

**Communist Party of Great Britain (Provisional Central Committee)  
contra Lukács**

articles:

**James Turley, “The antinomies of Georg Lukács” 1/24/13**

**Chris Cutrone, “Regression” 1/31/13**

**James Turley, “Dummy” 2/21/13**

**Chris Cutrone, “Nota bene” 2/28/13**

**James Turley, “Bacon” 3/7/13**

**Lawrence Parker, “Lukács reloaded” 3/7/13**

**Chris Cutrone, “Unreloaded” 3/14/13**

---

## 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**



Theory of class consciousness?

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 Søren 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.[2](#)

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.[3](#)

*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.[4](#)

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; 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' [6](#): "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 proletarian. 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 inherence 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 'scientistic' 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 crotchets, 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.

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 - decry 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 irremediably 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 milieus 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.

### 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/PSPS90ii.html](http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/PSPS90ii.html)).

---



## Regression

James Turley ([‘The antinomies of Georg Lukács’](#), January 24) upholds Althusser against Lukács and so goes for a certain New Left doxa, while claiming that the New Left was essentially Lukácsian. Indeed, this is the ‘materialism versus idealism’ dispute, as filtered through the New Left, such that the Lacanian-Heideggerian trajectory of Althusser, Foucault *et al* becomes what stands for ‘materialism’, and the Marxist-Hegelian Frankfurt school trajectory becomes ‘idealism’.

This involves some very distorting flattening of the issues, but suffice it to say that such postmodernist ‘materialism’ is to be found in the pseudo-Nietzschean/Heideggerian ontology (‘logic of [material] being’ and its supposed ‘revelations’) contra Hegelianism. This is the present ‘common sense’ that Turley expresses, and why he then must read Lukács as self-contradictory in certain ways. Lukács’s early Marxist works were only ever obscure to the New Left and so prone to bowdlerisation, and have only become more so since.

It is noteworthy that, in Turley’s view, the only positive claim one is left with regarding Lukács is that, beyond a commendable “revolutionary *élan*”, Lukács is good in his criticism of “Kant, Fichte and Hegel” (in the section, ‘Antinomies of bourgeois thought’ - part 2 of the ‘Reification’ essay in *History and class consciousness*).

But Turley thinks that the limits of Lukács’s ‘materialism’, and hence of his ‘Marxism’, are with regard to how he conceives of the empirical experience of the working class in capitalism. This involves, according to Turley, a “short circuit”, in which the “confrontation and struggle of employee with employer” is “already socialism”, whereas Turley thinks that this neglects political mediations, in an “ultra-left” manner. But, while in Turley’s characterisation it could, in fact it doesn’t. Lukács was addressing how it was precisely in the struggle for proletarian socialism, in the era of the high point of Second International Marxism, that the problem of ‘reification’ manifested itself. For Lukács, ‘reification’ meant Bebel’s and Kautsky’s SPD, in theory and practice.

What makes Lukács’s early 1920s works so difficult to read today is that we lack Lukács’s object of critique. So his arguments become objectless and

seem ‘speculative’ in the worst sense. We do not have the high Second International in crisis 1914-19 but something much worse in our political reality today. This makes it difficult to grasp Lukács’s arguments.

In fact, Lukács was engaged in the self-critique of the crisis of Marxism in the collapse of the Second International and in the difficulties of reformulating Marxism as revolutionary politics by Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, and their comrades in the Third International. But their failure was not due to an error in thinking supposedly condensed in Lukács. We lack the basis for the immanence of Lukács’s critique of the newly formed Third International, why Lukács thought he was making a vital contribution to addressing the political problems of his time. And so Lukács’s work appears as an ‘intellectual’ exercise in the most limited sense. But this merely projects the potential limitations of our own reading today onto the text, bereft of its original concrete context, the comparably high level of political disputes within the fledgling Third International 1919-22.

Ultimately, Turley cannot go beyond Lukács’s own later self-criticism of *History and class consciousness*, in that Lukács had tried, mistakenly, to ‘out-Hegel Hegel’. Hence, Turley cannot go beyond Lukács’s own capitulation to Stalinism, as the ‘material reality’ to which theory must supposedly discipline and subordinate itself. In this view, Lukács’s own later repudiation of his earlier work seems justified, but this is the justification of what happened to Marxism as ‘critical theory’ as a function of Stalinism. It became intolerable. To save his skin, Lukács had to change his mind. But the real alternative was to try to change the world, whose failure Stalinism both expressed and reinforced.

The question is, what happens to Marxism as critical theory when evacuated of its object of critique, when divorced from political practice? It disintegrates. But this was not due to the “antinomies of Lukács”, but rather the degradation and liquidation of Marxism, and the resulting regression of history. The self-critique of Marxism - its ‘Hegelian self-consciousness’ - cannot make sense when there is no Marxism politically.

**Chris Cutrone**

---

## Dummy

Chris Cutrone exemplifies the rather odd approach his Platypus organisation has to its anointed theoretical forebears ([Letters](#), January 31). I do not recognise the depiction of myself as some kind of “Lacanian-Heideggerian”, but that is by the by. More importantly, I do not recognise his brief presentation of Lukács. “Lukács was addressing,” apparently, “how it was precisely in the struggle for proletarian socialism, in the era of the high point of Second International Marxism, that the problem of ‘reification’ manifested itself. For Lukács, ‘reification’ meant Bebel’s and Kautsky’s SPD, in theory and practice.”

The problem is that this is flatly inconsistent with the entire line of argument of *History and class consciousness*. There is a clue, in fact, in the title - if Lukács said the things attributed to him by Cutrone, then he would have been better off calling it *The Second International and class consciousness*, or some such title. In any case, this is a text in which Kautsky barely appears at all, and Bebel only as the recipient of a letter from Engels at the tail end of the critique of Rosa Luxemburg’s text on the Russian Revolution. Where the International appears at all, it is simply to be the subject of an utterly run-of-the-mill, mass-action left critique (as in certain footnotes in the final chapter on organisation).

Reification, in Lukács, is not ‘official Marxism’. It is *the entire structure of consciousness of bourgeois society*, as lived through the “pure” categories of capital. This is not buried in some obscure footnote. It is laid out in a *200-page essay* that constitutes the book’s beating heart. I cited all the relevant passages in my original piece, so I will not repeat my shameless quote-mongering on this occasion.

So how is Cutrone able to turn Lukács into this peculiar kind of ventriloquist’s dummy? I suppose the ‘sting in the tail’ of the above-cited passage is the phrase, “the *problem* of reification manifested itself”. It would be possible to put Cutrone’s words into Lukács’s mouth by taking it literally, and using *History and class consciousness* as a meta-commentary on itself. Viz the *theory* of reification is itself a product of reification’s ‘highest stage’, rather than the fundamental categories of capital, and an expression of the self-consciousness of society circa 1918-22.

I may, of course, be making a ventriloquist’s dummy out of Cutrone himself here, but that seems to be the implication of some of his other statements: “What makes Lukács’s early 1920s works so difficult to read today is that we lack Lukács’s object of critique. So his arguments become objectless and seem ‘speculative’ in the worst sense.” This would seem to imply that Lukács is only comprehensible in the specific headspace he occupied in 1918-22, from which we are all irrevocably cut off.

If this *is* Cutrone’s argument, however, then the necessary consequence is a radicalised subjectivism, in which no individual or collective from any given historical situation can fully comprehend the product of any other historical situation. Cutrone himself must stop bellyaching about the New Left, for he was not yet born when it emerged. And this whole exchange is equally pointless, for neither of us have any grounds to justify our assertions concerning Lukács’s significance. (And it’s *me* who’s supposedly some kind of postmodernist!)

More to the point, we have no way of assessing Lukács’s relevance as a critique of his own time, either. To put it in a very bald way, Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is a product of the same historical context (the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the disaster of World War I, the failure of the German revolution ... ). Why should Hitler’s ‘critique’ of Second International Marxism be treated with any less respect than Lukács’s? After all, we lack his ‘object of critique’ too - and so surely we are equally doomed to misinterpret the poor man.

If he does not want to uphold some absurd historical relativism, then Cutrone is back to square one. He must evaluate Lukács’s work according to the logical validity and empirical-historical accuracy of the claims *he actually makes* in his *actual books*. He must evaluate my critique, equally, according to the claims I actually make. (For that matter, he must evaluate Lukács’s 1967 self-critique according to the same calculus, not vulgarly dismiss it - in the most worn-out New Leftist manner - as a straightforward expression of his capitulation to Stalinism.)

Personally, I would make the exact opposite claim to the comrade - the subsequent 90 years of history, along with countless theoretical arguments concerning history, class-consciousness and *History and class consciousness*, make evaluating Lukács’s work *easier*. Forcing him into the procrustean bed of the Platypus tradition - which chops and stretches everyone from Adorno

to the pseudo-Trotskyist shrieking of the Spartacist League into the same mutilated shape - presents, on the other hand, a serious obstacle to doing so.

**James Turley**

London

---

## Nota bene

James Turley seems to distinguish between regarding bourgeois society as a whole and the Social Democratic Party of Germany and Second International in the crisis of World War I as exhibiting what Lukács called the problem of ‘reification’, as if the workers’ movement were somehow apart from bourgeois society ([Letters](#), February 21).

Has the dialectic been ruled out of court? No self-contradictions and no need for self-overcoming transformations in the history of Marxism? The subtitle of Lukács’s book *History and class consciousness* was *Studies in Marxist dialectics*. Turley doesn’t consider that it just as well could have been called *Studies in the dialectics of Marxism*. For Hegelian and thus Marxist dialectics is not extrinsic to its object, but rather critically reflexive of it: how to understand history from within the process of historical development?

At stake here is not ‘historical relativism’, but rather the dialectics of history: was Marxism historically subject to self-contradiction? Turley appears to dismiss this possibility, where this was Lukács’s central concern in *History and class consciousness*. Like many readers, Turley sunders the two parts of Lukács’s title, ‘history’ and ‘class-consciousness’, rather than regarding their intrinsic interrelation for Marxists: ‘class-consciousness’ is consciousness of history, especially of its dialectical contradictions. Marxism was part of the history it sought to understand - and change.

Turley simultaneously condemns Lukács for Hegelianism and tries to defend Lukács against my characterisation of *History and class consciousness*’s essential Hegelianism! Is there no dialectic of theory and practice in the history of Marxism worth considering? Or are we left only with the standards of historicism for regarding the history of Marxism? Is there no place for what Hegel called “philosophical history” in Turley’s consideration of the history of Marxism?

This is not a matter of some supposed wilful “procrustean” (mis)interpretation of historical Marxism, but rather of finding the ‘red thread’ that links Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukács and Adorno (among others): that is, the immanent dialectical critique of the workers’ movement for socialism, including the critical self-reflection of Marxism, or Marxism’s dreaded Hegelianism, which Turley seems eager to

cut, in favour of the standards of pre-Kantian, pre-critical, naive bourgeois thought, long after its innocence was lost - in the late 18th century. Why?

Or worse: Althusserian anti-Hegelianism - not merely sub-bourgeois, but avowedly pre-Socratic! An exemplary case of regression in the history of Marxism. Just as - and indeed owing to - Heidegger’s anti-bourgeois regression in the history of philosophy. In Turley’s view the reactionary anti-bourgeois character of Heidegger’s philosophy would not be the expression of the reactionary anti-bourgeois politics of Nazism that Heidegger joined or the regression of bourgeois society in fascism, but somehow apart from it. Indeed, we may not be able to fully understand the historical moment of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in the present - history does grant some small mercies! But Hitler was not merely wrongheaded: millions joined Nazism for some reason, not simply for lack of reason! But I thought we were discussing not the right, but the left, and Marxism in particular.

Lenin warned in his *Testament* that the leading Bolshevik theorist, Bukharin, perhaps never “understood dialectics”, and so could not quite be considered as “fully Marxist”. The leading Bolshevik theorist! This was in the same year as the writing of Lukács’s *History and class consciousness*. Neither Lukács’s critique of the historic crisis of Marxism nor Lenin’s warning about the legacy of Bolshevism was heeded. *Nota bene!*

**Chris Cutrone**  
Platypus Affiliated Society

---

## Bacon

Chris Cutrone ducks, dives and weaves; but he does not answer the challenge in my previous letter: namely, to deal with Lukács's (and my) arguments as they actually are, not as he would like them to be ([Letters](#), February 28).

Again, Lukács's *History and class consciousness* is recast as a "critique of the Second International", a subject on which it says almost nothing (five or so pages of polemic in the first chapter against Rudolf Hilferding and Max Adler, plus a few scattered and unenlightening footnotes); indeed a subject on which, as is clear from Lukács's later *Lenin: a study in the unity of his thought*, the author was pretty ignorant.

For pointing out the blindingly obvious - that Lukács is talking about, er, history and class-consciousness in bourgeois society as such - I am accused, on the one hand, of erecting a Chinese wall between bourgeois society and the Second International as a component of it, and, on the other (even more oddly), of artificially separating Lukács's account of history from his account of class-consciousness.

The first argument is simply facile - I do not and have never argued that the Second International existed in sublime separation from bourgeois society in general; only that Lukács's arguments are pitched at the latter, higher level of generality and *must be assessed as such*. They are much stronger on that ground, for what it is worth, than they are as a critique of Second International Marxism, which Lukács treats only in caricature.

The second argument, again, misses the point - of course history and class-consciousness are inextricably linked in Lukács's view; I argue only that his view of this relationship (the 'self-consciousness of historical reality' line) is ultimately idealist, and thus contrary to the core premises of what is properly called orthodox Marxism; indeed, contrary to Lukács's description of the latter as a "scientific conviction".

Instead, we face the oldest cliché in the Hegelian Marxist book: "Hegelian and thus Marxist dialectics is not extrinsic to its object, but rather critically reflexive of it: how to understand history from within the process of historical development?" This, I am afraid, is a problem which tortures

Hegelian Marxists exclusively. You do not hear many theoretical physicists tormenting themselves with the problem of understanding quarks, Higgs fields and the rest, while being composed and constituted by them. There is no search for the elusive 'Archimedean point'. They do the maths, do the experiments and get on with the rather unromantic business of incrementally improving our knowledge of the natural world.

Does this mean "the dialectic [is] ruled out of court?" No - because a scientific understanding of history requires understanding it as process, as the interaction of contradictory elements that are as distinct as they are inseparable. Dialectical thought, in one form or another, is rendered indispensable simply by the demands placed upon historical materialism by the nature of its object - just as the complex mathematical systems that form the core of theoretical physics are made necessary in that domain.

The proper and scientifically justified use of abstraction and analysis of contradictions is the difference between, say, viewing the present economic crisis as an incomprehensible calamity caused by a little dodgy mortgage trading, and viewing it as the outcome of determinate economic and political processes. (It is often joked that such is the predictive power of Marxism that we have foreseen 10 out of the last five crises - but that is still a better hit-rate than the big fat zero predicted by bourgeois economics.)

By conceiving dialectics in a strictly Hegelian fashion, however, Lukács commits himself to a far stronger claim for its utility than can be justified by reference to mundane reality (hence his hostility to 'facts' and experimentation, which is "contemplation at its purest"), which is that - in the form of Marxism, the imputed class-consciousness of the proletariat - it *is* the self-understanding of history. As I argued in my essay, this leads him necessarily to idealism, because nature must either be cleaved from or folded into history.

Even worse, history for Lukács then equally has its 'owl of Minerva', despite his criticism of this motif in Hegel. History may not have actually been completed, but we are told in no uncertain terms what that end will be. Are there "no self-contradictions and no need for self-overcoming transformations in the history of Marxism?" Cutrone asks. Of course there are - strip out the jargon and this is nothing more exotic than the scientific method - but in Hegelianism *as a method*, and thereby Marxism as it is conceived by Lukács, there *cannot be*, because the Hegelian method is an exercise in circular self-justification.

So much for Lukács. What words are put in *my* mouth this time? Apparently things are going from bad to worse - from having been some kind of “Lacanian-Heideggerian”, I have now become “avowedly pre-Socratic!” It is as much a surprise to me as to anyone else, but then we seem to be faced with a sort of ‘six degrees of Kevin Bacon’ school of ideology critique here - viz, I quote Althusser, therefore I endorse Althusser’s work in total, therefore I endorse his late enthusiasm for Epicurus and Heidegger *and simultaneously* his early enthusiasm for Lacan (a feat he never managed himself), therefore I am a pre-Socratic Lacanian-Heideggerian.

What a peculiar diagnosis indeed! After all, Lacan *was a Hegelian* - his work is full of the dialectics of this and that, and his principal ‘innovation’ in psychoanalysis was to bring heterodox Hegelianism, via Alexandre Kojève, to the table (along, later, with Levi-Strauss’s structural anthropology). The ‘Heideggerian’ component of post-structuralism comes later, principally through Derrida, a lapsed Sartrean.

Even worse is the small matter that Hegel himself openly advocated versions of pre-Socratic philosophy. The transition from being to becoming - which, according to one Georg Lukács, “contains the whole of [Hegel’s] philosophy” - is in fact more or less directly lifted from an aphorism of the pre-Socratic Heraclitus.

For clarity’s sake, my interest in Althusser is in his militant defence of that ‘vulgar’ thesis, that ideology and science are epistemologically distinct and irreconcilably opposed; he defends it reasonably well in some places and terribly in others, and makes a series of interesting and provocative points along the way. I *do not* buy the ‘materialism of the encounter’, which Cutrone is so keen to pin me to; I *do not* buy ‘Freud and Lacan’, although his clandestine *critiques* of Lacan are interesting. As for Heidegger, the whole *point* of his philosophy is the exact reverse of the militant defence of the sovereignty of science - a straightforward irrationalist onslaught. I should not have to refute this ‘charge’.

**James Turley**  
London

---

## Debate: Lukács reloaded

**Dealing with the complex legacy of Georg Lukács demands something more sophisticated than treating him as an honorary member of the SWP, argues Lawrence Parker**



Lukács: transitional

James Turley's supplement on Lukács was an interesting and thought-provoking read ('The antinomies of Georg Lukács' *Weekly Worker* January 24). Indeed, I think the CPGB owes a debt of gratitude to the comrade, in that his contribution can be counted as the only really serious intervention on the subject from one of its members since the 'star' of Lukács began to wane in the organisation.

Up until the early 2000s, majority opinion in the CPGB was, of course, extremely critical of the legacy of Lukács, but his earlier works, *History and class consciousness (HCC)* in particular, were given some respect. This has seemingly changed and I have been frankly appalled at the some of the ignorant nonsense about Lukács ('elitist', 'obfuscatory', 'not worth reading' and so on) that has been spouted in various CPGB forums over recent years (I exempt comrade Turley from this charge).

The leader of this particular pack has been Mike Macnair. I have some time for Macnair as a thinker and a writer, but on the subject of Lukács (or Althusser, or the Frankfurt School and so on) you can pretty much guarantee a heap of parrot droppings each time you put your money in the slot. The issue with comrade Macnair is that I have not read anything resembling the recent supplement (which actually attempts to dissect a piece of work from *Lukács*) emanating from his keyboard. What I have read is material looking at the work of *John Rees* on Lukács, which is then used to debunk *Lukács*.<sup>1</sup> I do not have the space to go into this in more detail, but I would respectfully suggest that using John Rees as a means to master Georg Lukács is rather like using Jimmy Savile as a means to master Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

When John Rees (or Alex Callinicos, etc) pontificate, as they do on, for example, Lenin, there is a whole battalion of CPGB writers on hand to illustrate the ways they are wrong; if the Socialist Workers Party writes about Lukács (in its own degenerate manner) then this is seemingly taken as absolute truth and the last word on the subject. Why would we take anything the SWP writes at face value (particularly with a subject as complex as Lukács)? Well, we would do this if it was simply convenient to *smear* Lukács through guilt by association with the SWP, because he is deemed a threat (wrongly, as I will argue) to the project of rehabilitating the practice of the Second International centre.

Turley adds another note of complication, in that his motivation is partly based upon salvaging what he can of the Althusserian tradition. Emaciated visions of *History and class consciousness* have long been the philosophical gruel of this camp (I know - I have eaten it enough times). However, I do not see many of Turley's comrades buying into this particular motivation and, if anything, there is even more enmity and incomprehension directed towards Althusser, as he simply cannot be made to fit into the 'What is the next link in the chain?/How can we bend the stick, this month?' instrumental rationalisations that more obscure theoretical debates in the CPGB get smothered with sooner or later.

I am not writing as a follower of Lukács or his career. I do not self-define as a 'Hegelian Marxist'. *History and class consciousness* certainly does border on irrationality and mysticism with the idea of the proletariat being the identical subject-object of history, and it certainly is no surprise to me that comrade Turley finds a whole host of crap in the book. However, I think *History and class consciousness* is still a brilliant work, but it simply does not fit into the Stalinised, instrumental way that the left approaches such

texts. I *try* and treat all such works as unrealised - something like a painter's sketch, where you are alive to brilliance, but perceive the flaws. While following Karl Korsch's idea that philosophy needs to be realised, I agree that we should not sign up for 'philosopher kings' and that such a realisation would be hesitant, partial and in constant flux.

But, while it is a worthy exercise to dethrone our monarchs, I would be wary of another trap. Macnair and Turley want to knock Lukács off the (absurdist) pedestal of the 'philosopher of Lenin', but in doing so they have been trying to make him into a sort of useless philosophical jester. This shares the errors of the 'philosopher king' rationale: someone is being disposed of so that other figures in the Marxist historical canon (Althusser, Kautsky) can rise up again. Maybe they will not be kings, but there will certainly be some writers that are more equal than others, know what I mean?

### *'New Left' method*

Turley writes: "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." It is completely correct to locate a fault-line in this generation's adoption of Lukács, which suffers from its inability to perceive *History and class consciousness* as merely one of many points of departure, or, to paraphrase Trotsky, not a closed circle, but a loop: one end moving into the past; the other into the future.

The problem for the so-called 'New Left' is that, in general, it has been unable to locate *History and class consciousness* in this movement, which results in a fixing of and fixation on *History and class consciousness*. Part of the issue behind this is that the 'New Left' was instrumentally concerned with constructing a set of frail, sect orthodoxies, which, in the case of Lukács, led to a suspicion of his 'ultra-leftism' in the period before *History and class consciousness*, while the works of the mid-1920s were suspect because of his support for Stalin's faction in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (despite the fact that all of Lukács's post- *History and class consciousness oeuvre* has an enormously contradictory relationship to 'official' communism - see below). So the 'New Left' was left with an *History and class consciousness* freeze-frame, a snapshot, which it was forced to endlessly pore over in its dark towers. Unfortunately for Turley, his presentation is implicated in this method, in that *History and class*

*consciousness* is taken for granted as the ultimate point of departure for understanding Lukács. While I accept that this is an advance on taking John Rees as the last word on the subject, this inability to establish any dialectic in relation to Lukács himself leads to a flattening and distorting effect in Turley's account.

Turley argues: "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." However, he then moves on to partially contradict this statement, by discussing, quite correctly, the fact that Lukács's leftism had begun to unravel by the time of the *publication* of *History and class consciousness* in 1923. But, for Turley, this process of unravelling has no consequences for *History and class consciousness* itself (at least none that I can see).

Unfortunately, as I have previously pointed out in debate with the comrade, his account of this process is fundamentally garbled. In response to the specific point that *History and class consciousness* was a continuation of an earlier ultra-leftism, Michael Löwy points out that Lukács had substantially recast at least two of the essays ('What is orthodox Marxism?' and 'Class consciousness') for its 1923 publication with the 'watershed' moment coming in the middle of 1920, when Lenin's *Leftwing communism - an infantile disorder* pamphlet appeared.<sup>2</sup>

For example, the following passage was inserted into the 1922 version of 'What is orthodox Marxism?': "Do not let us forget either that every attempt to rescue the 'ultimate goal' or the 'essence' of the proletariat from every impure contact with - capitalist - existence leads ultimately to the same remoteness from reality, from 'practical, critical activity' and to the same relapse into the utopian dualism of subject and object, of theory and practice, to which revisionism has succumbed."<sup>3</sup> Helpfully (or I guess unhelpfully for comrades Turley and Macnair), Lukács briefly tips his hat to *Leftwing communism* in the footnote to this point, suggesting that he saw it (rightly or wrongly) as of a piece with Lenin's work. Attentive readers will also note that such passages do not lend themselves very easily to the idea of 'mass action' leftism with its undertone of conspiracy behind the backs of the proletariat.



## Dislocated

It might be helpful if, at this point, I give my own view of what is going on in *History and class consciousness*. Lars T Lih has argued that Lenin had a ‘heroic’ scenario of the revolutionary party inspiring a genuine mass movement (and a mass *conscious* party) of the popular classes (as opposed to the traditional Trotskyist perversion of this, which involves a tiny minority *manipulating* the befuddled masses). My take on Lukács in 1923 is of an activist who was *starting* to absorb Lenin’s standpoint, which means that *History and class consciousness* is essentially *transitional* and internally dislocated. The full flowering of his engagement with Lenin’s ‘heroic scenario’ was, in my reading, not in *History and class consciousness* at all, but in the later, and also problematic, *Lenin* (1924).

One can see this ‘heroic’ perspective clearly flowering into life in an essay such as ‘Class consciousness’ (dated 1920, but, as pointed out above, recast for publication in 1923). The arguments presented here are infused with the idea of the *objective possibilities* (not the mundane, sociological realities pored over by Lukács’s critics) inherent in the proletariat and proletarian class-consciousness: “*Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism.*”<sup>4</sup> What a contrast with the petty tyrants of today’s left with their lamed and incremental view of working class consciousness (‘Keep it simple for the workers’ and so on)!

Other points, such as where Lukács discusses examples of reified consciousness in relation to empiricism and abstract utopianism could stand as good (if rather abstract) injunctions against the practice of today’s proponents of the ‘mass strike’: “In the one case, consciousness becomes either a complete passive observer, moving in obedience to laws which it can never control. In the other, it regards itself as a power which is able of its own - subjective - volition to master the essentially meaningless motion of objects.”<sup>5</sup> So, when comrade Turley talks of the “semi-anarchist, mass-action leftism that informed *History and class consciousness*” or “its status as the expression of Lukács’s philosophical voluntarism, rather than his ‘realistic’ political activism”, we have to reply that this is not just factually incorrect, but *undialectical nonsense of the first order*.

As for the so-called ‘followers’ of Lukács included in comrade Turley’s grisly litany of modern-day Hegelian villains (the new ‘Holy Family’), well, he can scarcely be asked to answer for their heresies; any more than Lenin should be held to account for Alex Callinicos. Of course, Lukács’s account

of class-consciousness is somewhat abstract and flawed, and it is quite correct for Turley to reproduce a quote from Lukács’s 1967 preface to *History and class consciousness*: “... 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.”<sup>6</sup>

However, at least Lukács’s preface is trying to come up with a balance sheet of *History and class consciousness*; to determine what of it belongs to the past and what links it to the future (even if sifting his rather notorious double-think becomes somewhat tiresome and counterproductive). In other words, he is thinking *dialectically*; Turley (in what is an entirely appropriate metaphor for his theoretical practice) is concerned merely to “nail the coffin shut”, to *fix* Lukács as an immobile, inert concept among exterior objects.

Comrade Turley is utterly precluded from seeing any movement in his subject (away from ‘ultra-leftism’ and, imperfectly, towards Lenin’s ‘heroic’ perspective for the proletariat), partly because, as already noted, there is little or no sense in his piece of what proceeded and what followed *History and class consciousness*; and partly because, in the current ‘CPGB version’ of Lukács, as he has many followers in the SWP, he simply must be made up as a straw man, on which to hang all the anti-democratic fallacies of the ‘mass strike’ theory. In reality, as many of us saw years ago, the SWP’s adoption of Lukács (partial and fallacious as it was) was a howling *contradiction* in relation to its practice in the real world: there is no simple and neat homology between its philosophical adoption of Lukács and its other nefarious practices. In that light, the CPGB’s current ‘orthodoxy’ stands revealed as a rather naked and unimpressive instrumentalism.

These problems reach an absolute farcical pitch when Turley turns his attention to what, to my mind, is the sharpest (although, again, thoroughly *transitional*) essay in *History and class consciousness*: ‘Towards a methodology of the problem of organisation’. Turley, clearly underwhelmed, writes of this: “The bulk [of the essay] 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 (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.” At the

very best, such a statement could be read as ambiguous and grudging; at its worst it is downright misleading.

The first point is a historical one. This essay is dated September 1922, long after the ‘watershed moment’ of *Leftwing communism*. And it shows. It is crystal-clear that we are not dealing with a pure ultra-left any more. For example, Lukács dismisses both right and left critics of the united front tactic in the following terms: “The debates about a united front demonstrated that almost all the opponents of such a tactical manoeuvre suffered from a lack of dialectical grasp, of appreciation of the true function of the party in developing the consciousness of the proletariat. To say nothing of those misunderstandings that led to the united front being thought of as leading to the immediate reunification of the proletariat at the level of organisation.”<sup>7</sup>

To move on to the substantive point of this: did Lukács “simply recapitulate classic ‘mass action’ arguments against the Second International centre”? No, he did not do this, simply or otherwise. In substance, he reprised the arguments of the Second International centre (of which the Bolsheviks were part) against a sectarian view that abstracted the struggle of the party from the struggles of the class into a modern-day Blanquism; to that end his arguments are not without import today.

The problem with this for the unwary was that Lukács was obviously confused in regards to the political physiognomy of the Second International: he reads the Bolsheviks as always having been on the left, as against Kautsky and the centre, which is obviously incorrect.<sup>8</sup> However, that misunderstanding should not obscure what he was actually saying. And certainly ‘Towards a methodology of the problem of organisation’ bears similar ‘transitional’ markings to the rest of *History and class consciousness*. Thus Lukács does argue: “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.”<sup>9</sup> But by the end of the essay, what we understand as the contemporary implications of this theory of mass actions and mass strikes, of political sects bobbing along and manipulating the unconscious masses into ‘power’, has been thoroughly emptied out (although the trace of its *form* remains, as a trap for the unwary).

## Shifting

I think the following three quotes exemplify his shifting perspective, his clear anti-sectism and the fact that Lukács is determined not to yank the party and a *conscious* proletariat into undialectical poles, despite the necessity of defending, dialectically, the organisational independence of the Communist Party:

The formal, ethical view of the sects breaks down precisely because it cannot understand that [the party and masses] are unified, that there is a vital interaction between the party organisation and the unorganised masses. However hostile a sect may be towards bourgeois society, however deeply it may be convinced - subjectively - of the size of the gulf that separates it from the bourgeoisie, it yet reveals at this very point that its view of history coincides with that of the bourgeoisie and that, in consequence, the structure of its own consciousness is closely related to that of the bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup>

If the sect acts as the representative of the ‘unconscious’ masses, instead of them and on their behalf, it causes the historically necessary and hence dialectical separation of the party organisation from the masses to freeze into permanence.<sup>11</sup>

The struggle of the Communist Party is focused upon the class-consciousness of the proletariat. Its organisational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle *for* its interests *on its behalf and in its place*. (This is what the Blanquists did, to take but one instance.)<sup>12</sup>

The issue with ‘Towards a methodology of the problem of organisation’ is assuredly not that it recapitulates “classic ‘mass action’ arguments against the Second International centre”. The problem arises from the diametric opposite: the partial reiteration of the Second International centre’s arguments against sectism, and implying that the various communist parties (Russian and international) were now the carriers of those values in the context of 1922, means that the essay (as Debord correctly stated) reverted, in that context, to the status of an empty state ideology (one that was further developed a couple of years later in *Lenin: a study in the unity of his thought*). In the Soviet Union, the dialectical unity of party and class was

being increasingly restricted to the formulations of its propagandists and thus Lukács, against his will, succumbs to ideology.

On the topic of reification and Lukács's conception of totality, I feel that comrade Turley has been sadly led adrift by his Althusserian inheritance, and this works back onto his reading of the 'Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat' essay in *History and class consciousness*. (I do, however, take on board Turley's recognition that Althusser's take on 'totality' has its problems; indeed, one of the weird paradoxes of this debate is that I suspect, from various conversations, we have come to broadly similar conclusions on Althusserian Marxism.)

Turley writes:

... 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 homogenously 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 ... 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.

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.

Is the all-conquering power of the commodity assumed in the manner of reducibility to a single principle? To argue this line means ripping apart *History and class consciousness* and viewing its constituent parts in frozen isolation (a practice Lukács rather eloquently destroys on a number of occasions). In 'What is orthodox Marxism?' Lukács writes: "We repeat: the category of totality does not reduce its elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity. The apparent independence and autonomy which they possess in the capitalist system of production is an illusion only in so far as they are involved in a dynamic dialectical relationship with one another and can be thought of as the dynamic dialectical aspects of an equally dynamic and dialectical whole."<sup>13</sup>

A few points become clearer from this. First, the Althusserian critique of Lukács's 'expressive totality' (which can "be crudely likened to a stick of Brighton rock: wherever you break it, the same message is written on the cross-section") is not worth the paper it was written on: he was obviously aware of the danger of merely identifying different societal spheres in a simplistic and undialectical manner. Also, the emphasis on *dynamic* interrelationships means it would be very surprising if Lukács merely *assumed* the power of reification in the manner Turley ascribes - he is not setting up a fixed category of 'reification' that we can pore over in isolation and bloodlessly define.

This Althusserian muddle can partly be explained by confusion over the *object* of Lukács's critique and the nature of that critique itself, which, in an exquisite irony, Turley crudely solders together so that "wherever you break it, the same message is written on the cross-section". It is perfectly true that the process of reification is seen by Lukács as *expansive*: "The divorce of the phenomena of reification from their economic bases and from the vantage point from which alone they can be understood is facilitated by the fact that the [capitalist] process of transformation must embrace every manifestation of the life of society if the preconditions for the complete self-realisation of capitalist production are to be fulfilled."<sup>14</sup>

But this power is not *assumed* - Lukács foresees a time when the 'natural' forces of 'the market' come to an end: "In its unthinking, mundane reality *that* life seems firmly held together by 'natural laws'; yet it can experience a sudden dislocation because the bonds uniting its various elements and partial systems are a chance affair even at their most normal."<sup>15</sup> Lukács was, of course, mercilessly critical of the abstraction, quantification and alienation inherent in capitalist society but, whatever the crudities of *History and class*

*consciousness*, his critique was not the mere methodological equivalent of what he was being critical of.

Turley, in what I presume is another Althusserian lurch, this time back towards ascribing ‘relative autonomy’ to various societal spheres, queries why the commodity has the power to colonise everything. Isn’t it, after all, the churches and mass media that do a rather better job of this? And can commodity fetishism/reification account “for the stupidities both of Mitt Romney and Joseph Ratzinger”?

In the flat, fixed and undifferentiated spectacles through which Turley views Lukács, then the theory of commodity fetishism/reification clearly cannot account for anything much. The dialectical reality of *History and class consciousness* is somewhat different. Lukács identifies a clear trend towards quantification in capitalist society that blurs distinctions: “The distinction between a worker faced with a particular machine, the entrepreneur faced with a given type of mechanical development, the technologist faced with the state of science and the profitability of its application to technology, is purely quantitative; it does not directly entail *any qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness.*”<sup>16</sup>

But this shift also entails the division of labour: “This enables the artificially isolated partial functions to be performed in the most rational manner by ‘specialists’ who are specially adapted mentally and physically for the purpose. This has the effect of making these partial functions autonomous and so they tend to develop through their own special laws independently of the other partial functions of society....”<sup>17</sup>

So Lukács is acutely alive to the issue of differentiation and specialisation, which precisely flows from the expansive totality bewitched by the commodity, and thus his theory emphatically does provide a framework to account “for the stupidities both of Mitt Romney and Joseph Ratzinger”.

### *Stalinism*

Finally, it is probably necessary to say something on the rather depressing topic of Lukács and Stalinism. Turley does not deal with this in his critique (and I largely agree with his comments, as against the ‘capitulation’ dogma of Chris Cutrone).<sup>18</sup>

A few weeks back, sympathisers of the CPGB were sent an email (‘Notes for action’, January 24) introducing comrade Turley’s critique with the join-the-dots line that Lukács was “the favourite Stalinist of a number of leading members of the SWP”. This is horseshit on a number of levels. First, as you would hope the writer of this charming epithet would realise, the SWP generally does not praise Lukács on any level after his ‘capitulation’ to Stalin in the mid-1920s. Second, if Lukács did become a ‘Stalinist’, then it was of a very peculiar stamp.

On one level, there is no way to prettify Lukács in the mid-1920s. By choosing Stalin’s faction and the illiterate politics of ‘socialism in one country’ (which a man as erudite and cultured as Lukács must surely have known were complete nonsense), he effectively maimed his politics. Right up until his death in 1971, he still stuck to mealy-mouthed logic-chopping on subjects such as the Moscow trials (he maintained that he personally found the trials to be monstrous, but was tactically neutral on the broader political issues involved). This means that anybody who self-identifies themselves as ‘Lukácsian’ or as a follower of Lukács across his entire career risks making their politics almost entirely useless for the 21st century. That much is clear.

However, to make that correct judgement there are a host of countervailing factors to take into account. Lukács always had his own line and appeared to view his career as an underground guerrilla war against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Most of his works from the 1930s onwards, couched in Aesopian language, can be read as indictments of this or that ‘official’ communist inscription - an obvious example being his rearguard defence of critical reason as against the irrationality of the Soviet ideological conjuncture.

Towards the end of his life Lukács did become a much more outspoken critic of ‘actually existing socialism’, but the tactical choices he had made earlier in his career still maimed his outlook. As he bluntly put it himself, “I have always thought that the worst form of socialism was better to live in than the best form of capitalism.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, this absurd outlook meant choosing the worse kind of bureaucratic police dictatorship; in Terry Eagleton’s brilliant critique “... Lukács gibbed at Stalinism’s dreary philistinism and privately winced at its pathetic ‘socialist realism’. A lonely, aloof Hegelian, he became the Idea that entered upon real, alienated existence - the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions, and indeed, at base, the opium of the people”.<sup>20</sup>

But here is another thought: I have heard plenty of comrades mouthing off about their own anti-Stalinist credentials and using Lukács as a kind of whipping boy to prove their impeccable revolutionary moral fibre. However, this stance ignores the fact that Lukács was an active opponent of the Soviet-inspired police dictatorship in Hungary, particularly after his participation in the Nagy government of 1956. Of course, it would not have been Lukács if there had not been a strong dose of naivety in regards to the potentiality of the bureaucracy to ethically reform itself. Thus, for example, Lukács subscribed to the bizarre illusion that the Warsaw Pact would protect Hungary from western *and* Soviet interventions.<sup>21</sup>

Lukács was eventually captured by the Russians and held prisoner in Romania, a process under which he refused to submit to a demand to denounce his comrades and came out with a great deal of honour. On this occasion, there was to be no lying ‘self-criticism’: “My interrogators said to me that they knew I was no follower of Imre Nagy and so there was no reason why I should not testify against him. I told them that as soon as the two of us, Imre Nagy and myself, were free to walk around Budapest, I would be happy to make public my opinion of all of Nagy’s activities.”<sup>22</sup>

For those tempted to smear Lukács as just another run-of-the-mill Stalinist or, at best, a mere capitulator: think *hard*, comrades, and think *long*.

### Notes

1. See M Macnair, “[“Classical Marxism” and grasping the dialectic](#)’ *Weekly Worker* September 11 2003.

2. M Löwy *Georg Lukács - from romanticism to Bolshevism* London 1979, pp172-75.

3. G Lukács *History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* Cambridge (Mass) 1975, p22.

4. *Ibid* p76. Quotes are all with original emphasis.

5. *Ibid* p77.

6. ‘Preface to the new edition (1967)’ in *ibid* ppxviii-xix.

7. *Ibid* p328.

8. *Ibid* p302.

9. *Ibid* p297.

10. *Ibid* p321.

11. *Ibid* p322.

12. *Ibid* p326.

13. *Ibid* pp12-13.

14. *Ibid* p95.

15. *Ibid* p101.

16. *Ibid* p98.

17. *Ibid* p103.

18. [Letters](#) *Weekly Worker* February 21.

19. ‘Interview with *New Left Review*’ in G Lukács *Record of a life* London 1983, p181.

20. T Eagleton *Walter Benjamin or towards a revolutionary criticism* London 2009, p84.

21. I Eörsi, ‘The right to the last word’ in G Lukács *Record of a life* London 1983, p21.

22. G Lukács *Record of a life* London 1983, p132.

---

## Unreloaded

Lawrence Parker makes passing reference to my take on Lukács, and accuses me of dogmatic anti-Stalinism ('Lukács reloaded', March 7). I know that Lukács remained a dissident of sorts. The problem is that the later Lukács opposed Stalinism from the right rather than from the left. As Adorno put it pithily about Lukács's book *The destruction of reason* (1962), this expressed merely the destruction of the author's own.

I agree with Parker that Lenin's critique of *Leftwing communism* (1920) was an essential point of departure for Lukács's book, *History and class consciousness*. There, Lenin addresses the problem of the workers' own "bourgeois consciousness" in political practice, but as something to be worked through. About Parker's critique of the earlier Lukács, however, it only appears that Lukács was mystifying because of the high level of abstraction at which *History and class consciousness* is pitched.

As Lukács put it at the beginning of his essay on 'Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat', the centrepiece of *HCC*, "... 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. Of course, the problem can only be discussed with this degree of generality if it achieves the depth and breadth to be found in Marx's own analyses."

This meant that Lukács took Marx for granted and did not seek to revise him. The same can be said of Lenin and Luxemburg in Lukács's view. He presupposed them, precisely in ways that we cannot today. As a result, Lukács's *HCC* can seem nebulous where it actually aims to be very concrete. But, in Marx's phrase in the *Grundrisse* on Hegel's method, it is the concretion of abstractions. This is the "method", Marx's method in *Das Kapital*, that Lukács championed in *HCC*.

What justifies such a 'Hegelian' or perhaps simply 'philosophical' approach? Lukács, following Marx, Engels, Lenin and Luxemburg, among others, is concerned with the transformation of social relations, and this means working through the categories of such social relations' critical self-reflection in thought - but not only or primarily as a matter of thinking. Lukács joined the Communist Party, and was a commissar in the 1919

Hungarian revolution. Lukács was a responsible comrade in ways that no-one today can possibly be; Lukács wrote *HCC* as a member of the Communist International, not as an academic.

The 'commodity form' and its 'reification' after the industrial revolution is a problem of social relations, not directly those of supposed empirical reality. It is rather a matter of how such social reality is 'mediated', in both practice and theory. In Lukács's terms, it is precisely what is most apparently immediate, in practice, that must be grasped in its essential mediations. The problem is how capitalism obscures its mediations. But this also includes how the struggle against capitalism can obscure its own mediations, which are part and parcel of the history of capitalism, not outside or independent of it.

This is a problem of modern society, of bourgeois social relations. These are the social relations of labour in modern urban life specifically, as opposed to the traditional customs of pastoral agriculture and its caste values, which were not so mediated. What the workers do or don't do affects, essentially, the course of development of capitalism: it is a task of history under which modern society progresses or regresses. The workers' movement for socialism was grasped by Marxism as part of the dialectic of history. That was the essentially Marxist point that Lukács sought to emphasise in *HCC*. And it is pointless today because there is no such historical movement.

Reification remained a problem for Marxism to work through, including and perhaps especially the reification of the workers' movement against capitalism, which threatened, subjectively, to naturalise its object, and thus become what Marx called 'ideology'. This was already true in the 1840s when Marxism began, and clearly happened to Marxism itself in the 20th century. Lukács gave up his critique of such reification, which didn't mean going along with Stalinism in its entirety, but enough to disqualify Lukács politically, at least as far as the left is concerned. Lukács's later work accommodated and promoted the lowered horizons of possibility involved in Stalinism, which meant necessarily renouncing and not merely critiquing his earlier work.

**Chris Cutrone**  
Platypus Affiliated Society