
Lukács's abyss

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At the Marxist Literary Group's Institute on Culture and Society 2011, held on June 20–24, 2011 at Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, Platypus members Spencer Leonard, Pamela Nogales, and Jeremy Cohan organized a panel on "Marxism and the Bourgeois Revolution." The original description of the event reads: "The 'bourgeois revolutions' from the 16th through the 19th centuries—extending into the 20th—conformed humanity to modern city life, ending traditional, pastoral, religious custom in favor of social relations of the exchange of labor. Abbé Sieyès wrote in 1789 that, in contradistinction to the clerical First Estate who 'prayed' and the aristocratic Second Estate who 'fought,' the commoner Third Estate 'worked': 'What is the Third Estate? – Everything. What has it been so far in the political order? – Nothing.' Kant warned that universal bourgeois society would be the mere midpoint in humanity's achievement of freedom. After the last bourgeois revolutions in Europe of 1848 failed, Marx wrote of the 'constitution of capital,' the ambivalent, indeed self-contradictory character of 'free wage labor.' In the late 20th century, the majority of humanity abandoned agriculture in favor of urban life—however in 'slum cities.' How does the bourgeois revolution appear from a Marxian point of view? How did what Marx called the 'proletarianization' of society circa 1848 signal not only the crisis and supersession, but the need to fulfill and 'complete' the bourgeois revolution, whose task now fell to the politics of 'proletarian' socialism, expressed by the workers' call for 'social democracy?' How did this express the attempt, as Lenin put it, to overcome bourgeois society 'on the basis of capitalism' itself? How did subsequent Marxism lose sight of Marx on this, and how might Marx's perspective on the crisis of the bourgeois revolution in the 19th century still resonate today?" What follows is an edited version of Jeremy's Cohan's opening remarks.

IN HIS "IDEA FOR A UNIVERSAL HISTORY FROM A COSMOPOLITAN POINT OF VIEW," Immanuel Kant sets forth to tell the story of humanity as if it were one of progress. This is not easy, says Kant,

Since men in their endeavors behave, on the whole, not just instinctively, like the brutes, nor yet like rational citizens of the world according to some agreed-on plan, no history of man conceived according to a plan seems to be possible...One cannot suppress a certain indignation when

one sees men's actions on the great world-stage and finds, beside the wisdom that appears here and there among individuals, everything in the large woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness.¹

For Kant, rationality in human history depends on the future. By completing the seeds of freedom and development implicit in the present, we might illuminate and make meaningful the sound, fury, and idiocy thus far characteristic of world-history. The stakes are high:

Until this last step...is taken, which is the halfway mark in the development of mankind, human nature must suffer the cruelest hardships under the guise of external well-being; and Rousseau was not far wrong in preferring the state of savages, so long, that is, as the last stage to which the human race must climb is not attained.²

Georg Lukács sought to revive a Marx that, like Kant, strove to bring the crisis-character of the present to self-consciousness, but under changed conditions. *This* Marx understood the problem of his—and our—epoch as the unfinished bourgeois revolution, whose gains would be meaningful only from the standpoint of redemption—what Lukács called the standpoint of the proletariat. The "orthodox" Marx Lukács found in the politics of the radicals of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, stood at the edge of an historical abyss.

As Nietzsche's Zarathustra puts it: "Man is a rope tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping."³ On the other side of the rope, the completion of the human freedom whose possibility the "bourgeois epoch" had begun. Beneath, the whoring subservience of bourgeois thought and socialism both, to a status quo with ever dwindling possibilities for human freedom.

This is a very different Lukács than the one who has gained some academic respectability of late. A sector of the academic left thinks we ought to take up many of the analytical tools Lukács has given us to become more "reflexive" critics of capitalism, paying attention to our "standpoint" of critique to get past objective and subjective dichotomies that plague debate in the social sciences, and to talk about ideology as "socially necessary illusion" rather than mere will o' the wisp. Sure, we have to ditch the politics—the crypto-messianic or proto-Stalinist (whichever you prefer) "proletariat as the identical subject-object of history." But Lukács can help us become keener, more critical academics.

I want to resist this assimilation of Lukács into the barbarism of academic reason.

As Lukács put it in his "What is Orthodox Marxism?": "Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic."⁴ Lukács is not the mere "analyst" of reification, on the model of his cultural studies epigones. He sought to demonstrate that Marxism was, from beginning to end, only possible as a practical self-clarification of the ongoing crisis of society triggered by the unfinished bourgeois revolution. Recent attempts to rescue the "academic" Lukács are an exercise in contradiction. It is precisely when he *stopped* being

an academic that he could move forward with his philosophical problems, because they were being addressed politically by the revolutionary Marxism of his day.

But the attempt to recover the political Lukács may be just as futile. For Lukács's moment is not ours; the crisis and possibility of the early 20th century is far from what we face. So any "recovery" of Lukács must operate on two levels: one, by asking seriously whether we have overcome the crisis that Lukács attempted to formulate theoretically, and two, by recognizing that, if we have not, we cannot simply take up where he left off.

I

The problem of epistemology, morals, aesthetics "Reification" essay is reason at odds with itself; reason that ends in mythology, suffering, and unfreedom.

We return to Kant, this time offering the battle cry of the Enlightenment: "Ours is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit."⁵ Not just ideas, but social institutions and forms of life too, must *justify* themselves by appealing to reason, rather than through claims of tradition or dogma. The philosophical Enlightenment and the political revolutions that fought under its banner—the American, the French, the Haitian, and those of 1848—looked forward to the realization of reason, freedom, and human self-development in the world, in our social institutions and in ourselves. This would be emancipation—humanity's "maturity" as Kant puts it.

But bourgeois society has been unable to fulfill its promise. We all-too reasonable moderns seem consigned to contemplate a ready-made world. Lukács shows this reason—a more powerful and mythical dominating force than nature ever was—at odds with itself, and in play in all forms in society: from the factory machine to the bureaucratic state, from jurisprudence to journalism. He peoples his essay with characters from the great social scientists of his day, Max Weber and Georg Simmel—the bureaucrats, the abstract calculative individuals—to describe a society whose "reason" is a soulless restrictive rationalization shaping humanity in its narrow image. He might, like Weber, have also turned to Nietzsche's "last man"—the shrunken, all-too reasonable, modern toady. Happy; unable to give birth to a star.

Nor does academia help us out of this crisis of modern reason. Disciplinary fragmentation is the rule, wherein the more we seem to know, the more reasonable each science becomes, the less it has to say about the nature of our society as a whole. Weber puts it like so in his "Science as a Vocation," "Natural science gives us an answer to the question of what we wish to do to master life technically. It leaves quite aside...whether we should and do wish to master life technically and whether it ultimately makes sense to do so."⁶ We once thought we could go to reason with our deep questions; we now know better, says Weber.

And, importantly, Marxism has been on the whole no better—it has been only a more advanced form of this domination-reconstituting reason. The target of most of *History and Class Consciousness* is, after all, Marxism itself, a "vulgar" Marxism that

loses the capacity to affect the course of events. This Marxism had signed on to national war efforts in WWI; this Marxism was responsible for the tightening and spread of state control over everyday life. We will return to this point: Marxism, for Lukács, faced a crisis in which it would either have to transform itself or would become one more apologia for the status quo.

This betrayal of emancipation by reason—this formalization, fragmentation, and tyrannous indifference to the particular—is what Lukács calls reification. None of this, let me emphasize, can be solved by interdisciplinary programs. This is a problem, Lukács asserts, that arises in our textbooks, because it is *real*, it has a basis in our form of life. Capitalist totality *really does* proceed fragmentarily, unconsciously, relegating humans into mere things. Reification is a *Gegenstandlichkeitsform*, a "form of objectivity." It cannot be overcome except through consciousness, but it cannot be overcome through consciousness alone.

II

We might read the entirety of the second part of the "Reification" essay, "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought," as demonstrating, again and again, that reification cannot be overcome in thought alone. But Lukács is not setting up philosophy for a fall. Instead, Lukács gives an account of "Idealist" philosophy struggling to express the problems and potentials of freedom in its moment—that philosophy's ambition, and the limits it reached, are characteristic of the "high" moment of bourgeois politics. Bourgeois philosophy, says Lukács, is the self-consciousness of a contradictory age, whose further transformations and developments necessitated its [self-]overcoming. This attempt to realize a freedom not "imposed upon" but immanent *in* social reality is passed on to *Marxism*. Marxism, in turn, is undergoing its own deep split, its own crisis, taking up in transmuted form the earlier crisis of thought and action.

Marxism, for Lukács, is the direct inheritor of a bourgeois practical philosophy of freedom. This definitively separates Marxism from many other varieties of anti-modern discontent (of which postmodernism is the most recent variety). Philosophy seeks to express, and through expression to become midwife to, the birth of the freedom implicit in our social relations. And while this task is more opaque in Lukács's moment, Lukács refuses to sadly shrug his shoulders at the coming barbarism; he calls us to risk achieving the Enlightenment's promise. Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schiller, and Hegel would not cede the attempt to combine reason, freedom, and human development, even as they conscientiously recognized that these could not be reconciled in a bourgeois world. They express that bourgeois society has not yet given up on itself.

Bourgeois philosophy stuck with its ambition: "...the idea that the object...can be known by us for the reason that, and to the degree in which, it has been created by ourselves."⁷ But through epistemology, morals, aesthetics (the subjects of Kant's three critiques) and even Hegel's invocation of history, this philosophy kept finding itself left with, on the one side, an incomplete formal reason, on the other side an inert and irrational object; on the

one side a free, self-determining subject, on the other the brute facts and “laws” of the world. Reason simply reproduces a subject denuded of its capacity to shape the world and itself, reconciled at the expense of unfreedom.

Classical philosophy’s honest focus on its limits was one of the things Lukács admired most about it. But even more importantly, that philosophical lineage attempted to probe and overcome its difficulties through developing a certain *form* of knowledge: the “identical subject-object,” “its own age comprehended in thought,” or *practical self-consciousness*. Classical idealist philosophy shows that freedom is possible only through a transformative self-consciousness, where “knowing” and “practical transformation” are mutually constitutive—where knowledge is immanent, rather than abstract.

Reason is not an abstract form to be imposed on a hostile reality—it is realizing something implicit in an object, an object which is actually *us*. A neurotic symptom appears to be a horrible hostile entity to be conquered, but it is rather a development of self to be understood and practically overcome. By knowing myself, I change myself. I am, but am not, the same self I was. Self-knowledge allows me, as Nietzsche puts it, to “become myself.”

Marxism is the attempt to realize the form of practical self-knowledge which offers the only hope of achieving freedom, reason, and development. But Marxism has inherited not only the tasks, but also the problems and crises, of the practical philosophy of freedom. Neo-Kantian, scientific Marxism, connected with varieties of reformism, becomes the farcical repetition of Kant’s achievement: it fails to radicalize the Kant–Hegel–Marx lineage. Much like what Freud would call *regression*—the use of outdated psychic tools to cope with new problems and changed conditions—Marxism threatened to become “stuck,” thus failing to justify the leap the bourgeois revolutions had initiated. Marxism needed to learn to grow up. Or, more specifically, it needed to learn to stop thinking that it had *already* grown up.

III

Lukács insists that revolutionary Marxism is able to concretely pose the problem of emancipation, because its politics seeks to practically achieve the self-consciousness of capitalist society in its crisis. And capitalist society’s crisis, in its most acute form, is the historical development and consciousness of the proletariat. As Lukács puts it, “the proletariat is nothing but the contradictions of history become conscious” (71). But why?

Firstly, because the rise of the proletariat meant, historically, the decline of bourgeois radicalism. The proletariat’s incipient demand that they become the subjects promised by bourgeois society—free, creative, and equal—led the bourgeoisie to become “vulgar,” to give up on the radical implications of the Enlightenment and to call for “law and order.” Capital’s tragedy is that it is always also the proletariat. The bourgeoisie’s tragedy is that it must, by necessity, be always one step behind capital.

Second, because the proletariat is a commodity, and thus the ultimate object, she sells herself on the market, is enslaved

by the machine, and is thrown about by economic crises over which she has not a whit of control. But bourgeois society also promises that each human being might become a self-determining subject. For Lukács, “the worker can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity.” Or “[the proletariat’s] consciousness is the *self-consciousness of the commodity*” (168). The commodity, this irrational reason, can *itself* make demands for its emancipation because the typical commodity is the proletariat. The inverse is also true: the proletariat is the quintessential “abstract” bourgeois subject, whose struggles to appropriate society for its purposes demand that the object—the product of the history of social labour—be infused with subjective purpose.

We are used to thinking of the natural constituency of the Left as those who are “marginal” to society. Lukács develops the daring claim of revolutionary Marxism that capitalism must overcome itself, not through the intervention of those outside, but by the action of those *at its very center*. “[The proletariat’s] fate is typical of the society as a whole,” says Lukács (92). The *only* advantage the worker might have is that her reification is often experienced as a form of powerlessness and therefore might be mediated politically into a transformative practice. Marxism is *not* the resistance to capitalism or reification or bourgeois subjectivity—it is their self-conscious realization and self-overcoming.

As proletarians seek to really become “bourgeois subjects,” their demands for subjectivity begin to strain against the limits of what is possible in bourgeois society. But the proletariat’s social position does not at all guarantee that it will radically push forward the demands of emancipation, only that it might. *Politics* is the attempt to realize this potential.

Lukács saw in the crisis of Marxism precipitated by World War I, but already presaged in the “revisionist debate,” a re-enactment at a new level of the crisis of bourgeois philosophy. Here self-consciousness could advance the new tasks posed, or thinking would become little more than an apologia for domination. In the radicals of Second International Marxism, especially Luxemburg and Lenin, Lukács saw the attempt to meet the tasks of the present, to formulate the politics that could realize bourgeois society’s—and *Marxism’s*—potential self-overcoming.

The essence of Lenin and Luxemburg’s Marxist politics was that socialism, in order to achieve emancipation, would have to be a conscious human act, immanent in present realities; it could not be deduced from social being nor a fervent wish from beyond. If one could “stumble into socialism,” as if socialism were fated from time immemorial by inexorable laws, then it would be one more form of unfreedom, of fake subjectivity. Human consciousness would be an *integral* part of “objective” development, or nothing at all.

This was exemplified in their focus on the “non-automatic” character of the transition to socialism. They criticized both inevitabilism and the reduction of the proletariat as just another sectional interest, seeking its “cut of the pie.” This was not Marxism, the politics of *freedom*, at all. Passages like the following from Rosa Luxemburg’s *Reform or Revolution*, were key for Lukács:

So that if we do not consider momentarily the immediate amelioration of the workers' condition – an objective common to our party program as well as to revisionism – the difference between the two outlooks is...[a]ccording to the present conception of the party [Luxemburg's position], trade-union and parliamentary activity are important for the socialist movement because such activity prepares the proletariat, that is to say, creates the subjective factor of the socialist transformation, for the task of realising socialism...we say that as a result of its trade union and parliamentary struggles, the proletariat becomes convinced, of the impossibility of accomplishing a fundamental social change through such activity and arrives at the understanding that the conquest of power is unavoidable.⁸

Luxemburg sought, then, to struggle with the proletariat in its halting attempts to achieve bourgeois subjectivity in order to constantly push against the limits of how much subjectivity capitalism *could* grant the workers—all so that the proletariat might someday demand the end of their being an object *tout court*. Furthermore political education and action around these limits would be designed to call workers to learning about how they came to be what they are—i.e. to understand historically their being as an expression of the crisis of capital—and thus be faced with the gravity of the task ahead for achieving freedom.

The revolutionary Marxism of Luxemburg and Lenin, then, was for Lukács the attempt to realize the promises and possibilities of bourgeois society by consistently pressing forward the demand for subjectivity contained in the commodity itself: the proletariat. This politics, in extremely telescoped form, insists on:

- the leading role of the proletariat as the most typical element and crisis-point of capitalism
- an emphasis on the subjective development of the proletariat in any struggles it undergoes
- a fight against the reduction of Marxism into sectional interest, seeking its “cut of the pie”
- the importance of emphasizing not victories, but limits in any given interest-pursued action by the proletariat
- the concomitant value of self-criticism and self-transformation
- the centrality of self-transformative political practice
- an organization—or party—dedicated (as Lukács quotes Marx in the Communist Manifesto) to clarifying the international and historical significance of any given action

This self-conscious capitalist politics elucidated, for Lukács, what the practical philosophy of freedom would have to look like in order to overcome the present and to realize the endangered, fragile past, soon to become only the miserable precursor to an even more

miserable sequel.

This struggle with the proletariat to achieve its own possibility was for Lukács the other side of the struggle of bourgeois society to achieve its potential, an historical open question that would be decided only by self-conscious self-action. The crisis of modern society is the crisis of the bourgeois revolution—which at a new, more deadly level, is the crisis of Marxism.

If this politics is unsuccessful, there will certainly be plenty of movements and resistance. But unless capital, the dynamo of modernity, is overcome from within, rather than by a *deus ex machina* from without, you won't get the self-overcoming of capitalist society at its highest point and the realization of the potential freedom implicit in modernity. Instead resistance becomes the cry accompanying a resigned acceptance to the unfreedom of the whole.

IV

Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* might be summed up in Freud's description of the goal of psychoanalysis: *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*; where it was, I shall be. Self-consciousness changes us, but we are still somehow “us”; we have *realized* something about ourselves. Nor is self-consciousness merely in the brain. To be really self-conscious we need to change our whole way of being. Lukács's Marxism is trying to recognize that Marxism poses the question to bourgeois society and to modernity as a whole whether or not it can achieve this kind of transformative self-consciousness. The prospects do not look bright.

But why return to Lukács? Especially if I insist that he was attempting to make sense of his practical moment, to raise the moment of world-historical danger and possibility of roughly 1917-1923 to self-consciousness, what relevance does he have in a moment whose practical possibilities are so different, and so diminished? Psychoanalysis again, perhaps, provides a useful metaphor. We do not revisit our childhoods to relive them—only to recognize how we have yet to integrate them by overcoming them. Lukács helps us see that we haven't grown up.

This means that perhaps Lukács's “identical subject-object” seems so “messianic” to us not because we have surpassed Lukács and his silly metaphysical speculations, but because we find ourselves no longer able to imagine this kind of freedom. We no longer believe that we can overcome capitalism for the better, realizing the reason, freedom, and human development it promises. Capitalism is a brute, inert, foreign entity, dominating us and our capacities. All we can do is look to the marginal, the suffering, and the pained, and offer sympathy and solidarity with their struggles: struggles that are part of the natural laws of history. There will be power, there will be resistance. Our politics take something like the form of Nietzsche's eternal return. As “critical” as we are, we can only imagine freedom swooping in from beyond and bringing its liberation into our miserable lives. And we are right—for we are surely in the age of second childhood, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Was Lukács a fool for wagering on the possibility of freedom

by becoming, *politically*, a Marxist? Lukács would insist on Luxemburg's call—*socialism or barbarism*. Either the immanent overcoming of capitalism and its irrational rationality, or resignation to ever-new, ever-horrifying, forms of "reasonable" barbarism.

To end, I offer two quotes. The first from Lukács:

When the moment of transition to the 'realm of freedom' arrives this will become apparent just because the blind forces really will hurtle blindly towards the abyss, and only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe. In other words, when the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, *the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness* (69).

The second from Rilke in the first of his *Duino Elegies*:

Yes—the springtimes needed you. Often a star
was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you
out of the distant past, or as you walked
under an open window, a violin
yielded itself to your hearing. All this was mission.
But could you accomplish it?

Without Lukács's Pascalian wager on freedom, it is not clear to me that Lukács is worth much of anything at all. The demon that drove him from philosophy to the politics of revolutionary Marxism is what should call out to us today, not the analytical tools we can dig up from the grave of his practical philosophy of freedom. Or maybe he is just a dead dog.

1. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *Kant on History*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963[1784]), 12.
2. *Ibid.*, 21.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978[1891]), 126.
4. Georg Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 2.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1787]), 100-101.
6. Max Weber. "Science as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1918]), 144.
7. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 112. Hereafter referred to parenthetically with the appropriate page number(s).
8. Rosa Luxemburg, *Social Reform or Revolution*, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1979[1900]), 84-5.
9. Rainer Maria Rilke. *Duino Elegies* in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (NY: Random House, 1982[1922]), 151.