Althusser later tried to reestablish when a number of Marx's early texts were published, texts to which Lukács and perhaps also Engels did not have access, but which appeared to contradict the "official" Marxist approach to Marx. The Marxist approach to Marx is often close to what today would be called positivism. Engels, who knew little about philosophy, knew little about science as well, but in which he exhibits a kind of naïve faith. One senses in his texts the view that science can solve the important problems of human beings and that the Marxist claim to knowledge is best formulated on a scientific basis. In different ways a positivistic view lives on in the analytic approach to Marx and Marxism that was invented by Gerald Cohen<sup>9</sup> and others in the 1980s.

The dominant dimension of this non-anthropological form of Marxism is the idea that Marx formulates a conception of capitalism as a law-governed system, a system analogous in many ways to conceptions of the natural world as a causal system. This approach, which is anticipated by Engels, who devotes little interest to the social role of human beings, finds support in Marx's later writings. It is correct that Marx later turns away from finite human being and toward capitalism understood as a system in which capital is the active subject, which in turn constrains human beings who function in their assigned roles within a liberal economic system in which they are mainly passive. Yet the later emphasis on the way that capital takes over or even usurps the role of human beings as the active subject of capitalism cannot be allowed to obscure the fact that for Marx early and late the entire theoretical structure centers on a conception of human being, hence is thoroughly anthropological.

It is often thought, at present by analytic thinkers concerned with philosophy of mind who take a reductionist approach in arguing, for instance, that the mind is just the brain,<sup>10</sup> hence that we do not need to appeal to a conception of

human in formulating our theories. A non-anthropological approach to Marx is a central component of classical Marxism, which supposes that in leaving philosophy behind Marx turns toward science in which nonideological analyses of social problems replace theories based on abstract or at least imperfect understanding of human beings. This general view, which is initially stated for Marxism by Engels, is restated by Althusser, who, in resisting the shock produced by the tardy publication of a number of central Marxian texts, does his best to obscure the difference between the Marxist interpretation of Marx, produced by Engels and his followers in ignorance of the texts, and the texts themselves. The form of Marxism invented by Althusser, which supposes a kind of anti-anthropological reading of Marx in which the subject plays only a minor role, is contradicted by the overtly anthropological side in Marx's position, more clearly worked out in the early writings, but arguably indispensable in the later writings, and which Lukács already makes central to his pioneer Hegelian reading of Marx.

In avoiding the subject, classical Marxists turn away a series of issues central in modern philosophy at least since Descartes. Marxism claims to differ from so-called bourgeois theories, including philosophy, which as such is bourgeois, hence merely ideological, in reaching social truth, or truth about human society. Yet theories of truth, including theories of social truth, presuppose a conception of the cognitive subject. In Lukács' Hegelian Marxism the anthropological problem, hence the entire series of issues linked to the nature and role of the subject, is raised in what Lukács, in anticipating Marx's theory of alienation, which only became known later when the *Paris Manuscripts* (1844) was published, calls reification.

"Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," the great central essay in *History and Class Consciousness*, begins with an account of "The Phenomenon of Reification." Lukács here utilizes the account of commodities, especially the important section on the fetishism of commodities in *Capital* I, to argue that commodity fetishism is specific to modern capitalism,<sup>11</sup> and that this problem cannot be grasped through so-called bourgeois thought, which is riven by antinomies deriving from its relation to a socially distorted surrounding context, but can be grasped from the standpoint of the proletariat. According to Lukács, in the present period, that is, at the time this essay was formulated in the early 1920s, there is no problem which either actually or potentially will not yield to commodity-analysis.<sup>12</sup> Lukács' claim reveals the depths of his faith in Marx and Marxism, which he conflates in this work and throughout nearly the whole of his immense Marxist corpus. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism provides a resolution for a central conceptual enigma that classical German philosophy, which abstained from a sustained analysis of economic reality, could not comprehend. He defines "reification" in the first paragraph in writing: "The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly

rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.”<sup>13</sup>

Lukács’ achievement in identifying reification as a central dimension of Marx’s theory focuses attention on the conception of human being in the mature analysis of capitalism at a time when observers like Althusser claim he had already left the anthropological dimension and philosophy behind. In identifying the phenomenon of alienation as central to Marx’s later writings, Lukács notes the unity of Marx’s position, which over time deepens and develops but does not give up central theses and which at no single point resembles the view that Marxism attributes to it. It takes nothing away from Lukács’ achievement that, at a time when *the Paris Manuscripts* had not yet been published, under the heading of “reification” he runs together objectification and alienation. Objectification is a prerequisite to alienation familiar in Hegel’s writings, for instance in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, where he writes: “I can *alienate individual products of my particular physical and mental skills and active capabilities to someone else and allow him to use them for a limited period*, because, provided they are subject to this limitation, they acquire an external relationship to my *totality and universality*. By alienation the *whole of my time, as made concrete through work, and the totality of my production, I would be making the substantial quality of the latter, i.e. my universal activity and actuality or my personality itself, into someone else’s property.*”<sup>14</sup>

This brilliant Hegelian passage links Hegel to Rousseau before him and Marx after him in identifying an economic mechanism through which human beings are objectified and alienated in the normal functioning of modern capitalism. We see here Hegel’s attention to objectification in the context of a discussion of the difference between a thing and its use-value. It is not difficult to imagine that a century and a half ago the young Marx was impressed by the conceptual possibilities of the way in which Hegel here links together political economy, human self-objectification, alienation, and work.

Lukács’ analysis focuses on human being, which is the central element in his analysis of Marx and Marxism. According to Lukács, the problem of human reification, which is not overcome in bourgeois society, and which presents an inadequate view of the human subject, is only finally overcome in Marx’s discovery of the proletariat as the identical subject-object. The analysis, which presupposes Marx’s well-known view that man is the root of man, presents another formulation of the ancient Greek view of man as the measure, which goes all the way back in the tradition until Protagoras. The theory of the subject, which is not formulated before early Christian thought, is formulated then by such Church fathers as Augustine to account for the problem of individual responsibility. Descartes, who depends on Augustine, formulates a conception of the subject in suggesting that the road to objectivity necessarily runs through subjectivity. Lukács’ reading of Marx suggests the solution to the problem of capitalism is not theoretical but practical. It lies in grasping human

activity that is both the source as well as the solution to the problem of reification.<sup>15</sup> When the proletariat becomes consciousness of itself as a class, it will burst its capitalist bonds in achieving human freedom.

This view combines elements central to classical German philosophy, including consciousness (and self-consciousness) as well as human activity. Lukács here directs attention to the revolutionary character of consciousness and self-consciousness in a specifically epistemological context. In the B preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant turns away from his earlier representational approach to knowledge and toward a constructivist approach. His constructivism is outlined in his so-called Copernican revolution, which amounts to the claim that we can only know what we in some sense “construct.” The post-Kantian idealist debate reacts to, criticizes, builds on, and attempts to think Kant’s constructivist turn through to the end. The central difficulty is to find a way to understand the sense in which human beings can meaningfully be said to “construct,” make, or produce their cognitive object instead of finding, uncovering, or discovering it as it is. It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to explore this theme in any detail. Suffice it to say here that in Lukács’ interpretation Marx makes a fundamental contribution to thinking through the constructivist theme opened up for classical German philosophy in Kant’s critical philosophy.

According to Lukács, who simply follows Marx and Marxism on this point, the proletariat is the oppressed, hence unfree part of modern industrial society, which can bring about freedom for itself and everyone else in destroying the class structure of modern industrial society. The solution to the problem of capitalism is not theoretical but practical. It lies in understanding that human activity is both the source as well as the solution to the problem of reification. In his identification of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of modern capitalism, Lukács’ argument rests on ideas he appropriates from Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. From Kant he takes the constructivist insight that a necessary condition of knowledge is an identity between subject and object, knower and known. This identity is produced as the result of the proletariat’s production of the commodity or product that is destined to be sold in the market place. From Fichte he appropriates the idea of the subject as basically active and never passive, which points to the formulation of a conception of finite human being as active, or activity. From Hegel, he takes over the insight, central to the famous analysis of the relation of master and slave, that at the point of self-consciousness, which is achieved only through producing products, hence in the self-objectification of the worker, the relation of master and slave is reversed since it turns out that the slave is the master of the master and the master is the slave of the slave. Writing at a time when in the early 1920s many observers, including Lukács, believed in the immanence of revolution, Lukács contends that if the proletariat can come to awareness of itself, or self-consciousness, it can burst the self-imposed bounds of capitalism.



## The Subject as Proletariat or as Finite Human Being

Much could be said about this brilliant theory of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of modern industrial capitalism. It is clear that this theory borrows from a range of classical German thinkers, some of which I have mentioned, in implying that a correct understanding of Marx reveals him as standing not outside but rather largely within the German Idealist tradition. It is pointing to the subject as central to Marx's theories, Lukács helped to begin a Marxist humanist discussion in the writings of Schaff, Petrovic, and others, which clashed strongly with the horrors of the Soviet gulag, which reintroduced slave labor as a basic dimension of a political entity intended to free all human beings.

Lukács' reading of Marx's conception of the proletariat as an identical subject-object points beyond Hegel to Fichte's view of the subject as active or activity. The proletariat is composed of workers, and work is the current form of human activity in the era of modern capitalism. A limitation of Engels' approach, which both links and restricts a grasp of Marx to his relation to Hegel, is that other influences are minimized or go unnoticed. Among the extra-Hegelian influences on Lukács' reading of Marx none is more important than Fichte. In criticizing Hegel, Marx, as Lukács depicts him, turns toward Fichte, a pre-Hegelian, who lacks the historical dimension central to Hegel and so important to Marx. But he presents a conception of the subject, which, suitably reformulated, provides a way to understand human being in order to identify the real historical subject.

In interpreting Fichte, Lukács relies on a contemporary neo-Kantian, Emil Lask. In reacting against Kant, Lask formulated what he calls the problem of irrationality (*das Irrationalitätsproblem*), which consists in the inability to reduce the given merely mental categories.<sup>16</sup> Fichte's theory of subjectivity is presented in the form of an antinomy. Kant points toward but was unable to formulate a theory based on the idea that the unity of the subject lies in activity. Fichte goes beyond Kant in making practical activity the center of his position.<sup>17</sup> His theory, however, suffers from an unresolved contradiction, which he expressed as a *hiatus irrationalis*, or transcendental thing-in-itself, which he could not explain as the result of human activity.<sup>18</sup> In his theory of the proletariat as the identical subject-object, Marx surpasses what in Fichte remains "an irrational chasm between the subject and object of knowledge."<sup>19</sup> On Lukács' Hegelian-Marxist interpretation of Marx, Marx turns back from Hegel, whose conception of the subject he cannot accept, to Fichte, who proposes an abstract, but also unacceptable view of the subject as activity, to formulate his own idea of the human subject as the proletariat.

If this is correct, then two points follow as concerns the genesis of Marx's position and the role of subjectivity. On the one hand, the historical accuracy of Lukács' suggestion of the importance of Fichte for Marx is confirmed in Marx's reading of Fichte in the *Paris Manuscripts*. Elsewhere I have argued that

Marx here draws on Fichte to formulate a conception of human being as a concrete existing historical being acting within a social context in which he meets his needs and in which he must find the possibility to develop in the process of becoming an individual.<sup>20</sup> Marx shares with Fichte a number of fundamental points including a conception of the subject as basically active, the view that we objectify ourselves in what we do opening the possibility of alienation, and the idea that individual development or development as an individual requires going beyond alienation through objectification of the subject in the form of otherness. It is important to note that I am not saying Marx's theory is reducible to Fichte but I am saying that he is strongly influenced by Fichte and in a sense is even a Fichtean.

On the other hand, as soon as we understand that if Hegel is the terminus a quo of Marx's position, he is far from the only influence on a position that is formulated in reaction to an entire range of German thinkers. Marx's theory is finally not centered only on human being in capitalism, which is an aspect, even a central aspect, but finally no more than an aspect of the deeper problem of the self-development of human being as human in and through human activity in a social context. Work (*Arbeit*) is the form that human activity takes in modern capitalism in which human beings are restricted to meeting their reproductive needs but unable, according to the theory Marx outlines in the *Paris Manuscripts*, from developing individual capacities, hence in developing as individuals. Marx takes from Fichte the crucial idea that one develops in extending the range and type of one's activity. The proletariat is composed of workers and work is the form that human activity takes in modern capitalism, but that will in theory be left behind in the transition from capitalism to communism, when human beings will in principle for the first time be able to develop as individuals outside the limitations of the capitalist process.

If this is correct, then Marx turns out to be a Fichtean or at least both a Hegelian, hence a post-Fichtean, and a Fichtean, hence a pre-Hegelian, a theorist influenced by Hegel, who allegedly takes up in his position all that is positive in preceding thought, as well as by Fichte, who arguably advances an interesting dimension Hegel does not take up in his theory and that Marx appropriates directly from Fichte. If the subject is central, then Marx's theory, which is clearly decisively influenced by Hegel's, is finally not Hegelian at all, except in the sense that both Hegel as well as Marx are influenced by Fichte, Hegel directly and Marx directly as well as indirectly in the formulation of a concept of the subject in Kant's wake.

This point has important consequences concerning our understanding of the relation of Marx to the philosophical tradition. It is an article of faith in Marxism as created by Engels that Marx leaves philosophy behind, so that his theory, whatever it is, is not philosophy. Yet as analysis of Lukács' Hegelian Marxism shows, through the conception of the subject, Marx does not leave behind but rather rejoins the post-German Idealist tradition that, after Fichte, turns on the conception of the subject as active.

## Conclusion: Lukács and the Recovery of Marx after Marxism

I have argued that a conception of human being, whose main source is Fichte's theory of the subject as active or activity, lies at the center of Marx's position. If we admit that Engels did not so much interpret as dismiss Hegel, whose position he did not know well, then it follows that Lukács' invention of Hegelian Marxism for the first time creates a specifically Marxist reading of Hegel and, in that context, a reading of Marx. Yet Lukács' interpretation of the relation of Marx and Hegel finally does justice to neither figure. It does not do justice to Hegel since it continues to accept the indemonstrable Marxist presupposition of the basic distinction between materialism and idealism. Though Lukács contributes to our understanding of Hegel, early and late he continues to reiterate the Marxist point that so-called bourgeois philosophy, which culminates in Hegel, is shot through with intrinsic contradictions. And though Lukács points to Marx's relation to the entire classical German philosophical tradition, he also does not do justice to Marx. For one thing, the depth of his relation to German philosophy is indicated but never clearly stated. For another, Lukács, while criticizing Engels' grasp of philosophy, never clearly rejects the Marxist dogma of the continuity between Marx and Marxism since to do so would presumably undermine his Marxist faith. Hence as a Marxist, even though he is infinitely better equipped to understand philosophy, Lukács continues to accept a political approach to philosophical themes.

This was perhaps necessary in Lukács' historical moment when there was a price to pay to defend Marxism. Yet it is not only not necessary but even antithetical to further progress at the present time. The problem now does not lie in preserving Marxist orthodoxy, but rather in recovering Marx after Marxism while preserving still valid insights from the earlier debate. These include a series of insights Lukács advances in his pioneer version of Hegelian Marxism, such as the stress on alienation, which is central to Marx's position early and late, the problem of the subject, and the complex relation to Hegel as well as Fichte and other German Idealist figures in working out a non-Marxist reading of Marx. At present we can do that best in acknowledging Lukács' many obvious contributions while turning away from Marxism, hence from Hegelian Marxism, in continuing to pursue the interpretation of Marx's position.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 83

<sup>2</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 48.

<sup>4</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 127.

- <sup>5</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 159.
- <sup>6</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 171.
- <sup>7</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 177.
- <sup>8</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 181.
- <sup>9</sup> See Gerald Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1978.
- <sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Paul Churchland, *The Engine of Reason, The Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 1995.
- <sup>11</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 84.
- <sup>12</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 83.
- <sup>13</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 83.
- <sup>14</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 67, p. 97; Hegel's emphases.
- <sup>15</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 97.
- <sup>16</sup> See Emil Lask, *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte*, in *Emil Lask-Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eugen Heerigel, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923–24).
- <sup>17</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 122.
- <sup>19</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 157.
- <sup>20</sup> See Tom Rockmore, "Is Marx A Fichtean?," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 36, no. 1, 93–104.

## Chapter 3

# Georg Lukács' *Destruction of Reason*

Stanley Aronowitz

In 1952, the Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Georg Lukács published a huge polemic against post-Hegelian German philosophy and sociology from Kierkegaard, to Heidegger. The *Destruction of Reason* was unsparing in its contention that with almost no exceptions the post-Hegelian idealist tradition prepared the ground for imperialist, even fascist thought. While Arthur Schopenhauer, neo-Hegelians such as Ranke, and Wilhelm Dilthey, and the phenomenologists, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre come in for a share of criticism, the main culprits are Frederick Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. These writers are accused, in turn, of introducing irrationalism into social and philosophical thought, pronounced antagonism to the idea of progress in history, an aristocratic view of the “masses,” and, consequently, hostility to socialism which in its classic expressions are movements for popular democracy—especially, but not exclusively, the expropriation of most private property in terms of material production.

At the time of its publication Lukács was a professor at the University in Budapest, under the Rakosi government which was among the most subservient of recently installed Eastern European regimes to Stalin and to the Soviet state. Needless to say, at a moment in Western thought when the Kantian-inspired Phenomenology enjoyed a degree of intellectual hegemony in philosophy, and positivist sociology was perhaps the most widely influential social science method, Lukács' extensive tract, when not entirely dismissed as an unfortunate, even tragic, manifestation of the “deterioration” of a once prominent Marxist literary and social theorist (e.g., Theodor Adorno) was savagely attacked for unblinking Stalinist orthodoxy. That Lukács presented his views under the sign of Leninism, did not deter even some critics who, themselves, were prone to distinguish Lenin from his notorious successor at the head of the Soviet State. When the work was translated into German in 1962, and in English in 1980, aside from reviews that rejected its central theses, it passed virtually unnoticed. But it has enjoyed something of a revival in the past 15 years. Still, among Marxist scholars, despite its impressive display of scholarship, when not excoriated it is considered a lesser work among Lukács' writings. Yet a closer examination of the book may reveal some surprising results. To be sure, given the

context within which it was composed and received, the rhetoric of the work is clearly grating to anti-Stalinist ears. Nevertheless, I propose to look past these features in order to grasp its substantive claims. My main contention is that Lukács' critique substantively anticipates those of others, including Adorno's, and that of the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Moreover, the issues raised by the book are still contemporary, despite the vogue that his interlocutors enjoy today.

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What made the book so disappointing for its detractors is that Lukács' magnum opus *History and Class Consciousness (HCC)* (1923), is arguably the major influence in the emergence of the distinctly unorthodox Marxisms associated, paradoxically, with both the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and its chief post-World War II competitor, the structuralism of Louis Althusser, Jacques Ranciere, Etienne Balibar, Nicos Poulantzas, and Claude Levi-Strauss. The critical theorists followed Lukács in his remarkably prescient reading of *Capital* at a time when Marx's early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* was still unavailable. Lukács' "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" the most famous essay included in history . . . was, perhaps, unique at the time for its refusal to ascribe to "objective conditions" the failure of the revolutionary events of the postwar period. Lukács was attempting to craft a theory in which the subject as much as the object played a formative role in forging history. His argument that the commodity form itself—a category of political economy—transformed relations among people into relations between things. The "thingification" of everyday life thereby reified and appeared to make eternal the capitalist system itself. Lukács derived his astounding idea from both *Capital's* first chapter, especially the fourth section on the "fetishism of commodities," and from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and reinserted the concept of alienation, especially alienated labor, into the lexicon of historical materialism. In Lukács' hands alienation became a structural feature of the capitalist system of production and, especially of social and political reproduction rather than a superstructural reflection of the economic infrastructure as in the conventional Marxist theory of ideology.

Of course, structural Marxism renounced Hegel and traced alienation to a youthful Feuerbachian Marx (before *The German Ideology* of 1845), pronouncing the concept a legatee of philosophical idealism. Denunciations aside, what unites the two antinomious tendencies is their equally vehement refusal of the economic determinism shared by both the Second and Third Internationals. And, following Lukács' pathbreaking essay these disparate Marxist theorists shared that work's close attention to the problem of ideology which, in their respective versions, played a decisive role in the survival of capitalism in the wake of twentieth-century world wars and economic crises.

What Lukács had accomplished was a materialist theory of subjectivity. The commodity form, discussed by Marx as “the fetishism of commodities” was an aspect of the production and reproduction of capital, not a mental category. But it did have decisive effects on consciousness. In current terms, Lukács may be credited, among other achievements, with having anticipated the power of consumer society to vitiate and even displace revolutionary politics, at least in the most industrially advanced societies that helped explain why large sections of the working class, suffering the burdens of exploitation and alienated labor, were “seduced” or overcome by the prevailing system even as they fought, through their unions, for higher wages and improved working conditions, and voted for the socialist and labor parties to represent their interests in bourgeois legislatures. Lukács’ theory had provided a substantive basis to Kautsky’s declaration—echoed by Lenin in his influential pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done?*—that the proletariat can through its struggles only achieve “trade union” consciousness; class consciousness can only be brought to it “from the outside,” chiefly by revolutionary intellectuals and “advanced” workers who were schooled in scientific Marxism. Although Lukács himself was a devoted supporter of Rosa Luxemburg, perhaps the most original Marxist thinker of the Socialist International era, he had distanced himself from her apparent endorsement of spontaneity. But the charge was never fully accurate. In her reply to Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* and other criticisms that she was surrendering the role of the party in the revolutionary process, she issued a strong defense of the role of the party, but not its vanguard role. For Luxemburg, the party was chiefly an educational and propagandist force whose influence would ultimately inform revolution, but not “lead” it. She underlined the leading role of the workers themselves in revolutionary situations, a proposition that Lenin himself had accepted. The differences between them was what was the proper place of the revolutionary party, for a careful reading of *What Is To Be Done?* would reveal that Lenin’s notion of the vanguard of professional revolutionaries was offered in the era of Czarist absolutism. That the issue became blurred thereafter by Lenin’s heirs who decontextualized the vanguard and made it a universal principle of the left’s organizations, may be due to the enormous prestige enjoyed by the Russian Bolsheviks for most of the twentieth century. The relationship between leadership and influence remains, in these days of social movements and anarchist sentiments, a burning question among radicals.

The leaders of the Communist International (CI) vehemently disagreed with Lukács and Karl Korsch who had written a parallel text “Marxism and Philosophy.” They were admonished to renounce their deviations lest they face expulsion. Korsch left the German Communist Party and joined with others to organize a relatively short-lived competing political formation and Korsch himself became hostile to Lenin and Leninism and spent the last three decades of his life associating with the group known as “Council Communists,” CP defectors who came to question the efficacy of party Marxism entirely in favor

of workers' self-managed councils. But still inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, by the international scope of the movement, and by his own insistence on the centrality of political organization, Lukács remained in the fold. Yet even as he ostensibly backed down from the main concepts of *HCC* two years after the denunciation by the Internationals leader, Zinoviev, who delivered his tirade from the Dais of the CI conference, Lukács wrote a defense of *HCC*, in which the Reification chapter appeared. Significantly, in the repressive environment of post-Lenin Soviet Communism and the ideological ossification of the international movement, he did not publish the book-length defense. And discretion may have been the better part of a bold intervention; by 1926, the year of its composition, he was living in Vienna and took a post in the Communist regional organization.

The irony of Lukács' early (1919–27) Marxist writings is that notwithstanding their unfavorable, even virulent reception by Bolshevik officialdom, a careful reading of *History and Class Consciousness* reveals a sophisticated exposition of the philosophical basis of the Kautsky-Lenin thesis against the possibility that the working class can, on the basis of its exploitation and struggle achieve revolutionary class consciousness. Moreover, the final chapter of the book argues forcefully for the necessity of a political avant-garde for the development of practical revolutionary struggle. This point is further underlined in Lukács' 1924 study, *Lenin*, and his subsequent *Defense*. *Defense* accuses two prominent critics of *HCC* . . . of "tailism." According to Lukács the failure of his comrade in the Hungarian Communist movement, Rudas and the Soviet philosopher, Abram Deborin, to address the crucial questions of political organization (a major, but surprisingly unmentioned upon theme of *HCC*'s concluding chapter), left the proletariat to its own devices which, in Lukács' argument placed them in the harm's way of capitalism's most potent weapon: the commodity form. Party organization was the only way to achieve collective class consciousness by organizing effective opposition to the blandishments of commodification and reification. In this light, *HCC* can be read as, in part, a Leninist tract, and would help distance Lenin from many of his orthodox followers for whom subjectivity was simply read out of the Marxist lexicon, except in the terms of strategy and tactics.

Seven years later, in 1933, Lukács moved to Moscow and during the next 12 years wrote many books on works of European literature. He returned to Hungary in 1945, but did not resume his philosophical and political preoccupations until *Destruction of Reason*. Lukács' prolific writings on literature include widely influential studies of Balzac, Dickens, Walter Scott, Thomas Mann, and the highly controversial anti-Stalinist novelist Solzhenitsyn. And, in 1938 he published a study of the Young Hegel, the major exception to the general pattern of his writings of this period.

The *Destruction of Reason* is written in the highly charged Cold War environment. The years immediately following the defeat of fascism were marked by a profound fissure between the victorious Western powers—the United States,



United Kingdom, and France—and its erstwhile partner, the Soviet Union, its Eastern European allies, and Communist China which achieved state power in 1949. The breakup of the wartime alliance produced vast changes in the European and US labor movements, organizations of civil society, and the Cold War had a huge impact on intellectuals. Already rent by the Trotsky/Stalin split, and the Moscow trials of 1936–38, in which Stalin’s minions exterminated some of the most revered “old Bolsheviks” of the October Revolution, (among them the beloved Nicolai Bukharin, Karl Radek, and less than admired Zinoviev and Kamenev); intellectuals were further divided after Winston Churchill, the wartime British Prime Minister, delivered his fateful Iron Curtain speech in U.S. president Harry Truman’s home town of Fulton, Missouri in 1946. There Churchill had dreamed that, with the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini, the Western allies would now proceed to secure the fall of Soviet Communism. In his Fulton Mo. Address, he portrayed the Soviet Union an enemy of freedom, drenched in brutality toward its citizens and the “captive nations” of Eastern Europe and buried in nefarious secrecy that rendered any hope of reconciliation with the West unimaginable. No country pursued the relentless effort to isolate the Communist countries more than the United States, but Western Europe followed suit as well, even though in Italy and France the Communist parties largely held their electoral ground until the 1970s and retained considerable power within almost most of the labor movements. But, with a much narrower base, the CPs were devastated in North America.

The ideological struggle was equally intense. Most non-Communist Socialist and liberal intellectuals who had once entered into fragile anti-fascist alliances with the Communists severed their political relationships. In Italy, the important Socialist Party split, with the majority led by Pietro Nenni moving closer to the relatively flexible Communist Party led by Antonio Gramsci’s collaborator, Palmiero Togliatti, but a second faction eagerly embraced the Cold War. The still dominant General Confederation of Italian Labor (CGIL) was now challenged by a U.S.-backed Socialist-led federation and a smaller Catholic union. The Communists spent the postwar era in sullen isolation from the representative parliamentary institutions, but were far from beaten.

The most dramatic ideological combat occurred in France. In 1945 on the heels of liberation, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau Ponty, and Raymond Aron, among others founded the journal *Les Temps Modernes* and briefly attempted to form a political party that would be independent of the two major parties of the left, the SP and the CP. Sharply critical of the Communists for their unabashed Stalinism, the journal’s editors engaged in an extensive critique of party Marxism and enunciated, along phenomenological lines, a competing political and social philosophy which nonetheless, acknowledge the validity of much of the classical Marxist tradition, even as it carefully separated itself from the orthodoxies of the CP intellectuals. But contrary to Aron who broke with the journal over relations with the CP, Sartre

and Merleau Ponty remained engaged in dialog with their adversaries. By the late 1950s Sartre was regarded by the non-Communist left as a "fellow traveler" of the CP. And his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the first volume of which was published in 1960 reveals strong influence of the Western Marxism inspired by Lukács. But Merleau Ponty broke with Sartre and *Les Temps Modernes* to become one of Stalin and Stalinism's more severe detractors. In the 1950s, he published several important essays on Lukács, wherein he prepared the ground for the broadly shared view that the once iconoclastic philosopher and social theorist had surrendered to Stalinism.

In 1947 Sartre, still in his anti-Communist phase, and the then leading CP intellectual, Henri Lefebvre, held a series of celebrated debates which were reported and discussed not only in intellectual and partisan circles but also in the mainstream of the French press. The irony of these discussions was that, despite his CP membership, Lefebvre was by no means a typical representative of his party's ideology. Even before the war his text *Dialectical Materialism* (1939) was not similar to more traditional treatments by, among others, David Guest and August Thalheimer. Tacitly reflecting Lukács' theory of consciousness, the book embraced the concept of alienation and alienated labor and bore more than traces of the influence of Husserl and Heidegger. In 1947, the year of the confrontation with Sartre, Lefebvre published the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, an adroit combination of Lukács-inflected Marxism and phenomenology. Like his earlier *Dialectical Materialism* it was initially received by his party's leaders and intellectuals with enthusiasm, but it was not long before it suffered the condemnation that, similarly, had been accorded Lukács a quarter century earlier. Lefebvre was ultimately "excluded" from the French CP and went on to become one of the more influential intellectual influences on the student movements that ignited the rebellion of May 1968.

So *Destruction of Reason* appears in the frigid environment of Cold War politics. Seen from this perspective Lukács undertakes a difficult task: not only does he address the growing influence of Nietzsche, but takes on the entire phenomenological school, not only its most vulnerable tribune, Heidegger, but Husserl (a major influence on Merleau Ponty) and Sartre, whose left political credentials were considered to be unimpeachable.

-2-

Right from the start Lukács lays his cards on the table:

It will be our task to bring to light all the intellectual spadework done on behalf of the 'National Socialist Outlook', however far removed (on the face of it) from Hitlerism it may be and however little (subjectively) it may cherish such intentions. It is one of this book's basic theses that there is no such thing as an 'innocent' philosophy. Such a thing has never existed

. . . This is so in precisely the philosophical sense: to side either with or against reason decides at the same time the character of philosophy as such, and its social developments. Reason can never be something politically neutral, suspended above social developments, It always mirrors the concrete rationality—or irrationality—of a social situation and evolving trend, sums up conceptually and thereby promotes or inhibits it. (5)

But to display and analyze the “social developments” that condition the emergence of irrational thought is necessary, but not sufficient. Lukács proposes to use the method of “immanent critique”—a close textual examination of the works in order to expose their underlying tendencies and contradictions. These currents are often manifest only when subjected to close reading and, at least in the cases of twentieth-century sociology and left phenomenology are not apparent to the writers themselves, especially to Sartre and Merleau Ponty who considered themselves left intellectuals. This Hegelian-Marxist method begins from the premises that the writers have themselves declared or implicitly employed a standpoint; rather than imposing some external criteria upon them the critic moves from within the text outward. The critic is obliged to (a) explicate these premises and the process by which they unfold and then to interpret their substance and method; (b) evaluate the degree to which the writer has fulfilled them; and (c) to situate them in the context of their time and ours. The latter is an activity of interpretation that is always subject to dispute. Thus, the critic herself, does not read innocently, but must declare her point of view from which critique proceeds.

Clearly, Lukács is a partisan of Reason as promulgated by the Hegelian dialectic, but also by the key thinkers of the Enlightenment. The scientific Enlightenment, it will be recalled, sought to free humans from the shackles of religion, mysticism, and arbitrary censorship. Hegel restored reason to its proper place in history, but he argues the rationality inherent in the Hegelian dialectic required the transformative power of historical materialism to oppose the corrosive influence of its idealist appropriation. Lukács’ appreciation of Hegel situates the development of his dialectical philosophy in the framework of the French Revolution

. . . it is certainly no accident that the final and most advanced form of idealist dialectics developed in connection with the French Revolution and, in particular, with its social consequences. Only after the Revolution did the historical character of the dialectic, of which Herder and Vico were forerunners, acquire a methodologically conscious and logically worked-out expression, principally in Hegel’s dialectics. (6)

As huge as Hegel’s contribution was, it was still caught in the net of idealism albeit neither in positivism which he sharply rebukes or subjective idealism. His objective idealism was rooted in historical reality but led him to conclude

in one of his last major works, *The Philosophy of Right*, that the Prussian State marked the end of human history since it had achieved the identity of subject and object. Of course, Marx's refutation of this claim, brilliantly expounded in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State* (1843) demanded, tacitly, that the fundamental concepts of the materialist dialectic—grounded in the centrality of class struggle, and of unlimited social transformation, be elaborated. This he did in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and especially, with Engels in the German Ideology to which one might add the disputed *Manuscripts of 1844*. The task, first assumed by Marx and Engels was accomplished by the same method Lukács proposed to apply to the preponderant tendencies of German philosophy. Their early writings consisted, in large measure in providing an immanent critique of Hegel himself, the so-called Young Hegelians (Ruge, Stirner et al.) of Marx's own time, and competing socialist doctrines that were based on idealist philosophical premises such as those of, among others, Pierre Joseph Proudhon.

If Hegel and his idealist followers remained infused with faith in Reason, particularly the idea of freedom albeit the liberal, democratic ideologies and institutions arising from the German Enlightenment and of the French Revolution, in the century of German bourgeois philosophy and sociology from Schopenhauer to Heidegger, Lukács finds that the fundamental intention of many of its leading figures was counterrevolutionary. Irrationalism manifests itself in its first important period in the struggle against the "dialectical-historical concept of progress" which occurs at the same time as the emergence of the proletariat as an independent social force during the revolutions of 1848 and whose signal document is the Communist Manifesto (January 1848). But it must be stated that dialectical philosophy does not posit a linear history. Instead, history unfolds in struggle of opposites and the contradictory forces that animate it allow for a degree of uncertainty regarding outcomes. And, contrary to various Marxist orthodoxies Marx himself never declared that Communism marks the end of history. Still, Lukács identifies with the camp that holds that over the long term, human evolution parallels biological evolution: lower forms are transformed through our collective relation to nature and to social development. "Development" appears first in the progress of the forces of production that, over time, permit, objectively at least, a fuller, more egalitarian and culturally richer life for the immense majority.

But with Nietzsche, Lukács sees the first systematic, and convincing—for some—effort to insert irrationality into philosophy. Nietzsche is, as well, the primary source of subsequent elaborations of irrationalist thought from Bergson to Heidegger. So, the largest section of *Destruction of Reason* is devoted to a fairly comprehensive critique of Nietzsche. We first encounter Nietzsche's revulsion, at age 26, in the wake of the temporary triumph of the Paris Commune of 1871. Nietzsche responded to the Commune by becoming literally sick to his stomach and greeted its downfall with glee. From this moment, Nietzsche becomes the leading adversary of historical materialism a major intellectual

opponent of the proletariat and in the course of time, a tribune of concepts of history, and culture that consistently deny progress, rationality, and the dialectical logic of the politics of social change, where dialectics signifies that history evolves through a series of determinate class contradictions and struggles.

In the chapter on “Nietzsche as Founder of Irrationalism,” Lukács provides in copious detail evidence for his thesis and the further claim that Nietzsche also prepares the way for imperialism’s ideology. Moreover, he will “always remain the reactionary bourgeoisie’s leading philosopher, whatever the variations in the situation and the reactionary tactics adopted to match them” (315). But Lukács is more than aware of the philosopher’s “personal gifts.” Among them:

“He had a special sixth sense, an anticipatory sensitivity to what the parasitical intelligentsia would need in the imperialist age, what would inwardly move and disturb it and what kind of answer would most appease it. Thus he was able to encompass very wide areas of culture, to illuminate the pressing questions with clever aphorisms, and to satisfy the frustrated, indeed sometimes rebellious, instincts of this parasitical class of intellectuals with gestures that appeared fascinating and hyper-revolutionary. And, at the same time he could answer all of these questions, or at least indicate the answers in such a way that out of his subtleties and fine nuances, it was possible for the robust and reactionary class insignia of the imperialist bourgeoisie to emerge” (315). This was marked by Nietzsche’s ability to express a “deep unease about culture,” in Freud’s phrase a revolt against it.

For Lukács, then, Nietzsche was a philosopher who, simultaneously, expressed the most reactionary currents of modern thought (“the fight against democracy and socialism, the creation of an imperialist myth,” and “the summons to barbaric action”), and concepts that appeared to challenge bourgeois conformity (a militant agnosticism and contempt for organized religion, a sharp critique of conventional ideas of progress in the context of capitalism’s triumph, a blistering attack against ossified philosophical systems). But Lukács views these sparkling and subtle sentiments as nothing more than a “demagogically effective pseudo revolution.” And, he argues, while deploring all theories of social transformation, Nietzsche was able to make room for changes within the context of his lasting influence. “This was made possible by the deployment of aphorism as a key literary form. By juxtaposing aphorisms composed in different periods, he was able to address the needs of the moment” (321). Thus, Lukács insists, Nietzsche offers a “bottomless relativism” cloaked in a renunciation of “idealist systematizing” even as Nietzsche renounces the objectivity of knowledge, “a real coherence of the actual world and the possibility of knowing this” (322).

Despite Nietzsche’s vehement denial that he has created a philosophical system, Lukács asserts that his apparent disparate comments, cloaked as aphorisms, constitute a definite system of thought which, despite some brilliant insights and compelling style that are framed in apparent randomness must,

nevertheless, demonstrate that Nietzsche's "romantic anti-capitalism" is a systematic discourse that looks both backward and forward to an era when there existed a "dictatorship of an elite" such as that which existed in ancient times in Caesarian Rome where an aristocracy ruled, a myth that as we shall see was later to infuse much of Heidegger's later work. Michael Pelias has remarked that "unlike Heidegger he does not privilege the Greek polis as a site from which to think the future." The core of Lukács' contention may be seen in Nietzsche's major concept of the eternal recurrence.

Hegel's concept of negation consists of three elements: (A) struggle of opposites results in the "annihilation" or "negation" of one of its terms, (B) the new is a "higher level" of being (C) but the "new" preserves the old even as its elements are transformed into a qualitatively different synthesis. So, contrary to the view of history as a linear process, Hegel insists that the old recurs, but within a new set of conditions and its features are no longer dominant. So, for example, although Marx and Engels mark the victory of capitalism as an event that virtually eliminates all the "idyllic relations" of the old feudal order, at least some of these relations are preserved in radically transformed institutions, and as forms of ideology in capitalist societies. The feudal family, once the primary site of production, is "torn asunder" by the universalization of the commodity form and of the market, but capitalism requires its preservation in the service of economic and social reproduction. Having been stripped of its productive functions (in capitalist terms) the bourgeois family prepares the next generation of labor but preserves the current generation as well. And, at least in some societies, "family values" become a cutting edge capitalist ideology, even in the wake of the disintegration of many concrete families.

Nietzsche's concept of the eternal recurrence denies negation but, at the same time, appropriates Hegel's notion of the recurrence of the past in the present. He does speak of historical transformation through the transvaluation of values. However, rather than situating it in its historical context, although he does not have an ontology in the usual sense of the term, Nietzsche ontologizes it by adding the mediation of "eternal" and elevating it to a "first principle." Thus, the new is strictly precluded but nothing disappears and any phenomenon or event can insert itself at any time in the present. Lukács:

For Nietzsche himself, the eternal recurrence is the counter-idea to the concept of becoming. This counterbalance was needed because Becoming cannot give rise to something new (in the context of capitalist society) without betraying its function in Nietzsche's system. We have already encountered the tendency to transform Becoming into a simulated movement, to assign to it the mere role of providing variations within the "eternally cosmic" laws of the will-to-power. Eternal recurrence narrows the scope even more: the emergence of something new is "cosmic" impossibility. "The rotating cycle" wrote Nietzsche . . . is not something that has become but a first principle, just as mass is a first principle, without exception or transgression. (377)

It should be evident that the power of Nietzsche's philosophy is significantly enhanced by his vast learning, but as well by his deft series of appropriations of the dialectical tradition initiated by Hegel. He purports to offer a philosophy of becoming which is, perhaps the reason he was able to seduce generations of French intellectuals. But, for Lukács and other Nietzsche critics, the resemblance cannot mask profound differences. Nietzsche's philosophy has two contradictory aspects: the assertion of difference as an ineluctable feature of being and the denial of the possibility of genuine historical transformation. Thus, Lukács argues, difference exists as a series of binaries within a given social order, but the social order does not change.

Lukács' attack against Nietzsche's political philosophy seems unexceptionable. Nietzsche did view the emergence of powerful workers' and socialist movements in the second half of the nineteenth century with alarm, chiefly because these forecast the rise of the masses to social power, an eventuality which he regarded as an unmitigated disaster. But Lukács' acknowledgment of the brilliance of some of Nietzsche's cultural theories is framed within a rather orthodox Marxism in which enlightenment conceptions such as the idea of progress are invoked uncritically. During the twentieth century, generations of left and radical intellectuals were attracted to Nietzsche, precisely because he breaks from the linear view of history and with Hegel's unbridled optimism about the State's capacity to resolve all social contradictions. He almost single-handedly called into question the classical Hegelian formulation "the real is the rational" where "rational" signifies, at least in its contemporary interpretation, that history inevitably moves upward, albeit in a contradictory spiral. Given the actual course of twentieth-century history (two bloody world wars, frequent economic crises, the persistence of reactionary nationalisms, the stubborn survival of religious myth amid rampant secularization) readers were likely to be attracted to the uncertainty that Nietzsche introduced into historical thinking. Nor could critical thinkers remain encouraged by the fate of socialism in the century. The victory of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and throughout the revolutionary and radical movements of the West and Southeast Asia, could not have supported Lukács' optimism. That Lukács wrote *Destruction of Reason* 15 years after the Moscow trials is a testament to his partial intellectual blindness. And the subsequent collapse of Soviet Communism, the apparent complete conquest by capitalism and the commodity form of virtually all societies had to call into question the idea of progress and give some credence to the view that capitalism was "eternal." Seen in this light, it is no wonder that, for example, many took seriously Nietzsche's concept of the will to power which foretells the folly of the idea that human fraternity will ultimately triumph.

It may be argued that the orthodox Marxist theory of historical progress is the mirror image of the liberal view. The question that may be raised by the bloody events of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, even from a

Marxist perspective, is the possibility of long-term historical regression in the context of capitalist crisis and systemic shifts from liberal democracy to various forms of absolutism. Even when states formally adopt representative political institutions, viz Africa dictatorship is not precluded. And, most representative democracies, including the United States, systematically disenfranchise large sections of their respective populations. As capitalism goes planetary this exclusion also entails the widening of economic and political inequality which, as we know undermines the claims by liberals and modern "conservatives" (who are economic and political liberals, but more directly linked to big Capital) that the contemporary post-Communist era is moving inexorably toward democracy.

Thus it is no accident that critical theory and structural Marxism were, each in their way, obliged, especially after the 1930s, to reexamine progressive perspectives on history. Adorno's aphoristic style, especially in *Minima Moralia* owes its literary inspiration to Nietzsche. The terse, but resonant comment "Is poetry possible after Auschwitz?" reflects the profound pessimism that many shared, even as the fascist powers were vanquished by the Allied coalition. But this phrase is also a comment on history's indeterminate course. And we need only consult Althusser and his school's extensive philosophical output to discern the degree to which their rejection of the Hegelian dialectic was derived from Spinozian as well as Nietzschean premises. As is well known, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze was deeply influenced by Nietzsche even as his *Anti-Oedipus*, an effort to found a new materialist psychology, relies heavily on Marx's ideas. And, among the left phenomenologists, especially Sartre and Merleau Ponty, Marxist and Hegelian orthodoxies come under severe scrutiny, partially due to Nietzschean skepticism even as, for example, each philosopher in his own way, supports the concept of totality.

Yet, in defense of Lukács there can be little doubt that his indictment is linked to the proposition that pessimism remains a deeply conservative stance that, in the terms enunciated by Ernst Bloch in his monumental *Principle of Hope* (written between the late 1930s and 1940s during humankind's darker periods), without hope for a utopian future, humankind is condemned to eternal recurrence of the crimes that attended both world wars, innumerable smaller military conflicts and counterrevolutions that remain a staple of capitalist decadence. What Nietzsche teaches, in effect, is the impossibility of any politics that looks beyond the prevailing system of domination, except to strengthen its authoritarian and aristocratic tendencies. That his many admirers among left intellectuals choose to ignore these underlying features of his system is a commentary both of the power of his discourse and the despair shared by many in the wake of the defeats of the past century. That the utopian vision has suffered almost complete eclipse in these dark times cannot erase the power of Bloch's argument. Whether dreamers will emerge from the ashes of a disintegrating capitalism is, of course, undecidable. What is not in question is



what Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, and his followers and detractors among the '68 generation, and Bloch observe: in the face of the defeats the only realistic course is to demand the impossible.

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The trail of Nietzsche's influence spans philosophical and ideological orientations. Adorno shares Lukács' hostility to phenomenology: his two book-length critiques of Husserl and Heidegger parallel those of Lukács, although he focuses sharply on the idealism inherent in epistemology, especially the debt owed by phenomenology to Kant's Idealism. But, in Adorno's essay on Holderlin "Parataxis" which contains a rather direct political attack on Heidegger, we can see traces of a Marxist influence that often rises to the surface in his otherwise unorthodox texts. And Pierre Bourdieu, in his *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* exposes the close links between Heidegger's right wing politics and his philosophy. Bourdieu focuses on Heidegger's philosophical language and its relation to his politics. The core of both critiques echoes Lukács' earlier treatise: Ontology itself constitutes a surrender to the existing social system, a move, as in any science of "Being" regards human nature as immutable and therefore not subject to historical transformations, which can occur only in some undefined, passive way. We can hope that some force will emerge to cleanse humanity of the multitude of "ontic" or local preoccupations that turn us away from our true destiny. Seen in this light, politics becomes an exercise in the purging of Being of its distractions, such as care for others and other nonessential temporal aspects in order to return to its essence. Thus atemporality consists in elevating temporal continuity to an ontologically immutable, essential concept that defines and shapes centuries. It is the religiosity of the language of revelation that marks at times the merging of the mystical, the irrational and the right wing politics of Heidegger. In the early 1930s Heidegger supported the Nazis because he believed in the principle of racial purity and hoped the Nazis would restore humanity to itself.

While Adorno is prepared to marginalize the degree to which Nietzsche may be credited or condemned with having restored the ancient concept of Ontology, Lukács is unforgiving. Like his early master Edmund Husserl Heidegger substitutes a theory of intuition (irrationality) for experience which for Lukács is always historical and changing. While Heidegger was constantly trying to shut himself off from irrationalism, to "elevate himself" from both the dichotomy of materialism and idealism, and of rationality and irrationality, Lukács insisted that the weight of his critique is against materialism and rationality, both of which are predicated on objective, observable reality. Indeed, according to Lukács Heidegger's argument that subjective time "disrupts

the dominion of reason and understanding. 'Logic' has lost its long-standing primacy in metaphysics." And following Nietzsche (about whom he wrote a three-volume critical work), "Its idea is becoming questionable" (509).

Heidegger's quest for authenticity of being leads him to make the distinction between Ontology and the "Ontic." To the latter belongs the entrapments of everyday life, the world of obligations to others, and the sacrifice of the Self's quest for authenticity in the service of care. Among the inauthentic aspects of life is "real history." This despite Heidegger's invocation of the category of "historicality" which, for Lukács, although correct in its critique of the old idealistic argumentation of the theory of history ends by reducing history to its atemporality, that is, ontologically immutable significance. Here Lukács is on more solid ground.

The final part of *Destruction of Reason* concerns the sociology of two of its founders as a separate discipline: Georg Simmel and Max Weber. I will not examine, in any detail Lukács' attempt to join them with irrationalism and hence with the rise of imperialism and fascist dictatorships, except to remind us that these were once central influences on Lukács himself. For example, it is inconceivable that the Reification essay could have been written without Simmel's brilliant exposition of the concept of Reification in the *Philosophy of Money*. Or that the idea of the distinction between actual and "putative" class consciousness, elaborated so skillfully in the same essay, would be possible without Weber's methodological principle of the ideal type. That Weber was an author and was implicated in the liberal, postrevolutionary constitution of the Weimar Republic that followed the defeat of the German revolution—which he opposed—goes without further remarks. And it is true that Weber and Simmel were ensconced in Kantian Idealism which, according to Lukács, is the deep structure of irrationalism. Moreover, they were each keen observers of the vicissitudes of modern life: the triumph of bureaucratic rationality that accompanied the rise of capitalism; the ironies of everyday life that defied rationality; and, for Simmel, the role of the unconscious in the reproduction of the commodity form. Lukács is mistaken to hold these and other discoveries hostage to his condemnation of irrationalism. The whole section on sociology, therefore, seems like an instance of sour grapes and tendentiousness. It is, on the whole, superfluous to his main argument.

What is living and what is dead or mistaken in *Destruction of Reason*? Although acknowledging that overall, Lukács' account of Western Philosophy is "dead" Janos Kelleman, defends Lukács on the ground of his link between irrationalism in some aspects of late German philosophy and the rise of fascism, "which grew out of the culture saturated with irrationalism" (p. 2). And, Kelleman agrees with Lukács' identification of pessimism and what he calls the "crisis of progress" as key elements in the drift of some sections of the intelligentsia "articulating the interests of the bourgeoisie." And, he argues that Lukács' condemnation of irrationalism's "opacity or non-transparency" and its avoidance

of the concrete history of political economy is at the same time a critique of bourgeois claims to power. Concealment is always in the interest of ruling classes.

It seems to me that what is lacking in the post-World War II sophistication that marked neo-Marxist and left phenomenological thought was the kind of “vulgar thought” (Gramsci) without which critical, radical theory is impossible. That “vulgarity” may be defined in terms parallel to Lukács’ directness and blunt evaluations. Perhaps this absence itself attests to the enduring influence of irrationality’s greatest modern representatives, and the despair shared by a large portion of their audiences. Seen in this perspective *The Destruction of Reason* may be understood as a corrective to the positioning of Nietzsche as a radical democrat, as compatible with Marx (but only for their mutual hatred of Duhring and a disgust of the bourgeoisie’s complacency) (witness the current dawdling by the United States and other major powers in the wake of the threat posed to the survival of life forms by the relentless effects of capitalist industrialization and consumer society). While the critique of Lukács by Adorno and the post-structuralists remains valid in the particulars, we enter our own praise of vulgarity as a great antidote to academic perfume.

## Chapter 4

# Revolutionary Dialectics against “Tailism”: Lukács’ Answer to the Criticisms of *History and Class Consciousness*

Michael Löwy

*History and Class Consciousness* (HCC) is certainly Georg Lukács’ most important philosophical work, and a writing that influenced critical thinking throughout the twentieth century. Next to the dialectical method, one of the most important aspects of the book is the central place occupied by the *subjective dimension* of the revolutionary struggle: class consciousness. In fact both dimensions are directly linked: a dialectical understanding of history and of politics leads necessarily to a dialectical approach to the subject/object relation, superseding the one-sided vulgar materialist interpretation of Marxism, where only the “objective conditions,” the level of development of the forces of production, or the capitalist economic crisis, play a decisive role in determining the issue of historical processes. No other work of those years was able to offer such a powerful and philosophically sophisticated legitimation of the Communist program. However, far from being welcome in official Communist quarters, it received an intense fire of criticism soon after its publication in 1923. No exclusions were pronounced—such practices were still impossible in the early 20s—but it was obvious that the kind of revolutionary dialectics represented by HCC was hardly acceptable to the dominant philosophical *doxa* of the Comintern. For many years scholars and readers wondered why Lukács never answered to these critical comments. It is true that in the 1930s he did indulge in several “self-critical” assessments of his book, rejecting it had an “idealist” piece. But there exists no evidence that he shared this viewpoint already in the early 1920s: on the contrary, one could assume, for instance from his book on Lenin, in 1924, or his critical comments on Bukharin in 1925, that he did *not* recant his philosophical perspective.

The recent discovery of *Chvostismus und Dialektik* in the former archives of the Lenin Institute shows that this “missing link” existed: Lukács *did reply*, in a most explicit and vigorous way, to these attacks, and defended the main ideas of his Hegelo-Marxist masterpiece from 1923. One may consider this answer as his last writing still inspired by the general philosophical approach of *Geschichte*

*und Klassenbewusstsein*, just before a major turn in his theoretical and political orientation.

The German manuscript was published by the Lukács Archives of Budapest in 1996—and translated into English by Verso (London) in 2000 under the title *Tailism and the Dialectic*. Laszlo Illés, the Hungarian editor of the original version, believes that it was written in 1925 or 1926 “at the same time as the significant reviews of the Lassalle-Edition and Moses Hess writings.” I think that 1925 is a more accurate guess, because there is no reason why Lukács would wait two years to answer criticisms published in 1924—the style of the document suggests rather an immediate response. But, above all, I don’t believe that it is contemporaneous with the article on Moses Hess (1926), for the good reason that this article is, as I’ll try to show later on, strictly opposed, in its basic philosophic orientation, to the newly discovered essay.

Now that we know that Lukács found it necessary to defend *History and Class Consciousness* against his “orthodox” Communist critics—he never bothered to answer the Social-Democratic ones—the obvious question, curiously not raised by the editors (both of the Hungarian and the English edition) is *why did he not publish it?* I can see three possible answers to this question:

1. Lukács was afraid that his response could provoke a reaction from Soviet or Comintern bodies, thus aggravating his political isolation. I don’t think this is a plausible explanation, not only because in 1925—unlike 1935—there was still room for discussion in the Communist movement, but above all considering that in 1925 he published a severe criticism of Bukharin’s “Marxist sociology,” which has many points in common with *Tailism and the Dialectic*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Bukharin was a much more important figure in the Communist movement than Rudas or Deborin, and still Lukács was not afraid of submitting him to an intense critical fire.
2. Lukács tried unsuccessfully to publish it but failed. One possible hypothesis is that he sent it to a Soviet publication—for instance *Pod Znamenem Marxisma* (Under the Banner of Marxism), where Deborin had published an attack on him in 1924—but the essay was refused, the editors being rather on the side of Deborin. This would explain why the manuscript was found in Moscow, and also—perhaps—why Lukács used the Russian word *Chvostismus*, known only to Russian readers. It may also be that the essay was too long to be published in a review, and too short and polemical to appear as a book.
3. Some time after the essay was written—a few months, or perhaps a year—Lukács began to have doubts, and finally changed his mind and did not agree anymore with its political and philosophical orientation. This hypothesis, by the way, is not necessarily contradictory with the former one.

As for Lukács’ silence on this document during the following years, it can be explained by the new “realist” orientation, beginning with the Moses Hess article from 1926, which will be discussed later—not to mention his

rejection—particularly after the 1930s—of *HCC* as an “idealist” and even “dangerous” book.

*Tailism and the Dialectic (T&D)* is, as its title suggests, an essay in defense of revolutionary dialectics, a polemic answer to his main official Communist critics: Lazlo Rudas—a young Hungarian communist intellectual—and Abram Deborin—a former Menchevik and follower of Plekhanov, who had belatedly joined the Bolsheviks; both represented, inside the Communist movement, an influential and powerful semi-positivist and non-dialectical standpoint.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of its outstanding value in this respect, Lukács’ essay has, in my view, some serious shortcomings.

The most obvious is that it is a polemic against second-rate authors. In itself, this is not a significant issue: did not Marx discuss at length the writings of Bruno and Edgar Bauer? However, Lukács did, to a certain extent, adopt the agenda of his critics, and limited his answer to the problems they raised: class consciousness and the dialectics of nature. While the first is certainly an essential issue in revolutionary dialectics, the same can hardly be said of the second. It is difficult to perceive the philosophical/political significance of the many pages of *T&D* devoted to the epistemology of natural sciences, or to the question if experiment and industry are, in themselves—as Engels seemed to believe—a sufficient philosophical answer to the challenge of the Kantian thing-in-itself. Another consequence of this limited agenda is that the theory of reification, which is one of the central arguments of *HCC* and Lukács’ most important contribution to a radical critique of capitalist civilization—a theory which was to exert a powerful influence on Western Marxism throughout the twentieth century, from the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin to Lucien Goldmann, Henri Lefebvre, and Guy Debord—is entirely absent from *Tailism and the Dialectic*, as it was from the laborious polemical exertions of Rudas and Deborin. Could it be that they agreed with the Lukácsian concept? Or, more likely, they just didn’t understand it? In any case, they ignore it, and so does Lukács in his answer . . .

In relation to class consciousness and the Leninist theory of the party—certainly the most interesting part of the essay—there is a problem of a different sort. If one compares the discussion of these issues in *HCC* with those of *T&D*, one cannot avoid the impression that his interpretation of Leninism in the last piece gained a distinct authoritarian slant. While in the *opus* from 1923 there is an original attempt to integrate some of Rosa Luxemburg’s insights in a sort of synthesis between Luxemburgism and Leninism,<sup>3</sup> in the polemical essay Luxemburg appears only, in a rather simplistic way, as a negative reference and as the embodiment of pure spontaneism. While in *HCC* the relationship between the “imputed consciousness” and the empirical one is perceived as a dialectical process in which the class, assisted by its vanguard, rises to the *zugerechnetes Bewusstsein* through its own experience of struggle, in *T&D* the Kautskyan strictly un-dialectical thesis that socialism is “introduced from outside” into the class by the intellectuals—a mechanistic view taken up by

Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) but discarded after 1905—is presented as the quintessence of Leninism.” While in *HCC* Lukács insisted that “the workers councils are the political/economical overcoming of reification,”<sup>4</sup> *T&D* ignores the Soviets and refers only to the party, going as far as identifying the dictatorship of the proletariat with the “dictatorship of a real Communist Party.”

In spite of these problems, *Chvostismus und Dialektik* has little in common with Stalinism: not only there is no reference to Joseph Vissarionovitch and his writings, or to his new thesis of “socialism in one country,” but the whole spirit of the essay runs against the sort of metaphysical and dogmatic doctrines imposed by Stalin and his followers. In fact, it may be considered as a powerful exercise in revolutionary dialectics, opposed to the crypto-positivist brand of “Marxism” that was soon to become the official ideology of the Soviet bureaucracy. The key element in this polemical battle is Lukács’ emphasis on the *decisive revolutionary importance of the subjective moment in the subject/object historical dialectics*. If one had to summarize the value and the significance of *Tailism and the Dialectic*, I would argue that it is a *powerful Hegelian/Marxist apology of revolutionary subjectivity*—to a higher degree even than in *History and Class Consciousness*. This motive runs like a red thread throughout the whole piece, particularly in its first part, but even, to some extent, in the second one too. Let us try to bring into evidence the main moments of this argument.

One could begin with the mysterious term *Chvostismus* of the book’s title—Lukács never bothered to explain it, supposing that its—Russian?—readers were familiar with it. This Russian word—whose origin is the German term *Schwanz*, “tail”—was used by Lenin in his polemics, for instance in *What Is To Be Done?*, against those “economistic Marxists” who “tail-end” the spontaneous labor movement. Lukács, however, uses it in a much broader historical/philosophical sense: *Chvostismus* means passively following—“tailing”—the “objective” course of events, while ignoring the subjective/revolutionary moments of the historical process.

Lukács denounces the attempt by Rudas and Deborin to transform Marxism into a “science” in the positivist, bourgeois sense. Deborin tries, in a regressive move, to bring back historical materialism “into the fold of Comte or Herbert Spencer” (*auf Comte oder Herbert Spencer zurückrevidiert*), a sort of bourgeois sociology studying transhistorical laws that exclude all human activity. And Rudas places himself as a “scientific” observer of the objective, law-bound course of history, whereby he can “anticipate” revolutionary developments. Both regard as worthy of scientific investigation only what is free of any participation on the part of the historical subject, and both reject, in the name of this “Marxist” (in fact, positivist) science any attempt to accord “an *active and positive* role to a subjective moment in history.”<sup>5</sup>

The war against subjectivism, argues Lukács, is the banner under which opportunism justifies its rejection of revolutionary dialectics: it was used by Bernstein against Marx and by Kautsky against Lenin. In the name of

anti-subjectivism, Rudas develops a fatalist conception of history, which includes only “the objective conditions,” but leaves no room for the decision of the historical agents. In an article—criticized by Lukács in *T&D*—against Trotsky published by *Inprekor*, the official Bulletin of the Comintern—Rudas claims that the defeat of the Hungarian revolution of 1919 was due only to “objective conditions” and not to any mistakes of the Communist leadership; he mentions both Trotsky and Lukács as examples of a one-sided conception of politics which overemphasizes the importance of proletarian class consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Apparently Rudas suspected Lukács of Trotskyist leanings; in fact, he was not a partisan of Trotsky, but did not hesitate, until 1926, to mention him in a favorable light in his writings—quite a heresy for the official spokesmen.

While rejecting the accusation of “subjective idealism,” Lukács does not retract from his “subjectivist” and voluntarist viewpoint: in the decisive moments of the struggle “everything depends on class consciousness, on the conscious will of the proletariat”—the subjective component. Of course, there is a dialectical interaction between subject and object in the historical process, but in the *Augenblick* of crisis, this component gives the direction of the events, in the form of revolutionary consciousness and praxis. By his fatalist attitude, Rudas ignores praxis and develops a theory of passive “tail-ending,” *Chvostismus*, considering that history is a process that “takes place independently of human consciousness.”

What is Leninism, argues Lukács, if not the permanent insistence on the “active and conscious rôle of the subjective moment”? How could one imagine, “without this function of the subjective moment,” Lenin’s conception of insurrection as an art? Insurrection is precisely the *Augenblick*, the instant of the revolutionary process where “the subjective moment has a decisive predominance (*ein entscheidendes Übergewicht*).” In that instant, the fate of the revolution, and therefore of humanity “depends on the subjective moment.” This does not mean that revolutionaries should “wait” for the arrival of this *Augenblick*: there is no moment in the historical process where the possibility of an active rôle of the subjective moments is completely lacking.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, Lukács turns his critical weapons against one of the main expressions of this positivist, “sociological,” contemplative, fatalist—*chvostistich* in *T&D*’s terminology—and objectivist conception of history: the *ideology of progress*. Rudas and Debordin believe that the historical process is an evolution mechanistically and fatally leading to the next stage. History is conceived, according to the dogmas of evolutionism, as permanent advance, endless progress: the temporally later stage is necessarily the higher one in every respect. From a dialectical viewpoint, however, the historical process is “not an evolutionary nor an organic one,” but contradictory, jerkily unfolding in advances and retreats.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately Lukács does not develop these insights, that point toward a radical break with the ideology of inevitable progress common to Second and—after 1924—Third International Marxism.



Another important aspect related to this battle against the positivist degradation of Marxism is Lukács critique, in the second part of the essay, against Rudas' views on technology and industry as an "objective" and neutral system of "exchange between humans and nature." This would mean, objects Lukács, that there is an essential identity between the capitalist and the socialist society! In his viewpoint, revolution has to change not only the relations of production but also revolutionize to a large extent the concrete forms of technology and industry existing in capitalism, since they are intimately linked to the capitalist division of labor. In this issue too Lukács was well ahead of his time—eco-socialists began to deal with this argument in the last decade—but the suggestion remains undeveloped in his essay.<sup>9</sup>

Incidentally, there is a striking analogy between some of Lukács' formulations in *T&D*—the importance of the revolutionary *Augenblick*, the critique of the ideology of progress, the call for a radical transformation of the technical apparatus—and those of Walter Benjamin's last reflections. Of course, Benjamin was familiar with *HCC*, which played an important role in his evolution toward communism, but he obviously could not know Lukács' unpublished piece. It is therefore by following his own way that he came to conclusions so surprisingly similar to those of this essay.

A few months after writing *Tailism and the Dialectic*—in any case less than one year—Lukács wrote the essay "Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics" (1926) which stands for a radically different political/philosophical perspective. In this brilliant but highly problematic piece, Lukács celebrates Hegel's "reconciliation with reality" as the proof of his "grandiose realism" and his "rejection of all utopias." While this realism permitted him to understand "the objective dialectics of the historical process," the moralist utopianism and subjectivism of Moses Hess and the left Hegelians led to a blind alley. As I tried to show elsewhere, this essay provided the philosophical justification for Lukács' own "reconciliation with reality," that is with the Stalinist Soviet Union, implicitly representing "the objective dialectics of the historical process."<sup>10</sup> The sharp and one-sided "anti-subjectivism" of this writing is sufficient proof that—unlike the hypothesis of the Hungarian publishers of *T&D*—Lukács' answer to his critics was written *before* the Moses Hess piece—that is around 1925—and not at the same time. Soon afterwards, in 1927, Lukács, who had still favorably quoted Trotsky in an essay which appeared in June 1926, published his first "anti-Trotskyist" piece, in *Die Internationale*, the theoretical organ of the German Communist Party.<sup>11</sup>

How to explain such a sudden turn, between 1925 and 1926, leading Lukács from the revolutionary subjectivism of *Tailism and the Dialectic* to the "reconciliation with reality" of the essay on Moses Hess? Probably the feeling that the revolutionary wave from 1917–23 had been beaten in Europe and that all that remained was the Soviet "socialism in one country." Lukács was by no means alone in drawing this conclusion: many other communist intellectuals followed the same "realistic" reasoning. Only a minority—among which of

course Leon Trotsky and his followers—remained faithful to the internationalist/revolutionary hope of October. But that is another story . . .

To conclude: in spite of its shortcomings, Lukács' *Tailism and the Dialectic* is a fascinating document, not only from the viewpoint of his intellectual biography, but in its theoretical and political actuality *today*, as a powerful antidote to the attempts to reduce Marxism or critical theory to a mere "scientific" observation of the course of events, a "positive" description of the ups and downs of the economic conjuncture. Moreover, by its emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity, by its critique of the ideology of linear progress and by its understanding for the need to revolutionize the prevailing technical/industrial apparatus, it appears surprisingly tuned to present issues being discussed in the international radical movement against capitalist globalization.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lukács' critical review of Bukharin's *Theorie des historischen Materialismus* was published in Grunberg's *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* in 1925.

<sup>2</sup> In my essay on Lukács (from 1979) I wrote: "We may note that the two best-known critiques, those by Rudas and Deborin, stood squarely on the ground of pre-dialectical materialism. Deborin used copious quotations from Plekhanov to show that Marxism stems from the very 'naturalistic materialism' criticized by Lukács; whereas Rudas compared the Marxist laws of society with Darwin's law of evolution, and drew the surprising conclusion that Marxism is 'a pure science of nature'" (M. Lowy, *Georg Lukács—From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, London: New Left Books, 1979), 169.

<sup>3</sup> For instance: "Rosa Luxemburg perceived very correctly that 'the organisation is a product of the struggle'. She only overestimated the organic character of this process (. . .)." (G. Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), 494. I tried to analyze this synthesis in *Georg Lukács*, 185.

<sup>4</sup> G. Lukács, *GuK*, 256.

<sup>5</sup> G. Lukács, *Tailism and the Dialectics* (London: Verso, 2000), 50, 135, 137. Cf. the German original, *Chvoostismus und Dialektik* (Budapest: Aron Verlag, 1996), 9.

<sup>6</sup> As John Ree very aptly comments, Rudas and Deborin stand in direct continuity with Second International positivist/determinist Marxism: "In Rudas' mind, Trotsky and Lukács are linked because they both stress the importance of the subjective factor in the revolution. Rudas steps forth as a defender of the 'objective conditions' which guaranteed that the revolution was bound to fail. The striking similarity with Karl Kautsky's review of Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, in which he attributes the failure of the German revolution to just such objective conditions, is striking testimony to the persistence of vulgar Marxism among the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy." ("Introduction" to *T&D*, 24–25.)

<sup>7</sup> G. Lukács, *T&D*, 48, 54–58, 62. Cf. *Chvoostismus und Dialektik*, 16. Emphasis in the original. Of course, this argument is mainly developed in the first chapter of the first part of the essay, which has the explicit title "Subjectivism"; but one can find it also in other parts of the document.

<sup>8</sup> *T&D*, 55, 78, 105.

<sup>9</sup> *T&D*, 134–135.

<sup>10</sup> M. Löwy, *Georg Lukács*, 194–198. The English translation of Lukács' essay on Hess can be found in his *Political Writings 1919–1929* (London: New Left Books, 1972), 181–223.

<sup>11</sup> The article from 1926 is "L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung," *Die Tat* 18.3, June 1926 which favorably quotes Trotsky's critique of the Proletkult. The piece from 1927 is "Eine Marxkritik im Dienste des Troztkismus, Rez. von Max Eastman: Marx, Lenin and the Science of Revolution," *Die Internationale*, X. 6, 1927.

## Part II

# Extending Aesthetic Theory

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## Chapter 5

# The Theory of the Novel and the Concept of Realism in Lukács and Adorno

Peter Uwe Hohendahl

### I

The clash between Georg Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno, especially Adorno's bitter polemic against Lukács' *Realism in Our Time*, has been a source of frustration, even embarrassment, for the students of Western Marxism. The fact that Adorno felt obliged to turn against an author to whom he was so obviously indebted clearly did not help Marxist theory outside the Eastern Bloc and possibly damaged the larger project as a whole (Jameson, Moors). While early readers of Adorno's 1958 essay "Extorted Reconciliation" understood the piece as part of the Cold War struggle and tended to take sides according to their position within the division between capitalist and socialist countries, later readers, especially after the demise of the Socialist Bloc, looked for strategies to overcome the opposition either by ignoring it altogether or by downplaying it through the emphasis on the work of the early Lukács (Tertulian). For even in his most polemical moment Adorno still paid homage to *The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness*. From the perspective of Adorno's students, then, Lukács' early works up to 1923 could be rescued for critical theory and Western Marxism as long as one could demonstrate the theoretical compatibility of the early Lukács and Adorno. Indeed, as we will see, it is not too difficult to prove Adorno's affinities and dependence on the conceptual apparatus of the early Lukács. By the same token, however, the later turn of Lukács, that is his complicated involvement with orthodox Marxism, falls out of the picture and, together with state socialism, is relegated to the trashcan of history. The concept of realism, which is central to the literary theory of the middle period of Lukács (1930–56), must be banned as irrelevant to the understanding of modern art. Yet it turns out that such a ban is premature when we look more closely at Adorno's broader response to Lukács, for the polemic focuses exclusively on the moment of difference, leaving unexamined the broader problematic of aesthetic/literary representation and its critical function. In other words, if one means to examine Lukács' impact on Adorno, one has to go beyond the Hungarian critic's early work; one has to include the

essays and books in which Lukács makes use of and both aesthetically and politically defends the category of realism. As much as Adorno chides Lukács for his dogmatic and narrow use of the concept, he does not escape, as we will see, the deeper structural questions that Lukács believed to have addressed. Although Adorno vehemently opposed the solutions offered by the later Lukács and portrays them as a betrayal of the early work, he remains, at least to some extent, captive to the same questions. We discover a common ground that transcends Adorno's stated affinities to Lukács' early work. This complex configuration is determined by the legacy of Hegel, which both Lukács and Adorno openly acknowledged, and that of Marx, about which more recent Adorno criticism prefers to be silent. Yet Adorno never rejected the reification chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, although it is rarely explicitly mentioned in his postwar writings. At the same time, we have to note that Lukács and Adorno interpreted this Hegel-Marx legacy in rather different ways, differences that left their imprint on their aesthetic and literary theory. In fact, it is precisely these differences that motivated the conflict during the years of the Cold War.

A renewed engagement with the relationship between Lukács and Adorno must therefore avoid two potential traps. It should neither simply return to the conflict of the 1950s in order to take sides (to trash Lukács with Adorno's arguments) nor avoid the conflict by limiting the analysis to the legacy of the early Lukács in the writings of Adorno, a strategy that defined the first decade after the Cold War for plausible reasons. It allowed to include at least part of Lukács' work in the discussion of critical theory. While the concept of Western Marxism had lost its valence, the selective appropriation of Lukács by the students of critical theory, an appropriation that the author would have rejected, rescued Lukács from the fate of oblivion. But a substantial price had to be paid for this approach. The so-called orthodox Lukács had to be sacrificed in order to rescue those works that impacted the Frankfurt School. The result is a somewhat narrow understanding of the Lukácsian legacy (Jameson, 196–213). It represses those elements that Adorno opposed. Still, as always, we must remember that the negation remains linked to and engaged with what it negates.

## II

Let us begin with Adorno's critique. In "Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács' *Realism in Our Time*" Adorno sharply distinguishes between Lukács' early work, including *History and Class Consciousness*, and the Stalinist period. While the early work is praised for setting high standards, the later writings come under severe critique. For the purpose of this essay it is important to reexamine the nature of Adorno's assault, both at the level of its rhetoric and its argument. The initial attempt to show a conciliatory side to the Hungarian philosopher breaks down after a few pages to be replaced by a highly hostile

rhetoric *ad personam* that aims at reducing the opponent. We find sentences like the following: “The pedantry of his manner is matched by the sloppiness in the details” (NL I, 219) or “It remains an open question whether the regression one senses in Lukács, the regression of a consciousness that was once one of the most advanced, is an objective expression of the shadow of a regression threatening the European mind” (NL I, 235). While contemporary Western readers may have been sympathetic to this tactic, for critics of a later generation, it is possibly off-putting in its desire to silence the opponent. In his relentless polemic against Lukács’ dogmatism Adorno is in danger of becoming dogmatic himself. His defense of modernism and the avant-garde against a normative concept of realism concentrates its theoretical efforts on the formal aspect in explicit contrast to Lukács’ emphasis on the representation of reality (*Widerspiegelung*) and the dubious deviation from realism in European modernism. Adorno objects with good reasons to the notions of decadence and illness as biological categories that are problematic and potentially dangerous metaphors to examine historical processes. Furthermore, Adorno rightly points out that any attempt on the part of Lukács to explore modern literature through Heidegger’s existentialism misses the autonomous labor of modern literary artworks. Once these arguments have been presented the question remains: Does modern literature engage historical reality through the mode of representation?

Lukács’ critique of modernist formalism takes this for granted in order to differentiate correct and incorrect forms of representation. But Adorno’s objection to this distinction as a form of undialectical, abstract moralism does not attack the underlying assumption of an independent historical process. Not only his extensive quote from Marx’s *Grundrisse* but also his own critique of Brecht’s method in *Arturo Ui* makes this quite clear. At the same time, he insists on the difference between the ontology of the artwork and that of empirical reality. “Art exists within reality, has its functions in it, and is also inherently mediated with reality in many ways. But nevertheless, as art, by its very concept it stands in an antithetical relationship to the status quo” (NL I, 224). By emphasizing the complexity of the mediation of art and empirical reality Adorno counters the Lukácsian critique of epistemological solipsism without conceding a universal theory of realism. But does he concede the need for aesthetic representation? While his critique of Brecht in other parts of the essay presupposes the need for a form of dramatic representation, the same is not obvious in the context of his exploration of literature in general. When Adorno insists on the expressive subjectivity of the literary work he does not presuppose aesthetic representation as a universal principle. At the same time, we have to note that Adorno does in part engage Lukács’ understanding of representation as *Widerspiegelung* (reflection) and in doing so presupposes the legitimacy of the concept as such, while fiercely attacking Lukács’ use of it. He agrees with Lukács that art presents *Erkenntnis* (knowledge), but objects to the identification of scientific and aesthetic knowledge/truth in Lukács’ theory. By emphasizing the peculiar nature of aesthetic truth, Adorno also, implicitly, asserts literature as a



form of knowledge that invites serious examination, in this respect similar to that of philosophy or science. By stressing the need for a dialectical relationship between the different forms of knowledge and truth, he also claims a common ground for the concept of truth, a claim to which Lukács would certainly agree.

Stripped of its polemical rhetoric, the essay “Extorted Reconciliation” presents significant theoretical disagreements between Adorno and Lukács concerning the legitimacy of modernism and the universal validity of realism, not to mention the usefulness of reflection theory; at the same time, Adorno’s very critique ultimately makes visible deeper shared assumptions and predispositions. They are, as we will see, by no means limited to Lukács’ early work. Adorno’s understanding of the modern European novel is possibly closer to Lukács’ essays of the 1930s and 1940s than Adorno was ready to admit. A comparison between Lukács’ Balzac essays and Adorno’s “Reading Balzac” of 1961 (*NL* I, 121–136) allows us to explore the response of the younger critic. For Lukács, Balzac’s novels are representative of a specific phase of the bourgeoisie, both in social and literary terms. In his analysis of *Lost Illusions* Lukács seems to favor a content-oriented sociological approach. Balzac’s novel serves as an index for the historical development of the new class that succeeded to defeat the feudal nobility during the eighteenth century. Examining the narrative of the novel enables Lukács to write a commentary on the internal contradiction of this development and specifically the failure of the new class to live up to its own ethical and cultural standards. What differentiates Lukács’ approach from conventional sociology is the emphasis on the importance of the new capitalist economy. “In almost every one of his novels Balzac depicts this capitalist development, the transformation of traditional handicrafts into modern capitalist production; he shows how stormily accumulating money-capital usuriously exploits town and countryside and how the old social formations and ideologies must yield before its triumphant onslaught” (*ER*, 49). For Lukács the task becomes to show how Balzac responds as a novelist (independent of his political views) to the social and human consequences of modern capitalism through the choice of his characters, the selection of relevant plot structures, and the adoption of specific narrative perspectives. In short, it is the configuration of unique, historically determined social, ideological, and literary forces that he is interested in rather than the moral position of the author or the details of the plot. For Lukács the “integrating principle of this novel is the social process itself” (*ER*, 52).

A decisive element of this configuration is the literary aspect, namely the mode of representation. Following the distinction between narration and description of his famous 1936 essay, Lukács stresses the concrete character of the representation, its attachment to individual characters and situations. According to Lukács, Balzac’s literary achievement is the result of a cyclical composition that makes use of multiple characters that can be moved from one novel to the next to establish the social totality of the narrated world. Lukács is

willing to defend the arbitrary moments of Balzac's plots against a stricter understanding of causality in the later realist tradition because it appears to correspond to the social structure of the early nineteenth century. Differently put, his idea of realism, at least in this essay, is not determined by a concept of scientific causality. Rather, the social totality of Balzac's novels, constructed as a loose pluralism of characters and events, is seen as historically determined by the specific mode of capitalist production of that time. For Lukács the exaggerated nature of the Balzacian method is justified as a way to foreground the essential moments of social reality (*ER*, 58f.).

It seems that Lukács' defense of Balzac's "realism" motivated Adorno's rereading of Balzac's novels, although the Hungarian critic is not mentioned. Adorno, however, places the emphasis on the lack of realistic representation in Balzac. He highlights the exaggerated moments of the plot and the characters, the preference for stark contrasts, situations that are unusual to say the least, and figures with extreme qualities. Clearly, Adorno does not subscribe to Lukács' interpretation of Balzac as a realist. By invoking Freud's interpretation of paranoia, he offers an alternative reading of the Balzacian narratives. They represent a quasi-paranoiac system of social relations where everything is linked to everything else. There are, Adorno comments, no chance events. The force of Balzac's representations is due to a narrated social network without escape. Instead of the Lukácsian realistic pluralism, Adorno detects paranoiac "delusions of reference" (*NL I*, 126) as the mode of composition. Yet far from using this insight as an argument against the quality of Balzac's novels, Adorno affirms Balzac's method as appropriate and successful in literary terms. In short, he agrees with Lukács on the value of Balzac's novels as valid representations of the nineteenth century but refuses to acknowledge the realistic nature of Balzac's narratives. Still, the agreement is by no means limited to the literary appreciation of Balzac. Adorno is equally convinced that through his novels Balzac did grasp the social essence of the early nineteenth century. Adorno questions neither the ability of the novel form to represent social structures nor the primary importance of capitalism for the character of social relations in the nineteenth century. But unlike Lukács, he does not insist on a narrative that imitates or reflects (*widerspiegeln*) the objective social reality. Instead, he claims "the unleashed rationality takes on an irrationality similar to the universal nexus of guilt that rationality remains" (*NL I*, 126). In other words, Balzac's mode of representation foregrounds the irrational character of the social environment as a subjectively experienced environment.

Adorno's "Reading Balzac" has a noticeable tendency to shift the emphasis from the concept of realism to the more fundamental question of the literary representation of social totality. It is not accidental therefore that he invokes Brecht's critique of photographic naturalism in order to deemphasize conventional notions of realism. Hence the argument turns against realism in order to capture the changing reality: "The realism with which even those who are idealistically inclined are preoccupied is not primary but derived: realism

on the basis of a loss of reality" (*NLI*, 128). If one carries this argument further, one arrives at the structural problematic of the modernist novel, which is faced with precisely the impact of the increasingly abstract nature of modern reality. In short, Adorno recognizes in Balzac proto-modernist elements as he does in the poetry of a romantic author like Eichendorff. The borderline between literary realism and modernism is treated as fluid, whereas Lukács asserts a sharp contrast not only in method but also in value. Of course, it is his critique of modernism that caused Adorno's polemic. However, also this confrontation deserves closer scrutiny.

### III

Adorno's defense of modernism against any form of traditionalism is an essential part of his larger project, first developed in the *Philosophy of Modern Music* (the Schoenberg chapter was written in 1939), and then after World War II extended to literature and the visual arts. In his essays of the 1950s Adorno establishes himself as a public voice in West German literary criticism, mostly through journal essays and radio talks. The essay "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel" was originally a radio talk before it was published in *Akzente* in 1954. Adorno's basic claim is the internal contradiction of the modern novel. While the form of the novel calls for narration, narration is no longer legitimate. This situation is contrasted with that of the nineteenth century when, according to Adorno, a realistic representation of the world was still possible. What Stifter could do, Joyce or Musil could not. The essay explores this difference along two axes: on the one hand, it examines the formal changes that occurred in the twentieth century; on the other, it scrutinizes the transformation of what the novel used to treat as its referent: the social world. To be more precise: for Adorno the crucial phenomenon is the transformation of the subject-object relation and its impact on the modern novel.

In order to determine the structural change, Adorno focuses on the role of the narrator and advances the thesis that the narrator of the modern novel, unlike the epic storyteller, can no longer rely on the full presence of the world. With the transformed experience of the narrator a realistic representation of the world has lost its former validity. In other words, the loss of experience necessitates new narrative strategies. Here we can observe affinities to Benjamin's essay "The Story Teller," an essay Adorno knew well. However, his own essay follows a different line of argument, which was first developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: In "The Position of the Narrator" he recalls the basic argument: "The reification of all relationships between individuals, which transforms their human qualities into lubricating oil for the smooth running of the machinery, the universal alienation and self-alienation, needs to be called by name, and the novel is qualified to do so as few other art forms are" (*NLI*, 32). Here the emphasis is placed upon the transformation of the social world *in toto* and the

need of the novel form to reflect this. Given the transformation of social reality, including the relationship between individuals, the novel has to give up its previous mode of representation, that is its realism. Instead, in order to grasp the new social reality, the narrative foregrounds the subjective moments, among them the reflective and essayistic elements. For Adorno, in the wake of Benjamin, interiorization becomes the hallmark of the modern novel, for which Proust becomes the perfect example.

Adorno's approach to the modern novel is decidedly philosophical; it focuses on the status of the subject in the modern world and is much less interested in problems of narratology. There is no attempt, for instance, to differentiate the function of the narrator in novelists as distinct as Broch, Proust, Rilke, Jacobsen, and Joyce. In other words, Adorno remains attached to the very dialectical tradition that Lukács had shaped. His opposition to Lukács' critique of modernism has to be reassessed in this context. Therefore we have to return to Lukács.

Lukács' hostility to modernism, which made him the *bête noir* of Western critics, was grounded in a Marxist version of the philosophy of history. This means that Lukács, unlike traditional conservatives, who would invoke tradition to justify their resistance to modern art, had to argue from a position that accepted the transformation of the modern social world as part of the logic of history. He does this by distinguishing between the objective conditions of modernity under advanced capitalism and the ideology of the modernist writer. This distinction enables him to accept the former and reject the latter, because the modern condition (complete alienation) is caused by capitalism, while modernism, as an aesthetic and critical response, is perceived as an ideology, that is as false consciousness. The underlying assumption is that the artist or philosopher has a choice between a correct and a false response to modernity. Hence Lukács pronounces: "It is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung*, underlying a writer's work that counts" (RT, 19). Specific stylistic features and formal structures, therefore, are the result of the superimposition of a particular worldview on the aesthetic material. Differently put, the appropriate aesthetic response cannot be found without the correct worldview. Therefore Lukács argues in *Realism in Our Time* that the artist's creative process has to begin with the fundamental social situation, the characterization of the human as a *zoon politicon* (Aristotle) to understand the failure of modernism which clings, as Lukács tells us, to the Heideggerian concept of *Geworfensein* and radical human loneliness. Again, we have to remind ourselves that Lukács focuses on the ideology of modernism rather than the objective structure of modern society to access modern literature. In particular, he stresses the correlation between existentialist philosophy and modern art. The mediating term is the abstract mode of representation of the world in contrast to a concrete model in realist literature of the nineteenth century.

Yet it becomes never quite clear in the argument why the abstract mode of representation is inferior as such; at least Lukács does not provide a philosophical

argument for his claim. However, its function becomes obvious when Lukács refers to the realism. “The literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the concrete and the abstract potentialities of human beings in extreme situations of this kind” (*RT*, 23). Thus the modernist novel is charged with “narrative subjectivity” based on the abstract potentiality of the main characters. The narrative technique (stream of consciousness, monologue interieur, etc.) is confronted with the qualities of the figures in the novel. Therefore Lukács perceives the focus on the representation of the interior situation of the characters as “disintegration of the outer world” (*RT*, 25), that is a loss of social reality. The lack of a clear distinction between narrator and characters, a lack that we have also observed in Adorno, serves as the basis for the critique of modernism. The disappearance of the old-fashioned omniscient narrator of the nineteenth-century novel is equated with the destruction of objective representation, which in turn is equated with misunderstanding objective reality. Lukács’ polemic against modernism as decadent, subjective, and potentially pathological, depends on the unacknowledged shift from the features of the depicted characters to the perspective of the narrative and from there to the truth-value of the modern novel in general.

The rejection of modernism leads Lukács back to the praise of realism as the superior and appropriate method of representation. How is this possible when the social and economic conditions of the twentieth century are so different from those of the nineteenth century? Would not the transformation of the objective social world require a transformed mode of literary representation, as Adorno would argue? Lukács escapes this conclusion because for him modernism is caused by a false response of the artist to the objective reality; it is the result of a misapprehension that then reappears in the characters of the novel. Because of its very *ideological*, biased nature, the modernist approach can be corrected, at least theoretically. The correct worldview and perspective enable “the artist to choose between the important and the superficial, the crucial and the episodic” (*RT*, 33).

As we have seen, Lukács’ emphatic rejection of modernism has two roots: its determination as an ideology and a concept of correct literary production that leads to the demand for the objective representation of reality. It is the first element with which Adorno vehemently disagrees, while he does not fundamentally question the second. He defends modernism as the objective correlation of late capitalism, which means that for him realism is no more than a specific historical use of literary techniques and strategies to represent nineteenth-century reality and inadequate for aesthetically presenting the more complex world of the twentieth century. He shares with Lukács the fundamental insight that literary forms are historically determined and applies this conception consistently to the representation of the reality of late capitalism. Advanced modernist literature has a critical function that Lukács seems to miss by setting up a dogmatic standard of realism. From Adorno’s point of

view, therefore, it is Lukács who is the subjectivist by remaining at the level of ideology instead of examining the aesthetic consequences of the reified world of late capitalism. The *geschichtsphilosophische Sonnenuhr* to which Adorno refers in “On Lyric Poetry and Society” applies no less to the novel form as Adorno learned from *The Theory of the Novel* in the 1920s. There Lukács had discussed the structures of the modern European novel beginning with Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* in correlation with the unfolding of modernity. But the early Lukács saw no need to describe the historical dialectic as a movement toward realism.

#### IV

When Adorno invokes the early Lukács in “Extorted Reconciliation” in order to assault his later work, he does this not only because he admires the dense and complex rhetoric of the early essays but also because he is aware of the deep imprint these essays left on his own work. In structural terms, Adorno’s essays on the novel and individual novelists (Balzac, Kafka, Proust, and Joyce) rest on *The Theory of the Novel* seen through the lens of the later *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). They represent a Marxist rearticulation of the narrative developed in *The Theory of the Novel*. In the context of this essay there is no room for an extensive reading of Lukács’ text (for this see Bernstein). Still, we have to recall the basic features of the theory to approach Adorno’s revisionist adaptation. Of particular importance is the first part of the long essay that explores the difference between the ancient Greek epic (Homer) and the modern novel. Of course, Lukács was by no means the first critic to define the novel form in terms of its difference from the epic. In German literary criticism the trope was already present in the late eighteenth century when Friedrich Blanckenburg picked it up and used it as the point of departure for his theory of the novel in 1774. In Lukács’ text, however, there is a much stronger emphasis on the distinction between the Greek world and the modern age, a distinction defined in terms of plenitude and lack or immanence and transcendence, meaningful and problematic existence. Modernity is determined by its loss of self-containment and the unproblematic relationship of subject and world. “[F]or to be a man in the new world is to be solitary . . . No light radiates any longer from within in the world of events, into the vast complexity to which the soul is a stranger” (*TN*, 36). By arguing that the modern novel has its origin in modernity, Lukács claims that this form unfolds against the backdrop of a configuration in which the “spontaneous totality of being” (*TN*, 38) is permanently lost. In this sense Lukács’ theory of the novel is always more than a theory of a genre. The exploration of the modern European novel allows Lukács to investigate through its literary articulation the fundamental structural features of modernity. To be more precise: once he has identified the novel as the objective correlation of modernity he can search

for insights that the study of pragmatic history would not yield. As much as *The Theory of the Novel* examines the formal structure of the novel and its historical transformation from Cervantes to Dostoyevsky, the ultimate point is a deeper one. The form of the novel is the precise literary expression of the transcendental homelessness of the modern individual. Differently put, Lukács insists on the philosophical meaning of the form and it is this meaning that legitimizes the genre. The Lukácsian dialectic relates the literary form to the “given historico-philosophical realities” (TN, 56) and interprets the world in order to explore this *Gegebenheit*. In most general terms, then, this reality is that of a fundamental discrepancy between the subject and the world. Therefore, as Lukács suggests, the hero of the novel is a seeker (TN, 60).

Lukács’ structural analysis of the modern novel is fundamentally determined by its philosophical intent. Both its strengths and its weaknesses cannot be understood without it. This is the reason why *The Theory of the Novel* must return to the ancient epic, for only in this move the fate of the novel comes fully into view. What Lukács, following Hegel, calls its abstractness, its lack of an organic composition, defines its character, not as a failure of the writer but as the limitation of the era in which it thrives. Viewed from the perspective of its content therefore, the narrated world is always already fragmented and brittle. But this state is not seen as a flaw or deficiency—quite the opposite. The early Lukács asserts the legitimacy of the novel form in the way it represents a broken world, “the normative incompleteness, the problematic nature of the novel is a true-born form in the historico-philosophical sense and proves its legitimacy by attaining its substratum, the true condition of the contemporary spirit” (TN, 73). This moment deserves our full attention, since the later Lukács will withdraw from this position, or at least modify it significantly, while Adorno will remain loyal to this argument in his ardent defense of modernism. Later in his life, Lukács defended the shift as his own transition from Hegel to Marx that followed the completion of *The Theory of the Novel* (see the preface to the 1962 edition of TN), but this explanation overlooks that the Marxist turn in *History and Class Consciousness* presented a materialist position but did not imply a support of literary realism.

While *The Theory of the Novel* examines the epic and the world in terms of representation, there is no attempt to understand eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European novels as examples of realism. Lukács’ typology of the novel, worked out in the second part of the essay, distinguishes three historically distinct forms, namely the novel of abstract idealism, the novel of disillusion, and the *Bildungsroman*. It is apparent that the early Lukács is less interested in a historical map than in basic responses to the condition of modernity and ultimately in the fundamental problem of overcoming these conditions. The typology is based on a fundamental distinction between two types of incommensurability: “either the world is narrower or it is broader than the outside world assigned to it as the arena and substratum of its actions” (TN, 97). Succinctly put, the typology is based on the relationship between subject and

object or, in terms of the narrative, the relationship between the mentality (*Gesinnung*) of the main character (hero) and the narrated world. Lukács explores this relationship from the perspective of the subject or hero rather than the phenomenology of the world. To be more precise, for the early Lukács the narrated world is presented in the novels through the eyes of the hero. This leads, as Lukács notes, to a split between the perceived and the real world, between what he calls the “ungeformte” world and the real world (*Außenwelt*) that exists independently of the subject (TN, 98–99). However, this notion of an outside world that is independent of the subject/hero is not developed as an argument to favor a particular type of the novel or to sustain a theory of literary realism. Rather, at stake is the correct correlation between the structure of the modern world and the formal structure of the novel. Still, we have to note that the above distinction could be utilized for a theory of normative realism, that is a theory that Lukács would actually develop in the 1930s. As soon as the emphasis of the analysis shifts from the perceived world to the objective world, the problem of realism becomes a likely feature of the theoretical structure, since the accuracy or truthfulness of the representation can then be measured against the concept of an objective outside reality, as the later Lukács will in fact do.

*The Theory of the Novel* escapes this problematic by treating the objective outside world as external to the phenomenology of the novel, not only in the case of abstract idealism but also in the case of the novel of disillusion, a type that marks the transition to modernism and is for this reason of special interest to us. In this instance “the soul is being wider and larger than the distances which life has to offer it” (TN, 112). The structure of this type is determined by the interior reality of the seeking individual that cannot find an adequate outside world. Interior and outside world are strikingly incompatible, but this incompatibility is structured in such a way that the interior world of the individual is self-contained and not necessarily in contact with the outside world. “A life which is capable of producing all its content out of itself can be rounded and perfect even if it never enters into contact with the alien reality outside” (TN, 112). What are presented in the narrative are therefore the interiority of the individual and the representation of a perspectivized reality. Although Lukács speaks of a “disintegration of form” (TN, 113), there is no intent to question the legitimacy of this type of the novel by measuring it against a more even representation of the outside world. Instead, the narrated world is accepted as the articulation of the experienced reality “completely atomized or amorphous . . . entirely devoid of meaning” (TN, 113). But at no place does *The Theory of the Novel* confuse the deformation of the phenomenal world with the structure of the novel of disillusion. Rather, they are kept separate as different levels. The truth-value of the novel of disillusion is grounded in the radical articulation of the individual’s interiority. The creation of a harmonious solution, of a homecoming of the individual, would be both aesthetically and ethically a failure for this type of novel. Accordingly, Flaubert’s *Education*



*Sentimental* becomes the most truthful representative of the type, since in this text the decomposition of the traditional fabula has, as Lukács tells us, reached the highest degree by pushing the experience of time to its utmost limits. Flaubert's novel succeeds, Lukács suggests, because it remains consistently inside the hero and his own reality and through this very enclosure transcends the limited perception of the main character. The representation of time itself becomes Flaubert's crucial achievement. "The unrestricted, uninterrupted flow of time is the unifying principle of the homogeneity that rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship . . . between them" (*TN*, 125). The fragmentation of the subject as well as that of the experienced world and the decomposition of traditional forms of meaning are supposedly compensated by the flow of time.

As Lukács pointed out in his 1963 preface to the second edition, he later discarded this solution as arbitrary. In 1963 Lukács criticizes the old position as a typical result of idealism, although in *The Theory of the Novel* there was already an attempt to historicize the literary and aesthetic categories in the wake of Hegel. From the Marxist point of view of the late Lukács, his early work failed, since it tried to combine a conservative (idealist) epistemology and a left-progressive ethical perspective that resulted in "unfounded utopianism." The fact that Adorno invoked *The Theory of the Novel* in 1958 in order to reject Lukács' later development motivated Lukács in turn to dismiss Adorno's position as the comfort of the Grand Hotel Abyss where all solutions are permanently suspended.

## V

Lukács' self-critique treats the early work as well intended but fundamentally ideological in its emphasis on the correlation between the problematic of the novel form and the structure of the modern social world. Now the diagnosis that the totality of being is lost in the modern world is criticized as the reduced subjectivism of Expressionism (Gottfried Benn). Yet this critique covers up more than it discloses. In particular, it does not explicate the shift from the epistemology of *The Theory of the Novel* to the position of the 1930s, for instance that of Lukács' polemic against Bloch in the Expressionism debate. Two questions in particular need closer scrutiny: How does Lukács arrive at a realist understanding of literary production, and, how did Adorno interpret Lukács' early work? What relates these seemingly unconnected questions is the impact of *History and Class Consciousness* on Lukács' and Adorno's later literary theory.

The essays collected in this work document Lukács' transition to a Marxist position that remained of critical value for Adorno, while Lukács distanced himself from it already in the late 1920s convinced of the serious flaws and threatened by political isolation. The question remains whether his official self-critique led to a complete rejection of the earlier interpretation of Marx,

especially of his theory of reification, which owed its advance over Second International Marxism to the unique theoretical blend of Marx, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber. By returning to the analysis of the character of the commodity and commodity fetishism in *Capital*, Lukács developed a theory of advanced capitalist societies that modified the orthodox model of class conflicts and class struggle as the underlying forces of social evolution. While Lukács retains the concept of class and places the emphasis on the political consciousness of the proletariat, the phenomenon of reification takes on a much more general importance encompassing the cultural sphere. The fact that modern capitalist societies are primarily regulated through the market means that ultimately nothing is exempt from the process of exchange and the ensuing commoditization of human relations. Thus Lukács asserts: "The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole" (*HC*, 86). For Lukács commodity exchange has two consequences: Objectively it flattens difference because in the process of exchange these differences fall so-to-speak out of the picture. All that matters is the rule of quantitative equivalence. Subjectively, human labor is abstracted from its concrete nature and evaluated in terms of its exchange value. However, this subjective factor is, as Lukács points out, by no means limited to the working class; rather, the fate of the worker becomes the fate of the entire society. By this he means a process of increased rationalization and modernization throughout all social relations. In this process the social participants are pressured to objectivize themselves (*Selbstobjektivierung*) in order to function according to the general law of the market.

In two ways Lukács' concept of reification (which remains valid for Adorno) goes beyond older Marxist theory. First, it is constructed as a universal theory and not limited to economic phenomena or the condition of the working class. This means that it relates to all classes and to phenomena that seem to be far removed from the economy, for instance aesthetic production and reception. Second, it determines the existential condition of the subject; the reification of consciousness applies not only to factory labor but equally to science and philosophy. There is, as Lukács claims, no sphere that is exempt. The commodity relation "stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world" (*HC*, 100). The universality of reification reinforces Lukács' older belief that modernity can only be defined in terms of loss, but now this loss can be described in more precise economic terms as the result of the pervasive nature of the capitalist market. To be sure, there is significantly more involved than a mere translation of philosophical concepts into socio-economic categories. *History and Class Consciousness* expresses Lukács' commitment to socialism and a socialist revolution. Only a revolution and the victory of the proletariat will overcome reification. At the same time, we have to examine the impact of the theory on his understanding of culture and literature. At the

end of *The Theory of the Novel* Lukács gestures toward a new era in which a revival of the epic will be possible, but this gesture as Lukács later admitted, remained completely utopian, that is, without a political subject. *History and Class Consciousness* provided a political subject, namely the revolutionary proletariat, and a path out of reification through political revolution. These moments include a sharp division between reified bourgeois culture and a post-bourgeois culture without a capitalist market and commoditization. This new Marxist frame forces Lukács to rethink the history of literary production in general and the determination of literary forms.

Insofar as the young Adorno adopted Lukács' position he was similarly faced with the antinomies of bourgeois culture. All bourgeois culture, including the aesthetic sphere, came under the law of commoditization and reification, but Adorno does not construct a sharp divide between bourgeois and post-bourgeois (socialist) culture that had supposedly transcended reification. Not only does his theory of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* affirm the devastation of universal commoditization in the cultural sphere but he also is convinced of the negative impact of advanced capitalism on the arts and literature. Yet he draws rather different conclusions than Lukács. While Lukács after *History and Class Consciousness* demands a new culture grounded in the ultimate victory of the working class, Adorno discovers the moment of transcendence in the aesthetic sphere itself, namely in the radical modern work of art. For this reason modernism and the avant-garde become, as we have seen, the bone of contention. In this conflict Adorno can invoke *The Theory of the Novel* against the later Lukács, since this work is not yet hostile to modernism because of a normative concept of realism and furthermore contains a utopian strand that anticipates the end of reification and alienation expressed in a new epic form. However, we have to keep in mind that Adorno read *The Theory of the Novel* already through the lens of *History and Class Consciousness*, that is, he interpreted the philosophical terminology of the earlier work through the lens of Marxist theory of commodity and reification. Therefore in his later essays on the novel and individual novelists Adorno stresses the modernist elements and plays down the relevance of bourgeois realism. In this respect his argument is quite consistent with Lukács' theory of reification. Reification is, as Adorno believes, a universal social and intellectual phenomenon that penetrates all subsystems of capitalist society. What calls for an explanation, then, is in fact Lukács' "deviation" from this theory—namely his affirmation of realism and his rejection of modernism.

## VI

We have to recall that *The Theory of the Novel* stresses the problematic character of the novel form in the historical context of a lost totality of the modern age. Still, Lukács insists on the aesthetic legitimacy of the form. If one superimposes

the Marxist theory of universal reification on this scheme, one would arrive at the question: What happens to the novel form under the conditions of advanced capitalism? Lukács' answer does not follow the obvious path, since he does not embrace literary modernism as the logical response to complete commoditization. Instead, beginning in the 1930s, he develops a theory of realism that either ignores or rejects advanced aesthetic practices of the early twentieth century. Is this a regressive retreat to past forms of bourgeois culture, as Adorno charges? In the Expressionism debate of 1937/38 Lukács had the opportunity to defend his position against Ernst Bloch's sharp critique (in Jameson, 28–59). Relying on a Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, Lukács treats literary production as part of the superstructure, that is as a form of ideology. As such the literary work can be evaluated as true or false by measuring it against an objective outside reality. The expressionist writers, for instance, did recognize the loss of meaning, the emptiness of the contemporary world but they failed, Lukács asserts, to understand the cause and therefore created works based on a flawed ideology (*Kleinbürger*). Hence Lukács notes already in 1934 in his position essay “‘Größe und Verfall’ des Expressionismus”: “The Expressionist abstracts from these typical features of the characters; he does this, just like the Impressionists and Symbolists, by starting out with the reflections of the subjective experience and by emphasizing exclusively that which appears as essential from the perspective of the subject” (*EüR*, 140). Implicit in this charge of subjectivism is an epistemology that presupposes the principle recognizability of reality as independent of subjective experiences. For Lukács there is a realm outside of literature, an independent second path to reality through scientific cognition, specifically the science of materialism. Dialectical materialism allows the distinction between phenomena and essence, surface of life and deeper structures. Referring back to Lenin, Lukács asserts a dialectics of surface and essential reality that is then used to criticize the method of Expressionist abstraction as empty. He specifically argues that “in reality the superficiality of the determinations that are immediately grasped can be overcome only by the exploration of the real, the deeper lying determinations” (*EüR*, 143). Therefore the failure of the German avant-garde was the result of a flawed epistemology that relied on different versions of idealism. Obviously this negative verdict contains an element of self-critique since *The Theory of the Novel*, contemporaneous with Expressionism, made use of German Idealism (Kant, Schiller, and Hegel) for its own epistemology.

Lukács' embrace of dialectical materialism as an epistemological model when applied to literature entails the question of realism: How can a literary work represent reality in an unbiased manner? After 1930 this becomes the crucial question for Lukács' essays on literature. The question has two parts: On the one hand, he has to make sense of the literature of his time; on the other, he has to assess the literary tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the centuries that were at the center of his earlier theory of the novel. The latter aspect, of course, raises the question of the place and value

of “bourgeois realism” in the larger context of European literature. The search for contemporary realism leads him to Heinrich and Thomas Mann in Germany and Romain Rolland in France, authors whose depiction of the world conveys, Lukács believes, not only the surface but also the deep structure of social reality. Whether these authors were in fact best suited to fulfill the program of realism is not our concern. What is relevant is Lukács’ belief that there is an actual model of contemporary realism that can be distinguished from the one-sidedness of modernism. Only in passing we note therefore that Lukács’ assessment of Thomas Mann must firmly repress all modernist elements of his mature novels to present him as a realist. Theoretically speaking, for Lukács the possibility of contemporary realism depends first and foremost on his epistemological model with its distinction of two levels of reality (the outside world and the consciousness of the writer) that the writer has to represent with equal force and skill. Without the proper consciousness the author is doomed to fail. In the final analysis, it is not the artwork (the novel) that is examined and evaluated but the author. In short, Lukács has moved away from a correlation of form and reality, which he explored in *The Theory of the Novel*, in favor of an activist understanding stressing the contribution of the writer to the path of historical progress. This approach, however, misses the possible discrepancy between the consciousness of the author and that of the work. Balzac’s achievements as a novelist representing the social world of high capitalism had, as already Marx observed, little to do with his own worldview. Obviously, this choice narrows Lukács’ theoretical options, as Bloch pointed out. It blocks any recognition of the literary avant-garde of the 1920s (Dada, Surrealism).

## VII

At this juncture, we have to ask a crucial question: Given his epistemological presuppositions (the outside world is objectively knowable), was Lukács logically limited to a realist program? Both Bloch and Adorno criticized him for this fixation as a form of theoretical regression. However, a closer analysis of the concept of realism will show that Lukács’ Marxist turn did by no means limit him to a realist project. In Lukács’ epistemology of the 1930s and 1940s the term “realism” refers to two separate aspects of cognition: Either it refers to the ability of the subject to develop an adequate cognition of the outside reality, or it refers to specific forms of representation of this reality in a literary work. While Lukács believes that the literary techniques of nineteenth-century European literature best achieved this goal and therefore sometimes conflates the question of realism with the specific features of nineteenth-century techniques of literary representation, there is no need to do this. In other words, Lukács’ epistemological model of realism, which would apply to philosophy,

science, and the arts, does not necessarily lead to the support of nineteenth-century realism as the standard for contemporary literature. In the 1960s Lukács acknowledged this when he changed his mind about the historical importance of Kafka, the quintessential modernist writer. Accepting the aesthetic value and historical importance of Kafka's novels meant that toward the end of his life he broadened the scope of meaningful representation (*PR* III, 9–10).

This insight has broader ramifications. It opens up the possibility of a Lukácsian theory of literary production, specifically with regard to the novel, that is not bound by a normative concept of realism, independent of the question whether Lukács actually developed such a theory. Furthermore, this turn throws new light on the clash between Adorno and Lukács. If it is true that a Lukácsian epistemology does not necessarily lead to an embrace of normative realism, Adorno's critique, which focused on the later Lukács' dogmatic defense of realism, has to be reconsidered. This reconsideration would not automatically result in the claim that the theories of Adorno and Lukács are fundamentally identical or even compatible, but it possibly suggests that the reciprocal hostility and polemic was possibly based on mutual misunderstandings. It seems that neither Lukács nor Adorno fully examined the theoretical premises of the opponent and possibly they did not fully understand their own positions. Fixated either on socialist realism or on modernism—a fixation that was politically and morally overdetermined—they overlooked the shared ground and exaggerated their disagreements. Adorno was unable to see that the Lukácsian model (as distinct from the position of the later Lukács) did not logically imply a commitment to a normative concept of socialist realism, and Lukács overlooked that Adorno's literary preferences, that is modernism, did not challenge the concept of representation as equally valid for the periods of realism and modernism. Both theorists understand the novel form as fundamentally determined in history, that is, as a literary form defined by the social and economic conditions of modernity. By interpreting the novel both examine the human consequences of the contradictions of capitalism. Moreover, both of them think of the formal structure of the novel as an index and code that discloses the deeper meaning of its time. Thus the idea of representation is not limited to the level of content (where conventional sociology of literature tries to find it). However, they differ with respect to the role of the writer and the conception of aesthetic production. Here the later Lukács tends to promote the activist role of the writer, while Adorno conceives of the author as an instrument of the historical process (which he or she does not necessarily understand). By defining the act of writing as an act of cognitive and political intervention, Lukács moves from an aesthetic to an ethical understanding of literary production. Adorno, on the other hand, defines the engagement of the author strictly in terms of a commitment to the aesthetic material that is available for the advance of the literary process. For him the meaning of the artwork rather than the engagement of the writer stands at the center. Differently put, the

artwork (for instance the advanced modernist novel) translates the aesthetic commitment of the writer into the ethical meaning of the artwork, not through a didactic tendency but through the disclosure and illumination of the historical process to which the work remains tied.

## VIII

The stated differences between Lukács and Adorno are, as we have learned, to some extent a matter of emphasis caused by their own interpretations of the stakes in the Cold War. The polemical rhetoric suggests that these stakes were experienced as very high, especially on Adorno's side. Clearly, the confrontation created blind spots on both sides that have to be removed before the strictly theoretical differences can be recognized and judged. In this context it is worth noting that Adorno in his engagement with the novel adheres to a concept of representation (with an antirealist drive) that is not, I believe, essential to his late aesthetic theory. While his essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1956) still explores the dialectics of poetry and society in terms of subjective expression and its correlation to the objective social conditions, in *Aesthetic Theory* he shifts the emphasis to a notion of aesthetic production in which the moment of representation is assigned a minor role, mostly explicated in the long section "Society." The concept of truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) that stands at the center of the posthumous work cannot be subordinated to the model of literary representation, as it is operative in Adorno's essays on the novel. The theory of the artwork emphasizes both radical expression through the rigorous use of the aesthetic material and the need for formal objectivation constituted through the autonomy of the artwork. Yet the concept of aesthetic objectivation that we find in the late Adorno is organized around the question of the artwork's incompatible elements that claim to be a unity nonetheless. Thus the artwork becomes problematic in its very foundations (that idealism wanted to protect). This occurs to an extent that is alien to Lukács' aesthetic theory.

At the same time, Adorno insists that artworks "are the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch" (AT, 182). This means that he allows for a concept of highly mediated representation, but it is a construct in which the intention of the writer and the concept of imitation do not play a significant role. By contrast, Lukács' late aesthetic, placing the emphasis on an ontology of the artwork, remains faithful to the priority of historical reality to which the writer is expected to relate. "This fidelity signifies an aesthetic in the service of ontological resistance and a renewal of a dynamic dialectic of totality" (Wurzer, 174). A mimetic attitude of the writer is therefore always already assumed, even if a normative concept of realism had been questioned or discarded. In *Aesthetic Theory*, on the other hand, Adorno can integrate this moment as a special case, but he is not committed to a social ontology to which the aesthetic sphere has to be subordinated.

From the vantage point of Lukács' and Adorno's late aesthetic theories the substantive differences that were at the bottom of their earlier conflicts become more accessible. In fact, it appears that they moved further apart than before, although there are at the same time strange and unexpected echoes between them, among them the notion of art as the recollection of human suffering. With regard to the place and function of the social in the artwork the differences increase, while there are still overlapping concerns and viewpoints. In contrast to Adorno, Lukács, even in his late work, holds on to the category of reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) as fundamental for the evaluation of aesthetic production, yet without favoring mere imitation of natural and social phenomena (PR, 705–709). The distinction between essence and appearance, core and surface, enables him to differentiate between artworks that reflect the deep structure of reality and those that cling merely to the surface (such as naturalism). The fact that in the 1930s and 1940s this distinction also became the basis for the repudiation of modernism is secondary, since it is not logically implied in the fundamental distinction. As Agnes Heller points out, “with his own aesthetic theory there was theoretically no room for such a judgment [the resentment against modern art, PUH]” (Heller, 1983b, 186). In fact, the significant structural transformations of the economic and social conditions at the end of the nineteenth century would point to the need for a new and different approach to literary forms such as the novel. Still, the focus on the priority of the outside reality is not given up, as Lukács explains in “Über die Besonderheit als ästhetische Kategorie”: “The specific element of art consists of the fact that the structure of reality appears to be sublated in the immediate impression, that (art) succeeds in making evident the essence without giving it in the consciousness a form that is detached from its mode of (aesthetic) appearance” (PR, 721). Although for Lukács aesthetic production is clearly distinct from scientific cognition, in the final analysis for him they attempt to reach the same goal, namely the truthful exploration of reality. Succinctly put therefore, Marxism as a (materialist) science is equal to art and therefore also offers a critical standard for the evaluation of aesthetic production. Although Lukács explicitly criticizes Hegel for treating art as a mere form of thought (PR, 723), he insists nonetheless on the link between aesthetic production and scientific cognition. The shared ground is the moment of reflection, either through abstract thought or concrete aesthetic representation. It is the concept of the particular (*das Besondere*) that enables him to define the specificity of art. In the context of Lukács' late aesthetic his literary criticism can be modified (to include modernism and the avant-garde) but not fundamentally transformed. Under the umbrella of the concept of reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) the historian of the European novel can consider and appreciate different types and formal evolutions, but they are ultimately measured against social reality as an independent category. The more this reality is historically differentiated, the more differentiations of the genre can and should be recognized in the history of the novel.



In the late work of Lukács this position is further developed. Here Lukács claims the fundamental importance of reflection for the creation of art. Yet his *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* of 1963 keeps its distance from the debates of the 1950s and the question of social realism (Heller, 1983b). There is no longer any mention of the lasting achievements of state socialism, although the classics of Marxism, including Engels and Lenin, are still invoked. At the same time, the concept of reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) remains a central feature of Lukácsian theory, in fact, it moves to the very center of his late aesthetic. By treating reflection as a fundamental anthropological and, by extension, epistemological category Lukács holds on to the notion of a common root of art and science, while more carefully differentiating their social functions. Epistemologically, reflection theory presupposes that reality is given as an unquestioned ground. In this respect the contrast to Adorno could not be more explicit. Yet also in this instance the comparative analysis has to go beyond the first impression. In order to understand the concept of reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) in the late work, we have to recall that Lukács introduces the concept of labor to explore the beginning of aesthetic production. He stresses the importance of techné for the development of art, insofar as techné is grounded in human labor (*EÄ* I, 208f.). It is the increasingly complex process of labor that makes the production of art possible. While Lukács' theory unfolds under the umbrella of reflection theory, the truly dynamic element is actually the concept of labor as the precondition of art. This moment, by the way, is shared with the emergence of early science. Lukács conceives of the origins of science and art (as well as religion) as a process of slow differentiation against the backdrop of existing social practices.

This raises an important question. If artistic production is ultimately grounded in human labor, why does Lukács think of this process in terms of reflection as he explicitly asserts when he begins to explore the character of aesthetic production? In a surprising move, he links labor as a fundamental social practice to the notion of reflection by declaring them as almost identical. Insofar as Lukács understands reflection as a complex process of abstractions he moves away from a model where artworks provide copies of a given reality, although the concept of reality remains indispensable to his theory. Still, his reconstruction of reflection stresses the active role of human behavior rather than a passive form of reception suggested by the metaphor of the mirror in the German term. Again, this emphasis points to the importance of labor as a form of controlling and channeling human activity whose ultimate success then becomes proof of the correct assessment of the outside world (*EÄ* I, 358). Yet Lukács insists on the indirect nature of this process, namely the need to explore the objective reality for its own sake, for instance in the context of scientific examination.

Lukács' stress on the centrality of labor and his resistance to the notion of copying leads to a much greater emphasis on the independence of the artwork than the German term "Widerspiegelung" would suggest. Lukács grants to the

work of art the “character of objectivity that is in itself closed off and independent of the subject” (EÄ I, 510). Yet we must also realize that Lukács, while he does not interpret this autonomy as a mere correct imitation of the world, he still denies (against Adorno) the utopian aspect of the artwork when he notes: “The separate world of art is neither in the subjective nor in the objective sense something utopian, something that transcends man and his world” (EÄ I, 511). According to Lukács therefore, art is focused on and restricted to showing and unfolding the concrete potential of man.

This move seems to severely limit the contribution of art as a form of cognition, since it appears to reduce the content of the artwork to the level of the phenomena found through the daily experience (*Alltagsleben*) of the outside world. However, Lukács strongly opposes a perception that sees art as a lower form of cognition compared with science. His distinction between the experience of daily life and art is as sharp and clear as that between a form of knowledge established by way of daily experience and scientific cognition, but this distinction leaves room for difference. By foregrounding the subjective moment of aesthetic reflection Lukács wants to preserve the deeper meaning and truth of the artwork. But how far is he willing to go in this celebration of the subjective moment of aesthetic production? How far does the structure of a reflection model allow him to articulate the expressive moment? The answer is: The subjective aspect is treated less as a moment of individual expression than a collective element. Lukács foregrounds the finitude of human life and human suffering that art, much better than science, can address through the articulation of memory. Hence, instead of the utopian aspect emphasized by Adorno we find the moment of recollection: “[the] mission of art as the memory of humanity” (EÄ I, 516).

While Adorno can acknowledge the idea of formal development and differentiation against the background of economic and social transformations, he remains distant to a reflection model and its presupposition that scientific cognition offers a second and equally valid path to truth—truth understood in a more than positivist (quantitative-mathematical) sense. For this reason, for Adorno the idea of aesthetic autonomy takes on a more radical character. The aesthetic sphere has to be considered as separate and independent not only vis-à-vis science but also vis-à-vis philosophy. Still, in *Aesthetic Theory* there is a small space left for the concept of imitation (*Nachahmung*) in the larger context of Adorno’s efforts to clarify the concept of the artwork and its production. But Adorno suggests that the principle of imitation should be read against the grain. It is reality that should imitate art. “Rather than imitating reality, artworks demonstrate this displacement to reality. Ultimately, the doctrine of imitation should be reversed; in a sublimated sense, reality should imitate the artworks” (AT, 132). The existence of artworks takes on a function that Lukács does not and could not acknowledge. They point to the significance of the possible (*das Mögliche*). In short, Adorno stresses the utopian dimension of artworks, a dimension that must not be restrained or reduced by reflection

theory. Thus in *Aesthetic Theory* the concept of semblance (*Schein*) is given a prominence that it does not have in Lukács' construction of the aesthetic. However, we have to recall that semblance (*Schein*) is not conceived as a harmonious illusion of the beautiful; rather, it includes the notions of the ugly and violent, thereby exposing the artwork to the destructive forces of a reified world. For Adorno the *raison d'être* of artworks is that they say more than that which exists (*das Seiende*). Therefore aesthetic experience is not only distinct from scientific cognition (as Lukács would also recognize) but also at odds with the notion of conceptual knowledge because artworks resist the idea of permanence (*Dauer*). The artwork is "nothing fixed and definitive in itself, but something in motion" (*AT*, 178). This means that the artwork cannot be thought of, in the manner of Lukács, as a complex aesthetic translation of the social world. The existence of the artwork in time, induced by its producer (since artworks are made), does not replicate the patterns of social reality.

If one accepts the logic of *Aesthetic Theory*, the question arises whether there is room left for the type of literary criticism Adorno wrote in the 1950s and 1960s. Those essays were predicated on a dialectic of art and reality that insisted on mediations (against reflection theory) but recognized the force of social reality as the ultimate cause. Their approach was partly compatible with Lukács' literary criticism and at the same time, for this very reason, hostile to his method. This leaves us with the question: To what extent is the sociology of art articulated in *Aesthetic Theory* still grounded in the idea of representation?

The answer is complex. While Adorno asserts that a critical concept of the social is inherent to the artwork, he warns against a construct that claims a preestablished harmony between social reality and art. Yet he believes that a superior theoretical solution of the problem is possible. The relationship of art and society can be conceived as a dialectical parallel of social and aesthetic processes. Adorno does this by stressing the deeper affinity of social and artistic labor. For him artistic labor, that is the production of art, is always part of the larger process of social labor and thereby also part of the division of labor. Yet precisely because of this division, it also separates itself from the domination of social labor and frees itself from the burden of producing objects that are socially useful. One might say therefore that in *Aesthetic Theory* the concept of representation is replaced by the concept of labor as constitutive for both the social and the aesthetic sphere. In this configuration the critical impulse of the authentic artwork is experienced through its advanced formal structure rather than an image of the social world. But this radical aesthetic articulation inside the artwork can be understood as a representation of the very problems that the social world does not want to admit and confront. Thus Adorno speaks of an "entwinement" (*AT*, 238) without using the term representation. This position defends art against the demand for a correct image of social reality (for instance in the demand for social realism) on the one hand, and the threat of complete commoditization on the other, a threat that turns art over to the expectation of social entertainment. Neither concern is crucial

to the late Lukács. In Lukács' late aesthetic theory the concept of labor explains and supports the function of art as a collective human achievement and underscores the cognitive function. Yet despite all their differences Lukács and Adorno remain connected, even in their late work, through the category of labor.

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## Chapter 6

# Time—The Corrupting Principle: A Short Apology for Georg Lukács’ Poetics of the Novel\*

Werner Jung

Within the context of the conceptualization of the Complete Works edition of his writings, apprehensively Marxist Georg Lukács ceded to the pressure of his German editor to issue a new edition of *The Theory of the Novel*, a work that he’d written as a thirty-year-old. The July 1962, dated foreword to this new edition begins with the declaration of the seventy-seven-year-old Lukács, “This study was sketched in summer in 1914 and written in winter 1914/15.” It followed, he pointed out to the reader that the book was “a typical product of the humanistic tendencies” and to also clearly recognizable traces of Hegelian reception: “The first, general component if determined by Hegel, as with the juxtaposition of type of totality in epic and drama, as the historico-philosophical conception of the similarity and opposition between epopee and novel, etc.” This notwithstanding, Lukács speaks repeatedly of a “failed attempt” that would intend to synthesize the two incompatibilities: a “leftist” ethic with a “rightist” theory of recognition. With this he intends his anticapitalism, which received its nourishments from romantic and utopian sources and bears the simultaneous feature of appearing coupled with a traditional, “fully conventional interpretation of reality.” At the end of his self-assessment, he does not forget to quote Arnold Zweig’s impressions of reading him: “Arnold Zweig read *The Theory of the Novel* as a young writer for orientation; his healthy instinct correctly led him to abruptly dismiss it.”

This late appraisal of his early work bears several points that are worthy of consideration: for one, Lukács completely misappropriates the context which led him to conceive *The Theory of the Novel* with its fragmentary ending, instead of crossing out the linearity and inevitability of his intellectual development, on the other hand—and precisely necessary to the system—he has to vilify the guiding and furthering thoughts of his poetics of the novel. This is because they barely fit—and only whisperingly refer to—the historico-philosophical orientation of *The Theory of the Novel* and the later Marxist that can connect with materialistic flesh and a secular home.

With this Lukács certainly fueled the fire of his opponents, who took recourse in the later foreword and immediately saw their prejudices confirmed therein and extended them to all those characteristics about Marxists that supposedly lead one to wretchedly regurgitate: the Classicist Orientation—the traditions of Realism—the concept of an organic, harmonious closed work of art, etc.

Let's take a closer look.—It was the original intention of the young Lukács to compose a large monograph about Dostoyevsky, whom he much esteemed. In fact, Lukács places this intention around the time of 1914–15. In a letter to his friend, the author Paul Ernst, dated March 1915, writes: "I am finally coming to my new book: on Dostoyevsky (putting aesthetics temporarily to rest). It will be about a lot more than Dostoyevsky: large parts of my metaphysical ethics and philosophy of history, etc." However, a short time later, again in a letter to Ernst, dated August 2, 1915, he wrote: "I have decided to break up the Dostoyevsky book, which was too big." A large essay has come out of it: *The Aesthetic of the Novel*. Next to the "large essay," which initially appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Journal for Aesthetics and the General Cultural Sciences) an omnibus volume containing notes, outlines and excerpts of the planned Dostoyevsky monograph has followed, which was only edited post 1985 in Hungary by Christoph Nyíri. Nyíri was already able to ascertain "a distinct tension" between the completed part and the Dostoyevsky notes, which were possibly related "to theoretical-immanent reasons." Nyíri believed further, as did Lukács' student, Ferenc Feher, that Lukács' concept had to fail because he was unable to mediate the historico-philosophical dimension with his metaphysical-metapsychological. On the other hand, he argues that Lukács believed to recognize in Dostoyevsky's oeuvre the harbinger of a new time and society that in spite of that, "the mediation between historical reality and historico-philosophical construction" was missing.

Stated more pointedly: while the Dostoyevsky notes on the planned monograph show the direction that the Marxist would pursue since 1919, something that was additionally supported by pronouncements on Dostoyevsky in the small volume, *Béla Bálazs und die ihn nicht mögen* (Hungarian Title published in 1918: Balázs Béla és akiknek nem kell) (Béla Bálazs and Those Who Do Not Like Him), at the end of *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács shrinks back from all "historico-political sign interpretation" as to whether and to what extent "this new world (. . .) as simply seen reality" appears in Dostoyevsky's works. Lukács is still not sure of himself and in the published text he simply leaves it to the theory and typology of the modern novel, which he harshly carries to the limit of his times.

In contrast to the open end, Lukács commits himself in the widely known and often abominated opening phrases of *The Theory of the Novel*: "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.”<sup>1</sup> Lukács extends an idealized and certainly idyllic image of Greece from the historico-philosophical background screen without disruption from German Idealism to his own times. A background that points at the numinous, historically unspecific period of the Modern Age as decline, as a world of conflict and a time that has become transcendently homeless. Immediately thereafter appears—in dialogue with Hegel—the category of totality, which Lukács defines as follows: totality “implies that something closed within itself can be completed; completed because everything occurs within it, nothing is excluded from it and nothing points at a higher reality outside it; (. . .) Totality of being is possible only where everything is already homogeneous before it has been contained by forms; where forms are not a constraint but only the becoming conscious, the coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant; (. . .).” He expresses this in the extension of the Hegelian aesthetic—the ancient epic as paradigmatic form of the structure of the world.

In contrast to Classical Antiquity, a transcendental home does not exist in modernity—that is to say, that man has once again lost his home with his restricted admission into (life) time. Modern man finds himself in the paradoxical situation in which world, environment, and reality appropriate and grow more secure—both in mass and within the process of contemporary rationalism and an in-tandem growing bourgeois capitalist economy—and yet these increasingly lose their meaning as a reliable orientation in the human lifespan. Lukács describes with a terminological conglomerate of *Lebensphilosophie*, existentialism, classical-idealistic language, and sociological reflections. Herein, I think, lies—although admittedly cryptic—the thesis of Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel*. Since the novel, this bourgeois epopee, represents in its development—a permanent becoming, as contemporary theorists point out—the artistic-literary form that reflects, and not merely mirrors, the conditions of history and reality. Art is a construct—the novel, as Lukács continually argued in his essay. It was only “a fabricated totality, since that natural unity of metaphysical spheres is forever dismembered.” Soon thereafter he firmly rejected utopian thought; all attempts to create a truly utopian epic had to fail since they originated from the empirical.

A complimentary concept to totality, that is to say the devaluation of totality in the modern world, is for Lukács, the “problematic individual,” which is to say the constitution of an I, that no longer knows how to be conscious and sovereign of itself and no longer knows how to situate itself in the world, but has to constantly prove itself and check and discover itself. The characters of the novels are presented as seekers. The novel is the epopee of an age in which the extensive totality of life can no longer be given sensibly, an age in which the immanence of meaning has become a problem, and yet has a disposition toward totality. This problematic constellation leads to two typical modes of appearances of the new I, the criminal on the one hand, the madman on the other, that Lukács boldly, yet justifiably, perceived as the developmental tendencies of the novel; because at the basis there is a wide trace of outcasts, underdogs,



and losers that one can ascribe to the typological categories of madman and criminal, according to the national literary histories through the end of the Enlightenment: from Jean Paul and E. T. A. Hoffmann and Kleist through Balzac, Dickens and Eugène Sue up to Zola and Dostoyevsky, just to remain within the timeframe delimited by Lukács. As a matter of fact both figures—in pure form, so to speak—remain unknown to the epic, since as Lukács puts it, “it either portrays the pure world of children” or “complete theodicy” against which madness and crime are “objectivizations of transcendental homelessness”; “the homelessness of an act in the human order of societal relations and the homelessness of a soul in the order of things that should-come-into-being, an order made of a super-personal system of values.”

Here Lukács goes as far as speaking of the origination of the epic individual, that is to say the hero of the novel, who is tied to the “foreignness of the outside world.” With regard to individuality this means further that it has to reflect on itself—the hero should, as Lukács once stated in other contexts, taking Friedrich Schlegel in view, build himself out of his own selfhood. This also addresses the loneliness of the modern, bourgeois individual: consequently Lukács speaks of the “the self-reflectiveness of the self of the lonely and confused personality.” In the end it can be summed up as “The contingent world and the problematic individual are realities which mutually determine one another. If the individual is unproblematic, then his aims are given to him with immediate obviousness, and the realization of the world constructed by these given aims may involve hindrances and difficulties but never any serious threat to his interior life. Such a threat arises only when the outside world is no longer adapted to the individual’s ideals and the ideas become subjective facts—*ideals*—in his soul.”<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

The above implicitness provides a sketch of the typology of the forms of the novel that Lukács drafted in the second part of his theory. The relationship between the I and the world, that is to say between problematic individual and preexisting societal circumstances, can be rewritten as the “dichotomy between is and ought,” which in the end is a problem that can never be abolished. Only a “maximum conciliation,” Lukács writes “a profound and intensive irradiation of a man by his life’s meaning—is attainable.”<sup>3</sup> Where this recognition matures and seizes hold, it achieves artistic representation and the constitutive principle in the modern novel. Lukács defined the widely and avidly debated phenomenon of “the writer’s irony” because of its association with arbitrariness and subjectivity since Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century as a “negative mysticism to be found in times without a god. It is a *docta ignorantia* towards meaning; (. . .) and in it there is the deep certainty, expressible only by form-giving, that through not-desiring-to-know and not-being-able-to-know he has truly encountered, glimpsed and grasped the ultimate, true substance, the present, non-existent God. This is why irony is

the objectivity of the novel.”<sup>4</sup> In the last lines of the first part of his theory, Lukács imparts the highest consecration on the novel because of irony, which renders it the “representative art-form of our age,” because “the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today.”<sup>5</sup>

While the first part was effective above all in the philosophy and cultural critical reflections for later decades, literary scholars and narratologists have been especially inspired by the second part of *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács’ idea—in an absolute obvious Bergsonian sense—is a basic intuition, that there are two successive “pure forms,” in which the development of the modern novel is reflected and on the basis of—in Hegelian terms—subject and object, and soul and outside world, to adopt the terms of the turn of the century. There is a supposed “a limine,” as Lukács states, an “incommensurability”: the soul is either “narrower or broader than the outside world assigned to it as the arena and substratum of its actions.”<sup>6</sup> This can then be further typologically expressed in the forms of the novel, which Lukács identifies on the one hand as “abstract idealism” on the one hand and “Romanticism of delusion” on the other. The first historically surfacing continuous archetype of abstract idealism is provided by Don Quixote, and Gontscharow’s *Oblomow*, especially Flaubert’s *L’Education Sentimentale* for the—since the mid-nineteenth-century surfacing-type of Romanticism of delusion.

The pattern that Lukács claims to recognize consists first of all in the “soul” of the protagonist—a conglomerate concept of psyche, intellect, and also personality—with the abstract, inadequate, and historically overcome (ideal-) concepts acting and wanting to take part in the happenings of the outside world and behaves grotesquely out of synch as with Don Quixote in his struggle with the wind mills or Balzac’s protagonists’ inexhaustible attempts to revitalize pots of gold. In this instance, the soul is too narrow, whereas in Romanticism of delusion, it is too broad. This condition finds its expression in the resigned-disappointed attitude of the “too late” arrival in the opinion that it—and also especially in the sobering experiences that have been revealed through novels of education, upbringing and development—no longer present a possibility to actively influence matters and alter (real) history in the course of events. Its sensual-plastic expression for it offers “the eternal, helpless lying still of Oblomow.”

With this we have come to the ground-breaking, lingering contributions of *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács emphasizes the eminent meaning of Flaubert and above all his *L’Education Sentimentale* and invokes Bergson’s theory of time, which allows Lukács to restore the art that Hegel had dismissed and to reestablish its highest assignation to the modern novel. “The greatest discrepancy between ideal and reality,” proceeded Lukács’ basic theoretical reflections with which he introduces his subsequent interpretation of Flaubert, “is time: the process of time as duration. The most profound and most humiliating impotence of subjectivity consists not so much in its hopeless struggle against the lack of idea in social forms and their human representatives, as in the fact that it

cannot resist the sluggish, yet constant progress of time; that it must slip down, slowly yet inexorably, from the peaks it has laboriously scaled; that time—that ungraspable, invisibly moving substance—gradually robs subjectivity of all its possessions and imperceptibly forces alien contents into it. That is why only the novel, the literary form of the transcendent homelessness of the idea, includes real time—Bergson’s *durée*—among its constitutive principles.”<sup>7</sup>

Lukács, who in this context still refers to his award-winning monograph, *The History and Development of the Modern Drama* (Hungary, 1910; Germany, posthumously, 1981) and to his literary-sociological reflections (Remarks on a Literary History, Hungary, 1910; Germany, posthumously, 1973) ties into various works of Bergson, promptly addressed again in various lectures entitled *The Perception of Change* (1911), in which he argues against the common perceptions of time with reference to inner time as duration: “There is just one thing that will give us the constitutive melody of our inner lives—a melody that from the beginning until the end renders our existence indivisible and continues indivisibly and will continue so, and that is our personality.” This internal time is supposedly that which “what one has always called time, but as time that was perceived as indivisible.” Naturally “in space” there exists the “before” and the “after” in the sense of a “clear and explicit distinction between parts that are sharply separated from one another.” And we deem ourselves, according to Bergson “commonly” “in spatialized time.” But the true duration lies in the “uninterrupted noise of our deeper life.”

One could shorten and sharpen Bergson’s metaphysics of time—at least according to its Lukácsian reception—to the plain juxtaposition of subjective, experiential time and objective, measurable time (arrangement), since Lukács recognizes precisely herein the charge for Romanticism of disillusionment *par excellence*. It is already generally valid that time “can become constitutive only when the bond with the transcendental home has been severed.”<sup>8</sup> When we lost our paradise—wherever this might have been—the situation since the mid-nineteenth century intensified dramatically. As when Lukács in agreement with Hegel’s remarks on the novel believes that, “the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the time forms in the Romanticism of disillusionment—post-Hegel and with Bergson, “the corrupting principle.”<sup>10</sup> Gustave Flaubert drew the consequences of this—and for this reason an actual “prose of modernity” (Peter Bürger) begins with him, in whose footsteps Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Musil, or Thomas Mann stepped further—in that he put back, or stowed away the plot in the interiority of the protagonists, in the interior time, in the way of outward streaming and flowing—an “unrestricted, uninterrupted flow”<sup>11</sup> and a disintegrating exterior reality in the way of “heterogeneous, brittle and fragmentary parts”<sup>12</sup> and offered defiance with two existential expressions, “hope” and “memory.” To wit, these are eminent subjective “experiences of time”—and are further, “victories over time: a synoptic vision of time as solidified unity *ante rem* and its synoptic comprehension *post rem*.”<sup>13</sup> Whereupon one should immediately add

that Lukács is not tying into the usual tradition of epiphany-thinking—at best in *modo negativo*, to bring Karl Heinz Bohrer’s reflections on the emphatic moment in modern-postmodern literature, or, as Bohrer calls it, “diminishing representation” into play. Since for Lukács, too, falling back on Flaubert, it is a question of banal sentiments (the most beautiful experience, from which the heroes of “education” constantly swagger, making it actually a non-experience) that suddenly flash up in the lived instant: “Duration advances upon that instant and passes on, but the wealth of duration which the instant momentarily dams and holds still in a flash of conscious contemplation is such that it enriches even what is over and done with: it even puts the full value of lived experience on events, which at the time, passed by unnoticed. And so, by a strange and melancholy paradox, the moment of failure is the moment of value; the comprehending and experiencing of life’s refusals is the source from which the fullness of life seems to flow. What is depicted is the total absence of any fulfillment of meaning, yet the work attains the rich and rounded fullness of a true totality of life.”<sup>14</sup>

An instant, from which and after which nothing else follows, rather only settles the quotidian mostly underneath the threshold of conscious awareness. With outright divine-appearing farsightedness, Lukács perceived moments in Flaubert’s novel, which were visible for the development of the genre for a wide readership. Years before Proust concluded his time philosophy-oriented research on the idea of *memoire involontaire* and Thomas Mann got through declining all of the prevalent time discourses in the cloistered Magic Mountain world of the Davos mountains, Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel* had already clarified the signatures of modernity that gravitate around the problem of the perception of time and structure and around the asynchrony between subjective and objective time, from poetry and experience, to refer to the title of the most influential volume of essays of Lukács’ Berlin teacher, Wilhelm Dilthey (“Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung”). To wit, the experience that molds, and that which Lukács in his collection of essays, *Soul and Form* had traced in considering Stefan George, was loneliness—the loneliness of the sensitive intellectual above all, of alienation, of collectivization, contingency and neurasthenia, of the acceleration of “objective culture” (Georg Simmel) and the discrepant abilities that the subject feels on his own skin.

On the forefront is the modern *Zeitroman*; it structures, so to speak, the points of social being, on to which the subject, the modern bourgeois individual, after he has tried out all of the games in history to date and all of the possibilities of form, recollects himself and retreats to the passive experience of interiority. There are myriad narrative possibilities, those from the forms of the comical to the stylistic device of irony (Mannian origin or Musilian derivation) up to stone-cold realisms (from “Nouveau Roman” to Cologne School “New Realism”) suffice—however aesthetically playful they all are—to respond to the corruption of time. A modern fairy tale such as the children’s and young adult classic *Momo* by Michael Ende, in which a “strange story of time thieves and of the

child that returned the stolen time to the people” (as the subtitle reads) is told and continued, and a no less widely popular historical adventure novel such as *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit* (The Discovery of Slowness) by Sten Nadolny gives the answer that: to the rapid acceleration, which must be seen as the main feature of modernity, must follow a return to one’s own time (“Eigenzeit”), as it was referred to by sociologist Helga Nowotny.

One may wish to privilege another concept, as for example Silvio Vietta in his transcendental textual theory, which distinguishes six different textualities and refers to a “textuality of reflection,” that molded “literary modernity in the figure of the experience of the *Ichkrise*, the loss of metaphysics, the objectification of nature and the superiority of rationality.” In the center however, still stands the association with temporality; more precisely, the inquiry and new positioning of a subject whose “decentered *Icherfahrung*” must first be come to terms with. In the end, in Vietta too, the shameful reference to the meaning of *The Theory of the Novel* “of the early, still undogmatic Lukács” banished to a footnote is not lacking.

The Lukácsian trail extends itself implicitly and in part entirely explicitly through newer and newest works, that generally maneuver in the fields of narratology, literary theoretical and poetic genre reflections as well as literary historical monographs on the history of the novel.

The Cologne writer, Dieter Wellershoff presented in 1988—looking back to lectures on poetics at universities of Paderborn and Essen—his history of the modern novel under the programmatic title of *Der Roman und die Erfahrbarkeit der Welt* (The Experientiality of the World), in which he deciphers a progressive freeing of our perception, as a taboo-breaking and probing of human experiential spaces. He refers to Georg Lukács in multiple ways and speaks of his preoccupation with Proustian research, extending thereby the Lukácsian interpretation of the novel of delusion and of art and literature as “the only countervailing powers against the fury of disappearance: time. Because only then can a present in the non-present exist that resists to the deadly decay in the current of time” (Wellershoff, 1988, 174).

The Osnabrück-based Germanist and literary theorist, Jürgen H. Petersen published an encompassing monograph *Der deutsche Roman der Moderne. Grundlegung—Typologie—Entwicklung* (The German Novel of Modernity: Foundations, Typology, Development) in 1991, which introduces—in correspondence with the subtitle—a poetics of genre as well as its history since 1900. The thesis is developed on a wide bedrock of sources and countless detailed interpretations that view the progress from modernity to postmodernity, the *Roman der Wirklichkeit* (novel of reality), as Petersen calls it, develops further into a complete *Roman der Möglichkeiten* (novel of possibilities)—with “a variable openness.”<sup>15</sup> Even though the express relationship to Lukács is missing—he refers comparably more to the Frankfurt School and the young Lukács—and an author like Peter Bürger would expressly be rebuffed from Petersen, at its core, the diagnostic point of departure is exactly the same: “Man,” as Petersen

wrote in his “Foundation” of his investigation “can no longer be sure of himself.”<sup>16</sup> According to him the truth of the world consists even more “in the pure possibility.”<sup>17</sup>

An equally impressive monograph was delivered by Viktor Žmegač in 1990 under the title of *Der europäische Roman. Geschichte seiner Poetik* (The History of the European Novel: A History of its Poetics), which dedicates several pages to the young Lukács before presenting the background to his Hegel following and Žmegač crosses out “the lasting effect”—not least on the basis of the workability of the concept of contingency as an appropriate description for the condition of the modern, bourgeois, capitalistic world.<sup>18</sup>

And for the purpose of introduction, *Der Roman* (The Novel) written by Christoph Bode, which presents above all a narratological description of the genre, refers in the last chapter, which is dedicated to the end of the novel and the future of illusion, to the representatives of the Frankfurt School and Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel*. Especially the function of making sense of things that is assigned to the novel in a world of transcendental homelessness, Bode extends this capacity into current conditions and postmodern reflections. Thereby it is not a crucial condition, that the world makes sense; narration needs “only the impetus to make sense of something (not necessarily the entire world).”<sup>19</sup> Even more radical, the more emphatic and irrefutable contingency is experienced in reality and in life and accordingly worked through, the more important Bode deems the form of the novel, which orbits possibilities of “how sense is brought into the world,” which for Bode continually rebuild “the paradoxical *tension between contingency and ‘foothold,’*” which points to the instability of yearning for an illusion of an existential feeling of security mediated through narrative, and at the same time recognizes working through it as fully legitimate.<sup>20</sup> As final pronouncement in his disquisition, Bode sets the purpose of the novel as follows: “Encounter with the self in the medium of empowering another, *experience*; that in order to be understood and made sense of needs to be embedded into a narrative.”<sup>21</sup> Bode calls this *Neuheitserfahrung*,<sup>22</sup> (an experience of the new), a concept that can be projected back onto Lukács’ idea from the start, the construction of an aesthetic transcendental home, that is to say a (however ironically broken) totality, which represents aesthetic mores and in the words of Dieter Wellershoffs, an answer to the situation in “an open, expanding world.”

It still remains, to refer to the ambitious attempt of the literary theorist from Düsseldorf, Hans-Georg Pott, who in explicit connection to Lukács’, *The Theory of the Novel* says that “represents the most advanced and sophisticated understanding of the modern novel” seeks after a new “Theory of the Novel”—indeed, one that considers above all that which Lukács excluded, and is associated with four authors: Sterne, Jean Paul, Joyce, and Arno Schmidt. By all means in accordance with Lukács (and the philosophy of history behind it, which is admittedly tempered with Pott) the literary theorist speaks of “connection between life forms and forms of the novel” moreover that “every

meaningful theory of the novel (. . .) also integrates a time-dependent ‘world theory,’ since the novel is the prose form with the most extensive relationship to the world; that is to say, that everything can come to language in the novel: whatever the case is, whatever the case was, or whatever it will or could be.” The novel, according to Pott, “produces the world as a (subjective) imagining”—ever new and different, since it, as it was most recently formulated in an essay by one of the most educated among its dispraisers, Heinz Schlaffer, is always “facing the present”; “its appearance is always a new appearance.” An outstanding “topos of chronos,” to borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation, is allegedly the “everyday way of life” of the protagonists, through which Pott—in reference to Husserlian thought—also believes to differentiate himself from Lukács. Further Pott also abandons the concepts of the “problematic individual” and above all “totality,” in which he claims to find “no practical relevance to life.” Worse yet, he sees in it a downright “category of death.” Pott brings the concept of a phenomenology of effortless subjectivity under attack, in order to subsume within it the efforts and achievements of the modern-post-modern novel. In sum, he focuses on a theory of the novel that is a supposed “pure phenomenologism.”

Apart from the difficulty, as to how one can choose a pure phenomenologism for a theory, Pott’s abandonment of Lukács’ central categories before the background of a distorted appropriation through Stalinism (and through the theorems of socialist Realism) is wholly comprehensible, but certainly not mandatory or necessary. For is not also that, which Pott grasps as under a formulation of the world as subjective imagining in the novel, an (indispensable) attempt to create meaning and coherence—consequently to create a totality of limited ranges—possibly ones that focus strictly on one’s own skin and have an unmediated world-focus? The growing boom—not only in German literature- of (auto-)biographical prose, often structurally paired with the poetological, to narrate a *Zeitroman*, only reinforces this assumption.

It most certainly remains one of the most important insights of *The Theory of the Novel*, which also the later and harshest critic, the Marxist Lukács, pointed out as the achievement of his early essay: the assignment of the role of time. What Lukács basically expresses with the help of the Flaubertian “Education” about the type of disillusionment novel and Romanticism of disillusionment “the new function of time in the novel on the basis of Bergsonian ‘durée’” delivers a framework that enables a better understanding of subsequent international developments of novels—in truth until today.

Or expressed differently and stated with greater polemical sharpness: the novel of disillusionment is and remains—no matter how modified—arguably the last type of the modern-post-modern novel, that is capable of bringing our perennial “era of completed peccability” to a timely expression (Lukács via Fichte). This is something we need to remember, for we are allowed to hope in the future. What was it that Lukács had to say about this? “Everything that

happens may be meaningless, fragmentary and sad, but it is always irradiated by hope or memory.”<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

\* Translated from the German by Elena Mancini.

<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 80.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 120–121.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 122–123.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jürgen Petersen, *Der deutsche Roman der Moderne. Grundlegung—Typologie—Entwicklung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), 43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Viktor Zmegac, *Der europäische Roman. Geschichte seiner Poetik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990), 142ff.

<sup>19</sup> Christoph Bode, *Der Roman: Eine Einführung* (Tübingen und Basel: UTB), 312.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 126.



## Chapter 7

# Art's Struggle for Freedom: Lukács, the Literary Historian

János Keleman

1. Georg Lukács' writings on literature form a significant part of his oeuvre, which comprises several thousand pages. He began his career as a literary and theater critic, and he responded throughout his life to developments in contemporary literature, producing studies on many classic authors of world literature. He also had an interest in the theoretical and methodological issues of literary history writing—and this is not even to mention his aesthetic syntheses (from his various periods) or the many articles he wrote on the history of aesthetics, where literature once again formed much of the material.

In consequence of all this, one cannot evaluate Lukács' oeuvre as a whole without describing his work as a literary critic and historian and asking how his ideas should be viewed in the light of recent developments in literary theory. For several reasons, this is a difficult undertaking. The differences between the various periods in Lukács' work—the young and the old Lukács, the Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist Lukács—may be too great for us to be able to answer the question in global terms. Moreover his work in this field is particularly closely tied to the language and literature of his native land. His critiques of the Hungarian literary works of his era and his writings on the classics of Hungarian literature (together with his much disputed value judgments of these works) are relatively unknown internationally, even though they form a significant part of his literary historical work.

Despite these difficulties, I think it is possible to draw a unified picture of Lukács, the literary historian. Behind the contrasting trends manifested in the various periods, which Lukács himself dwelt upon in his self-critiques in the field of philosophy and politics, we find a sufficient amount of continuity. For instance, a striking feature is the extent to which his aesthetical thinking focuses upon exemplary canonical works representing the high points of world literature. In this regard, Lukács shows a surprising consistency despite his dramatic ideological and political reversals. The same authors and works—the Greek tragedies, Dante, *Faust*, Balzac, and Thomas Mann—mark the horizon of his aesthetic theoretical work, both in his early writings and in a late major work on aesthetics.

He devoted the most attention to Goethe. His essays in the volume "*Goethe and His Age*" ("Goethe und seine Zeit") are considered classics. His conclusions and value-judgments about the *Divine Comedy* exhibit similar continuity and depth, although he never dealt with Dante systematically and so his comments on Dante's poetry—few in number but theoretically important—have been largely ignored. Another example is found in the field of Hungarian literary history. Concerning *The Tragedy of Man*, an important work by the classical nineteenth-century poet and dramatist Imre Madách, Lukács offered the same opinion in an early work on the history of drama published in 1911 as he did in a late essay on Madách published in 1955.

In what follows, I seek, by analyzing the three aforementioned examples, to add several features to the portrait of Georg Lukács, the literary historian.

2. By way of introduction, I note that the methodology and theory of literary history writing were always of interest to Lukács. This is not surprising since he was a thinker who examined every problem from a broad philosophical and aesthetical perspective. As examples, I cite an early writing and a late one: his 1910 essay on the theory of literary history ("Megjegyzések az irodalomtörténet elméletéhez" [Notes toward the theory of literary history]) and a paper entitled "A magyar irodalomtörténet revíziója" [The revision of Hungarian literary history], which he presented in 1948 on the occasion of the reestablishment of the Hungarian Literary History Society. The two texts are a world apart. The former defines—within a framework of a neo-Kantianesque theory concerning the relationship between facts and values—the study (science) of literary history as a synthesis of sociology and aesthetics, offering within this context an abstract conceptual analysis of the contact points (style, form, and effect) between sociology and aesthetics. The latter, in contrast, is not only Marxist but also acutely politically motivated, which the occasion of the lecture also indicates. To speak in 1948 of a revision of Hungarian literary history was tantamount to announcing a radical and apparently dangerous shift in cultural policy.

Nevertheless, in both writings we find questions that are interconnected and which make the texts interesting despite subsequent developments in aesthetic and critical thinking.

A fundamental conclusion of the young Lukács was that a work of art exists as a work of art by means of its evaluation. The evaluation is a fact-constituting enterprise, but it is not a fact constitution performed by an individual subject. For a work of art to exist as a work of art, it is sufficient that there be the possibility of performing the evaluative act or the possibility of verifying the fact constitution already performed. In other words, we must speak of a "potential evaluative act," which—one might add—is driven by the principle of form, because there is no literary phenomenon in the absence of form. This analysis is, I believe, the first germ of Lukács' later theory on class consciousness as a "potential consciousness."

Analyzing the notions of value, form and the effect elicited by form, Lukács introduces his receptive figure, which he refers to here as the “receiver” (receiver of the effect). He underlines that the creator (writer or artist) and the receiver, the work and the audience, are connected by form, because it is form—rather than the vitality contained within the form—that is enduring and resists obsolescence. He cites as examples the *Divine Comedy*, the contents of which are not even “half understood,” and *Hamlet*, whose readers in different periods “have envisaged the most utterly diverse things.” These examples well illustrate the manner in which “great forms” provide ultimate models of human relations that become saturated with different content in each period. The “greater the form” (i.e. the greater the work), the more this is true.

Lukács’ proposition in general terms is the following: “All truly great works of world literature, those surviving down the centuries, have always been interpreted differently over time. And this is precisely why they could survive, because all such works were capable of concentrating their contents in an ultimate connection to destiny, thereby ensuring that readers in every period perceive their own connection to destiny as the true content of the work.”<sup>1</sup> The proposition—with the cited examples—tells us two things in particular: first, that people living in different periods will saturate a literary work with different content. In other words, the work takes on a different meaning for them, and it is precisely this diversity of meaning that becomes the guarantee of a work’s survival. Second, the proposition states that the value of a literary work lies in the various possibilities of its interpretation (“a truly great work of world literature” can be interpreted and understood in various ways). The first assertion can be understood as a descriptive definition of the “literary nature” of a work, while the second counts as a standard, or measure, for evaluating literary works. I hope that by slightly changing Lukács’ phraseology I have not fallen into the error of excessive interpretation. It seems, namely, that Lukács—who later became a theoretician of closed forms and the sealed work of art—was formulating in this early work the theory of the “open work of art” and the principle of an infinite number of interpretations. According to his understanding, this principle means each work has an endless number of interpretations, but that this depends not only on the individuals involved but also on the conditions in the period determining their receptibility. In other words, there are typical interpretations characteristic of particular historical periods.

In his Marxist period, Lukács reformulated this view; he combined it with other propositions, while retaining the foundations. The idea of a revision of literary history itself implies interpretation and diverse evaluation—and it does so not just for certain works but for the whole literary historical process. In the paper mentioned above, Lukács rightly noted how the revisionist program announced by him was just one of many actual and potential revisions, for “a most superficial survey of Hungarian literary history also shows [. . .] that this development consists more or less of a chain of radical revisions.”<sup>2</sup> Here Lukács

derives the necessity of revision, that is, of reinterpretation and reevaluation, from the incompleteness of the past and from the very nature of historical cognition; that is to say, from the fact that changes in the present cast new light on the past. Aspects of the past are now visible to us that were necessarily unknown to contemporaries. Further, although seeking to show the superiority of Marxism on every issue, even the Marxist Lukács shows no sign of believing that a work could ever have a single correct interpretation.

For Lukács, one of the main questions of literary history writing concerned the theoretical basis for a periodization of the literary process. Do literary periods develop in consequence of an autonomous development, and can they be characterized using literature's own notions? Or should literary historical periods be distinguished as a function of the great historical periods and then characterized using notions that are external to literature? As far as the Marxist Lukács is concerned, who ascribed to the notion of the social determination of art, it is not surprising that he believed in a periodization based on "external factors." Alongside the literary historical process, he regarded the necessity of an external approach to be valid in the field of literary history writing, and in this respect he sometimes expressed himself bluntly. Of course, his life's work presents overall a rather more dialectical picture, for he basically solves the question by having the "external" and "internal" antagonisms dissolve themselves within the totality. In one of his final writings, which deals expressly with literary historical periodization, he recognizes the notion of "period" merely as a general societal category.<sup>3</sup> In the end, his basic answer to the question is that literature is one aspect of an all-embracing historical shift and so—like art as a whole—it achieves its own autonomy as part of a permanent interaction. This idea was to receive its final form in *Esztétika*, where Lukács summarized the relationship between art, religion, and tradition, and expounded his teaching on art's struggle for freedom.

3. For his great aesthetic syntheses, Lukács drew upon literary material from world literature as a whole, but he himself acknowledged that the nineteenth century was his particular fascination. His interest sprang not just from his education and upbringing, but was connected to his ideological choices. In the foreword to one of his latter collections, he wrote: "This century, the century of Goethe and Heine, Balzac and Stendhal, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky—and not incidentally of Hegel and Marx—focussed with unprecedented energy upon the decisive questions of man's becoming man and the external and internal problematic of this development."<sup>4</sup>

The proposition used here by Lukács to justify his attraction to the nineteenth century is itself one of the nineteenth-century ideas originating with Kant, Hegel, and Marx. According to such ideas, history as a whole is none other than the self-realization of the spirit, man's becoming man, and the process whereby human capabilities are fulfilled. If this is so, then world literature as a whole must verify it, and the nineteenth century deserves special attention

because its contribution in this regard was particularly significant. All great works in every period represent a stage in the process of man's becoming man—or of realizing his “species-being,” to use the term applied by Feuerbach, Marx, and Lukács.

And, indeed, we know of works from other periods too that raise the question of man's destiny and essence from this same universal perspective. The *Divine Comedy* is just such a work. For Lukács—as for Schelling and Hegel—it was an inescapably positive example; Lukács's many allusions to Dante are indicative of this.

True, beyond such veiled references, Lukács rarely made truly analytical observations concerning Dante. In part this reflected the fact that he knew less about Italian literature than about the three great Western European literatures that formed the backbone of his education—German, English, and French literature. Still, one should not forget that in 1911–12 he spent almost a year in Florence as the guest of his close friend Lajos Fülep, an expert on Italian culture. At that time (between 1908 and 1916), Fülep was working on a book about Dante. He and Lukács were united by a shared interest in intellectual philosophy. Naturally enough, Lukács' picture of Dante came to resemble closely Fülep's—or at least Fülep's reading of the *Divine Comedy*.

Even so, the *Divine Comedy* was for Lukács not only a positive example but also a major challenge; the work became one of the great touchstones for his ideas about the relationship between religion, art, and science and for his concept of art's struggle for freedom. According to this latter concept, the entire history of art is—together with the development of “species-being”—a struggle for aesthetic autonomy and liberation from a religious type of consciousness. And this struggle is part of the fight being waged for human emancipation and for the defeat of human mundanity. It is no easy task to interpret within this framework the greatest poem of medieval Christian culture, whose subject is necessarily transcendent and in which poetic verse is inseparably linked with philosophical and religious teaching.

Moreover, the allegorical nature of the poem also conceals a challenge—and not just for Lukács. Drawing from the Goethean theory on allegory and symbology, modern aesthetic thinking has always considered the allegorical method as inferior to the symbolical. For Lukács “allegorization as an aesthetic style” was so deeply problematical because—as he emphasized—“it rejects, in principle, mundanity as an artistic world-view”<sup>5</sup> and so represents a fundamental obstacle to the emancipation of art.

Regarding such ideas, the *Divine Comedy* can be cited as a blatant counterexample, one that belies allegory's negative appraisal. In this case, theory and example are juxtaposed—allegory's supposed hostility to art and the universally acclaimed greatness of Dante's poetry.

A radical solution to the problem was suggested by Benedetto Croce, who—for differing reasons—considered allegory to be in absolute opposition to poetry. Among Lukács' fellow philosophers, Croce was one of the greatest

readers of Dante, influencing views on Dante in the twentieth century. He argued that since allegory and poetry are mutually exclusive, Dante became a poet “in spite of himself.” In his view, the undeniable poetic greatness of the *Divine Comedy* is limited to the songs that manifest the dramatic fate of the protagonists of the various episodes and which are free of allegory. In contrast, other components of the work, where allegory is present, lack all poetic quality and are irrelevant to today’s readers. He includes among the latter the “structural” motifs of the work: for example, the narration of the hero’s journey to the other world or the description of the cosmological and moral order of the afterlife.

For a thinker like Lukács, this path cannot be contemplated, because it leads to the disintegration of the work’s totality; we lose the meaning and significance of Dante’s worldview and of his vision of the destiny of man. If we heed Croce, we must place in parentheses as a “structural” unpoetical element—or actually dispose of—the whole of the work’s notional (religious, philosophical, and moral) content. Thus, those who maintain that the allegorical method is hostile to art but who seek to preserve the *Divine Comedy* in its entirety, must explain how one of the greatest poetic works of world literature is concurrently a high point of the allegorical mode of expression. How is the *Divine Comedy* possible?

According to Goethe and Hegel, the problem of allegory concerns the fact that within it are connected “outwardly” and “inorganically” artistic form and abstract conceptuality, the sensory phenomenon and the notion. In more general terms, it is the problem of how—and whether—it is possible to express in artistic form intellectual beliefs, philosophical, ethical and theological ideas, and all-embracing ideological teachings. Can ideas, philosophy, or ideology be transformed into poetry?

If our approach resembles that of Croce, this is not even a possibility: even Dante was unsuccessful. In contrast, for Lukács such a development is both possible and even desirable. Great poetry is always intellectual/thoughtful poetry. This was also the view of Lajos Fülep, from whom Lukács evidently learned something about Dante. For Fülep, who was incidentally a bitter critic of Croce, the aesthetic problem concerned the manner in which “a worldview, and everything that went with it, could be transformed into the material of artistic form.”<sup>6</sup> In Fülep’s view, the *Divine Comedy* represented the highest-level solution to this problem; indeed, he argued that the piece “is the best example of a work of art in which the notional element and direct experience are merged into an organic whole.”<sup>7</sup> I note at this point that Mihály Babits, the great poet and outstanding Hungarian translator of the *Divine Comedy* (with whom Lukács had a memorable debate concerning *The Soul and Forms*), argued similarly that philosophical thought and poetry are inseparable from one another in Dante’s poem. Regarding the *Paradiso*, he wrote: “The highest zeniths of medieval philosophy are melded into a soaring poesis.”<sup>8</sup>

On this issue, Lukács appears to say no more than Fülep and Babits. In fact, however, he expresses himself more strongly. An example is the following comment from his late work on aesthetics: In vain has the development of human thought gone beyond Dante's world of thoughts, "it has not soared above its poetic strength, the poetic strength of human thought."<sup>9</sup> This implies three major propositions, in addition to what has already been said: (a) In the course of its development, human thought goes beyond a given conceptual world; in other words, thoughts become obsolete due to development. Dante's conceptual world (including his general worldview, his cosmology, his academic views, his ideas about history, and everything that can be placed among the substantial elements of his poem) is obsolete. (b) Thus—in view of the conceptual content included in it—the poem itself should be regarded as obsolete. It is a fact, however, that it has not become obsolete. (c) This is because Dante discovered and exploited a feature of human thought that deems thought *as* thought. This is none other than the poetic strength of thought, which, being independent of its concrete object and veracity, is not subject to the laws of development and resists obsolescence.

If this is a correct reconstruction of what Lukács wants to say, then we have to understand that here he is making the same logical distinction—between things that become obsolete and things that endure—as the one we know from his early writings on the history of literary theory. Obsolescence is a consequence of historical development, rendering inactual (irrelevant) any factuality and conceptual substance bound to a period. Lasting things are so, because they are not subject to historical change: they are *nonhistorical*. (The *validity of value* is not historical; this is why it is so difficult to answer the Hegelian question which asks how it is possible that things with value have a history.) But what exactly should we understand by "the poetic strength of human thought"? I think, in line with the logic of Lukács's reflections on the theory of literary history, this must be a formal quality. However, we can go no further than this for the time being.

All of this does not solve fully the problem of allegory. Allegory is clearly a feature of intellectual poetry, including transcendentalist poetry. Its function is to make philosophical, religious, and moral teachings more accessible to the reader, to make it easier to understand things. Dante also believed this, using allegory intentionally for this purpose. (The many metatextual places in the *Divine Comedy* bear witness to this, not to mention his allegory theory, which he explicitly explains in his prose works.)

But Lukács is not satisfied with resolving the contradiction between the *Divine Comedy's* poetic quality and its allegorical nature in terms of "the poetic quality of human thought." Thus, the two following paths remain open to him. The first is the historical relativization of allegory's role, that is, to accept that the use of allegory is correct only at certain stages of development. He referred explicitly to the possibility of exceptions: "So in literature only exceptional phenomena can be works of art of a similar high standard to that

of the allegorical-deductive Byzantine mosaics."<sup>10</sup> The second path would be to show that the allegories of the *Divine Comedy* constitute a special type unique to Dante, which is not affected by general criticisms of allegory. Lukács signals he considers both routes possible.

Most importantly, despite all his reservations, he recognized the aesthetic category of allegory. "The problematic of allegory—he says in one place—is played off in the field of aesthetics."<sup>11</sup> Thus, in spite of all the accompanying problems, he did not consider allegory from an aesthetic perspective as a "foreign entity," or as Croce referred to it, as an "allogenic" element in works of art. Its relative *raison d'être* he explained as its ability to express certain ideologies: "It is the aesthetic category of allegory—itsself of course highly problematical—that can express artistically worldviews where the world has split into two in consequence of the transcendence of the essence and because a chasm has arisen between man and reality."<sup>12</sup>

In this way it became possible for a genuine work like the *Divine Comedy* to be based on allegory and, as Lukács said, without breaking away from the allegory prescribed theologically, to unravel the mundane features of its nature. But at this point, more is at stake than whether allegory may sometimes be justly applied, even resulting in exceptional cases in great works. If allegory is generally the expression of a splitting into two, then it has a special form, which not only *expresses* the chasm between man and reality but actually *bridges* it.

As a result of this train of thought, the individual steps of which were not expressed, Lukács was ready to accept the proposition of the special nature of the Dantean allegory. For he assigned to it a unique role in "art's struggle for freedom," and he could do this only within the framework of an interpretation that viewed Dante as "a poet of the secular world." Erich Auerbach entitled his renowned work on Dante with these words.<sup>13</sup> He is the only authority referred to by Lukács when he describes Dante's role in art's struggle for freedom. Specifically, he cites a place in Auerbach's essay "Farinata and Cavalcanti" where the German literary scholar introduces into critical literature the idea of the specific nature of Dantean allegory as well as the principle of figural interpretation. Figural interpretation—as applied by Auerbach—reveals a concrete linguistic-poetic mechanism in the *Divine Comedy* which renders the narration serving to describe the transcendent experience a means for describing life in the mundane world, and transforms the approach to life from the perspective of eternity into a realist portrayal of the temporal, historical world.

Lukács sees the final note to Auerbach's analyses in the fact that Dante's work realized—but through this realization also destroyed—the Christian-figural essence of man.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the specific Dantean allegory is the expression of what Lukács called elsewhere "the perfect immanence of transcendence."<sup>15</sup>

Through his analysis of the problem of the allegorical nature of the *Divine Comedy*, Lukács reached the conclusion that Dante had created a special type of allegory, one that was unique to him. This fact is inseparable from the *Divine Comedy's* being an unprecedented and unique creative work—something that



many have been repeating for centuries. These are big words, but they are empirically supported. This was first stated by Schelling in his epoch-making article on Dante<sup>16</sup> in relation to the genre problems of the *Divine Comedy*. He showed that the *Divine Comedy*, being neither a drama, nor a poem, nor a novel, constitutes by itself a separate literary genre: type and specimen coincide in the work.

Lukács sought to illuminate in a historical-philosophical manner the unprecedented and unique nature of the *Divine Comedy* from the genre perspective in his *The Theory of the Novel*. In doing so, he appears to have found the key to solving the question. He explained the work's peculiarities from a world historical perspective, arguing that they correspond structurally to an exceptional and transitional moment in the historical process. In his definition, the *Divine Comedy* represents a "historical-philosophical transition from the epic to the novel" or "the union of the conditions of the epic and the novel."<sup>17</sup> The features of the epic are reticence, a "complete lack of immanent distance" regarding its own world, and the epic independence of the organic parts. These qualities are present in the *Divine Comedy*, but its own totality is built systematically and architectonically rather than organically, transforming the separate epic sections into actual parts. In this way, the work becomes like a novel. Its figures are thus individuals; they are real personalities detached from the reality confronting them and opposing that reality. "Dante is the only great example, where the architecture perfectly subdues the organic features," says Lukács using the above terminology.

This is the point where Lukács's analysis offers a good point of departure for contemporary interpretations of Dante. John Freccero makes reference to Lukács as follows: "Georg Lukács felvetette, hogy Dante írta az utolsó eposzt és az első regényt, úgyhogy mind az irodalmi műfajok terén, mind a nyugati kultúra történetében ő hidalja át a középkor és a modern világ közti szakadékot."<sup>18</sup> The American Dante scholar rightly notes that this proposition means not only that the *Divine Comedy* is *still* an epic and *already* a novel, but that it is *already* not an epic and *still* not a novel. There are further consequences of this, which require Dante's interpreters to add new aspects to Lukács' characterization of the *Divine Comedy*'s genre. We do not need to refer to such subsequent developments, as it was enough for us to show that Lukács' contribution to Dantean philology has proved both original and enriching.

4. Dante was aware of the unprecedented nature and uniqueness of the *Divine Comedy*; his intention had always been to compose an exceptional work. It is this demand that he announces when he refers to his work as the "sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set their hand" (*Paradiso*, 25, 2). Literary historians consider the work to be—like *Faust*—an exceptional piece. And Goethe—just like Dante—always intended to produce such an exceptional work. The German author uses the expression "incommensurable work." The same adjective is used by Lukács in his essay on *Faust*, an essay which Cesare

Cases, the renowned scholar of German literature, regarded as a highpoint of literary historical criticism.<sup>19</sup>

The most visible external sign of Goethean incommensurability—and of the singular nature of the *Divine Comedy*—is genre unclassifiability. *Faust* forces open the boundaries of epic and drama, but it cannot be said to be a totality of lyrical images. We may say that this was not so much a sign of exceptionality but the expression of the trend of an age, or more exactly the first appearance of a nascent trend. According to this view, Goethe's work points to the direction of subsequent developments whereby modern drama would adopt epic features and in general the old boundaries between genres would become relative. Lukács himself propounded that “the mutual intertwining of the dramatic and epic principles is a general trend in modern literature, which in *Faust* appears merely in its most emphatic and paradox form.”<sup>20</sup> The work deserves the attribute of “incommensurability” for its innovative and pioneering nature and because it is an antecedent of subsequent developments—rather than because it is inimitable in an absolute sense. Lukács develops this point by arguing that *Faust* prepared at an intellectual and aesthetic level for the works of Walter Scott and Byron, Balzac and Stendhal.

However, incommensurability has a more important meaning that this historical one, namely the meaning that comes from the deeper ideological content of the work. *Faust* is incommensurable in the same sense as the *Divine Comedy*.

That the two works cannot be classified in terms of genre is, however, the consequence of the novel intention of their writers, who wanted their works to express in artistic form something that is inaccessible to artistic expression; that is to say, it cannot be transformed in a dramatic, epic or lyric interpretation into the content of individual experience or intuition. The fact that Dante so often uses his “unspeakable” *topos* reflects his impossible ambition, his stubborn endeavor to grasp what is artistically inexpressible with the help of artistic expression. Likewise it is no coincidence that the final lines of *Faust* refer to the capturing of the indescribable (“Das Unbeschreibliche / Hier ist getan”).

But the incommensurability of the *Divine Comedy* and of *Faust* means at a more profound level that material that seems to be *useless* for artistic purposes could be used by both authors to interpret in poetic form the life and destiny of the whole of humanity. As Lukács reminds us, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel recognized, merely on the basis of the *Faust* fragment of 1790, the exceptional character of Goethe's work as a piece of world literature. The opinion was shared, according to someone who later spoke to Goethe, by their students, who understood that “Faust is a representative of the whole of humanity.” They were captivated by the fact that the tragedy that was being written manifested “the spirit of the whole of world history,” giving a full and faithful picture of the life of all humanity and covering the past, present, and future. They easily spotted *Faust's* affinity with the *Divine Comedy*; they even referred to it as the *Divine Tragedy*.<sup>21</sup>

In this reading of the work we see the seed of Lukács' later interpretation of *Faust*, which he described as "the drama of mankind." The most obvious place in the text that can be used to verify this description is found in the *Faust* fragment:

s mi az emberiség egyforma sorsa,  
 átélni legbelül én is kívánom.  
 Szeretném mélyét-magasát bejárni,  
 jaját és kacaját magamba zárni,  
 tulajdon énem így énjévé többszörözni,  
 s mint ő maga, legvégül összetörni.<sup>22</sup>

"Tulajdon énem így énjévé többszörözni" ("mein eigen Selbst zu ihrem Selbst erweitern"): this is the point where humanity is clearly manifested as a collective subject, which has an "ego" just as singular individuals do. The singular "ego" can be broadened into a general "ego," but it can also, in the reverse process, accept into itself the experiences of the general "ego." This picture has a medieval antecedent in Averroes's ideas about the potential intellect, which also had a substantial effect on Dante. The "I" and the "we" are interchangeable in several important places in the *Divine Comedy*—as are also the singular individual's "ego" and collective humanity's "ego" in the aforementioned quotation from *Faust*. Moreover the relationship between the "I" and the "we" is a condition for us viewing Dante, the protagonist in the *Divine Comedy*, as a representative of humanity—like we do Faust.<sup>23</sup>

In the light of these things, it is easy to see how ideas about the relationship between the individual and mankind connect Goethe's poetry with Hegel's philosophy—just as Dante's idea of the relationship between the "I" and the "we" can be linked with Averroes's philosophy.

It is thus understandable that Lukács reads *Faust* in the light of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, even considering the two works to be (mutually) corresponding in two different areas of intellectual pursuit. He emphasizes that "Goethe's *Faust* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as the greatest literary and philosophical achievements of German classicism, are integrally connected."<sup>24</sup> In this vein he says that Faust's path "is the poetic *phenomenology* of mankind."<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted that Lukács uses here the same words chosen by Fülep to describe the *Divine Comedy*: "the *Commedia* is the 'Phenomenology' of the lyrical spirit."<sup>26</sup> No doubt Lukács borrowed the words and the comparison from Fülep. What is also certain is that in a historical sense these words applied to *Faust* more than they did to the *Divine Comedy*. But in a general typological sense, Fülep was also right. The works of both Dante and Goethe are comparable to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* because they grasp the relationship between the individual and mankind in a similar manner, and because the protagonist in each undergoes a process of intellectual development whereby—albeit in a very different sense—they realize in themselves mankind's potential and go

from damnation to salvation. Of course, only in Faust's case can one strictly say that he "took the phenomenological route" in a Hegelian sense.

But is this really so? Should *Faust* be read to such a degree through the Hegelian lens? The questions take us back to the century-old debate about whether Goethe's worldview, philosophy, and theory of knowledge were actually closer to Kant than to Hegel. The view (propounded by, among others, Ernst Cassirer in his famous book on the Enlightenment) that Goethe connects in *Faust* above all with Kantian philosophy was strongly denied by Lukács. Indeed, he considered it "completely wrong" to read from *Faust* any essential connection between Goethe and Kant. On the contrary, he continuously noted how the moral content of Goethe's works—from *Werther* to *Wilhelm Meister* and *Faust*—was at variance with Kantian ethics. Nor, however, did he claim that Goethe became over time a follower of Hegel. He could not have claimed this, for we know that Goethe worked on *Faust* throughout his life, starting at a young age. As Lukács himself says, *Faust* grew in tandem with Goethe's life and experiences. If there is a historical connection, in terms of effect, between the poet and the philosopher, it would seem rather to be the reverse. The young Hegel—like his revolutionary-minded contemporaries—was an enthusiastic reader of the *Faust Fragment* and fell under its spell. Meanwhile, influenced by *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the mature Goethe's *Aesthetics*—as Lukács points out once again—places educating man for reality at the center of the theory of the novel. According to Lukács, Hegel's ideas about the theory of the novel refer clearly to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and touch upon the core of Goethe's *Three Questions*.

Lukács' position on these issues is that Goethe was sympathetic to the *whole* of the German philosophical movement throughout his long career, but had no wish to affiliate himself to any of the nascent systems. Goethe, Lukács emphasized, "never fully joined one of the philosophical schools, but was attracted by the natural philosophy of the young Schelling and exhibited in later decades a far-reaching parallel with Hegel's objective dialectics."<sup>27</sup>

I think this is a key sentence for the *Faust* interpretation. A "Hegelian" Goethe would not really be important to Lukács. For him, what is far more interesting and of greater objective and necessary significance is that a *parallel can be drawn* between the thinking of the poet and the ideas of the philosopher. The accidental coincidence that *Faust 1* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* were published in the same year (the eventful year of 1808) strengthens symbolically this parallel.

In Lukács' analysis, *Faust* is comparable, in terms of basic ideas and structure, to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The basic idea is not limited to Faust, in his individuality, representing mankind, in a similar manner to the protagonist Dante representing mankind. For, compared with the *Divine Comedy*, an essential difference in Goethe's work is that the relationship between the individual and the species is a fully historical one. According to the phenomenological scheme, the individual can connect with the species because the main stages of individual

development coincide with the main stages of human development; in other words, the individual experiences world history in an abbreviated form. And in this way, human capabilities develop in him.

The structure of *Faust* reflects all of this in that Faust first appears in his singular particularity, but then, through his adventures, comes to experience various periods in world history. The periods selected are those that Goethe and his contemporaries regarded as particularly significant; they correspond to the logical junctures of history rather than actual historical progression. The two parts are linked together in such a manner (here we can glimpse a “phenomenological” feature) that the first part formulates direct and naïve historicity, while the second part expresses reflected historicism (*Historismus*), or to use Lukács’ memorable words “history philosophy turned into an experience.”<sup>28</sup>

Lukács organizes his analysis around two dialectic problems—the dialectics of the individual and the species, or of good and bad. From the dialectics of the relationship between the individual and the species he derives the many characteristics of the act, such as the phantastic form, the ambiguous relationship between the tragic and non-tragic elements and the “phenomenological nature” of Faust and Marguerite’s love story. (The phenomenological peculiarity of the story comes from Faust’s passing through all the stages of development of individual love, and in his relationship with Marguerite the whole story of human love is repeated.) His analysis of the dialectics of good and bad relates principally to his interpretation of the figure of Mephisto. At this point, Lukács seizes the opportunity to show the effect—on the concept of *Faust*—of ideas concerning the historical role of evil and tricks of the mind.

The above summary shows that Lukács’ *Faust*-interpretation basically concerns content. This conclusion contains two *repudiations*: first, it evidently does not depart from formal principles; second, it does not apply the patterns of deterministic Marxism, that is to say, it does not explain the work in terms of social causality. At the same time, *in a positive sense*, the content-based nature of the interpretation could mean that it explains the work in philosophical categories at several levels: it connects the meanings expressed in the work with Hegelian ideas, and it justifies this connection by applying its own Marxist conception of historical philosophy.

Lukács’ evaluation principles rest upon the same content-based approach. *Faust*, on the basis of these principles, is considered one of the greatest works of world literature, because it expresses the world historical path of the advance of the human essence, or that part of world history in which human essence is realized at the highest attainable level. This also means that *Faust*—just like the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—represents the highest possible level of bourgeois ideology.

But we have not yet addressed the issues that are critical for any *Faust*-interpretation: how to grasp the relationship between the first and second parts of the work, how to appraise the two parts in comparison with each other,

and how to evaluate the work as a whole, given that it comprises two heterogeneous parts. How does Lukács answer these questions?

Since he chose the phenomenological approach as the key to his interpretation, he cannot agree with those who consider the second part to be a complete mistake, for—as he indicates—this is the part where the destiny of the individual has to appear directly as an abbreviated version of humanity's development. Structurally, it is an indispensable component of the work. Moreover, the attribute “incommensurable” is far more applicable to this part than to the first part.

Even so, Lukács acknowledges the entirely problematic nature of the second part and its failure to exert the same emotional and experiential effect as the first part. This, he explains, was because Goethe did not always find the stylistic means needed for the realization of his plan. Often the connection between the collective and the individual's perspective is abstract and stiff and can only be established with the help of a decorative word-typization. Many times in the second part, the allegorical element becomes excessive. Let us state what Lukács fails to say openly: Goethe's poetic practice in the second part of *Faust* ironically contradicts his epoch-making theory of allegory and symbology.

Perhaps the main problem is that the difference between the two parts gradually becomes amplified into a difference between heterogeneous elements. The category of “tragedy” is clearly applicable to the first part; and this category is the one that Goethe wanted to characterize the whole work. However, the work as a whole cannot be called a tragedy because—as Lukács shows—the path of mankind is not a tragic one, even if it leads across innumerable tragedies. Certainly, *Faust* as a whole reflects this truth. But precisely because it reflects this truth, the work disintegrates into a series of separate parts and tragedies.

5. Nineteenth-century Hungarian literature also produced a poem of universal significance, one that may be compared with *Faust*. The work in question is Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, which presents the history of humanity in dramatic form. Adam, the protagonist/hero of the work, assumes various historical roles (Pharaoh, Miltiades, Tancred, Kepler, Danton, etc.), traveling through time to visit turning points in world history—from the ancient era of the pharaohs to the cooling of the earth in the future. On this journey, Adam is led by Lucifer, the embodiment of the evil forces shaping history, that is, the negative dialectic.

*The Tragedy of Man* is not one of the most famous works of world literature, but it certainly deserves world literary status and in Hungary it is a national classic. In view of its content and ambitious message, it perfectly meets the expectations that may be made of major works of world literature, based on Lukácsian aesthetics. It does so, because it seeks to answer in artistic form the fundamental questions of the purpose and direction of human history. Lukács understandably turned to the work several times during his long career as a critic.

In the 1950s, reflecting Stalinist cultural policy, the authorities banned Madách's work: for many years, it could not be performed on the stage or republished. Many have accused Lukács of being responsible, because after his return from Moscow he became a leading intellectual authority in Hungary's Communist Party. In fact, however, he never assumed an official function within the party and had nothing to do with specific political and administrative decisions. Even so, in his writings at the time, he did express reservations about *The Tragedy of Man*, which must have carried some weight with party officials.

Should we see in Lukács' criticism a concession made to Stalinism? I do not believe the problem can be formulated using such clichés. In lieu of a detailed analysis, perhaps it is sufficient to note that Lukács' critical work was already remote from Stalinism as early as the 1930s, during his time in Moscow. "Whatever the literary critics may think and say" wrote Guido Oldrini, the fact that Goethe and Hegel were at the focus of Lukács' interest so decisively and for so long is "further irrefutable proof of the great distance that separated him as early as the 1930s—and even more so later on—from the official slogans of Stalinism."<sup>29</sup>

But we do not have to search so far. The ideas formulated in his critique of Madách reflect in themselves a very different mentality and culture. They remind us of what I noted in the introduction: the ideas at the foundation of his Madách critique are already present in his early writings, and they put forward the criteria seen in his later *Faust* analysis.

In the 1911 drama book, Lukács complains that in *The Tragedy of Man* "thought and sensualisation are artistically separate." The scenes are beautiful, but in terms of their relationship to ideas they are illustrative and allegorical.<sup>30</sup> Of course, whether Lukács was right or wrong about Madách is not the important thing here. What is crucial is the aspect, or consideration, upon which this judgment was based. It is easy to see that the mediating element he finds wanting between "thought" and "sensualization" is one that would later become a basic category of his aesthetics: that is, *particularity*. Madách "over-generalizes," says Lukács almost 50 years later, essentially repeating a view he expressed in his youth.<sup>31</sup> His specific criticism relates to a whole aesthetic theory, and cannot be derived from the political circumstances of the moment. By this time, the theory underlying his judgment is evidently more elaborate than what he had argued in the drama book. Nevertheless it includes the same criteria of critical evaluation that he adhered to throughout his life—and which are clearly applied in his critique of the second part of *Faust*.

I should add that Lukács also reproaches Madách for the pessimistic tone of his work. In that era, criticism of this type may have seemed to be directly politically motivated. Even so, behind all this we may discover a more general criticism rooted in ideas. The reason for the Lukácsian criticism is that while Madách applied the Goethean-Hegelian world-historical terms, he did so almost in reverse: he failed to connect it with the idea of man's capacities being

fulfilled by the species. Every scene in the drama ends in disappointment, and in moral terms the preceding story recommences in every scene. Among the work's structural principles there is the metaphor of Vico's recurring cycle. At the end of history (actually, before history even begins), Adam awakens from a bad dream to hear merely reassuring words from God. Unlike the protagonists in the *Divine Comedy* and *Faust*, he experiences no salvation.

Clearly, these great works of world literature are interpreted and analyzed by Lukács within a theoretical framework that includes a teleological image of the unity of the world-historical process, the universality of progress, and the continuous development of the human essence—whereby the image is also projected into the future. Today such optimism has been severely shaken. But it is this image whose foundations were established by such great poets and thinkers of German classicism as Goethe and Hegel. With this I want to say that Lukács does not bring his interpretative conclusions into Goethe's text *from the outside*, because the meaning which he attributes to the text is already there. But I also want to say that there is an inevitable harmony between Lukács' interpretative categories and the categories defining the meaning of the Goethean text. One might say that Lukács has no choice but to show empathy with Goethe for structural reasons—even though, in the second part of *Faust*, he discovers the same errors of illustrative and allegorical portrayal and of generalization without particularity that he finds in *The Tragedy of Man*.

If, in the postmodern era, the Goethean-Hegelian image of uniform world history, universal progress, and the human essence has been shattered, the question arises whether Lukács' analyses of the classical works of world literature are still valid. Are his conclusions about Dante and his reading of *Faust* instructive? And what should we think of his criticism of *The Tragedy of Man*? Changes in literary theory do not automatically invalidate the critical work of Lukács or any other author—or the works that are the object of their criticism. In the immanent- and reception-historical process, a connection forms between works and their relevant interpretations. Now Lukács' Hegelian-phenomenological reading forms a part of *Faust's* "causatum," because the work illuminates layers of meaning that other interpretations have ignored.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> György Lukács, "Megjegyzések az irodalomtörténet elméletéhez" [Notes toward the theory of literary history]. In G. Lukács, *Ifjúkori művek (1902–1918)* (Magvető, Budapest, 1977), 413. [Not available in English]
- <sup>2</sup> György Lukács, "A magyar irodalomtörténet revíziója" [The revision of Hungarian literary history]. In G. Lukács, *Magyar irodalom, magyar kultúra* (Gondolat, Budapest, 1970), 492. [Not available in English]
- <sup>3</sup> György Lukács, "Az irodalomtörténeti periodizáció." In *ibid.*, 632. [Not available in English]



- <sup>4</sup> György Lukács, “előszava a világirodalomról szóló válogatott írásaihoz” [Georg Lukács’s foreword to his selected articles about world literature]. In G. Lukács, *Világirodalom I-II* (Gondolat, Budapest, 1969), I. 6. [Not available in English]
- <sup>5</sup> György Lukács, “Az avantgardizmus világnézeti alapjai” [The ideological foundations of avantgardism]. In G. Lukács, *Művészet és társadalom* (Gondolat, Budapest, 1960), 351. [Not available in English]
- <sup>6</sup> Lajos Fülep, “Dante.” In L. Fülep, *A művészet forradalmától a nagy forradalomig forradalomig—Cikkek, tanulmányok I-II* (Magvető, Budapest, 1974), II. 306. [Not available in English]
- <sup>7</sup> Lajos Fülep, “Dante.” In *ibid.*, II. 249.
- <sup>8</sup> Mihály Babits, *Az európai irodalom története* [The history of European literature]. (Nyugat and Irodalmi RT, Budapest, no date), 191. [Not available in English]
- <sup>9</sup> György Lukács, *Az esztétikum sajátossága* [The peculiarity of aesthetics] (Akadémiai, Budapest, 1969), II. 154.
- <sup>10</sup> György Lukács, “Az avantgardizmus világnézeti alapjai” [The ideological foundations of avantgardism]. In G. Lukács, *Művészet és társadalom*, 351.
- <sup>11</sup> György Lukács, *Az esztétikum sajátossága* [The peculiarity of aesthetics] (Akadémiai, Budapest, 1969), 704.
- <sup>12</sup> György Lukács, “Az avantgardizmus világnézeti alapjai” [The ideological foundations of avantgardism]. In G. Lukács, *Művészet és társadalom* (Gondolat, Budapest, 1968), 351.
- <sup>13</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929). [Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (translated by Ralph Manheim). The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961.]
- <sup>14</sup> György Lukács, *Az esztétikum sajátossága* [The peculiarity of aesthetics] (Akadémiai, Budapest, 1969), 704. (Lukács refers to the 1946 Berne edition of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*.)
- <sup>15</sup> György Lukács, “Az epepeia és a regény; a regény kompozíciója, a dezillúziós romantika” [Epepeia and the novel: composition of the novel, delusional romanticism]. In G. Lukács, *Művészet és társadalom*, 64. [See also “A regény elmélete,” *The Theory of the Novel*.]
- <sup>16</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, “Über Dante in philosophischer Beziehung.” In F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst (Aus dem handschriftlichen Nachlass)*. In F. W. J. Schelling, *Frühschriften* (Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1971), II. 1188–1206.
- <sup>17</sup> György Lukács, “Az epepeia és a regény; a regény kompozíciója, a dezillúziós romantika” [Epepeia and the novel: composition of the novel, delusional romanticism]. In G. Lukács, *Művészet és társadalom* (Gondolat, Budapest, 1968), 69.
- <sup>18</sup> John Freccero, *Dante—The Poetics of Conversion* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1986), 138.
- <sup>19</sup> Cesare Cases, *Su Lukács. Vicende di un’interpretazione* (Einaudi, Torino, 1985), 125.
- <sup>20</sup> György Lukács, “Goethe: Faust.” In G. Lukács, *Világirodalom*, I. 151.
- <sup>21</sup> Cited by Lukács. *Ibid.* 86.
- <sup>22</sup> “Und was der ganzen Menschheit zugeteilt ist, / Will ich in meinem innern Selbst genießen, / Mit meinem Geist das Höchste’ und tiefste greifen, / Ihr Wohl und Weh auf meinen Busen haufen, / Und so mein eigen Selbst zu ihrem Selbst erweitern, / Und, wie sie selbst, am End’ auch ich zerschheimern.”
- <sup>23</sup> For a more thorough analysis, see János Kelemen, “Paradiso XVIII–XX.” In *Quaderni danteschi. Periodico della Società Dantesca Ungherese*. 1/2009. Anno 4. N. 5. 1–30.

<sup>24</sup> György Lukács, op.cit. 89.

<sup>25</sup> György Lukács, op.cit. 92.

<sup>26</sup> Fülep Lajos, "Dante."

<sup>27</sup> György Lukács, "Goethe: Faust," 86.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Guido Oldrini, *György Lukács e i problemi del marxismo del novecento*. La città del sole. Napoli 2009. 185. ("Che Goethe e stiano così decisamente e così lungamente al centro dei suoi interessi è solo un segno in più della sua spiccata originalità di marxista e—cheché si pensi e dica da molta parte della letteratura critica— un'altra prova irrefutabile della distanza chilometrica che lo separa, già negli anni '30 (e tanto più naturalmente in seguito), dagli slogan ufficiali dello stalinismo.)

<sup>30</sup> György Lukács, *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* [The history of the development of modern drama] (Magvető, Budapest), 1978.

<sup>31</sup> György Lukács, "Madách tragédiája" [Madach's tragedy]. In G. Lukács, *Magyar irodalom, magyar kultúra*, 570.

## Chapter 8

# The Modern Meaning of Georg Lukács' Reconstruction of Walter Scott's Novels of Premodern Political Ethics

Norman Arthur Fischer

In 1936 and 1937, the German-speaking Hungarian philosopher, Georg Lukács, contributed to a Hegelian aesthetics of imagination, linked to a Hegelian and Marxist political ethics and philosophy of history, when he presented, in the *Historical Novel*, an imaginative aesthetics for understanding historical novels, with emphasis on Walter Scott.<sup>1</sup> It is this Lukácsian/Hegelian/Marxist philosophy of political imagination that I want to retrieve and revitalize, in order to show the relevance for our time of Scott's novels of the premodern past of the Scottish clans, and of the age of European chivalry, and the crusades.

Sir Walter Scott's historical novels blended a political ethics of history and aesthetic imagination. Scott's novels dominated the literary scene in Scotland and throughout post-Napoleonic Europe, particularly Britain, between 1814 and 1832, the same period in which the political and historical ethics of G. W. F. Hegel became enormously influential, also throughout Europe, but particularly in Germany. Scott's novels and Hegel's ethics of politics and history are emblems of post-Napoleonic European culture, one expressing an imaginative politics, the other a directly ethical politics. Much of the most famous part of Hegelian political ethics is concerned with history, often the same history that Scott was concerned with. But, although Hegel addressed the link between his aesthetics, his political ethics, and his philosophy of history, much more linkages needed to be done when Lukács wrote *The Historical Novel*. History and political ethics appear in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, but aesthetic imagination appears rarely in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*.<sup>2</sup> Lukács' *Historical Novel* throughout addressed the link between aesthetics and the ethics of history and poetics, and my retrieval and revitalization push these links even further. In order to develop an abstract aesthetics of imagination that incorporates political and historical ethics, (one) the general Hegelianism of Lukács' enterprise must be logically separated from (two) the contemporary political framework in which he wrote, which is leftist and Marxist. This is particularly important for understanding Scott's premodern novels, where only a

strong Hegelian emphasis can unlock their peculiar mix of radicalism, liberalism, and conservatism. Lukács linked Hegelianism and popular front Marxism so closely in *The Historical Novel* that they often appear as logically inseparable, but at a deeper philosophical level they are logically separable, and must be seen as such in order to bring out the deepest elements in Scott's political-historical imagination, particularly in his novels of premodern clans, chivalry, and crusades.

Lukács' leftism and Marxism in his account of historical novels by Scott and others arose itself out of a very specific historical context. To understand this context we must distinguish between two political movements of the 1930s and early 40s: popular front type movements against fascism and Nazism, and the "Popular Fronts" against fascism and Nazism that were linked to official communist parties in the Soviet Union, England, Germany, the United States, and other countries. As a participant in popular fronts and "Popular Fronts," Lukács used aesthetic and literary analysis of historical novels to broaden the political struggle against fascism and Nazism to include literary opposition to antidemocratic, anti-populist, and fascist-Nazi type politics. *The Historical Novel* thus began by locating democratic and populist political concepts in the work of novelists whom Lukács regarded as the founders of the democratic and populist historical novel, Scott in Britain, and James Fenimore Cooper in America, and concluded with the democratic and populist historical novels of German popular front participants, Heinrich Mann and Lion Feuchtwanger. Lukács saw Scott's heroes, such as Rob Roy, Robin Hood, and Ivanhoe, and Cooper's Natty Bumppo, as upholding democratic and populist values against tyrannical and fascistic tendencies. Many literary critics and writers associated with popular fronts and "Popular Fronts," presented similar analyses. In Germany, Mann and Feuchtwanger won Lukács' praise for unearthing democratic values in the France of Navarre (Mann) and the Rome of Josephus (Feuchtwanger). Working on parallel themes in England, George Thomson saw Aeschylus upholding democracy.<sup>3</sup>

My retrieval and revitalization of Lukács' aesthetics of the historical-political imagination depends on logically distinguishing between the general Hegelian aesthetics of imagination, political ethics, and philosophy of history, from the Marxist and left wing politics of the popular front and "Popular Front" period. The abstract philosophical thrust of my retrieval of Lukács should make it clear that the general philosophical core of Lukács' work not only stands as logically separable from, but sometimes even logically opposed to, the overall political tendencies of his work in the 1930s as a participant in the popular fronts and the "Popular Fronts." The general theory of historical-political imagination in the premodern historical novels that I am retrieving and reenergizing stands even more sharply against those of Lukács' arguments that come from his very specific immersion in the most famous of the popular front type movements, namely the "Popular Fronts," that were closely linked to official communist parties in the Soviet Union, Germany, England, the United States, and other

countries. It is too common for anti-Stalinist writers, whose political critiques of Stalin's influence on the popular fronts and "Popular Fronts" I accept, to hold that such philosophically subtle participants in popular fronts and "Popular Fronts" as Lukács, Mann, Feuchtwanger, and Thompson could not rise above the conformist politics and aesthetic reductivism that Stalinist party hacks or hackish sympathizers did not rise above. My approach is entirely different. Critics of philosophical and literary depth who were part not only of the popular fronts, but also of "Popular Fronts," such as Lukács and Thompson, or subtle imaginative writers such as Mann and Feuchtwanger who participated in Popular Front type movements, were able to create a personal aesthetics of the political-historical imagination, of great universality and specific relevance to the political lives of Americans in 2010.

Lukács linked historical novels to Hegelian ethics, by showing their public spiritedness: that they wrench the reader away from an obsession with private life and private ethical conflicts, and force the reader to see the possibility of individuals defining their identity in terms of large and small-scale social, political, legal, and above all historical ethical conflicts. In his *The Young Hegel*, a companion work to *The Historical Novel*, written in the same time period, Lukács defended Hegel's defense of a public ethics of social practices immersed in history, called by Hegel *Sittlichkeit*, as over against a more private morality of individual conscience, called by Hegel *Moralität*. When an individual is immersed in a *Sittlichkeit*, he or she can participate in the public spirited life of the world. Lukács in *The Young Hegel* linked Hegel's ethics with the republicanism of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as with Montesquieu.<sup>4</sup> Hegelian ethics requires such public spiritedness. Lukács was clearly interested in Scott's novels, because they depict individuals immersed in *Sittlichkeiten*. In an earlier article I argued that at least five of Scott's novels—*The Tale of Old Mortality*, taking place in the decade preceding The Glorious Revolution of 1689–90, and *Waverly*, *Rob Roy*, *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Redgauntlet*, taking place during the Jacobite revolt of the eighteenth century, represented radical populism and civic republican *Sittlichkeiten*.<sup>5</sup> In the present article on Lukács' philosophy of the historical novel applied to Scott's depiction of *Sittlichkeiten* in premodern clans, chivalric Knighthood, and the crusades, the radical populist and civic republican thesis is more nuanced, but still holds: the greatest heroes of Scott's premodern novels are populist republican Knights or would be knights.

In *the Historical Novel* Lukács filled in the aesthetic, imaginative, side of Marxist and Hegelian political-historical ethics. For Lukács a historical novel is above all a work that depicts both what Hegel called *Sittlichkeit*, that is, ethical practices embedded in society and history, and the individual's immersion in that *Sittlichkeit*. Historical novels show the immersion of their main characters in a historical *Sittlichkeit*. Often, they also show how at least some of the characters display not only their immersion in a *Sittlichkeit*, but also a public spirited political stance. What must emerge in a great historical novel or narrative is an ethical situation that brings out the public ethical quandaries and disputes of

the age—particularly those that emphasize public spirited politics—and also helps structure the novel's imaginative depiction of interaction between personality and public events.<sup>6</sup>

But there must, then, be an intermediate concept between the ethical and political on the one hand, and the aesthetic imagination on the other, as they operate in historical fiction. I call this intermediate concept "fusion." I do not pretend that fusion is the key concept for linking ethics/politics and aesthetics absolutely generally, but only that it is a key concept in linking ethics/politics and aesthetics in historical fiction. Although the concept of fusion is highly indebted to the ethics, politics, and aesthetics of Hegel, Lukács and the great historical novelists, it is my own concept, used to reconceive, revitalize, and revive the deeper meaning of Lukács' philosophical probing of historical novels.

Fusion measures the extent and nature of the identification that a character, in a historical novel or other imaginative work of historical literature or art generally, has with the larger ethical and political goals, problems, and feelings of their time, that is, with what Hegel and Lukács called the *Sittlichkeit* of the age. There may be several such *Sittlichkeit* patterns operating. All great characters in historical narratives fuse with a *Sittlichkeit* of their times, even though they are in opposition to part or even all of the dominant *Sittlichkeit*. The more identification there is, the more fusion there is. However, from the standpoint of aesthetic imagination, more here is not necessarily better. At an ethical level, whether in regards to Hegel, Lukács, or the great historical novelists, there must be fusion between the individual's personality and political, social, legal, and historical tasks. But more fusion is not necessarily always better than less. The key is always the quality of the ethical fusion. Furthermore, to apply the concept of fusion to historical novels, questions of the aesthetic and imaginative quality of the fusion must be added to questions concerning the ethical and political quality of the fusion. In a great historical novel characters can live imaginatively through an aesthetically complex description of a complex ethical-political fusion. Their fusion is often multidimensional ethically and politically, and they are presented fully aesthetically and imaginatively in such a way as to make them live at a number of different levels of fusion. Thus, the great historical novels display imaginative as well as ethical and political fusion. Their fusion is often contradictory, but yet its very contradictoriness makes them imaginatively living characters psychologically. But the life breathed into them does not come from modernist obsession with private personality, but from their capacity to fuse with the great tasks of the day. The best fusion for historical literature is not always the strongest. It is not so much the strength of fusion that makes a character in a historical novel fully live imaginatively as a character, but the complexity of their fusion.

Lukács' greatest success in his aesthetics of historical novels was with Scott, in whose novels he found a leftist and populist politics, with strong emphasis on class, but also on strong liberal values of liberty and democracy. Lukács was

aware that there was another, more conservative, side to Scott's novels, but the urgent political tasks of the day forced him to deemphasize that side. Since my concept of fusion covers any historical novel, whether it takes a right, center, or left political stance, I do not have to emphasize so much the question of how left or right Scott's historical novels actually are, and can simply look at them as emblems of imaginative and ethical fusion. I agree with Lukács that often Scott's historical novels can be interpreted in a left, democratic, populist, and even Marxist direction, but I also think, along with most Scott critics, that at least sometimes they move in a more conservative direction than Lukács was willing to admit. This is particularly true of Scott's premodern novels. Lukács concentrated on Scott's novels of Scotland that displayed democratic, populist or left leaning elements most clearly, for example, novels dealing with the exploitation of the Highland clans, such as the eighteenth-century novels, *Waverly* (1814) and *Rob Roy* (1818), and the seventeenth-century novel, *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* (1819), which takes place in 1644–45, and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828), which takes place in 1402.<sup>7</sup> While a complete account of the clan novels would also have to include their more peripheral appearance in Scott's eighteenth-century novel *Redgauntlet* (1823), and *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816), my interest here is solely in the essentially premodern clans of *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, and the completely premodern clans of *The Fair Maid of Perth*. Lukács' emphasis, however, even with the early clan novels, was on clan life in what for him was the modern world of the eighteenth century, or their role in a novel about the origins of the eighteenth century in the previous century, in *The Tale of Old Mortality*.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, I will deepen Lukács' left political analysis by showing both left-liberal and conservative leaning fusion in the novels depicting premodern clan life, so that *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* and even more *The Fair Maid of Perth* will emerge as contrasts to the novels of the clans in more modern life. I will then also apply the concept of ethical and imaginative-aesthetic fusion to Scott's clearly more conservative novels dealing with chivalry in relation to popular life: *Quentin Durward* (1823), set in fifteenth-century France, and Scott's three interconnected novels of the crusades: *Ivanhoe* (1820), and what I call the first and second prequels to *Ivanhoe*, *The Talisman* (1825), and *Count Robert of Paris* (1831).<sup>9</sup> *Ivanhoe* takes place in 1194 in England, and *The Talisman* in 1192 in Palatine, both set in the period of the Third Crusade. *Count Robert of Paris* takes place between 1196 and 1197, at the beginning of the First Crusade, when the Western Crusaders under Godfrey of Bouillon were passing through Constantinople, on their way to Palestine. Like Lukács I do think that a novel of knighthood and chivalry such as *Ivanhoe*, often has left leaning, democratic, populist, liberal, and even Marxist elements.<sup>10</sup> But this is harder to show with the prequels to *Ivanhoe*, and it is important to show that all the premodern novels clearly also have important conservative elements. It is easier to agree with Lukács on the populism of the depictions of premodern clan life in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* and *The Fair Maid of Perth*.<sup>11</sup>

But even there, it is impossible to understand these novels without a strong dose of conservative politics in mind. The range of novels of clan and chivalry before us allows me to both concentrate, when appropriate, on left leaning and liberal political, ethical, and aesthetic imaginative fusion, and also on a more politically neutral or conservative fusion, when that is appropriate. These novels of early clan life and of knighthood and chivalry with emphasis on the crusades do not always fit as easily into Lukács' political leftism of the 1930s as do Scott's eighteenth-century novels of Jacobite revolt, such as *Waverly* and *Rob Roy*, or even his seventeenth-century *Tale of Old Mortality*, where the clans are on stage, but not as central figures, and thus can be counterposed to the clans of *A Legend of The Wars of Montrose* and even more *The Fair Maid of Perth*. These novels of early clan life illustrate the general principles of political, ethical, and imaginative-aesthetic fusion very well, by displaying its operation in left-conservative political ethics. This "tory," radicalism, to use the British and Canadian term for it, fits into both Lukács' Hegelianism and Scott's passion for premodern elements of clan and chivalric life.

The truth is that an ambiguity between conservatism and leftism exists in parallel ways in both Lukács and Scott. In his popular front and "Popular Front" period Lukács had come to the conclusion that three great thinkers, who had been labeled conservatives and who were indeed conservatives in many respects, pointed the way for a revival of Marxist class struggle ethics. The three were Hegel, Scott, and the French follower and admirer of Scott, Honore de Balzac. What united all three was that they wrote works that immersed the individual in a series of developing historical, ethical, and social-political and above all historical practices, *Sittlichkeiten*. This vision of history set the three radical conservatives—Balzac, Hegel, and Scott—at odds with more individualist writers.<sup>12</sup> It was their unifying philosophy of history that allowed Lukács to give a Marxist interpretation of all three, and to set aside aristocratic, reactionary, Tory, monarchical, or royalist comments that any of the three made, in favor of emphasis on their ethics of immersion of the individual in history and class struggle. Hegel, Scott, and Balzac were certainly at least sometimes on the reactionary side of that class struggle, but often they were not, and took the side of the people and suppressed classes and individuals, even when that meant going against their own official ideology, although sometimes, as we will see in Scott's premodern novels, their conservatism itself led them in liberal, populist, and radical directions.

It has been pointed out many times that these ambiguities in Hegel led to a split between left, center, and right Hegelians. Given this background, it would be natural to assume that, as a Marxist, Lukács would present a left wing interpretation of Hegel, and interpret Marx as a Left wing Hegelian. In fact Lukács had once given such an interpretation in his *History and Class Consciousness* 1923.<sup>13</sup> But in the works associated with the popular front and "Popular Front" mot only did he not do so, but he argued positively that typical left interpretations of Hegel were incorrect, and that Marx himself was not a left



Hegelian in any typical sense. For Lukács, both Hegel and Marx were progressives who, because they adopted a political ethics that emphasized how individuals were immersed in the social practices of history, parted company with abstract leftist calls for flying in the face of history and tradition. For Lukács, Hegel—and of course Marx even more—called for change, but a philosophy of change had to emerge out of a sober realism about how individuals were actually immersed in history.<sup>14</sup> What resulted was an interpretation of Hegel and Marx that we might call center-left, moving sometimes to the center and sometimes to the left. Some critics have argued, and they are partially correct, that this turn to a center-left version of Hegelian aesthetics, political ethics, and philosophy of history was driven by Lukács' participation in popular fronts and "Popular Fronts." My retrieval and revitalization of Lukács, however, depends on the idea that part of his popular front period interpretation of both Marx and Hegel as center-left Hegelians is not so completely driven by immediate political needs, but also by a very deep concept of the political imagination as applied above all to Scott's historical novels. This deep theory of center-left political imagination can be made even richer, if we face up squarely to the need for a more nuanced interpretation of Scott's novels than we actually get in *The Historical Novel*, but one that could have resulted from Lukács' mix of Marx, Hegel, and Scott.

For the dichotomy in Lukács' mind between left and right interpretations of Hegel, which led him to the view that Hegel (and Marx) at their best were left centrists, was a perfect view not only for expressing his own political ethics at the time, but also for interpreting Scott as well, including the novels of early clan life and chivalry. The problem is that the practical politics of the time forced Lukács often in the *Historical Novel* to avoid ambiguity, and to lay down a left-centrist interpretation of both Scott and Balzac, which, he thought at the time, followed a straight line of left centrism in Hegel and Marx.<sup>15</sup> But the trichotomy between left, right and center in Hegel, Marx, Balzac, and Scott—particularly in Scott's premodern clan and chivalry novels—is much more complex—and fruitful—than that.

As for Scott, to anyone now reading James Hillhouse's account of Scott criticism—written in 1936 and thus contemporaneous with the *Historical Novel*—it should be clear that there was also such a split between left, center, and right interpreters of Scott.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the Scott critic whom Hillhouse portrays as one of the most significant in the early and mid-nineteenth century, William Hazlitt, although often critical of Scott because of what he saw as his conservatism, was also able to see a full range of imaginative political ethics in Scott, in a way that sometimes complements, and sometimes contradicts, Lukács' centrist-leftist approach, but which always shows the creative power of Scott's imaginative approach to political ethics.<sup>17</sup>

Although there is much evidence in Scott's novels to back up Hazlitt's characterization of him as a conservative, beyond the question of what kind of conservative he was, there is also a great deal beyond Lukács' favored Scott

novels of eighteenth-century highland clan exploitation and Jacobite revolt, to place Scott on the left. Indeed, since 9/11 I have been surprising and even shocking participants at political theory conferences with my thesis that Scott's literary defense of suspected "terrorists" in his novels about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scotland could well be a model for those heroic writers who gave their all to provide what Earle Stanly Gardner once called "A court of last resort," particularly for the vast number of Muslims, Arabs, and war party opponents who have been swept into custody without adequate due process. Scott's defense of liberal rights, even as he adopts conservative positions of one sort or other, is often found in the premodern clan and chivalry novels, and requires nuanced political, as well as aesthetic analysis.

Scott's "Introduction" to *Quentin Durward* made clear his admiration for the philosophical conservative, Edmund Burke, whereas I have been unable to find a parallel reference to philosophical liberal John Locke.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there are many reasons in Scott's *Tale of Old Mortality*, to think that its main character, Henry Morton, is not only associated with a Lockian defense of liberty rights and toleration, but imaginatively there is some reason to believe that he represents a Scottish version of Locke, in action during the Scottish civil wars of the seventeenth century. The same liberalism—and even radicalism—is often intermingled with specific conservative virtues in the premodern novels.

One continuity between the various heroes in the premodern chivalry novels is what Lukács called the middle way of things.<sup>19</sup> Quentin Durward, Ivanhoe, Kenneth of the Crouching Leopard in *The Talisman*, and the Saxon Hereward and the non-Norman Frank, Count Robert, in *Count Robert of Paris*, all share this middle perspective, whereas there is no premodern clan leader that does, in either *A Legend of The Wars Montrose* or *The Fair Maid of Perth*. No such middle way hero ever gets even hinted at in the former, whereas in the latter the middle-class armorer, Henry Gow, symbolically becomes a clan leader when he joins the ranks in one of the clans in Scott's reconstruction of the historical battle/tournament between two clans in Perth in 1402.

The middle way hero espouses the value of tolerance. Insofar as Scott shows sympathy for the underdog, those against whom the forces of intolerance have been unleashed, even if Scott does not believe in their cause, Scott is, like Henry Morton in *The Tale of Old Mortality*, adopting a politics enunciated in Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Still, whereas Henry Morton's fight for toleration fits perfectly into Lukács' Marxist, popular front interpretation of Scott, the case is very different with Quentin Durward, Ivanhoe, and other heroes of the novels of premodern clan and chivalric-crusader life, all of which illustrate Hegelian, Lukácsian fusion, but politically combine liberal tolerance, leftist populism and specific conservative elements. The premodern novels are about clan members, knights, would be knights, and even anti knights, who are also often fighters for toleration within a context that could be labeled liberal, radical, and conservative.

Scott's ability to create living and vital characters was often in direct proportion to the kind of political character they have, and Scott was only able to believe deeply in political characters of the Henry Morton type, who take their Protestant apotheosis of individual conscience to depths of political integrity not open to other characters. The political reason for this is made clear above all by contrasting Henry Morton, liberal hero of *The Tale of Old Mortality*, with any of the heroes of the promodern novels. Henry Morton possesses the precondition for imaginative vitality in a Scott novel, because he shares Scott's belief in the explicit tolerance goals of The Glorious Revolution; and Scott is thus capable of presenting Morton's political fusions in an imaginatively successful way. Yet, analogues to Morton appear in all the novels of premodern clans and chivalry, other than *A Legend of The Wars of Montrose*, set in the seventeenth century but dealing with a clan life which is clearly premodern, in contrast to the clan life of *Waverly*, and *Rob Roy*. Quite simply, the vital political fusion found in *The Tale of Old Mortality* is not found in the same way in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, and the chivalry novels, because no one in these novels is depicted as possessing political beliefs that Scott can share in as direct a political sense that he shared Morton's views. But that does not mean there is no toleration or aesthetic fusion in these novels. It only means that we need a more complex political ethics and imagination aesthetics to unlock the fusion. It is a different, more conservative, kind of fusion, and, looked at from Scott's perspective, more Burkian than Lockian, and from a Lukácsian perspective, more Hegelian than Marxist.

The historical antagonists that dominate the depiction in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* of struggles between Highland clan Scottish Presbyterians and Highland clan Royalists in the mid-1640s, are depicted often as cold, calculating, and opportunistic. The Duke of Argyle, representing the minority Presbyterians in the Highlands, runs away, leaving his men to fight the decisive battle that ends the novel with the never to be doubted victory of the Marquis of Montrose, representing the royalists, the side most popular with the highland clans, then and in the eighteenth century. But Montrose himself is depicted only as a skillful general and diplomat, and Scott emphasizes that Montrose had switched his allegiance from the Presbyterian cause to the Royalist cause, apparently without, however, believing very much in either as a matter of principle.

Yet, there is another kind of fusion in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* that exemplifies to perfection Lukács' observation that Scott is the populist poet of the soldier and the outlaw.<sup>20</sup> For, just as Morton's real political fusion is defined in part by who he actually rides with, so too the real political ethics of *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* are defined by the strange trail taken by the heroic highland clan outlaw, Rainald of the children of the mist, and the valiant but mercenary soldier, Major Dugald Dalgetty. As the great early Scott critic William Hazlitt pointed out long ago, the baying of the bloodhound, as the highland fighters for the Presbyterian cause chase those two most maverick of

Royalists, Rainald and Dugald, into the Highland mist where Rainald's clan of the children of the mist thrive, is one of the key dramatic moments in Scott.<sup>21</sup> But Rainald's and Dugald's struggle represents no particular cause that Scott can join in on directly, and thus no cause that he can imaginatively create a political ethics around in the same discursive way that he does in *The Tale of Old Mortality*. The fusion is of a different sort, what Scott would call Burkian and what Lukács would call Hegelian. Of course, a deconstructionist might read the novel, and claim that in it all vaunted political beliefs are deconstructed, because the heroes, Rainald the outlaw and Dugald the soldier, do not have political beliefs, in any conventional sense, and certainly identify with neither the Presbyterian nor the royalist cause.

That would be wrong. The honor of mercenary soldier, Dugald, extending even to his treatment of his horse, Gustavus Adolphus, and the belief of the Outlaw, Rainald, in the solidarity of his outlaw clan, in the end allow Scott the poet and follower of Burke to dramatically depict a fusion with a cause that he increasingly came to embrace in the next decade of his historical novels: the cause of political honor and chivalry, the cause of the middle class armorer, Henry Gow, in *The Fair Maid of Perth*, when he fuses with a highland clan, of the fifteenth-century Scottish Knight, Quentin Durward, of the crusaders: the twelfth-century Saxon Knight, Wilfred of Ivanhoe, and of the Scottish Knight of the Crouching Leopard in the first *Ivanhoe* prequel, *The Talisman*, and Hereward and Count Robert the Saxon, and non-Norman French heroes of *Count Robert of Paris*, the second prequel to *Ivanhoe*.

Nothing shows the integration of clan and chivalrous ethical ideals more clearly than *The Fair Maid of Perth*. The paradox however, is that the integration of the two ideals comes about solely through the actions of the central character, Henry Gow, who is firmly rooted in the life of the rising middle class of Perth in 1402. His greatest friendship is with the middle class merchant father of *The Fair Maid of Perth*, although she is admired by a member of the royal family and by the leader of one of the two clans who fight in a tournament at the end of the novel. Henry's completely solid relation with her and her father symbolizes the actuality of his steadfastness. He remains a middle class armorer, even though he fights like a chivalric knight—wearing his own armor—when he joins one of the clans in the historic tournament between two clans in 1402.

This is a novel that takes fusion as its central theme, and in doing so shows Scott's interest in uniting the values of middle class, clan and chivalrous life, while certainly tilting toward the latter, and its knightly glory. The figure of Henry Gow thus leads us to the concept of republican knights, as a way of transforming the weaknesses in Lukács' account of Scott's novels of chivalry into a fully nuanced aesthetics based on a Burkean-Hegelian political ethics of a chivalry that also has its Marxist and liberal side—and an aesthetics that explains both how Scott's premodern novels attain fusion and how they do not.

Scott's 1831 "Introduction" to *Quentin Durward* contains one of his most profound accounts of chivalry. The fifteenth-century Scottish knight, Quentin Durward, wanders through the France of Louis XI as part of a Scottish guard protecting the King. As Scott makes clear in his "Introduction," Louis XI represents for him the antithesis of public spirited service represented by Quentin Durward and his fellow Scottish guards. Scott in *Quentin Durward* found hanging to be one of the best symbols of the France of Louis XI.<sup>22</sup>

It is Scott's "Introduction" to *Quentin Durward* that truly makes the case for his view of the deep political ethics that can be associated with the ideas of chivalry and knighthood. Scott's emphasis is on the royal figure who dominates the book, in this case Louis the Eleventh of France, and his contrast with the chivalry of the Scottish knights. In understanding this strategic contrast, it is important to emphasize that *Quentin Durward* starts a third path in Scott's historical novels, after the opening salvo (1814–20) of his nine novels of Scotland, including *The Tale of Old Mortality*, and *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, and concluding with Scott's tenth historical novel, and his first not dealing with Scotland, *Ivanhoe*; and the second stream (1820–22) of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century adventure fiction. *Quentin Durward* like most of the novels of the third stream (1823–31) moves into the past. As such, they are like Scott's third stream novels of the crusades, as well as *The Fair Maid of Perth*.

For many critics these third stream novels represent simply a continuation of the second stream of adventure fiction, and a decline from the first stream novels of serious historical fiction about Scotland. My view is that the political ethics of the theme of chivalry, and also its relation to clan life that unites at least some third stream novels with *Ivanhoe*, represents an important political, ethical depiction of Lukácsian fusion, even though these novels never attain the emotional, imaginative, aesthetic fusion of *The Tale of Old Mortality*.

Quentin Durward and the other Scottish guards for Louis the Eleventh represent a political ethic of chivalric opposition to the corrupt and tyrannical King Louis. The "Introduction" to *Quentin Durward* concentrates above all on the inadequacy of the king whom Quentin serves. Louis' problem is above all, not only an absolute lack of chivalry, but also a desire to destroy chivalry; and Scott's attack on Louis and those who resemble him makes clear that the spirit of chivalry is tied to public spirited political virtue, and the quest for liberty and toleration, just as Scott also throughout echoes Montesquieu's scorn of monarchs without republican public spirited virtue. As the spirit of chivalry fades, the political scene becomes dominated by "those grosser characters who centered their sum of happiness in procuring those personal objects on which they had fixed their own exclusive attachment. The same egoism had indeed displayed itself even in more primitive ages, but it was now for the first time openly avowed as a professed basis of action. The spirit of chivalry had in it this point of excellence, that, however unrestrained and fantastic many of its doctrines may appear to us, they were all founded on generosity and self-denial of which, if the earth were derived, it would be difficult to conceive of the existence of virtue among the human race."<sup>23</sup>

Although Scott's "Introduction" to *Quentin Durward* is an absolutely key document for understanding the deep ethical commitment associated with his historical novels, nevertheless two aspects of the novel prevent it from achieving much aesthetic fusion. First, the role assigned to Quentin and his uncle—of Scottish guards of King Louis, and thus outsiders in fifteenth-century France—militates from the start against their having the kind of varied connections with other people in France that would allow the kind of rich, complex, and contradictory fusions that animate the more living characters in *Ivanhoe*. It is only the one quality—their chivalry—versus Louis's corruption, that emerges, and that quality is too static to make Quentin fuse imaginatively in a rich and complex way. Second, *Quentin Durward* depicts an individual, Durward, who is committed to a premodern way of life—chivalry—that he, unlike *Ivanhoe*, knows is disappearing. His political virtue exposes the corruption of the monarch that he serves, Louis the Eleventh, at the same time exposing the failures of the modern world. But Quentin Durward remains too much outside the world he lives in to achieve anything like the complex fusion found in *Ivanhoe*.

*Ivanhoe*, which appeared three years before *Quentin Durward*, in 1820, is Scott's first novel not dealing with Scotland, and the last of what clearly is an identifiable first stream of novels written between 1814 and 1820. It is far from being as different imaginatively and politically from the first nine Scottish novels as it is often held to be. It arises directly out of them, and has a special relationship to Scott's only novels of the seventeenth century that appeared in the first stream, namely, *The Tale of Old Mortality*, and the clan novel of the seventeenth century, *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* (1819). It is true, however, that the political links between Scott's novels of early clan life, and his novels of knighthood and chivalry only give up its secret when Scott's political imagination, as opposed to simply his discursive political ethics, is deciphered.

*Ivanhoe* is a novel where public spirited quest for liberty and toleration finds its greatest outlet in a combined struggle, in which the oppression of Saxons and Jews is opposed by the search for tolerance of the Saxons Robin Hood and *Ivanhoe*, the Norman Richard the Lionhearted, and the Jewish Rebecca.<sup>24</sup> When Scott published *Ivanhoe* in 1820 he had already published nine novels of Scotland, including two novels of the seventeenth century, *The Tale of Old Mortality* and *A Legend of The Wars of Montrose*, and such key novels set in the period of eighteenth-century highland clan revolt as *Waverly* and *Rob Roy*. Scott's 1830 "Introduction" helps us see *Ivanhoe* as thematically the culmination of the liberty rights and toleration seeking themes of his Scottish novels. Scott presents an almost mythic picture. He emphasizes the virtues of the Saxons and Normans in the England of 1194, right after the Third Crusade: for the Saxons, "the plain, homely, blunt manners, and the free spirit infused by their ancient institutions and laws"; for the Normans the "high spirit of military fame, personal adventure, and whatever could distinguish them as the flower of Chivalry."<sup>25</sup> In the history of political ethics this same opposition is often made between the simple, plain, and populist virtues of the people versus aristocratic virtues.<sup>26</sup> The novel itself, but not the "Introduction," makes clear that various

Saxons and various Normans exemplify these virtues in various ways, with *Ivanhoe* himself somewhere between the two. Significantly, the “Introduction” does conclude with the attribution of a more general set of political virtues, namely, the values of “self-denial and the sacrifice of passion to principle,” to Rebecca, the Jewish woman who aids and is aided by the Saxons and their Norman ally, Richard the Lion Hearted.<sup>27</sup> *Ivanhoe* retains a singular position among Scott’s historical novels. In assessing the aesthetic and imaginative quality of its depiction of political-ethical fusion, its chronological place as the ending point of Scott’s most important series of historical novels about Scotland must be emphasized. Its theme of extending toleration links *Ivanhoe* most obviously with *The Tale of Old Mortality*. Yet, the problem must be faced that *Ivanhoe* himself often lacks realism and complexity of imaginative fusion when compared with Henry Morton. Still, overall, *Ivanhoe* does achieve imaginative fusion. The reason is that *Ivanhoe* does not depend ethically or aesthetically on the complex fusion of one single character or even two, but rather depends on the fusion together of all the major fighters for toleration in the novel: *Ivanhoe*, Richard the Lion Hearted, Robin Hood, Rebecca, even Cedric, *Ivanhoe*’s rather stereotyped father. Ethically fused together in *Ivanhoe*, these characters as a symbolic group demonstrate an aesthetic fusion.

Like *Ivanhoe*, Scott’s two later novels of Knighthood and European chivalry in the crusades that can be regarded as prequels to *Ivanhoe*, *The Talisman*, and *Count Robert of Paris*, also gain from their clear insertion into the political ethics of a search for liberty and toleration, as well as a Lukácsian Marxist, popular front immersion in democratic popular life. At the same time, in these novels a Burkian ethics emerges that is best unlocked by emphasizing the Hegelian elements in Lukács’ account.

Those familiar with Lukács’ popular front Marxism, and with some passing familiarity with *Ivanhoe* or even *Quentin Durward*, but who at the most have only heard of Scott’s two novels taking place entirely in the crusades, *The Talisman* in the Third Crusade, and *Count Robert of Paris* in the First Crusade, may be skeptical about how they could be analyzed in anything even resembling Lukácsian terms. They may say that even my revitalizing of the Hegelian elements in Lukács’ aesthetics and political ethics may not help the matter. Even Burke, they may say, may not help the matter, and they may point to Lukács’ refusal to deal with them, and of their rejection as art, even by critics who appreciate Scott’s artistry.

Yet these two prequels to *Ivanhoe* are actually very susceptible to Lukács’ Hegelian analysis, because their theme is the attempt to make up for losing one’s *Sittlichkeit*—by reestablishing it in a foreign land: Palestine for the Scottish Knight of the Crouching Leopard in *The Talisman*, Constantinople for the Saxon exile, Hereward, and the non-Norman Frank, Count Robert, in *Count Robert of Paris*.

Almost destroyed by the treachery of some of the European crusaders, Kenneth, the Scottish Knight of the Crouching Leopard, manages to create his

own *Sittlichkeit* in Palestine in 1192 in the Third Crusade, by helping to achieve peace between Saladin and Richard The Lionhearted. Similarly, in 1196–97 in the First Crusade, Hereward, the Saxon exiled by the Norman conquest, manages to secure the successful exit of the Crusaders out of Constantinople, ultimately going himself to fight in Palestine with the man who at first he regards as his bitter enemy, Count Robert—not the historical Norman Robert who also fought in the First Crusade, but the historical Count Robert of Paris, a non-Norman Frank whom Hereward originally assimilated to his Norman enemies. Kenneth of the Crouching Leopard, Hereward and to a lesser degree, Count Robert, are depicted as isolated figures, who manage to succeed precisely because they create in Palestine and Constantinople a new version of their native *Sittlichkeiten* of Scotland, Saxon England, and Non-Norman France. In this new *Sittlichkeit* they can exercise their chivalry and tolerance within a context that both Scott and his teacher, Burke, and Lukács and his teacher, Hegel, could accept as a recreated ethical tradition or *Sittlichkeit*.

I now want to show how my account of the premodern novels follows Lukács, but reconceptualizes his account, in so far as it corrects his failure to follow out his own Hegelian principles, principles that are particularly relevant for the premodern novels, and also help unlock Scott's Burckianism in those novels. When we look at key statements of Lukács' view of the overlap between aesthetics and ethical philosophy of history and politics, and extricate them from a narrowness that crept into them from his popular front Marxism, we find that the premodern novels do fit a revitalized Lukácsian, Hegelian, Marxist aesthetics. But almost always either the aesthetics, or ethical philosophy of history, or the overlap itself, display a Hegelianism which takes on a very special form when applied to the premodern novels. The deeper meaning and even a better English translation of Lukács' German original emerges when the popular front Marxist interpretation is supplemented by, and sometimes even contrasted with, the Hegelian meaning, particularly when it is a question of Lukács' understanding of Scott's premodern novels.

First, Lukács' principle of the "derivation of the particularity of the individual from the specificity of the historical form," clearly refers both to his ethical philosophy of history and politics, and to the aesthetics that he wants to apply to Scott's novels.<sup>28</sup> This is a general principle, which must be understood in the light of Lukács' reconstruction of Hegel's ethics of *Sittlichkeit* in *The Young Hegel* and *The Historical Novel* and is not applicable only to his popular front Marxism. But this principle works differently as it is applied to a modern hero like Henry Morton, on the one hand, and to the protagonists of the early clan and chivalry and crusader novels, on the other. It applies equally well to both cases, but different analyses are required about how it works.

Again, a key issue is fusion. The fusion of a character with a social practice only happens in any strong form when there is "derivation of the particularity of the individual from the specificity of the historical form." The modern hero, Henry Morton, fuses with so many different approaches to the struggle



for religious liberty and toleration, and so many of them are in conflict, that an extreme vitality emerges in his character. But the outlaw clan member, Rainald, in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, only fuses with the solidarity of clan life, although in respect to honor he may be said to fuse with the mercenary soldier, Dugald. Both characters are also illuminated by contrast with the cynical leaders of both of the opposing clans. Henry Gow, in *The Fair Maid of Perth*, has a certain amount of vitality, because of his fusion with the opposed *Sittlichkeiten* of clan, middle class, and knightly life. He is certainly contrasted with members of both of the clans that fought in 1402, and particularly to the young leader of one of the clans, who cannot be seen to share in the heroism of his clan, and is revealed as a coward.<sup>29</sup> This clan leader is thus in complete contrast with Henry Gow, who manages to fuse with knightly, clan, and middle class ideals simultaneously, although not always without conflict. Indeed, it is the conflict in Henry Gow's fusions that makes him a relatively vital character.

Quentin Durward fuses only with his comrade Scottish guards, and never manages to fuse with popular life. This does not mean that the novel presents no Lukácsian "derivation of the particularity of the individual from the specificity of the historical form." But the derivation of particularity from social form here has to do not just with the historical situation of his age, but also with Quentin Durward's particular relation, as a Scottish Knight, with France. *Ivanhoe*, in contrast, is integrated into his age by his alliance with those fighting for liberty and tolerance in his own country, England. He, therefore, resonates throughout, as Lukács realized, with popular life, and this is revealed exactly in the doubling effect of the parallel characters, *Ivanhoe* and *Robin Hood*.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, in the two prequels to *Ivanhoe*, *The Talisman's* Knight of the Crouching Leopard, and *Count Robert's* Robert and Hereward, all display a different version of Lukács' "derivation of the particularity of the individual from the specificity of the historical form," having to do with the replication of the social form of their own country, Scotland, non Norman France, and Saxon England, respectively, in a foreign country, the country in which they are crusading. Palestine for the Scotsman Kenneth of the Crouching Leopard, or on the way to crusade in—Palestine—or stuck in—Constantinople—for Count Robert—or in exile in Constantinople for Hereward until at the end he too sets off for Palestine.

In going from Scott's modern to his premodern novels a similar problem arises in applying Lukács' concept of necessity and individuality, and its relation to historical faithfulness.<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, one of his prime examples is one of our novels that I have called premodern in its treatment of the clans, but since it takes place in the seventeenth century, *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* can also be called modern; and what is striking about Lukács' analysis is precisely the aspects of it that do not fit the worldview of Scott's whole premodern enterprise. Lukács is careful not to fall too heavily into a completely necessitarian type of Marxist interpretation; his mixture of Hegelian and popular front ideas stops that. Nevertheless, once we get beyond the nuanced balancing act in Lukács' language—between complete necessity and complete free floating

voluntarism—the hard facts of historical necessity dominate Lukács' interpretation of the story of the smuggle between the clan supporters of king and the clan supporters of parliament.

This is made clear by Lukács' concentration on the iron cage of clan ideology—wanting to fight each other more than joining in the struggle between King and parliament—that prevents the royalist Montrose from bringing his clans into England to strike at the parliamentary cause there. Lukács' praise is for Scott's historical faithfulness in depicting Montrose's failure—a failure Lukács sees based on historical necessity. Lukács says nothing about what I have emphasized: the mystic and poetic honor of the outlaw Rainald, and its strange affinity with the soldierly honor of the mercenary Dugald, an honor that presents a counter point to the cynicism of both clan leaders. There is little doubt that Lukács' failure to deal fully with the chivalry ideal in novels that he analyzes—*The Fair Maid of Perth*, *Quentin Durward*, and *Ivanhoe*, and those that he does not even bother with—*the Talisman* and *Count Robert of Paris*—stems from his realization that they are less concerned with historical necessity than the Scott novels he likes most. Yet, many of the apparently free floating choices of heroes like Henry Gow, the Knight of the Crouching Leopard, Hereward and Count Robert, operate within a historical necessity of its own that must be interpreted and depicted differently than as found in the modern novels. Scott's premodern novels are about a man—Henry Gow—who is able through his own ideal to meld clan middle class and knightly life; and about knightly heroes who must replicate the *Sittlichkeit* of their own country in a foreign land: France, Palestine, and Constantinople.

Similar problems arise in applying to the premodern novels Lukács' concept of how the heroes of historical novels enter into mass experience; how they experience nationhood; and how they are depicted through the Hegelian ideal of the transformation of quantity into quality. The prime example that Lukács uses to illustrate these principles is the French Revolution. He also applies these principles to *Waverly* and other of Scott's eighteenth-century novels, and in a much more perfunctory way to *Ivanhoe*, *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, and *The Fair Maid of Perth*.<sup>32</sup> Once these principles are understood, both in themselves and in their interaction with each other, it is relatively easy to apply them to the promodern novels. All these principles, of course, simply express in different ways Lukács' application of the Hegelian concept of immersion in *Sittlichkeit* to historical novels. It is also quite clear that these principles help us decipher Scott's Burkianism in his historical novels. This is not surprising, since over and over we have seen that Scott's Burkianian traditionalism—which comes more to the fore with the premodern novels—fits in perfectly with Lukács' centrist interpretation of Hegel—and Marx—in “Moses Hess.” If individuality is often subordinated to mass experience, this is very well illustrated by the kind of clan solidarity that Lukács was actually critical of in his account of in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, but supportive of in his account of *Waverly*. But, as we have seen, he ignored the times in *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* when clan

members escaped from this type of necessity. We can now add that Lukács also ignored similar elements of rising above historical necessity in *The Fair Maid of Perth*. Even more significantly, Lukács never talks about one of the major themes of *Quentin Durward* and the prequels to *Ivanhoe*, and ignored it when it appears in *Ivanhoe*: the theme of the recreation of a mass experience that the hero has lost, precisely because he is not in his native *Sittlichkeit*, and must recreate it in a different form, as Durward, Kenneth of the Crouching Leopard, Hereward and Count Robert of Paris all must.

These premodern heroes cannot have the same mass experience of nationhood that Lukács found in *Waverly*, and in the period of the French revolution, because the heroes of these premodern novels have lost their country and their native Lukácsian *Sittlichkeit* and Burkian tradition. They cannot watch as social relations slowly change from one *Sittlichkeit* in their country to another, so that ultimately there is a transformation of quantity into quality, and they can fully experience a new *Sittlichkeit*, a new mass experience, a new type of nationhood. Quentin Durward, The Knight of the Crouching Leopard, Hereward, and Count Robert are dumped into a new country, where they must construct a new *Sittlichkeit*, that resembles the one they are exiled from. They must recreate this *Sittlichkeit* entirely through their knightly honor—a knightly honor that in Scott’s novels strongly resembles Henry Morton’s liberty and toleration search. They are republican knights who must create their own republic.

Following some of Scott’s most hostile critics Lukács has very little to say about the premodern novels dealing with knights outside their own country—a situation that in fact completely dominates *Quentin Durward* and the prequels to *Ivanhoe*. Yet, the lives that Durward finds in France, the Scottish Knight of the Crouching Leopard finds in Palestine, and Hereward and Count Robert find in Constantinople on their way to Palestine, represent a variation on the theme of Hegelian, Lukácsian immersion in *Sittlichkeit*. It is because the heroes of these novels are not at home that there is a different way of looking at the relation between historical necessity and individuality, that they enter mass experience and nationhood differently, and that the transformation of quality into quality works differently.

These differences lead to a different way of fusing as well. The problem is not that the chivalry heroes do not fuse with a social form, or even with a complex variety of social forms, but that no matter how varied the fusion, it does not create as believable a conviction as we find in Henry Morton. But Lukács should not have let that stop him from paying attention to these late chivalry/crusader novels. After all, he was willing to spend much time on an equally non-vital immersion in clan life on the part of *Waverly*.

The whole problem with the prequels to *Ivanhoe* is that, even though the Lukácsian “derivation of the particularity of the individual from the specificity of the historical form” is clearly present in them, Scott cannot share in the beliefs of their heroes as much as he does with Henry Morton’s. But the

prequels to *Ivanhoe* should not have been ignored by Lukács or anyone else for that reason. In fact, the fusion resulting from the “derivation of the particularity of the individual from the specificity of the historical form” simply has an entirely different character in the prequels to *Ivanhoe* than in Scott’s more modern novels. Scott did not believe in the crusades any more than he believed in the Jacobite revolt. Indeed, almost certainly he believed in them a lot less.

Proof of this abounds in both *Ivanhoe* prequels, with such key evidence as Scott’s admiration for Saladin, and occasional preference for him over the crusaders in *The Talisman*, and his clear endorsement of aspects of Alexius’ view of crusader folly in *Count Robert of Paris*.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Scott believed in Henry Morton’s specific search for liberty and toleration, against the background of the coming of The Glorious Revolution, in *The Tale of Old Mortality*. But whereas the only way Scott could deal with his doubts about Waverly’s entrance into the Jacobite cause was to make him falter in that cause, Kenneth of the Crouching Leopard, Hereward and Count Robert never falter, because they come to fuse with something that is beyond Palestine, beyond Constantinople and far beyond the crusades: the honor on Western knighthood, which bears a curious similarity to Henry Morton’s toleration and liberty cause. This also explains why Saladin and his Saracens come off so well in *The Talisman*, whereas the Greek citizens and rulers of Constantinople, with the exception of Anna Comnenus, the historian daughter of the emperor Alexius, come off so badly in *Count Robert of Paris*. Saladin is depicted as a firm believer in both chivalry and honor, and Alexius, and most of the other residents of Constantinople, are not.<sup>34</sup>

So the premodern novels can fit into a revitalization and reconceptualization of the basic principles of Lukács’ *Historical Novel*. But on this interpretation do we still have Lukács’ popular front populism and Marxist class theory? I think so, because Lukács himself wrote against the reductive class interpretation of Scott, at the same time proclaiming Scott as the poet of peasant and outlaw.<sup>35</sup> This nuanced class and populist interpretation of Scott dominates *The Historical Novel*, and shows that Lukács was very wary of too crude a reduction of Scott’s novels to class and populism issues.<sup>36</sup> For Lukács in *The Historical Novel* the heroes of his favored Scott novels exhibited “revolutionary patriotism.”<sup>37</sup> This is a concept that can easily be applied to Henry Morton and *Ivanhoe*. It may be lacking from *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, but if my analysis is correct, it applies strongly to Henry Gow, Quentin Durward, the Knight of Crouching Leopard, Hereward and Count Robert of Paris. All these republican knights or would-be knights are witting or unwitting populists in their revolutionary patriotic efforts to restore or recreate liberty and toleration—often as a *Sittlichkeit* that they have lost—while in exile in a foreign land.

Fusion in the premodern clan and chivalry novels exemplifies some general truths about aesthetic-imaginative fusion and its relation to the political imagination. In great historical narratives the heroes are identified with a political cause, or ethical task, and the relation between them and the cause

or task helps give imaginative aesthetic structure of the novel. Ethical interpretation based on the broad framework of immersion in political ethical tasks which can wrench the individual out of obsession with their private concerns, allows a balance between modernistic individualism and Lukács' emphasis on the immersion of the individual in history. Lukács' *Historical Novel* possessed a general Hegelian ethical and aesthetic core, and a left leaning, Marxist populist ethical-political core, and the struggle between these two elements is what makes his theory of the political imagination fruitful—for Scott and historical novels in general. Scott's novels of early clan life and of European chivalry represent a cleavage between a left leaning populism and a more conservative Burkian and Hegelian immersion in tradition. But the question of who his greatest creations are from the standpoint of aesthetic and imaginative vitality, transcends this dichotomy, and shows that Scott's greatest heroes are the ones, conservative, liberal, or radical, or some combination of these qualities, who achieve the most complex fusion with the political and ethical tasks of their historical epoch. As the examples of Dugald and Rainald, Henry Gow, Quentin Durward, Ivanhoe, the Knight of the Crouching Leopard and Hereward and Count Robert, all show, Scott's most vital characters take on political and ethical tasks not only for premodern times, but also for our time.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács, *Der Historische Roman* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1955); *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
- <sup>2</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: "Introduction"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- <sup>3</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 33, 53–54, 54–65, 288–293, 340; Walter Scott *Ivanhoe*, ed. A. N. Wilson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986); James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (New York: Penguin, 1986); Lion Feuchtwanger, *Josephus: Roman-Trilogie* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, 1952); Heinrich Mann, *Young Henry of Navarre* (New York: Knopf, 1937); *King Henry of France* (New York: Knopf, 1939); George Thomson *Aeschylus and Athens* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941).
- <sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel* (London: Merlin, 1975, 53–67, 46–47, 146–167; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- <sup>5</sup> Norman Fischer, "Historical Fiction as Oppositional Discourse: A Retrieval of Georg Lukács' Popular Front Revival of Walter Scott's Historical Novels" (*Atlantic Journal of Communication*, vol. 15, No 1, 2007), 161–177; Walter Scott, *Waverley*, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); *Rob Roy*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2008); *The Heart of Midlothian*, ed. David Hewitt and Allison Lumsden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); *Redgauntlet*, ed. G. A. M. Wood with David Hewitt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); *The Tale of Old Mortality*, ed. Douglas S. Mack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999).

- <sup>6</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 34–37.
- <sup>7</sup> Walter Scott, *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, ed. J. H. Alexander (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1995); *The Fair Maid of Perth*, ed. A. D. Hook and Donald Mackenzie (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1999).
- <sup>8</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 58–60.
- <sup>9</sup> Walter Scott, *Quentin Durward* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1923); *The Talisman*, illustrated by Simon Harmon Vedder. London: T.C And E. C. Jack, n.d); *Count Robert of Paris*, ed. J. H. Alexander (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2006).
- <sup>10</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 49.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.
- <sup>12</sup> Georg Lukács, *Balzac und der Französische Realismus* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1952), *Historical Novel*, Young Hegel.
- <sup>13</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: M. I. T. Press, 1971).
- <sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács, “Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics,” In *Tactics and Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
- <sup>15</sup> Lukács, *Balzac*, 5–18.
- <sup>16</sup> James Hillhouse, *The Waverly Novels and their Critics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1936), 125–141.
- <sup>17</sup> William Hazlitt, “Walter Scott” in “The Spirit of the Age,” in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 11 (London: J. N Dent, 1932), 60–64; “Sir Walter Scott, Racine and Shakespeare,” in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 12 (London: J. N Dent, 1931).
- <sup>18</sup> Scott, *Quentin Durward*, 8; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986); John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. And with an Introduction by James Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983); “Second Treatise,” in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: New American Library, 1965).
- <sup>19</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 36–37.
- <sup>20</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 48.
- <sup>21</sup> Hazlitt, “Walter Scott,” 64.
- <sup>22</sup> Scott, *Quentin Durward*, 5; see also 81, 92–93, 160.
- <sup>23</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 25–27; Scott, *Quentin Durward*, 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 383–393.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.
- <sup>26</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 21–30.
- <sup>27</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 545.
- <sup>28</sup> Lukács, *Der Historische Roman*, 11, my translation; *Historical Novel*, 19.
- <sup>29</sup> Scot, *Fair Maid of Perth*, 385.
- <sup>30</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 49.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–60.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 25, 28.
- <sup>33</sup> Scott, “Introduction” to *The Talisman*. Xii, *The Talisman*, 9–10, 23.
- <sup>34</sup> Scott, “Introduction” to *The Talisman*. Xii, *The Talisman*, 9–10, 23, *Count Robert of Paris*, 4, 27.
- <sup>35</sup> Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 48.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

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## Part III

# Perspectives on Critical Theory



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## Chapter 9

# Back to History? Reinterpreting Lukács’ Early Marxist Work in Light of the Antinomies of Contemporary Critical Theory

Konstantinos Kavoulakos

“Another world is possible” assert the advocates of contemporary “antiglobalization” movements or, according to a different version, of “alterglobalization” movements. Yet this “possibility” sounds uncertain and abstract enough. To begin with, the *content* of this “other world” remains as yet indeterminate: Will it be related to “socialism” or “direct democracy”, “anarchism,” “communism,” “ecology,” or a blend of all of them? And it is not enough to decide only *what* we want. We are interested in *the ways* this could be realized; we want to learn more about the *concrete historical possibility* of this “other world.” However, it is particularly this last question about the historical possibility of a free humanity that contradicts the intuitions of a diffuse postmodern consciousness, which is convinced of the “end of grand narratives.”

Although the critique of historico-philosophical reflection has been historically indispensable for the distancing of leftist thought from dogmatic Marxism, our present inability to take up again the problem of the knowledge of history in terms other than those of post-history and deconstruction entails negative, mainly, implications for critical thought and action. Because, imbued as they are with the historicist spirit of “multiculturalism,” they dismiss any other universality beyond the universality of difference. They are forced thus to translate urgent substantive demands (e.g., for social justice, ecological safety, protection of local communities etc.) into the vocabulary of human rights. In this way, however, they lose sight of the wider social dimensions of these problems and they get trapped within the frame of the dominant neo-liberal discourse, unable to truly think any other world beyond the given one. In light of this failure, is it a pure coincidence that, in order to cover this deficiency, some groups and organizations in contemporary protest movements tend to resort to post-modern caricatures of the good old “Marxist-Leninist” orthodoxy?

I believe that we could come up with more reliable solutions. In my contribution I will discuss initially the communicative critical theory that has been

largely dominant until the end of the '90s, trying to flesh out its dilemmas around the problem of the relationship between universal values and social-historical reality (section 1). As a Marxist neophyte, Lukács had similar dilemmas in mind, but the historico-philosophical solution he suggested (2) has been dismissed by contemporary critical theory as objectivist and metaphysical (3). Against this reading, I will undertake a different interpretation of Lukács' outlook on history, which might renew its appeal and help us to make the most of it so as to tackle the problems of contemporary critical theory (4 and 5).

## Antinomies of Formalism in Contemporary Critical Theory

When we hear people talking about "contemporary critical theory," our mind goes directly to the name of Jürgen Habermas. Indeed, in virtue of the great scope and the theoretical force of his work, Habermas has managed to bring up to date the questions of the so-called "old Frankfurt School," but also to renew its conceptual resources for addressing them. Beyond its scientific appeal, his theory has become thus highly influential in the wider public realm. It is impossible here, of course, to attempt a full reconstruction of communicative theory. I will focus only on the mature political philosophy which Habermas set out throughout the '90s, in order to bring out the fundamental antinomy that pervades it.

During the '70s, Habermas elaborated a grand project that would re-found critical social theory on the basis of "universal pragmatics" construed as the rational reconstruction of the universal and necessary conditions of communication.<sup>1</sup> From the latter he deduced the concept of communicative reason, which grounds his theory of the communicative rationalization of the lifeworld.<sup>2</sup> On the political level, the modern development that releases the emancipatory potential of communicative rationality assumes the form of the establishment of democratic institutions and procedures of political deliberation.<sup>3</sup>

According to Habermas, the contemporary demand for a rational grounding of legal rules in a process of free communication *makes visible the internal relationship between democracy and the basic principles of the rule of law*: "Each form of autonomy, the individual liberties of the subject of private law and the public autonomy of the citizen, makes the other form possible. This reciprocal relation is expressed by the idea that legal persons can be autonomous only insofar as they can understand themselves, in the exercise of their civic rights, as authors of just those rights which they are supposed to obey as addressees."<sup>4</sup> The human and political rights represent thus formal conditions of democratic lawmaking. The "system of rights" secures the *public autonomy* of citizens and, at the same time, their *private autonomy*, without which it would be impossible to freely participate in lawmaking processes.

This foundation of the rights and the principles of the democratic rule of law is supplemented with a theory of “deliberative politics,” according to which popular sovereignty is a permanent procedure which combines the formal institutions of deliberation (parliaments, committees, courts etc.) with a network of informal discourses which unfold within “civil society.” To this idea corresponds the image of a decentered, pluralistic society, which is no longer constituted exclusively around the state.<sup>5</sup> The radical democratic element of this political theory consists in the crucial role attributed to the “anarchic” communication of citizens, that is, to the “wild complex” of discourses carried out by a “weak public,” which possesses only the “soft” communicative power of arguments, besieging relentlessly with them the bastions of institutionalized politics.<sup>6</sup>

Habermas’ mature political theory is based thus on an application of the concept of communicative reason to the field of politics and law. Habermas had already drawn in his moral philosophy a clear distinction between universalizable *moral norms* and *values* or *conceptions of the good* (*good life*), which are tied up with a context-bound form of life and they are, consequently, relative. The task of the philosopher is reduced to a reconstruction of the necessary and universal presuppositions of the discursive validation of norms.<sup>7</sup> In an analogous fashion, in the field of political philosophy, the universality of theory requires an abstraction from all historically relative, empirical-contingent elements. In other words, it requires from political philosophers an attitude that Habermas calls “postmetaphysical abstention” from judgments on the content of the life of a community or an individual<sup>8</sup> and their self-limitation to reconstructing the formal terms of the democratic procedure.

Habermas’ normative theory breaks with positivist value-neutrality, revealing the normative core of the fundamental legal arrangements of a democratic rule of law. However, it is forced—like every formalist approach—to focus its attention on the *universal and transhistorical form* as distinct from the *particular and historically specific content*, which remains theoretically unintelligible as contingently “given.” The universal discourse principle of political procedures turns thus into an *abstract imperative* which is juxtaposed to *historical facticity*, while their harmonization is a desirable but, in any case, contingent fact which depends on “empirical factors.” The latter do not fall under the formal conditions of the democratic procedure and, therefore, they lie beyond the scope of post-metaphysical political philosophy.

For example, an “empirical” condition of a functioning democracy, which is mentioned by Habermas himself, is the existence of a developed liberal and democratic political culture that is able to integrate civil society.<sup>9</sup> Another “empirical precondition” is social justice, without which it is impossible for citizens to participate in democratic procedures on equal terms.<sup>10</sup> Two theorists who belong to the camp of habermasian communicative theory, Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth, sought to remedy these two fundamental deficiencies of the theory through their own interventions.

Albrecht Wellmer's intervention deals with the aforementioned problem of political culture within the frame of a *historical-hermeneutical* correction of Habermas' discourse theory. Wellmer's aim is to link the formal discourse principle with a concrete historical context by moving away from strict formalism toward a moderate historicism.<sup>11</sup> In this way, by adopting and adapting the Hegelian concept of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) to contemporary conditions, Wellmer places the system of individual rights in the wider context of modern *democratic ethical life*, that is, the context of modern values, habits, institutions, and practices that are tied up with the exercise of individual and collective freedom. The singular (and paradoxical) feature of democratic ethical life is that it *does not predetermine concretely the contents* of social life, but it sums up the institutional and evaluative terms of a procedure of democratic self-determination of society and a liberal tolerance of difference. Hence, the constitution of a liberal and democratic culture is inextricably interwoven with the radical critique of every dogmatism that would impose a concrete conception of the good life as the only one that is worthy of recognition.<sup>12</sup>

Although the *historicization* of liberal values and institutions in Western democracies seeks to rectify the formalism of the habermasian foundation, the central concept of the democratic ethical life is ultimately defined as quasi-“formalist.” It is not therefore a coincidence that Wellmer passes over quickly the question of the *establishment of social rights* in Western democracies, taking it to be “practically soluble,” and he refers only in passing to the need to “tame the destructive energies of capitalist economy.”<sup>13</sup> However, is it not the case that the perpetuation and the contemporary intensification of social inequalities create an *internal contradiction* in democratic ethical life? Is the social fragmentation caused by formalist freedom merely the “necessary price” for individual and collective freedom in modernity,<sup>14</sup> or is it also the deeper root of the strong trend that we experience today toward an effective eclipse of democratic participation and the negation of a substantial part of individual rights in the context of an authoritarian, formally democratic, neo-liberal “governance”? It is clear that Wellmer's hermeneutics of democratic culture does not suffice to analyze and comprehend this historical dynamic.

Through his theory, Axel Honneth, Habermas' successor in Frankfurt, endeavors, among other things, to address the second basic deficiency of the theory of deliberative democracy, the lack of any theoretical standards for social justice. Honneth saw clearly that—as opposed to the project of *The Theory of Communicative Action*—Habermas' mature procedural theory gives up the classical aspiration of modern social philosophy to locate and explain *social pathologies*, and entrusts the evaluation of axiological questions of the good life exclusively to the real procedures of social discourse.<sup>15</sup> To make up for this deficiency of habermasian formalism, Honneth turns to philosophical anthropology and, more particularly, to the concept of *recognition*.

Drawing on young Hegel's ideas, Honneth distinguishes three types of recognition:<sup>16</sup> "care," "moral respect," and "solidarity" or social "esteem." In its honnethian version, the "moral point of view" is wedded to the social enactment of all those attitudes which provide the three forms of recognition that condition personal and individual well-being.<sup>17</sup> In this way, next to "moral respect"—that corresponds to the recognition of liberal individual rights, which are accorded primacy in a Kantian way<sup>18</sup>—social "esteem" is established as an equally important component of the ethical-practical social totality, which is directly related to individual and collective self-realization through the participation of each in the achievement of a *common social good*. This warrants a *social right* of all members of society to take an equal part in social and economic life. This demand is reinforced by the identification of the realm of *social labor and cooperation* as the prepolitical source of social integration and solidarity, which are preconditions of every democratic political project.<sup>19</sup> Honneth reaches thus a unified conception of *political and social democracy*.

Of course, the anthropology of recognition does not aim either at dogmatically positing a particular ethical-practical totality as the sole right one. It opts rather for a "formal conception of ethical life."<sup>20</sup> The theory of recognition takes its phenomenological cues from experiences of "social disrespect," which threaten the integrity of social and political life. It refers thus to lived social practice and social "struggles for recognition" which develop spontaneously within society.<sup>21</sup> However, as soon as some "disrespected" subjects claim recognition, a debate opens up inevitably as to the *broader constitutive conditions* of the very positive identities which enjoy recognition in a particular society or those negative identities which are endorsed by the marginalized members of society. Honneth is of course aware of the fact that the demand for recognition may turn around morally unacceptable values or may mobilize morally unacceptable means.<sup>22</sup> It becomes clear, then, that the theorist needs a standard to appraise the moral quality of these values and of their means of realization.

It is obvious that the empirical-historicist appeal to the conventional values of a particular group or community does not suffice to provide an acceptable solution to this problem, since the "legitimate identities" evoked by agents may be an effect of political or economic coercion and ideological manipulation. Honneth's suggestion to check the potentially ideological character of "positive patterns" that are recognized by society on the basis of the correspondence, or lack thereof, between the symbolic and the material dimension of recognition<sup>23</sup> remains suspended in mid-air, since the constructionist approach that informs the theory of identities does not allow for such a distinction between "subjective" and "objective" elements. Beyond, thus, its tendency to yield to an abstract and ahistorical "ought" which obstructs our understanding of the present, a tendency inherent in any anthropological theory,<sup>24</sup> the theory of recognition fails to deal effectively with the crucial problem of the *critical evaluation of the concrete contents of a form of life*.<sup>25</sup>

## Philosophy of History as a Solution to the Antinomies of Formalism

So far we have seen that the basic shortcoming of Habermas' foundational strategy is its formalist orientation which detaches it from the social-historical totality and from urgent substantive demands, such as the demand for social justice. Neither Wellmer's nor Honneth's interventions, that have diagnosed this failure, manage ultimately to truly overcome formalism and to restore the lost unity between theory and practice. Communicative critical theory seems thus to have reached its limits.

Habermas' communicative theory was designed to provide a critical theory of welfare state. Therefore, in the '80s it was still able to provide alternative movements and civil society associations with conceptual resources that would allow them to formulate the demand to safeguard the autonomy of public spheres against the interventions of the state. However, this democratic-theoretical strategy is now clearly insufficient, as the dismantling of the welfare state and the dominance of the logic of the market put in danger the economic and social conditions of "autonomous public spheres."<sup>26</sup> Today, communicative theory seems to assume increasingly the role of the preacher who praises with passion the goods of "democratic culture" and "liberal cosmopolitanism," even though he knows that they do not belong after all to this world.

In view of the unchecked inroads of forces that seek to establish a global system of control and domination under a neo-liberal ideological mantle, it becomes—I believe—all the more obvious that the future of critical theory passes through the search for a nondogmatic way to break with the formalist dualism between "idea" and "reality," the ultimate goal being to reconnect theory with a promising political praxis. From this perspective, it is perhaps interesting to recall that—for all the immense difference of historical conditions—a similar overcoming of dualism had been the theoretical motivation behind Georg Lukács' turn to Marxism, at the end of 1918.

Already in his first Marxist essays, Lukács is on the lookout for a way to theoretically mediate between the "idea" and "sociological reality," turning his attention to the *dialectical-practical historical consciousness* of the working class.<sup>27</sup> In *History and Class Consciousness*<sup>28</sup> and especially in its chapter "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," Lukács formulates a critique of the modern phenomenon of reification,<sup>29</sup> treating "modern critical philosophy" as an intellectual expression of the latter.<sup>30</sup> He goes on to analyze the "antinomies of bourgeois thought," tracing them back to the fundamental disharmony between the universal form and the particular content of knowledge. Kant, the foremost thinker of the bourgeois age, describes this disharmony when he refers to our twofold weakness to reach an identity between thought and being: This concerns, on the one hand, the problem of the "thing in itself," the intelligible source of phenomena which is unknown to us,<sup>31</sup> and, on the other

hand, the problem of comprehending the totality of the objects of knowledge, the possibility of which is denied by Kant in the “Transcendental Dialectic” of his *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>32</sup> These two intertwined problems undermine the claim to universality which classical philosophy seeks nonetheless to uphold, getting tangled in an antinomy it is unable to resolve.<sup>33</sup>

Among the post-Kantian attempts to overcome the dualism between form and content we are particularly interested here in Fichte’s turn to the activity of the subject that “produces” the world, the turn to “productive” praxis that defines the original unity of subject and object: the former dualism should be understood as a derivative manifestation of this unity. By means of his radical turn to the praxis of the productive subject, Fichte takes a step that delves deeper into the problematic of the *intellectual genesis or production* of objectivity, a step however that did not go beyond the fundamental bourgeois way of thinking. Lukács shows that bourgeois thought is still unable to overcome the irrationality of the content in the primary field of human praxis, in *moral action*, which it is forced again to define formalistically, as the formal determination of an irrational content.<sup>34</sup> But, in this way, human agency becomes again prey to blind determining forces that it cannot control.<sup>35</sup>

To find a way out, Lukács turns to the dialectic of subject and object in Hegel. Here it becomes possible, in principle at least, to transcend the antinomies of bourgeois thought: Thought does not set out from the two opposite poles of the cognitive process, the subject and the object, but from the process that develops between them.<sup>36</sup> The subject is conceived now as the producer of the world, whose product it itself is, within the frame of a *historical process* of a continual emergence of new forms of mediation between subject and object, the so-called forms of objectivity. History becomes thus the central concept of a philosophical approach that turns decisively its attention to the apprehension of the content. This is achieved through the development of a logic of the concrete concept, by integrating the immediately given in the frame of a *concrete totality*. The conception of the concrete totality establishes thus a bridge between the subject and the object and enables the reconciliation of the antinomies between form and content, between intellectual and historical genesis, between “ought” and “is.”<sup>37</sup>

Undoubtedly, Lukács is at pains to distance himself from hegelian idealism, pointing out its contemplative character and its consequent inability to recognize the real subject-object of history. This weakness forces it to resort to the philosophical fiction of the “world spirit” or to the anti-dialectical thesis of an end of history which has already arrived.<sup>38</sup> Overwhelmed with revolutionary enthusiasm, Lukács believes that he is able to remedy this shortcoming in Hegel by drawing on Marx’s resources. He proclaims unequivocally that “the dialectical method as the true historical method was reserved for the class which was able to discover within itself on the basis of its life-experience the identical subject-object, the subject of action; the ‘we’ of the genesis: namely the proletariat,”<sup>39</sup> and he attempts to defend this thesis through a series of



arguments about the development of class consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Although Lukács seems to open thus a way beyond the antinomies of formalism, his solution has come in for heavy criticism from the standpoint of communicative critical theory, among others.

### Critical Reservations about Lukács' Solution

While Wellmer and Honneth resort to Hegel in order to find conceptual ways out of Habermas' formalism, neither of them refers positively to this central dimension of Hegel's work, the philosophy of world history; this alone shows how self-evident it is for the exponents of communicative theory that the philosophy of history is no longer an option. There are, of course, various reasons for this dismissal.

In the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas reconstructs the lukácsian theory of the phenomenon of reification and examines Lukács' suggestion for a possible overcoming of it. On Habermas' conventional interpretation, Lukács uses Hegel's dialectical logic in order to restore the unity of the fragmented dimensions of Reason and endorses the Marxist demand for a mediation between theory and praxis. However, the idea of a "transformation of philosophy into praxis" is extremely problematic since, in order to *think* of it alone, Lukács is forced to conjure up a subject of this praxis. He finds it in a *metaphysical concept of the proletariat*, which reveals his captivity to hegelian idealism and poses automatically the problem of the *avant-garde* that possesses "objective knowledge" of historical change.<sup>41</sup>

At this point, Habermas evokes also some relevant theses of Wellmer. According to them, the failure of the lukácsian theory of reification is due "ironically to the fact that Lukács' philosophical reconstruction of Marxism amounts in some key respects to a return to objective idealism."<sup>42</sup> According to Wellmer, the reconnection of Marxism with its hegelian foundations could only reinforce its already existing objectivist tendencies, reproducing the "theoretical shortcomings of objective idealism."<sup>43</sup> To understand these "theoretical shortcomings" we must return once again to *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

In his discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas locates the basic difference between the two founders of critical theory and Lukács in the fact that the former "no longer trust in the Hegelian logic just as it is"<sup>44</sup> and, hence, they do not consider the development of working-class consciousness as "rationally necessary," but regard it at most as a hypothetical construction that could be empirically falsified.<sup>45</sup> Reconstructing Adorno's critique of Hegel, which turns against Lukács as well, Habermas notes: "All conceptual thought that stands apart from mere intuition—and this includes dialectical thought—proceeds by way of identification and betrays the utopian element in cognition."<sup>46</sup> On this view, then, there is no longer any point in searching

for a way out of reification in dialectical logic, as Lukács did in his theory of the constitution of class consciousness.

The construal of the early Marxist work of Lukács as a “speculative” and “objectivist” philosophy of history, which shares the “theoretical shortcomings of objective idealism” has established itself within communicative theory, so we should not be surprised at the direction of Honneth’s recent attempt to update the lukácsian concept of reification by adapting it to a theory of intersubjective recognition.<sup>47</sup> What is most interesting for us here is that Lukács’ insistence that the problems of bourgeois thought can be resolved through a holistic conception of history is totally absent from Honneth’s reconstruction—there is not even a negative critique of it.<sup>48</sup> This total suppression makes it possible to transmute the theory of reification into what Lukács emphatically dismissed,<sup>49</sup> that is, into a philosophical anthropology.<sup>50</sup>

Is this now the only possible reading of that legendary text of Western Marxism? Are we forced, if we want to “modernise” young Lukács, to cover over what he himself considered the central pivot of his revolutionary theory, the *historico-philosophically grounded* diagnosis and critique of capitalist and bureaucratic alienation from the vantage point of emancipatory political praxis? Or could we argue, rather, that today a different reading of the historical dialectic of class consciousness becomes possible again—and even necessary, perhaps? The deficiencies of communicative critical theory that I have pointed out make certainly more attractive an experimentation with this thought. But if Lukács’ early Marxist theory is to become relevant again today, it should be construed in a way that immunizes it to the foregoing critiques.

## A Philosophy of History beyond Subjectivism and Objectivism

The “point of departure” for the lukácsian theory of the social-historical totality is, of course, clearly non-metaphysical.<sup>51</sup> It is none other than the *experience of the crisis* of modern culture and society. This experience pervades the early, pre-marxist work of Lukács, where it is reduced to the fundamental disharmony between “form” and “life.”<sup>52</sup> In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács seeks to explain the same dualism between form and content as being determined by historically finite social relations. In any case, economic crisis, war, and the uprising of the oppressed provide irrefutable evidence for the disharmony that pervades social life. Equally evident is the inability of the dominant forms of thought and knowledge to discern in these phenomena anything other than an irrational eruption of contingency, which determines human affairs as a destiny—a number of references to the social sciences suffice to bring this out.<sup>53</sup> Hence, the crisis of established social practices and the crisis of knowledge and theory are intertwined and it becomes necessary to overcome them.

However, even if Lukács' thought sets out from experience, isn't it true that the recourse to the philosophy of history leads to a dogmatic identification of an objective meaning or an objective teleology in historical development, as Habermas and Wellmer suggest? This interpretation of Lukács' historico-philosophical method relies, I believe, on the misrecognition of its intertwined dialectical *and* practical character. Lukács wanted to overcome precisely the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity by understanding history as the process of their intellectual (spiritual) *and* simultaneously practical (material-sensible) *mediation*.<sup>54</sup>

The project of a dialectical-*practical* theory of history as totality does not imply by any means the identification of an immutable transhistorical meaning. It entails, on the contrary, the adoption of a radically presentist perspective, in which the past appears through the different practical projects that are relevant to the present, "as our interest in history is determined in the last analysis by our desire to understand the present."<sup>55</sup> And these projects condense demands for social change which are rooted in *concrete* experiences of social crisis. Hence, Lukács' theory is neither hermeneutically naïve nor is it fully reducible to the quasi-transcendental perspective of a historicist hermeneutics. It lies beyond both objectivism and subjectivism:

[H]istory as a totality (universal history) is neither the mechanical aggregate of individual historical events, nor is it a transcendent heuristic principle opposed to the events of history, a principle that could only become effective with the aid of a special discipline, the philosophy of history. The totality of history is itself a real historical power—even though one that has not hitherto become conscious and has therefore gone unrecognized—a power which is not to be separated from the reality (and hence the knowledge) of the individual facts without at the same time annulling their reality and their factual existence. It is the real, ultimate ground of their reality and their factual existence and hence also of their knowability even as individual facts.<sup>56</sup>

From the standpoint of "history as totality"—the standpoint of the practical present rather than the standpoint of contemplative eternity—our knowledge does not merely *invent* a meaning in the light of which we come thereafter to "interpret" particular facts, which remain in themselves cognitively inaccessible and fixed in their essence. The authentic knowledge of history would be nothing but a fiction if it did not turn on the immanent "real meaning," the "real function" of facts "in the historical process,"<sup>57</sup> if it did not turn on totality as "a real historical power,"<sup>58</sup> even if the latter has remained until now alien and unintelligible to human beings, even if it has remained alienated and alienating, depriving humans of the possibility to become its conscious agents. And, more crucially, the holistic knowledge of history would be a mere fantasy if it did not change "the objective structure, the actual content of the *individual phenomenon*,"<sup>59</sup> that is, if it did not change the way in which we understand the

“objectivity” of objects and orient ourselves *in practice*. From the standpoint of the practical present, history does not “take on” a meaning that we confer on it, it literally *is* this “real meaning” as the *unity of subjective and objective moments of a changing totality*, which should be disclosed by our historical knowledge.

Indeed, the intertwining of consciousness and reality constitutes an intrinsic feature of the very historical matter with which historical knowledge is confronted, since

[. . .] the essence of history lies precisely in the changes undergone by those *structural forms* which are the focal points of man’s interaction with environment at any given moment and which determine the objective nature of both his inner and his outer life [. . .]. It is first necessary to search for them and to find them—and the path to their discovery is the path to a knowledge of the historical process in its totality.<sup>60</sup>

This definition of the “essence of history” is itself a historical achievement. It presupposes, on the one hand, modern social conditions lacking any dominant religious-metaphysical dogma and, on the other hand, the rupture of reified consciousness and the integration of the immediately given in the historical totality. Historical facts are revealed now as the products of human doing under historical conditions, which are not fully controlled by human beings. By contrast, on the formalist conception of history, the historical totality is a thing-in-itself, to which the subject has no cognitive access. By fixing the two poles of the opposition (form-content, subject-object) in a contemplative fashion, this conception is inevitably led to *abolish history* in the emphatic sense of the appearance of the *radically new*, of the sequence of qualitatively different forms of mediation between human beings and their social and natural environment, hence the fundamentally a-historical character of historical relativism itself.<sup>61</sup>

The formalist conception of an “infinite” progress does not alter this a-historical character. Using a hegelian argument, Lukács explains that replacing *qualitative* historical change with a “false becoming,” that is, with a supposedly infinite approximation to a limit that remains always beyond our practical and cognitive grasp (it remains transcendent), fixes in effect an eternal gap between ought and is. “Infinite progress” obscures thus the objective possibility of an immanent qualitative change, reducing it to a process of infinite quantitative accumulation. As a result, qualitative change, the real historical “rise and fall,” becomes an invisible phenomenon, since nothing qualitatively new can surge forth in a history thus understood.<sup>62</sup> The historical consciousness of the proletariat stands at the opposite end of this bourgeois-formalist theory:

The historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with knowledge of the present, with the self-knowledge of its own social situation and with the elucidation of its necessity (i.e., its genesis). That genesis and history should coincide or, more exactly, that they should be different aspects of the same

process, can only happen if two conditions are fulfilled. On the one hand, all the categories in which human existence is constructed must appear as the determinants of that existence itself (and not merely of the description of that existence). On the other hand, their succession, their coherence and their connections must appear as aspects of the historical process itself, as the structural components of the present. Thus the succession and internal order of the categories constitute neither a purely logical sequence, nor are they organized merely in accordance with the facts of history.<sup>63</sup>

In this quote, it becomes clear that Lukács sought to chart a middle course between two rival alternatives, between, on the one hand, the logical reduction of historical events, on the basis for example of the rational reconstruction of the capacities of a collective subject, and, on the other hand, a vulgar historical empiricism of raw facts. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that his project has been misconstrued either as a theory of an abstract productive subject and its expressive realization or as an empirically refutable futurology.

In reality, the philosophical problem that Lukács sought to address concerns the way in which we could conceive of a nonmechanistic emergence of a qualitatively new form of consciousness and a corresponding social practice as the concrete embodiment of effective human freedom. On his view, this prospect requires an irreducible “manifestation of [. . .] the authentic objective structure”<sup>64</sup> of objects. However odd we may find this formulation, the “manifestation” in question has nothing mystical about it. It turns, by contrast, on the possibility of a demystification, an understanding of the historical-social character of “reality,” that is, of the relations between human beings. What Lukács has in mind here is nothing but the classical idea of Enlightenment, the idea of enlightening people about their real conditions of existence and the application of this knowledge to the field of politics and the social practice of citizens. If today it strikes us as almost outrageous it is because—despite the “democratic” spirit of our age—we have, to a great extent, lost faith in the power of deliberate agency.

## Philosophy of History without Metaphysics

If we restore the dialectical understanding of historico-philosophical consciousness, the critique of the metaphysical-idealist genesis of its subject, the proletariat, becomes automatically less convincing. My view is that, despite the fact that many formulations of Lukács lend credit to this “official” interpretation of the proletariat as “the identical subject-object” of the socio-historical process, as “the subject of action; the ‘we’ of the genesis,”<sup>65</sup> one can evoke other passages in order to show that in effect Lukács wanted to mount—with the conceptual resources of dialectics that were available to him—a critique of the philosophy of the subject and its pretension to pin down an immutable basis of the unity

of reason. It is incumbent on us to reconstruct this second hermeneutical possibility, turning now our attention to the internal link between historico-philosophical consciousness and the practice that changes the world. As Lukács points out in straightforward terms:

The practical character of the thought of the proletariat is born and becomes real as the result of an equally dialectical process. In this thought self-criticism is more than the self-criticism of its object, i.e. the self-criticism of bourgeois society. It is also a critical awareness of how much of its own practical nature has really become manifest, which stage of the genuinely practicable is objectively possible and how much of what is objectively possible has been made real. For it is evident that however clearly we may have grasped the fact that society consists of processes, however thoroughly we may have unmasked the fiction of its rigid reification, this does not mean that we are able to annul the “reality” of this fiction in capitalist society *in practice*.<sup>66</sup>

For Lukács, the constitution of the collective subject is the complex outcome of a series of breakthroughs in knowledge which begin with the emergence of the elementary “self-consciousness of the commodity”<sup>67</sup> and culminate in the knowledge of the social-historical totality, while interacting continuously with a series of practical ruptures with the given. It constitutes then a “dialectical process,” whose development is not guaranteed in advance.<sup>68</sup> This is why it also calls for self-criticism, which would be pointless if the proletariat were, so to speak, always already what it ought to be.<sup>69</sup> Both the theory of class consciousness and the polemic against the economism and determinism of social democracy, which ignores the dialectic of consciousness,<sup>70</sup> should be seen as part of a necessary “self-criticism” of the labor movement. In any case, Lukács highlights the tension between the “imputed” (*zugerechnet*) and the empirical consciousness of the members of the working class,<sup>71</sup> the tension between “objective possibility” and factual individual consciousness.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, if the proletariat itself constitutes a collectivity that is being constantly redetermined in both its consciousness and its practice, then its idealist interpretation as a preexisting essence in search of its appropriate expression in reality<sup>73</sup> is simply mistaken. The “proletariat” constitutes rather a theoretical “mask,” a notion which represents the *process* whereby the universal breaks forth in history. It is a theoretical construct, through which Lukács seeks to address the problem of the emergence of a supra-individual meaning of individual subversive acts, a meaning that does not fully correspond to the conscious intents of the particular individuals who carry them out, but it is reconstructed by the theorist.<sup>74</sup> The fact, however, that the proletariat is a “mask” does not mean that nothing lies behind it. There are real historical subjects who act under its constellation, under the form of consciousness it represents: The proletariat is an intellectual construct and, at the same time, a constantly changing form

of consciousness and a self-constituting, acting collectivity that changes the world. In this sense, every socio-historical period has its own “proletariat”:

Even the proletariat can only overcome reification as long as it is oriented towards practice. And this means that there can be no single act that will eliminate reification in all its forms at one blow; it means that there will be a whole host of objects that at least in appearance remain more or less unaffected by the process.<sup>75</sup>

This excerpt shows clearly that the overcoming of reification can only be the result of a *series* of acts.<sup>76</sup> What if, then, despite the rhetoric of the identical subject-object, the idea of an immediate practical enactment of Reason in reality, the idea of a full realization of philosophy, is problematic for Lukács himself? This reading is reinforced by the thesis that some objects remain more or less indifferent toward socio-historical change. The most salient example of such an object is nature, which represents a further important limit to the unifying “standpoint of the proletariat,” since its complete “dialectization” is impossible.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Lukács explains that “nature is a social category.”<sup>78</sup> Although the standard critique of Lukács’ thesis is that it abolishes the alterity of nature,<sup>79</sup> it is clear that his thesis could be interpreted in the exactly inverse way. To admit an insurmountable limit of holistic knowledge itself, that is, to preserve the antinomic structure of the latter—despite all mediation—is to *safeguard* the nonidentical from the “compulsion of identity.”<sup>80</sup>

How “identical” is then this subject-object of history, which is pervaded by internal ruptures, by internal divisions that impel it to a constantly renewed search for its identity? We should rather think of it, ultimately, as an open process rather than as the appearance on earth of a transhistorical “essence” which signals the secular establishment of the kingdom of God or the completion of the hegelian “absolute spirit.” Dealing with the problem of the conscious transformation of society by human agents, Lukács seeks to find a middle course between the two alternative conceptions of the agent in bourgeois thought:

The individual can never become the measure of all things. For when the individual confronts objective reality he is faced by a complex of ready-made and unalterable objects which allow him only the subjective responses of recognition or rejection. Only the class can relate to the whole of reality in a practical revolutionary way. (The “species” cannot do this as it is no more than an individual that has been mythologised and stylised in a spirit of contemplation.)<sup>81</sup>

On the one hand, we have the practically weak individual, on the other, the “human species” as an abstract philosophical idea, shorn of the concrete contradictions of the real process by which individuals are woven together in an acting collectivity that exceeds their aggregate sum. The “proletariat” as an

under construction collective subject that remains internally heterogeneous and in an insurmountable tension with a series of objects is, then, the third possible solution to the question of the subject of history—if, of course, we do not want to give way to a blind objectivism of “historical laws” or “objective structures.” If the contemporary language of social philosophy had been available to Lukács, he might have built into the dialectical theory of the revolutionary subject an analysis of the complex “intersubjective process” which constitutes the relationship of a particular social group to social reality, making thereby his theory more convincing for us today. It is always possible for us, of course, to make up for this “deficit.”

### Back to History

It seems that a different interpretation of the lukácsian philosophy of history, from which we could take our bearings in order to come up with solutions to the present impasses of critical theory, is possible. On this interpretation, the “proletariat” represents the historical process of the self-constitution of an internally contradictory collectivity that changes the world, it is a readaptable project which points to a freer humanity. The praxis of this collectivity, in the double sense of the practical development of consciousness and the actual production of the qualitatively new, is a dialectical process, whose meaning transcends the thoughts and actions of particular individuals. It concerns only that part of society which “can see [. . .] it also as its own fate,”<sup>82</sup> a fate that at the same time is freely and consciously “chosen.”<sup>83</sup>

This dimension of free “choice” is crucial, because the start and the continuation of the practical process of changing the world remains merely *possible*—it is by no means mechanically necessary. Hence reification “can be overcome only by *constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development.*”<sup>84</sup> If we construe the proletariat’s unity in this open teleological sense, we can distance ourselves from the sterile opposition between ideal and reality, between the universal form and the empirically given, and we can turn our attention, as Lukács wished, to the “developing tendencies” of history.<sup>85</sup>

These tendencies have never been independent of a contradictory continuity of class struggles and political conflicts that lack a predetermined end but possess an immanent, abstractly formulated final objective or orientation: the realization and the widening of substantive freedom in a society of equality and solidarity. The world-historical role of the proletariat is not a metaphysically determined truth, nor is it inscribed in some timeless essence of the proletariat. It relies “merely” on the dialectical development of the historico-philosophical judgment that human beings exist in order to become free and



their history is—in a constantly redefined, nondeterministic sense—the progress of this freedom. The signs of this freedom appear today in the self-organization of an opposition—no matter how feeble it still is—to the tremendous economic and ecological crisis of globalized capitalism. This opposition, however, will also need to become conscious of itself as the collective creator of “another world,” which it evokes without truly understanding yet what this world might be.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, “What is Universal Pragmatics?,” in his, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1–68.
- <sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas’ *The Theory of Communicative Action* (vols 1 and 2, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987 and 1991, first German edition: 1981) remains the fullest formulation of the more general presuppositions of habermasian political philosophy.
- <sup>3</sup> The basic work on this topic is Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, first German edition: 1992). For a thorough presentation of the book see James Bohman, “Complexity, Pluralism, and the Constitutional State: On Habermas’s *Faktizität und Geltung*.” *Law and Society Review*, no 4, 1994, 897–930.
- <sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “On the Internal Relation between the Rule of Law and Democracy.” In his, *The Inclusion of the Other. Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 257–258.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 287–387.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 306–308.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 103–104, 108. For the tasks of philosophical morality cf. *ibid.*, 93–94. The distinction between the right and the good has remained fundamental to habermasian practical philosophy, despite the fact that the criticisms leveled against it forced Habermas to partially modify his position. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Remarks on Discourse Ethics.” In his, *Justification and Application. Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 19–111.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 11. It is worth noting that in this short book Habermas recognized for the first time the limits of “postmetaphysical abstention” in view of the challenges of bioethics. Cf. Konstantinos Kavoulakos, “Ruptured Formalism. The Challenge of Bioethics and the Limits of Moral Formalism.” *Radical Philosophy*, no 125, 2004, 37–45.
- <sup>9</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 487–488.
- <sup>10</sup> The lack of a mediation between the “universal and necessary” normative model of democracy and the “contingent” historical conjuncture makes up the core of my critique of habermasian political philosophy in “Constitutional State and Democracy. On Jürgen Habermas’s *Between Facts and Norms*.” *Radical Philosophy*, no 96, 1999, 33–41.

- <sup>11</sup> For Wellmer's critique of Habermas' practical philosophy see: Alessandro Ferrara, "Critical Theory and its Discontents: On Wellmer's Critique of Habermas." *Praxis International*, no 3, 1989, 305–320.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, "Models of Freedom in the Modern World." In his, *Endgames. The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 13–20. Cf. also idem, "Conditions of a Democratic Culture: Remarks on the Liberal-Communitarian Debate." In his, *Endgames*, op. cit., 50–52.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, "Conditions of a Democratic Culture," op. cit., 53–54.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, "Models of Freedom in the Modern World," op. cit., 24–25.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, "Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy," in his, *Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 41.
- <sup>16</sup> See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 4–63.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, "Between Aristotle and Kant: Recognition and Moral Obligation," in his, *Disrespect*, op. cit., 137–139.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 141.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today," in his, *Disrespect*, op. cit., 218–239.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle of Recognition*, op. cit., 171–179.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, "*The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today*," in his, *Disrespect*, op. cit., 71–72.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 77–78.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Axel Honneth, "Anerkennung als Ideologie." *Westend*, no 1, 2004, 51–70.
- <sup>24</sup> See the relevant remarks in Christopher Zurn, "Anthropology and Normativity: A Critique of Axel Honneth's 'Formal Conception of Ethical Life.'" *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 26, no 1, 2000, 119–122.
- <sup>25</sup> See the critical remarks in Roger Foster, "Recognition and Resistance." *Radical Philosophy*, no 94, 14–16.
- <sup>26</sup> This is now explicitly recognized by Albrecht Wellmer. Cf. his, "Erinnerungen an die Anfänge und eine späte Antwort auf einen fast vergessenen Brief." *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, no 6, 2009, 51–52. Faced with this difficulty, Wellmer turns his attention back to the social theory of Adorno. Cf. idem, "Adorno und die Schwierigkeiten einer kritischen Konstruktion der geschichtlichen Gegenwart," *Westend*, no 1, 2007, 147–152.
- <sup>27</sup> See Konstantinos Kavoulakos, "Lukács' geschichtsphilosophische Wende: Über ihre Aktualität vierzig Jahre nach 1968," in Rüdiger Dannemann (ed.) *Lukács und 1968* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2009), 189–215.
- <sup>28</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, abbrev.: *HCC*).
- <sup>29</sup> The place that the lukácsian theory of reification could assume in a critical analysis of globalized capitalism will not concern us here. Let me note only that, on my view, we should envisage new ways to combine Lukács' paradigm with the findings of communicative theory in a radical theory of social and ecological democracy. For a thorough reconstruction of the paradigm of "reification" cf. Rüdiger Dannemann, *Das Prinzip Verdinglichung. Studie zur Philosophie Georg Lukács* (Frankfurt a.M.: Siedler Verlag, 1987). For a comparison between the

habermasian and the lukaásian conceptual strategy cf. idem, “Das Verdinglichungsproblem und Habermas’ Versuch einer Reformulierung,” in Rüdiger Dannemann (ed.) *Georg Lukács—Jenseits der Polemiken* (Frankfurt a.M.: Sandler Verlag, 1986), 105–117.

<sup>30</sup> See *HCC*, 110–111. Regarding Lukács’ view of modern philosophy cf. Tom Rockmore, “Lukács on Modern Philosophy,” in Tom Rockmore (ed.) *Lukács Today. Essays on Marxist Philosophy* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1988), 221–237.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 294–315.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 536–593.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 114–118.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 124–125, 133–134.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 128–129.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 145.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 145–148.

<sup>39</sup> *HCC*, 148–149.

<sup>40</sup> See the third part of “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”

<sup>41</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, op. cit., 361–365.

<sup>42</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, “Kommunikation und Emanzipation. Überlegungen zur ‘sprachanalytischen Wende’ der kritischen Theorie,” in U. Jaeggi, A. Honneth (ed.) *Theorien des historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 477–478.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 478.

<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, op. cit., 368.

<sup>45</sup> Habermas concludes that “Lukács had assumed the validity of a logic according to which the process of the reification of consciousness *had to* lead to its own overcoming in proletarian class consciousness. Horkheimer and Adorno put Hegel’s logic to one side and try to explain empirically the evidence that refutes this prediction” (*ibid.*, 372).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 373. Habermas refers here to a famous passage from Theodor W. Adorno’s, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 9–10: “But whatever truth the concepts cover beyond their abstract range can have no other stage than what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard. The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts, without making it their equal.” Although he uses Adorno against Lukács’ “positive dialectics,” Habermas distances himself also from adornian “negative dialectics,” which leads, on his view, to the impasse of “negativism.”

<sup>47</sup> See Axel Honneth, *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). This is the text of Honneth’s Berkeley Tanner Lectures (2005). In his attempt to dissolve the negative bias of his interlocutors at the University of Berkeley, Honneth strips the lukaásian theory of reification of its radical content and adapts it to trivial cases of reification and “disrespect” of the other as a person.

<sup>48</sup> The word “history” appears only once in the text (*ibid.*, 46), in a reference to the distinction between history and logic that is unrelated to Lukács!

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 185–197.

- <sup>50</sup> For Honneth, of course, Lukács' anthropology turns out to be "not sufficiently complex, not sufficiently abstract" (Axel Honneth, *Reification*, op. cit., 55), and therefore it should be replaced by a "comprehensive and differentiated analysis" (ibid, 99) of the pathologies of intersubjective recognition, which, to his eyes, has also the advantage that it avoids the extremes of Lukács' Marxist economism with its ill-conceived—and, apparently, futile—denunciation of the capitalist market (cf. ibid., 75–85).
- <sup>51</sup> Needless to say, for a dialectic-holistic theory, the experience of crisis is not a nontheoretical point of departure, since the assertion of the crisis presupposes already some fundamental notions, it moves within the orbit of a "hermeneutical circle."
- <sup>52</sup> Cf. György Márkus, "The Soul and Life: The Young Lukács and the Problem of Culture." *Telos*, no 32, 1977, 95–115; Axel Honneth, "A Fragmented World: On the Implicit Relevance of Lukács' Early Work." In his, *The Fragmented World of the Social* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 50–60; Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 3–108.
- <sup>53</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 103–110.
- <sup>54</sup> On the shift of theory from contemplation to its practical self-understanding cf. *HCC*, 199–203 and 205. The crucial role of the concept of mediation in Lukács' early Marxist work is highlighted by István Mészáros, *Lukács' Concept of Dialectic* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), 61–74.
- <sup>55</sup> *HCC*, 158.
- <sup>56</sup> *HCC*, 151–152.
- <sup>57</sup> *HCC*, 151.
- <sup>58</sup> *HCC*, 152.
- <sup>59</sup> *HCC*, 152.
- <sup>60</sup> *HCC*, 153.
- <sup>61</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 156–157, 187–188.
- <sup>62</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 160–162. The same immobilizing effect is produced by those evolutionary theories which rely on a "formal typology of the forms of appearance of history and society," in which, despite the formulation of "laws," the "form" stands in a contingent relation to the "empirically given" (cf. *HCC*, 154). Although I cannot elaborate on this here, it is certain that, from the standpoint of Lukács' dialectical theory of history, a critique could be mounted against the objectivist theory of social evolution put forward by Habermas (see Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, op. cit., 153–197).
- <sup>63</sup> *HCC*, 159.
- <sup>64</sup> *HCC*, 162.
- <sup>65</sup> *HCC*, 149. This interpretation appears particularly convincing when, for instance, Lukács speaks of the end of the "prehistory of human society" that will come about after the "realisation of the unification of theory and practice" (cf. *HCC*, 189). He himself admits it in his self-critical preface to the re-edition of *History and Class Consciousness* (1968), where he asks himself: "Is the identical subject-object anything more than a purely metaphysical construct?" (ibid., xxiii). It is of course well-known that the frequent self-criticisms of Lukács were always problematic, something which is not taken adequately into account by Habermas,

when he evokes this very “Preface” (see Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, op. cit., 449, note 57).

<sup>66</sup> *HCC*, 205.

<sup>67</sup> *HCC*, 168.

<sup>68</sup> As it has been shown, I hope, Habermas’ interpretation tends, on the contrary, to reduce the dialectical logic of the process of the development of class consciousness to a determinist necessity. Lukács, however, dismisses explicitly the view which takes class consciousness to be a mere “determinist” outcome of the objectification of workers. Cf. *HCC*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Lukács knows of course that the self-knowledge of the proletariat is obstructed by the reification of its consciousness. Cf. *HCC*, 149.

<sup>70</sup> Lapsing thereby into the familiar dualism between “utopia” and “empirical facts.” Cf. e.g. *HCC*, 195–197.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 50–52.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 317–318, 327. Lukács sought to resolve the tension between the objectively possible and the empirical consciousness of the proletariat by working out an organizational model for the Communist Party. Cf. Georg Lukács, “Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation.” In *HCC*, 295–342. For an excellent reconstruction of Lukács’ proposal with a parallel discussion of Luxemburg and Lenin’s theses, which brings out Lukács’ implicit critique of the leninist view of the party, see Andrew Feenberg, “The Question of Organization in the Early Marxist Work of Lukács. Technique or Praxis?”, in Tom Rockmore (ed.) *Lukács Today*, op. cit., 126–156. However, the defence of Lukács’ historico-philosophical perspective does not entail necessarily an endorsement of his organizational proposal, as Habermas’ critique of the latter implies (cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Praxis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 34–37.

<sup>73</sup> This is the fichtean model of “expressive totality,” in which totality expresses the intentionality of a productive subject recognizing itself in the objective world. The designation “expressive totality” comes from the structuralist critics of lukácsian “idealism.” An evaluation of the role of the “expressive” model of praxis in Lukács can be found in: Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 108–109, particularly note 120, and *ibid.*, “The Concept of Totality in Lukács and Adorno.” *Telos*, no 32, 1977, 123–124.

<sup>74</sup> The question that arises here, of course, concerns the responsibility of intellectuals. In his first Marxist essays, Lukács dealt with the question of the responsibility of the revolutionary, as well as with the tragic character of revolutionary praxis. Cf. Georg Lukács, *Taktik und Ethik. Politische Aufsätze I*, Luchterhand, Darmstadt/Neuwied 1975, 43–53.

<sup>75</sup> *HCC*, 206.

<sup>76</sup> An important reason, on which I cannot elaborate here, is related, on my view, to the dialectical structure of the act itself, which should be associated with an “unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement” (*HCC*, 199).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *HCC*, 206.

<sup>78</sup> *HCC*, 130.

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. the formulation of this critique—which draws on Adorno—in Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, op. cit., 115–116.

<sup>80</sup> This is clearly brought out by Andrew Feenberg in *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*, Martin Robertson, Oxford 1981, 241. Seeking, moreover, to enrich and specify Lukács' theses regarding the knowledge of nature (*ibid.*, 241–252), Feenberg illustrates the potential of Lukács' early work for the elaboration of a contemporary philosophy of praxis. On the latter, see also: Andrew Feenberg, "Dialektischer Konstruktivismus: Zur Aktualität von Lukács Konzept der transformierenden Praxis." In Frank Benseler and Werner Jung (eds.), *Lukács 1998/99. Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft* (Paderborn: Universität Paderborn, 1999), 52–63. If I understand him correctly, Feenberg, in his interpretation of the Lukácsian philosophy of praxis, moves in the same direction that I suggest here.

<sup>81</sup> *HCC*, 193.

<sup>82</sup> *HCC*, 193.

<sup>83</sup> "Any transformation can only come about as the product of the—free—action of the proletariat itself," *HCC*, 209.

<sup>84</sup> *HCC*, 197.

<sup>85</sup> See *HCC*, 181–185.

## Chapter 10

# Reification and its Critics

Andrew Feenberg

### I

On my return in 1964 from studying Lukács in France with Lucien Goldmann, I borrowed the original German edition of *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* from my university library. I was lucky to find one of the only copies in North America. The yellowed pages printed on high sulfite paper in 1923 cracked as I turned them. The book was still readable only because it had remained closed and forgotten on the shelf since World War II. Later the book would attract the attention of a new generation of readers, to which I belonged, who were poorly equipped to understand it. As interest in Lukács revives, it is worth taking a critical look at the terms on which his thought was assimilated in this “second reception.”

Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness* under difficult conditions in exile and the essays of which it is composed are dense and disorganized. They range from a eulogy to Rosa Luxemburg to an analysis of Kantian philosophy, from reflections on the revolutionary party to considerations on landscape painting, from discussions of Marx’s *Capital* to a critique of Plato’s theory of forms. In terms of contemporary sources, Lukács was influenced by Weber, Simmel, Dilthey, Rickert, Lask, and many other thinkers who are rarely read today except by specialists. The temptation to reduce this extraordinary book to a few readily understandable and consistent principles is apparently irresistible, but Lukács’ argument is far from simple. By now Lukács’ famous book is known primarily through very negative and one-sided critical accounts.<sup>1</sup>

Of course there are many aspects of Lukács’ book that are thoroughly outdated, notably his faith in proletarian revolution. Unfortunately I will have to discuss this notion here to make sense of his thought. But his main philosophical argument is far more interesting than readers of the critics may suspect. I intend to reestablish that argument in something like its original form and in conclusion briefly consider its significance for the Frankfurt School which drew on Lukács’ theory of reification despite strong reservations.

I will begin by considering Adorno’s influential critique. This critique carries the imprimatur of a great thinker. It is elaborated against a sophisticated theoretical

background and represents the tradition of the Frankfurt School which shared Lukács' ambition to construct a Marxist philosophy on the ruins of German Idealism. Adorno's critique has been very influential and forms a kind of barrier to the original. And yet Adorno is tone deaf to the music of Lukács' dialectic. His critique exhibits a dismaying indifference to nuance and complexity not so different from the crudity he finds in Lukács' own later literary criticism. No doubt Adorno has real differences from Lukács, but they are not precisely where he locates them. In fact the continuity is much greater than he acknowledges. In this as in many other cases the straw man hides the dependence of the critic on his object.<sup>2</sup>

By now critiques like Adorno's are more familiar than Lukács' book. According to Adorno, Lukács lapsed into idealism, believed the proletarian subject could constitute social reality independent of any institutional framework or objective constraint on its action, and idealized immediacy and pre-capitalist society. Quite a program! And Adorno does not hesitate to associate his critique with that of the Stalinists who first denounced Lukács.

There is a good deal of irony in the fact that the brutal and primitive functionaries who more than forty years back damned Lukács as a heretic, because of the reification chapter in his important *History and Class Consciousness*, did sense the idealistic nature of his conception. . . . If a man looks upon thingness as radical evil, if he would like to dynamize all entity into pure actuality, he tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation, and not in vain. (Adorno, 1973: 190–191)<sup>3</sup>

This critique depends on a very narrow reading of Lukács. The impression given is that reification, which Adorno interprets here as a mode of consciousness, is overcome by the dereification of consciousness rather than concrete social change in the real world of "non-identical" objects. "The cause of human suffering, meanwhile, will be glossed over rather than denounced in the lament about reification" (Adorno, 1973: 190). What could be more idealistic?

To make matters worse, blaming all problems on reification seems to imply a romantic concept of liberation as pure immediacy. Adorno considers the critique of reification as a version of romantic anxiety over the distancing effect of modern rationality. This form of rationality confronts a world of independent objects. Reduced to the thesis that in criticizing reification, he is criticizing the very independence of this world, Lukács seems to call for assimilating things to the stream of consciousness or action.

So Adorno writes, "The liquefaction of everything thinglike regressed to the subjectivism of the pure act" (Adorno, 1973: 374). The reference here is at once to a kind of existentialist decisionism and to the Fichtean *actus purus* in which the world is "posited" by transcendental consciousness. Versions of this devastating critique abound in the literature and after becoming acquainted with them few readers bother to go back to the original, much less read it with



fresh eyes. This chapter is an invitation to do precisely that through a careful reading of many key passages.

In the first pages of his book Lukács warns the reader that the concept of “totality” under which he conceives a dereified social reality “does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity” (12).<sup>4</sup> This reservation is confirmed elsewhere in the text. Under the rhetorical surface Lukács’ views depend on a rather conventional Marxism, not the rehash of subjective idealism and naïve romanticism attributed to him by his critics. Consider the following passages:

Man must be able to comprehend the present as a becoming. He can do this by seeing in it the tendencies out of whose dialectical opposition he can *make* the future. Only when he does this will the present be a process of becoming, that belongs to *him*. Only he who is willing and whose mission it is to create the future can see the present in its concrete truth. As Hegel says: “Truth is not to treat objects as alien.” (204)

Here we might find Adorno’s critique vindicated. But reading a bit further down the page, we are offered the following gloss on these messianic claims:

Thus thought and existence are not identical in the sense that they “correspond” to each other or “coincide” with each other (all expressions that conceal a rigid duality). Their identity is that they are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process. What is “reflected” in the consciousness of the proletariat is the new positive reality arising out of the dialectical contradictions of capitalism. And this is by no means the invention of the proletariat, nor was it “created” out of the void. It is rather the inevitable consequence of the process in its totality; one which changed from being an abstract possibility to a concrete reality only after it had become part of the consciousness of the proletariat and had been made practical by it. And this is no mere formal transformation. For a possibility to be realized, for a tendency to become actual, what is required is that the objective overthrow of society, the transformation of the function of its moments and with them the structure and content of every individual object. (204–205)

What is happening in these passages? Here Lukács condenses two radically different discourses, the idealist discourse of classical German philosophy and the Marxist critique of political economy. The performative power of thought drawn from the one discourse is joined to the concept of economic evolution of the other. Simply put, history moves forward through the realization of its objective tendencies but the tendencies can only realize themselves when they are seized and appropriated by consciousness. Has Marxism ever said anything else?

It might be objected that Lukács is already practicing here the Aesopian rhetorical strategy of his later work, which says things that go beyond official

Soviet ideology by disguising them in the official language, un-saying them in the same breath. But there is no reason to believe that the Lukács of the early 1920s was so cautious. He even wrote an unblushing defense of his book in 1925 or 1926 which he did not publish (Lukács, 2000). No, *History and Class Consciousness* says exactly what he thought, for better or worse.

A critic might also complain that ambiguous statements such as the ones I have quoted are rare and do not accurately represent the book. But that too is incorrect. Such passages recur frequently as Lukács attempts to show the relevance of his philosophical argument to revolutionary practice. It would be tedious to quote them all, but here is another example that starts out confirming Adorno's worst fears but ends up quite differently:

Thus the knowledge that social facts are not objects but relations between men is intensified to the point where facts are wholly dissolved into processes. But if their Being appears as a Becoming this should not be construed as an abstract universal flux sweeping past, it is no vacuous *durée réelle* but the unbroken production and reproduction of those relations that, when torn from their context and distorted by abstract mental categories, can appear to bourgeois thinkers as things. . . . But if the reification of capital is dissolved into an unbroken process of its production and reproduction, it is possible for the proletariat to discover that it is itself the *subject* of this process even though it is in chains . . . (180–181)

In sum, Marx, not Heraclitus or Bergson. It is certainly worth questioning whether this is a coherent approach, but that is a different matter from Lukács' purported idealism. What requires understanding is Lukács' purpose in producing this strange hybrid. We need to know whether he accomplished anything of interest in doing so. Ignoring the complexity of his thought is not helpful for this purpose.

## II

To make sense of *History and Class Consciousness* it is necessary to understand why Lukács thought it necessary to relate proletarian revolution to German Idealism. What could have inspired such a strange detour from the mainstreams of both revolutionary theory and philosophy? I think the answer is a convergence of problems in the two traditions that Lukács was practically alone in noticing.

German Idealism dead-ended in Hegel, whose system was interpreted as a speculative pan-logicism. With the collapse of idealism the problems it was supposed to solve reappear as live issues. And this explains why certain thinkers such as Dilthey and Emil Lask were able to derive radical theoretical alternatives from the tradition. For example, Dilthey's distinction between the human and the natural sciences, and his hermeneutic approach to the former was a

powerful intervention in the struggle against scientism. And Lask's renewal of the issues raised by Fichte's attempt to go beyond Kant suggested an ontological conception of culture (Crowell, 2001: 43).

On the other hand, Marxism lacked a theory of consciousness or culture adequate to explain the revolutionary offensives that followed the war. The Leninist vanguard party had no precedent in Marx's thought. It appeared to violate the then dominant emphasis among Marxists on the "lawful character of history."<sup>5</sup> Lenin's success opened a debate within Marxism over the nature of the "subjective" conditions of revolution. But this debate was carried on with primitive intellectual means. It threatened to sink to the level of banal instrumental or moralizing prescriptions. Whether one advocated vanguard leadership or respect for the will of the proletariat, little insight was gained into the meaning of the history that was unfolding in Russia. Lukács' contribution lies at the point of intersection of these unsolved problems (Feenberg, 2002).

The core dilemma rending both traditions had to do with the relation of facts to values, realism to idealism in the common sense meaning of the terms. The notion of the autonomous rational subject had culminated in Kant in a complete split between the two realms. Values emerged from and applied to the noumenal realm without affecting the seamless flow of the phenomena determined by natural law. From this standpoint two practical attitudes were possible: the tragic affirmation of values against the real course of events, or practical submission and conformity to the way of the world.

This very same antinomy reappeared in the socialist movement in the conflict between reliance on the laws of history and ultra-left appeals to pure principle without regard for the objective situation of the proletariat. Only a renewed dialectic could mediate the opposing standpoints and provide a resolution of the antinomy. Lukács entertained the questionable belief that Lenin's practice represented such a dialectical resolution. In this he was no doubt mistaken, but his mistake was shared by many at the time, including sophisticated theorists such as Gramsci who had much more practical experience than Lukács.

Lukács did not approach the antinomy of fact and value directly but rather through the notion of reification. This starting point is widely misunderstood as psychological, but reification as he conceived it is not only a mental attitude.<sup>6</sup> Treating human relations as things, the definition of reification, was *constitutive* of capitalist society, an essential aspect of its workings. In his unpublished defense of *History and Class Consciousness* he says this explicitly: "The direct forms of appearance of social being are not, however, subjective fantasies of the brain, but moments of the real forms of existence" (Lukács, 2000: 79).

At the beginning of the reification essay Lukács claims that its source is the generalization of the commodity form. When most goods circulate as commodities the original relationships between producers and consumers are obscured and a new kind of society, a capitalist society, emerges. In that society all sorts of relational properties of objects and institutions are treated as things or as

attributes of things. Prices determine production and move goods from place to place independent of their use value. Corporations assume a reality independent of the underlying laboring activity through which they exist, and technical control is extended throughout the society, even to the human beings who people it.

From this description it should be clear that the concept of reification refers to a real state of affairs. But that state of affairs is unlike the things of nature because it depends on the human practices that generate it. There is no such human role in the constitution of nature, at least this was Lukács' view at the time. As he put it, nature lacks "the interaction of subject and object" (24n). The term Lukács uses to describe reification is therefore a peculiarly ambiguous one: *Gegenständlichkeitsform*, or "form of objectivity" (Lukács, 1968: 185). This term unfortunately disappears from the English translation and is everywhere rendered by circumlocutions that obscure its philosophical significance.<sup>7</sup>

That significance can only be grasped against the background of the neo-Kantian debates in which Lukács himself was involved a few years before he became a Marxist. The trace of these debates is very much present in *History and Class Consciousness*. The whole second part of the reification essay, on the "Antinomies of Bourgeois thought," is structured around the problem, central to neo-Kantianism, of the "irrationality" of the contents of the rational forms of human understanding.

This concept is the neo-Kantian version of Kant's thing-in-itself. Instead of positing an imaginary entity "behind" experience somehow mysteriously occasioning it, the neo-Kantians focused on the relation between the conceptual dimension of experience and its nonconceptual contents. Realms of experience were said to be organized by "values" that established types of objectivity such as nature and art. In the writings of Emil Lask, who had a considerable influence on Heidegger as well as Lukács, experience depends on conceptualization, the imposition of formal categories on particular entities. Truth refers not to existence but to the validity of the conceptual forms in which it is grasped. As Theodore Kisiel explains Heidegger's response to this theory, the key question is: "What then is the relation between the domains of real being and 'unreal' ideal meaning, validity? The non-validating kind of reality is *given* only in and through a validating sort of meaningful context. . . . 'It is only because I live in the validating element that I know about the existing element'" (Kisiel, 2002: 110).<sup>8</sup>

This sounds rather Fichtean, and indeed in Lask's interpretation Fichte is relevant. Lask explained the difficulties Fichte encountered as he attempted to derive the entire existing world from the positing activity of the transcendental ego, in this way overcoming the barrier of the thing-in-itself. But this project only succeeds in highlighting the "*hiatum irrationalem*," the irrational gap between concept and existence. Lukács followed Lask in identifying Fichte's program and its failure as the key to the history of classical German philosophy (119).

Lukács relates Fichte's problem to Vico's famous "*verum-factum*" principle to which he refers in the first pages of this section. The notion that we can only fully understand what we have ourselves created comes to grief because of the limited formal character of modern rationality. Formal rational disciplines such as mathematics and natural science cannot grasp their contents, that is to say the purely contingent or "factual" objects to which they refer. The limitation is self-evident in the relation of formal laws and representations to the particulars to which they apply. An abstract proposition such as "distance = velocity x time" cannot account for the existence of its objects, only their relations once they have been conceptualized on the terms of the law. Similarly, a map is useless until the person holding it has been oriented to a particular environment in which he or she is situated.

The gap between form and content cannot be closed by simply squeezing contents into the available forms. This limitation has never bothered physicists and geographers but it ends up posing problems in daily life. We are familiar with the unfortunate consequences of attempts to force the issue: bureaucracies that make no allowance for individual circumstances, laws the strict enforcement of which produces social pathologies, work to rule strikes, teaching to tests, technical interfaces and manuals that require users to think like engineers, and so on.

In practice common sense treats forms as resources in the context of activities oriented toward a type of content rather than as absolutes.<sup>9</sup> We know very well that the map is not the territory. But Lukács holds that modern capitalist society is a gigantic instance of economic and social forms imposed blindly on content. The commodity form prevails regardless of whether it successfully mediates the distribution of use values or leaves masses in starvation. Administration and law ride roughshod over the human "cases" they treat under unbending rules. Technology imposes its rhythms regardless of the workers' misery and the waste of their potential. The rationality of the system is fundamentally irrational from the standpoint of content.

Why then was bourgeois philosophy interested in overcoming the gap between form and content theoretically? According to Lukács, what is at stake is the vindication of the claim of rationality to embrace domains of being assigned to irrational forces such as royalty and religion in earlier societies. The ambition of the bourgeoisie to escape from the worldly power of the representatives of these forces requires it to extend its conception of rationality beyond all limits, at least in theory.

The philosophical system aims to accomplish this ambitious goal at the highest level of generality by literally deducing the existing world from its concept. But the history of classical German philosophy shows the failure of this project; the content of its formal rationality escapes all attempts to encompass it fully within the forms. The contingency and facticity of the world remains and is conceptualized in the thing-in-itself. Socialism is no less interested in establishing the credentials of an unrestricted rationalism, but as we will see,

in Lukács' theory it goes about it in a different way. This shared commitment to rationality characterizes capitalist and socialist modernity as stages in a progressive view of history.

It is against this background that we must understand Lukács' term "reification" as a "form of objectivity." Reification refers to the conceptual mask which the social world assumes in the bourgeois era as it comes to operate and be understood through formal rational categories. In Heidegger's phrase, the existing reality of society is only known through the "validating" element in which it is "lived." This element reveals processes of social relations as things in a specific sense of the term. The "thing" in this sense is not just an entity in general but an object suited to formal rational comprehension, prediction, and technical control.

Reification is in the first instance practical rather than theoretical. That is to say, the reification of social reality arises from the way individuals act when they understand their relation to social reality to be reified. The circularity of reification is a familiar social ontological principle currently referred to by the fashionable term "performativity." For example, money is money only insofar as we act as though it were money and it is the success of this sort of action that determines our conviction that money is in fact money. In behaving as friends we constitute a relationship which we perceive as a substantive thing, a friendship. A tool is only a tool insofar as we perceive its "toolness" in the possibility of a specific type of use. Social "things" are not merely things but are implicated in practices. The categories under which social life makes sense are the categories under which it is lived.

Thus, for Lukács, in constantly buying and selling commodities, including intellectual products, or working in mechanized industries, the members of a capitalist society live the reified relationships which construct that society. The reified form of objectivity of the society is the result of these relationships and the actions that underlie them. It is what gives coherence and meaning to social objects, arising from and feeding back into the practical relationship to those objects. Lukács concludes,

What is important is to recognize clearly that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the form of objectivity of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature. And also, the subject of this "action" likewise assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these—artificially abstract—processes, the attitude of the experimenter. (131)

### III

We are now ready to see the connection between Lukács' considerations on the system-busting irrationality of contents in philosophy and the tensions in

the social world analyzed by Marx. These tensions are explored in the third part of Lukács' reification essay. It is here that the strange passages combining philosophical and social arguments I have cited above are to be found. Lukács should have presented this section as the solution to the problems with Hegel identified at the end of the previous section. But in fact the third section seems an almost independent contribution. It does not refer back in any systematic way to the analysis of classical German philosophy that precedes it. The result is not the triumphant solution to the "antinomies of bourgeois thought" Lukács promised but an obscure argument full of digressions that has exposed Lukács to one-sided critique. I will try to unravel that argument in this section.

The argument turns on a reinterpretation of the conflict between form and content as a social tension with the power to undermine reification. That conflict is epistemological in the case of nature. It appears in particular failures of prediction and control but this does not lead to any dereification but rather to attempts to improve formal rational understanding. The social case is different. Reification constrains human life processes without always succeeding in performing the sense-making function it must fulfill to constitute stable objects. This provokes reflexive processes unknown in nature. Human beings considered as content of the reified forms have an independent power not just to violate expectations but also to understand themselves as doing so. This resistant self-understanding constitutes the core of what Lukács, following Marx, calls class consciousness.

Lukács details this process early in this section, explaining that the worker "lives" the categories of the capitalist economy differently from the bourgeois.

The quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as a process of abstraction of which he is the victim, and which cuts him off from his labour-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialized process that has been rationalized and mechanized, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanized and rationalized tool. . . . The quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence. (165–166)

This situation gives rise to what Lukács calls the "self-consciousness of the commodity," a bizarre hybrid of the human and the nonhuman (168). Philosophy and revolutionary theory are joined most intimately in this concept. The reference to self-consciousness appears to take us back to Fichte while

commodities belong in a Marxist discourse. But Lukács is once again careful to frame his thought precisely with respect to these two poles. He notes that the mere fact of self-consciousness is not revolutionary. A slave does not modify his status or society in recognizing the fact of his own slavery. What is different about the worker? The fact that the worker's self-knowledge "*brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge. . . . Beneath the cloak of the thing lay a relation between men, . . . beneath the quantifying crust there was a qualitative, living core. Now that this core is revealed it becomes possible to recognize the fetish character of every commodity. . . .*" (169).

The reified form of objectivity of the society is shattered from within. The worker as private owner of a commodity called labor power is transformed by self-consciousness (in conjunction with other workers) into a revolutionary force. The individualistic form of life imposed by capitalism, based on technical manipulation in conformity with the laws of the system, gives way to collective and conscious choice of other laws. "*The act of consciousness overthrows the form of objectivity of its objects*" (178). Lukács thus distinguishes what I call a transforming practice from the "contemplative" practice of capitalist reification.<sup>10</sup>

It is essential that this process be grounded objectively. Without such a basis the proletariat would reinstate reified reality in the very act of defying it, much as the romantic hero's actions correlate necessarily with the degradation of the world in which he acts. Reification is not overcome by its opposite—will—but by its determinate negation: "the forms of mediation in and through which it becomes possible to go beyond the immediate existence of objects as they are given, [must] be shown to be *the structural principles and the real tendencies of the objects themselves*" (155). This is the resolution of the antinomy of fact and value that seems inevitable under the horizon of reification. The facts are no longer rigid barriers to the realization of values but have become fluid as values enter reality as a living force.

With this Lukács breaks through the conceptual silos that separate the different levels of abstraction of his sources. The philosophical and the social problematics merge. The radical changes Lukács foresees will not take place because self-consciousness has the constitutive power Fichte attributed to it. Rather, its power in this specific case depends on the nature of capitalism, the fact that it is based on reified forms of thought and action and cannot survive except where those forms are operative. The dereifying effect of proletarian self-consciousness is by no means the whole story, but it is the beginning of a story which proceeds through the mediation of social analysis and party organization to inform and lead the proletariat in the revolution.

Its culmination would not be a return to pre-capitalist economic conditions as Adorno charges, but socialism. Adorno objects to the abolition of commodity exchange implied in Lukács' program but this is standard Marxist fare. Adorno wants to preserve the mediation supplied by exchange, making it "fair" and so realizing its implicit promise rather than regressing to a world in which economic fairness is not even an issue (Adorno, 1968: 147). But if he means to do this by preserving "free markets," his is an even more utopian hope than



the Marxist one. Surely the fairness achievable under socialism would involve effective and just economic planning of production and distribution of goods. It is difficult to see Adorno's problem with Lukács on this score.

More serious is the charge that Lukács' argument leads to a sinister convergence between philosophy and politics (Watnick, 1962). As we have seen, proletarian spontaneity is only the starting point of dereification. Marxism and the party achieve a fuller understanding of the situation and the strategy for dealing with it. Lukács "imputed" this fuller understanding to the proletariat as its correct "class consciousness" in an apparent philosophical sleight of hand that seems to legitimize the confiscation of its revolutionary mission by the party.

But whatever the flaws in Lukács' historical understanding in 1923, this was surely not his intent. The theory of reification and its dereification in proletarian "self-knowledge" established the "unity of theory and practice" by grounding Marxism and the party in social reality. On the second page of his book he already addresses this problem, explaining the inadequacy of Marx's initial hope that theory might "seize" the masses. Lukács then endorses a later passage in which Marx writes that "It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought" (2). Marxism and the party are there to solve practical problems—perhaps one might even say practical "details" such as the seizure of power—in support of a truly epoch making tendency of reality to "strive toward thought."<sup>11</sup>

Lukács' Leninism conflicts with another one of Adorno's criticisms. Socialism arises on the basis of a radically new historical situation in which conscious human control of history is possible for the first time. But this control is not exercised in the anarchic chaos of the "pure act" but rather through socially differentiated institutions as one would expect of a modern society. The fact that Lukács had serious illusions about the institutions actually established in the Soviet Union does not affect this conclusion.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV

As Lukács explains it, the notion that self-consciousness can play a role in history under capitalism is a Hegelian rather than a Fichtean thesis. The modification self-consciousness imposes on social reality is a mediation of preexisting elements rather than a "posit" of the transcendental ego. It is not a purely logical derivation of reality from the idea, of existence from meaning, but rather a practical process of social change in which already constituted meaning is transformed. This is an inescapable consequence of the fact that the agents of that process are living human beings in the whole complexity of their material and historical existence.

I want to review some passages in which Lukács argues for this mediated understanding of the rationality to show that his thought is not so easily dismissed. These passages are of more than historical interest. If we abstract

from the Marxist references more relevant in 1923 than today, they suggest a dialectic of reification and resistance, structure and agency. Anticipating my conclusion, I will argue that the notion of mediation can provide the basis for rethinking the nature of a differentiated modern society, its rational forms and the social action in which those forms are contested and modified. I will focus on five passages in particular.

1. Lukács claims that the proletariat cannot create a new society ex nihilo, but must start out from the capitalist heritage. The transcendence of capitalist reification in proletarian class consciousness implies no epistemological withdrawal to a free cogito, to a pure undetermined ground. The precondition of this transcendence is capitalist society itself, its culture, its forms of thought, which can only be transcended through a reflection in which they are criticized, mediated, and comprehended historically. Reification is the foundation of true knowledge of society precisely insofar as it is relativized dialectically.

Proletarian thought does not require a *tabula rasa*, a new start to the task of comprehending reality and one without any preconceptions . . . [but] conceives of bourgeois society together with its intellectual and artistic productions as the point of departure for its own method. . . . It implies that the “falseness” and the “one-sidedness” of the bourgeois view of history must be seen as a necessary factor in the systematic acquisition of knowledge about society. (Lukács, 1971: 163)

Why? Because “It is just in this [bourgeois] objectification, rationalization and reification of all social forms that we see clearly for the first time how society is constructed from the relations of men with each other” (Lukács, 1971: 176). This explains too why Marxist theory takes the form of a critique rather than a positive statement free of reference to “error.”

2. This position is incompatible with the notion that reification characterizes only the bourgeois era and can be wholly eliminated under socialism. Given the dialectic of reification and mediation, it is impossible to eliminate the former without also eliminating the latter. Insofar as the truth is discovered dialectically, reification is a necessary moment in the process of discovery. Reification is, in sum, not the “opposite” of dialectics, but a moment in it. Nevertheless, the position of the reified moment in the totality to which it belongs may radically change in the course of history. Lukács himself says something like this in a passage which shows he was aware of the danger of a utopian interpretation of his theory:

At the same time it is clear that from the standpoint of the proletariat the empirically given reality of the objects does dissolve into processes and tendencies; this process is no single, unrepeatable tearing of the veil that masks

the process but the unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement; and thus the proletariat represents the true reality, namely the tendencies of history awakening into consciousness. (Lukács, 1971: 199)

3. Lukács argues that the proletariat is the subject of history but it is not an idealist subject. Thus the proletariat is determined as much as determining and cannot freely create a world after its own designs.

It is true that the proletariat is the conscious subject of total social reality. But the conscious subject is not defined here as in Kant, where “subject” is defined as that which can never be an object. The “subject” here is not a detached spectator of the process. The proletariat is more than just the active and passive part of this process: the rise and evolution of its knowledge and its actual rise and evolution in the course of history are just the two different sides of the same real process. (Lukács, 1971: 21)

Lukács further clarifies this proposition, writing that the “identity” of thought and existence means not that the subject creates the object but “that they are aspects of one and same real historical and dialectical process” (Lukács, 1971: 204).

4. Lukács argues that history must be explained through human action, but human action itself is as much product as producer of history. “Man has become the measure of all (societal) things,” he writes, and the understanding of history consists in the “derivation of the indissoluble fetishistic forms from the primary forms of human relations” (Lukács, 1971: 185). In this sense, “man is the measure” specifically in opposition to all attempts to “measure” history from an “above” or an “outside” of history, such as a god, nature, or transhistorical laws conceived as founding for history. Yet this is no humanism in the sense of a doctrine which would derive history from a prior concept of man, or from a quasi-theological creative power attributed to the human species.

For if man is made the measure of all things, and if with the aid of that assumption all transcendence is to be eliminated without applying the same “standard” to himself or—more exactly—without making man himself dialectical, then man himself is made into an absolute and he simply puts himself in the place of those transcendental forces he was supposed to explain, dissolve and systematically replace. (Lukács, 1971: 187)

5. Here is a passage which develops this notion of mediation. This passage is particularly important for showing that the transcendence of the antinomies for which Lukács calls is not a one-sided predominance of the subject.

The dialectical process, the ending of a rigid confrontation of rigid forms, is enacted essentially *between the subject and the object*. . . . [Only] the relativising

or the interpenetration of the subject and the object themselves, . . . only if “the true [were understood] not only as substance but also as subject”, only if the subject (consciousness, thought) were both producer and product of the dialectical process, and if, as a result the subject moved in a self-created world of which it is the conscious form and only if the world imposed itself upon it in full objectivity, only then can the problem of dialectics, and with it the abolition of the antitheses of subject and object, thought and existence, freedom and necessity, be held to be solved. (Lukács, 1971: 142)

The world “imposing itself upon [the subject] in full objectivity” seems to mean that something like reification persists in a weakened form.

Lukács’ rejection of the idealistic notion of the proletariat as a free agent overcoming all structure comes through clearly in these passages. Instead, he affirms that the proletariat is structured and that only as such is it an agent of structural transformation. Its objectivity is the condition of its subjectivity while also posing obstacles to its self-expression.

Out of these scattered passages a sort of theory emerges, one which Lukács himself did not articulate but which helps to understand how he could have believed his position was truly dialectical rather than a replay of the old transcendental tune or a regressive return to *Gemeinschaft*. According to this theory human action in modern societies, whether capitalist or socialist, continually constructs reified social objects out of the underlying human relations on which it is based. The reified form of objectivity of these social objects gives a measure of stability and control while at the same time sacrificing significant dimensions of the human lives they structure.

The chief difference between capitalism and socialism is not that the one is reified and the other entirely free of reification, but rather that the one stands or falls with reification while the other can support a continual mediating and transforming of reified social objects in order to realize the potential of those sacrificed dimensions. Thus Lukács concedes that “Even the proletariat can only overcome reification as long as it is oriented towards practice. And this means that there can be no single act that will eliminate reification in all its forms at one blow; it means that there will be a whole host of objects that at least in appearance remain more or less unaffected by the process” (206).

Here Lukács avoids saying that reification persists under socialism *in principle* rather than as vestige or “appearance.” But just how different is his actual position from the one I have sketched? He remarks, for example, that “the world which confronts man in theory and in practice exhibits a kind of objectivity which—if properly thought out and understood—need never stick fast in an immediacy similar to that of forms found earlier on. This objectivity must accordingly be comprehensible as a constant factor mediating between past and future and it must be possible to demonstrate that it is everywhere the product of man and of the development of society” (159). It is hard to see the difference between this good “objectivity” and the persistence of something

like reification in a context where it has become more easily changeable instead of rigidly determining for the human lives it shapes.

## V

I want to return now to the question of whether this outcome fulfills the program of classical German philosophy as Lukács promises. That program aimed to establish the absolute autonomy of reason. The term Lukács employs to refer to this desired outcome is the “identical subject-object.” The pursuit of this elusive goal gives rise, Lukács argues, to three “demands of reason”: “1) the principle of practice; 2) dialectical method; 3) history as reality” (Feenberg, 1981a: 120). Each of these requirements emerges from the self-critical development of classical German philosophy.

What Lukács calls “the grandiose conception that thought can only grasp what it has itself created” leads to the demand to “master the world as a whole by seeing it as self-created” (121–122). This ambition is frustrated by the contingency of content, as we have seen. The response of classical German philosophy was “to find the subject of thought which could be thought of as producing existence without any *hiatus irrationalis* or transcendental thing-in-itself” (122). This led to a search for a practical subject which could be conceived as creating its objects through and through. Lukács traces the problems classical German philosophy encounters as it tries to fulfill the program with one after another practical subject.

The ethical subject in Kant constitutes its object, the ethical act, without remainder, but as we have seen it cannot intervene in the phenomenal world. The aesthetic subject creates a work that is entirely informed by its intent. Art reveals that “the essence of praxis consists in annulling that *indifference of form towards content* that we found in the thing-in-itself” (126). This is a type of rationality that is not formal but is oriented toward the content which it creates. But art is a marginal domain in bourgeois society. The principle of practice cannot deliver a “self-created” world until a subject is identified that is effective and central. The turning point in this search comes with Hegel’s discovery that the rationality associated with artistic practice can be generalized as historical dialectics.

In what does this historical rationality consist? Hegel introduces the concept of mediation to explain it, in contrast with the formalistic notion of conformity to law. Given its importance for Lukács’ argument, it is surprising how little explanation he offers of Hegel’s understanding of this concept. From Hegel himself and his commentators we learn that mediation does not proceed by classification under universal concepts, but rather unfolds the implicit meaning of its immediate starting point. In a sense then the immediate is always already mediated if only inarticulately. There are no things-in-themselves, “sense data” or other preconceptual entities that are given form for the first time by thought

since the essential element in which thought moves, meaning, is already present in its “material” presupposition.

Time now belongs to the unfolding process of meaning-making. It is time that separates the implicit meaning from its explicit form and the gap between them is overcome in time. The overcoming is a practical act of a subject, but in what medium does the subject act? This brings us to Lukács’ third demand of reason, history as reality, reality understood in the eminent sense as that which is most real. For Hegel, the proper realm of mediation is history in which a collective subject—the nation—returns to itself from its alienation in a sequence of outward forms through which it develops. History in this sense encompasses all human achievements and experiences, including, Lukács argues, our experience of nature.

But Hegel’s methodological insight was more advanced than his concrete historical understanding. Although the nation serves as actor in his scheme, it is instrumentalized by the cunning of reason and does not achieve its own goals. As a result Hegel finds no historical actor able to fully realize the principle of practice and his thought wanders off into the airy realm of Absolute Spirit where it loses touch with history and again encounters reality as a kind of unmediated thing-in-itself.

These reflections on Hegel’s failure end the second part of the reification essay. But the third part introduces other methodological considerations that explain more clearly the reasons for that failure. In Lukács’ interpretation, dialectical method has two additional aspects incompatible with Hegel’s designated historical subject. On the one hand, dialectics holds that the “contents” of history are not isolated facts but draw their meaning from their functional relation to the social totality. The nation as Hegel understands it cannot account for the place of economic life in the totality. On the other hand, history consists in the unfolding of the intrinsic potentialities or tendencies of those contents. Lukács explains:

To go beyond . . . immediacy can only mean the genesis, the “production” of the object. But this assumes that the forms of mediation in and through which it becomes possible to go beyond the immediate existence of objects as they are given, can be shown to be the *structural principles of construction and the real tendencies of the movement of the objects themselves*. In other words, intellectual genesis must be identical in principle with historical genesis. (155)<sup>13</sup>

Not the nation but the class, specifically the proletariat, is in a position to reconcile intellectual genesis and history. This it accomplishes when it transforms the reified form of objectivity of the society in conformity with the historical tendency toward socialism. This is what allows Lukács to claim that the proletariat is the legitimate heir of the idealist program.

But is this sufficient? In his important book on the history of Marxist thought, Martin Jay argues that Adorno “irrevocably demolished the foundations of

Western Marxism's initial concepts of totality," that is to say, *History and Class Consciousness* (Jay, 1984: 274). Jay claims that Lukács never succeeds in satisfying the exorbitant demand of the *verum-factum* principle. But in attempting to do so, he elevates the proletariat to the subject of an "expressive totality"—the term is Althusser's—which comes home to itself from the alienated world it creates.

I challenged this critique in response to an earlier article in which Jay first formulated it, arguing that Lukács' notion of totality was "decentered." By this I meant that Lukács had no intention of reducing the world to proletarian consciousness because the proletariat was itself a part of the world, albeit a special part able to alter the form of objectivity in which the world appeared.<sup>14</sup> But Jay replied that this simply confirmed his own view that Lukács failed to carry out the idealist program to which he was committed. The decentering of the proletariat reinscribes the thing-in-itself (Jay, 1984: 108–109n).<sup>15</sup>

The crux of the argument comes down to the understanding of mediation in Hegelian dialectics. If mediation is extrinsic to the presupposition it mediates, then the problem of the thing-in-itself does indeed return. But if the mediated lies wholly within the subject of mediation, then is not its alterity abolished in a perfectly idealist manner?

This is precisely the dilemma Lukács attempts to avoid with his *translation* of the requirements of *verum-factum* into the methodological concept of a coincidence of genesis and history. The world is not merely there in its facticity nor is it literally manufactured by the proletariat. The world—and this includes the proletariat—is bursting out of its reified form of objectivity. The violent actions in which that explosion takes place realize the objective tendencies identified in Marx's *Capital*. In so doing those acts also construct new social objects such as workers' councils which alter the meaning of those tendencies by changing the functional relation of the elements of society to the totality (Lukács, 1970: 67–68). The "indifference of form towards content" is overcome. The acts in which the revolutionary proletariat shatters its reified form of objectivity (historical content) open up a new way of being in the world, a new realm of meaning (form).

The logical structure of Lukács' argument is Hegelian although he concretizes Hegel's dialectic in an unexpected way. And like Hegel, Lukács thinks he can satisfy the demands of reason without denying objectivity. The key is, as Fichte supposed, eliminating the notion of some prior condition of knowledge and action entirely free of meaning, a thing-in-itself on which meaning is imposed. But this is not Fichte's solution; the subject cannot abolish the prior condition of its own life process by a pure act of intellectual genesis.

What is new in Hegel is the notion that the prior condition is always already meaningful because it is historically produced. It is neither an inert unreflected substance nor is it created by a transcendental subject. Its comprehension in thought, its "genesis," incorporates it into the subject without eliminating its alterity as an objectivity confronting the subject. But that alterity is now time-bound rather than metaphysical. As Robert Pippin shows, Hegel's project

radicalizes critical philosophy's attempt at reason's reliance on itself alone in accounting for experience or evaluating action, but it attempts to do so . . . by avoiding or denying any assumption that such self-determination should be understood as "imposing itself" on a foreign manifold or object. . . . Whatever comes to count as a constraint or limit on thought's self-determination is itself viewed as a kind of product or result, a higher or more comprehensive level, of thought's self-determination. . . . And it is this radically extended critical . . . project that is involved in such extreme Hegelian claims as, "This pure being-on-our-own belongs to free thought, to it in its free sailing out on its own, where there is nothing under it or above it, and where we stand in solitude with ourselves alone" (Pippin, 1991: 67).

In sum, Hegel and Lukács *redefine* the autonomy of reason and the unity of subject and object it implies. In so doing they avoid Fichte's extreme idealism while preserving his rhetorical excesses, with confusing results as one would expect. In Lukács' case, we have seen this definitional procedure at work as he compresses idealist and Marxist discourses in a seamless flow. In his argument the subjective mediating activity of the proletariat addresses not a thing-in-itself external to thought but the already implicitly mediated forms created by past historical action and explained by political economy.

Determining whether this redefinition is actually successful would require a full-scale evaluation of Hegelian dialectics that I cannot perform here. But this is where the serious discussion of Lukács must begin. The questions raised by that evaluation are not merely philosophical but extend to the politics that surround Lukács' second reception in the 1960s and after. Here are some of these questions. Did Lukács effectively transform the Hegelian concept of mediation into an instrument of social critique? Can Lukács' argument shed light on the role of self-consciousness in the identity politics and environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s and the later emphasis on performativity in feminist and gay political theory?<sup>16</sup> What is the connection, if any, between Lukács' critique of reification and contemporary politics of technology?<sup>17</sup> Are the "potentialities" and "tendencies" that surface in these various political movements able to carry the burden of a historic promise of redemption, even though they lack the power to make the sort of revolution Marx and Lukács foresaw?

## VI

The inadequacy of Adorno's critique should now be clear. Lukács' proletariat is no transcendental ego gobbling up reality out of rage at its independence from thought. That is a poor caricature of a far more interesting and complex position that shares much with Adorno's own views.

Adorno appeals to the "non-identity" of subject and object against Lukács' purportedly idealistic identity philosophy, but in fact Lukács anticipates Adorno's approach. In Adorno concept and object stand in an unsurpassable



tension. The concept refers to potentialities unrealized in the limited, concrete object but at the same time the object's content overflows the limits of the concept. Conceptuality is a kind of straight jacket viewed in one way, but from another angle it holds a redemptive promise. A corresponding duality haunts the object. It is imperfect and flawed, to be sure, but also repressed within the narrow confines of its conceptual form. Hence, "the concept is both more and less than the elements included in it" (Adorno, 2008: 7–8).

Adorno's theory of nonidentity is developed in quite different directions from Lukács' praxis philosophy, however, the theories converge in an important respect. Both emerge out of the breakdown of the neo-Kantian doctrines in which Adorno and Lukács were trained. Both concretize the neo-Kantian problematic of validity and existence by substituting a dialectic of social form and content for the original epistemological framework. This shows up in Lukács' theory of reification, precisely where Adorno misses it.

In Lukács the proletariat appears as the "object" repressed by its reified "concept." The proletariat overflows its concept almost literally in rejecting its own commodification. Its revolt is not motivated by an allergy to reification as Adorno charges but by the restriction of its life process, by unemployment, hunger, and injustice comprehended as consequences of the commodity form of labor. Revolution in Lukács is Adornian nonidentity with a vengeance. It fulfills Adorno's demand for respect for the dignity of the concrete.

But it is true that Lukács satisfies this demand only in a limited domain. The concrete content that breaks out of the conceptual straight jacket of reification is the laboring human being. Nature does not figure prominently or even consistently in Lukács' argument. In the first essay of his book, a famous footnote denies that there is a dialectic of nature (24n). But at the end of the reification essay, Lukács speculates about the possibility of constructing a dialectical system in which an "objective dialectic" of nature would have a place (207). Lukács also discusses nature in the context of the "socialization of society" in modern times, as a properly social form of objectivity—reification—replaces the natural form of objectivity of social relations in pre-capitalist society (233ff.). Finally, the question of nature is posed in relation to the genesis and validity of modern natural science. Lukács attempts to avoid relativism while simultaneously maintaining the social origins of modern science (131; Lukács, 2000: 103–108, 114–118). But missing in all this is any hint of a "dialectic of enlightenment" such as we find in Adorno that would address the repression of nature by overweening reason.<sup>18</sup>

The absence of such a reflection is related to the rather small place occupied by psychology and technology in Lukács' argument. He does note the reifying consequences of mechanization briefly in the reification essay, but that is the sum total of his dealings with what becomes the most important issue for the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Technology poses problems for Lukács' theory he was ill equipped to address. By the time he finally comes to the realization that the revolution is not about to overtake the advanced countries

of Europe but will remain confined to Russia for a long time to come, he reasons about politics exclusively in Leninist terms. He does not elaborate an independent theory of the failure of the revolution in the West.

Of course, the theory of reification could be deployed for this purpose, and that is precisely what the Frankfurt School did. It is in recognition of this that Adorno calls Lukács' book "important" despite his harsh critique, and elsewhere praises Lukács as "the first dialectical materialist to apply the category of reification systematically to philosophy" (Adorno, 1977: 151). The triumph of reification over the resistances on which Lukács counted must be explained. There was a real contest when Lukács was writing and the outcome was not foreordained. What Lukács failed to understand, as Timothy Hall explains was "the subtle ways in which the institutions of bourgeois society *mediated* the Marxian concepts of class consciousness and class politics . . ." (Hall, 2011). In addressing this issue the Frankfurt School made a definite advance.

The Frankfurt School offered an explanation based on a radical critique of technology, of the impact of regimentation at work, abundance of consumer goods, media propaganda, and so on, all of which served to integrate the working class into the system and sap its revolutionary potential. This critique was rooted in Lukács' concept of reification, but with the collapse of revolutionary expectations it veered close at times to the conservative and nostalgic cultural pessimism so prevalent in Germany. But Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were always careful to preserve a reference to a possible breakthrough to a liberated society, however improbable they judged that prospect. As Adorno and Horkheimer write, "The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past but the redemption of the hopes of the past" (1972: xv). In this they remained within the progressive tradition to which Marx and Lukács belonged. And like Marx and Lukács, they regarded dialectics as the essential instrument of any progressive critique of the dominant social sciences and the institutions of capitalist society. The adjustment to defeat did not change this framework fundamentally and this is what gives their work its peculiar elegiac quality. For all its differences with Lukács, the Frankfurt School was built on premises derived in large part from his thought.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some texts of this second reception that shaped a very negative view of Lukács include, Morris Watnick, "Relativism and Class Consciousness," in L. Labeledz (ed.) *Revisionism*. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), 142–165. Jones (1971), Hoffman (1975), Filsoufi (1977). More insightful critiques such as the book of Arato and Breines (1979) still maintain that Lukács was basically an idealist with a repressive political doctrine. Michael Löwy's (1979) more sympathetic treatment had little influence on the image of Lukács in the English-speaking world, and my own book (1981a) still less.

- <sup>2</sup> Adorno was a disappointed admirer. This may explain some uncharitable readings (Clausen, 2008: 84).
- <sup>3</sup> The Stalinist thugs to whom Adorno refers included some fairly sophisticated philosophers such as Abram Deborin. See Deborin, (1969).
- <sup>4</sup> References to Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* will be signaled by page numbers alone in parentheses.
- <sup>5</sup> Gramsci even wrote an article in *L'Ordine Nuovo* on the Russian Revolution entitled "The Revolution Against 'Capital'" (Gramsci, 1977: 34–38).
- <sup>6</sup> I address this problem in Feenberg (forthcoming 2010).
- <sup>7</sup> I have modified the English translation throughout to restore the term as "form of objectivity."
- <sup>8</sup> The influence of Lask on both Lukács and Heidegger was first noticed by Lucien Goldmann in his thesis on Kant published in 1945 (see "Anhang"). A recent contribution to the discussion, besides Kisiel's, is Feher (1992).
- <sup>9</sup> Generalized as a method, this is also one of the foundations of contemporary science and technology studies. It is one of several "dereifying" procedures for understanding scientific-technical thought. See, for example, Suchman (2007).
- <sup>10</sup> I analyze the difference between contemplative and transforming practice in Feenberg (2005: chap. 4).
- <sup>11</sup> This is the crucial problem of the "unity of theory and practice." I discuss the complicated path by which Marx and Lukács arrive at this concept in Feenberg (1981a: chaps. 2 and 5). See also Löwy (1979).
- <sup>12</sup> Lukács' book on Lenin (1970: 76–77) considers socialism as an institutional innovation rather than an abolition of institutions such as occurred during the phase of "war communism." I discuss his political theory and his illusions about the Soviet state in Feenberg (1981a: chap. 5) and Feenberg (2002); see especially 66–69.
- <sup>13</sup> For a critical discussion of this methodological approach, see Rockmore (1992: 134ff.).
- <sup>14</sup> In my article I related Lukács' concept of totality to the Hegelian dialectic of essence and appearance (Feenberg, 1981b).
- <sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this debate, see Grumley (1986).
- <sup>16</sup> For a discussion of "standpoint epistemologies" that stem loosely from Marx and Lukács, see Harding (1986: chap. 6).
- <sup>17</sup> I discuss this question in Feenberg (forthcoming 2010).
- <sup>18</sup> For an interesting account of Lukács' difficulties with nature, see Vogel (1996: chap. 1).

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## Chapter 11

# Returning to Lukács: Honneth's Critical Reconstruction of Lukács' Concepts of Reification and Praxis

Timothy Hall

### Introduction

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in the social and political thought of Georg Lukács across a range of disciplines. This includes a renewed interest in his theory of reification (*Verdinglichung*) in social, political, and cultural theory and a renewed interest in his theory of critical realism in literary and art theory.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I want to explore Axel Honneth's critical reconstruction of Lukács' concepts of reification and praxis in his Tanner lectures published as an extended essay entitled *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*.<sup>2</sup> As one of the central contemporary practitioners of critical social theory today—a tradition of social theory that Lukács has some claim to have founded—it represents one of the most important recent rereadings of Lukács. As such it represents an inescapable point of reference for anyone interested in the contemporary significance of Lukács' work. The essay focuses on Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*<sup>3</sup> and, in particular, the central theoretical essay in the collection "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat."<sup>4</sup>

Honneth's reading of the Reification essay is naturally selective and carried out from the perspective of his own "action-theoretical" model of critical theory based on the concept of acknowledgment or recognition (*Anerkennung*). The analysis of the key concept of reification, however, is undertaken in admirable detail and is sure to represent a significant contribution to the debate about the meaning and usefulness of Lukács' central critical concept today.<sup>5</sup> However, my particular interest, in this chapter, will be what Honneth's return to Lukács forecloses. For while his interpretation is inevitably selective it is also, I will suggest, idiosyncratic. An indication of this can be found in the fact that there is no substantive engagement with the central metacritical section of the essay, for example, or any attempt to explain the significance of this section for an understanding of Lukács' thought. This is odd because clearly *there is* a continuous line of argument running between the predominantly "sociological"

elaboration of the concept of reification in section 1 of the Reification essay and the “philosophical” development of the metacritique of idealist philosophy in section 2—or at least Lukács clearly intended there to be. In Lukács’ eyes a preoccupation with the problem of reification represents one of the distinguishing characteristics of “modern critical philosophy.”<sup>6</sup> It is therefore self-evident for him that a careful reading and critique of Kantian and post-Kantian idealism will be pivotal to the overcoming of reification.

A further indication of the idiosyncrasy of Honneth’s reading can be found in his unwillingness to engage with Lukács’ social theory. This is particularly odd given the sociological emphasis that Honneth gives to his own conception of critical social theory. According to Honneth the central significance of “second generation” Frankfurt School critical theory lay in its recovery of the social—a notion that had undergone a “definitive repression” in the hands of Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>7</sup> Arguably Lukács’ most distinctive contribution to social theory—the sociological generalization of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, with the help of Weber’s concept of rationalization, in the theory of reification—is abruptly dismissed as an unresolved ambiguity in his thought.<sup>8</sup> The question is: what significance can Lukács’ theory of reification have today if one of the distinguishing characteristics of his approach is summarily dismissed in this manner? My concern, then, in this chapter will be what Honneth’s influential rereading precludes and what the significance of this might be for a critical social theory today.

At the outset, however, I want to endorse, broadly, what Honneth takes to be one of the principal blind spots of contemporary social and political theory and one of the central motivations for returning to Lukács’ concept of reification. This is the almost exclusive focus—or even fixation—of much contemporary social and political thought on questions of social justice. The upshot of this has meant insufficient attention being paid to what Honneth refers to as social pathologies, understood as disorders in processes of development or “misdevelopments” (*Fehlentwicklungen*).<sup>9</sup> Indeed as Honneth notes it is quite possible that “a society can demonstrate a moral deficit without violating generally valid principles of social justice.”<sup>10</sup> This, in my view, is a tremendously fruitful claim and one which perhaps captures the most significant contribution that critical social theory can make to debates around issues of social justice today. For what it acknowledges is what has been called elsewhere the fundamental entwinement of the problems of nihilism and social justice today.<sup>11</sup> This entwinement implies not just that contemporary social and political institutions are unjust but also increasingly *meaningless*. Markets, political, and legal institutions on the one hand open up and sustain social divisions and on the other systematically deprive people of agency. The loss of the capacity to shape the world means that we experience social institutions as alien—not of our own making—and nihilistic consequences follow from this. Arguably the central political experience in modernity has been one in which claims for equal participation have been lodged in the context of the devaluation of the

whole. Thus while, example, women, and racial minorities have made significant strides toward greater equality in the twentieth and twenty-first century the concomitant devaluation of the social whole means that civil and political participation is worth less. Increased formal and in some cases substantive recognition, have been accompanied by a general devaluation in agency and the progress loss of the opportunities to transform the social world.

For this reason a critical theory of society cannot restrict itself to questions of social justice and democratization. It must also address the interrelated problem of the loss of agency and the nihilistic effect that follows from this. While Honneth's conception of social pathology appears to acknowledge this, I am skeptical as to whether his conception of critical theory provides the resources for thinking through the manifold implications of this entwinement. For although he appears to reject the "moral" interpretation of reification as offered by theorists like Nussbaum, he nonetheless insists on understanding reification as a set of *individual* attitudes—detached, observational patterns of behavior—which have a social and political significance only when taken collectively.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Lukács is much more concerned with the *de*-individuating characteristics of social rationality and in the way that rational social institutions appear to preclude human intervention and initiative. This is to say that, like Weber, he is interested, principally, in the nihilistic effect of the social rationality informing modern institutions and practices.

In part this difference is methodological with Honneth suspicious of *any* account of a collective subject and opting instead for a form of methodological individualism albeit heavily inflected by Foucault's micrological analysis of power relations.<sup>13</sup> However, its significance goes beyond this. For it is not necessary to subscribe to Lukács' class theory of political agency in order to accept his account of the crisis of political subjectivity contained in his conception of social rationality. Indeed I will suggest that it is important to bear in mind, when reevaluating Lukács' thought today, the manner in which his account of social domination outstrips his prescription for overcoming it. Consequently I will suggest that while Honneth is right to seek to broaden the debate in contemporary social and political thought by returning to Lukács' concept of reification, he misses the opportunity to broaden this debate still further by underestimating the crisis of political subjectivity that Lukács foresaw.

## Reification as the Forgetting of Recognition

It is precisely to Lukács that Honneth turns for help in explicating, theoretically, the nature of contemporary social pathologies. While Lukács' concept of reification was developed in quite different circumstances Honneth notes that the phenomenon that it describes has resurfaced in diverse areas: in contemporary literature (Carver, Houellebecq, Brodkey, Jelinek); in the exploration



of the contemporary capacity to manipulate one's own desires and emotions in cultural sociology and social psychology; through the analysis of the phenomenon of objectivization in moral and political philosophy; and with the removal of experiential standpoints in reductive naturalism evidenced in a range of scientific disciplines. In Honneth's view these different contemporary references to "reification" call for a renewed attempt to think through the various aspects of reification at a general theoretical level. Lukács' Reification essay represents the logical starting point for this theoretical work.

At bottom Lukács' concept of reification describes a process whereby a relationship between people takes on a thing-like character, acquiring an illusory objectivity in the process. Despite being nothing other than a relationship between people, the illusory realm of things/objects appears, to all intent and purposes, to be independent of human influence and control and governed by its own autonomous laws. The model for this analysis is, as Honneth notes, Marx's famous analysis of the commodity form in *Capital*. Unlike Marx, however, Lukács' concept of reification aims to provide an account of the forms of objectivity in bourgeois society, along with the forms of subjective corresponding to them, *in their entirety*. Whereas, therefore, Marx's account of the fetishism of commodities was restricted to, primarily economic life, Lukács advances a general theory of social illusion—that is to say an account of the illusion inherent in every aspect of bourgeois social existence and culture.

Despite the origins of the concept of reification in exchange relations in the capitalist market Honneth distinguishes three forms of reification in Lukács' essay: the reification of objects/nature; the reification of other persons; and the reification of the self. The first describes a process in which objects/nature are divested of their material qualities and become "abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members," the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculation.<sup>14</sup> The second relates to the process in which relations between people appear as properties of things and the third refers to the process of self-commodification that comes to characterize life under Capitalism. According to Honneth, Lukács' insistence on the fundamental *unity* of these different forms of reification and their common origination in the compulsions of the market represents a serious deficiency in Lukács' analysis. Such an approach, he contends, is not only reductive but, further, ends up treating in an a priori manner what is, at bottom, a fundamentally empirical question that is the relation between the different forms of reification.<sup>15</sup>

As a theory of social illusion, Lukács' theory of reification naturally gives rise to questions about the precise character of the error that it designates. For Honneth there are three possible interpretations of this: in the first, reification is an epistemic category error in which objects, persons, and our own selves are mis-cognized; in the second, it represents a particular type of moral failing in which others end up being instrumentalized in our actions; and in the third and final case is represents a distorted form of praxis.<sup>16</sup> Honneth quickly, and

in my view, quite correctly rejects the first two possible scenarios. The multi-layered and deep-lying quality of the phenomenon means that it is impossible to characterize as a mere epistemic category error.<sup>17</sup> Equally, however, the impersonal character of reification—its socio-pathological character—make it difficult to categorize as a purely moral failing.<sup>18</sup> Rather than looking to lay the blame for reifying behavior on the moral deficiencies of individuals, we should, Honneth thinks, be attending to the ways in which individuals are socialized into certain patterns of reified behavior. Hence, reification is more of a social fact than it is a moral failing. Since reification represents neither a cognitive error nor a peculiar moral failing this leaves only one possibility: that it constitutes a deficient or distorted form of praxis.<sup>19</sup>

It is at this juncture in Honneth's reading of Lukács that his own agenda comes very much to the fore. If reification describes a deficient form of praxis then the question inevitably arises as to what a non-distorted or genuine praxis consists in? For Honneth, Lukács' entire analysis begs the question of its normative basis.<sup>20</sup> While Lukács himself eschews this question as entailing a backslide into idealist moral theory, Honneth rejects this argument as at best gestural and at worst totalizing and insists on the question of the normative basis of the theory of reification being raised.<sup>21</sup> If reifying modes of behavior are ultimately distorted forms of social praxis then, he argues, it must be possible to specify, in positive terms, the *genuine* forms of praxis that they are a distortion of.<sup>22</sup>

At this point Honneth "fillets" Lukács' argument, rejecting the objectivist and totalizing aspects and retaining its practical and subjectivist aspects. Reifying forms of behavior cannot represent deficient forms of praxis as seen from some totalizing, "finalistic" perspective. Rather they must be deficient in a practical sense, that is to say, as deficient in respect of some positively specifiable account of mutual recognition between subjects. In this light the contemplative standpoint which characterizes the subject in capitalist society for Lukács is interpreted by Honneth as a distorted form of recognition in which subjects are characterized by the inability to empathetically engage with the world and with others.

This is a crucial juncture in Honneth's reconstructive argument for by insisting on the question of the normative basis of Lukács' theory he succeeds in substituting his own conception of social praxis—as reciprocal recognition achieved through moral struggle—for Lukács' more negative and more improvised notion. For while Lukács discusses at some length in the Reification essay, and in the volume as a whole, the character of proletarian praxis it is reasonably clear that he did not think that this was objectively specifiable. Rather the forms and meanings of social praxis had to be forged in the confrontation with bourgeois praxis. Inevitably this was a boot-strapping exercise and not, as Honneth contends, a form of struggle carried out under the normative ideal of full recognition between persons. For Honneth, however, this stage in the argument offers the opportunity for a "supplemental analysis" of Lukács' theory in

which the essential affinities with Heidegger's analysis of the care structure of Being, with Dewey's pragmatism and Cavell's conception of the primacy of the practical, are set out all with the aim of demonstrating how the concept of reification is derived from the more fundamental concept of recognition.

While Honneth remains fundamentally sympathetic to Lukács' attempt to uncover the social origin to reification—in contrast to the above-mentioned figures—his reconstruction departs, decisively, from Lukács' approach. For Honneth the different forms of reification represent a *forgetting* of the prior act of recognition underpinning our relation to world, to others, and ourselves. The notion that all reification is at bottom an act of forgetting is one that Honneth takes from Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>23</sup> But, as suggested, the analysis of how this forgetting comes about takes a fundamentally different form from that essayed by Lukács or Adorno and Horkheimer. For Honneth there is no *necessary* connection between these forms of forgetting—they do not all derive from the “logic of the commodity” in some sense. Rather the relationship between the different forms of forgetting is an empirical question.<sup>24</sup> While these forms of forgetting have a “social aetiology,” Lukács' own (Marxist) sociology is of little value in the task of tracing this in Honneth's view.

To summarize, then, the key aspect of Honneth's reconstructive reading of Lukács': reification is a deficient form of social praxis that is derivative of an authentic (non-deficient) form of social praxis. As such it derives from the more fundamental concept of recognition. Lukács himself only partially understands this which makes his analysis of the phenomenon of limited use. While he endeavors to find a social origin to the phenomenon his reductive and totalizing approach means that he runs together different forms of reification and precludes empirical research into the different forms. By showing the ways in which the critique of modern society as reified, presupposes the theory of recognition Honneth seeks to recover its empirical application.

### Social Praxis as Ontological Risk

There is much, I think, to recommend in Honneth's reading of Lukács. His analysis is detailed and his readings of key passages of the Reification essay are fine-grained and this serves as a corrective to the tendency for concept of reification to be used in an imprecise and “catch-all” fashion. As a critical term of art it takes on a renewed precision in Honneth's hands which is important. I think he is also basically correct to interpret reifying behavior as a form of distorted social praxis. For reasons that Honneth sets out well, reification cannot be a mere “epistemic category mistake” nor a particular kind of moral failing and it clearly goes against both the letter and spirit of Lukács' thought to interpret it as such. The affinities that Honneth sketches out—and the contrasts that he draws—both with Heidegger's fundamental ontology and American pragmatism are also legitimate and important and invite further

research on the connections between these different schools of thought. For example, Honneth's important point that, for Lukács, an alternative form of social praxis is not phenomenologically available in the way that it appears to be in Heidegger in the category of the "ready-to-hand."<sup>25</sup> As Honneth, correctly notes in my view, the emergence of an alternative social praxis is, for Lukács, conditional on the overcoming of capitalism. However, for other reasons that I want to turn to now, I think the reading of Lukács' concepts of reification and praxis are seriously flawed. For while Honneth rightly regards the two concepts as closely linked, he loses sight of the improvised and spontaneous character of praxis. For this reason I think he misses an opportunity to broaden the debate in contemporary "left" social and political thought with its tendency to become fixated on the concept of justice.

My argument then is that Honneth's reconstruction of Lukács ends up converting his theory of praxis into a form of moral theory. This is to say that the concept of praxis is transformed, in Honneth's hands, from a nonrule guided and essentially improvised form of action, to a form of moral theory in which action is carried out under the idea/ideal of a social praxis founded on full recognition. This is a large claim and one that I cannot demonstrate, satisfactorily, here. It seems incontrovertible, however, that Honneth, for all his differences with Habermas, follows him in reformulating critical social theory along broadly transcendental lines. While he challenges Habermas' concept of social differentiation—he encases his own dynamic accounts of social recognition in the different spheres of modern society in a communicative ethics. Thus struggles for recognition produce consensus which are themselves normative grounded in the possibility of uncoerced agreement.<sup>26</sup> This, I will suggest, runs directly counter to Lukács' own attempt to ground a critical theory of society in the concept of praxis and define the latter in contradistinction to moral theory. The loss of the improvised quality and inherently riskful character of Lukács' concept of praxis in Honneth's reconstruction is, in my view, the loss of what is most distinctive about it—what links it to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, on the one hand, and Leninist Vanguardism on the other.<sup>27</sup> It also loses sight of what is most distinctive about Lukács' attempt to transcend the contemplative relation to the world and reverse the immemorial domination of theory over practice in Western thought. For this reason it represents a missed opportunity to inject into contemporary debates hitherto unconsidered forms of action as well as overlooked forms of social pathology.

It is possible, I believe, to point to three aspects of Honneth's reconstruction to understand where it goes wrong. First, his insistence that the theory of reification has a normative basis and his related claim, which underpins his supplemental reading, that non-distorted social praxis be capable of elaboration in positive terms. Second his underestimation of the innovative character of Lukács' sociology. And finally, a lack of engagement with the metacritical section of the Reification essay and his tendency to regard reification as a purely sociological concept.

While Lukács devotes a good deal of time, in the Reification essay and the volume as a whole, to elaborating his concept of proletarian praxis there is little evidence to support Honneth's view that this takes the form of a practical political struggle carried out under the idea of full recognition. As Honneth himself acknowledges Lukács not only eschews moral characterizations of his concept of praxis but actively seeks to define his concept of praxis in contradistinction to it. The basis of Lukács' rejection of moral theory is not, as Honneth suggests, because he is committed to the project of providing a normatively neutral descriptive ontology of the social world. On the contrary, it is because, like Hegel, he thinks that moral theory *fails* when judged, immanently, according to its own criteria. Moral theory not only fails to transform the social world that operates in accordance with causal laws, but it further fails to provide an account of how change is possible. As Lukács states: "The task is to discover the principles by means of which it becomes *possible in the first place* for an 'ought' to modify existence."<sup>28</sup> In Lukács' lights, therefore, moral theory fails to establish the primacy of practical reason and *reverse* the domination of theory over practice; and fails to break out of the merely contemplative relation to the world. As in Hegel, this critique takes the form of uncovering a practical standpoint that is "adequate" to the social world; one in which the actions undertaken from this standpoint are capable of "gaining purchase" on social reality and in which it becomes possible for the subject to "meet with its own rationality" in the world, discovering in the norms underpinning its social institutions and practices, its own freely chosen norms. Unlike in Hegel, however, where this standpoint is excavated through a re-cognition of the phenomenal forms of knowing, in Lukács it is brought into existence through (revolutionary) practical activity. The issue is not then whether the critique of society as reified has normative import—of course it does! The point is rather whether social praxis requires a normative ideal (full mutual recognition) that can be elaborated positively in contradistinction to distorted (reified) social practice.

To put this in less theoretical terms; praxis for Lukács retains, in contrast to rule-governed moral theory, an element of improvisation. There is a crucial sense in which the proletariat, in opposing the reified forms of bourgeois society, make it up as they go along. This of course is not to equate praxis with a improvisation wholly without rules—a *modus vivendi* of some form. Praxis is at bottom an account of freedom as constraint by self-chosen norms. Everything hangs, however, on how norms figure in action. Lukács' basic argument is that if normative significance is attributed to empirical events in a determinative manner—that is as the subsumption of particular cases or applications under pre-given rules or precepts—then novelty in the ontological sense, is precluded. To put this simply: a theory that holds that all morally significant events can be subsumed under a priori rules or precepts not only fails to account for the socio-historical evolution of the rules but precludes the possibility that events and actions could have a significance beyond that captured in these precepts. By contrast, for Lukács it is vital that politics, understood as social praxis,

recognizes its historical mutable form and remains open to the possibility of events and actions whose significance transcends the horizon of our understanding. For this reason the way norms figure in action in political praxis is more akin to non-subsumptive accounts of form found in aesthetic reason than to moral theory.<sup>29</sup>

The reason why he views political praxis in these terms is reasonably clear. The position of the proletariat in bourgeois society is such that it fails, inevitably, to make sense of experience in terms of existing categories of thought and action. As Lukács puts this: where, in accordance with society's concept, it appears as the pure subject of events (the notionally free wage laborer entering into contracts as they see fit) in experience this concept is negated. That is to say as commodified labor-power it is revealed to be the pure *object* of the productive process.<sup>30</sup> So while there is an "existential surplus"—existing categories of thought and action *fail*, in the case of proletariat, to capture the experience that they purport to—there are, at the same time, no alternative categories "waiting in the wings" that the proletariat can avail itself of, in making sense of its experience. Proletarian praxis, for Lukács, is precisely this inherently risky action, carried out across economic, political, and cultural spheres, in which there is no guarantee of success. Risk is built into the action not in the contemporary sociological sense of the inescapable complexity of contemporary society but in respect of an essentially creative dimension of praxical action itself. In the face of the negation of the universal the proletariat, without ideals to realize, finds itself in search of a universal.

This is not to suggest that praxical action, for Lukács, is totally blind. The categories that could—or that will come to—comprehend this experience are in the process of becoming. They do not preexist practical activity but emerge out of it. Here I think hermeneutical models of understanding are helpful and I do not think it would be overstretching the bounds of acceptable interpretation to view Lukács' concept of the proletariat as functioning like a "hermeneutical key" rendering reified social experience intelligible but with the categories associated with this only have a retrospective application. There is little trace of this improvised quality in Honneth's reconstructed concept of social praxis however, and this has to be a concern regardless of where one stands on the issue of the potential for macrological social change in contemporary society and how the proletariat (or some revised notion of the revolutionary subject) would figure in this.

The first reason, then, that Honneth's reconstruction of Lukács' theory of reification and praxis, begins to look distinctly *un-Lukácsian* is because he removes all vestiges of improvisation from the theory of praxis and converts it, in the process, into a species of moral theory, the very thing that Lukács sought to define it against. The second reason is not unrelated to this. For while Honneth's reading of Lukács is in-depth and sociologically detailed there is a surprising lack of engagement with Lukács' sociology. Honneth tends either to dismiss this as Marxist or else regard it as an inherently unstable combination

of Marxist and Weberian approaches. Arguably, however, what Andrew Feenberg has called Lukács' sociological broadening of Marxism through Weberian sociology and philosophical deepening of Marxism through Hegelian idealism is one of Lukács' distinctive contributions to Marxism and critical social theory generally.<sup>31</sup> Honneth's engagement with Lukács' social theory is minimal and, in general, reliant on Habermas' critique in volume 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.<sup>32</sup> Yet on the basis of this engagement (or rather lack of it) he ends up imputing a base-superstructure model of society to Lukács and rejecting his account of the origin of reifying behavior as reductive. For example, he attributes to Lukács the view that the economic sphere has the power "to shape cultural life to such an extent that he regards all aspects of social life as necessary effects of economic processes."<sup>33</sup> I do not intend to go in to this in detail now but I think that it is pretty clear that this is *not* what Lukács understands by the "economic structure" of modern societies.<sup>34</sup> Rather, his approach is more akin to Hegel's than Marx's: to lay bare the reciprocal determination of the different aspects of the social structure which are taken for the most part as autonomous and self-regulating. While the economy and its conceptual representation in political economy and economic science are exemplary forms of this autonomy there is little to suggest that this is the source of the autonomous form of other aspects of the social structure. Lukács' model is invariably Hegel's concept of the self-determining whole.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the fact that for Lukács the commodity-form—or more precisely, the commodity capable of understanding itself as such (i.e. the proletariat)—is the key to both seeing the total social process behind the fragmented appearance form of society and altering it, in no way implies the reductive account of society that Honneth attributes to him either. On the contrary, it is one of the central achievements of Lukács' theory of reification to have shown that the kind of social domination that Marx uncovered in his analysis of the commodity form was precisely *not* restricted to the economic sphere but was just as much a part of the practice of modern politics and law and even the nomological and reflective sciences. Weberian sociology was central to his demonstration that reifying forms of behavior were to be found in the realms of law and politics and Hegel and Idealism general was pivotal to his account of how reification permeated our categories of thought and action.

Honneth recognizes that Lukács' theory of reification is a social generalization of the commodity form, but he criticizes Lukács for failing to make clear how this expansion was theoretically possible.<sup>36</sup> He goes on to criticize Lukács for vacillating between a functionalist account of the spread of reification on the one hand and a Weberian interpretation of rationalization as fate on the other. The point is, however, that Lukács' approach is neither of these. The argument is not functionalist because one could just as well say that a rational system of law *requires* a fully capitalized economy as the reverse and it is not fatalistic, clearly, because unlike Weber, Lukács maintained that there were immanent standpoints within the reified social whole from which it could be

transcended. To state as Honneth does that Lukács vacillates between functionalist and Weberian approaches is simply to refuse to engage with his social theory. In itself this is not a problem but the fact that his own reconstructed theory of reification draws justification from the untenability of Lukács' theory is a problem.

Possibly the most significant problem with Honneth's reading, however, is his tendency to regard Lukács' concepts of reification and praxis as *purely* sociological in character. As a consequence he does not really come to grips, in my view, with the structure of Lukács' essay or the argument implicit in its form. For in the second section of the essay—which Honneth barely mentions—Lukács attempts a metacritique of idealist philosophy on the basis of the problem of reification set out in section 1. This is a surprising oversight on Honneth's part although perhaps it is the result of his desire to return the analysis of reification and its forms to the domain of empirical sociological theory. The fact is though that Lukács' views of the projects of a sociological analysis of reification and a metacritique of idealist conceptions of reason are intricately related. The suppression of qualitative content that results from the domination of use-value in value-in-exchange, which is also to be found in the legal and administrative process in the domination of form over content, is prefigured in early modern rationalism in the transformation of the irrational content of rational systems into the unknown but, in principle, *knowable* content. This changes with the finite forms of rationalism in Kant and the problem of the thing-in-itself. For Lukács the importance of Kant is that, for the first time, occidental rationalism admits of an irreducible moment of irrationality in the concept of reason. This accounts for Lukács' interest in the Reification essay, in searching for forms of thought and action that do not suppress the qualitative content of our conceptual schemes, idealism and critical social theory share the same fundamental aims. While Lukács believes that idealist philosophy cannot but fail in its attempts to resolve the contradictions and antinomies springing from its base, its attempts to do so are of central educative significance for the proletariat seeking to overcome societal reification and forge its own categories of thought and action in the process.<sup>37</sup> Intriguingly Lukács regards this standpoint, not only as the site of revolutionary overcoming, but also, *en passant*, the solution to the idealist aporia of the thing-in-itself. It does this by representing the dissolution of the antinomy of system and history that, Lukács thinks, is the outcome of Hegel's thought which constitutes his own version of the aporia of the thing-in-itself.<sup>38</sup>

This is not the place to take up in detail Lukács' metacritique of idealist concepts of reason but suffice it to note the consequences, for Honneth's reconstruction, of not engaging with it. For it is clear that Lukács' thinks that the phenomenon of reification permeates the very categories of thought and action themselves not in a secondary way, by shoring up and justifying distorted forms of social praxis, but in a primary way by precluding the possibility of thinking the ontologically new or acting in novel and hitherto un-theorized



ways. Adorno acknowledges the same point in *Negative Dialectics* when he refers to the exchange relation as the social model of identity.<sup>39</sup> By failing to recognize and engage with this, Honneth both underestimates—seriously—the phenomenon of reification and exempts his own concept of critical social theory from the necessity of accounting for how it is free of the reifying tendencies that Lukács locates at the heart of modern rationalism.

## Revising the Concept of Social Praxis Today

What I've attempted to show in this chapter is that Honneth's reconstructed concept of social praxis loses sight of the improvised and spontaneous quality of Lukács' conception. Political praxis is fundamentally improvised for Lukács because it draws neither legitimacy nor orientation from existing categories of action deriving from bourgeois notions of subjectivity. If it falls back on these categories it can only misunderstand itself and the significance of its actions rendering the meaning of the present opaque. For these categories attribute a significance to social events and, in doing so, preclude the possibility that this significance could exceed what is already inscribed in them. While this transcendent signification should call forth radically new interpretations of self and world and radically new forms of action, it is instead closed off. The basic lesson drawn from the experience of moral theory is that the causally structured world, time and time again *fails* to hold the kind of significance attributed to it. The fundamental challenge that Lukács lays down to future social theorists is to outline a theory that is fundamentally *open* and that does not preclude the possibility of new forms of self-interpretation and new forms of action. Honneth's reconstructive reading does little to respond to this challenge or to the dialectic of nihilism that it posits. To reinterpret reification as an impeded form of social development in relation to one's understanding of self or other does not address this experience. But where does this leave us or what might Lukács' contribution to contemporary social and political thought be if not as Honneth suggests?

His work, I believe, remains relevant and this notwithstanding the historical demise of classical class politics. The central reason for this—as suggested in the Introduction—is his view that the problem of social justice and the problem of nihilism are intertwined. Bourgeois society is not only unjust and divided by class, it is also meaningless. This said there remain, well-documented, shortcomings in his approach. As Adorno has noted the problem with the concept of reification is the tendency to identify reification with objectification and regard all objectivity as alienated subjectivity. This tendency has led critics to point to the absence of any category of nature in the *History and Class Consciousness*, particularly where nature is understood as that part of the object not mediated by the subject. It also implies that paradoxically, for Lukács, a wholly dereified society is one *without* social institutions—that is without objective

social forms that *mediate* subjective action. For this reason Lukács' theory begins to look like an ontological version of Trotsky's thesis of permanent revolution. In Adorno's view, however, this ends up simply negating—abstractly—reified social relations. He argues that if the concept of proletarian praxis cannot account for the reinstatement of the social world (which unavoidably involves some process of objectification) then it becomes indistinguishable from idealism.<sup>40</sup> It becomes indistinguishable in two senses; first, and contrary to Lukács' expressed aim, it appears to exhaust the object and imply an ontological closure; second, and consequentially, by laying emphasis on the subjective side of the object he loses sight of the objective mediation of action and any possible account of the reinstatement of society. At this juncture Adorno points to the "institutionalism" of late Hegel or the political realism on Marx's Critique of the Gotha Programme with its emphasis on the importance of the plan.<sup>41</sup> Adorno's point here is neither to defend the mature Hegel's conservative politics nor to extol the virtues of the five-year plan but rather to insist on the importance of the finite moment of objectification in proletarian praxis—that is that point at which subjective meaning *becomes* objective institution and is actualized.

In my view if reification is to have a critical significance today it must be distinguished from the concept of objectification. For if this distinction is not made, there is a danger that, proletarian praxis will be unable to acknowledge *any* of its actualized objective forms. This will leave it open to the kind of reversals that Hegel argued befell the concept of absolute freedom in the French Revolution. As Adorno saw, however, reification and objectification can only be distinguished on the basis of a duality of subject and object. The concept of praxis cannot be premised on the identity of subject and object because this would imply the exhaustion of the object and the overcoming of objectivity as such.

Honneth likewise recognizes the need to distinguish between reification and objectification but from a profoundly different perspective. For whereas Adorno's critical theory responds to the challenge of Lukács' thought of providing a fundamentally open theory that doesn't preclude the possibility of the ontologically new, Honneth abandons this altogether in reverting to a Neo-Kantian position. Whereas Adorno's critique of Lukács radicalizes Lukács' insights, Honneth loses them altogether.<sup>42</sup>

If the demarcation of reification and objectification represents one important revision of Lukács' social theory today then another would clearly be the broadening of the concept of praxis to involve other non-class-related forms of social praxis. While Lukács was largely silent on other (i.e. non-class-related) forms of reification there are, I think, good grounds for supposing that he did not think that praxis and proletarian praxis were identical. The central dialectic that his work addresses is the unredeemed promise of modernity: that is to say, how emancipation from (first) nature ends up in subjugation to a "second nature" of our own making.<sup>43</sup> The emancipation from first nature takes the

form of the abolition of all “natural barriers” and the possibility of understanding all human relations in purely social terms. This applies, of course, to feudal estates but also, potentially to other “natural” distinctions between human beings such as those based on gender and race. So, for example, the emergence from patriarchy holds open the possibility that relations between human beings could be understood in purely social terms. Lukács’ concept of social praxis is, therefore, at least potentially, a logic of social movements. As such it has the added advantage of recognizing that such movements aren’t simply concerned with social justice but also address the sheer senselessness of the present.<sup>44</sup>

The final qualification, again Adornian in provenance, relates to the sphere of praxical activity which today appears, more than ever, to be restricted to the micrological domain. Quite how it has come about that opportunities for invention and improvisation in the macrological domain of politics have dried up, is difficult to say but it seems to me to be undoubtedly the case. In the absence of politics in this emphatic experimental sense one must look, I believe, to the micrological domain for spontaneous, risk-laden, action. Needless to say this is no substitute for macrological praxis but it remains nonetheless praxis in a sense that Lukács would have recognized.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Honneth’s reconstruction of Lukács’s concepts of reification and praxis ends up losing sight of what is most distinctive about it: namely its essentially improvised character. In doing this he has missed the opportunity to reintroduce into contemporary social thought and political thought an alternative account of social action and historical change to the dominant normative versions. However, I have suggested that Lukács’ account of praxis, if it is to remain relevant to contemporary concerns, must; (1) be reinterpreted on a dualist basis; (2) be extended to other non-class-based forms of domination and praxis and; (3) have a micrological application.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In addition to this volume see Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (eds.) *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence (Aesthetics, Literature, Politics)* (London: Continuum Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics (HCC)* trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as the Reification essay.

- <sup>5</sup> See for example Andrew Feenberg's 'Rethinking Reification' in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* edited by Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (New York: Continuum Press, 2011). I broadly agree with Feenberg's sense of where Honneth's critique goes wrong. However I differ from him in my assessment of the contemporary significance of Lukács' social theory.
- <sup>6</sup> *HCC*, 110–111.
- <sup>7</sup> See Axel Honneth *The Critique of Power* trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
- <sup>8</sup> Honneth (2008), 23.
- <sup>9</sup> Axel Honneth 'Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy' in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.
- <sup>11</sup> Jay Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), 11.
- <sup>12</sup> I agree with Feenberg on this point but disagree with his reformulation of critical social theory around the dialectic of technology on the basis that it does not take seriously enough the nihilistic consequences of the loss of agency. See Feenberg (2011).
- <sup>13</sup> Honneth (1991). See, for example, chapter 6.
- <sup>14</sup> *HCC*, 91.
- <sup>15</sup> Honneth (2008), 22, 23–24, 77.
- <sup>16</sup> Honneth (2008), 22.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer (1979), *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. J. Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), 230.
- <sup>24</sup> Honneth (2008), 77.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>26</sup> In this regard I agree with Butler's objections to the application of recognition to the field of child psychology. The fundamental point is that a communicatively derived consensus, whose possibility is transcendently grounded, is allowed to structure social struggles for recognition and preclude the possibility of *mis*-recognition. See, for example, J. Butler, "Taking Another's View" in Honneth (2008), 103.
- <sup>27</sup> If social praxis is fundamentally improvised then this opens up the possibility of a nonauthoritarian conception of political Vanguardism. Concentrated in the party is a fundamentally practical knowledge that enables the assessment of political risk. This enables Lukács to avoid the standard criticism of imputed or attributed class consciousness. See Feenberg's excellent essay on this which presents Lukács' theory of organization as mediation of Leninist and Luxembourgian models. "Post-Utopian Marxism: Lukács and the Dilemmas of Organization," John McCormick (ed.) *Confronting Mass Technology and Mass Democracy: Essays in Twentieth Century German Political and Social Thought* (Duke University Press, 2002), 45–69.

- <sup>28</sup> *HCC*, 161 (Lukács' emphasis).
- <sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty captures this element of praxis nicely when he describes politics as an "act in the process of inventing itself." *Adventures in Dialectic* trans. Joseph Bien (London: Heinemann, 1974), 4.
- <sup>30</sup> *HCC*, 165.
- <sup>31</sup> Andrew Feenberg *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). I have argued this in greater detail in "Novelty and Identity: Lukács's and the Concept of Critical Social Theory" in Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (eds.) *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence (Aesthetics, Literature, Politics)*. (New York: Continuum Press, 2011).
- <sup>32</sup> Jürgen Habermas *The Theory of Communicative Action* Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984) chapter IV.
- <sup>33</sup> Honneth (2008), 77.
- <sup>34</sup> *HCC*, 229.
- <sup>35</sup> See the discussion on just this point in 'The Changing Function of Historical Materialism' *HCC*, 229–231.
- <sup>36</sup> Honneth (2008), 23.
- <sup>37</sup> *HCC*, 163–164.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–149. For a fuller discussion of this see "Novelty and Identity: Lukács's and the Concept of Critical Social Theory" in Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (eds.) *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence (Aesthetics, Literature, Politics)*. (New York: Continuum Press: 2011).
- <sup>39</sup> Theodor Adorno *Negative Dialectics* trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 146.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 189–192.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.
- <sup>42</sup> I tried to demonstrate that Adorno's criticism of Lukács as a radicalization of the latter's insistence of novelty and historicity elsewhere. See Timothy Hall "Reification, Materialism and Praxis: Adorno's Critique of Lukács' *Telos* 2011 (forthcoming).
- <sup>43</sup> *HCC*, 176.
- <sup>44</sup> For an excellent discussion of this see Jay Bernstein "Lukács Wake: Praxis Presence and Metaphysics" in *Sovietica* 51, ed. Tom Rockmore (Dordrecht, Riedal: 1988). For a reading of the concept of reification along these lines see Timothy Bewes *Reification and the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002).

## Chapter 12

# Living Form and Living Criticism

Katie Terezakis

Lukács frequently made reference to the “unity of continuity and discontinuity” between his early and later writings, and though his literary career spanned over six decades, encompassing a proliferation of works and legendarily persistent corrigenda, the observation holds true.<sup>1</sup> Yet even at the peak of the last century’s discussions of Lukács, partition of key elements of his thought had, and continues to exert, a magnified effect on his reception. Lukács’ own approach has probably exacerbated the misapprehension, in part because of the hyperbole with which he censures his own thought (as in the 1962 preface to *The Theory of Novel*, which declares that a healthy instinct will reject the book root and branch); in part because of his infamous ventures into dogmatic literary prescription and concomitant, facile dismissal of the “decadence” of complex bodies of work (such as Nietzsche’s); but perhaps most of all because of Lukács’ uncompromising vision of totality, which insists that even the savviest criticism is socially determined and socially accountable, and thus that the critic’s valuations are neither sovereign nor convertible into ahistoric taxonomy. Lukács will not accommodate any creative or critical work which pretends “pure historicism,” or the investigation of historical particulars without their economic and social contexts, nor will he abide the modern critic’s “anti-historicism,” which, “out of the rubble heaps of the meaningless past, [warrants itself to] arbitrarily pick out, like raisins from a cake, whatever scraps suit the fad of the moment.”<sup>2</sup> This consistent historical materialism, as Fredric Jameson has illustrated, tends to unnerve Lukács’ Western readers, proving “the idea of Georg Lukács . . . more interesting than the reality.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet for those who seek in aesthetic criticism more than a cataloging of types and lines of influence, and more than the descriptive casing of fashionable jargon around experiments in the arts, Lukács’ distinctive handling of totality, of species-being, literary form, and of the authority of critique, offers irreducible insight. To grasp that insight at the root, it is worth revisiting Lukács’ earliest book of essays, in which he sets out to question the relationship between literary text and lived experience, and in working through a range of possible answers, launches the sort of criticism in which he will subsequently engage. Reading *Soul and Form* for its determination of Lukács’ critical enterprise will

confirm something of the dynamic unity of his oeuvre; I will argue that the expression of that general project offers not only a corrective to persistent misreadings of Lukács, but a directive for contemporary literary theoretical and critical practices. In the final sections of this chapter, I want to pursue the conditions of responding to that directive.

### *Soul and Form*

The essays of *Soul and Form* were first published in 1910, when Lukács was 25. Albeit from a range of perspectives, Lukács insists, in each of them, that the life of a given people at a given time demands representative articulation; *form* is the way in which life is condensed and expressed, before its expressive relevance is consumed again in the advance of time and changing circumstance. In these essays, Lukács wants to know how form is entitled, under what conditions it conveys accurately, and how its communicative power is advanced and limited. He wants to know how form, realized in particular artworks, may fail to affect people in their everyday lives even while it intrigues them intellectually or appears to be mastered in connoisseurship. Conversely, Lukács wants to know whether the creator of forms, one from the “form creating caste” must dissociate productive life from ordinary life—whether his cares and passions must be subservient to a more abstract reality which transforms his care into products of intellection. Can the romantic, self-involved life of the artist extend to a whole community sustainably, so that through individual artistic pursuits, people are brought closer? How can anyone, born and raised in a particular class, ever conceive of the idea that he might live otherwise? How does a potential audience learn to read a work that appears before an understanding audience is constituted? How does poetic form capture a longing or a sentiment which must, after all, exceed it? Which forms do justice to the richness of reality?

Lukács uses the *Soul and Form* essays to test the gravity of different responses to this same set of questions; he pushes each essay to stage an aspect of the conflict between life and work, or to assess a consequence of that conflict. The tension Lukács means to preserve is not merely, as he says, one between “art and life,” but within and between the essays’ contesting management of that tension. György Márcus refers to Lukács’ comparison, in Lukács’ opening letter to Leo Popper, of the essay form and the court of law: the task of both is to examine, judge, and to create precedents. The dialectic of polemic and counter-polemic, Márcus points out, becomes constitutive of the Lukácsian essay, whose form is almost dialogical, and indeed gives way to dialogue in several works.<sup>4</sup> In testing the possibilities, Lukács is both testing the logical entailments of his own positions and examining the process, or the inherently “problematic” structure of the essay form, which should be able to mediate between analytic philosophy and demonstrative art, while essaying the course of such mediation.

## Romantic Disaffinity

The oscillations of *Soul and Form* are intentional; they are also characteristic of Lukács. Lukács and his interpreters have described the mood in which these essays were written as that of “romantic anti-capitalism.”<sup>5</sup> But Lukács’ romanticism cannot be fully demarcated with the desire for social solidarity and harmony with nature, so the fact that Marxist theory, once Lukács encounters it, is equipped to respond to such desire, leaves the matter of Lukács’ identification with romanticism open. Having distinguished what he finds best in romanticism in the *Soul and Form* essays, Lukács retains its key elements, the presence and consequence of which compel revision of the standard reading of Lukács’ so-called objectivization theory as well as his understanding of the posit of totality.

Unlike the nostalgic mood of romantic anticapitalism, Lukács associates the romanticism of Jena with the vision of a golden age, “but their golden age is not a refuge in a past that is lost forever . . . it is a goal whose attainment is the central duty of everyone.”<sup>6</sup> The purest form of romanticism, best characterized in the life and writing of Novalis, wants to create culture, to make cultural value an “inalienable possession”; this romanticism knows that “the only possible basis for such culture [is] an art born of technology and the spirit of matter” (*SF* 65). For Lukács, this romanticism is an active, goal-oriented venture, realistic about the demands of its technological and material context. The Jena romantics express both a will for unity and the insistence that human divergences remain forceful; assimilation does not follow from the romantic desire for parity. The synthesis for which the romantics long remains a regulative goal, a matter of the fragmentary works that record it, and only once—only in the short life of Novalis—a unity of art and life in the “practical art of living” (71). Novalis is the true poet of the Romantic school, Lukács says, the only artist whose art and work form an indivisible whole, because what was provisional in romanticism becomes absolutely provisional in him; the merely exploratory becomes categorically exploratory in Novalis; what was unsettled in the romantic urge becomes permanently unsettled in Novalis. Where Novalis’s Jena symphilosophers go wrong, Lukács finds, is in failing to preserve the dissonance that haunts the desire for unalienated communion, a desire which is not satisfied, but recorded in romantic forms. The young men of Jena overlook the difference between artistic and concrete accomplishments without even noticing their evasion, so fervently do they follow the dreams of their art. In coming to make art exclusively about art, theory about theory, the romantics lose sight of the “spirit of matter”; they lose that about which writers and readers can communicate, the stuff of cultural deeds.

Lukács’ discussion of the Jena romantics is a cautionary tale. He writes about the Jena group as if he is retiring from a company he has loved and lost; as if the promise of his own youth is under discussion, and in order to recover it, he must come to terms with how something so exceptionally gifted could become so incurably sick. The Novalis essay announces that the romantic hope of real,



unalienated lives should remain the goal of an “uncompromising, self-willed manner of writing [that will] produce the right and necessary communion between writers and readers” (67). But the romantics go wrong by thinking that reconciled language is reconciled life; as such, they lose the value-creating force which exists in the willed opposition, in text, of art and life.

That opposition is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s work. Lukács identifies with each of the author-heroes of *Soul and Form*, but none as much as Kierkegaard.<sup>7</sup> In Kierkegaard, the romantic reckoning with dissonance and disunity, preserved concurrently with the longing for harmony and unanimity and expressed together in ironic form, is epitomized. The way in which the *Soul and Form* essays explore different aspects of Lukács’ relationship with Irma Seidler—who represented the frustrated possibility of “life” to Lukács at a time in which to choose “work” meant to choose over and against life—has already been the subject of secondary study.<sup>8</sup> In Kierkegaard’s relationship with Regine Olsen, Lukács recognizes his own struggle to face up to this either/or. But Kierkegaard never loses sight of the choice that sets the work apart from the compromises of everyday life. In his thinking, there is no compromise: only the separate, the individual, the irreducibly different. Kierkegaard sees all things as concrete and as distinct, and where it seems that life is but flux and undifferentiated happening, Kierkegaard “places fixed points beneath the incessantly changing nuances of life, and draws absolute quality distinctions within the melting chaos of nuances” (47).

It is no accident that Lukács’ Novalis and Kierkegaard essays end with his rumination on the emptiness of each man’s death. Each faces death as honestly as he faces his work, each wills death without renouncing life, yet Lukács cannot bring himself to romanticize the deaths of either: in the closing paragraphs of the essays, death becomes neither destiny nor gesture, but that which turns even the most courageous souls into its slaves. There is no proud death of the writer; his end offers no fulfillment or resolution, and Lukács remains gripped by a *romantic disaffinity* which characterizes the life and thought of his subjects. The writers Lukács considers treat their own, subjective desire for unbarred communion thematically and formally, and record the terms of their failure within the attempt. But romantic disaffinity (as I have called it) does not end with this irony (for Friedrich Schlegel already so defined the ironic, romantic form). Romantic disaffinity is characterized by open rejection of “solutions” to the problem of reconciliation between subject and world. For a writer may succeed at conveying his desire and difficulty to readers, and may thereby succeed at generating and organizing genuinely meaningful communication, but the thinkers in whom Lukács is interested reject the correspondence of literary and concrete achievement.

It is in the spirit of romantic disaffinity that Lukács tests different answers to the question of the potency of form. Likewise, romantic disaffinity describes the way that Lukács’ defense of the utopian function of art—or the idea that in alienated society, art presents the ethical goal of human living and a momentary

experience of shared humanity and species values, the experience of which can orient the fight to achieve them—is perpetually countered by Lukács' parallel rejection of the Satanism of art—or the idea that art offers only a fabricated sense of value and communion, and that it thereby preserves and exacerbates human isolation, alienation, and a submissive posture toward the given social reality. To call this dissonance in Lukács a “paradox” is to risk losing sight of its active, contesting nature, for the concept of paradoxicality does not delimit the violent oscillations of Lukács' treatment, or its exertion to demythologize every portrait of artistic heroism.

Reflecting on the work of Rudolph Kassner, Lukács begins by asking whether a life devoted to great works makes possible the congruous, internally resolved existence of its author. However, Kassner, too, exemplifies romantic disaffinity, for like the “Platonist” or critic he portrays, within Kassner “‘lives something for which he seeks but cannot find a rhyme anywhere’: he will always long for something he can never reach” (37). A true Platonist in his own sense of the term, Kassner uses others' works as the stuff of self-inquiry, but faced with the “irreducible fact of his life” he can never say enough, never fall silent productively; his forms of expression remain unfilled in order to convey what little they can about the poetry of others. Kassner presents form as the “real solution” to the antithesis between poetry and criticism. He knows—as Lukács says Schlegel knows—that the right form makes the accidental necessary and the drift of tendency into rhythm and harmony. Yet Kassner can also see—as Schlegel could not—that as soon as one starts down the “weary road toward universal, model-creating life,” one's being and work are betrayed (39). Unlike Schlegel, Kassner understands that to speak of himself he must speak through others, thus Kassner alone remains anchored in reality and aware of the cover under which he must work. Visionary poetry may require the critic's recuperation in order to speak through dark times, but an awareness of the disparity between its vision and its critical portrayal is a permanent condition on active or living criticism. For Lukács, Kassner's longing for open communion is basically romantic; yet his refusal of a merely aesthetic transformation of his life's limitations, and thus his disaffinity for the dominion of form, resonates with the purest expression of romanticism in Novalis and its persistence in Kierkegaard.

As Lukács writes of Stefan George, Paul Ernst, and Charles-Louis Philippe, in an essay he pens at about same time as the *Soul and Form* essays on each writer, these men are important not because they create culture, or new forms of life, but because they insist on living both without illusions about their contemporary culture and *as if* they could call culture forth: “They create no culture, but lead a life that would merit it. The whole atmosphere of their life is best described by Kant's insightful category, the ‘as if’ . . . this unassuming heroism gives sanctity to their lives.”<sup>9</sup> In recognizing the romantic disaffinity of his writers, Lukács adopts and amplifies it. And as he says his authors must, Lukács affirms that he is also a product and an agent of the culture to which he is so

hostile. This insight, which will be incorporated into his concept of totality, becomes the very crux of Lukács' aesthetic theory: for while the task of aesthetic criticism is to confront the adversity and atomization of modern society, Lukács determines that aesthetic criticism is itself a manufactured good or item for consumption—a true product—of modern society.<sup>10</sup> From its conception in Lukács' *Soul and Form* essays, aesthetic criticism begins with the conflictual task of articulating its own intervolved derivation in the society it criticizes. Accordingly, art and aesthetic criticism are given the charge of critiquing cultural objects together with their own abstract objectification, even while they imagine alternatives, and even as every effort of imagination is treated as an outgrowth of its contemporary historical configuration. Art and aesthetic criticism are uniquely situated to narrate their own lack of autonomy, as well as their efforts to turn their epistemic limitation into meaningful reflections on their times. Yet this "forlorn totality," too, invites delusion, particularly in redemptive myths of artistic genius and artistic culture, so criticism must ever again intervene to pursue what has been excluded from narration. The oscillations studied and practiced in *Soul and Form*, or what I have called Lukács' romantic disaffinity, are contrived to play this hypercritical role, to "place fixed points beneath the incessantly changing nuances of life," to insist on value distinctions, and to reflect on the very possibility of writing and critique while reflecting the dispositional restraints of their times.

### Poverty of Spirit

Lukács finishes *Soul and Form* uncertain about the ethical consequences of his oscillations in two urgent ways. In the first place, Lukács has begun to advance the claim that form, as the expression of and judgment on a way of life, transcends the sphere of ethics. Likewise, he has allowed that the creator of form belongs to a "caste" whose duty and highest virtue is the form-creating life, as against ordinary lives and loves and, should a choice between them have to be made, as against ethical obligations and interpersonal cares. Likewise, given that the end of the form-creating life is works, or in a parlance he adopts later, "objectivizations," Lukács seems to hold that the objective work must be of inestimably higher value than the individual who produces it. Indeed, at times Lukács appears to consider the "person of the forms" a mere vehicle, and his will, if it can be called that at all, important not to the creative process itself, which happens to him as much as through him, but only insofar as he must struggle to deny himself the indulgences of "everyday life." This is troubling because it leaves Lukács unable to account for the distinctiveness and the authorial command of the authors he most admires, a consequence Lukács wrestles with throughout *Soul and Form*. Where he entertains the thought that great writers dissolve themselves as individuals in order to communicate, Lukács positions his efforts as a critic against that dissolution, resuscitating his authors

one after the other in order to study their comprehensive accomplishment. Lukács appears to be caught between a psychologistic impulse he outwardly rejects and an aesthetic position which compromises its own legitimacy by simultaneously rejecting and claiming an inherent ethical obligation.

"On Poverty of Spirit," which Lukács wrote immediately after finishing the *Soul and Form* essays, is addressed to precisely this incongruity. In it, the young man who coins the term "poverty of spirit" explains: "Work grows out of life, but it outgrows life; it has its origin among things human, but is itself nonhuman—indeed, it is counterhuman. The cement that binds the Work to the life that brings it forth, separates the two, at the same time, for all eternity: it is fashioned out of human blood" (*SF*, 209). This young man is devastated, not just because he has failed to save a friend from suicide, but because the fact that he loved and wanted to help her was a violation of that which was most truly his, his intellectual caste. In feeling emotionally and ethically compelled, he has betrayed himself. The young man is thus determined to end his own life, and two days after the conversion recorded in the dialogue he does so. The young man's categories, judgments, and final act are self-involved and convoluted, but this only brings home his basic position: neither his inappropriate handling of his friend nor his own suicidal resolution can be evaluated or resolved ethically.<sup>11</sup> Herein Lukács personifies his own romantic disaffinity. The dialogue ends with the words of the Apocalypse, which the young man marked and left open on his desk before ending his life: "I know your Works, that you are neither cold nor warm; oh, if only you were cold or warm. Because you are lukewarm, however, and are neither cold nor warm, I will spit you out of my mouth" (*SF*, 214).<sup>12</sup>

Yet "On Poverty of Spirit" is a dialogue, and though the Scriptural pronouncement of romantic disaffinity ends the work, it has been framed by its narrator, Martha. As the only woman who "speaks" in Lukács' works to this point, Martha rejects not only the young man's assessment of his relationship to her sister (the first suicide), but the very idea of "castes." An existential decision which transcends ethical categories, she argues, is a farce. Of course she fails to convince her friend, for his suicide and her letter to his parents is the literary context of the dialogue she recounts, but it is not the case, as Ágnes Heller has argued, that "the woman's truth is just as irrefutable as the hero's."<sup>13</sup> For in staging Martha's counterarguments, as well as her living presence, as against the self-destruction of the young man, Lukács is revealing the course of his acceptance and refutation of his earlier ideas. As the hidden author of the whole, Lukács neither indulges the young man's renunciation nor is he preoccupied with Martha's goodwill. Rather, what survives, in and through the ethos of a new form, is the consequence of Martha's ethical and emotional commitment as well as the faithful expression of the typicality of a certain youthful and doomed position; in the form of "Martha's" letter, both become explicit.

Lukács' dialogue is not an objectivization which exceeds or empties the individual who writes it; on the contrary, it is an actualization of his personality,

the coming into awareness of an individual creator in and through a form of writing. Equally, when Lukács speaks of the objective work in his later aesthetics, particularly once he has appropriated the thrust of the Hegelian dialectic, his claim is not that individual personality is usurped within its works, but that the achievement of form is the documentation of self-overcoming. It is only by recording the process of an individual's deepening awareness that any form can express its historical moment for the cultural group of which he is wittingly or unwittingly a part. When Lukács emphasizes the realization of works and forms, he does so after having concluded that the real tension between life and work is not suffered in the artist's everyday life, but in the self-consciousness manifest in the work. Correspondingly, when Lukács begins experimenting with typological theory (in *The Theory of the Novel*), he at first supposes that a series of representative genera best epitomize the historical advance of civilization. Yet not only in his own later criticism of that position, but even, as Jameson has shown, already within *The Theory of the Novel* itself, Lukács begins admitting that ideal forms may express, but not encompass, the shifting reality of concrete historical particulars. As Jameson writes, *The Theory of the Novel* is a step away from the "abandonment of novelistic *types* as such"; Lukács is on the verge of apprehending the great novelistic work as a unique historical phenomenon, "an ungeneralizable combination of circumstances."<sup>14</sup> It is this same movement—romantic disaffinity with a host of resolutions to the conflict between life and work, followed by the conclusion that a great work is an index of the emergence of meaning in human relations, to be felt by the individual and understood in and through his objectivations—which characterizes Lukács' activity as a critic. Aesthetic criticism becomes an inherently ethical enterprise not because it submits to any ethical prescription regarding individuals, classes, or institutions—these are in fact what it is adept at refusing—but because its ethos is the examination of all authoritative demands on the individual, including the aesthetic demand that he represent a type or submit to a form.

Despite a score of misunderstandings in the literature on Lukács of this central point, Lukács confirms his understanding of the integration of individuality and objectivation all through his works. The idea, for Lukács, is a dialectical one, for the artist succeeds in "becoming who he is" by staking himself in his creative activity, and by allowing that focused act of artistic production to burn away the pettier customs to which his individuality has otherwise conformed. Goethe, Lukács writes, knew this well, for:

What today is called artistic personality, Goethe labeled "manner" [by which he] understood recurrent, obvious personality traits, elements of native talent not yet disciplined enough to penetrate subject matter but merely adding certain superficial qualities to a work. The break-through of creative individuality into art, into real creation, Goethe called "style". [. . .] And Goethe knew that the resultant paradox is a contradiction vital to art: only through the subjugation of the native or even of the artificially cultivated

subjectivity can the artist's real personality—the personality of the man as well as the artist—properly emerge.<sup>15</sup>

Real personality emerges, Lukács insists, when it is applied with talent and care to the problems of the objective world in the creation of works.<sup>16</sup> Meaningful forms are not phenomena to which their makers submit themselves; they are the ways individuals have ventured themselves in creative action, hence the authority with which such forms are organized and interpreted marks the emergence of meaning in communicative practices. By imposing form, an individual articulates the relationships that lay claim on her or him; by interpreting form, the critic discloses the dynamics of meaningful dependencies and contests of authority, personal and ideological. Thus for both the maker of form and the reader of form, the animation and logic of human relationships is the fundamental concern.

### Totality and Being-in-Relation

The exertions that generate *Soul and Form* culminate in one insight above all: the critic's imperative is to identify and evaluate the authority with which forms are organized and interpreted. The Lukácsian critic is bound to pursue the relation between art and life, and Lukács discovers early on that form's vital achievement is a record of the emergence of meaning in living practices. Form is the register of a particular way of life and a judgment upon it. In developing the dialogic form to convey the life and thought of Socrates, Plato both encapsulates a vision of that life and provides a standpoint on its relation to the social, political, religious, and theoretical influences of its times. When Lukács goes on to defend realism, it is because of his sense for the capacity of realist forms to exemplify the moments wherein human interactions take on definitive consequence. With cognitive clarity, the realist form should portray a point of human determination; the form itself should be a diagnosis of the rising and regulation of praxis. Lukács' early insight into the ability of form to register the entitlement of modes of human interaction persists throughout his work; it finds expression in his genre theory and it belies attempts to read his position, however dictatorial aspects of it may be, as predictably mimetic or as constrained by content analysis, especially in favor of some particular political ideology.<sup>17</sup>

Lukács repudiates "effects based solely on content," by which he means works that make their claims without reliance on the cognitive function of form. Such works fail to communicate the emergence of human meaning, and their failure cannot be overcome through any "artificial politicization," any more than it can be when they err on the side of an "equally abstract formalism."<sup>18</sup> Form sustains the encounter with content; qua structure, form relates to thinking as a structuring practice, which must submit to organizing principles to be communicated. As does cognitive reasoning itself, form "makes sense" only

insofar as it orders and manages experience. Just as percepts submit to the order of spatiality and temporality, Lukács argues that ideas submit to the demands of literary practice.<sup>19</sup> And Lukács' key insight in this regard, which begins with the struggle to relate art and life recorded in *Soul and Form*, is given expression after his appropriation of Hegel, and which remains consistent throughout Lukács' own literary-critical examinations, is the understanding that formal organization is mediation. To order ideas is to set them into relation; to identify the character of thoughts is to distinguish their interrelations. Form is a demonstration of *being-in-relation* (as I will call it).<sup>20</sup>

Being-in-relation is a cognitive condition of experience, insofar as experience is understood via ordering forms, and being-in-relation is the content of experience, insofar as subjectivity is only encountered in intersubjective involvement and in its productive (and thereby self-productive) objectivations. Whereas, despite Lukács' efforts, the ideological promises of dialectical materialism prove chimerical, the dialectical character of being-in-relation remains manifest in texts that allow for an encounter with the conditions of others' experience and action. When Lukács speaks of the *objectivity* of texts, he is referring to their capacity to arrange and convey relevant meaning; when he refers to their *universality*, he means that they encompass an optimal range of signification, precisely for conveying historical and contemporary social problems.<sup>21</sup> A literary work with an objective, universal character is a work which stands in direct relation to the scheme of social interrelationships active in its time, and which mediates the reader's encounter with them. The soul of a text, as Lukács would have put it in his twenties, is its living connection to its times; its form is that inherently relational, inherently cognitive measure which grants access to those times, and to the otherwise lost, empty, or alien lives that inhabit them. All of which is to say that it is through the achievements of form that we experience our species-being.

To say as much is to realize the bearing of Lukács' thinking for our contemporary critical practices, for "species-being" is no (merely) dusty concept from the historical bin; it is a critical project, a form of human desire, endeavor, and limitation, communicative of a shared moment and geared toward active revision. To grasp species-being is to experience being-in-relation and to consider its conditions; it is to meet with a plurality of value and the concentrated strangeness of others, and to find oneself able to appreciate how they came to be as they are. In taking over the concept of *Gattungswesen*, Lukács understands that it cannot be a monistic standard, and accordingly cannot be the subject of evangelization. It is thus that Lukács insists that the works of the creative writer, regardless of any intellectual distortions she or he may impose, retain access to real, concrete life. Again, this is the "soul" the writer registers in form, and the point is that we need the writer's realization, no matter how much criticism will have to be focused on releasing it, in order to address the full character of social reality. Where criticism distorts the social content in literature, as when it focuses exclusively on the character of certain writers, works, or movements

and the lines of transmission between them, what it misses is precisely its route of access to “the life of society.”<sup>22</sup> Literary form and the social content it presents for analysis, perhaps more closely than any other human phenomenon, exhibits the open system of social reality at a given moment, and thus the shared requirements, understandings, and innovations of those caught up in it. Here again, these events are not prearranged, and the representation of species-being that critique might extract from them cannot be prescribed.

Unlike the Hegelian dialectic which describes movements of increasing and increasingly absolute self-consciousness, the Lukácsian dialectic therefore understands narration to be the concrete, historical interleaving of the experience and understanding of social issues, without necessary advancement or the fullness of completion. It is narration in this sense with which we approach totality. Lukács resolves the question of his early romantic disaffinity with the realization that works may both actualize personality and interpret a stage of social reality, but he retains the animus of that disaffinity in his handling of totality and of the fundamental nature of species-being, both of which retain a regulative, dynamic character.

Lukács praises Hegel for seeing, in Goethe’s *Urphänomen*, “aspects of the total process, aspects to be resolved . . . disclosing the potentials latent within . . . and then transformed into a succeeding ‘form’”; he extols Hegel’s conversion of archetypal forms into the reflection of historical destiny, into aspects of “the external and internal structure in the life of a people.”<sup>23</sup> But what is crucial for understanding the Lukácsian vision of totality is that sensibility already present in the *Soul and Form* essays, namely that form is a register of life which achieves momentary relevance and dissolves into life’s operational demands. It is with this vision of totality and its utopian aspect that species-being may function as a regulative goal, insofar as it informs the imagination of an integrated, nonalienated social reality, or any aspect of it. Yet even where such a goal is momentarily met, the demand to accurately represent social reality remains as insatiable as the ongoing life of a people, with all the relentless vitality of its natural processes (a point which Lukács lauded the Jena romantics for recognizing). Thus the “philosophic critic,” as Lukács calls him, will always have cause to redirect knowledge at totality and the principles governing its shifting phenomena.<sup>24</sup>

## The Bequest of Criticism

For Lukács then, the onus is on the critic to extract the social reality from the narratives he examines, and to elucidate that reality in terms of the historical processes of which it is a part. Lukács discusses the role of the critic often and from a host of angles, beginning with the character of the critic he determines himself to be in the *Soul and Form* essays. Yet by the time of his essays of the 1940s, criticism was overtly attendant to the modern academic system governed



by capital, and Lukács was unambiguous in his analyses of the effects. Lukács describes writers and critics in a milieu in which dedicated, talented thinkers may publish work as token names in venues read by an intellectual elite, but must live with a culture of petty personal aggrandizement and cults of personality and style. He writes of the containment practices that arise in such an environment, which exaggerate artistic or intellectual personality and the individuality of trivial stylistic refinements, but that make a point of their independence from concrete social considerations. Literary venues, which include for Lukács philosophy, modern language, art, and sociology journals and associations, obsess with biographical data, techniques of presentation, questions of the personal influences on the thinkers treated, and internal conversations between movements in interpretation, in a flurry of activity which conceals their abandonment of the relationship between literature, or any formal textual productivity, and the real life of society.<sup>25</sup>

Why, Lukács asks, have writers and critics largely ceased to have a constructive, progressive relationship? In part, he writes that in viewing one another's camps, even the most focused of thinkers cannot help but to take into account the "mass of mediocre and corrupt scribblers" who replicate and extol the dominant ideas of the moment. The worried overproduction of texts is the setting for any real criticism, which is a scene impossible to ignore. Moreover, neither creative writers nor critics tend to work with an "objective framework"—by which, again, Lukács means an understanding, informed by real, contemporary social issues, of the capacity of written works to convey meaning to their audiences. This lack encourages the evaluation of texts based solely on artistic quality, method, or political content, with no regard for how they might manifest a transformative intensification of authorial personality, little grasp of the cognitive, synthetic achievements of form, and thus little sense of how texts can be persuasive, moving, and actively involved in social life. Without an objective framework, the political positions of most thinkers, even sincere and intelligent thinkers, remain superficial and abstract. In social crises, such political postures offer no means of consequential analysis or resistance. More often, these postures are easily accommodated to the ideological demands of the status quo.

The end effect of such conformity is achieved by everyday environments in which thinkers are beset with the need to strive frenetically for publication opportunities and the recognition of small groups of specialists, and in which competitiveness, intrigue, social isolation, and hothouse cultivation is the norm.<sup>26</sup> "Artistic and social nihilism" are typical, and in any case, thinkers do not have the time to care for popular understanding or judgment. What sets current thinkers apart from the serious philosophers of the past, Lukács charges, is the universality of interest with which the latter treat the problems of their times. Aristotle, Epicurus, Spinoza, and Hegel (Lukács' examples) were social theoreticians as well as ethicists, metaphysicians, or aestheticians; indeed their colossal contributions to theory *derive* from "their general universality, which has its origin in social problems and its direction in the investigation of

social problems.”<sup>27</sup> Serious analysis and criticism begin their systematic efforts at universality, or the optimal range of relevant meaning, in the demands of their times, and these are experienced first and foremost in the life and thought of the thinker engaged in analysis. As the young writer of *Soul and Form* suspected, critique begins with consideration of the way that the influence of culture and its contemporary forms of elucidation tend to condition the critic’s analyses.

If Lukács advises us of anything today, it is above all that philosophically minded criticism, which aims at general knowledge, must begin with its concrete situation, and that both the emblematic and individual phenomena the philosophic critic treats will prove to be involved in her or his intellectual development, and must be handled as such. As does the literary criticism of *Soul and Form*, working criticism must begin by determining the place of criticism in the culture and everyday life of its times, and by investigating the interpenetration of each.

The critic today, for all intents and purposes, is a professor. Even where criticism issues from independent scholars, journalists, editors, or interested laypeople, these write for an audience dominated by academics; for the vast majority, whether “writer critics” or “philosophic critics,” university professorships are the standard. The critic is an academic professional.

Yet although scores of thinkers—most of them academic professionals—have analyzed and criticized the bureaucratic and administrative practices of the modern university, it remains unclear, and all too easy to ignore, how the context of our contemporary academic culture affects—and fails to be affected by—the advancement of criticism.<sup>28</sup> That context, when it is appraised in detail and vis-à-vis the social totality of which it is part, presents a form of life governed by practices which threaten to paralyze or distort criticism. Indeed, the fact that so many academic professionals have been long aware of the deteriorating conditions within the contemporary university, even as they have struggled to pose critical positions constructively, should itself call attention to the need for the holism of Lukács’ position, with its emphasis on the concrete circumstances of understanding and practical engagement.

As it now stands, where those engaged in criticism will come largely from the disciplines of philosophy, English, comparative literature, and a small set of modern languages, it is significant for the youngest generation of critics that graduates outnumber tenure-track jobs, and that scores of thinkers work within unstable and inadequately remunerated posts as adjuncts, lectures, or visitors, often while carrying the financial debts of graduate school.<sup>29</sup> The pecuniary cost of a PhD as compared with entry-level salaries is relevant, as is the all-pervading demand to “publish or perish.” Before seeing print (often even before the confirmation that they will see print), works may wait in a protracted queue, even at publishing venues with meager circulation and reputation. Once disseminated, given the demand for records of publications and the myriad venues which have arisen to meet it, most critical works published in journals

serving humanities disciplines can expect small readership; in the case of junior scholars, these works must also count as satisfactory “progress toward tenure” within their disciplines, with all of the formal and thematic expectations entailed.

A contemporary aesthetic criticism which ignores this context neglects its own conditions of entitlement, and thus its ability to speak meaningfully from within the tide of productivity-for-productivity’s sake. For in the university culture within which the contemporary critic must live, the emphasis is on full capacity production, regardless of need or use. And that this should be considered par for the course, that frenzied production and the quantifiable standards of academic success based upon it should be considered natural and fair, without consideration of the social conditions of production and its significant effects, is the very definition of fetishism.

By the middle of the last century, Lukács had already noted that “under declining capitalism, the philosopher, too, has become a ‘specialist.’”<sup>30</sup> Today neither the philosopher, nor the philosophic critic, nor any academic can avoid specialization. Nonetheless, for criticism to gain traction, it must orient its specialized knowledge in consideration of its material conditions and its relation to social totality, and it must review how the principles which promote the vulgar calculability of academic work are “unthinkable without specialization.” Lukács warns that the “calculability” of results tends to extend to self-consciousness; with the normalization of calculable academic productivity, “the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into . . . consciousness.”<sup>31</sup>

Lukács today, that is, directs academic professionals to renew criticism with comprehension of the reification that pervades its professionalized enclaves. An honest assessment of academic culture, which is probably that sphere of society still most able to encourage, sustain, and extend criticism and critical thinking, shows it to be beleaguered by estrangement in the full, traditionally Marxist sense of the term, and by a “veil of reification” which grants academic production a “phantom objectivity” that conceals “the relations between people.”<sup>32</sup> This, in the face of an element of social will which would equate the post of “professor” with meekness, a preoccupation with abstraction, and thus a withdrawal from everyday and political life (at the time of this writing, a common insult used by the political right to describe the current American president is that he is, or is just like, a professor<sup>33</sup>). At the same time, we must deal with the judgment, among critics, that the smothering requirements of academic life must be (and are capable of being) dissociated from authentic critique. Among those who have considered the question, the judgment of Blanchot seems representative:

The University is now nothing more than a sum of determinate bodies of knowledge having no relation with time other than a program of studies. [. . .] The competent master speaks before an interested audience, that is all.

Evoke the leveling of relations that the slightly elevated position of the lecturer before a group of docile students introduces into philosophical language, and one will begin to understand how the philosopher, now a professor, brings about an impoverishment of philosophy so visible that dialectics cannot fail to break with what appears to it to be the idealism of speech in order to arrive at the more serious divisions of revolutionary struggle.<sup>34</sup>

What is criticism to do? Lukács tells us that the literary arts and the languages of the disciplines—or we might now say language or text widely speaking—are repositories and directives for the times that use them, and thus that their reification is the central matter for engaged criticism. Lukács often repeats that it is counterproductive to focus exclusively on the political import of the discourses we examine at the expense of an examination of their linguistic forms. He directs us to think of aesthetic works and the criticism that addresses them as the site of meaningful activity, and thus as the reinforcement of or challenge to social and political authority. It is the task of criticism to confirm whether the texts it treats have sufficiently grasped the compound human relationships they portray, and to make explicit the authority with which texts succeed or fail to do so. Likewise, Lukács reminds us that the contemporary imagination is rooted in our current discourses, and with it, our ability to envision or posit alternative systems of relation and the end of reification. Lukács therefore tells us that we cannot afford a disengaged toleration of superficially historical discourses, any more than we should abide claims of historical neutrality or the transcendence of history. Lukács tells us that criticism must begin, ever again, with its own concrete situation, the flight from which, however appealing, dooms it to irrelevance.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper benefitted greatly from the suggestions of a group of excellent readers. I am grateful to Edward P. Butler, Doris Borrelli, Sara Armengot, Laura Shackelford, and Lawrence Torcello for their invaluable insights. See for example the preface to György Lukács, *Deutsche Literatur in zwei Jahrhunderten, Werke, Band 7* (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1964), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Writer and the Critic.” *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*. Translated and ed. Arthur Kahn (Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., an Authors Guild Backinprint.com Edition, 2005), 223–224. (Originally published by Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 1970.) (Hereafter, cited as *WC*.)
- <sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton University Press, 1974), 160–161.
- <sup>4</sup> György Márkus, “Life and the Soul: the Young Lukács and the Problem of Culture.” *Lukács Reappraised*, ed. Agnes Heller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 5.
- <sup>5</sup> See for example Lukács’ 1962 preface to *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 19. For an elaboration of “romantic anti-capitalism” in the

literature, see Ferenc Fehér and Jerold Wikoff, “The Last Phase of Romantic Anti-Capitalism: Lukács’s Response to the War.” *New German Critique*, no. 10 (1977), 139–154. Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, “Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism.” *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984), 42–92. Michael Löwy, “Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anticapitalism.” *New German Critique*, no. 42 (1987), 17–31. Michael Löwy “The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization.” *Theory and Society*, vol. 16, no. 6 (1987), 891–904.

<sup>6</sup> György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 65. Hereafter, all reference to the essays of *Soul and Form* will occur within the text as “*SF*,” followed by page numbers from this edition.

<sup>7</sup> Lukács’ early identification with Kierkegaard, and the reasons he gives for it in *Soul and Form*, are not inconsistent with his later criticism of Kierkegaard, though it would take a different sort of essay to describe the continuity. Indeed, the terms of Lukács’ later criticisms are already discernable and integrated within this early essay.

<sup>8</sup> Agnes Heller, “Georg Lukács and Irma Seidler.” *Lukács Reappraised*, ed. Agnes Heller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Georg Lukács, “Aesthetic Culture.” *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kadarkay (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 158.

<sup>10</sup> Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller open the leading essay of their volume on the topic with this point. *Reconstructing Aesthetics: Writings of the Budapest School*, ed. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér (Oxford, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1–3.

<sup>11</sup> Agnes Heller argues that “On Poverty of Spirit” is one of Lukács’ most important documents, for in it he finally takes on the consequence of the conflict between life and work. Heller also analyzes the young man’s “truth,” or the idea that his decision cannot be described in generally valid ethical categories, in “‘Von der Armut am Geiste’: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács.” *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, ed. Katie Terezakis (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> “On Poverty of Spirit” is included in the recent English edition of *Soul and Form*, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> “‘Von der Armut am Geiste’: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács.” *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, ed. Katie Terezakis (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 257.

<sup>14</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 180–181.

<sup>15</sup> *WC*, 213–214. In a preface to the English language translation of the work written in 1965 and revised in 1970, Lukács stands by the position expressed here. Indeed, he seems to associate it with his long-term, “two-front battle against the literature of crass and of sophisticated manipulation” and to hold it accountable for his subsequent rejection by “all dominant movements” in both socialist countries and in the “so-called free world,” where alike the view remains that “literature and art really can be manipulated and that content and form can be manufactured to order according to the needs of the day” (22).

<sup>16</sup> *WC*, 213.

<sup>17</sup> Lukács is emphatic: Literature and criticism which identifies an author’s politics with his significance “has seriously hampered the artistic development of radical

democratic literature and of revolutionary proletarian literature . . . encouraging a sectarian complacency about its generally low artistic and intellectual level” (*WC*, 199).

<sup>18</sup> *WC*, 193.

<sup>19</sup> I rely on the Kantian forms of sensible intuition as paradigms of organizational categories without further elaboration here. For the argument that Lukács maintains this (and other) Kantian commitments, see my Afterword to *Soul and Form*, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> In choosing this descriptive designation (“being-in-relation”), I was inspired not only by the literature on “species-being,” but by the work of Maurice Blanchot, and by the excellent Foreword to *The Infinite Conversation* written by its translator, Susan Hanson. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> For a typical Lukácsian discussion of textual objectivity and universality see *WC*, 214–216.

<sup>22</sup> *WC*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> *WC*, 221.

<sup>24</sup> *WC*, 217.

<sup>25</sup> The description is from *WC*, 195–199, from which I also take the depiction of the practices of writer-critics and philosopher-critics.

<sup>26</sup> *WC*, 194.

<sup>27</sup> *WC*, 215.

<sup>28</sup> The work of Bill Readings is an excellent example of this kind of criticism. Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) has also become a paradigm for critical work on the administration of the contemporary university. In various ways, this work had been furthered by (to name only a few) Marc Bousquet, Frank Donoghue, Stanley Aronowitz, Susan Jacoby, Susan Haack, and Annette Kolodny. I do not mean to imply that any of these thinkers maintains Lukács’ political or literary positions exactly, but that they each assess evidence which helps to account for ways that contemporary university culture can asphyxiate critical inquiry.

<sup>29</sup> The American Association of University Professor regularly publishes a “Report on the Economic Status of the Profession.” For the 2007–08 Report, see <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/Z/ecstatreport2007-08>. For recent reporting on the place of adjuncts in universities, see for example [http://americanuniversities.suite101.com/article.cfm/the\\_roads\\_scholars\\_of\\_new\\_york](http://americanuniversities.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_roads_scholars_of_new_york), as well as a number of articles published by The Chronicle of Higher Education. One case in point: <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Special-Needs-of-Adju/46744/>.

<sup>30</sup> *WC*, 214.

<sup>31</sup> The quotes are from *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971, 1997), 88, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Again, the quotes are from *History and Class Consciousness*, 83–84. Here Lukács himself is quoting from and elaborating on Marx, in particular in the prominent chapter of *Capital* (1.4) concerned with “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret.”

- <sup>33</sup> For example, speaking at a Tea Party rally in Nashville, Tennessee in February 2010, Sarah Palin said (“to thunderous applause,” according to the Washington Post), “. . . to win [this] war, we need a commander in chief, not a professor of law standing at the lectern.” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/06/AR2010020603264.html>.
- <sup>34</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8. (Originally published in French as *L’Entretien infini* in 1969.)

## Chapter 13

# Ontology and Totality: Reconstructing Lukács' Concept of Critical Theory

Michael J. Thompson

If critical theory is to have any lasting relevance today, it lies in its ability to contrast meaningful forms of life with the presently existing structure of social reality. The kind of critical reflection that can not only form a truly critical discourse, but also provide us with ethical categories to guide the construction of new institutions, to be able to confront the most profound forms of dehumanization and moral degradation, and therefore give us an insight into a qualitatively more progressive form of social life. This was the motivating impulse that drove proponents of the Western Marxist tradition from the beginning and, from this point of view, the work of Lukács' later period—in particular his researches into ontological questions—is a systematic attempt to reinvent the tradition of critical theory and bring it back to its roots as a confrontation with the structural-functional arrangements of capitalist society. Rather than a new philosophy of the subject or an attempt to construct an ethical theory grounded in Kant or Hegel, Lukács' approach takes Marx's insights seriously in deepening the project of critical theory. I want to argue here that Lukács' concepts of ontology and totality can help us achieve such a paradigm shift in critical theory, one that takes us back to a direct confrontation with the structural and material causes of the pathological consequences of modern capitalism. In this sense, the classic question of alienation, of the possibility of man's lack of control over his self-determination—in both individual and social terms—remains at the heart of Lukács' attempt to come to grips with the basic structure of human life, thought, and activity.

Lukács' ontological theory provides us with a crucial way to find a concrete universal to which our theoretical and ethical categories can find reference, something that should be seen as an important antidote to the dilemmas of contemporary thought. In particular, the theories of modern social and political theory which seek to understand political, social, and moral categories from perspectives which exclude the distinctiveness of the ontological and material substrates of human activity and thought. In this sense, the search for some kind of universalism which can establish objective ethical categories



can be seen as the high-point of critical thought since, if such categories could exist, we would be able to make concrete ethical judgments without any of the dangers of moral relativism. Only by overcoming the problematic relation between thought and being, between theory and practice, between *what is* and *what ought to be*, can critical theory hold its place as a unique enterprise. At the heart of this project, Lukács proposes that the impulse of “bourgeois” philosophy as manifested in an exaggerated concept of subjectivity—whether in the form of subjective idealism, or modern existentialism—needs to be overcome. The Hegelian solution to this problem was to seek a reconciliation between human thought and the rational structure of reality, to look for the dialectical unity of the subjective and objective into a new, more integrated form of life. The rationalism of the Enlightenment was seen as incomplete since it was unable to formulate a true idea of the totality for man, a home in this world which was genuine.<sup>1</sup> But Hegel’s was an insufficient attempt at holism since, as Marx argued, the unity of man with his world could only come about through the “actual” (actively rational, *Wirklich*) transformation of the material conditions that shape social life itself. Only then would the project of the Enlightenment, of the holistic vision of antiquity (*Griechensehnsucht*), and of Hegelian idealism, come to its proper completion. Lukács, then, stands at the end-point of this ambitious project, one that should be seen as the true core of critical theory.

Throughout his work, Lukács struggled with the basic tension that ran through the course of German Idealism: the relation between an autonomous ethics which gives primacy to subjective, practical reason on the one hand, and a nonautonomous ethics which privileges the objective nature of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit* in Hegel’s formulation) or the formulation of ethical value as intrinsic in the objective structure of social life and practices.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the former, an ethical theory which could be used actively against the atomized world of modernity was appealing for obvious reasons: a subject could, as in the extreme case of Nietzsche, rail against the petrified iron cage of modern culture and its loss of meaning. But reflecting on the latter, the overcoming of the *absolute Zerrissenheit* required that there be some shared set of meaning in order for the tornness to be made whole again.<sup>3</sup> Lukács expresses the chasm between these two approaches in *The Theory of the Novel*:

No light radiates any longer from within into the world of events, into its vast complexity to which the soul is a stranger. And who can tell whether the fitness of the action to the essential nature of the subject—the only guide that still remains—really touches upon the essence, when the subject has become a phenomenon, an object unto itself; when his innermost and most particular essential nature appears to him only as a never-ceasing demand written upon the imaginary sky of that which “should be”; when this innermost nature must emerge from an unfathomable chasm which lies within the subject himself, when only what comes up from the furthest depths is his

essential nature, and no one can ever sound or even glimpse the bottom of those depths?<sup>4</sup>

The opposition between the inner need of the individual and the objective world cannot be overcome through an autonomous ethics of what “should be”; the dichotomy itself has to be overcome. Although Lukács grasps this problem in *The Theory of the Novel*, he is unable to come up with a satisfactory way out of this problem. I want to suggest that only in his later philosophical investigations is this problem solved in a compelling way; that the fact-value split is best seen as overcome through the formulation of an ontology of social being which is capable of providing a unification of *knowledge* of the object (socialized humanity on the one hand and the integrated moral personality on the other) and a *moral-evaluative* perspective for critical judgment.<sup>5</sup> Only by positing degrees of perfection of man can Lukács overcome the thorny problem of the fact-value split institutionalized by Weber and taken up by mainstream social science ever since.

In many ways, Frankfurt School critical theory began to disintegrate under the pressure of this very question. Marx had posited a cohesive theory of society, history, and our knowledge of them both, but by rejecting the centrality of this theory, thinkers such as Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer were unable to hold out against the temptations of subjectivity. The need to investigate the proper form of consciousness capable of understanding the mechanism of social change—a thesis put forth by Lukács himself in *History and Class Consciousness*—turned into a new problem for later Frankfurt School theorists: a defensive posture of the subject against the colonizing impulse of capitalist instrumental rationality in all of its forms. The turn toward the protection of subjectivity in the later work of Adorno and Horkheimer, to the linguistic turn of Jürgen Habermas, and the more recent move toward an “ethics of recognition” by Axel Honneth, all indicate an emphasis on epistemological concerns over ontological ones. This has had the effect of distracting us from what Lukács posits as a more genuine approach to understanding the world and changing it: an insight into the processes of actual reality, into the concrete world which we inhabit. I want to argue that Lukács effectively brings together the insights of a particular Aristotelian-Hegelian-Marxist vantage point in order to construct a theory of society and ethical value which can bring critical theory back to its more radical, more critical point of origin.

For Lukács, the persistent problem of any critical theory of society is to understand, from a rational standpoint, the *ontological nature of social being* and oppose this rational knowledge to the irrational, distorted understandings that compete with that rationalist standpoint. What makes this a particularly relevant theme for critical theory, I will argue, is that it forces us back to Marx in order to retrieve a more radical position on the nature of social life than that espoused by later Frankfurt School critical theorists who advocated a turn toward a concept of resistance embedded in forms of subjectivity. Instead, I will

argue that Lukács provides for us a crucial framework for rebuilding a more critical, more Marxian conception of critical theory. This return to Marx does not mean a return to outmoded concepts of social theory, but a return to the question of the extent to which social praxis can be guided by forms of thought which do not take into consideration the structure and process of capitalist social forms and institutions as an essential element in human self-understanding. What Lukács' later work forces us to consider is the way a critical theory of society can be produced anew from the construction of a specific form of ethical content, one grounded in the ontological structure of human sociality.

This ethical perspective—one based on a specific structure of thought rooted in Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx—provides us with a deeper critique of modern subjectivist forms of ethics by building an ontology of social being which serves as a ground to formulate ethical claims about the nature of social life. In this way, the Marxian project of overcoming alienation is saved from an over-emphasis on romantic forms of transcending the social world of the present, but it also frees us from the rigid and dogmatic teleological forms of thinking that dominated the lion's share of Marxist thought in collapsing the subject into a fatalist structural-functionalism.<sup>6</sup> In short, it is capable of forging a path out of the dual problem of determination and voluntarism without falling into the familiar traps of idealism and materialism. Far from being reductionist in character, Lukács provides us with a paradigm for a radical form of ethics that can both call into question the problems of capitalist modernity while also providing a framework for constructing a politics that escapes the romantic flight from reality and a resignation to necessity. In short, it serves as a ground for an ethical theory tied to the problem of the realization of human freedom through the realist structure of social life. It is in this sense that Lukács' comment *keine Ethik ohne Ontologie* should be understood: any ethical theory which is not grounded in the actual, real, ontological structure of human social existence will be ill-equipped to realize a more genuine progress toward human liberation; it will be plagued by some form of irrationalism, unable to shape genuine human personalities.

Lukács' particular ontological vantage point helps solve the crucial problem of constructing an objective ethics which, as Vittorio Hösle has argued "requires an ontology which transcends the factual and the empirical."<sup>7</sup> This means that any objective ethics that simply reduces the *ought* to the *is* simply reproduces the Humean insight that we would not be providing an ethics at all, since nature cannot provide for us ethical content. Instead, I propose to read Lukács' ontological analysis back through the concerns of Hegel and Marx and, to a broader extent, of Aristotle as well in that they persist in seeing man as a dynamic, processual being. This lineage constitutes not only a distinct tradition but also, and more crucially, a distinct *structure of thought*.<sup>8</sup> They hold this view of the individual and the social world itself especially in the face of subjectivist and liberal forms of ethics which they ultimately see as resting on problematic and

abstract categories. Lukács is insistent that the domain of ethics be grounded in an objective, ontological sphere of social being in order to construct an ethical conception of human value which is in line with our nature as human beings. Lukács' basic insight to get out of the problem of the naturalistic fallacy is to recast the question of nature itself, to see human beings not as collapsed into the structure of external nature, but, rather, to tease out the unique categories of social existence itself: the determinative categories of social being which avoids reducing us to a materialist natural mechanism (à la Hobbes) but instead seeks to reveal the categories which can be used to engage the material structures of the social totality in order to enhance human freedom and reduce alienation and fragmentation. To do this, Lukács sees that it is imperative to overcome the problem of subjectivist epistemology and ethics which, as his theory of reification had initially made evident, was the very source of modern alienation and false attempts at human self-understanding and freedom as genuine, unalienated self-determination.

## The Domestication of Critical Theory

Although critical theory was always grounded in the Marxian premise that capitalism produced certain distortions in human rationality as well as a complex of social and cultural pathologies, its later phase became more concerned with the problems of subjectivity than on the structural-functional nature of late capitalism. Whereas Marx's critique centered on the constitution of subjects within the empirical context of social formations, contemporary critical theory has turned its attention to the problems of communicative rationality on the one hand and, stemming from the later work of Adorno, on a negative dialectic of subjectivity resisting all forms of domination. In the process, the centrality of capitalism and its specific social forms has been eclipsed by this renewed interest in articulating an alternative which is freed from the constraints of the structure and function of social forms. This has led to a shift in critical theory to construct forms of rationality accessible to subjects detached from the material basis that determines the context within which the subject is formed.

Deeply impacted by Lukács' theory of reification, Adorno was able to develop the critical application of the category introduced by Lukács, but without what he and other late Frankfurt School thinkers saw as the failed thesis of the "expressive totality." From a methodological perspective, Adorno's ideas can essentially be seen as a prolonged reading of the first part of Lukács' "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" essay in *History and Class Consciousness* in terms of the second part, seeing the third part of the essay as essentially vestigial and passé. As a consequence, Adorno was centrally concerned with reification as a problem of knowledge and, therefore, a problem of subjectivity itself. Since a correct view of subjectivity had to be seen in dialectical terms, the crucial move

for Adorno was to refuse any form of reconciliation of the categories of thought with the objective world. This was not a resignation, as in existentialism, but rather a condition wherein—because of the disruptive effect of capitalism on consciousness—one’s conceptual thinking about the world cannot identify the true object of its thinking. By seeing advanced capitalism as beyond our capacity to grasp in its totality (the whole was false, after all) critical theory needed to focus on the problems of consciousness, on the inability of our conceptual thinking to be able to grasp adequately the concrete totality. As Gillian Rose once pointed out, Adorno sacrifices “the unique advantage of a Marxian approach: the derivation of political relations and the state from an analysis of the productive and social relations of a specific kind of society.” In short, “he makes it impossible to reinsert the ‘individual’ into a socio-political context.”<sup>9</sup>

Because of this crisis of relating the individual to processes of social integration, Habermas seeks to transcend the materialist nature of the Marxist framework in order to derive a theory of society which is capable of escaping the pathologies of modernity without the rejection of rationalist forms of critical thought.<sup>10</sup> To achieve this, Habermas moves beyond what he sees as the exhausted paradigm of subject-centered reason in favor of communicative rationality: “the paradigm of the knowledge of objects has to be replaced by the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speech and action. Hegel and Marx did not achieve this paradigm-change.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, Habermas argues, we need to move away from the dualism “between the productivity of a self-generating species and a primordial element prior to all production” which he claims is “a symptom of exhaustion.”<sup>12</sup> The real problem is to move the emphasis of the task of critical theory toward those aspects of human reason that are capable of overcoming both the problems of social atomism as well as the problem of reification. In this sense, a communicative rationality serves as the basis for a new kind of ethics based upon discourse. We are concerned now, Habermas argues, not with the concrete analysis of the socio-political totality within which man is produced, nor are we concerned with the Aristotelian question of objective values grounded in a philosophico-anthropological understanding of man. Rather, we are concerned with ethical postulates that are universalizable through rational discursive practices. The substantive content of ethics drops out since there is no longer an anthropocentric referent and we are left with a mechanism of universalizing ethical claims through justificatory discourse.

The Marxist proposition that the starting point for building a theory of society begins with the notion of labor is seen by Habermas as superseded by the thesis of communicative action. Habermas reads the Marxian thesis of *homo laborans* materialistically via the first thesis on Feuerbach in order to show that social labor is a “form of reproduction of human life.” In this sense, he seeks to reread the conception of social labor as “strategic forms of cooperation and rules of distribution,”<sup>13</sup> taking the Marxian thesis in the direction of

intersubjectivity and communication in order to establish a new paradigm for critical theory. Social labor becomes codeterminate along with language by preceding man and society, making it possible in the first place: "We can assume that it is through the structures of labor and language that a specifically human form of reproduction of life and also the initial state of social evolution occurred. *Labor and language are older than man and society.*"<sup>14</sup> As a result, Habermas contends we need to move the paradigm of critical theory toward questions about deliberation, pushing critical theory toward a Kantian paradigm mixed with pragmatism in order to analyze "the conditions for making impartial judgments of practical questions, judgments based solely on reasons."<sup>15</sup>

This view is elaborated and built upon by Axel Honneth who sees that the basis of critical theory ought to manifest a distinct concern with a normative theory of "recognition" a thesis which argues that "the integrity of human subjects, vulnerable as they are to injury through insult and disrespect, depends on their receiving approval and respect from others."<sup>16</sup> Moving back to the idealism of Hegel and the methodological framework of pragmatism via G. H. Mead, Honneth's move away from the material foundations of social life and consciousness makes the domestication of critical theory essentially complete. Now, moral theory is to concern itself with a sphere of social life which is detached from the logic of capitalist institutions and society more broadly. It may seek to reflect back on it, but it looks for the normative source of human liberation and the overcoming of the fragmentation of the human personality through means which bypass the structural-functional pulse that shapes the social totality within which individuals are shaped and formed. We are concerned with a moral philosophy which is epistemological and intersubjective, but removed from the concern with the ways in which social power is constituted by institutional logics grounded in capitalist economic life. The initial starting point of critical theory has now been eclipsed.

The domestication of critical theory means, in this context, a surrendering to abstract forms of thought which are unable to grasp the actual structure of the material forms of social life that shape forms of consciousness and praxis. Although Habermas seeks to secure a move to discourse ethics and an emphasis on the intersubjective nature of rationality, we are still not out of the problem of addressing the dialectical relation between subject and object in the sense of its relational structure to the processes and institutions economic life. The domestication of critical theory is therefore the state of moving away from this fundamental ontological precept: that social life is grounded in predetermined institutional forms which themselves shape the relations we have with others prior to the linguistification of consciousness and modes of expression. Adorno, Habermas, and Honneth pave a way for critical theory to abandon the ontological question and move once again, as with German Idealism, toward the separation of consciousness from objective structures and determinants of consciousness. More to the point, they are taken away from the real conditions of modernity: the capitalist matrix of social organization which possesses

certain structural-functional conditions for the development of pathological forms of rationality and moral degradation.

Indeed, Habermas' basic critique of subject-centered reason retains its salience, but it takes us far afield from the initial problems critical theory sought to confront. The central reason for this is that the problem of the social and material constitution of human beings and society as a whole cannot be overcome through epistemological or discursive means alone. The contents of the critical impulse against the structures of modernity are not an exclusively epistemological concern, but rather penetrate the deeper, ontological domain of social life itself. For this reason, both Hegel and Marx knew that the core problem was the means by which the social totality was structured: for Hegel around the question of the fabric of ethical habits and norms (*Sittlichkeit*) as well as the forms of subjectivity and institutional forms (*objektiver Geist*) to which that fabric gives rise, whereas for Marx it was a question of the ways in which the metabolism of society and nature was structured and organized that determined the nature of human freedom and development.

### From Moral Epistemology to Social Ontology

Both Hegel and Marx represent for Lukács a fundamental critical wedge for contesting the pathological shape of capitalist modernity, despite their crucial differences. But this requires a move from *epistemological* questions and concerns to *ontological* ones. Epistemology, which inquires into the structure of consciousness, is unable to grasp the *process of realization*, or the ways in which consciousness is shaped, determined by external objective forces. It is "not only unable to detect the elementary form in a higher realization or to show the way from an initial intellectual attitude to a later one, but the elementary and the higher ontological forms appear from the epistemological standpoint as contradictions."<sup>17</sup> When directed at society, ontological questions therefore concern the need to overcome the deductive logic of Hegelian thought as well as the subjective nature of bourgeois thinking. The only way to disclose the actual reality of social being is to move beyond deductive-logical thinking as well as subjective epistemology. At its core, Lukács' project becomes the construction of a theory of social reality which is truly dialectical in that it seeks to theorize the objective determinants of man's "social being" while at the same time perceiving the ways in which that being can and must be shaped and changed by man. In place of being passive moments within an abstract totality, we become active members of it; shaping those factors which in turn shape us: "The categories that are the most important from the point of view of principles, namely, the categories of the more complicated forms of being as opposed to the lower forms of being, have already been discovered by science: the reproduction of life, as opposed to mere change of becoming something else; conscious adaptation to the environment by transforming it, as opposed to the merely passive adaptation."<sup>18</sup>

The ontological foundation of human sociality is important for Lukács because it constitutes the totality within which man is constituted and constitutes himself. Man's self-evolution is circumscribed by this totality; it is the very foundation of thinking and of action, preceding our reflection of the world, rational or otherwise. By grasping the ontological structure of society, Lukács believes we will have an objective referent to build ethical values about the world which will be best suited to genuine human freedom, overcoming the moral and intellectual problem of atomism and diremption that oriented his thought from the beginning. Not unlike his theory of art, Lukács seeks to make this argument explicit within the realm of social theory in order to ground a normative vision of socialized man.<sup>19</sup> This means that the essence of the critical project is rooted in the construction of a kind of ethical content which can orient thought and action to overcome the distorting, dehumanizing structures that constitute capitalist society: the structures and patterns of life that have a pathological effect on man's self-evolution, retarding his growth and progress as a social being. But these can only be known, only be judged from the perspective of a social ontology which can ground the concept of a true form or state of being in the sense that it takes into consideration the insights of man as a socialized, laboring being—one fully realized and functional in a socio-human sense.

From a Lukácsian perspective, Habermas' move toward communicative rationality is insufficient for such a task because it does nothing to deal with the problem of *constitution*. The constitution problem arises from the basic ontological viewpoint that Lukács develops and it can be defined as the ways in which the subject is shaped and formed through its interaction with the object domain. Now, Lukács sees this as a central concern in structuring a Marxian philosophy of ethics, and the reason for this is obvious since the very nature of ontology, on his view, is derived not from metaphysical sources but from the point of view that sees the human subject as the result of processes of self-development, of *constitution*. This has its obvious roots in Aristotle's concept of ontology in his *Metaphysics*, but also in the ideas of Hegel and, finally, Marx. Lukács' social ontology is a means of investigating the crucial category of the social totality within which individuals are constituted, shaped, and formed.<sup>20</sup> Lukács therefore recasts the problem of alienation (*Entfremdung*) as a means by which we can understand the general sense of the human subject's ontological and moral degradation from what he can most fully achieve. This degradation is not caused by distortions in intersubjective reason (as with Honneth) but by the structural arrangements in capitalist society which constrain the development of a more genuine, more integrated personality. Ontology, rather than epistemology, therefore becomes the most important form of investigation because it is the "science of the qualitative, that is the science which measures the degree of perfection or realization of a being."<sup>21</sup> But this still requires that a crucial problem be solved, namely the problem of defining humanity in some ontological sense.

For Lukács, the ontological starting point is the concept of man as capable of positing a goal in thought which is to be realized through actual praxis within



the objective, material world. It is a special kind of praxis which plays an authentic role in changing reality. He sees this as a seed for all other forms of human thinking and acting—from the simple act of fashioning an ax to higher forms of sociality such as intersubjectivity—since the real conception of social being he wants to isolate possesses the character of the subject's ability to have power over his ability to progress into higher stages of being; a genuine (i.e., self-conscious) state of being as a process of becoming free (*Befreiungsprozess*) can only be obtained through this creative praxis which, according to Lukács, is man's fundamental ontological ground.<sup>22</sup> He does not make a neo-Fichtean move of seeing the world as constituted by the subject but rather sees it, as does Hegel, as a mediating process "that links human praxis with the idea of social progress."<sup>23</sup> It is not Lukács' claim that man can be reduced to the concept of labor, as some recent critics of Lukács have suggested.<sup>24</sup> Nor is it his claim that the teleology of the labor process is a static dichotomy, which would place him into a neo-Fichtean position. Rather, the core element in his ontological investigation is to search for and isolate that kernel within human existence wherein he is able to be most "at home"; to be most able to overcome the problematic split between abstract subjectivity and static objectivity and then to build higher forms and categories of social being from that point.<sup>25</sup> This means that we should see the essential nature of man as a laboring being in a more complex way. Specifically, human praxis is understood as a series of conflicting decisions (*Alternativentscheidung*) where "every social act . . . arises from choices directed toward future teleological positings."<sup>26</sup> This means that human praxis is grounded in the dialectical relation between thought and the object created. The value of any object, for any human being's self-understanding (*Fürunssein*) as opposed to its economic exchange value, is determined by the extent to which it "can fulfill its social functions."<sup>27</sup> Human beings are thus ontologically defined simultaneously by their sociality and their labor as seeking to realize goals (*Zielen*) in the concrete world. This Lukács refers to as the category of the "socio-human" (*gesellschaftlich-menschlich*).

Lukács claims that the root of social being is contained in labor which he defines as "the positing of a goal (*Setzen des Zieles*) and its means" wherein "consciousness rises with a self-governed act, the teleological positing (*Setzung*), above mere adaptation to the environment."<sup>28</sup> The act of positing means that the individual's labor is an act of realization (*Verwirklichung*) in the sense that man humanizes the sphere of nature, endowing it with value but also, and more importantly, structuring the nature of consciousness as well. What is typically seen as *praxis*, in the Greek sense, the actions of individuals in the world, becomes more akin to the Greek idea of *poiesis*, the act of doing-as-making, of shaping, transforming the realm of nature, endowing it with value. Making a distinction between "being-as-it-is" (*Sosein*) and the end product of labor which dialectically relates subject and object through the ontology of labor, Lukács sees a leap from the realm of pure nature to that of social being. The importance of this is that he wants to see labor not as the central category of all

human action but, rather, to see in the nature of labor, of the “positing of the labor process” (*Setzungen des Arbeitsprozesses*) the kernel of what is most distinctly human in all human forms of action believing “that it is correct to see labor as the model for all social practice, all social behavior.”<sup>29</sup>

The importance of this insight can be better grasped when we see that Lukács wants to connect this thesis of *homo laborans* with the kernel of the ontological essence of man. But as I have suggested above, this does not mean a reduction of man to labor, it means seeing that the only means to breach subject and object is through a activity which is actually found in that process. The labor process is central because it is the seed for ontological transformation: man reworks himself through labor as well as the environment; he develops the potentialities within him thereby forcing a qualitative change in his being.<sup>30</sup> The real key here is not to come up with a comprehensive theory of social integration, but to found a grounding for ethical claims which can guide the ontological development of man and, therefore, to grant us an understanding of what is distinctly human in an ontological sense. Once we are able to do this, Lukács hopes we will be able to possess a framework within which we can articulate ethical claims which are not abstract, but radical in the more traditional sense of the term in that they take man as the basic root of their concern. Lukács argues in his study of the young Hegel that this is a turning point in Hegel’s development and the more general move toward Marx’s conception of man. The basic thesis is that by seeing the teleological nature of labor as a central idea, the activities of man could be linked with the objective structure of reality in a truly dialectical way.

The ultimate goal of this theory of man’s social ontology is to provide a means for overcoming the great crisis that Lukács perceived throughout his work: the violent separation of the individual subject from the totality of his social relations, his social being, and the revolutionary potential that such knowledge can unlock.<sup>31</sup> Labor is therefore a starting point since it is in true labor that subjectivity and objectivity are dialectically sublated. The objects of nature, of the world, do not simply face the subject as an obstacle or act upon the passive subject. Rather, there is a crucial back and forth movement of change: “the element of self-creation not only alters the environment itself, and this not only in a directly material way, but also in its material reactions on man.”<sup>32</sup> Labor is therefore not a category toward which all forms of social action are reduced;<sup>33</sup> it is, rather, the model for all higher forms of social behavior because it *mediates*, and thereby *connects* the consciousness of the subject with the external world in an active rather than passive way—labor becomes the “generative cell of social life.”<sup>34</sup> This is not a simple connection between subject and object, of course, but a dialectical one which preserves the activity of subjectivity as well as a consciousness of the objective world’s own intrinsic categories. Lukács wants to avoid the act of the subject merely “reflecting” (*Widerspiegelung*) reality instead seeing man, as did Marx, as an “active and passive component of a concrete totality.”<sup>35</sup> This is done through mediations which have their beginning

in the act of labor: “consciously executed teleological positing brings about a distancing in the reflection (*Distanzierung in der Widerspiegelung*) of reality, and with this distancing the subject-object relation first arises in, in the true meaning of the term.”<sup>36</sup>

The ontological view of human social life therefore sees that what is most essential to man is his ability not to change reality in some simplistic, poetical fashion but to see that the ability to rise to the condition of sublating subjective and objective reality can be glimpsed in conscious labor. Labor therefore becomes something constitutive of man’s environment and of himself; it is the “activity which provides meaning to sense and values . . . the key to anthropogenesis.”<sup>37</sup> This results in a situation where “the total connection of the respective complex is primary to its elements. These elements can only be comprehended in terms of their concrete collaboration within the particular complex of being in question.”<sup>38</sup> This is because Lukács adopts a view—one shared by Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx—that there is an intrinsic, categorical distinction between the empirical existence of any thing (*Dasein*) and the potential (δυνάμις) reality (ἐνέργεια, *Wirklichkeit*) that thing can achieve under proper conditions.<sup>39</sup> It is therefore crucial to tease out the ways in which ontology reveals to us not a static reality simply lying there as a datum of experience, but a seed for the genesis for potential development and unfolding into a higher form of being. This is a point of view which goes back to Aristotle who makes a distinction between mere matter (ὕλη) and actual substance which is the product of a series of causes (ἐνέργεια). Therefore, when referring to the act of teleological positing, Lukács argues that “we should never lose sight of the fact that all that this positing can attain is a possibility, in the sense of the Aristotelian *dynamis*, while the transformation of potential into realization is a special act. . . . This act is precisely the decision arising from the alternative.”<sup>40</sup>

Now, in this sense, we can see that Lukács is trying to construct a moment wherein the subject-object division is overcome in a dynamic sense through the process of realization (*Verwirklichung*). But this process of realization through the activity of labor is reflexive and dialectical—our labor discloses to us the true nature of the world and ourselves. It is understood as that moment when we discover the rational structure of the world through praxis, through labor as opposed to contemplative thought: “I believe that that is rational (*rationell*) which corresponds with our experience in labor and our mastery of reality (*Wirklichkeit*), i.e., when I find a relationship that actually functions.”<sup>41</sup> The structure of reality is rational in nature, but not static—it is worked and reworked by us, by our conscious positing of certain plans, desires, needs, goals which direct our activity upon the outside world. We are able to shape the very structures of reality which in turn affect us; we are “responding beings” who, if we are to overcome the sterile confrontation of the subjectivity and objectivity, must actively intervene in the objective structures which in turn play a role in constituting social being itself.

This ontological insight implicitly leads to an ethical one, for it means that the true expression of human social life ought to be found in the realization of this capacity found in labor; in the means by which we are able consciously to overcome narrow, rigid forms of subjectivity and objectivity. This ethical idea was the project of Lukács from the very beginning: it was the need to provide a means by which we could become able, in real terms, to overcome the atomized, reified form of culture and consciousness dominant in capitalist modernity.<sup>42</sup> The ethical substance of the individual (*Persönlichkeit*) is a function of the extent to which this capacity of man is developed and permitted to develop: “The development of the process of labor and the broadening of the fields of activity have still other indirect consequences: the emergence and unfolding of human personality. This requires the growth of capacities as its indispensable ground.”<sup>43</sup> At its base lies the ethical proposition that to live a truly developed human life requires the proper knowledge of human needs: “seeking the satisfaction of unreal needs—private property, graft—renders one inhuman. On the contrary, the satisfaction of real needs makes one progressively more human. Man’s most essential need is to be a man as much as possible, and to develop his own and his fellows’ humanity. This is the way towards the development of human needs and this is how we realize in ourselves the totality of our essence.”<sup>44</sup> But how can a social ontology help us come to grips with these ethical demands? First, it needs to isolate the “essence” of what it means to be human; and second, it needs to disclose the means of achieving such an ethical status. What is crucial for Lukács is that the “concrete process of development” of society (*Entwicklung*) not be confused with man’s development as a person (*Persönlichkeitwerden*); that we see a distinction between the developmental logic of modern societies and the realization (*Seiendwerdens*) of human beings that are its products. Forms of social organization which are not constructed around the total development of the species, which alienate us, split us off from our capacity for teleological positing, will therefore produce deformed selves—human beings who are constrained from reaching their fullest potentiality in terms of self-purpose and self-fulfillment as members of the social totality.

Returning to the Aristotelian root of this thesis, we come to see man as a species who achieves his optimum self-realization through labor because that creative practice is most formative in the act of developing the ethical totality of one’s personality. Aristotle’s idea was that there is an ontological distinction between, say, a brick as a piece of mere matter (as a collection of clay dried in a certain way), and a house, which is not simply the sum total of these pieces of clay, but an ontologically superior, more highly developed substance than an accumulated mass of clay. So with Lukács: the development of the human species has as its very driving force the engine of labor as teleological positing, the existence of man as a highly developed species (*höhere Gattungsmässigkeit*) is an ontological development, one that is premised on man as a social being constantly expanding his realm of freedom seen as human forces as ends in

themselves (*Selbstzweck*). The human species becomes more free, erodes the state of alienation, unfolds into the realm of genuine freedom, each individual becoming more integrated as an ethical personality through this evolution—through the ontological movement from inferior levels of social being to higher, more superior ones. Knowledge of this ontological capacity within the species is at once an *ethical claim* and a *knowledge claim* since we are able to evaluate, to judge the social organization of society and its products by the ways it produces us, by using the ontological understanding as a metric for understanding the extent of our alienation.<sup>45</sup>

Now, the issue of labor as a model of social praxis becomes more important to solve a weighty problem. In the actual process of labor we witness a connection between subject and object, between individual and context, between man and nature, and most importantly, of man with man. Lukács sees it as crucial to tease out of the category of labor a capacity of man as a producer and a product; a free subject who is at once constrained by his environment and who has the capacity to alter it; as one who is capable in a creative way (i.e., through teleological positing) to enhance his humanity through that dialectical process. When one is alienated from this capacity, the ability to overcome the duality between the two realms is rendered impossible and the dialectical transformation of subject and object cannot occur.<sup>46</sup> We remain trapped in irrational forms of knowledge: subjectivism, rigid materialism, and so on. At a less abstract level of understanding, we begin to lose touch with the basic human capacity to reach out of our subjectivity, we begin to see the objective world around us as static, alien, unchangeable. The sociological implication of this thesis is that what Lukács, in his earlier, more famous work, called “reification” now becomes a concrete social-psychological condition rendered existent by the taking away of this capacity for “teleological positing.” In this sense, the ontological project is seen as essential for Lukács because of the need to transcend those false forms of knowing which misstate the nature of man: as a linguistic being, as an atomistic individual, a pure subject, as an emotive being, and so on. It is therefore crucial to grasp the nature of praxis adequately, as our interaction with the sphere of nature, of necessity itself.<sup>47</sup> Our socio-human nature is optimally realized once we are able to see that our humanness (*Menschsein*) develops through socio-cooperative praxis oriented toward solving concrete problems of human development. This praxis is not blindly guided, but grounded in what Lukács sees as the “fundamental ontological ground: Causality set into motion through teleological decisions where choice comes into play.”<sup>48</sup> The dimension of choice is crucial since Lukács wants to direct his ontological investigation toward the social rather than toward nature. Man’s life becomes more meaningful once his self-understanding encompasses himself as a “producer and at the same time as a product of society that achieves something greater in his humanness (*Menschsein*) than being a mere sample of an abstract species.”<sup>49</sup>

This begins with an interpretation of Hegel’s “genuine ontology” (*echte Ontologie*) which he defines as an ontology which grounds knowledge about

the world in the very categories and structure of the world. "This represents," writes Lukács, "a great step forward in the direction of a completely new ontology. True reality appears here as a concrete becoming, and genesis is the ontological derivation of any objectivity, without which living precondition this would inevitably remain incomprehensible as a deformed rigidity."<sup>50</sup> This discovery by Hegel is crucial, on Lukács' view, because of its centrality in building an objective form of knowledge, but also because it recognizes the dynamic conception of reality that Lukács sees as crucial. Even more, we see contained in this insight the unique nature of an ethical theory which can be called properly Marxian. For Marx, the problem with the bourgeois conception of ethics is that it posits ethical value as separate from the material conditions of society. In this sense, a sterile is-ought distinction was developed which made most forms of modern philosophy merely contemplative rather than active. Normative concepts were no longer properly grounded in actual social life and conditions, but autonomous from them. Even more, the separation of the *is* from the *ought* rendered an illusion in modern thought: that ethical content can be determined separate from the concrete totality of real existence. Lukács grounds this insight in Hegel's overcoming of subjective idealism.<sup>51</sup> This leads us to an understanding of the world which is objective: there are certain ontological properties to things, categories that determine their being. In this sense, we see a crucial move in understanding the ontological program of Lukács: to formulate a concept of the human, of the social, which is itself ontological in that it possesses certain categories which determine the essential, true being of man and society. If we are able to access these categories of determination, we would be a long way toward constructing a critical vantage point for understanding ethical value which is not subjective, abstract, contingent, but grounded in the objective nature of human potentiality. Ethics would therefore serve as a guide for breaking through reification and evolving new, more humane forms of life. This was crucial for Lukács in his struggle against what he saw as rival tendencies in bourgeois thought that were intrinsically irrational in that they were unable to grasp the true, objective nature of the world as a totality. They were plagued by abstracting their ideas away from the material conditions of life, but also, by extension, from knowledge of the determining categories of their own existence.<sup>52</sup>

Now, this also impacts the nature of rationality in an important way. If, as Lukács suggests, the core aim of ontology is the disclosure of the onto-genetic nature of human self-realization, then it becomes important to note the ways in which this impacts our ability to know what true reality actually is. In place of an epistemological vantage point, he sees it necessary to begin with an ontological one in order to be able to avoid the problem of subjective idealism: the act of simply reflecting the objective world in subjective thought without proper mediations. Instead, as with Hegel and Marx, Lukács argues that the crucial move is to try to grasp the totality of the concrete nature of the social world, to ground a methodological way of knowing that escapes subjectivist,

idealist, and other false forms of knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Without this, we are unable to orient ethical claims toward more integrative forms of social organization, toward forms of ethical value which can illuminate the more rational, more complete conception of the human personality and of society. Ethical concepts are therefore fused with correct knowledge of the rational structure of reality only once we are able to illuminate this social ontology—without this the fact-value split cannot be overcome. The ontological argument therefore provides an anchor to ground the activity of critical thought and action overcoming relativism, irrationalism, as well as providing us with a way out of the problem of reification and alienation.

### Toward a Renewed Paradigm for Critical Theory

The basic thesis I have explored in this essay is that Lukács saw it as a central concern to elaborate an ontological understanding of social being in order to construct an ethical theory would be able to grasp the total nature of human social life. In this sense, the ontological grounding of human social life is seen in the act of overcoming the division between subject and object in the dialectical transformation of active labor. The fundamental aim of this hypothesis is to construct a concept of human ontological existence which can be used as a kind of metric for self-realization. The ethical element of this argument therefore retains the crucial humanistic doctrine of dignity, respect, and actual freedom through the process of man's self-realization. The development of one's individuality becomes dialectically constituted by the totality of social relations which either impede or promote this self-realization. This constitutes an ethical ideal which can be read through the major institutions of capitalist modernity. Indeed, what Lukács was after from the beginning was a conception of value which would be able to direct forms of human consciousness toward the elaboration of ethical, cultural, social, and political forms of life which would promote the true, proper development of human personality.

This developed personality (*Persönlichkeit*) requires a social context which can promote its development; a set of relations that allow for the dialectical moral development of consciousness and action. Unlike thinkers such as Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch who also sought to defend the concept of an authentic, integrated personality in the face of the petrification of modernity, Lukács sees the individual's personality as grounded in the ontological dimensions of social being, in his capacity to realize "the realm of freedom as the 'unfolding of human forces that are ends in themselves; then, due to their worthy content, they can be valid ends both for an individual and society."<sup>54</sup> But what I have sought to show here is that Lukács' ontological investigations can bring us closer to an approach to ethics which grounds a conception of value in the objective category of man's self-determining onto-genesis. This position differs sharply from the current program of critical theory which has

witnessed a return to Kantian and abstract Hegelian themes and, most importantly, away from the basic structural-functional critique that Marx put forward of capitalist society. Lukács' ontological project does not aim to produce a formalist ethics, but rather a foundation to orient our ethical categories and self-understanding toward the most genuine realm of human praxis (labor) in order to reverse the moral degradation brought on by capitalism's skewing of man's potentiality to emerge as an all-sided and self-fulfilled being. Confronting the concrete, institutional arrangements of society therefore takes on a renewed emphasis: the rising living standards of capitalist society cannot activate the greater promise that comes from the realization of higher forms of being through labor.

Critical theory was always concerned, at one level, with the problem of consciousness in the process of social change. What Lukács was also able to see was that this emphasis on consciousness was only part of a larger problematic: the poverty of moral values which define the capitalist epoch are not simply an issue of consciousness, they are the result of the particular ways that our self-understanding has been shifted away from our socio-human nature as an end in itself, toward our social being, a "species in-itself" (*Gattungsmässigkeit an sich*). Our at-homeness in the world—something sought after by Hegel and Hölderlin alike—the overcoming of the fragmented self under capitalism, of alienation, of a return to a more genuine sense of sociality, of individual agency, of more human forms of work, action, and thought were all the aim of Lukács' ontological investigations. The basic thesis that man becomes more human, develops more of himself within a society organized around developing the potentiality inherent in human individuals and in society as a whole retains its radical character without devolving into Romantic fantasy. This serves as a ground for making critical theory come back to its initial project of investigating the fields of society, culture, and consciousness. A critical theory which is able to find the locus point for the pathological nature of modern life, which is able to make clear those dormant elements of consciousness for social transformation, a critical theory which is able to unite scientific knowledge of society with the act of moral evaluation—all of this is crucial for a renewed conception of critical theory. Far from seeing all of this through the lens of "reification," we should extend this notion toward an understanding of ethical value. In this sense, the philosophical project moves from constructing a method of philosophical justification grounded in mutual recognition or discourse ethics toward the questions of moral value which are able (i) to address the content of moral concepts and (ii) become concrete, *actualized* in the world through transforming the conditions that precede and shape social life and social practices. Put another way, the crucial move is to posit ethical claims which can resist the structural organization of capitalism on the basis that it has a deformative impact on social relations and personality development alike. This objectivist ethics is grounded in a sphere of values which is *capable of being realized through the transformation of social life and institutions*.<sup>55</sup> The ontological



understanding of man's sociality therefore enables us to ground an objective moment wherein the conditions of human freedom and development—at the individual and social levels—are able to become markers for calling the present conditions into question. In opposition to the more abstract project of thinkers such as Ernst Bloch who attempted to integrate natural law and utopia into the structure of Marxist thinking,<sup>56</sup> Lukács was able to see that the key element of critical consciousness was a confrontation with the material organization of society, toward those structures which misshape our human potentialities and, most crucially, distort our self-understanding of ourselves as social beings.

The outlines of this problem are not purely philosophical. They point toward a critical path back toward the real, concrete conditions of human existence and the potentials that exist within that sphere of socio-ontological reality. In this sense, the ethical moment is brought back into critical theory without sacrificing the contribution of Marx's "materialist correction" to Hegelian idealism. If critical theory has been hampered by its inability to provide a unique, coherent ethical vantage point which does not recede back into the "abstraction" of the fact-value dichotomy, then we can see Lukács' thought as a fertile basis for a new ethical foundation for critical theory, one that is more radical, more complete than its competitors. Freedom seen as the ability to make conscious choice with respect to action, with respect to the enhancement of human freedom means the establishment of concepts which are able to grasp the ontological nature of man's relation to himself and society as a whole, as a totality. It means a return to the formulation of concepts which can orient social and individual action and provide a more cohesive sense of critical reflection on the real origins of the various pathologies and potentialities of human social life. It means, in the end, the construction of a kind of ethical content which brings us back to unity with ourselves as social beings. In this way, critical theory can once again find fertile ground for positive political and ethical claims. We are therefore left with a central insight of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, one which needs once again to be taken seriously and brought back into critical theory: "The reason of the people is as clever as its arrangements."<sup>57</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Lukács' discussion of this theme in Hegel, *Der junge Hegel und die Probleme der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1986), 73–88.

<sup>2</sup> In Lukács' earlier work, this takes the form of an attempt to reclaim some form of "authentic" community with a corresponding integration of cultural life. See the discussion by Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870–1923* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 159–196.

<sup>3</sup> This was a problematic Lukács inherits most strongly from Simmel. For an excellent formulation of the problem see his 1918 book *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur* (Baden: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1994).

- <sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 36–37.
- <sup>5</sup> For an interesting critique of Lukács' attempt to overcome the fact-value split, see Norman Fischer, "Hegelian Marxism and Ethics." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 8, nos. 1–2 (1984), 112–138.
- <sup>6</sup> For a discussion, see Guido Oldrini, "Die Ethische Perspektive von Lukács' Ontologie." *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, vol. 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Vittorio Hösle, *Objective Idealism, Ethics, and Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 45.
- <sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this Aristotelian-Hegelian structure of thought and its relation to Marxism and ethics, see Michael J. Thompson, "Marxism, Ethics, and the Task of Critical Theory," in Michael J. Thompson (ed.) *Rational Radicalism and Political Theory: Essays in Honor of Stephen Eric Bronner* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 141.
- <sup>10</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 91–213.
- <sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 295.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.
- <sup>13</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 148–149.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>15</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 43. Also see the important discussion in *Truth and Justification*. Trans. Barbara Fultner (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 237–275.
- <sup>16</sup> Axel Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on a Theory of Recognition," in *The Fragmented World of the Social* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 248.
- <sup>17</sup> Ernest Joós, *Lukács's Last Autocriticism: The Ontology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 140.
- <sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács, "The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action," in Ernest Joós, *Lukács's Last Autocriticism*, 137.
- <sup>19</sup> For an excellent discussion of totality in Lukács' aesthetic theory, see Roy Pascal, "Georg Lukács: The Concept of Totality," in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas* (New York: Random House, 1970), 147–171. For a discussion of the relation between aesthetics and ethics, see his *Ästhetik*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Hermann Luchterland, 1963), 576–606.
- <sup>20</sup> For a background discussion of Lukács' concept of totality, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 81–127. Also see István Mészáros, "Lukács' Concept of Dialectic," in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas*, 34–85.
- <sup>21</sup> Ernest Joós, "Alienation in Georg Lukács' Ontology," in Ernest Joós (ed.) *Georg Lukács and His World: A Reassessment* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 105.
- <sup>22</sup> Lukács claims that this process of becoming free can be completely achieved only in art. See his *Ästhetik*, vol. 2, 830–872.

- <sup>23</sup> Georg Lukács, *Der junge Hegel*, 405.
- <sup>24</sup> As Axel Honneth has recently argued, “it seems as if he intends to criticize the reifying practices that have become second nature by judging them against the ideal of a comprehensive form of praxis, in which all of reality is ultimately engendered by the productive activity of the species.” *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28–29.
- <sup>25</sup> As Nicholas Tertullian has suggested, “the structure of [the *Ontology*] shows us, in effect, that Lukács begins from the analysis of the most elementary forms of social activity (beginning with work) and tries progressively to reconstruct the genesis of the principal social complexes (economics, politics, law, mores, etc.), by climbing the ladder towards superior forms of conscious activity (art, philosophy, the great moral acts).” “Lukács’ *Ontology*,” in Tom Rockmore (ed.) *Lukács Today: Essays in Marxist Philosophy* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1988), 252.
- <sup>26</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 139. Also see *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterland Verlag, 1986), 12–13.
- <sup>27</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 140.
- <sup>28</sup> Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 26.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>30</sup> Lukács makes this clear in his analysis of Marx: “Durch die Arbeit entsteht eine doppelte Transformation. Einerseits wird der arbeitende Mensch selbst durch seine Arbeit verwandelt, er wirkt auf die äußere Natur und verändert zugleich seine eigene, entwickelt ‘die in ihr schlummernden Potenzen’ und unterwirft ihre Kräfte ‘seiner eigenen Botmäßigkeit.’ Andererseits werden die Naturgegenstände, Naturkräfte in Arbeitsmittel, Arbeitsgestände, Rohstoffe, etc.” *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 1, 563.
- <sup>31</sup> As Fariborz Shafai has noted, “ontology as the field of examining the real is the effective key with which to unlock and disclose the being of sociality and consciousness.” *The Ontology of Georg Lukács: Studies in Materialist Dialectics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), 123.
- <sup>32</sup> Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 50.
- <sup>33</sup> Lukács is clear that he means to explore labor as a *model of social praxis*, not as the *essence of social praxis*: “we believe therefore that it is right to see labor as the model for all social praxis, all active social behavior.” Labor in the Marxian sense, of transforming objects into use-value, is seen as a narrow starting point: “Labor in this original and narrow sense involves a process between human activity and nature: its acts are directed toward the transformation of natural objects into use-values.” *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 46.
- <sup>34</sup> Nicholas Tertullian, “Lukács’ *Ontology*,” 256.
- <sup>35</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 136.
- <sup>36</sup> Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 47.
- <sup>37</sup> Nicholas Tertullian, “Lukács’ *Ontology*,” 256.
- <sup>38</sup> Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 47–48.
- <sup>39</sup> See my discussion of this theme in “Marxism, Ethics, and the Task of Critical Theory.”

- <sup>40</sup> Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 50.
- <sup>41</sup> Georg Lukács, in Theo Pinkus (ed.) *Gespräche mit Georg Lukács* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1967), 36.
- <sup>42</sup> I therefore see Honneth's critique of Lukács as deeply misguided. It is not that Lukács wants to reduce the activity of man to the reproduction of the species, but rather to glimpse an ontological moment where the subject-object distinction can be overcome—not by a trans-individual subject such as the “proletariat” but that it is a potential moment in all human social praxis. As Shafai insightfully notes, “If theory-praxis, according to him, is not focused upon the present contradictions in the socio-historical present time in its presentedness, then two equally false alternatives open up: on the one hand, a romantic yearning for a past golden age (which forms the matrix of *The Theory of the Novel*) or a utopian Ought-postulate whose very utopianism renders it ineffective.” *The Ontology of Georg Lukács*, 104.
- <sup>43</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 146.
- <sup>44</sup> “An Interview with Georg Lukács,” in Ernest Joós, *Lukács's Last Autocriticism: The Ontology*, 128–129.
- <sup>45</sup> See the important discussion of alienation in *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 2, 656–730.
- <sup>46</sup> See the interesting discussion by Louis Dupre, “Objectivism and the Rise of Cultural Alienation,” in Ernest Joós (ed.) *Georg Lukács and His World: A Reassessment*, 77–98.
- <sup>47</sup> See the interesting discussion by Tom Rockmore, *Irrationalism: Lukács and the Marxist View of Reason*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 103–127.
- <sup>48</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 144.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.
- <sup>50</sup> Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie der Gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterland Verlag, 1986), 472.
- <sup>51</sup> See his discussion in *Der junge Hegel*, 332–349.
- <sup>52</sup> Lukács saw this as the result of tendency in modern thought toward subjective experience and away from the objective, material realities that condition human life: “It is a general tendency of the imperialist period to regard social relationships as secondary circumstances which do not concern the essence of man. The intuition of essence takes the immediate givenness of inner experience as its starting point, which it regards as unconditioned and primary, never looking into its character and preconditions, and proceeds thence to its final abstract ‘vision,’ divorced from reality.” “Existentialism,” in *Marxism and Human Liberation* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1973), 247. The search for human essence is therefore not invalid, but requires an ontological method to disclose its content.
- <sup>53</sup> For a discussion, see Tom Rockmore, *Irrationalism*, 243–251; as well as H. A. Hodges, “Lukács on Irrationalism,” in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.) *Georg Lukács: The Man, His Work, and His Ideas*, 86–108.
- <sup>54</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ontological Foundations of Human Thinking and Action,” 147.
- <sup>55</sup> I develop a more coherent conception of “objective ethics” derived from Lukács’ ontological views in my forthcoming paper “Toward an Objective Ethics: Lukács’

Ontology and Contemporary Moral Philosophy.” *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, vol. 13, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> It was one of Bloch’s contentions that Marx himself possessed an implicit sense of natural law in his ethical vision of overthrowing capitalism for its degradation of workers and human beings in general and this was a fruitful starting point for integrating an ethical vantage point into the project of Marxism. See his important study, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*. Trans. Dennis Schmidt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 181–208.

<sup>57</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie II: Die Vorlesungen von 1805/6*. J. Hoffmeister (ed.). (Hamburg, 1967), 252.

# Index

- actual (*Wirklich*) 230  
Adler, Max 16  
Adorno, Theodor 51, 75–90, 172–5, 233–4  
    on Lukács 75–97, 172–5, 189–91, 233–4  
*Aesthetic* 23  
*Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno) 92–7  
alienation (*entfremdung*) 6, 13–22, 28–30, 40–8, 51, 80–1, 229, 237  
  
*Balzac und der französische Realismus* (Lukács) 6  
Balzac, Honoré de 78–80  
becoming free (*Befreiungsprozess*) 238  
being-as-it-is (*Sosein*) 238  
*Bildung* 3  
“Blum Theses” (Lukács) 24  
Bolsheviks 21–2, 52–4  
Bourdieu, Pierre 51  
  
*Capital Volume I* (Marx) 16, 43, 87, 198  
*Chvostismus und Dialektik* (Lukács) 65–9  
conflicting decisions  
    (*Alternativentscheidung*) 238  
*Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre) 55  
*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the State* (Marx) 57  
*Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant) 40, 45  
culture (*kultur*) 2  
  
daily experience (*Alltagsleben*) 95  
Dante 111–23  
*Destruction of Reason* (Lukács) 7, 26–7, 50, 53, 55, 63–4  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno) 80, 86  
dialectical materialism 40, 55, 89, 220  
  
*Dialectical Materialism* (Lefebvre) 55  
*Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* (Lukács) 94  
*Divine Comedy* (Dante) 111–23  
Dostoevsky, Fyodor 100  
  
*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx) 14, 22, 51  
*Education Sentimentale* (Flaubert) 103–4  
Engels, Friedrich 16  
*Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Dramas* (Lukács) 4  
*Erfurt Program* 15  
*Essence of Christianity* (Feuerbach) 38  
externalization (*entäußerung*) 5, 17  
  
Fichte, Johann Gottlieb 38–40, 45–8, 157, 173, 177–82, 188–9  
Flaubert, Gustave 103–4  
*flawed ideology* (*Kleinbürger*) 89  
  
genuine ontology (*echte Ontologie*) 242  
*Goethe and His Age* (Lukács and Anchor) 25  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 2, 114–15, 118–25  
“Greatness and Decline of Expressionism” (Lukács) 24  
*Grundrisse* (Marx) 37  
  
Habermas, Jürgen 152–3, 158, 234–7  
Heidegger, Martin 14, 62–3, 77, 81, 177–9  
*hiatus irrationalis* 46  
*The Historical Novel* (Lukács) 128–46  
*History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács) 5, 18, 22, 28–9, 40–1, 43, 51, 53, 65–71, 172–91, 195–208

- Honneth, Axel 153–5, 195–208, 235–7
- Husserl, Edmund 62
- idea (*vorbild*) 5
- identity (*Identitätsphilosophie*) 41
- identity politics 7
- imitation (*Nachahmung*) 95
- inverted world (*verkehrte Welt*) 19
- irrationality (*das Irrationalitätsproblem*) 46
- Kafka, Franz 91
- Kautsky, Karl 15, 52
- Kierkegaard, Sören 214–15
- knowledge (Erkenntnis)* 77
- Left Phenomenology 56, 62, 67–71
- Lenin, Vladimir 15–21, 40, 50–3
- Leninism 28, 50–2, 67–9, 182
- Lotte in Weimar* 26
- Lukács, Georg and Honneth 195–208
- concept of Critical Theory 229–46
- on Dante 111–23
- on epistemology 89–91, 236–7
- on Fichte 45–6
- on Goethe 118–25, 218
- on Nietzsche 57–63
- ontological theory of social being 229–46
- on Sir Walter Scott 128–46
- Luxemburg, Rosa 15
- Madách, Imre 123
- Márcus, György 212
- Marx und Hegel (Adler)* 16
- Marxism and Philosophy (Korsch)* 39, 52
- mediation (*Vermittlung*) 7
- mentality (*Gesinnung*) 85
- misdevelopments (*Fehlentwicklungen*) 196
- nature (*natur*) 3
- nature (*Naturphilosophie*) 38
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 57–63
- Novalis 213–15
- Obedience (Gehorsam)* 4
- objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*) 18–19, 30, 44
- Ontology 23, 28–30, 62–3, 92, 200–6, 229–32, 236–44
- The Ontology of Social Being (Lukács)* 40
- Paris Manuscripts (Marx)* 37, 43, 46–7
- particular (*das Besondere*) 93
- personality (*persönlichkeit*) 2, 244
- Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel)* 51, 120–3
- Philosophy of Modern Music (Adorno)* 80
- Philosophy of Money (Simmel)* 63
- The Philosophy of Right (Hegel)* 57
- Ponty, Maurice Merleau 54–6, 61
- presentations (*Bilder*) 6
- real world (Außenwelt)* 85
- “Realism in the Balance” (Lukács) 24
- Realism in Our Time (Lukács)* 75, 81–3
- reality (*Widerspiegelung*) 77
- realization (*Verwirklicht*) 238, 240
- reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) 93–4
- reification (*Gegenständlichkeitsform*) 172–91
- reification (*verdinglichung*) 6, 14, 29–30, 43, 63, 195–208
- Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea (Honneth)* 195
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 54–5
- Scott, Sir Walter 128–30
- self-understanding (*Fürunssein*) 238
- Simmel, Georg 3, 63
- Sittlichkeit* 130–46
- social praxis 195–208
- Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (Engels)* 16
- society (*Widerspiegelung*) 25
- socio-human (*gesellschaftlich-menschlich*) 238
- Soul and Form (Lukács)* 3, 211–25
- species-in-itself (*Gattungsmässigkeit ain sich*) 245
- Stalin and Trotsky 23
- Tailism and the Dialectic (Lukács)* 65–71
- The Theory of the Novel (Lukács)* 4, 75, 83–91, 99–109, 118, 218–19, 230–1

- Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx) 57  
*The Tragedy of Man* (Madách) 123–5  
truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) 92
- Weber, Max 73  
Wellmer, Albrecht 153–4  
*What Is To Be Done?* (Lenin) 19, 52, 68