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## Lukács on Uncritical Theory

**Abstract.** *The critique of bourgeois theory found in the work of the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács is predicated on his argument that no part of capitalist society is free from the effects of a generalized reification, and primarily intellectual activity is very much included in the accusation. In these circumstances, if philosophical and scientific theories are blind to what lies beneath or beyond them, it is because their historically transcendent constructions reflect and reinforce the commodification that is constitutive of all of bourgeois society – economic, political, social and cultural. This article seeks to bring out the detail of these associations as they affect different types of theoretical writing at different times, from Cartesian and Kantian views through positivist science to a good deal of Marxist theory itself.*

**Keywords:** *critical theory, cultural criticism, Marxist philosophy, social theory.*

**Raktazodžiai:** *kritinė teorija, kultūrinė kritika, marksistinė filosofija, socialinė teorija.*

*[T]he problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.*

GEORG LUKÁCS (1971; 83)

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács attacks what he calls bourgeois theory for its inability to do anything other than reproduce a set of universal dilemmas. Such theory may have a clear notion of the problems faced by contemporary society; it refers, for instance, to the destructive split between form and content, subject and object, individual and society,

freedom and necessity: in it, however, there is no attempt to go beyond an existing reality that can and must be transcended (Lukács 1971; 94–95, 156). Lukács cites a passage from Simmel's book *The Philosophy of Money* as evidence of this:

Now that these counter-tendencies have come into existence, they should at least strive towards an ideal of absolutely pure separation: every material content of life should become more and more material and impersonal so that the non-reifiable remnant may become all the more personal and all the more indisputably the property of the person (Simmel cited in Lukács 1971; 156–157).<sup>1</sup>

If Simmel's work is included in Lukács's charge that 'bourgeois thought entered into an unmediated relationship with reality as it was

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Lukács remarks that Simmel's work is 'very interesting' in its detail (ibid.; 95). For an analysis of Simmel's social and cultural theory, see Salem (2012; 5–23).

given' (ibid.; 156), it is because the ambivalent position that Simmel takes towards his subjects finally reflects and reinforces the split between subjective and objective elements that is so central to bourgeois society:

In this way the very thing that should be understood and deduced with the aid of mediation becomes the accepted principle by which to explain all phenomena and is even elevated to the status of a value: namely the unexplained and inexplicable facticity of bourgeois existence as it is here and now acquires the patina of an eternal law of nature or a cultural value enduring for all time (ibid.; 157).

For Lukács, a truly critical theory, by contrast, must do something other than sanction prevailing hierarchies. Rather, it should not be merely a conceptual system but a synthesis of theory and practice that aims to produce social change (ibid.; 2–3). This view of intellectual culture and radical politics coming into synthesis is not however the main point here. Instead the focus of this article is on the detail of what it is for Lukács that makes theory uncritical in the first place.

### Dialectical Movements

Lukács's response to the problem of a transition from a theoretical model of particular

social conditions to action taken to alter them lies in an attempt to revive the Hegelian aspect, particularly the dialectic, of Marxism as an intellectual tradition.<sup>2</sup> As explicit statements about dialectics are rarely found in Marx's own work,<sup>3</sup> Lukács draws to some extent on Engels's detailed account of the subject, though he adds a very different dimension to its analysis. Before looking at Lukács, then, Engels's ideas about the subject and their implications will be further discussed.

For Engels, dialectics are important for an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things.<sup>4</sup> It is a view of the world where all things are in the process of constant change, and for this reason Engels calls it 'the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought' (Engels *Anti-Dühring*, in Marx and Engels 1987; 131). Such ideas are opposed to conventional conceptions of causality and movement, which view phenomena as meaningful only when they appear as independent and distinct elements, when their particularity and its relation to other objects is left unexamined.<sup>5</sup> While, in conventional causality, one element and another can only be considered as separate, for Engels all phenomena are structured by each other,

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<sup>2</sup> An account of the long-term influence of dialectics within the Marxist movement can be found in Rees (1998). Eike Gebhardt describes how dialectics were developed by the writers of the Frankfurt School in 'The Critique of Methodology', in Arato and Gebhardt (1978; 396–404).

<sup>3</sup> That Marx never described the dialectic in detail has often been seen as part of a principled rejection of intellectualism. See for instance Parkinson (1977; 36, 173f). Similar arguments may be found in Rockmore (1992; 18–19, 257f). It is perhaps in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* that Marx's conception of dialectics emerges most clearly. See Marx (1973; 81–114).

<sup>4</sup> Engels makes this point in *Anti-Dühring*, which appears in Marx and Engels (1987; 22).

<sup>5</sup> This approach, we may note, is based on visualized knowledge, and as such has been very much open to critical questioning from Bergson onwards.

with the consequence that discrete elements lose their autonomy and are brought together in an associative unity.

Engels connects three considerations to dialectics: the transformation of quantity into quality, the unity of opposites, and the negation of the negation.<sup>6</sup> Writing about the relevance of each of these considerations to modern life, Engels gives examples drawn from nature and human culture alike, like the changes involved in cooling or heating water, where slow changes in temperature produce abrupt changes at certain points, transforming water into ice or steam; or the principle that an initial outlay is necessary before a profit can be made (ibid.; 42–3, 117, 115–116). The issue is not just that abrupt changes occur, but that such changes are qualitative in their nature; all of a sudden, one thing literally becomes another. Secondly, with both natural and cultural forms, the difficulty of distinguishing cause from effect demonstrates how the two are intimately connected, working against any straightforward identification of one side or another (Marx and Engels 1987; 23). For Engels, this indicates the operation of opposing but complementary forces, the implication being that the two should be considered as different aspects of a single unity. Thirdly, Engels identifies in the products of mind and nature a trend to development that he cites as evidence for the negation of the negation. In the natural world, as a grain of barley germinates, it becomes a plant that in turn generates many more seeds; the various stages cancel each other out, but also contain within themselves all the others. In a fur-

ther development, the qualitative change in these natural forms that cultivation can bring about is another act of negation, and can be thought of as an evolution to a higher state, but here too the resulting forms are founded on the previous ones that provide the basis for alteration (ibid.; 126–127). Similar trends are apparent in the history of philosophy, where oppositions tend to synthesize themselves into a higher unity (ibid.; 128–129). For example, a synthesis of materialist and idealist views is, for Engels, apparent in dialectical materialism, which contains both sides within itself. When all of these considerations are taken together, a perspective emerges in which the world can no longer be understood in terms of conventional logic.

Lukács acknowledges the utility of Engels's work, particularly in stressing the way in which dialectics break with logical procedure (Lukács 1971; 3). Yet at the same time, Lukács suggests that Engels tries to ground dialectics on a scientific basis, and so no longer stresses the potential of dialectics as a tool for the growth of radical political thought and organization among workers (ibid.). This is apparent in the way Engels presents the dialectical method as a set of universal laws, which are then applied to nature. For Lukács:

It is of the first importance to realise that the method is limited here to the realms of history and society. The misunderstandings that arise from Engels' account of dialectics can in the main be put down to the fact that Engels <...> extended the method to apply also to nature. However, the crucial determinants of dialectics – the interaction of subject and object, the unity of

<sup>6</sup> See Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, in Marx and Engels (1987; 356).

theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought <...> are absent from our knowledge of nature (ibid.; 24f).<sup>7</sup>

Restricted to and limited by its application to nature, dialectics, which are meant to have a role in political and social change through the encouragement of working-class self-consciousness and self-realization, become rather a contribution to the development of scientific knowledge, and thus a tool of bourgeois domination: 'When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie' (ibid.; 10). We shall look again at this later, but it could be said that Engels approaches just the kind of thinking that is criticized by him in the first place.

Lukács's objections to Engels's ideas about dialectics can be seen as part of his critique of

a more general tendency to reduce Marxism to a series of laws that can never be called into question.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, for Lukács the radical potential of Marxist theory has less to do with its content than its method: 'Proletarian science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method' (ibid.; 27). Nor has it anything to do with holding to a belief in Marx's own views:<sup>9</sup> 'Orthodox Marxism <...> does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the "belief" in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a "sacred" book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*' (ibid.; 1, italics in original).<sup>10</sup> Lukács's move toward finding a methodological grounding for Marxism is carried to the point that even if Marx's ideas were suddenly discredited in their entirety, 'every serious "orthodox" Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reserva-

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Korsch, an associate of Lukács, also argues against Engels's 'dialectics of wheat'. As discussed in Bronner (1994; 30f). The source is Korsch (1973; n.p.).

<sup>8</sup> Or (as outlined above) that can somehow bring about radical change in and of themselves: the issue, as Eugene Lunn puts it, is 'the deterioration of Marxism into a system of natural laws of economic motion, thereby losing the dimension of human active self-emancipation in history' (Lunn 1982; 97).

<sup>9</sup> Again, this stance is close to Korsch, who attacked Marxism for being uncritical of itself. As Douglas Kellner notes, 'Korsch stressed the need to apply the historical materialist method consistently to all social and intellectual phenomena, including Marxism itself' (Kellner 1989; 10–11). Kellner is referring to Korsch (1971). Gramsci, too, writing a few years earlier, pursued this line of criticism. See Gramsci (1975).

<sup>10</sup> Many of the more formalist writers were Stalinists, as might be expected, but even some of their critics were content to argue over the significance of Marx's writings without any reference to their actual content. Lucien Goldmann writes that "'Orthodox" Marxists were in the habit of calling upon a philosophy to answer the question and of defining themselves as materialist or idealist <...> as though a label <...> could render comprehensible, or explain, the meaning of a philosophy' (Goldmann 1977; 77). Lukács's relationship to Stalinism has been much commented on; for a sympathetic account, see Löwy (1975; 193–213). For a summary of the debate, and arguments that the relationship was at best highly ambivalent, see Lukács et al. (2000).

tion and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto* – without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment' (ibid.; 1).<sup>11</sup>

We have seen that Lukács moves away from questions about the content of Marxism to a concern with the approach that it takes. What is inherent to the method itself is conceiving of the otherwise autonomous parts of society only from the perspective of the social whole:

The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method <...>. [From] the moment you abandon the point of view of totality, you must also jettison the starting-point and the goal, the assumptions and the requirements of the dialectical method. <...> The whole system of Marxism stands and falls with the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant (ibid.; 27, 29).

This schema goes back to the ideas of Hegel (and then to Marx) who criticized the way Kant's philosophy falls short of penetrating beyond the appearance of things to their being-in-themselves (ibid.; 15–18). The contradiction is that in Kant, the mind's power to transform reality into comprehensible forms is premised on its inability to make sense of their material substrata. Lukács writes that:

The thing-in-itself has a number of quite disparate functions within Kant's system. What they all have in common is the fact that they each represent a limit, a barrier, to the abstract, formal, rationalistic, 'human' faculty of cognition.

<...But> the purely formal delimitation of this type of thought throws light on the necessary correlation of the rational and the irrational, i.e. on the inevitability with which every rational system will strike a frontier or barrier of irrationality (ibid.; 114).

While Kant of course ties together the exercise of rationality, a release from external forces and (through moral correctness) freedom of a fundamental kind, for Lukács rationality, in abstracting from actual processes to achieve complete knowledge of a closed system of static forms, can make reality seem open to control, but only at the cost of a new helplessness in the face of everything left outside this system: a world of superfluous material that must be accepted as it is. On this schema, and against Kant's view, the power of human reason is actually very limited. As Lukács puts it, 'even the complete knowledge of all phenomena would be no more than a knowledge of phenomena (as opposed to the things-in-themselves). Moreover, even the complete knowledge of the phenomena could never overcome the *structural limits* of this knowledge, i.e. in our terms, the antinomies of totality and of content' (ibid.; 132, italics in original). If in Kant the self can only look upon the material world as an autonomous and mysterious thing that cannot be grasped or understood, while at the same time stressing its own purity and separation from it, it is because what is missing from his account

<sup>11</sup> Over 40 years later, Lukács restated this view; see the 1967 preface (pp. xxv-i). Already in Engels there is a suggestion of this schema: he wrote that the approach of Hegel's philosophy is more important than its words. See Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in Marx and Engels (1990; 361, 363). Similarly, in 1908, Lenin argued that Marxism is a pathway to a new situation: it does not have value in itself. See Lenin (1947; 142).

is any reminder of their interdependence. As we shall see, this is exactly what Lukács's idea of totality appears to offer.

The notion of totality was first realized by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Mind* and his later book, *Science of Logic*, as a way of resolving the limitations of the Kantian position by grounding categories of understanding in the material substratum of their content (ibid.; 142). For Hegel, the social environment and the shifting historical moment engender the conditions which make the mind and its creations possible and, at the same time, bear qualities related to the mind, which participates in their creation. A dialectic of ideal and concrete is established in this way of looking at the issue, which sees forms of logical ordering take on the ever-changing and contingent nature of their content, while in turn producing outward effects, insofar as an otherwise elusive reality is given a sense of direction and development. This attempt to incorporate the concrete reality lying behind mental structures explains Hegel's view that 'the truth is the whole' (Hegel 1910; 17).<sup>12</sup> Similarly in Lukács, the true nature of objects can only be understood by seeing them in relation to the historical process, outside their context as fixed representations within logical forms:

Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process

and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of *reality*. This knowledge starts from the simple (and to the capitalist world), pure, immediate, natural determinants <...>. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e. to the conceptual reproduction of reality (Lukács 1971; 8, emphasis in original).

In this way, the objects can be identified not in terms of abstract categories but as part of a temporal process, while the categories themselves lose their autonomy and take on a historically contingent and transitory aspect.<sup>13</sup> It is against this background that this passage by Lukács should be seen:

The destruction of a totalising point of view disrupts *the unity of theory and practice*. Action, praxis – which Marx demanded before all else in his *Theses on Feuerbach* – is in essence the penetration and transformation of reality. But reality can only be understood and penetrated as a totality, and only a subject which is itself a totality is capable of this penetration. It was not for nothing that the young Hegel erected his philosophy upon the principle that 'truth must be understood and expressed not merely as substance, but also as subject' (ibid.; 39, emphasis in original).<sup>14</sup>

### Uncritical Theory

From the point of view of such totalizing thought about society as a whole, a convergence is established by Lukács between Kant and Engels in general terms – and indeed, as we shall

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<sup>12</sup> See also Hegel (1929).

<sup>13</sup> Among many examples, Hegel claims that 'laws are positive in so far as they have their meaning and appropriateness in contemporary conditions, and therefore their sole value is historical and they are of a transitory nature. The wisdom of what legislators and administrators did in their day or settled to meet the needs of the hour is a separate matter and one properly to be assessed by history' (Hegel 1967; 18).

<sup>14</sup> The reference cited is Hegel (1921; n.p.).

see, more broadly between various prominent tendencies in the intellectual culture of the day. In Kant, where ‘the “subject” is defined as that which can never be an object’ (ibid.; 21), the interaction of rational forms in an enclosed intellectual structure governed by moral law produces a regular and ordered experience ensuring freedom, but the material base on which it rests continues without human influence and without human knowledge. The result is that ‘freedom and the autonomy that is supposed to result from the discovery of the ethical world are reduced to a mere *point of view from which to judge* internal events’ (ibid.; 124, emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup> In Engels, the natural world (of which society is a part) appears as a closed system of change driven by laws (in this case, the laws of dialectics rather than a traditional causal schema), which proceeds inevitably toward a result defined only by its own dynamic: within this system, change takes place that the spectator somehow observes without influencing it.<sup>16</sup>

Lukács’s warning against thinking of nature as a distant ‘otherness’ over which the self must give up control can then be applied to Engels’s work: ‘The dialectics of nature can never become anything more exalted than a dialectics of movement witnessed by the detached observer, as the subject cannot be integrated into the dialectical process’ (ibid.; 207).<sup>17</sup> It becomes clear, then, that while Kant’s ethical and ordered view of mind and Engels’s view of dialectics as, at least in developmental terms, an ordering power in nature stand at the opposite poles of idealist ethics and dialectical materialism (though one of a much more mechanistic and positivist sort than Lukács would allow), links between them can be discerned. The first leads to an ideal contemplation in an ordered mental environment, the latter – to a detached observation of the order of nature, but neither give much space for envisaging an interrelation of subject and object. In this sense, it is possible to see these views not as opposing tendencies but as materialist and

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<sup>15</sup> In *History and Class Consciousness*, there are many similar passages on the opposition between freedom and necessity in Kant; for instance, Lukács argues that ‘just as objective necessity, despite the rationality and regularity of its manifestations, yet persists in a state of immutable contingency because its material substratum remains transcendental, so too the freedom of the subject which this device is designed to rescue, is unable, being an empty freedom, to evade the abyss of fatalism’ (1971; 133).

<sup>16</sup> Engels’s view that the mind produces a simulation of the external world in which features of the outside are literally reflected on the inside is what permits such an apparently clear observation of nature. As is well known, there are echoes of this view in Lenin, who writes that ‘the materialist theory, the theory of the reflection of objects by our mind, is here presented with absolute clarity: things exist outside us. Our perceptions and ideas are their images. Verification of these images, differentiation between true and false images, is given by practice’ (Lenin 1947; 106). For an argument that this is not what Engels means to imply, even in his later work, see Rees (1994; 51, 72–75). Rees’s argument seems to be based on the claim that the views of Engels and Marx are inseparable: ‘The most remarkable aspect of the view that there was a fundamental divergence between Marx’s theory and Engels’ thought is that it ignores the evidence of their lifelong partnership’ (ibid.; 51). See also Rees (1998; 98–99).

<sup>17</sup> Lukács uses this passage to describe Hegel’s work.

idealist versions of the same passive schema. In both writers, the passivity of the observer, the separation of the object and the bourgeois viewpoint are all present.

Such associations are only part of a much larger long-term development cutting across disciplines and currents of opinion that are not normally associated with one another. In the science and philosophy of the period, a concentration on the ordering of phenomena into highly rational and law-governed systems is dominant, downplaying the presence of matter beneath phenomena. Indeed, the splitting of intellectual culture into specialized disciplines is itself a result of being unable or unwilling to arrive at a view of the social whole, as these observations by Lukács show:

It leads to the rejection of every 'metaphysics' (in the sense of ontology) and also to positing as the aim of philosophy the understanding of the phenomena of isolated, highly specialised areas by means of abstract rational special systems, perfectly adapted to them and without making the attempt to achieve a unified mastery of the whole realm of the knowable. (Indeed any such attempt is dismissed as 'unscientific'). <...The> origin of the special sciences with their complete independence of one another both in method and subject matter entails the recognition that this problem is insoluble. And the fact that these sciences are 'exact' is due precisely to this circumstance (ibid.; 120).

With philosophy and the sciences insisting upon the centrality of reason in creation,<sup>18</sup> the material substratum of their content is lost, and a passive creator is left switching between various and incommensurable interpretative

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<sup>18</sup> For Lukács, the view that reality must be a creation of the mind, as against something existing completely independently of intellectual structures, has its philosophical basis in the work of Giambattista Vico, for whom 'the history of man is to be distinguished from the history of nature by the fact that we have made the one but not the other' (Vico cited in Lukács 1971; 112). While Vico's position was intended as the basis for a critique of rationalist methods, particularly Cartesianism, the implications of his ideas were ignored until long afterwards, so that much philosophizing after Descartes refuses 'to accept the world as something that has arisen (or, e.g., has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product' (ibid.; 111). Lukács continues: 'In ways diverging from that of Vico who in many respects was not understood and who became influential only much later, the whole of modern philosophy has been preoccupied with this problem. From systematic doubt and the *Cogito ergo sum* of Descartes, to Hobbes, Spinoza and Leibniz there is a direct line of development whose central strand, rich in variations, is the idea that the object of cognition can be known by us for the reason that, and to the degree in which, it has been created by ourselves' (ibid.; 112). Hinting at another analysis of Vico's work which might serve as a counterpoint to rationalist discourse, Lukács writes that even if we accept that 'only a reality cocooned by such concepts can truly be controlled by us <...>, "control" of reality can be nothing more than the objectively correct contemplation of what is yielded – necessarily and without our intervention – by the abstract combinations of these relations and proportions' (ibid.; 129). He is following Marx's line of argument here (see, for example, Marx 1961; 372f), which turns on whether the term 'making' in Vico can be extended to creativity and labor on the Marxist account. For Lukács, as for Marx, there is a great difference between an intellectual conception of a particular situation and action taken to alter it. If the gap between subject and object can be bridged, then 'reality loses its more or less fictitious character: we have – in the prophetic words of Vico already cited – made our own



frameworks. Again, it is important to note that while the ordering of phenomena into schemas by laws of various kinds is dependent upon ignoring material processes, it also presents problems about the status of the observer. The viewing mind becomes essentially passive, and has no effect on the phenomena it describes:

The ideal of knowledge represented by the purely distilled formal conception of the object of knowledge, the mathematical organisation and the ideal of necessary natural laws all transform knowledge more and more into the systematic and conscious contemplation of those purely formal connections, those 'laws' which function in – objective – reality *without the intervention of the subject*. But the attempt to eliminate every element of content and of the irrational affects not only the object but also, and to an increasing extent, the subject. <...It> strives with ever increasing vigour to drive a wedge between the subject of knowledge and 'man', and to transform the knower into a pure and purely formal subject (ibid.; 128, emphasis in original).

Lukács goes further than these general associations, taking to task a number of writers in many fields from the point of view of a totalizing critical account.<sup>19</sup> The denial of essence

in rationalist and positivist science leads him to call into question writers as diverse as the mathematician Henri Poincaré, the philosopher Hans Vaihinger and the physicist Ernst Mach. These are very distinct figures, yet all study only the relations between phenomena, rather than their essence; the impetus of the systems they create is toward the reduction of all things to what is measurable or calculable: "Their underlying material base is permitted to dwell inviolate and undisturbed in its irrationality <...> so that it becomes possible to operate with unproblematic, rational categories in the resulting methodologically purified world. These categories are then applied not to the real material substratum (even that of the particular science) but to an "intelligible" subject matter' (ibid.; 120). The removal of any unknowns in physics and mathematics as a way to achieve knowledge of the laws that govern phenomena, then, yields little more than an autonomous, self-referential discipline:

The more intricate a modern science becomes and the better it understands itself methodologically, the more resolutely it will turn its back

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history and if we are able to regard the whole of reality as history (i.e., as *our* history, for there is no other), we shall have raised ourselves in fact to the position from which reality can be understood as our "action" (Lukács 1971; 145, italics in original). For an analysis of the influence of Vico and his *verum-factum* principle on Marxism, see Jay (1984; 32–39).

<sup>19</sup> Since *History and Class Consciousness* does not provide a detailed account of the complex and varied currents of science and philosophy (and their related specialisms), it might be claimed that the relations it establishes between them are merely arbitrary. Certainly, as Andrew Arato and Paul Breines point out, it would be 'a mistake to seek a fully developed critique of modern science and scientific philosophy in *History and Class Consciousness*' (Arato and Breines 1979; 119). Lukács himself, though, is careful to state that his concern is neither with providing a historical source nor a systematic account of tendencies and past developments, but with how they share in the same complex of problems that affect human thought and its relation to modern life. On that level, at least his interpretations may be highly plausible. See Lukács (1971; 112, 120–121, 212f).

on the ontological problems of its own sphere of influence and eliminate them from the realm where it has achieved some insight. The more highly developed it becomes and the more scientific, the more it will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand, *its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp* (ibid.; 104, emphasis in original).<sup>20</sup>

The impulse to order phenomena in a functional scheme without referring to its material substratum is as evident in the work of those who use scientific models for describing society as it is in physics or mathematics. It is found, for instance, in the writings of the Soviet theorist Nikolai Bukharin:

The closeness of Bukharin's theory to bourgeois, natural-scientific materialism derives from his use of 'science' (in the French sense) as a model. In its concrete application to society and history it therefore frequently obscures the specific feature: that *all economic or 'sociological' phenomena derive from the social relations of men to one another*. <...> As a necessary consequence of his natural-scientific approach, sociology can-

not be restricted to a pure method, but develops into an independent science with its own substantive goals. The dialectic can do without such independent substantive achievements; its realm is that of the historical process as a whole <...>. The *totality* is the territory of the dialectic (Lukács 1972, 136, 139–140; cited in Jay 1984; 123, 124, emphasis in original).<sup>21</sup>

It is also found in the diverse and influential factions of the neo-Kantian movement, prevalent in Germany at the time, particularly the Marburg School (including Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp and Rudolph Stammler) and the Southwest German School (taking in Wilhelm Windelband, Emil Lask and Heinrich Rickert):

Where philosophy has recourse to the structural assumptions lying behind the form-content relationship it either exalts the 'mathematising' method of the special sciences, elevating it into the method proper to philosophy (as in the Marburg School) <...> or else it establishes the irrationality of matter, as logically, the 'ultimate' fact (as do Windelband, Rickert and Lask). But in both cases, as soon as the attempt at systematisation is made, the unsolved problem of the irrational reappears in the problem of totality (Lukács 1971; 120).

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<sup>20</sup> Lukács describes experimentation in similar terms: '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. He strives as far as possible to reduce the material substratum of his observation to the purely rational "product" to the "intelligible matter" of mathematics' (Lukács 1971; 132, italics in original).

<sup>21</sup> Kellner rightly states that for Lukács (and Korsch) the same applies to the rigid sociological schemas of the Russian Communist philosopher Georgi Plekhanov, and to the work of Social-Democrats, such as Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding, in German-speaking academic circles: 'Lukács and Korsch were reacting against what they saw as the theoretical and political deficiencies within the orthodox Social Democratic Marxism of Plekhanov, Kautsky, Hilferding and others. <...> This version of Marxism was deterministic in two dimensions: the economic base determined the superstructure, and laws of history, rooted in the economy, determined the trajectory of all social life. This "orthodox Marxism" was also scientific, claiming the status of a science of social development, and tended to be dogmatic as it congealed into a rigid system of categories, laws and positions' (Kellner 1989; 11).

These are highly distinct types of work – not only because of their diversity of subject matter, but also because together they span a range of opinion from leftist thinking (Cohen for example) to right-wing views (we may think of Lask here) – yet each presents a closed intellectual system in which abstract entities interrelate with predictable results according to generalized laws, and take no account of other causes.<sup>22</sup>

It could be argued that these views place themselves between two extremes. On the one hand, where formal elements are grouped into

schemes by logical categories founded on mathematical science (as in Cohen or Stammler), there is no questioning of the qualities of matter.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, in an attempt to find an ontological and historical grounding for the inquiring subject (the case with Rickert for instance), order is imposed by the transcendental values of (national) culture, while saying little about the conditions of their creation: essence here becomes something fixed rather than being a matter of process.<sup>24</sup> While slightly modulated variants exist between the two extremes, all of

<sup>22</sup> We can extend Lukács's comments about rational systems in Kant to the whole neo-Kantian school: "This notion of system makes it clear why pure and applied mathematics have constantly been held up as the methodological model and the guide for modern philosophy. <...> For a system in the sense given to it by rationalism <...> can bear no meaning other than that of a co-ordination, or rather a supra- and subordination of the various partial systems of forms (and within these, of the individual forms). The connections between them must always be thought of as "necessary" <...> every given aspect of the system should be capable of being deduced from its basic principle, that it should be exactly predictable and calculable' (Lukács 1971; 117). The reason for this should be obvious. If we are uncertain about the nature of the represented object in such a system, if its elements retained their autonomy and particularity, it would have no control over reality and no defence against the 'problem of the actually given' which would 'remain ineluctably "contingent." Instead it must be wholly absorbed into the rational system of the concepts of the understanding' (ibid.; 117–118).

<sup>23</sup> Lukács argues that Cohen's work on law is founded on an idea of mathematics as a formal system with its own internal, ahistorical functioning, and the writing of Stammler is a further link. It is a short step from this approach to leaving the institutions and practices of law with the character of just being there, like nature, unaffected by social time and context. Lukács writes of the 'relapse into natural law <...> observable – in substance, though not in terminology – in the works of Cohen and also of Stammler, whose thought is related to that of the Marburg School' (Lukács 1971; 212f). He argues further: 'Meanwhile, the real basis for the development of law, a change in the power relations between the classes, becomes hazy and vanishes into the sciences that study it, sciences which – in conformity with the modes of thought current in bourgeois society – generate the same problems of transcending their material substratum' (ibid.; 109). For a book-length account of the neo-Kantian movement in Germany, see Thomas E. Willey's *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860–1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> For Lukács, Rickert's attempt to found his judgements as a historian in the eternal cultural values of his own community amounts to mere formalism: 'Rickert, one of the most consistent representatives of this school of thought, ascribes no more than a formal character to the cultural values underlying historiography, and it is precisely this fact that highlights the whole situation' (Lukács 1971; 212f. See also 217–8f). Harry Liebersohn discusses Rickert's pursuit of objective foundations (see Liebersohn 1988; 53–5).

these opinions regarding the links between reality, mind and its creations are essentially alike. The issue, says Lukács, is that in such systems ‘the “ultimate” problems of human existence persist in an irrationality incommensurable with human understanding. The closer the system comes to these “ultimate” questions the more strikingly its partial, auxiliary nature and its inability to grasp the “essentials” are revealed’ (ibid.; 113–114).

In this article, I have tried to show something of the remarkable range of Lukács’s critique, which constructs structural analogies between different types of writing over a long period, and between the extremes in politics.

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## SANTRAUKA

### LUKÁCSAS APIE NEKRITIŠKĄ TEORIJĄ

Buržuazinės teorijos kritika, kurią galima rasti marksisto filosofo Georgo Lukácso darbuose, grindžiama argumentu, kad kapitalistinėje visuomenėje niekas neišvengia visa apimančio sudaiktinimo efekto. Dėl to pirmiausia kalta intelektualinė veikla. Jei filosofinės ir mokslinės teorijos nesugeba pamatyti ir įvertinti socialinių savo prielaidų ištakų, jos kuria istoriškai transcendentines konstrukcijas, imperatyviai nusakančias ir stiprinančias visuomeninių santykių suprekinimą visose esminėse buržuazinės visuomenės sferose – ekonominėje, politinėje, socialinėje ir kultūrinėje. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama detaliau aptarti šias sąsajas ir parodyti, kaip skirtingais laikotarpiais jos paveikė teorinę mintį – Dekarto ir Kanto pažiūras, pozityvistinį mokslą ir pačią marksistinę teoriją.

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