

SUPPLEMENT

# The antinomies of Georg Lukács

Though his key texts languished in obscurity for half a century, Georg Lukács re-emerged in the late 20th century with a reputation as one of the great Marxist thinkers. Leading members of the Socialist Workers Party eagerly declared themselves amongst his disciples. However, James Turley argues that his work constitutes an obstacle to revolutionary politics

This essay is probably best described as a 'distant cousin' of two talks I delivered last year: the first, entitled 'Georg Lukács - philosopher of revolution?', at Communist University<sup>1</sup>; the second, 'Class consciousness and party - towards a critique of the young Lukács' at the *Historical Materialism* annual London conference.

My focus, there and here, is the work produced by Georg Lukács in the 1920s, in particular *History and class consciousness*, regarded by most as his *magnum opus* - a lengthy, dense argument for the centrality of Hegelian thought to Marxism, whose influence persists not only through direct reference, but also through certain shared assumptions that, within Hegelian Marxisms of all kinds, have acquired the character of an unspoken 'obvious' orthodoxy. Lukács produced a good deal of other work - much focused on questions of aesthetics and literary theory - but it is the grand thematic sweep and political urgency of *History and class consciousness* that has left a mark on leftwing thought.

A distant cousin, partly because on neither occasion was I able to cram in enough detail really to nail the coffin shut to my satisfaction; I also intend to flesh out what have been, up to now, somewhat vague indications as to the place of philosophy within Marxism. But also, the essay benefits from the debates and perceptive interlocutions that followed my rambling, 'too long, yet too short' openings - as well as the many arguments I provoked with increasingly frustrated Hegelian Marxists during my 'year with Lukács' outside of formal political and academic settings. In particular, I would like to thank comrades Marc Mulholland, Mike Macnair, Lawrence Parker, Laurie Rojas and Lucy Parker.

Finally, a note on sources: both out of necessity and for ease of source-checking, I have referred to the Marxist Internet Archive and other internet sources where possible (the former contains a fairly complete set of Lukács's 1920s writings), using chapter and section headings where relevant.

## I. Lukács in context(s)

It is a perfectly commonplace starting point in textual analysis to return a text to its context. Yet it is perhaps peculiarly necessary to do so with *History and class consciousness* for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the problem that Lukács codifies, here a particular interpretation of his own context (the 'vulgar Marxism of the Second International'), which stubbornly persists among the far left today, and as a consequence deforms the historical understanding of Lukács's emergence as a thinker.

Related to this first problem is the second: while it is useful and necessary to historically specify Lukács as a product of, and an actor in, his own time - the birth of the communist movement, the establishment and degeneration of the USSR, the ill-fated Hungarian Soviet Republic, etc - this does not exhaust the question. For Lukács - as he survives for us today - has a 'second life', with the emergence of the 1960s-70s 'New Left'. His persistence as a theoretical touchstone to this day is a product of the 1960s as much as the 1920s, not least because it is the 1960s generation of Marxists who are most clearly indebted to him.

The final issue raised has to do with Lukács's theoretical framework itself. For he views theory as in a certain sense the crystallised self-consciousness of the historical moment (under capitalist society, at least). If Lukács misrecognises the historical constellation to which his text responds, then, we must ask whether his broader epistemological positions allow for a 'sympathetic critique' - that is, whether the philosophical tools exist to rectify mistakes within the universe of his thought, or whether it thereby descends into irresolvable antinomies that demand, instead, a thorough break with his whole problematic.

As far as the 1920s are concerned, we have to make a significant biographical point at the outset. Lukács was *not* politically active in the socialist movement prior to 1917. This makes him almost unique among the 'marquee names' of revolutionary Marxism we have inherited from his time. Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin were all active in the Russian movement by 1905. Rosa

Luxemburg - to whom two of the essays in *History and class consciousness* are directed - came into the socialist movement in the 1890s. A young Antonio Gramsci, the figure perhaps most closely analogous to Lukács, joined the Italian Socialist Party in 1913, and even Karl Korsch briefly flirted (of all things) with Fabianism at roughly the same time.

Lukács's background, rather, was mainly academic. Passing through universities at Budapest, Berlin and Heidelberg, his theoretical formation in the years prior to 1917 was primarily a deep engagement with German idealism, combined with the proto-existentialist thought of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Soren Kierkegaard. His peers during this time included two figures that haunt *History and class consciousness* - Georg Simmel and Max Weber. Both were to become influential sociologists (Weber most especially), but there is a particular commitment that appears in both in different forms, which is of particular significance to the discussion of Lukács.

Much of Weber's work is concerned with the increasing rationalisation that pertains to modern capitalist society - the emphasis on rational calculation, a necessary condition from business to the law. His conclusions are essentially pessimistic: capitalist society is one in which predictable mediocrities rather than brilliant individuals will thrive. Simmel, meanwhile, produced an important book, *The philosophy of money*, whose argument turns on the idea that broader social relationships between individuals become objectified in monetary exchange, to the spiritual detriment of the individuals themselves. He called this process 'reification'.

Lukács's sympathies up to this point could be called radical-idealist, and he often moved in socialistic circles - he had read Georges Sorel and Luxemburg by the end of the war. The revolution of 1917 jolted him into Marxism proper; but, while the vast majority of footnotes in *History and class consciousness* direct us to Marx, its theoretical coordinates were plotted under the influence of a great deal of contradictory thought - in a situation of rapid and unpredictable political ferment.

In particular, the directly *political* content of *History and class consciousness* is indebted most heavily to the 'mass action' left of the socialist movement, which hit its moment of greatest plausibility during the post-war, post-October revolutionary wave which spread across Europe. Yet the book was published in 1922, at which time things were - to put it mildly - looking less rosy. This new situation led to retrenchment in the political strategy of Comintern, through the policy of the united front, and ultimately a break with its left wing - sealed by the closure of the left-dominated West European Bureau in Amsterdam and the publication of Lenin's *'Leftwing' communism: an infantile disorder* in 1920. A break with the increasingly delusional millenarianism of the ultra-left, however, failed to prevent the German Communist Party from embarking on the infamous 1921 'March action' - a disastrous voluntarist stunt.

In Lukács's native Hungary, meanwhile, things were equally looking grim. Having been propelled to power and formed the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, the Communist Party rapidly ran into difficulties. A disastrous attempt to wage revolutionary war against Romania and Czechoslovakia, spearheaded by the quixotic voluntarist, Béla Kun, resulted rapidly in the regime's downfall. It was those who learned nothing from the Hungarian debacle who drove through the March action in Germany.

In 1967, when his works of this period were finally republished in German, Lukács provided a sketch of the rather odd position all this left him in as a thinker:

My dilemma was made even more acute by the fact that opposed to me within the leadership of the Hungarian party was the group led by Zinoviev's disciple, Béla Kun, who subscribed to a sectarianism of a modern bureaucratic type. In theory it would have been possible to repudiate his views as those of a pseudo-leftist. In practice, however, his proposals could only

be combated by an appeal to the highly prosaic realities of ordinary life that were but distantly related to the larger perspectives of the world revolution. At this point in my life, as so often, I had a stroke of luck: the opposition to Béla Kun was headed by Eugen Landler.<sup>2</sup>

Landler's influence, which focused on the immense practical difficulties of building the Hungarian Communist Party under the conditions of generalised repression that followed the fall of the soviet republic, led to a particular cognitive dissonance for Lukács:

This became particularly obvious early in 1921. On the Hungarian front I followed Landler in advocating an energetic anti-sectarian line, while simultaneously at the international level I gave theoretical support to the March action. With this the tension between the conflicting tendencies reached a climax. As the divisions in the Hungarian party became more acute, as the movement of the radical workers in Hungary began to grow, my ideas were increasingly influenced by the theoretical tendencies brought into being by these events. However, they did not yet gain the upper hand at this stage, despite the fact that Lenin's criticism had undermined my analysis of the March action.<sup>3</sup>

*History and class consciousness* is often thought of as in some sense returning to an orthodox and revolutionary kernel in Marxism, stripping away the vulgar misreadings that had come to encrust it. In fact, this classic writing is unorthodox in the extreme, and our contemporary failure to see its eclecticism - a febrile mix of Marx and Engels, Simmel and Weber, Luxemburg and Sorel, Kant and Hegel - leads to many misunderstandings: in particular, its status as the expression of Lukács's philosophical *voluntarism*, rather than his 'realistic' political activism, is not always recognised.

It is a misunderstanding to which the 1968 generation were especially prone. The New Left sought to escape the bureaucratic *diktat* and stale inertia of the 'official communist' movement, without succumbing to official social democracy. Many of them took things in the other direction, precisely towards a revival of the very same semi-anarchist, mass-action leftism that informed *History and class consciousness*.

This coincided with a great revival in Marxist philosophical discourse, especially of a Hegelian stripe (but also including, as a serious intellectual force, the radical anti-Hegelianism of Louis Althusser and his followers). This was the time that Marx's earliest writings became available in foreign languages, and also the highly Hegelian *Grundrisse* (first published in German in 1939). The work of Lukács's followers gained currency - the Frankfurt school began to gain a major international audience, and in the case of Herbert Marcuse's *One-dimensional man*, a serious influence on radical movements; Guy Debord's *Society of the spectacle*, published in 1967, also relied heavily on Lukácsian arguments.

*History and class consciousness*, in the Anglophone world, thus had acquired the mystique of the forgotten subversive classic by the time it was finally translated in full in 1971. It found a ready audience that had already imbibed its fundamental theoretical premises through divergent sources.

Forty years later still, Stalinism - which accounted for such spontaneist theory's instinctive appeal - is mortally wounded, although it is proving a stubborn spectre to exorcise fully. So, however, is the political strategy that *History and class consciousness* was most widely used to authorise at that time, and still is today. An orientation to mass action - which united semi-anarchists like Debord with various sections of the Trotskyist movement - utterly failed to displace Stalinism and social democracy as hegemonic forces on the left; the death of the one and the total depoliticisation of the other have simply left *nothing* in their place.

In that respect, and in what follows, I take it

for granted that this political strategy in its various guises - left communism, anarcho-syndicalism, 'western' Maoism, the Trotskyist fetishism of the general strike and the spontaneism of the *Transitional programme* - has failed. Organisations based on that strategy have rarely, if ever, transcended the status of small and fissile sects; and mass-strike movements have repeatedly failed, via their own dynamics, to transcend the political forces dominant in the workers' movement, which mass-action politics would expect to happen.<sup>4</sup>

Testing the viability of Lukács's thought, then, does not mean measuring the force with which he makes the case for a strategy of encouraging spontaneous mass action, or views of the 'vanguard party' which form an explicit part of 'Leninist' accounts of that strategy and (however much they deny it) an *implicit* part of anarchist variants (back to the arch-conspirator, Bakunin himself). It means asking whether we can think, with Lukács, a way *out* of this impasse. My view is that it is not possible to do so without serious structural damage to his overall problematic; that followers of Lukács have consequently divided all too neatly into politically voluntarist activist projects and academic, theoreticist pessimisms; and that the conception of the 'Marx-Hegel relationship' we have inherited from Lukács needs to be drastically rethought at the very least.

## II. A peculiar 'orthodoxy'

Establishing this means starting at the beginning. The first page of *History and class consciousness* is as programmatic as a good first page should be; the title of the first essay asks the question, 'What is orthodox Marxism?', and proceeds immediately to answer it, in one of Lukács's most widely quoted formulations:

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 and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto* - without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, 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>5</sup>

The rest of this chapter attempts to answer the question Lukács most obviously begs here - what, then, is the *method*? We know fairly quickly what it is not - any insistence on the part of the would-be Marxist, with Gradgrind and CP Scott, that 'facts are sacred' in and of themselves, taking a firm stand on the empirical. The word 'facts' appears a good number of times in these 20 or so pages, about half the time in scare quotes. For Lukács, the problem is that the facts have (to borrow an Althusserian phrase) always-already been incorporated into an overall *Weltanschauung*:

The blinkered empiricist will, of course, deny that facts can only become facts within the framework of a system - which will vary with the knowledge desired ... In so doing he forgets that, however simple an enumeration of 'facts' may be, however lacking in commentary, it already implies an 'interpretation'. Already at this stage the facts have been comprehended by a theory, a method; they have been wrenched from their living context and fitted into a theory (§2).

The decisive importance of method is thus ducked at precisely the point where its necessity is posed;

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instead of simply enumerating the facts (or 'facts'), we need to have some way of determining what those facts *mean*. In fact, so to speak, we would have to object here that - outside of Dickensian caricature - even the most "blinkered empiricist" could accept this complaint at face value, and refer Lukács to the scientific method: the blinkers in this case amount to a vulgar understanding of the potentialities of science (Lukács has his own things to say on this point later on).

Method, instead, is "dialectical method" - and dialectical method is to be understood as essentially Hegelian. While "cloaked in abstraction and misunderstanding", in this view Hegel makes the essential point underlying the dialectic: "Necessity consists in this that the whole is sundered into the different concepts and that this divided whole yields a fixed and permanent determinacy. However, this is not a fossilised determinacy, but one which permanently recreates itself in its dissolution."

Lukács comments: "The deep affinities between historical materialism and Hegel's philosophy are clearly manifested here, for both conceive of *theory as the self-knowledge of reality*" (§4, emphasis added). The difference between the two consists in that, ultimately, Hegel was not Hegelian enough:

Marx reproached Hegel (and, in even stronger terms, Hegel's successors, who had reverted to Kant and Fichte) with his failure to overcome the duality of thought and being, of theory and practice, of subject and object ... His knowledge is no more than *knowledge about* an essentially alien material. It was not the case that this material, human society, came to know itself (§4).

This is one of the central points in *History and class consciousness*, to which Lukács will return with pedantic regularity. The political and theoretical project of Marxism is directed at overcoming the binary oppositions enumerated here, which are themselves more than simple 'theoretical errors' - this bifurcation, as we shall see, is an objective affliction within the structure of capitalism as a social system. The failure of the German philosophers to overcome the classic antinomies of Kantianism is something that has to be solved in historical reality.

The other central axiom of Lukács's framework opens the second essay, 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg': "it is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality" (§1).

Like the residual Kantianism of bourgeois thought, Lukács's critique is structured around binary oppositions, but of a rather different type. The totality is opposed, as a *standpoint*, to the isolated 'fact' or individual; the concrete is read as that which is comprehended in the fullness of its determinations, as opposed to the abstract, which is sundered from them; the opposition between the active and the contemplative maps onto this pattern as well (leading to some counterintuitive usages elsewhere in the text). Lurking behind them is the 'daddy of them all' - the opposition in Hegel between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, the understanding and reason proper.

This, then, is the 'method' which is the yardstick of 'orthodoxy' - to grasp the totality, which, however, cannot be done as a theoretical exercise, but consists in bringing the "alien material" to self-consciousness. That poses two theoretical requirements - Lukács must establish that the 'self-knowledge of reality' he proposes is indeed materially rooted in that reality; and he must account for the equally stubborn reality of 'false consciousness'. Both are the task of the central essays of *History and class consciousness*.

On the first point, Lukács raises an argument whose influence has become increasingly baleful and intractable in theoretical work since. Pre-capitalist societies are characterised by a qualitatively different relation to their division into classes than capitalist societies. They are in the first instance less cohesive: "The various parts are much more self-sufficient and less closely interrelated ... In such circumstances the state - ie, the organised unity - remains insecurely anchored in the real life of society. One sector of society simply lives out its 'natural' existence in what amounts to a total independence of the fate of the state" ('Class consciousness', §2).

As a consequence, the division of society appears 'natural', and appears as so many estates and castes rather than classes as we know them today. The unstable and essentially arbitrary relationship between economic and juridical life

occludes 'true' class consciousness completely: "in Hegel's parlance the economy has not even objectively reached the stage of being-for-itself. There is therefore no possible position within such a society from which the economic basis of all social relations could be made conscious."

Capitalist society is quite the opposite. "There is ... an unbridgeable gulf between this and capitalism, where economic factors are not concealed 'behind' consciousness, but are present in consciousness itself (albeit unconsciously or repressed). With capitalism, with the abolition of the feudal estates and with the creation of a society with a *purely economic* articulation, class consciousness arrived at the point where *it could become conscious*."

We should stress that there is nothing novel to Lukács in stressing the differences between capitalism and previous modes of production - indeed, a brief popular account is to be found in the *Communist manifesto* itself. Lukács's argument is rather more 'radical', however; capitalist modernity introduces a whole new structure of consciousness, and does so through the complete saturation of society by the economy. The economic categories are thus not simply mental phenomena, but the very mode of being in capitalist society; the class nature of pre-capitalist societies is only made visible "by the methods of *historical materialism*".

This adds a reflexive twist to his argument about 'method': the self-consciousness of reality is only possible at a certain stage of that reality - the "scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth" is a historical expression of a mode of production which comes, retroactively, to include its predecessors in the terms of its self-consciousness.

Within this theoretical framework, keeping the idea of underlying historical dynamics alive becomes increasingly fraught. This can be illustrated through an earlier discussion, in the 'Orthodox Marxism' chapter, of the question of the separation of 'movement' and 'ultimate goal': "the ultimate goal is not a 'state of the future' awaiting the proletariat somewhere independent of the movement and the path leading up to it," he states, rebuking the likes of Bernstein. "The ultimate goal is rather that relation to the totality (to the whole of society seen as a process), through which every aspect of the struggle acquires its revolutionary significance" (§5).

This would appear, on the face of it, to be a straightforwardly teleological account of history. In fact, however, it is teleological in a much more ambiguous sense - which, again, flows from the underlying Hegelian methodology. In Hegel, as in this little stretch of Lukács, the genesis, the process and the *telos* are an indivisible unity - 'pure Being', the first section of the *Logic*, already contains the Absolute Idea, which in turn contains Being and the whole philosophical machinery that separates the two in the actual exposition. We are accustomed to think of Hegel as restoring a dynamic of historical development to philosophy, but we should in fact be much more cautious. To use the structuralist terminology, Hegelian philosophy is synchronic rather than diachronic - it is a machine whose parts coexist and develop logically from one another, rather than in a forward, temporal motion.

The homology between this and Lukács's account of the *telos* is striking. The past becomes irrevocably alien except inasmuch as it is afforded a precarious existence within the eternal present. Secretly, historical time itself is cast out of theory. We should stress that he is not *necessarily* wrong to do so; in any case the overarching drift in hyper-Hegelian Marxism has been in this direction, whether in Chris Arthur's 'systematic dialectic' interpretation of *Capital* or Moishe Postone's account of the radical difference of modernity and the self-moving Subject of capital.<sup>7</sup>

### III. Reification

Self-consciousness is thus posed as a possibility, uniquely, for capitalist society. How it should come about has to do with the manner in which economic categories come to dominate consciousness. Here we turn to the longest essay in the collection - 'Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat'.

Lukács is here at his most original (which, again, has to be stressed, as aspects at least of the theory he propounds are widely misrecognised as straightforward Marxist orthodoxy). The first part of the essay - 'The phenomenon of reification' - starts with the commodity form. Indeed, "it is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities, when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its

fundamental nature. 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."

Thus consciousness under capitalism consists in a structural typology of the effects of the commodity form on mental life. It begins with the theory of commodity fetishism - "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" (§1).

The 'phantom objectivity' of the commodity form then goes on to take on a significance far beyond the rather limited role it plays in *Capital* itself - that is, designating a particular socially necessary misrecognition in capitalist society, accounting for the concealment of social relationships from bourgeois political economy, on the one hand, and of exploitation from the working class, on the other. In fact, Lukács's great innovation here is to produce a hybrid out of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Weber's theory of rationalisation and Simmel's theory of reification.

Through Weber, Lukács argues that commodity production above all institutes the domination of the quantitative: the rule of equivalence and calculability, and the rational instrumentalisation of all human activity. Their necessity to the capitalist economy is obvious, simply in terms of deciding levels of production, buying enough inputs, calculating market prices, organising labour efficiently, etc. Yet this quickly becomes (in this account) the general rule throughout society. The state machine becomes reified: a faceless bureaucracy grows, in which the bureaucrat comes to a perverse identification with his specific duty (§2). The law becomes reified, and here he quotes Weber, in fine sarcastic form, directly:

For these modern businesses with their fixed capital and their exact calculations are much too sensitive to legal and administrative irrationalities. They could only come into being in the bureaucratic state with its rational laws, where ... the judge is more or less an automatic statute-dispensing machine, in which you insert the files together with the necessary costs and dues at the top, whereupon he will eject the judgment together with the more or less cogent reasons for it at the bottom: that is to say, where the judge's behaviour is on the whole *predictable* (§2).

The effects on consciousness of rational mechanisation are various: for the bureaucracy, it is the (pretty Kantian) aforementioned love of duty, the "specific form of bureaucratic 'conscientiousness'". For the worker, the situation is one of a painful split: "With the modern 'psychological' analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanisation extends right into the worker's 'soul': even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts" (§1).

Here, primarily, is the influence of Simmel - a spiritual-'existential' critique of capitalism, with a clear Romantic inflection, emerges - although the substance of the argument does not turn on it directly.

Rational mechanisation, however, turns into its opposite. The laws of motion of partial systems are rationalised to the last detail by capitalism; but reification occludes a rational understanding of the totality. The systematic exclusion of the qualitative, its violent reduction to what can be rationally measured, cannot be achieved in reality. The underlying irrationality of the system is exposed by crisis, which stems from the repression of the *qualitative* nature of things, the use-value as opposed to value of commodities, which stubbornly turns out to matter after all.

Yet this too penetrates the whole of society. The bureaucracy is rationalised - but anyone who has ever had any contact with a bureaucracy will recognise the underlying irrationality, the tendency to departmental warfare and generalised chaos pointed out wryly by Lukács here. Likewise, while the judge may be reduced to a "statute-dispensing machine", the laws themselves - in their *qualitative* nature - irrupt irrationally into society. Lukács quotes learned jurists:

With regard to the origins of law the perceptive 'critical' jurist, Kelsen, observes: "It is the

great mystery of law and of the state that is consummated with the enactment of laws and for this reason it may be permissible to employ inadequate images in elucidating its nature." Or, in other words: "It is symptomatic of the nature of law that a norm may be legitimate even if its origins are iniquitous. That is another way of saying that the legitimate origin of a law cannot be written into the concept of law as one of its conditions" (§3).

The second part of the essay<sup>8</sup> is essentially an extension of the arguments of the first, to the domain of 'classical German philosophy' - specifically Kant, Fichte and Hegel - where reification is pushed to its highest limits. The same fundamental split - between rational knowledge and the irrational excess that escapes it - is traced through a whole series of insurmountable obstacles: primarily the Kantian unknowability of the 'thing-in-itself'. This limit is chased around the houses: ethics and aesthetics are all proposed as potential reconciliations of the fundamental split.

Finally, with Hegel, we get a serious nudge in the direction of a solution: history itself, conceived as a dialectical process, becomes the ground for grasping the totality and bringing the thing-in-itself into consciousness. Yet Hegel's system is secretly contemplative itself: history is already completed, its steps and moves already integrated into the historical system. The ruse of reason, the owl of Minerva - all are attempts to get around the problem that history is not conceived as "human sensuous activity", to use Marx's terms in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. What results is a "conceptual mythology", whose resolution of the subject-object problem is ultimately false:

Since the method, having become abstract and contemplative, now as a result falsifies and does violence to history, it follows that history will gain its revenge and violate the method which has failed to integrate it, tearing it to pieces (§4).

If the conceptual mythologies of the classical German philosophers fail to grasp the totality, we must then return to the first demand above: by what means *can* historical consciousness be achieved? The rest of the essay provides an answer: in "the standpoint of the proletariat".<sup>9</sup> He begins with Marx's "lapidary account":

"When the proletariat proclaims the dissolution of the previous world order, it does no more than reveal the secret of its own existence, for it represents the effective dissolution of that world order ... The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But the former feels at home in this self-alienation and feels itself confirmed by it; it recognises alienation as its own instrument and in it possesses the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself destroyed by this alienation and sees in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence."

This citation is from *The holy family*, at the height of Marx's Feuerbachian phase, and is redolent of that period when - as Engels remarks somewhere - 'we were all Feuerbachians'. There is a more pertinent issue, which has to do with the way Lukács brings in the proletariat here, which is that it is substantially *subjectivist*: that is, its 'bite' comes from the *experience* of the inherent alienation felt by historical individuals in their situation. It is because the proletariat experiences alienation as intolerable that it can "reveal the secret of its own existence" - that is, that capitalism is not the consummation of reason in history, but rather another self-alienation of human species-being - and thereby represent the abolition of capitalism.

Lukács goes on to specify the argument a little further, which needs to be quoted at length:

This enables us to understand why it is only in the proletariat that the process by which a man's achievement is split off from his total personality and becomes a commodity leads to a revolutionary consciousness ... The basic structure of reification can be found in all the social forms of modern capitalism (eg, bureaucracy). But this structure can only be made fully conscious in the work-situation of the proletariat. For his work as he experiences it directly possesses the naked and abstract form of the commodity, while in other forms of work this is hidden behind the facade of 'mental labour', of 'responsibility', etc ...

Corresponding to the objective concealment of the commodity form, there is the subjective element. This is the fact that, while the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity dehumanises him and cripples and atrophies his 'soul' - as long as he does not consciously rebel against it - it remains true that precisely his humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities. He is able therefore to objectify himself completely against his existence, while the man reified in the bureaucracy, for instance, is turned into a commodity, mechanised and reified in the only faculties that might enable him to rebel against reification. Even his thoughts and feelings become reified (§2).

While the first paragraph here is specified at the beginning of the second as an 'objective' argument, it is in fact subjective. The inability of the bureaucrat (or the journalist, for whom Lukács's contempt is truly withering) to comprehend the reality of the commodity form comes from the existential situation in which he finds himself, by virtue of which his entire 'soul' becomes reified. But the *work situation* of the worker, who experiences reification in the form of the productive labour process, results instead in his productive capacities being split from his 'total personality'; thus he can conceive of his labour-power as a commodity, as something he sells.

The consequence of this is that the veil of fetishism-reification is torn aside. The worker becomes conscious of his own objectivity; in a historical situation saturated by the commodity form, the commodity itself becomes self-conscious. The worker is no longer subject to the split between the subjective and objective - his subjectivity is able to grasp the objectification inherent in his social situation. Thus, the working class becomes 'for itself', the famous identical "subject-object of history" (§6).

#### IV. The limits of Lukács

The third part of 'Reification ...' consists of a dense, complex argument. It is probably best thought of as a virtuoso performance of the task which, sooner or later, afflicts all those with a critical theoretical consciousness - philosophising oneself out of a hole.

He has, after all, dug a very deep hole - deep enough to hold the fate of all humanity inside it. From commodity fetishism in Marx as a specific point in an overall argument, we have arrived at reification as a total existential condition, which consumes a good portion of the species completely, and confronts a larger one with more limited colonial incursions into the soul.

In his critique of Kant, Fichte and Hegel, however, he has dug a hole for himself alone. He accuses the German philosophers, after all, of reified conceptions of history - history becomes abstractly a matter of human action, but ultimately subject to the 'ruse of reason', the law of unintended consequences; only *ex-post-facto* philosophies of history are possible. So, as well as providing the objective ground for historical consciousness, and the objective ground for historical *false* consciousness, Lukács has a third task - to do so *without falling into conceptual mythology himself*.

On the basis of the book's argument up to this point, it cannot be said that he does. The first problem that has to be mentioned is that, in the long passage quoted above distinguishing the subject-positions of the proletarian and the bureaucrat, he makes a substantially different argument for the historical importance of the working class than that of Marx and classical pre-war Marxism more generally. Marx, on the whole, is more cautious about making *positive* arguments concerning the inheritance of communism to the working class; rather than stemming from the positive phenomenal experience of alienation and exploitation, he points to the *lack* of property in the means of production - that 'double freedom' which *Capital* made so famous. The proletariat's class power thus fundamentally relies on *collective action*, which, however, is quite as true for the most sectional trade union dispute as it is for a social revolution.

Lukács's argument, on the other hand, is 'workerist' or economist in the narrow sense; that is, *contra* Lenin quoting Kautsky in the most infamous part of *What is to be done?*, socialist consciousness *is* to be found in the direct struggle between worker and employer. This has a constricting effect on our conception of the working class - at least implicitly for Marx and classical Marxism, those who do not work for a wage as such, but who belong to the class of people reliant on the social wage fund as a *whole* (the unemployed, housewives, school-age

working class children, etc), are quite as much proletarians as the horny-handed sons of toil in the factories; and it is the unity of all these strata which poses a mortal threat to the bourgeois order. Yet, on the line of his argument, Lukács cannot avoid a conclusion of broadly this type. Having presented capitalist society as one of a "purely economic articulation", and the economic categories as the very forms in which we live our relation to the world, the only way out is to find some decisive type of phenomenal experience from which point the society can become self-conscious. The proletariat as a *whole* - including homemakers, the unemployed, etc - *cannot* be subject to a sufficiently similar phenomenology, and so one stratum must be privileged, if the dissolution of the existing social order is to be the work of the proletariat at all.

But suppose we accept Lukács's argument on this point. The beautifully poised argument that brings us from the fatal *aporiae* of German philosophy to the proletarian subject-object is, on the face of it, precisely a 'conceptual mythology' of the order of Hegel's system. It 'works', whether or not the proletariat *actually does* achieve such consciousness - indeed, whether or not the proletariat exists or not. It thus falls prey to Kant's critique of the ontological argument for the existence of god,<sup>10</sup> let alone his own arguments about conceptual mythologies of history. It is clear, from the empirical record, that - while masses of workers *have* been won to the idea that their exploitation is systemic in nature and will continue until the end of commodity society - proletarian class struggle may equally, in its defensive forms, take place under the (consummately fetishised) slogan, 'A fair day's work for a fair day's pay', and thus remain stuck in its unconscious objectivity.

Lukács attacks this problem from two sides - either side of the 'Reification' essay, in fact. In 'Class consciousness', he proposes the concept of 'imputed (*zugerechnet*) class consciousness' (borrowed from Weber). On this conception, "class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions 'imputed' to a particular typical position in the process of production" (§1). With this caveat, the consciousness of the proletariat becomes a *potentiality* inherent in the life-world of the class, present even in situations where it is not actualised as such. In the 1967 preface, however, Lukács puts his finger on exactly what is wrong with this ingenious procedure, and it is precisely that it leaves him as stuck in a conceptual mythology as ever:

What I had intended subjectively, and what Lenin had arrived at as the result of an authentic Marxist analysis of a practical movement, was transformed in my account into a purely intellectual result and thus into something contemplative. In my presentation it would indeed be a miracle if this 'imputed' consciousness could turn into revolutionary praxis.

It is through (a certain) Lenin that Lukács will again attempt to dig his way out. The final essay, 'Towards a methodology of the problem of organisation', however, is theoretically cautious and in obvious tension with the overall analysis. It is hardly surprising that Debord, for example, can reject it out of hand without any serious conceptual difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Most of the essay is, innocently or otherwise, simply unconcerned with resolving the central issue - that is, making an argument for the party as the *form* which "mediates between theory and practice".

The bulk, rather, is based around rather obtuse philosophisations of that 'Leninist party' form which emerges from the early Comintern. In this respect, some arguments are perceptive and illuminating (§3, on the relationship between discipline and bourgeois individual freedom, in particular); others simply recapitulate classic 'mass action' arguments against the Second International centre, albeit obscured by Hegelian jargon.<sup>12</sup>

So, why the communist party? He proposes that a party is necessary, first of all, because a 'purely' proletarian revolution is impossible - that is, sections of the broad masses will need to be brought in by the conscious work of an organisation rather than spontaneous mass action, something missed even by Lukács's beloved Rosa Luxemburg:

Only in the class consciousness of the proletariat do we find that the correct view of revolutionary action is so deeply anchored and so deeply rooted in the instincts that this attitude need only be made conscious for it to provide a clear lead. Action will then advance of itself

along the right road. If, however, other strata of the population become decisively involved in the revolution, they may advance it under certain circumstances. But it is just as easy for them to deflect it in a counterrevolutionary direction. For in the class situation of these strata (petty bourgeoisie, peasants, oppressed nationalities, etc) there is nothing, nor can there be anything, to make their actions lead inevitably towards the proletarian revolution (§2).

The second argument is that consciousness is not homogenous among the proletariat, either:

Our aim here is to point out that the class consciousness of the proletariat does not develop uniformly throughout the whole proletariat, parallel with the objective economic crisis. Large sections of the proletariat remain intellectually under the tutelage of the bourgeoisie; even the severest economic crisis fails to shake them in their attitude. With the result that *the standpoint of the proletariat and its reaction to the crisis is much less violent and intense than is the crisis itself* (§2).

These arguments are, ironically, perfectly cogent from the point of view of the empirical record (although they do not even begin to exhaust the party question). The disputes among the Russian social democrats - and figures like Rosa Luxemburg - do indeed turn to a large degree on the problem of the non-proletarian masses, and the relationship the workers' party ought to have with those masses. The war, meanwhile, made it perfectly clear that sections of the workers' movement could be 'turned' to the "tutelage of the bourgeoisie", of which Lenin's theory of imperialism is only the most famous account.

Within the schema of Lukács's overall philosophy, however - and taken together with the 'imputed' class consciousness - they become quite problematic. The link between the subjective, existential situation of the industrial proletariat and its revolutionary class consciousness - on which the final dialectical leap of 'Reification ...' turns - is more or less decisively broken. Proletarian class consciousness then has to lie elsewhere: in the party - but the ability of the communist party to embody that consciousness is *not* rooted in anything about its objective situation. It is rather a matter of *will* - the ability of the individual member to submit to discipline; the ability of the party to intervene decisively in spontaneous mass actions (unlike the 'passive' social democratic parties).

Lukács's reasoning here is a theoretical short circuit, producing a barely convincing link between an imputed consciousness - somehow inherently rooted in the reality of which it is to be conscious, even if only as a potentiality - and an arbitrarily given historical collection of conscious individuals. The road to political voluntarism is hereby laid out. Yet so is the road to disillusionment - when voluntaristic politics fail, the result, where it is not ever more delusional voluntarism (the degeneration of various New Left sects into 'urban guerrilla' outfits, for example), is pessimism.

This short circuit is a symptom of a larger one - itself nested, in the manner of a Matryoshka doll, inside the decisive overall problem of *method*. The larger problem is buried in the 'Reification ...' essay. It *appears* that his argument here is impeccably dialectical, in the strict Hegelian sense. The first part begins with a simple concept - the commodity - and develops into an account of a sharp and irresolvable contradiction. The second part - through its analysis of classical German philosophy - drives that contradiction to its highest and most unbearable intensity. The third resolves the contradiction into a higher unity (the active consciousness of the identical subject-object).

However, we are entitled to ask: why on earth should the commodity have such an extraordinary power to colonise everything? In order to ensure its continued existence as a mode of production, capitalism needs to return enough people to work every day to reproduce themselves, as well as a parasitic class of exploiters on top of them. It does not need to colonise anyone's soul - in fact, it has been much happier, in a good many situations, to leave that job to the priests (and 'secular' inheritors, such as the mass media), who - after all - know one or two things about colonising souls.

In Lukács, this all-conquering power of the commodity is simply *assumed*. It is a perfectly rational assumption *on the basis of Hegelian idealism*, where the totality is embodied homogeneously across its particular elements. Althusser and his school called this the 'expressive totality', and it can be crudely likened to a stick of

Brighton rock: wherever you break it, the same message is written on the cross-section. There are serious difficulties that arise from Althusser's critique of this conception of totality, which we cannot go into here. Nonetheless, the prognosis he offers is pertinent: the various instances of society - the different spheres in which that complicated animal we call the human has its existence - lose their own specificity. They become reducible one and all, via various degrees of mediation, to a single principle.

#### V. Heads I win ...

But this principle, in a cruel twist of the dialectic, is condemned to *lose* its explanatory power. If commodity fetishism/reification accounts for the stupidities both of Mitt Romney and Joseph Ratzinger, then it cannot provide a satisfactory account of either. We are forced, one way or another, to rely on external theoretical resources. The cautious incorporation of a certain Freud (and another Nietzsche) into the analyses of the Frankfurt school is a relatively moderate example. Literary critic Fredric Jameson's absorption of almost every passing trend in contemporary academia as accounts of so many reified partial systems - post-structuralism as a necessary expression of the peculiarity of 'postmodernity' or 'late capitalism', for example - is a far more extreme one.

*Within the framework of this analysis*, however, distinguishing between 'legitimate' historicisations and theoretical opportunism is epistemologically impossible. The method, in which 'orthodox Marxism' is somehow embodied, is entirely circular and self-sufficient. 'Facts' cannot intrude on the problem, for they are themselves only comprehensible through method. Science, which is certainly the traditional answer for Marx and Engels, cannot either. Lukács, in a brief excursus entitled 'Subject and object in Hegel',<sup>13</sup> excoriates a 'scientific' passage in Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy*:

The most telling refutation of this [that is, "question[ing] the possibility of any cognition, or at least of an exhaustive cognition, of the world" - JT], as of all other philosophical crochets, is practice: namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the ungraspable Kantian 'thing-in-itself'. The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained such 'things-in-themselves' until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the 'thing-in-itself' became a thing for us.<sup>14</sup>

This is an unacceptable statement from Lukács's point of view. "Engels' deepest misunderstanding consists in his belief that the behaviour of industry and scientific experiment constitutes praxis in the dialectical, philosophical sense. In fact, scientific experiment is *contemplation at its purest*. The experimenter creates an artificial, abstract milieu in order to be able to observe undisturbed the untrammelled workings of the laws under examination, eliminating all irrational factors both of the subject and the object" (emphasis added). The method is justified rather because it is the expression of historical self-consciousness:

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 ('Reification ...', part 3, §2).

There are thus no means available for correction - two divergent theoretical formations cannot confront each other on the ground of a 'third party', the dreaded 'facts', about which a discussion would then be possible - because 'facts' are openly or secretly method to begin with. They cannot confront each other over the results of 'industry and experiment', which are themselves "contemplation at its purest" and therefore reified *in extremis*. There are only the two conditions above, which *already assume* the Hegelian expressive totality. It is a perfect circle: heads I win, tails you lose.

# SUPPLEMENT

On the basis of this exposition, 'orthodox Marxism' becomes exactly what Lukács, back in the opening pages, says it is not: "Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations" - but (his view of) Marx's method, which is surely a result of his investigations, *must* be accepted uncritically. (Gareth Stedman Jones, in a lengthy critique of *History and class consciousness*,<sup>15</sup> wonders what kind of method could survive the falsification of all its results.) "It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis" - but the method only works if we accept the thesis that capitalism is a society with a "purely economic articulation", in which the commodity form saturates all human relations. "Nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book" - but almost all Lukács's references are from either the first chapters of *Capital* or the available early works of the time, a characteristic that has become if anything far more acute in theoretical work of an Hegelian-Marxist stripe since the 1960s.

It is the Hegelian commitments that render this view circular. Hegel's system 'works' in the first instance because it does not distinguish, except as logical moments in a systematic exposition, history and nature. In that respect, human existence *can* be read as a self-sufficient totality with strictly endogenous laws of development. Lukács rejects Engels's theory of the dialectics of nature, in order to square this circle - and even rebukes Hegel for providing the lead for Engels<sup>16</sup>; his alternative to this view is to declare nature a "societal category".<sup>17</sup> In this way, the self-sufficient totality of human history can be preserved.

Yet it comes at the cost of a wholesale lapse into idealism. A given conception of nature, it is true, is determined as a social category. Nature, however, *is not a category*. Nature is a brute *fact* - no scare quotes here - an incomprehensibly complex assembly of matter, energy and empty space, whose laws of motion obtain in cruel indifference to whatever we tailless apes happen to think about the matter. The human race is *part of* nature, and is in a state of complete dependence on the non-human part of it - Marx speaks of the metabolic relationship between the two, and castigates the authors of the 1875 Gotha programme of German social democracy for failing to consider that dependency. His well-known citation of Vico - "human history differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former, but not the latter" - is referred to by Lukács, who, however, seems to miss its overall significance. It is not the case that Hegel's method has simply gotten 'lost' in the wrong subject matter, and can provide a model for materialist analysis with the relevant names changed. The methodological assumption of a homogenous totality, with wholly endogenous laws of motion, must either produce a 'unified field theory' that encompasses all physical phenomena, in which we humans play an almost insignificant role, or otherwise collapse into idealism.

The political result *today* of holding to the expressive, Hegelian methodology is ultimately the revenge of the subject-object dichotomy. Inheritors of Lukács, on the one hand, consist of various forms of voluntarism: the combination of an absolute structure of ideology and a weak point at the point of production leads to an obsessive focus on, precisely, *mass action*. This is very obvious in the anarchist, autonomist and so on forms of 'direct action' and fetishisation of the wildcat strike.

Yet it should be stressed that there are 'rightwing' forms of this too. The classic Socialist Workers Party line of 'moderate demands, militant action' is *in some sense* linked to the Hegelian heritage; while the SWP has never been formally committed to Lukácsian-Hegelian Marxism, it began translations of *History and class consciousness* in the mid-1960s, and former leader John Rees is a committed Hegelian Marxist. Despite Alex Callinicos's background in analytical philosophy and Althusserianism, philosophical discussion at the annual Marxism festival remains of a basically Hegelian stripe. A video of Chris Nineham talking at a Counterfire event is paradigmatic, in which he ends up arguing that a struggle over a lunch break can present an obstacle to commodification.<sup>18</sup> The result: it does not matter how rightwing the politics you put over actually are, but only that they get people *excited*.

And then - on the side of the 'object' - there are those for whom the arguments for proletarian class consciousness are simply unconvincing for one reason or another. For example, followers of the Frankfurt school, for whom the administered society spreads reification throughout, such that resistance can only take the form of critical theory, until (it seems) some kind of incomprehensible cosmic catastrophe returns revolution to the historical agenda. At the extreme end, we find 'Marxists' who - following the argument that

Marxism is an account strictly of the logic of capitalist society - deny historical materialism as a religion, because it (supposedly) imputes a purposive dynamic to history.<sup>19</sup> All that can be done is exposition of the theory of value to whatever individuals will listen. Finally, but under the same general stripe, there is the domestication of various forms of Hegelian Marxism in academia - be it increasingly esoteric arguments over value theory and *Kapitallogik* or the cultural criticism of a Jameson.

This is not a contingent historical result, with determinations exogenous to the Hegelian theoretical framework (which would, however, be quite unable to theorise such determinations anyway), but an irresolvable antinomy that results from holding to the 'stick of rock' view of society. The message down the middle either reads 'proletarian revolution' or 'perpetual domination'.

## VI. Marxism and philosophy

If a strictly Hegelian methodological standpoint cannot be sustained without falling into incoherence, the question is inevitably raised as to the status of philosophy in Marxism. I intend here to put forward some preliminary notes on this issue - something that has been hotly disputed, at least in part thanks to Lukács (and others such as Karl Korsch) returning it to the agenda in the 1920s.

An alternative, and radically anti-Hegelian, approach was put forward by Louis Althusser and his colleagues in the 1960s. They began with a view of philosophy as the "theory of theoretical practice" - a science whose object was the overall relationship between the different sciences and their objects; but this rapidly fell into irresolvable contradictions itself (a third approach, based on Anglo-American analytical philosophy, collapsed almost as soon as it came into being). The failure of Althusser's first theory led him quickly to radically downgrade the significance of philosophy as a practice: it was not a science, for it had no object, and thus ultimately no standard of reference for solving its own problems:

Let us be good sports. Philosophers at work! It is well worth going out of your way to have a close look at such a spectacle! What spectacle? Why, comedy. Bergson has explained and Chaplin has shown that, ultimately, comedy is always a matter of a man missing a step or falling into a hole. With philosophers you know what to expect: at some point they will fall flat on their faces.<sup>20</sup>

Althusser rather concludes that philosophy as a practice consists in posing problems - posing problems to theory 'proper' (ie, the scientific analysis of society), and to the practical activity of the masses in overthrowing oppression. It is a 'god of the gaps', as it were.

As a direct reading of 'the Marxist classics', Althusser's work is quite problematic - he tends rather to selectively quote forefathers to shoehorn them into the particular framework in which he operates. In this respect, however, he is quite faithful. The fundamental *intellectual* aspiration at the heart of classical Marxism is to *scientificity* - and, just as modern physics ultimately abolished what was previously called 'natural philosophy', so a scientific understanding of the motor forces of history - inasmuch as it is achieved - should do away with 'philosophies of history' in the older sense. Given the differences in the nature of their objects, a science of history would surely differ radically in its methods of investigation from, say, physics; but *some* means must be found to produce a discourse that is broadly speaking *cumulative*.

A Marxist account is thus necessarily open - a Marxian dialectic must, while operating at a considerable level of abstraction from the natural sciences, be able to account for their exogenous determinations, as opposed to positing a strictly endogenous dialectical development (hence Marx's enthusiasm for Darwin's work, the interest with which he and Engels followed developments in natural science, and - for that matter - the 'scandalous' passage Lukács identifies in Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach* concerning science and industry).

Yet, if we cannot consider human (or even specifically capitalist) society as some kind of endogenous logical development, the categories made flesh, then we are left with the thorny question of exactly what relationship the logic of social forms has with the lived history of society, quite apart from the intervention of nature. My view is that it is impossible to solve this problem 'once and for all', without again falling into the incoherence of a conceptual mythology. The

utility of dialectical method cannot be assumed - whether openly or tacitly - without breaking with Marx's realism; it must rather be established with reference to the "alien matter" itself, the dreaded 'facts'.

Marx's mode of exposition in *Capital* is typically thought of as having a close correspondence to Hegel's *Logic*; yet there are points where the dense logical argument breaks off for 50 or 100 pages of historical narrative, which, however, cannot be reduced to mere historical illustrations. The chapter on the working day in England, for example, is the means by which the text moves from absolute towards relative surplus value - not only due to the internal contradictions in the former (absolute natural limits to the working day, for example), but to a long and messy battle with the industrial bourgeoisie, their vulgar economists, the nascent workers' movement and Tory factory inspectors all as indispensable protagonists. Without this cast of thousands, many of the most famous 'results' of Marx's analysis - the compositions of capital, the falling rate of profit and so on - could not have been discovered.

The broader lesson is this: no mode of production is immaculately conceived: capitalism, as socialism surely will, emerges out of its predecessor after "prolonged birth pangs". The emergence of capitalism in all European countries is marked by a long series of revolutions and tortuous compromises with elements of the *ancien régime* (we need only mention the various churches). With the rise of the proletarian movement, these compromises become a matter of urgent necessity. A 'pure' capitalist society has never, and will never, exist, simply due to problems of historical inertia.

But even if one did, that society would be faced immediately with the contradiction at the core of capitalist reproduction - that is, that it is based simultaneously on an assumption of sovereign, 'free' individuals, and at the same time produces on the basis of a fully developed and now fully global division of labour, and is thus *collective*. Institutions such as the state - which exist to represent the collective interests of capital as opposed to individual capitals, albeit often very imperfectly - thus cannot be purely determined, as Lukács suggests, by the commodity structure. Neither can the various ideologies, which attempt to suspend this contradiction at the level of the individual subject. Generalised commodity production sets limits to these institutions, but is in turn reliant on them for its own reproduction, and thus subject to their limits too.

Given this level of complexity, the dialectic is an indispensable tool of analysis: capitalism is irredeemably split, as were societies before it, and grasping its tensions through time is a task for dialectical thought. It is not made necessary by all the problems of society finding their solutions in "the riddle of the commodity structure".

## VII. What's the use?

It may seem that I have been pretty harsh on *History and class consciousness* here - what emerges is a text of dogmatic millenarianism, a hermetic philosophy of history with an essentially circular logic and a fissile historical tendency that obscures, rather than sharpens, the power of Marxism (as philosophy surely should). It is a description which, no doubt, many admirers of this book would barely recognise - but more flattering characterisations only serve to exacerbate the internal contradictions of this acutely contradictory product.

It is worth considering whether there is anything, on the contrary, worth salvaging from the book. My opinion is that there is not much. Some incidental arguments are illuminating (as noted, parts of the essay on organisation survive outside of the voluntaristic problematic that produced them). The *specific phrase* on the 'aspiration to totality' that opens the first Rosa Luxemburg chapter is acceptable (though the conception of totality it mobilises is not). The commentary on Kant, Fichte and Hegel has some pedagogical value - it is clear that Lukács knows his stuff on these thinkers - but is necessarily limited by its purpose as an ancillary to an overall argument which is ultimately incoherent.

Indeed, there is much more to say - and very much more has already been said - on the subject of Hegel, who has entered my argument exclusively in the manner that he is read by Lukács; yet the incomparably dense and wide-ranging work that bears his name is by no means exhausted by this 'orthodox' interpretation. Certainly it would be absurd to deny the importance of Hegel to Marx's theoretical formation, or the usefulness of a working understanding of the basic conceptual moves in Hegel's philosophy for illuminating

Marx's more abstruse reflections (or, indeed, our own researches). Lukács's mistake is to read Marxism *simply* as a radicalised Hegelianism, which ends up falling prey to all the old sins of Hegelianism proper.

As a historical document, we may rather patronisingly characterise *History and class consciousness* as representative of the best of the spirit and the worst of the theory of its time - there is no denying the revolutionary *élan* of these pages, but equally no way to defend their revolutionary utility. Lukács attempts to defend Bolshevism against the 'inert', philosophically moribund Marxism of the Second International centre - yet it was precisely the very same Marxism that enabled the Bolsheviks to become mass; so Lukács, quite against his own intentions, defends instead the voluntarist sects, the likes of which the Bolsheviks swept aside.

Yet it survives today as a central point of reference for thousands of Marxists (and an unacknowledged one for many more). For some, the idea that revolutionary consciousness is immanent to our situation allows them to believe that, despite their small numbers, the revolution they seek is not so far away as all that. For others (the pessimists), it provides the germs of a theory of the impossible, terrifying power of commodity society, and thus a justification for critical-theoretical radicalism and political quietism (we might invert Gramsci's classic ethic here, and suggest that the post-Frankfurt school and post-situationist milieu suffer from optimism of the intellect and pessimism of the will). Both attractions are products of our undeniable historical weakness, whose importance is respectively dismissed or inflated.

In fact, our weakness is neither an illusion nor necessary. The scattered, demoralised forces of the Marxist left *can* become a mass movement (Marx himself started off from a worse position, and so did the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party). But we cannot do it on the basis of comforting conceptual mythologies or dead political strategies ●

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## Notes

1. <http://cpgb.org.uk/home/videos/georg-luk%C3%A1cs-philosopher-of-revolution>.
2. Preface to *History and class consciousness* (trans: Rodney Livingstone): <http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs67.htm>.
3. *Ibid.*
4. I refer readers to Mike Macnair's *Revolutionary strategy* (London 2008), especially chapters 2 and 3, for a more thoroughgoing critique of this political strategy (available at [www.cpgb.org.uk/home/books/revolutionary-strategy-2008](http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/books/revolutionary-strategy-2008)). See also 'Transitional to what?' (*Weekly Worker* August 2 2007).
5. <http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/orthodox.htm>.
6. <http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/ch02.htm>.
7. CJ Arthur *The new dialectic and Marx's Capital* Leiden 2004; M Postone *Time, labour and social domination* Cambridge 1993. See especially Postone: "To the extent that a logical historical development leading toward capitalism is presented - as in the analysis of the value form in the first chapter of *Capital* - this logic must be understood as being retrospectively apparent rather than immanently necessary. The latter form of historical logic does exist, according to Marx, but, as we shall see, it is an attribute of the capitalist social formation alone" (p129).
8. 'The antinomies of bourgeois thought': <http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs1.htm>.
9. [http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07\\_1.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07_1.htm).
10. I Kant *Critique of pure reason* book II, chapter 3, §4. Very briefly: the ontological argument, raised by Anselm of Canterbury and then in René Descartes' *Meditations*, proposes that since the concept of god is a supremely perfect being, he cannot not exist without the concept becoming meaningless (non-existence being an imperfection). Kant objects famously that existence cannot be considered a predicate of a given concept - that is, an attribute such that, without it, the concept would fail to describe its object. Hegel, in turn, objects to Kant on the basis that finite beings such as us (or Kant's example, a hundred dollars) may not have existence as a predicate, but an infinite being such as god must. Hegel's argument is only satisfactory inasmuch as one is an idealist or, in particular, believes in the god of classical theology; otherwise, the latter deity can be fruitfully dismissed precisely as an incoherent concept.
11. "When Lukács, in 1923, showed that [the party] form was the long-sought mediation between theory and practice, in which the proletarians are no longer 'spectators' of the events which happen in their organisation, but consciously choose and live these events, he described as actual merits of the Bolshevik Party everything that the Bolshevik Party was not" (*Society of the spectacle*, §112: [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm)).
12. §1 is typical: "The Russian Revolution clearly exposed the limitations of the west European organisations. Their impotence in the face of the spontaneous movements of the masses was clearly exposed on the issues of mass actions and the mass strike. A fatal blow was dealt to the opportunistic illusion implicit in the notion of the 'organisational preparation' for such actions. It was plainly demonstrated that such organisations always limp behind the real actions of the masses, and that they impede rather than further them, let alone lead them."
13. <http://marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs2.htm>.
14. <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch02.htm>.
15. G Stedman Jones, 'The Marxism of the early Lukács: an evaluation', in *New Left Review* 1/70, 1971.
16. 'What is orthodox Marxism?', footnote 6.
17. 'The antinomies of bourgeois thought', §2.
18. [www.counterfire.org/index.php/video/5716-lukacs-contribution-to-marxism-chris-nineham-counterforum-19-june](http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/video/5716-lukacs-contribution-to-marxism-chris-nineham-counterforum-19-june).
19. [www.junge-linke.org/en/historical-materialism](http://www.junge-linke.org/en/historical-materialism).
20. L Althusser, 'Philosophy and the spontaneous philosophy of the scientists', p76 ([www.marx2mao.com/Other/PSP590ii.html](http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/PSP590ii.html)).