

THE LATE PHILOSOPHY OF GEORG LUKÁCS: HISTORY, FETISHISM AND ALIENATION

CRISTIAN NICHITEAN*

ABSTRACT. The Late Philosophy of Georg Lukács: History, Fetishism and Alienation.

Lukács's late ontological turn is an attempt to go beyond the limitations of his early thesis of the identical subject-object and to better understand those forms of objectivity that appear as a consequence of social existence. In this category of social forms of objectivity he includes the phenomena of fetishism and reification, determined by the dual character, simultaneously material and social, of the objects produced under the rule of commodity form and of exchange value. Closeley related is the phenomenon of alienation, caused by the difference between the development of society and that of human personality, crushed under the weight of fetishism.

Keywords: *fetishism, alienation, ontological turn, marxism, objectivity*

“It is the bad side that produces the movement
which makes history, by providing a struggle.”

Karl Marx

The most important early philosophical work of Georg Lukács, *History and class consciousness (HCC)*, put forward a concept, *reification*, that has made a nice philosophical career, being the foundation of what was later to become the *western marxism*. We cannot say that the later work of the Hungarian philosopher has enjoyed the same reputation, maybe with the exception of the monumental *Ästhetik*. One of the reasons for this skepticism is the association of Lukács with stalinism and his supposed compromises with the simplistic dogmatism of the *diamat*. I will try to prove that, regardless of the tortuous political trajectory of the man, once the nonphilosophical interpretative frameworks are cast aside, his theoretical work stands on its own and can be analyzed and criticized from a philosophical standpoint.

* PhD student at the Doctoral School in Philosophy, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: crisis76@yahoo.com

A case for the late philosophy of Lukács

In the opening essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, (*What is orthodox marxism?*) Lukács makes clear that the orthodoxy refers exclusively to method. In other words, even if a number of marxian theses were to be infirmed by the empirical historical development, “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” (*HCC*: 1). We think that we are not mistaken if we apply this principle to Lukács’s own work, in its entirety. Even if one thesis or another asserted in the *HCC* were reconsidered or even retracted by the author himself, his marxist engagement cannot be disputed as long as we detect there the same fidelity to the dialectical method. The road from the *marxism of the revolutionary subjectivity*¹ to a philosophical position that was perceived (unjustly, in my view) to be close to the objectivist determinism of the *Third International*, doesn’t mean that Lukács abandoned the dialectical method; instead he embraced a new point of view, ontological-genetic, that was meant to clear the way to the understanding of the concrete socio-historical process in its dynamic, as a dialectic between subject and the forms of objectivity that he creates in his social existence.

As happened with Marx a century before, the revolutionary Lukács of youth seems to have given way to a mature cautious thinker who didn’t believe anymore that an unlimited freedom of the political praxis can radically transform society and discovered instead the crucial role of man’s economic activity in shaping it. Lukács didn’t deny the possibility for new revolutionary situations to emerge, but he didn’t believe anymore that a conscious revolutionary agent, the *identical subject-object*, can be produced only by means of providing it from outside with the adequate consciousness, disregarding the economic base and the role of contingency. This is why the strange sensation of detachment that Lukács projects when looking back to his early work, relegating it to the level of a time capsule, a document of the epoch, an expression (even if not completely adequate) of that messianic time when the philosopher tried to jump ahead of his shadow, in other words, a form of *ideological consciousness*.

What motivated such a shift? Lukács fully felt the ebb, the recoil of the revolutionary wave. His late work is not an expression of capitulation, a fatalistic reconciliation with stalinism or with the prosaic communism of his contemporary Hungary, but an attempt to better ground theoretically the emancipatory movement of the working class. For Lukács remained throughout his life a revolutionary marxist,

¹ This formula belongs to Michael Löwy: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article4485>.

fully hostile to reformism and revisionism à la Eduard Bernstein. The texts and interviews of his final years confirm this perspective, although the work that was supposed to update his views of youth regarding the human praxis, the *Ethics*, was never written.

The new cannot repeat the ideological forms of the past and a new theory should not fail to take into account the objective conditions: on the one hand the capitalist consumer society and the social-democrat post-war consensus which lead to the welfare state, on the other hand the bureaucratic communism from which any revolutionary impetus had vanished. Those who disagree with Lukács' assessment of the political situation of the late sixties and accuse him of appeasement and passivity or deplore his detachment and caution should take into consideration that the same state of mind was not unusual among the intellectuals of the Frankfurt school. It is enough to recall here a letter that Marcuse wrote to Adorno on the 5th of April 1969: *We know (and they know) that the situation is not a revolutionary one, not even a prerevolutionary one.*² Marcuse wasn't too impressed with rebellious youth of '68 and Adorno seemed to fully agree with him. As for Lukács, he believed that the mass organization and class consciousness of the proletariat had regressed to the levels of the early nineteenth century. In the changed circumstances, a new theory was needed that would ground a new revolutionary praxis. The socio-centric approach outlined in *HCC* seemed to cause some unwanted but not totally abusive interpretations that would find its author culpable of a Hegelian supersession of nature by society or of an over-estimation of the "imputed" class consciousness. Also, for a materialist philosopher who believes that the objective reality has an existence independent of consciousness a socio-centric starting point would always be a shaky foundation, so Lukács felt that a theory of society had to be ontologically grounded in more elemental forms of existence, ultimately in the relation of man with nature, in *labour*.

In the already mentioned essay, Michael Löwy traces the path followed by the thought of Lukács, between the newly discovered missing link *Tailism and the dialectics* written around 1925 and the next station represented by the essay on Moses Hess, in this way: In *Tailism*, while rejecting the accusation of "subjective idealism", Lukács does not retract from his subjectivist and voluntarist viewpoint: in the decisive moments of the struggle "everything depends on class consciousness, on the conscious will of the proletariat" – the subjective component. Of course, there is a dialectical interaction between subject and object in the historical process, but in the *Augenblick* of crisis, the subjective moment gives the direction of

² https://hutnyk.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/adornomarcuse_germannewleft.pdf

the events, in the form of revolutionary consciousness and praxis. In exchange, all that Löwy has to say about *Moses Hess* is that this essay provided the philosophical justification for Lukács own “reconciliation with reality³”, i.e. with the Stalinist Soviet Union, implicitly meaning his agreement with the official thesis of “the objective dialectics of the historical process”. So, for Löwy the trajectory of Lukács is one from the dialectic between subject and object, with the accent on the subjective moment, to a purely objective dialectic in which the subject is only the effect and never the cause of dialectical developments.

There are in Lukács’s writings enough indications that point out to a shift in his later position, in the sense of the inclusion of social objectivity among the determining factors of reality. For example, in the 1967 preface to *HCC*. But to assert that this is a form of the “objective dialectics” in tune with the stalinist dogma is provable wrong. First, although by 1926 the western capitalism was already stable, stalinism as such was not yet fully coagulated until the first five year plan which abolished the *NEP* by 1929. So the objective limits that must have dissuaded Lukács from his messianic beliefs were more probably, as he himself asserted, those determined by the failure of the european revolution, which imposed a new international proletarian policy oriented, in the short run, towards less ambitious goals. If by reconciliation with reality Löwy understands a slightly more authoritarian nuance of Lukács’s political writings, traces of that can be already found in the leninist essays of *HCC*. On the other hand, in his later works, Lukács distances himself clearly from the stalinist objectivism and asserts that subjectivity is one of the constitutive components of social existence. He repudiates, it’s true, his youth thesis in which the dialectic between subject and object is close to become a real identity in the shape of the proletariat, with the aim of emphasizing the autonomy of the two moments. Between objectivism and voluntarism, between economic determinism and the total autonomy of ideology, his answer is *Tertium datur!*, a dialectical process between subject and object that is tracked back to its origins. This explains the anthropological overtones of the *Ontology*.

The reception of Lukács in the west raises a few interesting questions. While *HCC* is largely praised for its emancipatory views, his later work is ignored or rejected for its alleged compromises with stalinism. However, in the *Ontology* you will hardly find any references to the role of the communist party, which in *HCC* was “the first conscious step towards the empire of freedom”, the “conscious general will”, the revolutionary form of consciousness of the proletariat etc. Nothing would

³ The famous phrase “reconciliation under duress” was coined by Adorno in an essay directed against Lukács.

have been easier, if he were a stalinist, than to retain these leninist formulae in order to justify the not so bright communist realities. Instead Lukács searched a new theoretical basis for explaining the genesis of the social forms of consciousness, other than their imputing by the party intellectuals.

Another paradox: unlike more fashionable marxist currents that shaped the western debates at the time, Lukács neither traced a line of separation between an early marxian work, still contaminated by idealist and subjectivist views, and a mature “scientific”, objective one, nor did he repudiate an allegedly metaphysical core that were supposed to be found in the former. Like Marcuse, Lukács asserted the essential continuity of Marx’s thought and in the late works of Lukács we can find quotations from, say, *The Holy Family* and phrases extracted from *Capital*, sometimes on the same page, or in the same thread of argumentation.

The ontological turn

In its author’s view, one of the merits of *HCC* was its attempt to sketch a materialist ontology of the social existence, to present the dialectical categories in their real objectivity and ontological movement (*HCC*: xxvi). For Lukács these categories were not conceptual artifacts, not subjective implantations into the objects from outside, but the manifestation of their own real, objective structure. But later he came to believe that his attempt failed, however, because of the aforementioned general socio-centric approach of the work. These efforts recalled in the 1967 *Preface* are the starting point of the *Ontology*, which tries to reestablish the role of the economic processes and the exchange between man and nature in the shaping and development of society. The ontological priority of the productive activity of man has its roots in the fact that “there cannot be exchange value without use value” (*OM*: 9), so the purely social existence rests upon and presupposes the natural existence. Labour is the ontological basis of man’s sociality.

Lukács remarks that Marx’ writings have always had an ontological character, even the scientific ones (*OM*: 14). He believes that the goal of Marx’ philosophy was to recreate in thought the genuine reality as it exists in itself (a rather hegelian assumption). So Marx’s thought reconstructs the totality of social being and from this perspective weighs the reality and the significance of every particular phenomenon (*OM*: 17). This scientific reflection of reality, one which is not photographic but a process of abstraction and generalization mediated by the ontological categories, is necessary because the outward appearance and the essence of things don’t directly coincide (*OM*: 16). This reflection is not a formal and simply ideal totality, the mental reproduction of the real existence and the

categories are not building blocks of a hierarchical system but, in Marx's words "forms of being, characteristics of existence" (OM: 19). To further exemplify, I must mention that for Lukács the marxian category of *labour* is not a conceptual or analytical tool, but the reflection in thought of a real process of abstraction of labour through its socialization, namely the emergence of a new ontological category of labour: *abstract labour* (OM: 40). These categories of thought adhere directly to reality, which does not mean at all that they can be discovered immediately. But, as Lukács warns, all ontological categories have a historical development, they are not static, eternal entities (OES: 73). In other words, he doesn't try to re-ontologize history but, rather the opposite, he historicizes ontology.

The perspective that Lukács introduces is ontological but also genetic. For him, the structure of a social formation cannot be understood without knowing its genesis and that of its components, as well as their function in the complex, or, in other words, the genesis determines the structure. Continuing the search inaugurated with HCC's attempt to produce the producer of history, Lukács gives us an account of the dynamic picture of the genesis of social existence since the emergence of mankind from the animal world due to *labour*. The social life comes into being at the same time with labour (the originary form of human praxis), with the emergence of new forms of created objectuality that are as real as the natural objects. Also, labour has as its premise the capacity of man to consciously plan its activity, the so called teleological project (*teleologische Setzung*) based on alternative options. So, humans are the ones that introduce teleology in a causally deterministic world, but for this to happen, some subjective conditions have to be met: the creation of the new objects require an adequate process of labour and this in turn is based on adequate teleological projects and alternative decisions which can be adopted only if the subject's mind can reflect adequately reality as it exists in itself. Two processes occur simultaneously: a separation between subject and object and an "assimilation" of the object into the subject as reflection.

So, human praxis is possible only as the consequence of a teleological act effected by a subject (OES: 49). These teleological projects are the basic elements of the social existence, because only at this level can the natural causal chains be interrupted. The development of the productive forces as a general tendency triggered by the new man-made objects and the division of labour, determines the retreat of the bounds of nature and an ever stronger socialization of society. Simultaneously, the demands exerted by the labour process, the correct reflection of reality and the adequation of the teleological projects to the desired result, determine the conscious self-domination of the labour subject and his progressive transformation, that is the *humanization of man*. Therefore, the socialization of society and the humanization of man are two aspects of the same historical process. We find thus, at the end of the route proposed by Lukács, the two poles of the

social existence: on the one hand the social totality, the result of the global and objective historical process, produced by man even though not in full awareness, on the other hand the individuals, the subjects of the teleological projects. In this complex, freedom of praxis coexists with determination by the social reality and keep each other in check (with the exception of a revolutionary situation, where the freedom of subjectivity seems to prevail) – this is the final view of the dialectic between subject and object, the *tertium datur* that Lukács was searching for.

Capitalism and reification

The theory of reification is one of the most important early contributions of Lukács to a radical critique of the capitalist society. Leaning on the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism, Lukács further explores the way in which the social relations between men vanish beneath the relations between things. In turn, these reified forms penetrate human consciousness and veil the social rapports of domination beneath quantitative, formal relations. No domain of social consciousness escapes this fate: art, law, philosophy. “This is the reason the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising the reform. There is only a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things”, said Marx.⁴ Lukács adds: “because of this situation a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man” (HCC: 86–87). As the commodity production generalizes, “reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (HCC: 91), and this in turn has profound repercussions on the subjectivity: even its most elevated expression, the modern critical philosophy, “springs from the reified structure of consciousness” (HCC: 110).

Later Lukács became rather dissatisfied with some of his early conclusions. What displeased him most was his equation of reification (which in *HCC* is synonymous with alienation) with objectivation (HCC: xxiii-xxv). Objectivation, as the elementary form of human activity, is an unsurpassable fate. Alienation is a specific form of objectification that characterizes some historical epochs, including capitalism. Because of this limitations, the concept of reification cannot grasp the role of labour

⁴ Marx, Engels MECW vol. 35, p. 83, also quoted by Lukács in HCC, p. 86.

in the humanization of man, the objectivation of man as a species, the development of his productive capacities, material production as the objective ontological basis for the historical change (HCC: xxvii). I will return to this important aspect when discussing alienation.

So, if in *HCC* Lukács mainly superimposed his theory of reification on Marx's conception of fetishism, indicating by it a distortion that obfuscates real historical and social processes beneath the veil of rigid objects, and then expanded the results to the field of arts and social sciences, the same problematic reappear in *The Young Hegel*, this time in the larger context of the philosophical concept of objectivity, of objectivity as such. As I alluded to earlier, this became a *leitmotif* in Lukács's late work, after he reconsidered the importance of nature and circumscribed the relative autonomous sphere of social being.

In his social existence, man's teleological activity is incorporated in the objects and institutions he creates, and in turn society appears more and more clearly as the product of man's actions. But simultaneously social existence gave birth to forms of life, social structures and institutions that hindered the development of human personality and crushed man with the force of their dead objectivity (YH: 111). These institutions, results of longstanding processes and interplay of social forces, often surrounded by an aura of venerability, are opaque, their origins and role escape human understanding. One example of such mysterious entities is the commodity, whose dual nature of thing and of social relation was the object of Marx's analysis. This magical power that some objects have over men, because their dual nature (simultaneously objectual and social) remains hidden, is exactly what Marx called *fetishism*. In *HCC*, Lukács showed that the philosophical antidote to reification and fetishism is dialectical thought, dissolving the objects into processes. In *The Young Hegel* he reiterates that only historical materialism can draw a clear distinction between the real forms of objectivity, nature and the practical activity of man,⁵ and the fetishistic, phantom-like⁶ forms of objectivity scrutinized by Marx. This distinction could not have been fully grasped by Hegel because, on the one hand, he could not determine the relation between the fetish forms and the economic structure of society (he could not infer a theory of fetishism from the undeveloped German capitalism of his time) and, on the other hand, for idealist thinking any form of objectivity is phantom-like (YH: 82).

So, for Lukács the historical progress engenders the appearance of new, more complex and social forms of objectivity (such as the socially necessary labour time or the law of value) and these forms must be adequately grasped by philosophical thought. This thought has to fight against metaphysical dogmas as well as against

⁵ We shall have in mind the first thesis on Feuerbach.

⁶ See YH, note 57, p. 653.

fetishized categories of philosophy that objectify human relations as self-created social institutions, has to be dialectical so that human activity can interact with the world of objective determinations (YH: 365). Now, if we know Lukács's preoccupation with objectivity, and we know that for a materialist thinker objectivity is the fundamental characteristic of the world as it is, independent of human thought, the reasons for his late ontological turn should be clearer.

From this standpoint the commodity, for example, is such a form of objectivity simultaneously phantom-like and real. It has therefore a particular ontological constitution, a socio-processual objectivity (Prolegomeni: 94). For Lukács, this ontological structure is shared by all the fetish forms. Their appearance that of a "second nature" obfuscates their hidden core, the social relations and processes that creates them. Because of their objectivity, the fetish forms don't vanish when their structure enters the consciousness of the social subject, they cannot be abolished by contemplation. But, because their objective, second-nature character is just an appearance, they can be overthrown by practical activity.

Fetishism is a key factor in the dialectic between subject and object that Lukács outlines in his late work, because of its overwhelming and generally degrading influence on human personality and human development. This leads us to another essential point in Lukács late thought, the concept of *alienation*.

The concept of *alienation*

In the 1967 *Preface*, Lukács considers that the HCC equation of alienation and objectification was the biggest theoretical error of the book. He traces this error back to Hegel, appropriating the criticism outlined by Marx in the *Economical and philosophical manuscripts*. Externalization or alienation is the concepts that Hegel used to describe the relation between subject and object in the process of the self-knowledge of the Absolute Spirit. This is what Lukács has to say: "there is a broad philosophical extension of the concept 'externalization' which then comes to be synonymous with 'thinghood' or objectivity. This is the form in which the history of objectivity is portrayed: objectivity as a dialectical moment in the journey of the identical subject-object on its way back to itself via 'externalization'" (YH: 539–540). So objectivity as such is just a moment of the Odissey of the Spirit, which discovers himself behind the objective world, implicitly the knowledge of the world is just a stage of self-knowledge of the Spirit, a stage that will be transcended. Finally, as objectivity itself is just a moment of the development of the Spirit, the central problem of the emergence and transcendence of alienation becomes that of the *aufhebung* of objectivity as such in the absolute knowledge, a historical process which culminates with the identical subject–object.

Unlike Hegel, who reached these erroneous conclusions because of the idealist equation of man with his self-consciousness, Marx, “drawing on his knowledge of the empirical evidence, distinguishes sharply between objectification in work in general and the alienation of subject and object in the capitalist form of work” (YH: 551–552). This marxian distinction between alienation and objectification is restated many times in Lukács’s later works. In the 1967 *Preface*, objectification is described as the natural means by which man masters the world, a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated from life in society, while alienation is just a special variant of objectification that takes place in definite historical circumstances (HCC: xxxvi). In the *Ontology*, objectification is the general form of human activity.

This unsurpassable character of objectivity is the materialist overturn operated by Marx in philosophy and Lukács follows him closely. With Hegel, objectivity as such was regarded as an estranged human relationship; for Marx it is an primordial ontological fact, while the dialectic of the Absolute Spirit is nothing more than conceptual mythology. So, Marx rejected the idealist conception of alienation as an externalization of the Spirit and simultaneously restricted its boundaries: from the objectification as such in Hegel to the concrete forms that this objectification takes in his contemporary society, more precisely to the way in which the human spirit, not the *Absolute Spirit* is alienated in capitalism. Man is an objectual being and as such he acts upon other objectual entities in his exchange of substances with nature, he necessarily externalizes himself in creating new objects. But, as Lukács carefully states, although alienation is to be found in the context of externalization and the material relations between men and between men and nature, it is a specific mode of externalization in relation with the process of production and of distribution in class society. Therefore, its existence depends on a social and historical situation in which human essence objectifies itself inhumanely, in contradiction with itself (YH: 550–553).

After following Marx in tracing the limits of alienation as a historical phenomenon determined by the human progress and establishing its ontological basis, Lukács is ready to present his own contributions, building on Marx’s insights. Dismissing those critical advocates of marxism who consider that the problematic of alienation was specific to the young, metaphysical Marx and was overcome by the mature, „economist” Marx, Lukács quotes from *Theories of surplus value*, to prove that the focus of Marx’ interest, the development process (including that of the individual) in its historical totality is closely connected with the problematic of alienation: “production for its own sake means nothing but the development of human productive forces, in other words the *development of the richness of human nature as an end in itself* although at first the development of the capacities of the human species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and whole human classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides

with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed, for the interests of the species in the human kingdom” (MECW 31: 347–348). So, in Lukács’s view, alienation will be superseded only when the development of the human species will coincide with that of human personality, of the individual.

Now for Lukács it is this dialectical contradiction as such that manifests itself as alienation. It is the development of the productive forces that leads immediately to the superior development of human capacities, but it also implies the possibility that in this process individuals or even entire classes be sacrificed. This contradiction is necessary, writes Lukács, because it has at its basis certain ontological moments of the social process of labour, moments that are inescapable. One such moment is the fact that although the production process is the synthesis of teleological acts, as such it has a purely causal character, never a teleological one. The particular teleological acts are starting points for different causal chains that cumulate in an overall process, acquiring at this level new functions and characteristics, without ever losing their causal character. (OES: 568). In other words, the practical activity of man has always unpredictable and unintended consequences. Man is crushed by his own creation, the economic system.

In the end Lukács defines alienation in this way: although the development of the forces of production entails simultaneously and necessarily the development of the human capacities, this doesn’t necessarily bring about the development of the human personality. On the contrary, such an expansion can deform or degrade human personality. (OES: 569) But although alienation manifests itself directly at the level of the individual, and even if the individual alternative decision is part of the essence of its dynamics, it’s phenomenal existence (*Geradesosein*) is still a social process, albeit mediated by many interactions. Only in the last instance, the individual decision is the ontological basis of alienation (OES: 573). But although this individual moment is always present and determines the contemporary forms of alienation as much as it did the past ones, Lukács believes that often philosophical analysis falls into an opposite error by generalizing this unmediated, real and important aspect of alienation and transforming this phenomenon (that can always be clearly and concretely circumscribed from a social perspective) into something related to an eternal *condition humaine*, that has a general and suprahistorical character, as in the well-known philosophical clichés that sets man against society, subject against objectivity and so on (OES: 565, 572). For Lukács, man without society and society without man are empty abstractions that can be objects of logical or semantic speculations that don’t have any correspondent in the real existence (OES: 574).

Conclusions

I hope that I shed some light on the late philosophy of Georg Lukács and proved that its intent, focus and direction were determined by internal, philosophical arguments rather than by external pressures and psychological motivations such as the need of reconciliation with official doctrines. In the changed historic circumstances, the reflux of the revolutionary wave and the emergence of fascism, Lukács felt that the messianic thesis of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history was no longer useful. Still, he never repudiated his analysis of bourgeois society, but integrated its results concerning fetishism and reification into a new frame of thought, a dialectic between subject and object grounded in labour. Even the ontological turn can be explained as a consequence of his investigations regarding alienation and the dual nature of the fetish forms of objectivity, as he thought he had to depart his early socio-centric approach for a better understanding of the ontological substratum of these social phenomena.

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