

Back to Hegel!

Georg Lukács, Dialectics, and Hegelian Marxism

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As a decisive work in the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* has been called "a groundbreaking manifesto for a critical, humanist Marxism", which, published in 1923, was "one of the few authentic events in the history of Marxism".¹ With this collection of essays Lukács clarified the Hegelian roots of Marx's thinking and showed, as Peter Bürger has pointed out, how Hegel could be read from a leftist perspective.² Indeed, one may say that as a critical intellectual movement Hegelian Marxism arose with *History and Class Consciousness*, together with Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, also published in 1923.

This article focuses on Lukács' version of Hegelian Marxism. The aim is to identify, analyze and to some extent contextualize his specific form of Marxism and the uses he made of Hegel's philosophy for this purpose. So, what kind of Marxism does *History and Class Consciousness* advocate, and what role does Hegel play in Lukács' interpretation of Marx and Marxism? Unlike many other Hegelian Marxists, Lukács was an idealist thinker influenced by Hegel before he identified as a Marxist; he came, so to say, to Marxian materialism from German idealism, not vice versa. As a background to the analysis of *History and Class Consciousness* there are therefore reasons to say something about his early reception of Hegel's philo-

¹ Andrew Arato & Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (London: Pluto, 1979), p. ix. Slavoj Žižek, "Postface: Georg Lukacs as the Philosopher of Leninism", in Georg Lukacs, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. Esther Leslie (London & New York: Verso, 2002), p. 151.

² "Interview with Peter Bürger", in Eva L. Corredor, *Lukács after Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals* (Durham & London: Duke, 1997), p. 46.

sophy, and towards the end of the article I will also examine how Lukács' uses of Hegel gradually changed as step by step he distanced himself from the positions he defended in *History and Class Consciousness* in favor of an approach that was more affirmative to the dogmatism of the Soviet Communist Party, even while never entirely abandoning Hegel.

Aesthetic anti-capitalism

In his early writings, including his important volume *Soul and Form* (1910), Lukács devoted himself almost exclusively to literature, drama and philosophy. He was a theorist of aesthetics with a special fondness for the concept of form. Indeed, there is something almost Platonic regarding his early interest in both the ideas of soul and form. At the same time, one can detect in his writings the strong influence of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Georg Simmel. Although at this point Hegel played a less prominent role for Lukács, some Hegelian traits can nonetheless be discerned already in *Soul and Form*, especially in his essays on Novalis, Søren Kierkegaard and Stefan George. As Judith Butler puts it:

In a sense that is clearly Hegelian, Lukács maintains not only that soul requires form in order to become manifest but also that form requires soul for its animation. Form would be nothing without its substance, and its substance would not be anything without the soul.³

In addition, and like many other German artists, writers and thinkers in the early twentieth century, the young Lukács, had a deep aversion to modern Anglo-Saxon culture, which was connected to utilitarianism, liberalism, commercialism and materialism. Germanic society served as a potent counterpoint, associated as it was with higher values such as art, authenticity, spirituality and humanism. At this time, Lukács' disapproval of liberalism in no way implied an allegiance to the socialist or communist cause. Rather his antipathy was rooted in a romantic and politically quite diffuse anti-capitalistic position, and it was this basis on which his criticism of the contemporary situation was formulated.

Nevertheless, Lukács was already familiar with the writings of Marx, including *Capital*, which he read for the first time around 1908. Three years later, in 1911, he wrote: "The system of socialism and its view of the world,

³ Judith Butler, "Introduction", in Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Verso, 2010), p. 6.

Marxism, form a synthetic unity—perhaps the most unrelenting and rigorous synthesis since medieval Catholicism.”⁴ This is in many ways a remarkable quote, particularly given that, already during his pre-Marxist aesthetic period, Lukács always searched for synthetic unity and comprehensive explanations. In that sense he had a kind of structural readiness for the Marxist view on the world, which he would later come to embrace.

Thus it was directly from Hegel, not via Marx, that the young Lukács picked up concepts that would later be central in his works, for instance totality, the typical and the world-historical.⁵ These concepts are frequently used already in *The Theory of the Novel* from 1916, his first work to be thoroughly based on a Hegelian perspective. In retrospect, Lukács would claim that, taken as a whole, this study was “the first work in the domain of spiritual interpretation in which Hegelian philosophy was concretely applied to aesthetic problems”.⁶

The Theory of the Novel deals partly with epic literature in the early, Homeric tradition, and partly with the modern novel. Like Hegel, however, Lukács seeks to come to terms with and overcome various atomizing tendencies present within contemporary society. If Hegel had given a harmonizing role to reason and subsequently to the state, the early Lukács maintains that it is art and aesthetics that have the capacity to overcome the split between the objective and the subjective, or in Kantian words, between *Sein* (being) and *Sollen* (ought). In comparison with *Soul and Form*, *The Theory of the Novel* is a more political text, invested in the hope of a less alienated and a more harmonized world.⁷

In a certain respect it is possible to interpret Lukács’ turn to communism, which, it should be added, surprised and even shocked many of his friends, and which to this day continues to puzzle scholars, as the logical extension of his awareness of the increasing atomization and utilitarianization of modern society. Step by step—under the impact of the First World War and the events of the Russian Revolution—Lukács came to realize the limits of art and aesthetics; neither functions as an appropriate response to the most urgent questions in contemporary society. To allude to

⁴ Lukács quoted in Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1979), p. 96.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1976), p. 14.

⁶ Lukács quoted in George Lichtheim, *Georg Lukács* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 9.

⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

Walter Benjamin's famous formulation, one may say that even before the fascists had aestheticized the politics, Lukács chose to politicize aesthetics.⁸

Hegel as a leading intellectual force

After the October Revolution of 1917, and while the Russian Civil War was taking hold, the Hungarian Communist Party was founded in November 1918. One month later Lukács enrolled as a party member. Hungary was in turmoil and the prospect of founding an entirely new social order seemed to be within reach: the real possibility of creating something new that was radically different from the contemporary liberal capitalism Lukács detested. From now on, communism was for him a promise of a free and humane world, and he dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the party. When the Hungarian Soviet Republic was proclaimed in March 1919, he was appointed Deputy People's Commissar for cultural and educational issues in Bela Kun's government. The Republic was, however, short-lived, and with the Hungarian revolution crushed Lukács was thus forced to go into exile in Vienna.

There he continued to write intensely, now focusing on ideological and political issues. He published a lot of articles in *Die Internationale*, *Kommunismus*, *Rote Fane* and other radical journals. Some of these articles were reworked and then re-published in *History and Class Consciousness*, along with a couple of newly written texts. The book, published originally in 1923, consists of several essays on history, class-consciousness and reification as well as on the questions of historical materialism and the political organization of the party, all interpreted on the basis of a Hegelian infused Marxism. He describes the overall ambition of the book as "mak[ing] us aware of Marxist method, to throw light on it as an unendingly fertile source of solution to otherwise intractable dilemmas."⁹ With this emphasis placed on Marx's method Lukács stresses the importance of Hegel. With a solid knowledge of both Hegel and German idealism, Lukács was able to distinguish and analyze the Hegelian elements present in Marx's own thinking. This understanding of the Hegelian Marx—and for that matter even the Marxian Hegel—was novel in the 1920s. But in several key

⁸ Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217-251.

⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. xliii.

respects, it was also a controversial development, something Lukács soon became aware of.

In the preface to *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács discusses Hegel's position and status in Marxism. He recalls certain passages in which Marx points out Hegel's importance for his own thinking, for instance in Marx's letter to Joseph Dietzgen, where he wrote that the "true laws of dialectics are already to be found in Hegel, albeit in a mystified form".¹⁰ Lukács speaks also of Marx's warning about the danger of treating Hegelian dialectics as a "dead dog". According to the author of *History and Class Consciousness*, this is precisely the dominant way in which Hegel was treated in Marxism. The principal purpose of the book was thus to save "the seminal elements of Hegel's thought and rescue them as a vital intellectual force for the present".¹¹

According to Lukács, the crucial element in both Hegelian and Marxian philosophy inheres in the dialectical method. In "What is Orthodox Marxism?", the most programmatic of the essays in *History and Class Consciousness*, he claims:

Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the "belief" in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a "sacred" book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.¹²

It is primarily because orthodox Marxism is dependent on the dialectical method, which, according to Lukács, was originally invented by Hegel, that this idealistic thinker occupies such a central place in Lukács' interpretation of Marx and Marxism. Besides Marx's own writings, Hegel's *Logic* and *Phenomenology of Spirit* are in fact the main background sources for Lukács' view of contemporary Marxism. In short, it is necessary to return to Hegel in order to provide an accurate presentation of true Marxism.

Despite—or perhaps on account of—being the first modern thinker to develop the dialectical method, Hegel's understanding of this method was in certain respects limited. The same point applies to Engels, who, according to Lukács, unquestioningly accepted certain shortcomings in Hegel's use of the method. Lukács writes: "The misunderstandings that arise from

¹⁰ Marx in a letter to Joseph Dietzgen, quoted in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xlv.

¹¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xlv.

¹² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 1.

Engels' account of dialectics can in the main be put down to the fact that Engels—following Hegel's mistaken lead—extended the dialectical method to apply also to nature."¹³ The dialectics of nature, which Engels worked out, and which at the end of nineteenth century was codified into Marxist dogma, was indeed non-Marxian according to Lukács. This means that Lukács, in contrast to most other Marxists in the early twentieth century, was keen to stress that Marx's thought was by no means identical with Engels'.

Hegel's and Marx's method is thus not applicable to nature, but only applies to historical and social processes. By harnessing the dialectical method it is possible to acquire a complex understanding of society as a "totality", a central category in the works of both Hegel and Marx as well as in Lukács. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács writes:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts, is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science.¹⁴

The category of totality is here critically directed against capitalism and the tendency towards specialization characteristic of positivistic science. "*The primacy of the category of totality*", Lukács maintains, "*is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.*"¹⁵

The proletariat and the party

In the decades that followed the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, and with later representatives of the Hegelian Marxism such as Herbert Marcuse, Karel Kosík and Leszek Kołakowski coming to the fore, this movement became a key challenge to the Marxist-Leninist dogmatism that became hegemonic in the USSR. Against that background, it is notable that Lenin did not pose any main target in *History and Class Consciousness*. On the contrary, the book conveys a quite positive image of the Russian leader. Lukács highlights Lenin's importance not only as a revolutionary activist

¹³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 27. On the category of totality in Lukács, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Los Angeles & Berkeley: Polity, 1984), pp. 81-127.

¹⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 27.

but also as a theoretician in his own right. For both Lukács and Lenin, not only is emphasis placed on a close connection between theory and practice, but moreover their focus on the dialectical method as the key element in Marxism unites them.

Besides Lenin, Lukács also emphasizes the importance of Rosa Luxemburg. Two of the essays in *History and Class Consciousness* deal explicitly with Luxemburg—“Rosa Luxemburg as a Marxist” and “Critical comments on Rosa Luxemburg’s criticism of the Russian Revolution”. According to Lukács, Luxemburg, “alone among Marx’s disciples, has made a real advance on his life’s work in both the content and method of his economic doctrines. She alone has found a way to apply them concretely to the present state of social development.”¹⁶ Lukács realizes the great value of Luxemburg’s economic analysis and points out that she—unlike many other contemporary socialists and communists—was in fact a “genuine dialectician” with a sophisticated understanding of the concept of totality.¹⁷

Together with Marx and Hegel, it is with the theoretical help from Lenin and Luxemburg that the author of *History and Class Consciousness* tries to formulate a radical alternative to, on the one hand, Eduard Bernstein’s reformist line that many social-democratic parties in Europe followed during the early twentieth century, and on the other hand, the essentially rigid, scientifically-influenced Marxism associated with Karl Kautsky and the Second International. Something that unites Bernstein and Kautsky, according to Lukács, is that neither of them realizes Hegel’s crucial influence on Marx or the significance of Hegelian philosophy for contemporary Marxism. On the contrary, they claim that Marxian materialism has nothing to do whatsoever with Hegelian idealism. Lukács says that this anti-Hegelian position—which in practice means an abandonment of the dialectical method—is just one example of the historical fact that many so-called Marxist thinkers have become increasingly bourgeois and social-liberal in their general outlook.

Lukács criticizes, in other words, the deterministic and economic side of the Second International. Its leading representatives regard history as a predetermined and natural law-bound process. Even though Lukács—just as Marx and Hegel—basically have a teleological (albeit dialectical) view of history, he refuses to agree that something truly transformative in human history can take place automatically—especially the transition from a cap-

¹⁶ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xli.

¹⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 182.

italistic to a communistic social system. In *History and Class Consciousness* he formulates the point in this way:

But the “realm of freedom” is not a gift that mankind, groaning under the weight of necessity, receives from Fate as a reward for its steadfast endurance. It is not only the goal, but also the means and the weapon in the struggle. And here the fundamental and qualitative novelty of the situation is revealed: for the first time mankind consciously takes its history into its own hands—thanks to the class consciousness of a proletariat summoned to power.¹⁸

Lukács shares Marx’s assumption that it is the proletariat who provide the link to the future communist society, the “realm of freedom”, an insight that Marx regarded as one of his greatest discoveries. In line with this, Lukács claims that in the current historical situation only the working-class may act as a genuine revolutionary collective subject. In fact, in *History and Class Consciousness* the proletariat occupies an analogous position to the world spirit in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: a substance that is also a subject.¹⁹ But in order to fulfill its highest *telos*, the proletariat must first be made conscious—just like the spirit in Hegel’s philosophy.

Lukács’ strong emphasis on consciousness is a part of the legacy of Hegel and German Idealism. Consciousness means in this context something more than merely having knowledge about something. The main point is that consciousness is not external to the object, but is a part of the object that also changes it. The moment when the workers become conscious of itself as a class, they are transformed. It is only then that the proletariat becomes a revolutionary subject. In this respect class-consciousness is directly related to political praxis.²⁰ Thus class-consciousness constitutes a precondition for the communist revolution; class-consciousness stands for the subjective element that is necessary—in political analysis as well as in praxis—as a supplement to the objective historical development trends Marx had forensically identified.²¹

¹⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 250.

¹⁹ G. W. F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 10.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), p. 220.

²¹ This involves a dynamic interaction between the objective and the subjective, in line with Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectical method. When Lukács lines up “the crucial determinants of dialectics”, he mentions precisely “the interaction of subject and object”, but

Together with radical intellectuals, the most advanced part of the proletariat constitutes a kind of political avant-garde and thus operates as the central element in the communist party. The question of how the proletariat and the party should be organized is not only a technical matter, Lukács says, but “one of the most important *intellectual* questions of the revolution”.²² Leading intellectuals and those elements of the working class who have already become conscious of the situation and the tasks that lay ahead of them, represent the intellectual and political elite at the forefront of the new communist society, which is to say, the party.

When Lukács in this way understood the intellectual and political avant-garde of the party as forerunners of the new communist society, he was clearly influenced by Lenin. But here he gave recognition also to Rosa Luxemburg, even if, according to him, she tended to overestimate the value of spontaneity in the mass actions of the proletariat and concomitantly to underestimate the importance of that kind of conscious organizational work Lenin stressed. The big challenge, Lukács says, is thus to find a middle-way, “an interaction between spontaneity and conscious control,”²³ one that constitutes an intermediate standpoint, a negation of the negation, between the position of Luxemburg and the negation of Lenin. In short, even if *History and Class Consciousness* stands closer to Lenin than to Luxemburg, it is the combination of their theories, together with the dominant Hegelian influence, that makes the book so fascinating and original in the history of Marxism.

Criticism and defense

After the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács’ thinking became in many ways less complex. This, of course, has much to do with the fact that he became more loyal to the Soviet Communist Party as the party itself was gradually becoming more dogmatic. When *History and Class Consciousness* was published, Lenin’s theories of capitalism, imperialism, the party and the revolution had not yet been codified into dogmas. This canonization of Lenin’s writings occurred soon after his death in January 1924.

also the “the unity theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc.” Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 24.

²² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 295.

²³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 317.

Quickly after Lenin's death, Lukács wrote a short book, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, in which he gave a very affirmative portrait of his life and thinking. Here too Lukács stresses the importance of the dialectical method in so far as Lenin is said to represent a new phase in the development of dialectical materialism. After decades of decline and distortion by vulgar Marxism, Lenin was responsible for the development and maturation of the method itself. "*Lenin re-established the purity of Marxist theory on this issue. But it was also precisely here that he conceived it more clearly and more concretely.*"²⁴ That Lukács in this context does not say anything of Lenin's interest in Hegel, may at least partly be explained by the fact that Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*—where this interest is clearly expressed—had not been published. Otherwise Lukács would have certainly quoted Lenin's now well-known statement that it is impossible to really grasp *Capital* if one has not read and understood Hegel's Logic.²⁵

Despite Lukács' homage to the first Soviet leader, Lukács would soon be subject to harsh criticism from party cadre. The Hegelian interpretation of Marx in *History and Class Consciousness* appeared to be too controversial to pass unnoticed. The criticism against Lukács was delivered by, among others, Abram Deborin, the Russian philosopher, and László Rudas, who was an influential Marxist-Leninist philosopher and a leading figure in the Hungarian Communist Party. Both Deborin and Rudas recoiled from what they identified as Lukács' "revisionism", including his criticism of Engels, his highlighting of Luxemburg's importance, and what they regarded as his strong tendency toward subjectivism in *History and Class Consciousness*.²⁶

For a very long time it was thought that Lukács never responded directly to the accusation of "revisionism", deciding instead to distance himself from many of his previous positions. When a new German edition of *History and Class Consciousness* was published in 1968, Lukács took the opportunity in a newly written preface to emphasize that he now regarded much in the book as incorrect and reprehensible.²⁷ Even before this auto-critique,

²⁴ Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*, trans. Nicholas Jacobs (London & New York: Verso, 2009), p. 12.

²⁵ Lenin, "Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic", *Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress, 1963), p. 180.

²⁶ On Rudas's and Deborin's criticism, see John Rees, "Introduction", in Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. Esther Leslie (London & New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 17-25.

²⁷ Georg Lukács, "Preface to the New Edition", in *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. ix-xxxix. In an interview given at the same time, Lukács says, however, that *History and Class Consciousness* despite all its shortcomings, nevertheless was "more intelligent and

he had renounced his critical treatment of Engels' dialectics of nature.²⁸ In fact, the later Lukács very seldom criticizes Engels. That he speaks of Engels almost in positive terms is just one example of how, from the late twenties onwards, he did what he could to be close and faithful to the party with its codification of the holy trinity of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Long after Lukács' death, however, when the secret archives of the former communist countries were opened after the fall of the USSR, a previously unknown response to Deborin's and Ruda's criticism, written by his own hand, was found in Moscow. In this text, *Tailism and the Dialectic*, dated from around 1925 or 1926, Lukács offers a robust defense of *History and Class Consciousness* at the same time as he presents himself as an orthodox Leninist. The overall purpose of the book from 1923, he now describes as follows:

To demonstrate *methodologically* that the organization and tactics of Bolshevism are the only possible consequence of Marxism; to prove that, of necessity, the problems of Bolshevism follow logically—that is to say logically in a dialectical sense—from the method of materialist dialectics as implemented by its founders.²⁹

Instead of taking these statements as a confirmation of what *History and Class Consciousness* really is about—which, for example, John Rees tends to do in his introduction to the English edition of *Tailism and the Dialectic*—Lukács' statements must be understood in their specific context.³⁰ Given the fact that the dogmatization of Leninism had gone much further in 1925 and 1926 than when *History and Class Consciousness* was published just a few years earlier, there are circumstantial reasons why the author here portrays Lenin as the most obvious authority besides Marx and Engels—or, for that matter, why “Comrade Stalin” is mentioned positively.³¹ Even in other ways the new book is more Leninist than *History and Class Consciousness*. While,

better” than most of what was written about Marx “on the bourgeoisie side.” Georg Lukács, *Gelebtes Denken: Eine im Autobiographie Dialog*, ed. István Eörsi, trans. Hans-Henning Paetzke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 125.

²⁸ T. I. Ojzerman, “Lukács' Hegel Interpretation”, i Tom Rockmore (ed.), *Lukács Today: Essays in Marxist Philosophy* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1988), p. 197.

²⁹ Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, p. 47.

³⁰ Rees, “Introduction”, p. 27 et passim. See also Žižek, “Postface”, p. 151-182, and Joseph Frachia, “The Philosophical Leninism and Eastern ‘Western Marxism’ of Georg Lukács”, *Historical Materialism* 21(1), 2013, pp. 69–93.

³¹ Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, p. 73.

in the original publication, the view of the party was somewhat ambivalent, Lukács now clearly defends Lenin's understanding of the party, instead of Luxemburg's; in *Tailism and the Dialectic* Luxemburg is mentioned only on a few occasions, and on these few occasions they are mainly of a critical character.³² In comparison with *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács now tones down Hegel's importance for Marx, although he does make it clear that Hegelian thought is fully compatible with the Marxism-Leninism promulgated by Moscow.

From the young Marx to the young Hegel

When Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness* and *Tailism and the Dialectic*, he had not access to all of Marx's writings. Many of Marx's posthumous texts had still not been published, including *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *Grundrisse*, which were rediscovered in the latter part of the twenties.³³ When *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* were published in 1932, Lukács had already been given the opportunity to study them while, in and around 1930, he had worked as a scientific assistant at the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow. Even so, this was still several years after he had penned *History and Class Consciousness*. Paradoxically, the manuscripts from 1844 nevertheless throw an interesting light on Lukács' controversial book, especially its theory of reification.

Central in this theory is the phenomenon of the commodity form and how everything in capitalist society, including relations between people, tend to take "the character of the thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity'."³⁴ The commodity form is, in short, characteristic of modern, capitalist society, distinguishing it from all previous social systems. Commodities certainly existed earlier in history, but what is new in capitalism is that the commodity form now permeates all facets of society including different manifestations of life. Only in a communistic system could this

³² Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 78f.

³³ The writings of Marx to which *History and Class Consciousness* refers is above all "To the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", *The Holy Family*, *The Poverty of Philosophy* ("his first, mature, complete and conclusive work"), *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Critique of Political Economy*, and the first and the third volume of *Capital*. The references to Hegel are comprehensive and general. The specific works of Hegel that Lukács uses most frequently are *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *The Science of Logic*, and *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. See also Rockmore, "Lukács on Modern Philosophy", p. 229.

³⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 83.

insidious form of reification be overcome. “‘The Realm of freedom’, the end of ‘pre-history of mankind’”, Lukács writes with a reference to Marx, “means precisely that the power of the objectified, reified relations between men begins to revert to *man*.”³⁵

Lukács developed his analysis of reification on the basis of the famous section in the first volume of *Capital* on the fetishism of commodities.³⁶ With the publication of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the economic analysis in Marx’s *opus magnum* was supplemented with a discussion on the alienation of the working class, that is, how the workers in the industrial labor process gradually are alienated not only from the goods they produce, but also from themselves, other people and ultimately from humanity as a species.³⁷ After their publication in 1932 the manuscripts came to play a key role in the further development of Hegelian Marxism.³⁸

Although the Manuscripts of 1844 seemed to support Lukács’ humanistic and Hegelian interpretation of Marx, he made no new attempt to defend *History and Class Consciousness*. In fact, he had by that time already accepted the official communist party line. During most of the 1930s Lukács lived and worked in Moscow. The Soviet Union’s totalitarian development under Stalin’s leadership made it increasingly difficult to openly discuss political issues, and Lukács chose to leave the theory and practice of politics in favor of the theory of literature and aesthetics, although continuing to work from a stringent Marxist perspective.

The primary goal for Lukács from now on was, as Georg Lichtheim has highlighted, to develop “a theory of aesthetics which would do for the world of East European socialism what German Idealism in general, and Hegel in particular, had done for the bourgeois world”.³⁹ Given these ambitions to

³⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 69.

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin in association with New Left Review, 1976), pp. 163-177.

³⁷ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Dirk J. Struik, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

³⁸ Lukács’ theory of reification, which demonstrates the connection between reification and the capitalist system, can be compared with Erich Fromm’s analysis of alienation. On the basis of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Fromm, who in the thirties belonged to the Frankfurt School, made a kind of anthropological and psychological interpretation of Marx without taking any account of the economic issues. That kind of interpretation is very far away from Lukács, who was always skeptical of psychological explanatory models. Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, with a translation from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* by T. B. Bottomore (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1963).

³⁹ Lichtheim, *George Lukács*, p. 105.

formulate an alternative socialistic and communistic aesthetics, the late Lukács' literary and cultural preferences are strikingly traditional. As he had done during his pre-Marxist period, he still praises Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann and other realistic authors, and the ideals of totality, universality and harmony that still guided his aesthetical analysis made it impossible for him to appreciate the most striking examples of modernist art and literature, including writers such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.⁴⁰

During his period in Moscow, Lukács also wrote a study on Hegel, entitled *The Young Hegel*, which was completed in 1938 but not published until after the Second World War. If Hegel had been overshadowed by Marx in *History and Class Consciousness*, he stands in the foreground in *The Young Hegel*, and if the reading of Marx in the book from 1923 had been Hegelian, Lukács now interprets the young Hegel's philosophy from a Marxist, historical materialist perspective. (Nevertheless, Lukács claims that *The Young Hegel* also sheds new light on Marx's thinking. In a later added preface he points out that the book tries to clarify how involved Marx is with "the progressive German tradition from Lessing to Heine, from Leibniz to Hegel and Feuerbach, and to prove how profoundly German his works are from the structure of their thought down to his very style.")⁴¹

The Young Hegel consists of four main parts. The first is about what Lukács calls Hegel's early republican phase, from 1793 to 1796, during which he lived in Bern and for which the French Revolution made an especially powerful impression on him. The second part deals with the years in Frankfurt, 1797–1800, during which time Hegel went through a kind of crisis in terms of his view of society. It was at precisely this time that he began to develop his dialectical method. The third part deals with Hegel's period in Jena, between 1801 and 1803, when he worked out his conception of objective idealism. The fourth and final part focuses on the years 1803 to 1807, when *Phenomenology of Spirit* was published and Hegel broke irrevocably with Schelling.

In comparison with *History and Class Consciousness* the study of the young Hegel is less essayistic and, from an academic point of view, we could say more "scholarly". On the whole, the work is solid, even if some of its

⁴⁰ See e.g. Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1982).

⁴¹ George Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), p. xiii.

theses certainly seem less convincing—not least the claim that the young Hegel’s theological period is only a reactionary myth.⁴² However, the main argument presented in *The Young Hegel* is forceful, namely that Hegel was alone among the German idealistic philosophers to take strong cognizance of the industrial revolution in England and the political revolution in France, and that his dialectical method was elaborated precisely as an attempt to understand and conceptualize this two-sided revolutionary development. Lukács shows how Hegel’s philosophy and especially his dialectics were evolved in relation to contemporary socio-economic conditions, including the emergence of modern political economy. Lukács’ approach to the book is decisively historical materialist and could, according to the author himself, be regarded as an illustration and application of “the brilliant insight” that Marx formulated in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* (...) is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, (...) that he grasps the essence of *labor* and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man’s *own labor*.⁴³

According to Lukács, *Phenomenology of Spirit* signified a kind of reconciliation with reality (*Versöhnung mit der Wirklichkeit*) after Hegel’s rebellious juvenile period. Michael Löwy has drawn certain similarities between Hegel’s position in 1807 and Lukács’ own situation in the Soviet Union when he wrote *The Young Hegel*: by this time, he too had abandoned his former revolutionary ideals and had become reconciled with the reality of the contemporary political situation.⁴⁴

⁴² See “Hegel’s ‘Theological’ Period: A Reactionary Legend”, in Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, pp. 3-17. While Lichtheim, *Georg Lukács*, p. 115, is skeptical about the academic value of *The Young Hegel*, Ojzerman really esteems it in “Lukács’ Hegel Interpretation”, pp. 197-220. See also Marek J. Siemek, “Das Hegel-Bild als Problem des philosophischen Selbstverständnisses des Marxismus: Am Rande des ‘Jungen Hegel’ von Georg Lukács”, *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 37(3), 1983, pp. 425-441.

⁴³ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ By the way, the parallel between Lukács and Hegel was highlighted by Theodor W. Adorno already in 1958, in “Erpresste Versöhnung: Zu Georg Lukács’ Wider den missverstandenen Realismus”, in *Noten zur Litteratur 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962). It could be added, however, that toward the end of his life, after the totalitarian era of Stalin, Lukács himself explicitly claimed that he never had accepted Hegel’s reconciliation with reality. Georg Lukács, “Forord”, in Lukács, *Kunst og kapitalisme*, ed. Bente Hansen (Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1971), p. 7.

The question of Lukács' Stalinism cannot be investigated here, but it is clear he never raised public objections against Stalin during the latter's lifetime. After Stalin's death in 1953, Lukács could indeed express certain criticisms, but even these were in accordance with his constant attempts (from the late twenties) to ingratiate himself with the official Soviet line. During Nikita Khrushchev's famous speech at the twentieth party Congress in 1956, the new Soviet leader denounced the Stalinist terror and Stalin's cult of personality. Lukács did not risk anything when he, for example, in a late interview dismissed Stalin as not any real Marxist and that the large bureaucratic apparatus, which emerged in the Soviet Union under his leadership, was deplorable, or even when he took the opportunity to criticize the cartoon-like depiction of Hegel that circulated during the era of Stalin.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Lukács remained convinced that even the worst form of socialism and communism are preferable to the best kind of capitalism.⁴⁶ Seen from that perspective, it is unsurprising he did not object more strongly to Stalin and the other subsequent Soviet leaders.

To read Hegel for one's own purposes

In both *The Young Hegel* and the later, highly polemical *The Destruction of Reason*, published in 1954, Lukács argues that Hegel was essentially a rationalistic and radical philosopher who turned against the emotional irrationalism of Romanticism.⁴⁷ In this way Lukács challenged the image of the young Hegel as a conservative thinker, which had become well established in German-speaking philosophy by the early twentieth century. This alleged "reactionary" interpretation of Hegel was advanced by, among others, Wilhelm Dilthey in his study *Die Jugendgeschichte Hegels* and Franz Rosenzweig in his *Hegel und der Staat*. In these, and other similar studies, Hegel was presented, Lukács says, "as a forefather of the contemporary reactionary bourgeoisie, as a predecessor and accomplice to Bismarck", and

⁴⁵ John T. Sanders & Katie Terezakis, "Preface", in Lukács, *Soul and Form*, p. ix. Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. Halbband 1*, ed. Frank Benseler (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1984), p. 516.

⁴⁶ Harry Redner, *Malign Masters: Gentile, Heidegger, Lukács, Wittgenstein. Philosophy and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (London: Merlin, 1980). Lukács points out the close relationship between *The Young Hegel* and *The Destruction of Reason* in the preface of a later edition (from 1954) of the book on Hegel. Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, p. vi.

Hegelian philosophy—cleansed from all dialectics—became a philosophy of preservation for different reactionary tendencies.⁴⁸

In *The Destruction of Reason* Hegel is positioned as an alternative to a broad range of irrational thinkers—from Schelling, via Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, to Nietzsche and the *Lebensphilosophen* of the early twentieth century—all of whom, according to Lukács, paved the way for fascism. This means that in the 1930s, when he wrote *The Young Hegel*, as well as during the Cold War when *The Destruction of Reason* was published, Lukács used Hegel as a brother-in-arms in the communist struggle against the irrationalism that had received its clearest expression in Italian fascism and German Nazism, but which also was characteristic of contemporary capitalism. More than any other thinker or scholar, it was Lukács who constructed this strongly politicized image of Hegel as an opponent not only to irrationalism but by extension also to modern fascism and capitalism.⁴⁹ Although Lukács consistently uses Hegel for his own communist purposes, he objects to the reactionary form of Hegelianism as an example of mis-readings and abuse of Hegelian philosophy.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, even Lukács had to admit that Hegel's philosophy is extremely complex and can be interpreted in a variety of different ways.

Moreover, as Lukács was well aware, Hegel's thinking changed over time. The philosopher who wrote *Phenomenology of Spirit* differs both from the younger and the older Hegel. While the young Hegel was a radical thinker, toward the end of his life, he became arguably more conservative, with indeed his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* constituting something of a philosophical condensation of his regression into conservatism. It is hardly a coincidence that the latter book is one of the works of Hegel that Lukács uses and writes about the least, even though this particular philosophical work of Hegel's is commonly treated in various synoptic histories of political ideas. In his extensive *oeuvre*—from the early study of the theory of the novel to the late works of the destruction of reason and the ontology of social being—Lukács returned constantly to both *Phenomenology of Spirit*

⁴⁸ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, p. 565.

⁴⁹ See Jozsef Lukács, "Die Probleme von Religion und Irrationalität im Schaffen von Georg Lukács", in Manfred Buhr & Jozsef Lukács (eds.), *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität, Beiträge zum Werk und Wirken von Georg Lukács* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1987), p. 34.

⁵⁰ Lukács treats the Nazi's interpretation of Hegel in "Der deutsche Faschismus und Hegel", in Lukács, *Schicksalswende: Beiträge zu einer neuen deutschen Ideologie* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1948), pp. 37-67.

and the *Logic*.⁵¹ It was mainly based on these two books that he worked out his specific form of Hegelian Marxism.

To summarize, in Lukács' writings from the late 1910s onwards, Hegel and Marx were his main references. He interpreted Marx through Hegel (primarily in *History and Class Consciousness*) and Hegel through the perspectives of Marx and historical materialism (especially in *The Young Hegel*). Although Hegelianism, even more than Marxism, was a kind of "cultural dominant" for his thought, it was through synthesizing these two currents of ideas in *History and Class Consciousness* that Lukács made his most significant contribution to the modern history of political ideas.⁵²

In addition, it deserves to be noted that throughout his work Lukács continued to defend not only Hegel's philosophy but also many other concepts and values that he associated with German idealism and the classical humanistic culture—favoring authors such as Lessing, Schiller, Goethe and Thomas Mann. In his later career Lukács defended as well as attempted to bring these constructive elements of the older humanistic culture into the orbit of a modern Marxist worldview. Thus both before and after he had become a communist, Lukács was first and foremost a humanistic scholar with a strong sense for the harmonious and a firm belief in the whole of humanity and humankind.

After the publication of his controversial book in 1923 Lukács' thinking lost much of its complexity as he adapted himself to the quiet simplistic form of Marxism-Leninism that was mandated in Stalinist USSR. At the same time, he continued to emphasize the general importance of Hegelian philosophy and in particular the significance of the dialectical method, not only as a starting point for Marx but also as a tool in the current struggle against the capitalist system, which according to Lukács was a curse for humanity. It was, indeed, to critically challenge capitalism, to re-vitalize Marxism and ultimately to emancipate human beings that Lukács argued it is necessary to go back to Hegel.

⁵¹ Hegel's *Logic* also takes a prominent place in Lukács' last comprehensive treatment of Hegel, which was never completed and published first after his death, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Sein*. Although the sections on Hegel here focus on ontological questions, Lukács also deals with Hegel's dialectics, since this has an obvious ontological side; according to Hegel, the dialectic movements reflect the dynamics of external reality. Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. Halbband 1*, ed. Frank Benseler (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1984).

⁵² The concept of cultural dominant is borrowed from Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 4 et passim.