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DIALECTICS OF REIFICATION: THE ORIGIN AND THE MEANING OF LUKÁCS'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction: Lukács Redivivus? The Current State of Lukács Scholarship

Recently, the thought of Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács (1885–1971) and his concept of reification have acquired new relevance in philosophical discussion. The last decade has seen a proliferation of publications on the topic of reification in excess of anything since the first rediscovery of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács’s early Marxist work, within the student and New Left movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹ In that context, Lukács’s book offered a critical perspective on the “reified” and “reifying” patterns of authoritarian social orders and inspired hope for the constitution of a new conscious, active subjectivity that could bring about change. Then, after more than 30 years of relative uninterest in the problematic of reification,² Axel Honneth (2008) made a significant attempt to reactualize the concept from the standpoint of recognition theory.³ At the same time, though, Honneth’s relative distance from the original terrain of socio-economic analysis, present both in Lukács and first-generation Critical Theory, has attracted criticism.⁴

In this work, I will look at the reasons behind revived interest in reification in today’s philosophical milieu. As part of this, I will argue it is largely motivated by the need to

¹ This rediscovery also attracted more general interest in the early Marxism of Lukács. The result was a decade fruitful with publications on Lukács; see Perlini 1968; Cerutti, Claussen, Krahl, Negt, Schmidt 1971; Goldmann 1973; Dutschke 1974; Kammler 1974; Grunenberg 1976; Löwy 1976; Boella 1977; Arato and Breines 1979; Cerutti 1980; Feenberg 1981.

² Notable exceptions to this tendency are found in Jay 1984; Dannemann 1987; Rockmore 1992; Bewes 2002.

³ It is worth noting that Adorno and Habermas had already attempted to reformulate Lukács’s notion of reification within their respective theories of immanent critique and communicative action, although without dedicating separate works to the topic, as was the case with Honneth. For more on this topic, see Wolf 2012.

⁴ See, for example, Butler 2008; Geuss 2008; Jay 2008; Lear 2008; Chari 2010, 2015; Jütten 2010; Stahl 2011; Henning 2012; Wolf 2012; Lotz 2013; Dannemann 2017; Kavoulakos 2017.

provide a novel account of subjectivity and objectivity in the contemporary world. Critical Theory has not renounced attempts to critique new objective transformations brought to light by late capitalism or redefine the status of subjectivity in this context, nor has it given up on the emancipatory potential of critique. However, it has become common to consider abandonment of the foundational ideas of the tradition as a precondition for renewing critical discourse. And the undeniable antiquatedness of hope in a vanguard party-led social revolution with the proletariat as its genuine subject has led to neglect of Lukács's theoretical legacy, while his allegedly naïve understanding of praxis and idealistic conception of totality may seem to render his theory impracticable in today's context.

Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with such a unilateral verdict on Lukács's philosophy, which tends to oversimplify both the most far-reaching and controversial aspects of his theories, as well as the inability of later Critical Theory to provide an adequate response to actual social crises, has motivated a return to Lukács's early Marxist oeuvre. The character of this second wave of interest in Lukács, however, differs significantly from the first rediscovery of the book in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as its key emphasis is on the philosophical background of the formation of Lukács's early-Marxist masterpiece.⁵ Thus, instead of merely offering a model of subversive social subjectivity that could offer a political response to generalized social stagnation and, in this sense, representing a subjectivist alternative to more scientific and deterministic currents of Marxism, *History and Class Consciousness* is finally being seen for what it is: a complex philosophical project combining different and even seemingly heterogeneous philosophical influences. A careful look at Lukács's text shows us that we cannot fully comprehend the formation of his Marxism without seeing it, at least in part, as a theoretical and practical response to his prior

⁵ See Feenberg 2014; Kavoulakos 2018; Westerman 2019; Lopez 2020.

philosophical background. And beyond some known influences on Lukács intellectual maturation, such as Simmel and Weber, scholars now recognize the crucial importance of Neo-Kantianism and the Hegel renaissance,⁶ which were flourishing in Heidelberg during Lukács's stay in the renowned university town of the Republic of Baden from 1911 to 1918. As a result, new ground has been laid for systematic research on Lukács's theory of reification.

For now, it is worth leaving aside the traditional interpretations that consider Lukács exclusively as a follower of Marx and thus take a comprehensive analysis of Marx's thought as a departure point for evaluating whether Lukács was an "orthodox" or "non-orthodox" Marxist. And this leaves us with two main approaches in recent studies of Lukács's Marxism.

The first approach is directed against unilateral historiographical simplifications of Lukács's thought as purely Marxist. These interpretations claim that Lukács should be analyzed in light of either his formative philosophical interest in Neo-Kantianism (Feenberg 2014; Kavoulakos 2018) or his work on formalist art history and phenomenology (Westerman 2019). According to proponents of this view, such readings enable a more accurate revival of his core notions in today's philosophical context, countering outdated "over-ideologized" or completely decontextualized readings. Of course, even these interpretations do not overlook Lukács's overt Hegelianism and Marxism. But they also (correctly) maintain that Lukács's discovery of Hegel and Marx merely allowed him to

⁶ For Lukács's reception of the revived debate around Hegelian philosophy in Heidelberg's philosophical scene, see Weisser 1989, while a concise historical-sociological overview of the Hegel renaissance in Heidelberg is available in Honigsheim 1963. For an evaluation of German Hegel renaissance in light of the Neo-Kantian philosophical debate, see Levy 1927; Glockner 1931. For some of the most important manifestos of the New-Hegelian movement, see Windelband 1910; Lasson 1916; Marck 1917.

further explore and address problems that he had already formulated during his philosophical apprenticeship.

An example of this is the well-known dichotomy of form and content, which pervades the Kantian tradition in philosophy, from Kant himself to the Neo-Kantianism of Rickert and Lask. Lukács had already dealt with this difficulty in his pre-Marxist aesthetic writings, composed under the direct influence of the latter thinkers. In his early *Heidelberg Aesthetics* (1916–1918), for instance, Lukács argued that the aesthetic object in its concrete being embodies the unity of contemplation and activity, form and content, and being and value, thus offering a way beyond the dead-end alternative of either believing there is an abyss between the content of intuition and formal categories of understanding or deducing (or producing) content from within such categories, as is the case in what Lask, referring to Hegel, defined as emanative logic. With his philosophy of the work of art, Lukács also tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice by escaping the shortcuts Rickert took in his subjectivist solution to this dichotomy within the theory of judgment, a solution that Lask had already rejected before Lukács. However, despite agreeing with his criticism of Rickert, Lukács remained unsatisfied with the outcomes of Lask's ontological turn in the neo-Kantian theory of value. Lukács's discovery of a "practical harmonization of form and content," moreover, stems directly from the dead-end "chiliasm in the logical field" that he identified in Lask's philosophy (Kavoulakos 2018: 44).

In line with the neo-Kantian flavor of his early Marxism, Lukács also interprets Marx's panoramic view of modern capitalism and his analysis of its structuring principle, the commodity-form, as a possible answer to the problem of the rationalization of parts and the irrationality of the whole, which Lukács had already faced at an epistemological level during his neo-Kantian phase. The social-natural thing, invested with a reified form of objectuality, thus appears to be rationally and irrationally structured at the same time and, instead of

representing a logical dichotomy, embodies a historical contradiction inherent to capitalist modernity.

The second approach to reification is best exemplified by Axel Honneth's (2008: 52) attempt to reactualize the concept in terms of "forgetfulness of recognition." Honneth relates the genesis of the concept to cultural sentiment in the Weimar Republic:

In the German-speaking world of the 1920s and 1930s, the concept of reification constituted a leitmotiv of social and cultural critique. As if refracted through a concave mirror, the historical experiences of rising unemployment and economic crises that gave the Weimar Republic its distinctive character seemed to find concentrated expression in this concept and its related notions. Social relationships increasingly reflected a climate of cold, calculating purposefulness; artisans' loving care for their creations appeared to have given way to an attitude of mere instrumental command; and even the subject's innermost experiences seemed to be infused with the icy breath of calculating compliance. An intellectually committed philosopher's presence of mind was needed, however, before such diffuse moods could be distilled into the concept of reification. (Honneth 2008: 17)

Moreover, Honneth (2008: 21) claims that "Lukács' analysis can be said to deliver a social-ontological explanation of a certain pathology found in our life practices." From this perspective, we can see how Honneth aims to insert Lukács's theory of reification into his theory of lack of recognition as a social pathology. Significantly, though, this Honnethian reformulation results in a crucial historical decontextualization of Lukács's theory of reification.

The overarching hypothesis of my work is that, when considering both approaches, one has to keep the plurality of layers of reification in mind. One of these layers is undoubtedly economic, if by economic we understand, along with Marx, material determinations of human existence (*materielle Daseinsbestimmungen*). Honneth seems to claim that this aspect of reification belongs to the past. However, Honneth is wrong at least in three senses: he provides only a partial analysis of the origin of the concept of reification

in Lukács by simply deriving it from the cultural climate of the Weimar Republic, thus depriving Lukács's theoretical accomplishment of any systematic validity; he ignores that subjective and intersubjective forgetfulness of recognition represent only single levels of the complex phenomenon of reification; and, finally, Honneth seems to claim that our time has little or nothing in common with the time of the Weimar Republic, and he thus believes that the concept of reification must be completely reformulated in order to be applicable.

All these points are (more or less) taken into consideration by exponents of the first approach to reification described above and used against Honneth's reading. Yet despite my agreement with these critiques, I consider the Honneth's attempt to reformulate reification an important step in revitalizing Lukács's critical concept. It sheds light on an essential point: Lukács's did not provide a satisfactory account of subjectivity. Lukács's account of consciousness is also scattered through his work and defining it exhaustively was beyond the scope of his project.

A noteworthy precedent for examining the "pathological" structure of reification is Joseph Gabel, a student of psychopathologist Eugène Minkowski. In his book *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification* (1962) and some earlier articles going back to the early 1950s, Gabel tried to reinterpret the structure of reified social forms through the lens of the reified patterns he encountered in his analyses of schizophrenia. Gabel maintained that a schizophrenic patient is a subject "dominated by spatiality," lacking any real grasp of time and history; the individual loses the ability to distinguish between subject and object; he feels crushed by the world, as if he had become a passive object (Swingewood 1977: 224). This experience of dispossession of the world is also present in some recent Francophone interpretations of reification (Haber 2009; Fischbach 2012). Throughout my thesis, I consider both approaches to Lukács's understanding of reification, arguing that both add important elements to our overall comprehension of his early Marxism.

To this end, in the first part, I analyze Lukács's critical approach to the modern phenomenon of reification. First, I define the lines along which Lukács, drawing on but going beyond both Hegel and Marx, conceptualizes his dialectical method, which I refer to as dialectical epistemology of the totality, and which is crucial for understanding his critique of reification put into practice. Next, I consider the key philosophical sources that allowed Lukács to first identify the content of his critique. Following Andrew Feenberg's (2014: 229) definition of Lukács's overall theoretical project as a "practical metacritique" of reified forms of thought, I see the *pars construens* of Lukács's argument as being in a co-constitutive relationship with its *pars destruens*. In other words, we cannot understand Lukács's critique of reification without asking what comprises reified thought. In claiming this, I discuss Lukács's take on several key conceptual constellations in modern philosophy, including the fundamental role of necessity and immutability in laws of nature for the constitution of a modern scientific and philosophical worldview. This reconstructive operation is necessary because Lukács takes the notion of natural law for granted in construing his critique of modern reification, never fully explicating the meaning of "laws of nature" for modern thought as such.

I also defend Lukács's rejection of employing the immutable and necessary structure of laws of nature in building a theory of a transformative activity (what Lukács's calls *praxis*). Beyond any accusations of abstract-idealist historicism from his critics, this aspect of Lukács's thought does not indicate a denial of laws of nature, but rather a recognition of the immanent contradictoriness of theories of emancipation that take laws of nature as a model for conceptualizing "social laws." As I will show, Lukács's idea retains its relevance in contemporary debates around the nature of social causation, particularly in relation to theories that question the existence of "laws" in social sciences and rather talk about "rules"

and “regularities” that cannot be legitimately called “necessary” or “immutable” in the same manner as the laws of the natural sciences.

In the second part of this thesis, I examine Lukács’s vision of non-reified theory and praxis, which I refer to as a dialectical prefiguration of an emancipated society. By choosing these terms, I only do partial justice to *History and Class Consciousness*, as my key interest lies in illustrating the philosophical meaning of Lukács’s use of concepts that are not always derived from the history of philosophy conventionally understood. And as Lukács’s early Marxism draws from his various pre-Marxist philosophical influences, I discuss the role of thinkers such as Meister Eckhart, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky in the formation of his theory of reification. Contextualizing Lukács’s early thought in this way prepares the ground for better understanding his later Marxism, as I show in my discussion of Lukács’s interpretation of Marx and Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism.

As well as the impact of these pre-Marxist influences and Marx himself on Lukács, I argue that Lukács’s concept of reification reflects the culturalist vision of capitalist modernity that he discovered in the works of Max Weber and Georg Simmel. I claim that, for Lukács, the overall phenomenon of capitalism remains unintelligible without considering the accompanying culture, which Lukács invests with a mediating function, allowing us to understand the process by which theoretical and practical phenomena reveal their interwovenness and the way they structure our social lives in as a totality. In addition, I show that the approach to reification adopted by Axel Honneth, the author of one of the most renowned recent reinterpretations of Lukács’s theory in sheer normative, socio-pathological, and recognitional terms, is only partially compatible with Lukács’s own view. To demonstrate this, I use Lukács’s pre-Marxist and early Marxist writings, which reveal that the normative dimension constitutes only one layer of his complex theory of reification.

In part three, I look at Lukács's idea of the unity of theory and praxis, which is central to his social and political philosophy. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I have had to set apart aspects of Lukács's political philosophy related to the social and political constellation of the immediate aftermath of revolutionary events in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, including his belief in the "actuality" of the revolutionary situation, which informed much of his political thought in the period. Similarly, I have had to overlook the traditional understanding of Lukács placing a "Leninist emphasis" on proletarian revolution, as well as his understanding of the proletariat as the privileged agent of social change. And I have had to distance myself from Lukács's convictions regarding the privileged role of the political party in shaping practices directed toward social change.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that I regard Lukács's reflections on revolutionary action and collective social agency as impracticable in their entirety. In fact, I stress the persistent relevance of Lukács's search for an adequate form of mediation between the social and political spheres by giving political weight to transformative social practices. I also offer an overview of Lukács's reflections on the dialectical method and its practical manifestations in several essays in *History and Class Consciousness*, which coincide almost entirely with "historical materialism."

I also argue, however, that Lukács articulates his understanding of historical materialism in non-dogmatic terms, as a contradictory unity of theoretical and practical conceptual systems. In addition, I show that Lukács's preoccupation with the intersubjective constitution of collective forms of consciousness, which lies at the center of his theory of class consciousness, remains relevant in today's philosophical context. Finally, I will offer a brief overview of various evaluations of Lukács's legacy for both Western Marxism and Soviet and post-Soviet Russian Marxism. By doing so, I argue that beyond the well-known impact that *History and Class Consciousness* had on the development of Marxism on the

west side of the Iron Curtain, his legacy, contrary to standard histories of Marxism, has inspired many philosophers in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

Parts of this work have already appeared in the following places: “From Imputation to Action: Lukács’s Normative and Dialectical Subject of Praxis,” Lukács 2017/2018: *Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft*, 17/18. Jg. (2018): 133–49; “How Can a Subject Be Reified? The Role of ‘Thinglikeness’ in Georg Lukács’s Account of Subjectivity in Capitalism,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 23:1 (2019): 5–30; and Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács’s Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism*, Bloomsbury 2018 (Review). In: *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy, Book reviews* (2019).

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**PART I.
REIFICATION:
THE CULTURAL CONDITION OF MODERNITY**

1. Reification and the Dialectical Method in History and Class Consciousness

In the historiographies of Western Marxism and Critical Theory, it has become common to identify Lukács's overall philosophical output with just his theory of reification, first formulated in his early-Marxist essay collection *History and Class Consciousness*, and particularly in the essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." At the same time, this notion has often been uncritically assumed to be an idealistic substitute for a "truly Marxist," or materialistic, critique of capitalist alienation and commodity fetishism.

According to this line of thought, Lukács is guilty of not paying enough attention to the specificity of the capitalist mode of production. In addition, his critics believe Lukács's critique of reification fails to distinguish the development of productive powers, which determine social progress as such, and the specific form that this development assumes under capitalism (Autorenkollektiv 1975: 106). They also criticize the methodological priority Lukács assigns to the commodity, understood as a "prototype (*Urbild*)" form that shapes all other forms of social life under capitalism (Lukács 1971: 83),⁷ which prevents him from correctly grasping the constitutive role of the capitalist process of production – with the antagonistic relation of wage-labor to capital at its basis – in determining all further social

⁷ For Georg Bollenbeck (2007: 261), the deduction of multiple determinants of social life from one structural category betrays the cultural-critical (*kulturkritisch*) core of Lukács's Marxism, leading to "a textually-philologically unprecise, albeit productive reading of 'the critique of political economy' [*eine textphilologisch ungenaue, aber produktive Lesart der 'Kritik der politischen Ökonomie'*]." In this sense, Bollenbeck goes as far as claiming that, with *History and Class Consciousness*, "the New Marxism originates from the spirit of cultural criticism [*So entsteht...der Neomarxismus aus dem Geist der Kulturkritik*]." For further arguments in favor of the cultural-critical derivation of Lukács's early Marxism, see Gangl 2005: 140ff. As I will argue, although culture certainly offers a privileged standpoint for Lukács's analysis of capitalism, his Marxism is also immune to the neo-organicist longing for a lost pre-modern cultural totality that characterizes much of German *Kulturkritik*.

forms of existence. In other words, Lukács's privileging of the sphere of circulation of commodities in his philosophical interpretation of society as a whole is taken to clash with Marx's fundamental discovery that "the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society" is not the commodity-form but capital, which "must form the starting-point as well as the finishing point" of social analysis (Marx 1993c: 107; see Autorenkollektiv 1975: 93). From this perspective, Lukács appears to be a rather unorthodox Marxist, uninterested in some of the key accomplishments of the critique of the political economy.

But how does this conclusion cohere with Lukács's endorsement of Marxist orthodoxy in the opening essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" In the essay, Lukács offers a solution to this apparent riddle and, indeed, defines himself as an orthodox Marxist. But his definition of orthodoxy seems to clash with conventional understandings of the term. In other words, Lukács defines himself a *methodologically* orthodox Marxist, implying that instead of uncritically accepting "this or that thesis" – as Marx's work would require "the exegesis of a 'sacred' book" – he strictly follows Marx's appeal to think about reality dialectically (Lukács 1971: 1). In Lukács's view, the dialectical method properly understood is not the same as pure theory, but it is a reflection that helps us to understand the relationship between theory and practice. As Lukács has it, "[w]e must extract the practical essence of the theory from the method and its relation to its object" (Lukács 1971: 2). In this sense, dialectics is a practically motivated theory of theory, or a metacritique of theory from a practical standpoint. Far from reducing theory to practice, in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács seeks to investigate the practical conditions of possibility of taking a theoretical attitude towards reality.⁸

⁸ A similar critique of scientific-theoretical objectivity can be found in Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936), published more than a decade after Lukács's early Marxist work. Just like Lukács, Husserl does not undermine the legitimacy of

Given the diffusion of misleading readings in the receptive history of Lukács's book, this aspect of his thought cannot be overstressed. Lukács does not offer his reader a manual for revolutionary action. Interpreted this way, the book loses its philosophical intelligibility as such, whether read today or one hundred years ago. Certainly, by stressing the revolutionary character of the dialectical method throughout the book, Lukács unintentionally confused many of his readers, both critical and appreciative. The significance of Hegel and Marx for Lukács lies precisely in the foundation of the dialectical method, through which they offered a novel way of approaching reality theoretically. Lukács perceived dialectics as a "metacritical revision" or a "practical metacritique" (Feenberg 2014: 229) of the philosophical project of modernity, which took the methodological foundations of the natural sciences as the point of departure for interpreting humanity's relation to the world. Meanwhile, the revolutionary character of dialectics lies in its ability to offer a philosophical alternative to the type of thought that, even in defining the social sphere, operates within the conceptual horizon of an object of analysis being governed by necessary and immutable laws. The true object of Lukácsian version of dialectics is the relationship between subject and object (society, the natural world, and other subjects) in history, as well as the structure of social change. And Lukács found the model of natural lawfulness insufficient for shaping the methodological premises of his dialectics.

Returning to the apparent problem of "orthodoxy," Lukács ventures an oxymoron in identifying his approach to orthodoxy as being a creative and flexible treatment of the results

theoretical science but critiques its claim of objective validity by exposing objectivity as only possible within a sphere of intentional intersubjective attitudes that Husserl calls a lifeworld. In *History and Class Consciousness*, the equivalent to the Husserlian "lifeworld" is the dialectical notion of "totality." For a detailed discussion of these similarities, as well as differences between the two philosophers, see Vajda 1978.

of Marx's thought, but one that does not idolize them. For Lukács, a genuine Marxist – and he considered himself one – is someone who employs the critical potential of Marx's dialectical method to make sense of our actual historical situation. In other words, it is not a critique of Hegel or classical political economy that constitutes genuine Marxism. Instead, it is the ability to identify intellectual tendencies that are intrinsically contradictory and whose contradictoriness has to be brought to the surface in order to unleash their critical potential. Lukács suggests such explication can overturn the way we see the world and offer a new horizon for thinking our way out of the cultural, social, and political crises brought about by capitalist modernity. I will argue that instead of trying to offer his own version of the critique of political economy, Lukács selectively uses its results to reflect upon cultural categories that shape our social lives. As I will suggest, culture represents a “historical *a priori*,” a category mediating between diverse layers of reality (individual, social, natural). I will counter readings of Lukács that see confirmation of his alleged abstract idealism and distance from the economic determinations of society and nature in his cultural take on dialectics. Beyond the false opposition between the material constitution of economic categories (base) and allegedly abstract and dematerialized cultural categories (superstructure), Lukács sees the cultural and economic domains as co-constitutive. In line with Marx, he understands the economic sphere to be material determinations of human existence (*materielle Daseinsbestimmungen*), so culture is the concrete form in which economic determinations are first intelligible as categories: the two are inseparable. If Marx dedicated more attention to analyzing the economic side of the inseparable cultural-material whole, Lukács' approach is one that illuminates the cultural side of the same whole.

After Marx's death, Marxists concentrated most of their attention on the economic aspects of his thought, obscuring the philosophical and cultural reflections present in Marx's multilateral textual legacy. This led to treating Marx as an economic determinist with scarce

interest in the philosophical and cultural condition of capitalist modernity. Such interpretations of Marx were characteristic of the Second International Marxists Bernstein and Kautsky. Next to Engels, Bernstein and Kautsky are the most heavily criticized Marxist authors in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács strategy was to counter the reduction of Marxism, and especially the dialectical method, to a crude economicism, where the economy, in a sort of bottom-up explanation, can be unproblematically analyzed to illuminate all social phenomena in their superstructural being. For Lukács, on the contrary, culture is a mediating social category that constitutes the form of intelligibility for *all* other social phenomena, the economy included. Lukács clearly states that obscuring culture's role as an immanent structuring principle of the socio-historical totality was a fallacy of economic determinism.

This clarifies why Lukács was unwilling to reduce the scope of his book to economic analyses of the discoveries made by Marx or other Marxists. And even a superficial look at the preface to *History and Class Consciousness* is enough to clarify Lukács's overall theoretical commitment. Commenting on his interpretation of Rosa Luxemburg, Lukács informs his reader that instead of assessing "the economic content" of her or Marx's teachings, he will confine himself "to their methodological premises and implications" (Lukács 1971: xlii). In the following, I will therefore argue that methodological controversy is the overarching theme of Lukács's early Marxist work. It is a controversy because *History and Class Consciousness* is articulated around two conflicting accounts of a philosophical method. Some of the key notions of the book, such as the "reified structure of consciousness" and "reified categories," do not offer solutions to the problems that modern philosophers face because of their defective methodological presuppositions. Identifying the contradictions underlying modern epistemology represents the *pars destruens* of Lukács's philosophical accomplishment. But Lukács is not a philosopher of disenchantment like his

academic mentors Georg Simmel and Max Weber, who, in Lukács's view, capitulated in face of modernity's contradictions.

Lukács philosophical critique of capitalist modernity has an express *pars construens* as well. First, the overarching conviction of *History and Class Consciousness* – which has offered numerous occasions for Lukács's critics to accuse him of “idealism” – is that a dialectical critique of reified forms of thought entails an effective transformation of our attitude towards reality that, in turn, motivates us to change it.⁹ Second, Lukács argues that modern philosophy, or at least classical German philosophy from Kant to Hegel, pinpoints real problems but fails to provide satisfactory solutions (Rockmore 1992: 89). The reason for this, as we will see, lies in its inability to grasp the principle of connecting theory and praxis within a historical totality.

Although *History and Class Consciousness* reflects on method philosophically, the book does not offer any methodological doctrine in a Kantian transcendental sense. The second part of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* bears the title “Transcendental Doctrine of Method.” In general terms, the task of this “Doctrine of Method” lies in “the determination of the formal conditions of a complete system of pure reason” (Kant 1998: 627). According to Otfried Höffe (2010: 335), by placing his methodological reflection at the end of the *Critique*, “Kant acknowledges the Aristotelian principle that genuine method must do justice to the object...: our provisional determination of the object only permits provisional

⁹ As I will argue in the second part of my thesis, there is another aspect of Lukács's explanation of the unity of theory and praxis: namely, that certain attitudes towards reality, such as a subject's practical directedness toward the surrounding world, constitute a standpoint from which the theoretical critique of reification becomes possible. Although Lukács is firmly convinced that the shift between theoretical and practical perspectives constitutes an indivisible theoretical-practical totality, I will analyze the different layers of this unity separately, as if they belonged to autonomous spheres of meaning.

reflections on method, for the latter in turn can only thoroughly be undertaken after an equally thorough determination of the object itself.” In other words, Kant reverses the Cartesian order of organizing philosophical research. While Descartes sought to define a method first in order to approach the object of his investigation with absolute certainty, Kant places the transcendental-methodological part of the first *Critique* at the end of the book and defines the object in the first, placing the principles of reason beyond any methodological reflection. Lukács opposes both Descartes’s and Kant’s understandings of method throughout *History and Class Consciousness*. In fact, the shared assumptions of these thinkers will become a paradigm for “the reified structure of consciousness” (Lukács 1971: 99; 110–111) that isolates method from its object. Meanwhile, to define his own dialectical method, Lukács borrows Hegel’s definition of “the thing itself (*die Sache selbst*)” as the mediating thread of both object and consciousness.¹⁰

¹⁰ In this regard, Lukács’s, idea of method is closer to the “classical” understanding of *methodos* as a “going along with (*Mitgehen*)” (Gadamer 2000: 30) the thing of knowledge than the Cartesian restriction of the method to “general rules,” “repetition [of] techniques,” and “recurrent processes” that a subject “must be able to apply” and, “in a given situation and following certain protocols,” repeat (Derrida 1983: 37). As Gadamer observes, the *methodos*, “in the ancient sense,...is not a tool for objectivating and dominating something; rather, it is a matter of our participating in an association with the things with which we are dealing” and with respect to which we “can occupy no neutral standpoint” (Gadamer 2000: 30). At the same time, the methodological centrality of the “thing” in Gadamer has a direct antecedent in Hegel’s notion of *die Sache*. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “the doing of the thing itself” is conceived by Hegel as the only genuine “method,” since it reveals “the dialectical movement of consciousness” (Bernstein: 1983: 154). It is by following the Hegelian philosophical orientation that Lukács formulates the holistic method that he calls dialectics. Alien to the “hyperbolic Robinsonade” of *cogito ergo sum* (Derrida 2011: 33), the “epistemological” subject presupposed by Lukács always finds herself within an open system of historical categories and situated in active relation with the surrounding socio-natural world. The truth-value of this method so construed depends neither on its infallible character nor on its potential for being repeated. On the contrary, the structural intertwinedness of epistemological categories and

It is worth noting that my aim here is limited to reconstructing Lukács's view of modern philosophy. This means that although I will mention some shortcomings of Lukács's interpretation, I will not do justice to the philosophies he criticizes as a whole. This is because I take his reading of certain tendencies within modern philosophy as indicating his holistic critique of the phenomenon of reification. Lukács understands forms of philosophical consciousness as expressions of a deeper structure of reality, which he calls concrete totality. As I will argue, philosophical categories for Lukács are structurally mediated by historical forms of theory and practice that make them concretely intelligible. In turn, philosophy contributes to shaping culture and history, as well as how historical subjects interpret themselves and their world. In this sense, Lukács's philosophy is a historical epistemology of totality, understood as a dialectical theory of the unity of theory and praxis.¹¹

Lukács's philosophical method is, therefore, holistic, whereby seemingly pure categories of understanding are always already mediated by a deeper structure of reality, which Lukács calls a "concrete totality." Within this methodological framework, society is understood as a social whole emerging from the interrelation of institutions, intersubjective

concrete historical experience leaves space for the positive effect that errors, shortcomings, and contradictions exercise on the development of the dialectical method.

¹¹ In defining Lukács's project as "epistemology of the totality" I am following Marek J. Siemek who offers a valuable distinction between the "epistemic," understood as "overall structure of intellectual space (*ganzheitliche Struktur des intellektuellen Raumes*)" and the "epistemological" that, following Siemek, would define Lukács's own philosophical method. Siemek contends that while the "epistemic" is another term for the sphere of validity of reified consciousness, the "epistemological" problematizes the self-evidence and self-transparency of the theory by relating the theory to its genetic *locus* within the historical totality of theory and praxis. In this sense, *History and Class Consciousness*, understood as an "epistemology of the totality" (Siemek 2002: 49), has for its object the "theory of theory" or "consciousness of consciousness" (Siemek 2002: 34).

practices, cultural systems, and historically established forms of metabolism with non-human nature. By considering himself a methodological Marxist, Lukács is able to creatively assimilate those aspects of Marx's theory that allow him to better understand the cultural dimension of modern capitalism. His overarching contention is that modern capitalism's reified forms of social structuration subsume both modern culture and the economy. But while the late Marx analyzed the phenomenon of reification principally in terms of the critique of political economy,¹² Lukács chose to shed light on another side of the modern phenomenon of reification by analyzing the philosophical and cultural implications of this phenomenon. In the following sections, I will discuss Lukács's immanent critique of modernity's cultural processes, whereby quantifying mathematical rationality creates conditions for the commodity-form to become the structuring principle of modern society due to the increasing universalization of specifically capitalistic economic practices, such as generalized commodity exchange. But before that, I will address Lukács's view of the mathematization of nature in modernity. As my work is about the reconstruction of his critique of reification, I will take even Lukács's erroneous interpretations of philosophers as reflective of his own ideas. An overall defense of the philosophers Lukács discusses is beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹² There is confusion regarding Lukács's relation to the notion of "alienation" in *History and Class Consciousness*. Some critics, such as Victor Zitta (1964: 130), albeit admitting that Lukács could not have been influenced by Marx's critique of alienation in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which was only published in 1932, persistently conflate the meanings that "alienation" has for the young Marx and that "reification" for Lukács early Marxism. In the same vein, see also Bedeschi 1972: 190. Meanwhile, in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács (1971: 209) explicitly relies upon the notion of reification that Marx employs in *Capital*. On this point, see Kavoulakos 2019: 9.

2. *The Mathematization of Nature and the Emergence of a Reified Form of Objectuality*

Lukács's early Marxist critique of reification is based on the claim that the category of reification, understood as a universal form of objectuality that structures contemporary capitalist culture, has a double origin. On the one hand, it stems from the totality of theories and practices that define modern capitalist economies. On the other hand, Lukács sought a wide-ranging understanding of the phenomenon of reification and thus it is crucial to investigate his view of the conceptual system that first arose in modern scientific and philosophical thought. In his essay on reification, Lukács's analysis of the modern natural-scientific method in terms of the formalization of scientific experience by means of a progressive mathematization of the natural thing draws on some celebrated studies of the history of modern thought at the time. These include Friedrich Albert Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart und Zukunft* (1866), Ferdinand Tönnies's *Hobbes Leben und Lehre* (1896), and Ernst Cassirer's massive reconstruction of modern epistemology in *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit* (1907).

A closer look at these interpretations of modern thought is therefore due, since they define Lukács's own approach to modern philosophy. Moreover, at crucial points, Lukács takes on interpretations of modern philosophy by the above-mentioned authors as his own. This is especially the case with the interpretation of the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, who plays a privileged role in Lukács's reconstruction of modern thought in terms of reified conceptuality. For Lukács, Hobbes is also the point in the history of modern philosophy where reified forms of thought and practices intersect and affect each other mutually. What we clearly see in Hobbes is how the new methodology for approaching non-human nature

also leads to a new social anthropology and a novel conception of politics. The conceptual element that structurally holds together all fields of Hobbes's theoretical enquiry is, in Lukács's view, reification.

In this section, I will provide a general overview of the paradigmatic shift in modern natural science that led to the formation of the mathematical model of understanding and dominating non-human nature. Galilean experimental science, critically investigated by the likes of Edmund Husserl and Alexandre Koyré more than a decade after Lukács's reification essay,¹³ offered a new way of questioning nature, as well as the human relationship to the natural world and its laws. In doing this, I will refer to the above-mentioned historians of modern science and philosophy, who influenced Lukács directly. In the section three, I will address anthropological and socio-political implications of the extension of the natural-scientific method into the social sphere. This will lead to the problem of the naturalization of society, where Hobbes, in Lukács's view, occupies a key role in understanding this paradigmatic shift within modernity. In the section four, I will demonstrate the role played by the notion of natural law in modern philosophy's worldview. This will lead me to discuss, in the section five, the way in which Lukács's links his analyses of modern philosophy to the formation of what he defines as "bourgeois thought." And in section six, I will show how the Weberian interpretation of modernity helps Lukács to further investigate the progressive mathematization of human reality in the field of action and practical reasoning. In Lukács's take on the phenomenon of modernity, the expansion of instrumental rationality exists in a strict mutual relationship with the "mechanization of the world picture."¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Husserl 1970; Koyré 1978.

¹⁴ Cf. Dijksterhuis 1961.

Lukács was a member of a generation that dealt extensively with the mathematization of nature. The large-scale transformation of the world through industry and technological innovations lead numerous thinkers to question the theoretical foundations of this process. The birth of modern natural science from applying the mathematical method to natural phenomena in order to represent them in a regular, lawful form thus became a major preoccupation of research. But this interest was not exclusive to the history of science. At the turn of the twentieth century, philosophers, representatives of German sociology, and the so-called cultural critics (*Kulturkritik*) were also interested in the cultural effects of the ever-increasing expansion of mathematization to all spheres of life and the establishment of the positivistic worldview.

In this section, however, I will dwell on Lukács view of the philosophical-scientific origin of the mathematization of nature. This topic has been somewhat marginal in Lukács scholarship,¹⁵ but here I will examine the passages in which Lukács discusses early modern philosophers: Galileo and Hobbes in particular. Specifically, by drawing on the above-mentioned interpretations of Hobbes by Lange, Tönnies, and Cassirer, Lukács is able to connect the modern translation of natural experimental science into the mathematical language with the birth of the capitalist economic worldview. The historical process of

¹⁵ An exception to this tendency can be found in Kelemen 2014: 45–69; and Rockmore 1992: 107 ff. However, whereas Kelemen omits any reference to early modern philosophy in *History and Class Consciousness*, Rockmore obscures the source of Lukács’s view of early modern philosophy in Lange, Tönnies, and Cassirer. This allows him to formulate a reductive statement about Lukács’s argument: “it is false to claim that the whole of modern philosophy is concerned with knowledge of an object created by the subject” (Rockmore 1992: 109). Rockmore’s critique misses the target because it underestimates the epochal relevance of the natural-scientific method for Lukács’s argument about the modern form of objectuality. For a discussion of Lukács’s overall attitude towards natural science, see Komesaroff 1986; Vogel 1996; Burkett 2001; Starosta 2003; and Feenberg 2015.

extending a quantifying and geometricizing approach from the natural-mathematical entities of science to the objects of the anthropological and social realms is a key part of Lukács's theory about the modern form of objectuality.¹⁶ In other words, the establishment of fixed natural laws to advance epistemic and scientific-technological progress serves as a *model* for establishing the equally fixed socio-political and economic laws developed for understanding and thus advancing human societies. However, the mathematical formalization of natural events is not equal to reification. Often interpreted as identical to either formalization or objectification, the notion of reification has led some to criticize Lukács as an idealist or “a romantic, hostile to science and reason” (Feenberg 2018: xiii). But, as I will show in the following chapters, this critique does not stand against even a superficial reading of the central essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”

Let us take a closer look at Lukács's understanding of the origin of early modern philosophy. To do so, we must invert the order of reading *History and Class Consciousness*. I will begin by examining the second part of the “Reification” essay, titled “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought,” where Lukács interprets the development of modern philosophy. In the next section, I will turn to the first part of “Reification” essay, “The Phenomenon of Reification,” where Lukács lays out the social and cultural implications of reification. After

¹⁶ This form of objectuality (*Gegenständlichkeitsform*) is a crucial notion for understanding the thing (*res*) at stake in Lukács's theory of reification. As Andrew Feenberg aptly observes: “[t]he implied concept of ‘thing’ does not refer to entity in general,” but to “the object corresponding to the capitalist form of objectivity” (Feenberg 2018: xiii). This is otherwise known as the commodity form. I will discuss the socio-economic aspect of this modern form of objectuality, and its manifestation as a commodity form, later in this thesis. For a subtle distinction between the notion of the modern form of objectuality and reification, see Kavoulakos 2018: 115–120. See also Feenberg 2014.

that, I will analyze the opening essay of *History and Class Consciousness* – “What is Orthodox Marxism?” – in terms of how it highlights the relevance of formalization, objectivity, and reification for a philosophical re-examination of the method by which the critique of political economy occurs. Finally, I will address the third part of the “Reification” essay, “The Standpoint of the Proletariat,” which will connect Lukács’s idea of the critique of the political economy with his wider philosophical interest in the unity of theory and praxis.

In his treatment of early modern philosophy – similar to his reading of classical German philosophy, as I will discuss later – Lukács clearly states the structuring methodological principle of inquiry, which is historico-philosophical (*geschichtsphilosophisch*):

For we are not concerned to present a history of modern philosophy, not even in crude outline. We wish only to sketch the *connection* between the fundamental problems of this philosophy and the *basis in existence* from which these problems spring and to which they strive to return by the road of the understanding. However, the character of this existence is revealed at least as clearly by what philosophy does *not* find problematic as by what it does. At any rate it is advisable to consider the interaction between these two aspects. And if we do put the question in this way we then perceive that the salient characteristic of the whole epoch is the equation which appears naive and dogmatic even in the most “critical” philosophers, of formal, mathematical, rational knowledge both with knowledge in general and also with “our” knowledge. (Lukács 1971: 112)

At stake in this account of modern thought is the “salient characteristic” represented by the novelty of the idea of the universal applicability of mathematical methods for inquiring into natural and human reality. This is the “scientific exactitude” that presupposes the constancy of the elements under investigation and that had “been postulated as far back as Galileo” (Lukács 1971: 25, n. 8). From this perspective, the ideal of mathematical exactitude (“equation”) is a guiding intellectual principle of epochal relevance. However, Lukács is not

interested in the history of science. Nor is his intention to provide a naively romantic or idealistic critique of science, understood as sheer instrumental reason, as suggested by current criticism.¹⁷ What Lukács sets out to investigate is the connection between the historical process of the universalization of mathematical reasoning and the fundamental socio-historical constituents of the epoch that gave birth to the capitalist mode of production.

What particularly strikes Lukács is the “elective affinity” between two simultaneous processes: the establishment of the universal criterion for scientific knowledge in the form of discovering *laws of nature* and the diffusion of the use of these laws of nature within the social theories of nascent capitalism. Curiously, Lukács expresses his personal view of the historical priority of the capitalist mode of production with respect to the scientific discovery of natural laws, albeit without further developing this claim:

It cannot be our task to investigate the question of priority or the historical and causal order of succession between the ‘laws of nature’ and capitalism. (The author of these lines has, however, no wish to conceal his view that the development of capitalist economics takes precedence) (Lukács 1971: 131).

I believe, however, that this position is not a call to deduct the superstructure from the economic base. Rather, against the predominant scholarly tendency of treating the history of scientific problems exclusively from a theoretical standpoint, Lukács emphasizes a co-constitutive relationship between science’s immanent theoretical *Problemstellung* and its extratheoretical motivations. When he argues that “the *connection* between the fundamental problems of this philosophy and the *basis in existence* [Seinsgrund] from which these problems spring and to which they strive to return by the road of the understanding [*zu dem sie begreifend zurückzukehren bestrebt sind*],” Lukács offers more than just an account of a

¹⁷ See Burkett 2001; Starosta 2003.

deterministic base–superstructure relationship. Notwithstanding Lukács’s insistence on the extratheoretical origin of theoretical problems, this extratheoretical domain is not defined in sheer economic terms but rather refers to human life’s social-ontological situatedness in the world, to its *Seinsgrund*. It is worth paying attention to how Lukács, following Marx, conceives economic categories social-ontologically, as “forms of existence, determinations of existence [*Daseinsformen, Existenzbestimmungen*]” (Lukács 1971: 57; trans. mod.).

At the same time, this social-ontological reality is neither given nor transparent; rather, it requires a conceptual elaboration that, in turn, neither reflects nor reproduces this reality but co-constitutes it in an endless circular process of *begreifendes Zurückkehren*. Therefore, while Lukács’s repeatedly refers to the economic sphere in order to define the basis of human existence in *History and Class Consciousness*, he also conceives economic phenomena as embracing more than the sphere of needs, wants, and desires relative to human material subsistence. In the vein of the young Marx, Lukács ascribes the same fundamental social-ontological significance to the totality of human cultural strivings: their need for intellectual, artistic, and scientific self-realization. The priority of the economic sphere with respect to scientific problems in Lukács should therefore be understood as a logical priority of the material content of scientific problems over the form of their scientific elaboration (Kavoulakos 2018: 220–222), but not as a linear deduction of the latter from the former.

In Lukács’s view, the horizon for formulating and solving scientific problems is offered by the historically specific character of each social constellation in which a scientist finds herself. But this alone is not enough for an innovative scientific theory to come to light. Naturally, the historical context itself cannot produce a scientific genius such as Galileo or Kepler, nor can it predetermine their great discoveries. At the same time, the particular socio-historical configuration of Galileo’s and Kepler’s epoch offered a framework for the

acceptance or refusal of their scientific achievements, delimited upper and lower boundaries for the diffusion of their ideas and, eventually, gave them a universal, transhistorical validity. For example, Komesaroff sees “a conclusion of particular interest for the theory of science” within Lukács’s idea “that the present antagonistic relationship between nature and culture itself an historical product” (Komesaroff 1986: 177).

In this respect, Lukács intention is not to deny the objectivity and efficiency of the natural sciences, nor even to deny the ontological reality of nature as such, as some critics have inferred from his claim that “nature is a social category” (Lukács 1971: 130).¹⁸ The point he is trying to make, without developing it systematically, is that the idea of universal laws of nature can be expressed in a formal system of constants and variables via a mathematical equation, but that this idea would not be considered a universal truth for the *natural* or *social* sciences if lived social reality had not offered a concrete framework for such universalization. For Lukács, the social background of the universalization of the idea of natural laws was the nascent capitalist mode of production. And from this perspective, it is rather curious that Lukács attracted criticism for his uncritical vision of modern science. As Komesaroff has it:

¹⁸ An example of this treatment of the problem of nature in *History and Class Consciousness* can be found in the first review of the book by Ernst Bloch (2020: 20): “But with the restriction of homogenisation to purely social matter (which for Lukács governs, despite all the will to totality), one will adequately grasp neither life nor nature nor even those nearly always eccentric contents of the dianoetically related processes of comprehension.” Despite the markedly expressionistic overtones of Bloch’s argument, the point he is making here is the same one that will dominate most following critiques of Lukács’s conception of nature: Lukács is guilty of performing an illegitimate social deduction of the natural and, consequently, his dialectic of the totality is defective. By limiting the idea of totality to the social and, therefore, excluding its extra-social elements (“life,” “nature,” “eccentric contents”) the very idea of totality, which Lukács’s methodologically strives for throughout his work, risks being undermined at its core.

It cannot of course be said that Lukács was unaware of the great complexity of the transition between nature and epistemology, as our remarks above show. However, his failure to pursue relentlessly the consequences of his own insights prevented him from exposing the deep ambiguity within the currently accepted conceptions. Thus, in spite of the fact that he himself provides the necessary instruments, he prescinds from embarking on a refutation of the philosophical contentions of Newtonian mechanics. In spite of his recognition of the historical variability of the forms of truth and scientific laws he is prepared to concede the enduring validity of the propositions of conventional science... In the final analysis, positive science escapes from the critical gaze of the theory of reification with some of its social effects condemned but its theoretical structure altogether unscathed. (Komesaroff 1986: 181)¹⁹

It may be true that, at least in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács did not provide a critique of the modern natural-scientific method as such and did not question its utility in researching and technologically dominating non-human nature.²⁰ But while he conceded a constitutive function within natural science to the idea of laws of nature and saw it responsible for the unequalled intellectual and technological achievements that shaped Western modernity, he also saw it as playing a mystifying ideological function at the

¹⁹ In a similar vein, see also Vogel 1996: 39–48.

²⁰ Lukács interpreters seem to disagree on the degree to which Lukács's theory of reification can account for a conception of nature beyond its scientific-technological domination. While even his most charitable readers, such as Feenberg (2014: 168), see Lukács as unable to provide a satisfactory concept of natural domination, limiting domination as such to the social realm, other critics, such as Kavoulakos (2018: 215), argue that Lukács's view of nature is "fundamentally negative and incomplete" and, as such, resists full social appropriation. An excellent account of the historical basis of the duality between the social and the natural is provided by Westerman (2019: 261–267), whose reading demystifies the presumed priority attributed by Lukács to the social moment within his dialectical analysis of capitalist modernity by pointing to historical forms that introduce a radical gap between nature and society. In this sense, the duality of the commodity form offers a paradigm for a more general duality of the social and the natural and, in this sense, critique of the commodity form aims to establish a more harmonious relationship between nature and society.

moment it established itself as an explicative principle of social reality.²¹ I will later return to the implications of the application of natural law to social reality. For now, I will dwell on Lukács's account of modern philosophy and science. To begin with, Lukács lays out a general framework for his following argument:

[The Copernican] revolution which consists in viewing rational knowledge as the product of mind does not originate with Kant. He only developed its implications more radically than his predecessors had done. Marx has recalled, in a quite different context, Vico's remark to the effect that "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." In ways diverging from that of Vico...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. And with this, the methods of mathematics and geometry (the means whereby objects are constructed, created out of formal presuppositions of objectivity in general) and, later, the methods of mathematical physics became the guide and the touchstone of philosophy, the knowledge of the world as a totality....The question why and with what justification human reason should elect to regard just these systems as constitutive of its own essence (as opposed to the "given," alien, unknowable nature of the content of those systems) never arises. It is assumed to be self-evident. Whether this assumption is expressed (as in the case of Berkeley and Hume) as scepticism, as doubt in the ability of "our" knowledge to achieve universally valid results, or whether (as with Spinoza and Leibniz) it becomes an unlimited confidence in the ability of these formal systems to comprehend the "true" essence of all things, is of secondary importance in this context. (Lukács 1971: 112–113)

In a striking fashion, quotes like this reveal Lukács's generalizing approach to modernity's philosophical project. Tom Rockmore thus correctly observes that Lukács's statements regarding modern philosophy "are significant as efforts to characterize modern philosophy

²¹ See Kurz 2002: 18–50.

through a single thread, whose analysis varies in its reflection through a variety of positions” (Rockmore 1992: 108). Elaborating on this view, Rockmore goes as far as claiming that “[i]f modern philosophical thought turns on a single, identifiable problem, it is not necessary for Lukács to interpret each of the positions in the modern tradition since he can deal with this period as a whole from the perspective of a single concern” (Rockmore 1992: 108). The guiding thread of Rockmore’s interpretation is the reductionist flaw of Lukács’s reading of modern philosophy: namely, his alleged extension of Vico’s anti-Cartesian view, according to which we can have knowledge only of what we ourselves produce, to the whole of modern thought. Following this interpretation, Lukács would be guilty of indiscriminately applying the same hermeneutical principle to comprehending the development of Western philosophy from Bacon to Classical German philosophy. However, a closer look at Lukács’s text allows us to expand this line of inquiry. On the one hand, Lukács was definitely concerned with a kind of knowledge whereby the object of cognition, in order to be cognized, must first be posited by the human mind. On the other hand, he also interrogated the historical production of what others conceived as universal truths about nature and, in a sense as yet unexplained, the production of nature itself.

Throughout the “Reification” essay, Lukács makes reference to what he saw as the genuine unitary principle of modernity: the methods of mathematics and geometry. As mentioned, Lukács grounds his judgment in the analyses of historians of philosophy from his time. Ernst Cassirer, for instance, observes that Galileo’s principles furnished a model for Hobbes’s overall philosophical system: his logic, physics, and legal and political doctrines.²² So Hobbes extended a method that for Galileo was confined to physics to the field of

²² “Die Prinzipien Galileis haben in der Tat das Musterbild abgegeben, nach welchem Hobbes den Gesamtinhalt seiner Philosophie, nach dem er sowohl seine Logik und Physik, wie seine Rechts- und Staatslehre zu gestalten sucht” (Cassirer 1922: 46).

knowledge in general (Cassirer 1922: 49). Hobbes's analysis and Cassirer's reconstruction are too complex to reproduce here, so I will focus on the fundamental feature of Hobbes's philosophical project that informs Lukács's conception of modern rationalism: namely, the general methodological subordination of every object of knowledge to the geometrical method via analogy.

To achieve geometrical truth, Hobbes's subject of knowledge relies on her ability to address the immanent ideas produced by her soul, and specifically the construction of geometrical figures in the case of geometry. In line with Hobbes's peculiar "apriorism" (Cassirer 1922: 49), knowledge of nature is only possible *via analogy* with the general mathematical method.²³ In the Hobbesian system, thinking means computation, thanks to which a multiplicity of things are subordinated to determinate connections based on elementary arithmetic that, in turn, is subordinated to geometry (Cassirer 1922: 52).²⁴ At this point, Cassirer draws a fundamental conclusion that will play a significant role in Lukács's conception of the modern rationalization of the content of knowledge. Drawing on the movement of bodies –whose empirical proprieties and characteristics are adapted to the exigencies of the geometrical method – Cassirer argues that the genuine achievement of

²³ "Und selbst wenn wir uns zur Natur hinüberwenden, die uns wie ein fremder, von unserer Willkür unabhängiger Stoff gegenübersteht, so bleibt uns auch hier kein anderer Weg des Wissens übrig, als jenes allgemeine Verfahren, das sich in der Mathematik bewährte, wenigstens analogisch nachzuahmen" (Cassirer 1922: 50).

²⁴ In this context, Lange observes: "All reasoning, however, is computation; and accordingly, ratiocination may be resolved into addition and subtraction" (Lange 1877: 275).

Hobbes's philosophy consists in "having transformed the empirical content...into a rational content."²⁵

Moreover, Hobbes's explanation of thinking in terms of computation by means of concepts gets caught in a fundamental aporia as soon as the relationship between concepts and words are taken into consideration. If, in the first instance, philosophy was defined as "aprioristic knowledge of the effects and 'products' of nature," in the Hobbesian conception of grammar, philosophy is resolved into "the doctrine of the correct connection of 'signs' created by our thought."²⁶ Here, the origin of signification is arbitrary since it can be traced to the voluntary decision of the person who established the names for a thing. In a similar manner, these meanings can be overridden at any time by a new convention. At this point, the epistemological locus of Hobbes's theory of sovereignty comes to light: mathematical and logical laws originate in extra-logical and extra-grammatical sovereign decisions. Cassirer thus observes that "absolute sovereign does not only dominate our actions but also our thoughts and the truth and falsity of their connection."²⁷ In one note to the "Reification" essay, Lukács makes a curious historiographical mistake when he refers "to Cassirer's subtle remarks about the role of Robinson Crusoe in Hobbes' epistemology" (Lukács's 1971: 214 n. 46). Dafoe's novel was first published in 1719, 40 years after Hobbes's death. At best,

²⁵ "Die eigentlich originelle Wendung in Hobbes' Philosophie besteht darin, daß sie den empirischen Inhalt, den die exakte Wissenschaft festgestellt hat, in einen rationalen Inhalt zu verwandeln und als solchen zu begründen unternimmt" (Cassirer 1922: 53).

²⁶ "Wenn die Philosophie anfangs als die apriorische Erkenntnis der Wirkungen und „Erzeugungen" der Natur galt, so soll sie jetzt nichts anderes als die Lehre von der richtigen Zusammensetzung der "Zeichen" sein, die wir in unserem Denken erschaffen" (Cassirer 1922: 56).

²⁷ "Man sieht, es ist das Staats rechtliche Ideal des Hobbes, das hier einen Einbruch in seine Logik vollzogen hat: der absolute Souverän wäre nicht nur Herr über unsere Handlungen, sondern auch über unsere Gedanken und die Wahrheit und Falschheit ihrer Verknüpfung" (Cassirer 1922: 57).

Lukács probably meant the contrary: that some key elements of Hobbes’s philosophy were incorporated by Dafoe into the plot of his novel. However, in this respect, the reference to Crusoe illustrates the idea of an extra-systematic or “irrational” origin of any rational system – Crusoe’s constitutive act of giving names to a not yet rationalized environment – will inform Lukács’s interpretation of the idea of a total system, which will be addressed in the following sections of this thesis.

Returning to Rockmore’s remark about Lukács’s extension of Vico’s limitation of human cognition to the products of human activity, we can now add Hobbes as a source for this idea. Keep in mind that, although discussing the historical production of knowledge in modern rationalism, and in Hobbes specifically, Lukács is explicit that this happens in the latter case “[i]n ways diverging from th[ose] of Vico.” Lukács must have taken this idea from Cassirer.²⁸ Indeed, Cassirer unambiguously attributes such a conception to Hobbes: “the spirit can understand only what it has produced and connected by means of its own activity.”²⁹ To ground this conclusion, Cassirer turns to Lukács’s other source on Hobbes, Ferdinand Tönnies:

[Hobbes] strives to demonstrate that pure science is possible only with respect to *ideal things* [*Gedankendingen*]: abstract objects, ideal events...All these ideal things are made

²⁸ Lukács refers to Cassirer’s work as “the book[s] which are of value for us because they have been arrived at from a completely different point of view and yet describe the same process, showing the impact of the rationalism of mathematics and the ‘exact’ sciences upon the origins of modern thought” (Lukács 1971: 210, n. 3). Lukács also signals familiarity with Cassirer’s reconstruction of the history of universal mathematics, presented in volumes I and II of *Das Erkenntnisproblem* (cf. Lukács 1971: 213, n. 30).

²⁹ “*Der Geist vermag nur dasjenige zu verstehen, was er selbsttätig hervorgebracht und verknüpft hat*); *er findet die ersten Grundsätze nicht, indem er an die Dinge herantritt und sie an ihnen als allgemeine Merkmale unmittelbar wahrnimmt, sondern er bringt sie in ursprünglichen und eigenen Setzungen hervor*” (Cassirer 1922: 57).

by us ourselves, namely, by thinking and, in reality, we are also able to imitate – in a more or less perfect manner – those [things] that we consider [as] belonging to the external or corporeal world. In any case, we can *measure* the real facts [against] these ideas of ours, [even] when these exist only in people’s minds, such as the state and moral concepts.”³⁰

Naturally, the issue with the production of knowledge here is the unbridgeable gap between the *Gedankendingen* and the concrete content of knowledge, which can at most be measured against these ideals. This fundamental “antinomy of bourgeois thought” will continuously reappear in different forms throughout Lukács’s discussion of the formalist ideal of knowledge and the principle of systematization in Classical German philosophy and Neo-Kantianism.³¹

But in what sense does Vico’s idea of knowledge differ from that of Hobbes? A common denominator is that the object of knowledge is a human product, the difference being that Vico grants a historical dimension to this subjective constraint of our knowledge, while it remains a merely ahistorical anthropological human feature in Hobbes.³²

³⁰ “(Hobbes) will eigentlich darauf hinaus, daß reine Wissenschaft nur möglich sei von *Gedankendingen*: abstrakten Gegenständen, ideellen Ereignissen . . . Alle diese *Gedankendinge* machen wir schlechthin, nämlich denkend, und können solche, die wir als der äußeren oder körperlichen Welt angehörig denken, in der Wirklichkeit — mehr oder minder auf vollkommene Weise — nachbilden; immer aber können wir wirkliche Tatsachen, auch wenn sie, wie der Staat und wie moralische Begriffe, nur in den Gedanken der Menschen existieren, an diesen unseren Ideen messen” (Tönnies 1896: 114; quoted in Cassirer 1922: 57, n. 1). For Lukács’s own reference to Tönnies’s monograph on Hobbes, see Lukács 1971: 210, n. 3.

³¹ For the time being, I am leaving aside the question of the extent to which Cassirer’s own Neo-Kantianism may have influenced his attentiveness to the problem of form-content separation in Hobbes.

³² In a similar manner, Max Horkheimer, in his work *Beginning of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History* (1930), which appeared seven years after *History and Class Consciousness*, argues that Hobbes’s philosophy is profoundly ahistorical: “All social changes in the various spheres of the state,

Furthermore, in Hobbes, the intuition of the subjective and historical conditionedness of knowledge assumes a form that coheres with his absolutist theory of sovereignty: an arbitrary act of primordial naming.

Rockmore observes that Lukács “holds that the modern turn to mathematical methods as the model of thought that has been accepted by the entire rationalist tradition is not a mere contingent fact, but follows from the relation of modern philosophy to the social context from which it springs” (Rockmore 1992: 109–110). However, we must not fall into unilateral determinism when evaluating the status of “context” in Lukács. He often suggests that social being has a certain priority over the genesis of intellectual categories, but this social being, in turn, is not a fixed reality that consciousness merely reflects; rather, the social realm lies in the open horizon of a possible reconstitution, not least by the conscious activity of subjects.

3. The Mathematization of the Subject and Society: Hobbes and the New (Social) Anthropology

Let us now return to Lukács’s discussion of Hobbes. As I have argued, Lukács’s selective attention to the history of modern thought in terms of rationalization is motivated by his interest in the prevailing practices and social customs or institutions that provided a favorable framework for the universalization of the idea of natural laws, which, in turn,

politics, religion, ethics, and law are to be explained on the basis of the notion of the isolated individual, whose properties Hobbes, by means of a deliberate analogy to the properties of inorganic bodies, takes to be eternal and immutable. Each of these individuals reacts to external movements out of unconditional necessity” (Horkheimer 1993: 339).

brought a new image of the human being and society to light.³³ Lukács's argument is as follows:

It can similarly be taken as read that the whole evolution of philosophy went hand in hand with the development of the exact sciences. These in turn interacted fruitfully with a technology that was becoming increasingly more rationalised, and with developments in production. These considerations are of crucial importance for our analysis. For rationalism has existed at widely different times and in the most diverse forms, in the sense of a formal system whose unity derives from its orientation towards that aspect of the phenomena that can be grasped by the understanding, that is created by the understanding and hence also subject to the control, the predictions and the calculations of the understanding. (Lukács 1971: 113)

In other words, the lawfulness of predictions and calculations derived from the successful application of mathematical and geometrical methods to natural phenomena had to secure, via analogy, the same results in the practical sphere of social life.

Lukács brings together some of the intuitions found in Lange's *History of Materialism*. In his view, Lange's work reveals the "connection between this mathematicisation of reality and the bourgeois 'praxis' of calculating the anticipated results of the 'laws'" (Lukács 1971: 213, n. 30).³⁴ Indeed, Lange draws some instructive parallels between the origin of "materialism" or "the negation of philosophy" and its "transformation into natural science" by Bacon and Hobbes from the English "national spirit," which was "then already hastening to its mighty development – the spirit of a sober and practical people striving after power and wealth" (Lange 1877: 275). This social progress goes hand in hand

³³ For now, it is important to distinguish Lukács's interest in the historical reconstruction of the origin of modern science in nascent capitalism from the analysis of what Marx defined as "natural laws of capitalist production."

³⁴ I will draw on this argument extensively while discussing the relationship between scientific rationality and the rational conduct of life in Weber in section 5.

with the establishment of a new idea of a natural philosopher who “is nothing but the experimenting physicist” (Lange 1877: 275). We could, therefore, deduce from Lange’s overall argument that Hobbes’s account of reasoning as computation is co-original with a set of precise qualities socially required by a new mercantilist form of life.³⁵ As Lange puts it:

Not only does this definition transform the whole of philosophy into natural science, and completely set aside the transcendental principle, but the Materialistic tendency is still plainer in the explanation of the object of philosophy. It consists in this, that we foresee effects, and so are able to apply them to the purposes of life. (Lange 1877: 275)

As a result, “all reasoning...is computation; and accordingly, ratiocination may be resolved into addition and subtraction” (Lange 1877: 275). But what ontological implications does such a definition have in Hobbes? As Lange shows, Hobbes’s theory of “external nature” is shaped by the distinction between the body and the *accidens*: “Hobbes declared everything to be body that, independently of our thought, occupies a portion of space, and coincides with it. As opposed to this, the accident is not a really objective thing, like body, but it is the way in which the body is conceived” (Lange 1877: 285). In Lukácsian terms, the formalist division of subject and object in Hobbes is evident as Hobbesian reality is constituted by the bodies (substances) that are independent of our way of perceiving them (*accidens*).

³⁵ As Ingo Elbe observes, Thomas Schneider (Schneider 2003: 112, 129, 130, 133) institutes a relationship of co-determination between Hobbes’s theory of knowledge and his political philosophy: “*So wie Hobbes erkenntnistheoretisch die Synthesis der mannigfaltigen Sinneseindrücke als äußerliche, durch übermäßige Eingenommenheit des Subjekts durch ein äußeres Objekt, konstruierte (Corp., 255), so sei auch das Verlassen des Naturzustands nur durch Formung des Stoffes des zukünftigen Staates, der Menschen, durch eine vorgegebene Macht zu denken*” (Elbe 2015: 44). For an account of the structural dependence of Hobbes’ philosophical anthropology of “*bellum omnium contra omnes*” on his views on state, society, and economy under mercantilism, see Stapelfeldt 2006: 196–256.

Furthermore, Lange notes that even matter assumes a formal character in the presumed materialism of Hobbes:

[M]atter is neither one of the bodies nor a special body distinct from all others, and it follows, therefore, that it is in fact nothing else than a mere name.... Instead of matter as a substance, that can become anything, and is nothing definite, comes in the same way the statement that matter is the body conceived generally, that is, an abstraction of the thinking subject. (Lange 1877: 286)

There is no need to go further into Lange's reading of Hobbes to demonstrate the most salient features of its relevance for Lukács's definition of modern philosophy. In Hobbes we see, on the one hand, a convinced materialistic tendency³⁶ and, on the other hand, a formalistic and relativistic conception of matter. The name "matter" – and, for the "super-nominalist"³⁷ Hobbes, the truth of things is identical to their arbitrarily given names – enables our knowledge of corporeal reality, at the same time making it impossible to determine the qualitative content of such knowledge. Corporeal bodies are nothing but sense-images (*phantasma*)³⁸ accessible by means of sensation, which is, in turn, identical to the inner motion of our organism (*conatus*) reacting to external movements produced by

³⁶ "Hobbes never thought of abandoning this Materialistic principle in favour of a consistent Sensationalism, because, like Demokritos in antiquity, he started from the mathematical and physical consideration of external things" (Lange 1877: 289).

³⁷ This definition of Hobbes's thought was coined by Leibniz in his own critique: "Hobbes seems to me to be a super-nominalist. For not content like the nominalists, to reduce universals to names, he says that the truth of things itself consists in names and what is more, that it depends on the human will, because truth allegedly depends on the definitions of terms, and definitions depend on the human will.... Yet it cannot stand. In arithmetic, and in other disciplines as well, truths remain the same even if notations are changed, and it does not matter whether a decimal or a duodecimal number system is used" (Leibniz 1989: 128).

³⁸ "From this results the sensationalistic consequence that all so-called sense-qualities, as such, belong not to things, but originate only in ourselves" (Lange 1887: 289).

corporeal things. From a Lukácsian perspective, what matters here is that there is an unbridgeable gap between a thing's name (or form) and its material qualities (or content).

Therefore, Lange's interpretation of Hobbes's matters to Lukács to the extent that it allows him to draw significant parallels between Hobbes's nominalist theory of knowledge and his anthropological and political doctrines. Hobbes's genuinely modern view of the *ratio* as calculation reduces it to an efficient tool of dominion over nature, pursuing one's interests within the framework established by the social contract – or, in extreme cases, translating such pursuit into political tyranny –³⁹ is the element that gives Hobbes striking novelty. Later, Horkheimer observes that Hobbes proposal “was rather simple: all ideas which deviate from the exact theory of human and nonhuman nature are invented by human beings in order to dominate other human beings” (Horkheimer 1993: 350). As a consequence, even Hobbes's view of ethical action cannot but be conceptualized in formal and relativistic terms.⁴⁰

As we have already seen, Hobbes places the principle of sovereignty at the origin of both the names of things and the political order. And insofar as this concerns Lukács's

³⁹ “That every revolution that is strong enough is also justified, as soon as it succeeds, in establishing any new form of authority, is a necessary consequence of this system: tyrants need not comfort themselves with the proverb, ‘Might comes before right’ since, in fact, might and right are absolutely identical” (Lange 1887: 283).

⁴⁰ Comparing the classical (Plato's) and modern (Hobbes's) paradigms of ethical action, Leo Strauss aptly notes that ethical formalism is a necessary consequence of Hobbes's attempt to ground morals nominalistically within sovereign arbitrariness: “Whereas Plato retraces natural morals and the orientation provided by them to their origin, Hobbes must attempt in sovereignty, and without this orientation, to discover the principle of morals. While thus for Plato the ‘concreteness’, the ‘materiality’ of morals was and could be no problem, Hobbes travels the path which leads to formal ethics and finally to relativist skepticism” (Strauss 1996: 164). Instead, Lukács will attempt to go beyond Hobbesian formalism in retrieving materially-adjusted forms of “ethics,” but without falling back into the myth of a natural origin.

critique of modern philosophy's formally rational character, the dualistic aspect of the principle of sovereign legitimation perfectly embodies the modern process via which the formalistic impetus of total systematization extends over both the theoretical and practical spheres of life.⁴¹

4. Modern Philosophy and Laws of Nature

Besides formalism, Lukács raises a further case against modern philosophy. Modern philosophy, from Descartes to Kant, legitimates its interpretation of the subject's relation to objective reality on modern science's epistemological basis. The key issue for Lukács is the notion of laws of nature, which are constitutive of the modern scientific worldview. Many interpreters of *History and Class Consciousness*, misled by Lukács's own sporadic expressions about nature being an "undialectical" category, have accused Lukács of abstract idealism. It is important, however, to get to the bottom of Lukács's argument before assessing the viability or otherwise of this kind of criticism. At first, Lukács seems to raise a problem that retains its significance even for contemporary debates on the methodology of the social sciences: does the notion of natural law, or a law in general, offer a satisfying epistemological framework for explaining social life? In short, does social science have laws? According to John T. Roberts, the answer must be no, since the predictions and explanations on which the social sciences are grounded do not share the fundamental features of any kind of law:

⁴¹ This idea is not contradicted by the fact that the sovereign is a conventional construct and that the sovereign's particularity acquires universal validity only as a result of the social contract: "*Denn der aufklärerische Clou der Hobbesschen Souveränitätskonstruktion besteht doch in der klaren Erkenntnis des konventionellen Charakters der Staats- und Souveränitätskonstruktion: Der Souverän ist nicht allgemein von Natur aus, sondern sein partikularer Wille und seine partikuläre Vernunft gelten nur qua Vertrag als allgemeine*" (Elbe 2015: 40).

Prediction and explanation require reliable sources of information about the world, in the form of strict or statistical regularities. Laws of nature are regularities that have certain features: they are global or universal, and robust, in the sense that *they do not depend on contingent details of particular systems of objects, and they would not be upset by changes in the actual circumstances that are physically possible*. In order to have explanatory and predictive value, though, a regularity (strict or statistical) need not have these special features. Hence, not only does social science have no laws; it needs no laws. (Roberts 2004: 166; emphasis mine)

Certainly, Lukács's does not offer an account of how the explanation and prediction of social phenomena can be based on a "reliable" knowledge derived from regularities, although, as we shall see later, his account of ascribed consciousness implies this question without explicitly dealing with it. But what matters for our discussion is the fact that laws of nature "do not depend on contingent details of particular systems of objects." In other words, within a given system of objects, the laws of nature are necessary, universal, and *immutable*. To conceive a law of nature as being mutable is an oxymoron that can only mean we are dealing with a different sort of regularity. Consequently, whatever questions we raise about natural phenomena from a natural-scientific standpoint, we implicitly take for granted that the laws "governing" these phenomena cannot be modified either by the observing subject or by "changes in the actual circumstances that are physically possible."

As far as we are concerned, this formal feature of natural law as immutable remains unchanged independent from the actual definition of *what* laws of nature are in themselves. Whether we conceive of them as principles determining the connections between states or events in the world that *can* or *cannot* (and in case they can, they also must) occur, or we define their truth as deriving from *actual* connections between states or events observed in

the world,⁴² what matters is that laws of nature have to be immutable. Certainly, the immutability of natural law is still a debatable issue in the philosophy of science.⁴³ But Lukács's genuine preoccupation is not the epistemology of natural science.⁴⁴ The target of his metacritique is modern philosophy and particularly the way it locates the subject within the social world. The philosophical project of modernity implemented the idea of the immutability of law way beyond the reflection on nature and God, elevating it to an indispensable departure point for explaining ethics, politics, and society. Therefore, the crucial idea behind Lukács's argument is that the universalization of the principle of systematization is inseparable from the extension of the principle of the immutability of laws of nature in accounting for the intelligibility of all domains of human life.

Let us take as examples Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, all of whom assigned key importance to the notion of necessity within the domain of nature in their philosophies. Although Descartes attributes both the establishment of laws of nature and the power to change them to God's free will, he nonetheless limits the scope of this claim by adding that such powers are beyond our comprehension. In this sense, he argues: "I understand [laws of

⁴² Swartz 2003: 38. For a detailed discussion of "necessitarian" vs. "regularist" approaches to laws of nature, see Swartz 2003: 37–43.

⁴³ For an overview of the debate and a recent defense of the immutability of laws of nature, see Lange 2008.

⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Lukács's neglect of the epistemology of natural science has made him an unexpected target for critics who wanted him either to provide a critique of modern natural science (Vogel 1996: 48–49) or to elaborate a dialectics of nature in an Engelsian style (Foster 2008; Burkett 2013). Curiously, while, for Vogel, Lukács's version of Marxism uncritically accepts the truths of natural science, Foster and Burkett accuse Lukács of betraying Marx's original vision of dialectics by expelling natural science from his reflections. None of these authors, however, stress the problem that the *formal* structure of the immutability of laws of nature poses for Lukács's elaboration of a dialectics understood as revolutionary method. See also the already quoted Komesaroff 1986: 181.

nature] as eternal and immutable. And I judge the same of God” (Descartes 2000: 29).⁴⁵ In Spinoza, the immutability of laws of nature is expressed even more resolutely:

[T]he laws and rules of nature by which all things happen and change from one form to another are always and everywhere the same, and therefore there must also be one and the same method of reasoning for understanding the nature of anything whatsoever, namely through the universal laws and rules of nature. (Spinoza 2018: 94)

Therefore, not only does Spinoza stress the immutability and universality of laws of nature, but from this he derives the necessity of a unified method for investigating reality on the grounds of the same universal laws and rules. Notwithstanding Spinoza’s call for methodological monism, Lukács makes the case against this – and any other version of – naturalism, deeming it incapable of accounting for the historical specificity of individual and social being.⁴⁶ Kant, meanwhile, places limitations on human knowledge that seem to prevent him from providing an essentialist account of both the immutability and necessity of empirical laws of nature.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, he argues for the transcendental necessity of natural laws. He also distinguishes between transcendental (*a priori*) and empirical laws of nature, where the former represent the conditions of possibility for cognition of the latter:

By nature (in the empirical sense) we understand the combination of appearances as regards their existence, in accordance with necessary rules, i.e., in accordance with laws. There are therefore certain laws, and indeed *a priori*, which first make a nature possible; the empirical laws can only obtain and be found by means of experience, and indeed in

⁴⁵ And elsewhere: “God is immutable and...always acting in the same way, he always produces the same effect” (Descartes 2000: 39).

⁴⁶ Lukács’s fundamental contention is that this is the case with both naturalism and historicism, which equally separate history from the natural basis of social life. For Lukács, the true mediating point between nature and history will be constituted by the notion of culture.

⁴⁷ For an essentialist account, where laws of nature in Kant would “have a purchase on *nature itself*,” see Massimi 160ff.

accord with its original laws, in accordance with which experience itself first becomes possible (Kant 1998: 320).

In other words, we cannot assess the truth of the necessity or otherwise of particular empirical laws, for such a task would require a capacity to cognize the total system of empirical laws of nature. In the first *Critique*, such a task is precluded from empirical understanding and thus must remain a regulative ideal (Guyer 2017: 50). However, laws of nature, in order to be defined as laws, must be capable of being conceived as universal and necessary (*a priori*). Kant thus argues that “understanding does not draw its (*a priori*) laws from nature” but nonetheless “prescribes it to them” (Kant 2004: 72; cf. Watkins 2017: 19).

We cannot address the complex question of whether Kant’s transcendental acknowledgement of the fact that “the necessary sequence of states of affairs in a particular event must be necessitated by the relevant causal laws” leads him to admit the inherent truthfulness of the necessity of particular empirical laws (Guyer 2017: 60).⁴⁸ Nor can we attempt even an approximate description of the various types of laws and the functions they have in Kant’s philosophy.⁴⁹ Whether or not Kant, following Descartes and Spinoza, actually adopts an essentialist conception of the necessity of natural law is of little relevance for the type of metacritique Lukács exercises with respect to modern philosophy. I have already mentioned Lukács’s extremely selective reading in this respect, which contracts the

⁴⁸ In the third *Critique*, however, Kant takes a further step and argues that elucidation of the system of laws can lead us to understanding the necessity of empirical laws (Watkins 2017: 15).

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Kant distinguishes between multiple types of laws, going well beyond the dual distinction between empirical and *a priori* ones. As Eric Watkins points out, in Kant we find diverse kinds of laws having different functions in his philosophy. Watkins categorizes them as “moral” and “juridical” laws, “*a priori* laws of nature,” “empirical laws,” “nonempirical laws that serve as regulative principles,” “*a priori* cosmological laws,” “traditional laws of logic,” and “laws of sensibility” (Watkins 2017: 14–15).

whole development from Descartes⁵⁰ to Kant to several themes he finds expressive of the *reified structure* of modern philosophical consciousness. Lukács pays most attention to two: 1) the idea of knowledge as system and the possibility of cognition of the whole; and 2) the relationship between the form and content of knowledge. I believe that the immutability and universality of laws of nature represents a third overriding theme in Lukács's discussion of modern philosophy and even illuminates the issues at stake in the first two, which Lukács defines as antinomies of "bourgeois" thought. I will thus discuss the meaning of "bourgeois thought" and its antinomies in the following section.

5. The Meaning of "Bourgeois Thought" in Lukács

In the following, I will discuss the implications of Lukács's pre-Marxist definition of "bourgeois" for the comprehension of his unorthodox use of the same term in his early Marxist writings. I will claim that Lukács never managed to fully assimilate the sociological notion of "bourgeois" into his dialectical philosophy and persevered in using the term with an admixture of philosophical and cultural-critical determinations derived from his pre-Marxist period. I will also show that the term "bourgeois" was critical to Lukács's philosophy long before his turn to Marxism in late 1918.

First, I will trace his use of this term to *The History of the Development of Modern Drama* (1911)⁵¹, a work composed fifteen years before Lukács's first Marxist writings. To

⁵⁰ Following Hegel, Lukács regards Descartes as the first modern philosopher (cf. Rockmore 1992: 45).

⁵¹ Untranslated in English, this work was published as two volumes, titled *A modern drama fejlődésének története* in Hungarian, in Budapest in 1911 after Lukács was awarded the prestigious Kisfaludy-Society's prize in 1908 (see Zitta 1964: vii; Gluck 1985: 82). It is worth noting that although the work has been unduly obscured by Lukács scholarship, it is key for reconstructing his

do this, I will summarize the key themes of the work, then illustrate the significance of the word “bourgeois” for Lukács’s discussion of the impact of bourgeois forms of life on the production of modern cultural forms, which is at the core of his early readings of Theodor Storm and Thomas Mann.⁵²

a) “*Bourgeois*” in the History of the Development of Modern Drama

As I have argued, Lukács’s road to philosophy was non-linear from the very beginning. The reception of his philosophical thought, moreover, is complicated not only by his much-discussed turn towards theoretical and practical Marxism in late 1918, but also due to a considerable part of the writing from Lukács’s intellectual development between 1902 and 1912 being theatre criticism. According to Lukács, his interest in the theoretical aspects of the modern drama originated in the practical problems he encountered while staging modern

intellectual development as a whole. First, it offers a synthesis of young Lukács’s activity as a theatre critic for some of Hungary’s leading cultural periodicals, such as *Magyar Szalon*, *Huszadik Század*, *Nyugat* and *Pester Lloyd*, between 1902 and 1908. Second, by means of historical literary-critical analysis, Lukács engages with important themes that will later preoccupy him in his early Marxist phase, such as the problem of the relationship between historical forms of life and forms of culture, modern processes of fragmentation, rationalization, and reification, and the limits of aesthetic solutions to modernity’s contradictions. In the following, I will refer to the German translation of the work, *Entwicklungsgeschichte des Modernen Dramas* (Lukács 1981), and to a partial English translation of the second part of the first book, which Lukács published in 1914 with a new preface in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Lukács 1965).

⁵² In discussing Lukács interpretation of Mann, I will draw upon Lukács’s early review *Royal Highness*, first published in *Nyugat* in 1909 and later included in the 1913 essay collection *Aesthetic Culture [Eszttetikai kultúra]* (Lukács 1964: 135–143). I will also look to his essay on Storm, “The Bourgeois Way of Life and Art for Art’s Sake: Theodor Storm,” which was first included in the original Hungarian edition of *Soul and Form* (1910) and then in the German edition of 1911 (Lukács 1974: 55–78).

drama productions at the Thalia Theater in Budapest (Lukács 1981: 9). Thalia Group's attempt to introduce modern drama to Hungarian public, although met with enthusiasm by workers, did not manage to convince the theatre-going bourgeois audience, what predetermined the imminent decline of the Thalia experience (Kadarkay 1991: 32–33). This became an important source of Lukács's larger-scale cultural-philosophical doubts. What characterizes modern culture? What are the distinctive features of modern drama? Does modernity represent a favorable condition for the dramatic form as such? If not, then what historical epoch and what social order are the most compatible with the organic development of the dramatic form?

In search for answers, Lukács undertook broad historical research into the origin of the genre that resulted in *History of the Development of Modern Drama*. Drawing even the most general theoretical outlines of this monumental work would be beyond the scope of this work. However, what interests me is how this early text reveals a peculiar aspect of Lukács's working method that is significant for understanding his later thought. In this work, Lukács does not use rigorous historical research to provide an empirical history of the genre. Instead, he identifies paradigmatic moments, regularities, and shifts within the development of the dramatic form to produce a “developmental history” (*Entwicklungsgeschichte*). In other words, Lukács's genuine goal in adopting this method was to penetrate into the essence of the dramatic form, using historical research as a starting point. This does not mean that Lukács proceeds from facts to laws. Instead, he identifies several underlying presuppositions that are both formal-theoretical and historico-philosophical. I will name three that are key to Lukács's overall argument:

1) It is the form and not the material of a drama that unleashes its dramatic effect on its recipients and thus determines the success of the piece. Lukács offers numerous arguments to ground this claim, the most obvious of which is that, were it just the material of

the drama that exercised a dramatic effect on the public, the concrete content extracted from the flux of individual or collective life in a specific historical context, then ancient Greek dramas would have little or no impact on modern recipients due to the difference in the world views that define their respective epochs. Lukács thus draws the opposite conclusion: Greek dramas can still exercise a profound effect on us because of their formal perfection.

2) The most perfect and, consequently, the only true dramatic form is tragedy. I will return to this underlying assumption, which Lukács adopted from the *Neuklassik* movement in dramatic theory, in the second section of this introduction.⁵³

3) The tragic form is possible only in a historical epoch in which individuals share a world view that is unified by an immanent organizing principle. In this sense, Lukács assumes the historico-philosophical principle of Winckelmannian memory, which was widely diffused in the German philosophical culture of Lukács's time, namely, the idea of the self-contained and unitary character of Greek world. Generally, this type of "unproblematic" culture, where individuals, community, and nature were held together by the same religious, political, and ethical systems of reference, was considered a precondition for tragic culture. From this perspective, the secular, technological, and economy-driven modern world would seem to offer no conditions for tragedy. However, this interpretation of modernity was not shared by either Lukács or the representatives of *Neuklassik* theory.

⁵³ For a historical overview of main programmatic points of the *Neuklassik* movement, see A. Wöhrmann, *Das Programm der Neuklassik: Die Konzeption der Tragödie bei Paul Ernst, Wilhelm von Scholz und Samuel Lublinski* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter D. Lang Verlag, 1979). For Lukács's intellectual and ideological relationship with the movement, see K. A. Kutzbach (ed.), *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács: Dokumente einer Freundschaft* (Emsdetten: Lechte Verlag, 1974) and N. Fuerst, *Ideologie und Literatur: Zum Dialog zwischen Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács* (Emsdetten: Lechte Verlag, 1975).

Rather, they conceived the modern world, with its new immanent structuring principles, as fertile for tragic form.

In the view of these thinkers, after the transcendent God had abandoned the world scene, individuals once again stood alone, facing their destinies. In the absence of a divine principle that could structure and actively govern worldly processes, modernity had not provided a new unitary center around which a plurality of life expressions could converge, but a variety of reference points without a common denominator: it was up to individuals to choose or invent their own principles. In this context, one can think of Max Weber's definition of modern life in terms of a polytheism of values and ends.⁵⁴

But the German neoclassicists, Lukács included, believed the best solution to the problems posed by modernity lay in creating cultural forms that could resist the tendency towards complete cultural fragmentation. Tragedy thus acquired a double significance for these thinkers. On the one hand, they considered it the fundamental mode of experience in modernity, whereby individuals seek to give form or attribute unambiguous meaning to life, while at the same time realizing that this is destined to fail from the very beginning. In this sense, the tragic existence within the modernity was understood as a precondition of a modern tragic form. This was consistent with the thought of Georg Simmel, who had taught Lukács at the University of Berlin, on the tragedy of modern culture.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the neoclassicists and Lukács deemed tragedy a dramatic genre that, due to its unitary structure, highly formal principle of content selection, and tendency towards abstraction,

⁵⁴ See M. Weber "Science as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (ed.) H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958): 129–156, here 148–149; 152–153.

⁵⁵ See G. Simmel, "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" in G. Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, (tr. and ed.) P. K. Etzkorn (New York: Teachers Press, 1968), 27–46.

could transform the chaotic mass of the modern subject's lived experiences into a well-ordered architectonic construction. In this sense, the neoclassical understanding of tragic form appeared to be a solution to the unreflected tragedy of modern life.

Thus, Lukács's first preliminary answer to the alienating effects of modernity broadly understood is aesthetic: only a modern aesthetic form that could be at the height of the task of producing a unifying principle that would allow modern subjectivity to orient itself within the world where no such orientation seems to possible, can offer a – partial as it may be – remedy to modernity's tendency towards complete cultural dissolution. The task is quasi-theological and Lukács is well-aware of that in his insistence on the dramatic genre: only in this genre the divine intervention or otherwise constitutes a necessary formal presupposition.

Curiously enough, the central achievement of Lukács's *historical* inquiry into the development the genre lies in raising *transcendental* question about the conditions of possibility for modern drama. How is modern drama possible? Is it possible at all? At this point of his philosophical career, the neoclassicist Lukács will reply that if it is possible, it is only as tragedy. Lukács's inquiry into the development of modern drama led him to consider the possibility of a modern tragic form. I will further return to this topic while discussing Lukács criticism of Simmel's idea of the tragedy of modern culture.

But what about the “bourgeoisie?” In his work on modern drama, Lukács unambiguously states that it “is the drama of the bourgeoisie” (Lukács 1965: 146). But what does “bourgeoisie” stand for here? Commenting on his work several years later, Lukács defined it as an attempt to “clarify the fundamental problem of the sociology of literary forms,” which comprised tracing “the temporal-historical elements of life back to a formal typology [*Typik*],” as well as accounting for “the formal element in what is generally called the ‘content’ of the art forms in order [to] then investigate the interrelation between these

two groups of forms.”⁵⁶ In other words, his aim was to illustrate the interrelation of forms of (economic) life and cultural forms. His sociological history of modern drama was a first methodological attempt to attain this goal, albeit one he almost immediately perceived as insufficient.⁵⁷ But the sociology Lukács has in mind is *sui generis*. It interrogates how historical forms of life can create conditions of possibility for the production of cultural forms that are supposed to have transhistorical validity. Lukács seems to suggest the historical significance of “bourgeoisie” for understanding modern culture resides in its capacity to practically universalize its own forms of life and implement this universalization culturally. Economically, the only relevant fact for further discussion is that “the social and economic forms which the bourgeoisie opposed to remaining vestiges of feudal order became, from the 18th century onward, the prevailing forms” (Lukács 1965: 152).

Modern economic systems coincide with rules that were historically established by the bourgeoisie, victoriously emancipated from the feudal world order. Economic forms are, first of all, forms of life. In this respect, Lukács adds, “life proceeds within this framework, and in the tempo and rhythm it dictates, and thus the problems this fact provokes are

⁵⁶ Translation mine. The whole passage in German goes as follows: “*Wie sehr ich auch damals bestrebt war, das Hauptproblem einer Soziologie der literarischen Formen klarzulegen, nämlich sowohl die zeitlich-historischen Lebenselemente auf eine formale Typik zurückzuführen als in dem, was man allgemein das ‘Inhaltliche’ an den Kunstformen nennt, das Formale nachzuweisen, um dann die Wechselbeziehung dieser beiden Formengruppen zueinander zu untersuchen, ist manches nicht zur vollkommenen methodischen Reinheit gediehen*” (Lukács 2018: 491).

⁵⁷ I believe, however, that this was his first genuine attempt at a dialectical mediation between two “forms,” albeit one that was partially abandoned in his neo-Kantian phase preceding his turn to Marxism. The rigid neo-Kantian separation of the spheres of the validity of different phenomena could not but prevent him from grounding the interconnection between two types of form. In the second part of this section, I will argue that Lukács’s early Marxism draws largely from the intuitions set out in his drama book.

precisely the problems of life; in a word, that culture today is bourgeois culture” (Lukács 1965: 152). Let us now look at how Lukács, following Simmel and Sombart, describes the culture of bourgeois modernity:

If we examine even the superficial externals of modern life, we are struck by the degree to which it has grown uniform, though it theoretically has engendered a most extreme individualism. [...] Parallel to this is the ongoing *rationalizing* of our life. Perhaps the essence of the modern division of labor, as seen by the individual, is that ways are sought to make work independent of the worker’s capacities, which, always irrational, are but qualitatively determinable; to this end, work is organized according to production outlooks which are objective, superpersonal and independent of the employee’s character. This is the characteristic tendency of the economics of capitalism. Production is rendered more objective, and freed from the personality of the productive agent. An objective abstraction, capital, becomes the true productive agent in capitalist economy and it scarcely has an organic relation with the personality of its accidental owner; indeed, personality may often become superfluous, as in corporations.

Due to its significance to Lukács’s overall philosophy of culture of the period, it is worth quoting the passage in its entirety:

Also, scientific methodologies gradually cease to be bound up with personality. In medieval science a single individual personally would command an entire sphere of knowledge (*e.g.*, chemistry, astrology or “secret” to the pupils. The same situation was true in the medieval trades and commerce. But the modern specialized methodologies become continually more objective and impersonal. The relation between work and its performers grows more loose; less and less does the work engage the employee’s personality, and conversely, the work is related ever less to the worker’s personal qualities. Thus work assumes an oddly objective existence, detached from the particularities of individual men, and they must seek means of self-expression outside their work. The relations between men grow more impersonal as well. Possibly the chief characteristic of the feudal order was the way men’s dependencies and relations were brought into unity; by contrast, the bourgeois order rationalizes them. The same tendency to depersonalize, with the substitution of quantitative for qualitative categories, is manifested in the overall state organization

(electoral system, bureaucracy, military organization, etc.). Together with all this, man too develops a view of life and the world which is inclined toward wholly objective standards, free of any dependency upon human factors.

There is no doubt that such reflections on the rationalized and rationalizing character of modern life in many respects anticipate Lukács's Marxist critique reification. At the same time, I hope that the following chapters will clarify the important differences between Lukács's pre-Marxist negative diagnosis of the pathologies of modern rationalization of Weberian and Simmelian kind, and his mature dialectical theory of reification that sees the phenomenon of reification as inherent to specific modes of economic constitution of society as a whole.

b) *"Burgherly" Form of Life: Theodor Storm and Thomas Mann*

In the chapter five of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918), entitled "Burgherly Nature," Thomas Mann reflects upon Lukács's "Storm essay" in *Soul and Form*. Mann aptly suggests that in his interpretation of Storm Lukács, beyond any doubt, refers implicitly to Mann himself (Mann 1987: 72). Lukács's essay raises some fundamental questions about the definition of bourgeois form of life so that Mann finds it necessary to begin the chapter by invoking Lukács. Well recognizing himself in the category of a "burgher" described by Lukács, Mann praises the essay as "an investigation that to me, when I read it years ago, immediately seemed to be the best that had ever been said on this paradoxical subject, and that I feel I have a special right to cite, since the author was perhaps thinking of me—and at one place expressly mentioned me" (Mann 1987: 72).

What is then so striking about Lukács's description of "burgherly" form of life? Let us further follow Mann's argument:

Lukacs, then, distinguishes above all between the foreign, violent and dissimulating, ascetic-orgiastic bourgeois spirit, whose most famous example is Flaubert, and whose essence is the mortifying denial of life in favor of the work—and the genuine, burgherly, artistic genius of a Storm, Keller, Mörike, which actually only realizes the paradox of its adjective by connecting a burgherly conduct of life, based on a burgherly profession, with the hard struggles of the most severe artistic work, and whose essence is the “artisan’s excellence” (Mann 1987: 72).

The passage reveals the extent to which Mann emphasizes Lukács’s distinction – not of a crucial importance for Lukács’s overall argument – between German “burgher” and French “bourgeois.”⁵⁸ While bourgeois stands for the dissonant principle of aesthetic existence, the investment of life with the artistic production, burgher represents a more harmonious relationship between the professional form of life and aesthetic activity.⁵⁹ In Mann’s view, the crucial distinction between bourgeois and burgher lies precisely in the ethical dimension of calling [*Beruf*] that characterizes specifically German burgherly attitude towards professional life. This, in turn, is also reflected by artistic activity of German *Bürgerstum*. Mann continues his enthusiastic comment on Lukács in the following terms:

“Burgherly calling as a life form,” Lukács writes, “means first of all the primacy of ethics in life; that life is dominated by what is systematically and regularly repeated,

⁵⁸ Zeller (1976) offers a useful perspective on two different self-interpretative strategies of German bourgeoisie, articulated in terms of past-oriented and idealizing *Bürgerstum*, present in Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, and of that of the *bourgeoisie*, spontaneously moralistic and critical of present social arrangements, represented by Heinrich Mann’s *Im Schlaraffenland*.

⁵⁹ However, Mann himself struggled with a modern antithesis between the *Bürger* and the artist. The tragedy of the artist originates from the dual condition of the artist as a member of burgherly society and, as such, both assuming modernity’s conduct of life and participating in its decline, on the one hand, and as an artist, who distances herself from the reality of burgherly everyday affairs precisely by means of art, on the other. For an excellent overview of the wide-ranging antithesis between the artist and the *Bürger* in Mann’s writings, see Nachman & Braverman 1970 and Baier 2015.

by what returns in line with one's duty, by what must be done without regard to desire or lack of it. In other words: the dominance of order over mood, of the lasting over the momentary, of quiet work over genius that is fed by sensations." And as he continues, we see that he claims that this ethical-artisan mastery, in contrast to the monkish estheticism of Flaubert, whose burgherly conduct of life was a nihilistic mask, is the Germanic figure of the burgherly artist: estheticism and burgherly nature, he explains, represent here a complete and legitimate form of life, indeed, a *German* form of life; yes, this mixture of artistry and burgherly nature forms the actual German variation of European estheticism, the German *l'art pour l'art* (Mann 1987: 72).

Following Mann, it would then seem that Lukács's rejection of (French) bourgeois orgiastic aestheticism implies his straightforward appreciation of (German) burgherly nature that allows harmonizing ethics and art. Such judgment would seem to be confirmed by the specific value that Lukács attributes to burgherly artist's conduct of life. In other words, Mann reads Lukács in a way, as if Lukács's main goal lied in the justification of German burgherly virtuousness. According to this scheme, Lukács seeks to defend the noble German *Kultur* against the decadence of French *Zivilisation*. It is worth emphasizing, in this respect, that although it is generally considered that, throughout his career, Mann continuously tended to oppose the *Bürger* to the artist, *Bürgertum* has a key cultural significance in Mann's worldview; in fact, it is often associated with the role of culture-bearing.⁶⁰ As Mann observed "on the occasion of the seventh centenary celebrations of the city of Lübeck, in 1926:"

It is one thing to recognize the world revolution, and another to believe that it has extinguished the tradition of the German bourgeoisie. This form of life is too closely connected with humanity, education and all higher human values as to become estranged and unnecessary to anybody in the world. It is a misinterpretation to put too

⁶⁰ For the discussion of overarching impact of the tradition and cultural legacy of Hanseatic *Bürgertum* on the formation of Mann's worldview, see Kamenetsky 1962.

much stress on the economic and class aspects of the bourgeoisie, and to confuse it with the spiritual world center of German “Bürger.” (Mann 1937; quoted in Kamenetsky 1962: 186).

But let us ask ourselves, whether one can legitimately argue, as Mann seems to suggest, that the underlying interest of Lukács’s “Storm essay” is represented by a nostalgic defense of the declining virtue of German *Bürgertum* against its French decadent counterpart. Even though Lukács tends to give privileged attention to the aspects that formally characterize German burgher, this does not imply an argument for Lukács’s Germanocentric geophilosophical standpoint. Since Lukács’s interest is conceptual and categorial, rather than socio-economic, his “preference” of German burgherly writers over their French counterparts derives from a major attention these writers pay to the central philosophical problem Lukács has at heart while working on *Soul and Form*: burgherly conduct of life as a mediating point between ethics and aesthetics in the capitalist modernity.

c) The Place of Bourgeois Thought in Lukács’s Early Marxism

Let us take, as an example, the attempt to explain the essence of economic life (namely, immediate everyday existence) from the standpoint of the “natural attitude” of a capitalist entrepreneur:

Bourgeois thought observes economic life consistently and necessarily from the standpoint of the individual capitalist and this naturally produces a sharp confrontation between the individual and the overpowering supra-personal “law of nature” which propels all social phenomena. (Lukács 1971: 63)

From this perspective, it makes little difference for Lukács overall argument whether the “subject” is one governed by primordial self-interest, such as in Hobbes, Spinoza, and Adam

Smith, or one whose actions are motivated by Kantian inclinations. What matters is that modern theories of ethical and social commitment are construed in a way that transposes individuals, in themselves driven by the natural laws of self-preservation and self-interest, to a sphere that must come to terms with this natural legality in one way or another.⁶¹ As a consequence, the causal necessity that shapes the natural lives of individuals is then sought in manifestations of a “second” nature – ethical, institutional, and social norms – which is conceived as governed by analogous, though practically domesticated or interiorized causal laws, conceptualized in terms of the laws of the “first” nature. I will return to Lukács’s unique thematic combination of the necessity and immutability of natural laws and the priority of self-interest in “bourgeois” thought in the following sections.

Lukács argues that it is no accident that the “bourgeoisie” perceive their everyday existence as belonging to the sphere of natural rule. This is the core of his theory of reification. Everyday existence, the world of labor and production, is actually structured in a way that makes it appear natural. Here, one can recall Marx’s critique of bourgeois society as being split into civil and political societies, where beneath the abstract totality of political rights persists the content-related negation of these same rights within the practical reality of social life. Formally understood, even most fundamental human rights, such as equality, can remain empty, if not adjusted with respect to the human content of these rights, which only can guarantee the effective realization of human rights in the society. From Lukács’s

⁶¹ The centrality of self-interest in Hobbes and Spinoza is stressed by Malcolm (2002: 31, 48). For self-interest in Spinoza, see also Smith (2003: 107, 122), while Montag (2009: 57ff) offers an alternative account that sees a strong critique of the idea of a “subject of interest” in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. See also Barbone (1993) and Malcolm (2002: 48), who prioritize rationality, sociality and cooperation in Spinoza. Finally, the presumed absoluteness of self-interest in Smith is countered by Force (2003), who stresses Smith’s critical and appreciative appropriation of Rousseau’s “republican” attack on modern commercial society.

philosophical perspective, the contradictory status of rights and their human content reflects, at the legal level, a more profound systematic contradiction between form and content in capitalist social organization.

What matters here, however, is that natural law becomes a paradigm of any causal determination, inserting one's action or will into a pre-existing set of rules or laws. This has significant effects on the concept of freedom in modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant. Whether freedom is understood as a voluntary self-determination with respect to *external* – namely, natural – determining power, or the rational compliance to the laws of nature, the dialectics of free will and the immutable laws of nature that is here at stake barely takes into consideration the horizon of free agency that is represented by historically established institutions: religious, economic, legal, and political. In other words, these conceptions do not treat *culture* as mediating nexus between the realm of natural law and our “free” self-determination.

At this point, however, we should try to understand the presumed “scandal” of naturalism in Lukács, which, if we believe his critics, would have brought him to expel nature from the social realm. Indeed, Lukács offers no account of nature as such. This would have involved deviating sharply from the main aim of the book: to define dialectics, understood as a revolutionary method. In order to do this, though, Lukács has to identify its intrinsic normativity. The question can be formulated as follows: Are there any laws that would shape the dialectical method in a way analogous to how laws of the nature shape the natural sciences?

We have seen that Lukács identifies a dual relationship between economic and scientific practices in the onset of capitalist modernity. This is grounded on the expansion of calculative rationality, which itself has deeper foundations in a type of rationalism that arose in the modern epoch. According to Lukács, modern rationalism is the first form of

rationalism in human history that shows a tendency toward a total systematization. On this, he writes:

But there are fundamental distinctions to be made, depending on the *material* on which this rationalism is brought to bear and on the *role* assigned to it in the comprehensive system of human knowledge and human objectives. What is novel about modern rationalism is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the *principle* which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind. Compared with this, every previous type of rationalism is no more than a *partial system*. (Lukács 1971: 113)

Lukács puts forward a striking idea here. Due to the growth of the principle of total systematization and the increasing dependence of scientific and economic practices on formal rationality, the *material* to which this rationalism appeals is itself formal. Thus, the idea of a total system only becomes possible by reducing the heterogeneous materials of the social and natural worlds to a homogeneous medium, the material of rational forms, where we are already abstracted from the heterogeneous, content-related determination of the original materials. Lukács claims that no previous form of rationalism ever aimed to systematize all possible spheres of being without being aware of the limits of such systematization. In partial rational systems, certain sectors of being were excluded from the reach of systematization, establishing a strictly limited relationship of irreducibility between the rational and the irrational. Instead, “bourgeois” thought appears as a form of consciousness that aptly operates within the rationalized, albeit inherently contradictory, condition of the capitalist modernity, both reflecting and reproducing the antinomic structures of reification. More than a sociological category, it is a form of consciousness that represents the very possibility of cognizing the world via isolated and isolating reflexive determinations of understanding that, according to Lukács, first originates in capitalist modernity. Further, I will analyze, how this fundamental

contradiction is manifest in modern juridical culture and will present Lukács's ambiguous perspective on the problem of legal ascription. I will argue that although criticizing neo-Kantian conception of the legal sphere, Lukács's also implicitly draws from it his attempt to preserve a normative moment within his dialectical philosophy.

6. Lukács's Metacritique of Modern Juridical Culture: Split Consciousness and Ascription

Georg Lukács's intellectual formation in the fields of literature and philosophy has received due attention from his biographers. Less discussed is that before academically engaging with literature and philosophy, Lukács received his law doctorate under the supervision of prominent Hungarian legal philosopher Felix Somló. However, little is known about Lukács's legal studies,⁶² and his dissertation remains undiscovered.

It is thus not surprising that Lukács's writings do not present a coherent exposition of his views on law. Csaba Varga analyzed this issue in *The Place of Law in Lukács's World Concept*, the only study so far entirely dedicated to Lukács's legal apprenticeship and his general understanding of law. While Varga's core claim is that Lukács did not formulate a clearly defined concept of law before the *Ontology of Social Being*,⁶³ he also deals with fragmented appearances of legal thought in Lukács's early Marxist writings. Ultimately, though, Varga judges Lukács's conception of law during this period as flawed by "a

⁶² Due to the lack of detailed documentation, the issue is only briefly mentioned in otherwise rich biographical material on Lukács's cultural maturation. See Bendl 1994: 60-61; Hermann 1986: 26; Kadarkay 1991: 37; Keller 1984: 55-56; Kókai 2002: 81.

⁶³ Varga 1985: 18.

messianic belief in the revolutionary immediacy pointing to consciousness as the decisive factor behind the law.”⁶⁴

Leaving aside the question of whether this “immediacy,” for Lukács, truly represented an authentic alternative to law, it is worth dwelling on the relationship that Varga established between law and consciousness. Surprisingly, Varga disregards the juridical dispositive at the heart Lukács’s theory of consciousness. However, if consciousness is a “decisive factor behind the law,” the law, or at least Lukács’s use of a juridical notion of ascription, must be crucial for understanding Lukács’s theory of “ascribed class consciousness.” This issue is not merely terminological since it determines how Lukács develops his arguments and confers not only theoretical but also historical validity upon them.

To define ascribed class consciousness, Lukács draws explicitly on Max Weber’s use of ascription in the field of historical science. However, this does not explain Lukács’s extension of the term beyond historiography to historical reality itself. To shed light on the architecture of ascribed class consciousness, I shall therefore stress points of contiguity between Lukács’s account of ascription and one from the legal philosophy of Hans Kelsen, who, among all neo-Kantian philosophers of the early twentieth century, treated the methodological aspects of ascription most rigorously.

In the following sections, though, I shall look at why the theory of ascribed class consciousness must take the disaggregating effects of reification for consciousness as its departure point. Indeed, the split of class consciousness into “psychological” and “objectively possible” class consciousness is a necessary precondition of the theory of ascription in Lukács. While the first type of consciousness combines Lukács’s early pre-

⁶⁴ Varga 1985: 67.

Marxist anti-psychologism with a newly acquired genetic perspective on reification, the second is an amalgam of two theoretical perspectives: the normative and dialectical. The normative moment and its relation to historical dialectics require more attention. If considered at all, it is often found guilty of Lukács's theoretical and practical idealism or seen as instrumental for a dogmatic acceptance of the Leninist model of political organization. However, Lukács's theory of ascribed class consciousness is actually an attempt to harmonize a dialectical approach to consciousness with a normative moment derived from Neo-Kantianism. The need for this was dictated by the historical context in which Lukács developed his theory of class consciousness. The existential decision to favor the Leninist party was accompanied by a philosophical reinterpretation of the nature of the party itself. The methodological introduction of ascription is thus not only relevant for the foundation of class consciousness, understood as a dialectical constellation of theory and practice, but also reveals Lukács's caution towards both the metaphysics of historical processes and an eventual self-referential turn of the party organization.

a) The Split Consciousness under Reification

Lukács's notion of class consciousness would be incomprehensible without reference to reification⁶⁵ as discussed in *History and Class Consciousness*, especially in the central essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." The following synthetic outline of reification can thus help us find the origin of split consciousness in Lukács. The essence of reification is that under modern capitalism, individual and social being are structured by reified forms of thought and existence. In Lukács's view, the form of commodity constitutes

⁶⁵ Dannemann 1987: 98.

a theoretico-practical model for the organization of the varied spectrum of social life.⁶⁶ As a result, the relations of subjects to fellow human beings and non-human nature display themselves in thing-like forms. Causal laws, such as those governing the economy, orient the practices of individuals and shape their categories of thought. The central hermeneutic category in Lukács's analysis of reification is abstraction, which means that qualitative aspects of life – and Lukács thinks first here of labor – are increasingly diminished in favor of quantitative determinations.⁶⁷

However, reification is not absolute. Large-scale quantification has a qualitative effect on the immediate existence of workers. Reification therefore reveals its dialectical nature when it collides with the lives of subjects, such as with increased labor time, where quantification directly negates worker's needs, desires, and intentions.⁶⁸ Reification thus allows workers to arrive at self-consciousness through self-experience as repressed subjectivities, as mere possessors of commodity labor-power.⁶⁹ By doing so, it creates conditions for workers to acquire knowledge of the structuring forms of society via direct experience.⁷⁰ In this sense, reification generates a framework for the emergence of not only reified consciousness but also consciousness of reification.⁷¹

Nonetheless, because of the ideological fixity of reification, individual self-conscious experiences do not spontaneously pass into practices that could modify the state of things. Lukács's believed that this would require discovering a more comprehensive viewpoint that could bestow universal meaning upon the same affective experiences of reification that resist

⁶⁶ Lukács 1971: 83.

⁶⁷ Lukács 1971: 166.

⁶⁸ Dannemann 1987: 104.

⁶⁹ Feenberg 2014: 237.

⁷⁰ Dannemann 1987: 103.

⁷¹ Bewes 2002: 89-90.

full articulation in isolation.⁷² Workers' self-knowledge regarding their position within the totality, although not in itself irrational, does not alone constitute the horizon of collective rationality that Lukács described as class consciousness, since they are still subject to the standpoint of immediacy that Lukács calls psychological or empirical consciousness. And although negative experience of reification offers a departure point for the dialectical process of gaining self-knowledge, it is insufficient for overcoming the fragmented perspective of "psychological" consciousness, to which workers relapse due to the pervasive disintegrating effects of reification on their immediate lifeworld. Hence, workers' self-consciousness represents a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of proletariat class consciousness.

This produces a contradiction between "objectively possible" consciousness, anticipated by the experience of reification, and the persistence of the "psychological" viewpoint perpetrated by the intertwining of reified social forms and epistemological categories. For psychological consciousness, even a coherent pattern of interests cannot but appear as fragmented or distorted since its "reflexive" nature means that it is unable to represent objects other than as unrelated single units.⁷³ In turn, interests so conceived can only motivate practices as single spontaneous actions, lacking unity and continuity. Lukács believed that, practically, the gap between psychological and objectively possible consciousness can be bridged through organized political activity. To avoid becoming mere "spontaneity," however, this practical moment requires adequate theoretical expression. This

⁷² See Kavoulakos 2011: 163.

⁷³ For Lukács (1923: 204), reified thought operates with "*isolierenden Reflexionsbestimmungen*". Unfortunately, the term "isolating reflexive determinations" is lost in the English translation of *History and Class Consciousness* by Rodney Livingstone, who renders it as "isolated mental categories" (Lukács 1971: 186).

implies shifting attention from genetic inquiry towards a wider perspective that also includes a moment of normative concept formation. This shift does not entail abandoning the historical-dialectical view on consciousness, but rather integrating it within a more comprehensive conceptual “constellation” of class consciousness. Here, the notion of ascribed class consciousness marks the field of tension between historical and normative instances in Lukács’s early-Marxist thought.

b) Weber’s Methodology of Social Sciences: Ascription, Adequate Causation, Ideal Type

In defense of *History and Class Consciousness* against its first critics, in *Tailism and the Dialectic*, Lukács reminds us that the term “ascription” stems from an objectivist tendency in the juristic tradition. Lukács explains his use of it, saying “[i]t is supposed to aid the singling out of the objectively decisive, causal context from the confusion of superficial connections and subjective psychological conditions.” In the juristic context of a norm violation, what counts in ascription “is not what the person concerned thought or intended, but whether he *could* or *should* have known that his action or failure to act in a normal way *would* have to lead to these consequences.”⁷⁴ Lukács also alludes to Max Weber’s use of ascription in his writings on methodology in the historical sciences. I cannot fully discuss the Weberian notions of ideal type, objective possibility, and adequate causation here [I will further work on these categories]. However, these categories allow us to reconstruct the objective situation and, on this ground, explain the meaning of its subjective moments.

In ascription, one deals with the objective possibility or impossibility of a certain horizon of action and the subjective capacity or otherwise “to reach possible conclusions

⁷⁴ Lukács 2000: 63-64.

from the given situation, and to act accordingly.”⁷⁵ Applying this to the historical figure of the proletariat brings us back to split consciousness. The dispositive of ascription establishes “the distance that separates class consciousness from the empirically given, and from the psychologically describable and explicable ideas which men form about their situation in life.”⁷⁶ Historical reconstruction allows us to assess isolated cognitions against the horizon of rationality that Lukács calls totality, thus yielding the objective possibility of historically significant knowledge and action.⁷⁷ It delineates a field for “class conscious” agency and allows for sanctioning their actions as “correct” or “erroneous” in the context of a typical rationally anticipated situation.

Theoretical affinities between Lukács and Weber are controversial.⁷⁸ What interests me, however, is the strong parallel between juridical and historical causation in Weber, who believed that both share the same structure.⁷⁹ This means that adequate causation, which brings historical phenomena into meaningful relations, can be strictly distinguished from natural causality. Nonetheless, Lukács’s theory of ascription was not limited to methodology. Instead, Lukács integrated the Weberian notions of ideal type and objective possibility into his dialectical conception of what I define as the constellation of class consciousness, a constellation that mediates all three figures of consciousness present in

⁷⁵ Lukács 2000: 65.

⁷⁶ Lukács 1971: 51.

⁷⁷ See Grumley 1989: 140.

⁷⁸ An attempt to marginalize Weber’s role in Lukács’s theory of ideal types can be found in Oldrini (2009: 117). For an interpretation of ascribed class consciousness as a hypostatization of Weber’s heuristic conceptual apparatus, see Cerrutti (1980: 113). Finally, for a reading of the relationship between the “heuristic” *Begriffsbildung* and the factual reality in terms of interconnection, see Beiersdörfer (1986: 149) and Küenzlen (1980: 111).

⁷⁹ Neugebauer 2017: 111.

Lukács's work: 1) the psychological consciousness of the worker; 2) the self-consciousness of the worker qua the commodity labor-power; and 3) the ascribed class consciousness of the proletariat.

These figures of consciousness correlate with three modes of temporal experience: i) the eternal present of psychological consciousness under reification; ii) the mediation of the present through the self-consciousness of the worker, which brings forth a future-oriented "aspiration towards totality"⁸⁰; and iii) the amplification of the second moment by means of a theoretical perspective on the historical origin of reification. Only together can these types of consciousness, along with their respective temporal registers, give concrete sense to Lukács's idea of class consciousness. It is worth noting that theoretical outlooks, although exceeding the first two figures of consciousness, are nevertheless firmly grounded in them, otherwise they would remain mere abstractions. Moreover, class consciousness also draws its concreteness from its structural interdependence with its practical expression: the organizational form of the party.

The above lets us comprehend the possibility of adequate causation or normativity in Lukács without falling into abstract idealism. However, these concepts have to be conceived in view of Lukács's dialectical understanding of class consciousness. In this context, normativity represents a non-deterministic, although effectively historical (*realhistorisch*), connection between the figures of class consciousness. Far from reflecting the voluntarism of the theoretician who performs it, ascription therefore indicates her limited place within the constellation, as she depends on both the historical situation of the class and the concrete praxis of the party. But how can one imagine normativity, or adequate causation, that transcends the Weberian use of the term? In general, how can one think of a non-causalistic

⁸⁰ Lukács 1971: 174-175, 198.

“causation” between an empirical and an ideal-typical subject and hypothesize an “ought” that would not equate to a moral imperative?

c) Lukács’s Ambiguous Relationship with Neo-Kantian Juridical Formalism: Hans Kelsen

A canonical representative neo-Kantian theory of ascription can be found in Hans Kelsen’s *Main Problems in the Theory of Public Law*,⁸¹ whose first edition was published in 1911. There are substantial grounds to infer that Lukács was familiar with neo-Kantian legal philosophy and, in particular, Kelsen’s earliest work.⁸² An exposition of Kelsen’s legal theory would be beyond my scope here and I will not argue for its direct influence on Lukács’s early Marxist thought. However, the logic of Kelsen’s legal theory of ascription

⁸¹ Kelsen 1923.

⁸² Beside an explicit critical reference to Kelsen’s work in *History and Class Consciousness*, there is also a biographical circumstance that points to Lukács’s acquaintance with Kelsen’s ideas, possibly acquired through personal discussion. During his years in Heidelberg, Lukács maintained direct intellectual exchange with Emil Lask and Gustav Radbruch, who each made significant contributions to early twentieth century neo-Kantian legal theory. Not only was Lukács familiar with Lask’s *Rechtsphilosophie* (1905) and Radbruch’s *Einführung in die Rechtswissenschaft* (1910), he also played a crucial role in Radbruch’s choice to publish his *Grundzüge der Rechtsphilosophie* (1914). As Varga observed, “in the preface of Radbruch’s first truly original work on legal philosophy,” Radbruch acknowledges that his decision “to set forth his ideas [...] is primarily due to the reassuring and stimulating encouragement of Dr. Georg v. Lukács from Heidelberg” (Radbruch 1914: v, in Varga 1985: 33). This network of relations – besides Lask and Radbruch, one has to mention Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and Emil Lederer – allowed Lukács to meet Kelsen during the latter’s visit to Heidelberg. In fact, replying to a 1916 letter from Felix Somló, in which Lukács’s doctoral supervisor expressed concerns regarding the publication of his *Juristische Grundlehre*, Lukács felt confident in offering to mediate between Somló and Kelsen, who is described as “an acquaintance of mine I met during his visit here. [...] I am quite willing to forward the manuscript to him and ask him to contact you” (Varga 1985: 31).

can shed light on Lukács's attempt to move beyond the historiographical use of this term in order to employ it for assessing concrete norms of action generated on the ground of objective historical possibilities, but which are nevertheless immune to the transitoriness of historical flux. Kelsen's work is thus used here only to illustrate a concept of ascription that differs from Weber's.

Just as in Lukács's ascribed class consciousness, Kelsen methodically isolates the legal subject from its immediate empirical and psychological determinations. Unlike Lukács, Kelsen is less concerned with consciousness than with the will: the Kelsenian legal subject is not just a bearer of will but, in the final analysis, indistinguishable from the will itself.⁸³ Formalistically, Kelsen defined the will as a mere "conceptual tool of specifically legal cognition."⁸⁴ As a consequence, ascription is the attribution of an act (a material fact) to the legal subject understood as the end point of ascription (*Zurechnungspunkt*). The ultimate legal subject in Kelsen is the will of the state qua the final meeting point of all lines of ascription.⁸⁵ This *Staatswille* is, however, nothing but the unity of the legal system, "a product of juridical construction" construed for the sole purpose of ascription.⁸⁶ Naturally, this raises a problem regarding the relationship between the formal *Staatswille* and psychological will: if they were to be disconnected once and for all, the law would be deprived of any efficacy, even while its validity would be preserved. Kelsen was aware of this difficulty.

As for the individual legal person, her actions do not concern legal cognition until, in the case in issue (*Tatbestand*), they become normatively qualified. The act itself is the object

⁸³ Kelsen 1923: 194.

⁸⁴ Kelsen 1999: 14; translation mine.

⁸⁵ Kelsen 1923: 183.

⁸⁶ Kelsen 1923: 184.

of normative consideration, independent from its being willed or otherwise. Kelsen believed that, even though an act can always be causally traced to the psychological will of an individual, “the subject of the responsibility is [the] subject of ascription.”⁸⁷ The legal consequence refers not to a causal event but to the normative will of the subject, to the fact that she *ought to* have acted in a certain way or otherwise. This is particularly evident with omissions, where the subject is ascribed even without provoking any causal modification in empirical reality. In Kelsen’s view, this proves “the possibility of an ascription without [a] psychic act of the will of the subject.”⁸⁸

Similarly, the activities of organs of state qua physical agents and their psychic acts of will are not directly relevant for normative consideration. They become relevant only insofar as a state organ brings forth an action of the state in the sense that it realizes the ascription to the state itself.⁸⁹ Acts are not ascribed to state organs, which constitute points of transition for ascription.⁹⁰ As Kelsen puts it, “ascription crosses through the acting physical subject and its psychic act of will,” finding an end point in the convergence of all lines of ascription in the will of the state.⁹¹

In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács refers to Kelsen in his critique of formalist theories of law that exclude the material content of norms from the sphere of

⁸⁷ Kelsen 1923: 74; translation mine.

⁸⁸ Kelsen 1923: 76.

⁸⁹ Kelsen 1923: 427.

⁹⁰ Kelsen 1923: 528. This does not mean that state organs, as subjects of obligations, cannot be treated as end points of ascription. In case of a non-realization (*Nichtrealisierung*) of the will of the state, state organs are subjects of ascription (Kelsen 1923: 526, 529).

⁹¹ Kelsen 1923: 528; translation mine.

juridical cognition.⁹² In this context, he objects to Kelsen by referring to a passage from the first edition of *Hauptprobleme*:

With regard to the origins of law the perceptive “critical” jurist Kelsen observes: “It is the great *mystery* of law and of the state that is consummated with the enactment of laws and for this reason it may be permissible to employ inadequate images in elucidating its nature.”⁹³

The “*mystery*” that Lukács emphasizes here lies in the fact that, in terms of legal cognition, the positivity of norms must always be presupposed, while questions about their origins remain beyond the focus of jurisprudence.⁹⁴ For a jurist to perform ascription, the historical

⁹² In Lukács’s (1971: 108) words, the essence of these theories “can be summarized as the belief that the content of law is something purely factual and hence not to be comprehended by the formal categories of jurisprudence.”

⁹³ Lukács 1971: 108.

⁹⁴ See also Paulson 1999: 41. An analogous objection to Kelsen was moved by Carl Schmitt in his *Political Theology* (1922). Just as Lukács, Schmitt criticizes Kelsen’s construction of law precisely for the fact that in order to preserve its formal validity it must presuppose the whole legal system and its unity. In Schmitt’s view, “unity and purity are easily attained when the basic difficulty is emphatically ignored and when, for formal reasons, everything that contradicts the system is excluded as impure” (Schmitt 2005: 21). What Schmitt notoriously defended against Kelsen’s formalism was a qualitative moment of sovereign decision on the exception (Schmitt 2005: 5). In this perspective, the exception constitutes the ultimate ground of the legal system and enables its normal functioning. According to Schmitt, the exception “confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition” (Schmitt 2005: 15). Curiously enough, the *pars destruens* of Schmitt’s argument resembles to that of Lukács. This could be explained by Kierkegaard’s early influence on the conceptions of decision in both Schmitt and Lukács. In fact, right after the passage quoted above, Schmitt invokes Kierkegaard’s considerations, drawn from *Repetition* (1843), on the primacy of exception with respect to the general, where the general itself can be explained only from the standpoint of the exception (Schmitt 2005:15). For Kierkegaard’s influence on Lukács’s early Marxism, see Westermann 2015. At the same time, the solutions that Schmitt and Lukács provided to the lacunas of formalism differ radically. Lukács’s dialectical theory

flux of the content of norms must be suspended. Similarly, Kelsen claimed that to become a point of ascription, the legal subject had to be “thought not in the movement, but in the stillness.”⁹⁵ For Lukács, this line of thought is the perfect expression of the reified separation of form and content, of genesis and validity, in formalist thought. But does Lukács’s confrontation with Kelsen only represent an occasion to critically illustrate his theory of reification? Or can Kelsen help us better understand Lukács’s concept of ascribed class consciousness, as well as its shortcomings?

The apparent paradoxicality of Lukács’s argument lies in the fact that, although critical of Kelsen’s and other neo-Kantian’s theories of law, Lukács draws on their method in his attempt to reconsider ascription from a historical-dialectical perspective and reconcile it with a genetic view on reification. Just as with Weber’s historical and Kelsen’s juridical causation, Lukács’s historico-dialectical “causation” is not reducible to natural causality. Rather, it brings to light practical tasks and duties.⁹⁶ ascribed class consciousness is normative not in the sense that it is empty, but rather because it is historically determined. It is a normative subject of praxis only inasmuch as it is a subject of historico-dialectical

of class consciousness was designed, at least in its intension, to oppose the resistance to the unilaterality of both formalism and voluntarism, where under the latter category would fall also the sovereigntist decisionism of Schmitt. For similarities between Lukács’s reflections on the decisive moment (*Augenblick*) of decision already in *Soul and Forms* and Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, see Bürger 1988: 417.

⁹⁵ Kelsen 1923: 74; translation mine.

⁹⁶ It is not by accident that, in *Tailism and the Dialectic*, Lukács argues that the “duty” of any Marxist (theoretician) is “to reflect seriously” on the causes of split class consciousness and “on the *means of overcoming it*”, while the true “task” of political organization (the party) is “the prospect of bridging” this gap (Lukács 2000: 66). In this sense, ascription theory confers a normative framework to Lukács’s ethics of sacrifice and other existentialist determinations of his engagement with politics, such as “self-discipline” and “unconditional absorption of the total personality in the praxis” (Lukács 1971: 320).

ascription. Like Kelsen, where acts produced by the psychological will do not concern legal cognition until they are normatively qualified, for Lukács subjective actions are not praxis until they are historically qualified with reference to the overall constellation of class consciousness.

Moreover, at the macroscopic level, ascribed class consciousness stands to the historically significant praxis of the party as, in Kelsen, the state stands to state organs. To maintain the analogy, the sense and historical validity of the actions of party leaders and members are not self-referential; just as with state organs, such actions are only points of transition for ascription to another “subject.” The end point of ascription, to which all lines of the party’s actions converge, is class consciousness,⁹⁷ of which the party is only a visible manifestation.⁹⁸ In turn, just as Kelsen’s state will is a theoretical reconstruction that ascriptively holds together the legal system, class consciousness is a constellation that ascriptively holds its moments in a dialectical unity: the psychological consciousness of the worker, self-consciousness of the commodity labor-power, and the ascribed class consciousness of the proletariat. For Kelsen, a jurist ascribes legally significant actions to the will of the state on the ground of a reconstructed norm. For Lukács, a “historical materialist”, who like Kelsen’s jurist is a functional for ascription, reconstructs historically meaningful perspectives for action and “ascribes” them to class consciousness. But since class consciousness is an ideal-typical (although practically intentioned) construction, ascription also means that ascribed acts are performed by an agent that, in given situation, *can* and *ought to* act empirically. The theoretician here is not an elevated judge standing above history, but rather an immanent and partial standpoint within the historical movement.

⁹⁷ For a definition of Lukács’s ascribed class consciousness as *Zurechnungspunkt*, see Marck 1929: 125, 133.

⁹⁸ See Feenberg 2014: 243.

To sum up, Kelsen's and Lukács's conceptions share an interpretation of "ought" that is distinct from abstract moral imperative since it is produced within the same framework to which it confers functional unity. What is more, both philosophers thought of the normative subject as exceeding the person of an individual agent and left space for ascribing the meaning of actions to a subject other than the one that produced them in immediate and empirical terms.

PART II.
BEYOND THE PRINCIPLE OF REIFICATION:
A DIALECTICAL PREFIGURATION

1. *A Brief Overview of Lukács's Pre-Marxist Ideas on Modernity's Dissonances*

So far, the underlying hypothesis of my work has been that behind the revived interest in reification today, there is a strong need to provide a novel account of subjectivity under late capitalism. Critical Theory has not renounced either attempts to redefine the status of a (reified) subject under capitalism, or efforts to assess its emancipatory potential. However, any explicit attempt to revive an author's ideas must inevitably deal with the original context of their formation. This obligation often seems to have been disregarded, when it comes to Honneth's use of the term "reification" to define the defective state of forgetfulness of recognition.⁹⁹ The reified subject that interests us here appears, in Honneth's work, as a subject that is forgetful of an antecedent state of pre-reified self-relation. I deem this view unable to provide a satisfactory account of reified subjectivity under capitalism. Honneth's interpretation also contends that, due to radical differences between the social and economic contexts of the early 1920s and our own times, reification had to be substantially reconceived (Honneth 2008: 17–18). But a curious result of this attempt to confer an amnesic, essentially normative, foundation to the notion of reification is that instead of renewing the original concept, Honneth seems to have overlooked the overall socio-economic dimension of Lukács's critique. Contrary to this, I claim that understanding Lukács's idea of reified economic categories is essential for conceptualizing the reification of subjectivity under capitalism. In other words, if reification, following Lukács, has to do with a universal form of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeitsform*) that confers a thinglike

⁹⁹ For a criticism of this position, see Konstantinos Kavoulakos, "Philosophy of Praxis or Philosophical Anthropology? Andrew Feenberg and Axel Honneth on Lukács's Theory of Reification," in *Critical Theory and the Thought of Andrew Feenberg*, (ed.) D. P. Arnold and A. Michel (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 47–69.

character (*Charakter einer Dinghaftigkeit*) to the appearance of *any* object in capitalist society and thus shapes our subjective experiences, mental states, patterns of action, and intersubjective relationships, then this notion must be exposed in its structural core rather than in one of its possible manifestations. In this sense, the normative or recognition-centered level of analysis can only offer a partial perspective on reification.

In this part, I will therefore look at the development of the notion of reified subjectivity in the thought of Lukács, moving from his implicit pre-Marxist ethical conception of reification to his explicit early-Marxist formulation of it. This brief account of the internal transformations of Lukács's understanding of reification is not intended to be merely illustrative; it should also shed light on the limits of any attempt to reconceive Lukács's notion of reification without also engaging with the socio-philosophical presuppositions internal to his account.

In the following section, I will trace the origin and define the content of the idea of reified subjectivity in Lukács's pre-Marxist phase. Without intending to be exhaustive, I will draw on Meister Eckhart, one of Lukács's major influences at the time, using Eckhart's critical approach to thinghood as my departure point in order to assess Lukács's early account of reified subjectivity. Although rooted in a medieval religious worldview, Eckhart's theory, or more specifically the use Lukács makes of it during his pre-Marxist period, exemplifies the structure of any purely ethical approach to reification. A brief reference to Husserl will show the insufficiency of any epistemic approach to reification of the subject from the young Lukács's ethical viewpoint.

The process of estrangement indicates the exceptionally modern condition whereby our institutions, laws, forms of life, generally speaking what we might call culture acquires ontological autonomy in front of any individual life and cannot be reabsorbed into it through free and conscious activity. Hundred years later, right before the outset of the First World

War, Georg Simmel will call this universal condition of the Western civilization as the tragedy of modern culture. The crucial contradiction lies in the fact, that the same cultural powers that enforce human progress in its emancipation from the natural forces, turns it back to the same powers of cultural development from which it stems.

This was also Husserlian approach to reification and phenomenological sociology took over this approach and even transformed it in a positive moment of perception. I will define this as a microlevel solution to the problem of reification.¹⁰⁰ But before seeing how this position is adapted, although not entirely dismissed, to fit into Lukács's early-Marxism, I would like to draw attention to another source of the notion of reification: the philosophical tradition of "alienation" (Zitta 1964; Haber 2009; Fischbach 2009, 2011)¹⁰¹. Since the topic of alienation is closely related to defective experiences of subjectivity, it has become almost commonplace to treat it together with the issue of reification. However, the relation between these notions needs further attention. The first reason for this is that, although Hegel and Feuerbach indeed dealt with processes of human self-objectivization that results in autonomy of the sphere of objectivity with respect to the subjective activity that had previously produced it, their accounts of reification are deeply intertwined with a more general framework of religious or spiritual alienation (or estrangement). Instead, at stake in Lukács's analysis of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* are historically concrete structures and modes of appearance of objects in modern capitalist society, as well as the theoretico-practical attitudes of subjects confronting such objectual spheres. Moreover, in

¹⁰⁰ On this type of solution of the problem of reification, see Husserl 1910; Gabel 1951, 1964; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Thomason 1982; Virno 2004; Jaeggi 2005.

¹⁰¹ V. Zitta, Georg Lukács Marxism: Alienation, Dialectics, Revolution. A Study in Utopia and Ideology, Dordrecht: Springer, 1964; S. Haber, L'Homme dépossédé. Une tradition critique de Marx à Honneth, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2009; F. Fischbach, Sans objet. Capitalisme, subjectivité, aliénation, Vrin, Paris 2009; Id., La privation de monde. Temps, espace et capital, Vrin, Paris 2011.

reification there is no “positively experienced before” (Henning 2012: 243): what describes experience under capitalism is that within this modern form of socialization objects of relational nature from the very beginning present themselves in their thing-like character.

Thus, what is crucial in Lukács is not solely a normative presupposition that the posited objectivity must be reabsorbed by the free and conscious subjective activity from whence it originated. What is in my view relevant, is that beyond this kind of presuppositions, Lukács’s analysis of reification claims to have critical potential. It has been observed that, while alienation is a descriptive term in Hegel, used to illustrate modes of self-alienation of individual consciousness or, at a higher level of dialectical exposition, of the spirit (*Geist*), alienation first becomes a critical concept with Feuerbach’s critique of religious consciousness and, in this form, passes into young Marx’s critique of capitalist alienation (Fischbach 2008: 96). At the same time, Marx used Hegel against Feuerbach to overcome the anthropological reduction in Feuerbach’s critique of religion and to underline the historically determined relationship between individual actions and their contexts. What becomes crucial, especially in later Marx, is the systematic exposition of a process that identifies abstract, although historically particular, human activity (labor) as a source of value for the things we call commodities. Marx thus tries to articulate the “mysterious” form of the inherence of abstraction in things themselves.

However, Lukács does not deal with the genesis of the concept of alienation in his major early-Marxist work, *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923, as he will do almost 20 years later in *The Young Hegel*. And Lukács could not yet consult the then-still-unpublished early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx paid most attention to post-Hegelian and post-Feuerbachian themes of estrangement and alienation. Another reason for the absence of alienation in Lukács at that time lies in the anthropological claims about human essence defined via the concept of labor that underlie

this conception. By contrast, Lukács's goal was to identify an elementary form of objectivity that organizes modes of thought and action under modern capitalism; the overriding theme of Lukács's book is thus both epistemological and that socio-philosophical.

Various Lukács interpreters have observed that his argument about the all-embracing commodity-form as a structuring form of society stems from his reading of Marx through the lens of Max Weber's reflections on modern rationalization. This contends that so-called instrumental rationality, based on formal calculation of technical factors directed to reach expected results, has pervaded all spheres of the human lifeworld, resulting in rigid parcellation, fragmentation and formalization of human experience, thought and action. At the same time, the paradox of the rationalization process lies in how rationality imposes itself on all sectors of life taken separately, yet it is unable to produce a unifying principle from the disarticulated whole of partial systems, or to put it another way, it is unable to generate the notion of a "totality." In order not to remain empty and self-referential, a rational system must therefore presuppose "irrational" content as its correlate. It is here that we can witness the "self-inflexion" of rationalism that, according to Lukács, unavoidably results in the dissolution of the idea of a fully rationalized system from within. A similar idea, according to which the growing sectorial rationalization produced by the social division of labor, per se justified and necessary, correspond to the growing irrationality of the whole (i.e. "barometric swings of the prices of the market") can also be found in Marx.

Georg Lukács's view on modernity can be inscribed among those currents of thought which were represented mainly, although not exclusively, by the German philosophy of culture of the *Belle Époque*. Representatives of this line of thought saw in modernity a radical rupture with respect to the precedent pre-capitalist epochs. According the proponents of *Kulturkritik*, what distinguished modernity, was its mechanical and rationalistic grip on the traditional worldview and its values. The principle of rationalization not only resulted in

the dominion over the natural world by means of universal application of mathematical method to scientific practices, but also in the establishment of a rationalistic cultural values based on that model. The process of rationalisation thus resulted in the substitution of traditional forms of life with a new structure of all-pervasive rationality governing individual and social phenomena in modern capitalism. Famously, Weber termed this process as the “iron cage”.

One of the most renowned images that came to represent Weber’s theory of the modernity as such is that of the “iron cage.” At the same time, this suggestive concept cannot be uncoupled from his overall theory of rationality. As Löwith aptly observes, Weber “attempted to make intelligible this general process of the rationalization of our whole existence precisely because the rationality which emerges from this process is something specifically irrational and incomprehensible” (Löwith 1993: 62). In the conference on *Science as a Vocation*, Weber has famously argued: “[i]t is the destiny of our era, with its characteristic rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, the disenchantment of the world, that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from the public sphere” (Weber 1947: 155).

The formation of the concept of reification passed through at least three previous phases of theoretical elaboration. In the following, I will dwell on these three initial moments in the development of Lukács’s reification critique. In relation to these moments, I will use the term “reification” with due caution since Lukács rarely used the term at this stage of his philosophical career despite his continuous use of other notions that in many respects resemble his early Marxist notion of reification. However, the cultural impulse that motivated Lukács later critique is already present at this stage. In this proto-critique of reification, Lukács attacks modernity’s cultural disaggregation and its *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism, as well as the split between everyday experience and form-oriented claims of

aesthetic subjectivity, and the false reconciliation of modernity's emptied-out cultural, socio-political, and religious formations in the name of anti-formalistic ethical imperatives and a non-institutionalized sense of community.

a) Misunderstanding as a Constitutive Aesthetic Paradox of the Aesthetic Sphere

Max Weber once commented that “the transformation of the ‘Kantian question’ by Lukacs was the first significant step forward in aesthetics since Immanuel Kant.”¹⁰² Weber’s enthusiastic appraisal of his Heidelberg protégé is rooted in how Lukács shifted the focus from Kantian transcendental inquiry into the possibility of making judgments of taste to critical inquiry into the immanent constitution of aesthetic objects, namely, artworks. Indeed, Lukács begins the *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art* with the following: “Aesthetics, which should be grounded without any illegitimate presuppositions, has to begin with the following question: ‘there are artworks – how are they possible?’” (HPhA, 9; translation mine). The originality of Lukacs’s work therefore consists in his re-evaluation of the Kantian approach to incorporate the normative foundation of the givenness of aesthetic objects. Lukács considered this reversal of approach as the only way to remain true to Kant’s original program of grounding the autonomy of aesthetics.

Lukács begins the *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art* by evaluating the claim that the production of art originates in the will to unambiguous communication, the same communication whose possibility appears to be excluded a priori by the structural dissonance that characterizes our day-to-day interactions. In modernity, any relationship between form and content, or referent and reference, seems to be condemned to an eternal

¹⁰² F. Fehér, “The Transformation of the Kantian Question in Lukács’ *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art*,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1996): 331–344, here 331.

divergence due to the contingent and external character of the relationship between the two poles. Any attempt to bring together the scattered fragments of a once meaningful totality under a common denominator in everyday existence cannot but lead to further ambiguity. In accordance with the claims we encountered in the previous section, things could not be otherwise in a culture lacking any unitary governing principle. Nonetheless, the experience of alienating effects brought about by modern isolation, the longing for a re-established sense of community, is responsible for the modern subject's striving for substantial communication.

Now, since Lukács seems to propose a harmonious, monadically enclosed and complete world of the artwork as a communicative alternative to the chaotic character of our daily (mis)communication, it would be natural to infer that art unproblematically brings subjects (creators and recipients) into a relationship of successful understanding. In the Heidelberg manuscripts, Lukács addresses this “expressive” explanation of the origin and function of art. (Kavoulakos 2014: 102–108). According to this interpretation, artforms are communicative mediums (signs) that carry content (lived experiences) from creator to recipient. This transfer of experience from one subject to another would then be proof of successful artistic expression, leading to intersubjective understanding. However, Lukács's early philosophy of art is built upon a constitutive paradox: that of necessary misunderstanding as a precondition for subject–object and subject–subject relationships in aesthetics. Let us look at how he describes this paradox.

First, it is worth noting that the insufficiency of this expressive model lies in its claim to *explain* the peculiarity of aesthetic phenomena, which does not mean that a desire to communicate cannot *motivate* the production of art. Rather, Lukács seems to argue that the desire to communicate may motivate the creation of an artwork, but its status and value as an artwork does not depend on that desire. This is because the possibility of unequivocal

communication between subjects is obstructed by how each subject is limited by their own horizon of lived experience, which Lukács defines as a “reality of lived experience (*Erlebniswirklichkeit*).” Any experiential content, as soon as it becomes *our* lived experience, is absorbed by this “solipsistic pure sphere of lived experience (*Erlebnis*)” and thus constitutes what Lukács emphatically calls the “prison of individuality.” The structure of this prison is represented by the incessant, continuous flux of immediate lived experiences, which is alien to any form of heterogeneity. Given this, the production of an artwork can take nothing else for its material but temporally unique lived experiences of individual subjects. At the same time, the need to produce artworks is driven by the strive to transcend the “prison of individuality.” And to achieve this aim, the creating subject must rely upon the universal and “atemporal” validity of the medium, namely, the form.

However, as soon as the artist’s aim of expressing their subjective lived experience is fulfilled and given form, the artwork paradoxically becomes something qualitatively new. As a finished artwork, it is a homogeneous sphere of internal connections, independent from the initial conditions of its production and any particular subjective will. From now on, the effect of the work on both its creator and its recipients is due to its status as a self-enclosed aesthetic object, a harmonious complex of form and material. The subjective lived experiences of the creator conferred an initial character to the formal aspect of the artwork, but the shaping of these experiences into a particular form becomes the source of any possible misunderstanding in its reception as an aesthetic object. In other words, the artwork, as a realized aesthetic value, is posited in entirely normative terms and thus becomes heterogeneous with respect to any “qualitative a priori of lived experience” of the subjects that experience the work. For this reason, the original intention of the artist to communicate their lived experiences is destined to structural failure. So, while Lukács does not deny that

the act of reception invokes certain lived experiences in the recipient, he argues that this is due only to the internal aesthetic validity of the artwork as formal-material complex.

To summarize, Lukács's aesthetic paradox lies in the fact that the artwork has its necessary origin in the immediate lived experience of subjects. Yet, as a pure realization of aesthetic value, it is also heterogeneous with respect to any possible lived experience. The constitutive role of this paradox within the organization of the aesthetic sphere explains Lukács's understanding of artistic form as "a bridge that separates." It is only due to the "suggestive power intrinsic to the form" that artworks can appear to communicate something. But this appearance is nonetheless necessary, inherent to the normative configuration of the subject-object relationship in aesthetics. Or, to put it another way, the structural heterogeneity of the content of any artwork with respect to any subjective lived experience is what guarantees its success as an artwork, as it leaves it open to an infinite number of possible misunderstandings with respect to the artist's intentions.

b) The Logic of the Tragic: Lukács's Neoclassicist Philosophy of Form

In the Heidelberg manuscripts, Lukács also defines the constitutive aesthetic paradox in terms of tragedy. He argues as follows:

Thus, even here [in the artwork] the great failure of any human longing towards communication should be neither concealed nor overcome: even the perfectly successful expression [the artwork] reveals this tragedy [*Tragik*] in all its sharpness. However, this tragedy has no grief or sentimentality about it; it is a statement of a profound circumstance, namely, that while imperfect forms of expression are not able to carry lived experience, perfect forms of expression fuse lived-experience with themselves until it [the lived experience] becomes forever unknowable and thus vanishes. Out of this failure, art blossoms. (HPhA, 75; translation mine)

In this quote, and throughout the *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art*, Lukács offers an aesthetic-normative acceptance of tragedy. An artwork, as realized aesthetic value, necessarily assumes a tragic meaning for both creator and recipient, understood as empirical subjects of lived experience. This is because, even though we may be attracted to an artwork that offers a suggestive image of a self-enclosed world outside the uninterrupted flux of our lived experience, this is a mere utopic projection provoked by the harmonious relationship of form and content within a successful artwork. However, since the aesthetic object is heterogeneous with respect to the sphere of pure lived experience, it bears no traces of *Erlebniswirklichkeit* in which subjects can recognize themselves. Hence, aesthetic experience is tragic in this well-defined double sense, which excludes any of the oversentimental connotations often associated with the term “tragedy.”

Scholars often oppose this conception of the tragic in the Heidelberg manuscripts (1912-1914) to Lukács’s previous understanding of tragedy, as presented in “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” (1911), published one year earlier.¹⁰³ On such a reading, Lukács’s early essay, which is also included in the German edition of *Soul and Form*, is an example of Lukács’s either irrationalist-romantic¹⁰⁴ or proto-existentialist¹⁰⁵ view of tragedy in modern life. These interpretations tend to overemphasize the existential figure of a tragic hero who challenges their destiny in an absurd exercise of liberty despite prior knowledge of final

¹⁰³ G. Lukács, “The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” in G. Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 152–174.

¹⁰⁴ M. Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, (tr.) P. Camiller (London: New Left Books, 1979); A. Arato and P. Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

¹⁰⁵ L. Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, (tr.) P. Thody (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964); L. Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger: Towards a New Philosophy*, (tr.) W. Q. Boelhower (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

failure. They also underrate the significance that Lukács, in perfectly neoclassicist fashion, attributes to tragic *form*, where hero, free action, and destiny are mere abstract functions, emptied out of reality and positioned with almost mathematical perfection within the harmonious totality of the tragic events.

Moreover, such interpretations often erroneously claim that, while Lukács employs the notion of the tragic to describe aesthetic experience in the Heidelberg manuscripts, he focuses exclusively on tragedy as a dramatic genre in “The Metaphysics of Tragedy.” But a closer look at Lukács’s text reveals how little he was preoccupied with distinguishing the genre of tragic drama from tragedy in a wider sense. Instead, he inquired into the essence of the tragic phenomenon in its totality, including what it can tell us about our experience of the world and, more specifically, the experience of art. It should thus be unsurprising that Lukács’s original title for his essay was “The Metaphysics of the Tragic,” which was only changed by his editor at the last moment. But let us read a passage from the essay itself:

The deepest longing of human existence is the metaphysical root of tragedy: the longing of man for selfhood, the longing to transform the narrow peak of his existence into a wide plain with the path of his life winding across it, and his meaning into a daily reality. The tragic experience, dramatic tragedy, is the most perfect, the only perfect fulfillment of this longing. (Lukács 1974: 162).

A careful look at this shows that, apart from some stylistic peculiarities that distinguish Lukács’s non-academic essays from the Heidelberg manuscripts, his concern is the same in both cases: the paradoxical structure of tragic experience.

The argument is developed on two levels, since “tragedy” here assumes two meanings. First, as a dramatic genre it represents, in a neoclassical fashion, the form as such, which due to its harmonious compositional unity is also ideal for shaping dramatic material. Second, Lukács follows a line of thought that leads to the same aesthetic paradox regarding

constitutive misunderstanding that we encountered in the Heidelberg manuscripts, which encompasses both the creation and reception of an artwork. We can think of these as the creative and receptive “moments” of aesthetic experience.

In the creative moment, if we treat “tragedy” as equating to “artwork,” both texts contain the idea that the artwork has its necessary beginning in a longing of some kind, whether towards a more essential selfhood or towards community. By “longing,” Lukács means that the artwork’s creation is rooted in a genuinely felt need to transcend the immediacy of *Erlebnis* a priori (“the narrow peak of existence”). The aesthetic paradox appears in “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” as an immediate continuation of the above quote: “But every longing fulfilled is a longing destroyed. Tragedy sprang from longing, and therefore its form must exclude any expression of longing. Before tragedy entered life, it became a fulfillment and therefore abandoned the state of longing.” In the Heidelberg manuscripts, meanwhile, as soon as longing is expressed in the self-enclosed totality of an artwork, which is governed by immanent aesthetic laws, there is no room for the initial longing or lived experiences that originally shaped the work’s content, nor is there space for the lived experiences of the artwork’s recipient.

When we shift our attention to the moment of the reception of an artwork, we find the same idea regarding the impossibility of either the transferal or encapsulation of lived experience via artworks. Lukács explains this in “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” thusly:

“Lived experience” is latent in every event of life as a threatening abyss, the door to the judgment chamber: its connection with the Idea—of which it is merely the outward manifestation—is no more than the conceivable possibility of such a connection in the midst of the chaotic coincidences of real life. (Lukács 1974: 156)

To continue the parallel reading with the *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art*, the “Idea” here stands in for the “form” of an artwork, “judgment chamber” refers to both the “formation”

and “reception” of art, and “no more than the conceivable possibility” refers to the fact that lived experience is merely an infinite source of material for aesthetic stylization. This passage thus suggests that lived experience is an a priori of our engagement with any of life’s phenomena, so its connection with the artwork must be characterized by the same tragic paradox of constitutive misunderstanding that we see in the *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art*.

Therefore, notwithstanding the differences in expression between the essay from 1911 and the Heidelberg manuscripts, Lukács’s early philosophy of tragedy was consistently interested in identifying the fundamental structure of (successful) aesthetic experience, which is rooted in misunderstanding. In this sense, there was a degree of continuity in the central theoretical claims that Lukács made in these works. Without adopting the neo-Kantian vocabulary of autonomous spheres of meaning and the specific values inherent to them, in his essay on tragedy, Lukács is far from succumbing to irrationalist themes. As a skilled “logician” of the tragic form, he uses precise technical terminology regarding the stylization of the tragic, which he inherited from his short, but influential, period of theoretical activity in the field of drama. Indeed, Lukács’s negative judgment of modern tragedy in the “The Metaphysics of Tragic” illustrates how he used his theory of the tragic to evaluate the possibility of bringing tragic forms to life: “[The desperate attempt of modern tragedians to transfer longing into a dramatic work] is the reason for the failure of modern tragedy. It wanted to introduce the a priori of tragedy into tragedy itself, it wanted to turn a cause into an active principle; but it succeeded only in intensifying its lyricism until it became a kind of soft-centered brutality” (Lukács 1974: 162).

In summary, then, Lukács’s philosophy of the tragic – as represented by “The Metaphysics of Tragic” – and his later value-based aesthetics – as represented by the *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art* – present two different modes of *aesthetic rationality*, but

neither has to exclude the other. Lukács's philosophical achievements in his essayistic treatment of tragic form in gives content to the his later methodological inquiry into the very conditions of the givenness of artworks and the tragic character of such givenness in the Heidelberg manuscripts. Reading these works in light of one another is the only way to make them mutually intelligible.¹⁰⁶

By insisting on the tragic paradox in his early aesthetics Lukács's retains a critical distance towards false attempts of pacifying the inner conflict of modernity. In particular, it allows him to stay clear from the myth of art's communicative function that would reconcile the subject with other subjects and the surrounding world. Due to the structural inability of our everyday expressive forms to communicate lived experiences in our ordinary interactions, such interactions are not immune to the risks of the assimilation of difference to the same, including the potential assimilation of the other subject in an attempt to achieve understanding. The ideal of transparency in mutual understanding is always two-sided, since it implies the possibility of imposing a preconceived conceptual mold upon experience, or otherwise forcing it to be immediately communicable.

In contrast to this, because the meaning and validity of an artwork is rooted in its self-enclosed internal harmony and thus does not reflect any specific subjectivity, it does not undermine the singularity of the subject confronting it. Communicative inadequacy persists, but it is different to ordinary communication, where miscommunication represents an obstacle to be overcome, often by means of forceful "harmonization" of subjective experiences. Instead, aesthetic misunderstanding is productive. In this sense, one can talk about the normative *relationship of misunderstanding* between subjects mediated through an

¹⁰⁶ The thesis that essayistic and systematic impulse are mutually constitutive in Lukács pre-Marxist work and successively shape his early-Marxism was first formulated by Elio Matassi and is the overriding claim of his book *Il giovane Lukács: Saggio e sistema* (Matassi 2011).

art object. And at this point, one can hardly avoid recalling the faith Adorno placed in the ability of the mediating function of art to resist the identificatory strategies of an assimilating subjectivity.

These reflections anticipate Lukács's later Marxist preoccupations with the modern culture's claim of having established its own homogeneous culture and thus obscuring the fundamental dissonance that characterizes its nature. According to Lukács, the "aesthetic culture" is the capitalist modernity's quasi-totality that wants to present itself as a new cultural system of reference, in place of pre-modern societies' organic cultural unity. But if modern artworks allowed direct communication between modern subjects, then the thesis of complete fragmentariness of modern condition would be rebuked. This and similar arguments will re-appear in *History and Class Consciousness*, in the discussion of capitalist cultural system which tends towards a quasi-homogeneity which, on the other, hand appears as radically fragmented. But in his early-Marxist work, Lukács will go even further and will extend the argument to the field of philosophical system: just as the culture, also modernity's philosophy presents itself as an integral system, though concealing its essential nature: the system is integral only as a partial system, based on the rationality of its constituent contents and the irrationality of the whole.

As I will show further, Lukács remained unsatisfied with his paradoxical aesthetic solution to the dissonances of modernity and turned instead to revolutionary philosophy of culture in the hope that a new standpoint of cultural integrity cannot be uncoupled from imagining social change.

c) The Theory of the Novel *and the World of Absolute Sinfulness*

The last stage of Lukács's pre-Marxist critique of reification can be found in *The Theory of the Novel*, where the historico-philosophical presupposition of modernity's complete

fragmentation becomes the constitutive principle for Lukács's further argument. Lukács's conceives modernity, following Fichte, as a "world of absolute sinfulness." As Alasdair MacIntyre (2007: 158) observes:

[Lukács] saw the outbreak of war in 1914 as confirmation of Fichte's thesis that the present age is an "age of absolute sinfulness," the third of four stages through which the idea of freedom has been and will be realized in successively more adequate forms. What Fichte took to be characteristics of "the present age," that is, of *his* present, 1806, when he published *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, Lukács took to be characteristics of *his* present, and of those characteristics Lukács focused not only on the age's "absolute sinfulness," but on the fact that it is a precursor of two succeeding ages, through which enlightened freedom will be realized.¹⁰⁷

A world of absolute sinfulness is one of radical alienation and the bureaucratic rationalization of all spheres of life. The Weberian iron cage of modernity reappears here but in the strikingly graspable form of the war and its bloodshed. Moreover, the modern world is abandoned by God, creating an age of nihilism where all secure guidelines for thought and action have disappeared and the modern subject is plunged into metaphysical solitude, into "transcendental homelessness – the homelessness of an action in the human order of social

¹⁰⁷ MacIntyre sees the origin and meaning of Lukács's political engagement in terms of religious conversion. He places Lukács alongside other philosopher-converts of Jewish origin in the 1910s, including Franz Rosenzweig, Adolf Reinach, and Edith Stein. The conversion stories of these thinkers, in MacIntyre's view, offer a striking example of the diverse religious impulses circulating in German culture in the prewar and war years. A son of an assimilated, liberal Jewish family, Franz Rosenzweig embraced Judaism after a period of being on the brink of converting to Christianity; Adolf Reinach became a Lutheran; Edith Stein converted to Catholicism before becoming a Discalced Carmelite nun; and Lukács, after a period of religious atheism, converted to Bolshevism (MacIntyre 2007: 158 ff.).

relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values” (Lukács 1971: 61–62).

The aesthetic answer to this situation is represented by a genre that claims to have become the modern epic: the novel. However, Lukács opposes the superficial equation of the novel with epos. While epos reflects the harmonious unity between subject and object proper to traditional organic societies, and in this sense represents an organic part of such a social whole, the novel is an expression of a “problematic” subject and their equally problematic relationship with the surrounding world. The modern subject–object relationship is characterized by an unbridgeable gap between thought and action, interiority and exteriority. The modern novel’s protagonist is entirely “psychological,” tormented by interior conflict and only able to act in a transgressive manner, such as in *Madame Bovary* or novels about criminals; the only alternative is to be condemned to madness, such as in *Don Quixote*. Transgressing emptied-out social conventions appears to the only *principium individuationis* of a subject in a world of absolute sinfulness.

However, Lukács did not succumb to the negative overtones of this diagnosis. In Dostoevsky’s novels, he saw a direct representation of a new type of subjectivity that acts *within* and *for* the community. He thus saw Dostoevsky’s characters as organs of genuine communication with both other subjects and the surrounding world, a communication defined neither in psychological nor sociological terms but rather in terms of a unique logic of a non-psychological *psyche* and the imperatives of the ethics of the good. Indeed, Lukács defines this ethics as “the second ethics.” But what, then, did he consider the “first” ethics?

While this may surprise readers of Lukács’s later works, such as *History and Class Consciousness*, at this stage of his career he was a radical anti-Hegelian. He even compares Hegel’s theories of objective spirit and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) to a “Jehovian” form

reigning over modernity's institutions. In the historico-philosophical vocabulary of Lukács's thought at the time, "Jehovah" stands for a reifying principle that tends to hollow out all spiritual objectivations during the history of their lived meaning, be it the abandonment of primitive Christianity's evangelical spirit due to the Church's institutionalization and dedication to earthly power or the meaninglessness of Western political institutions, such as the democratic parliaments that instead of advocating diplomacy embraced the Great War with enthusiasm. Together with other critics of the time, such as Rosenzweig, Lukács viewed Hegel as defending the modern nation state. This was based on passages such as the following from *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*:

Since the state is objective spirit, it is only as one of its members that the individual himself has objectivity, truth, and ethical life. Unification as such is itself the true content and aim, and the individual's destiny is to live a universal life. His further particular satisfaction, activity, and mode of conduct have this substantial and universally valid life as their starting point and their result. (Hegel 2008: 229)

Due to his defense of the rational idea of the modern nation state and his belief in the state as the highest form of ethical life, Hegel, in Lukács's view, left no space for truly ethical resistance to the decadence of the belligerent states' institutions and the inert self-referentiality that brought entire nations to the bloodshed of the Great War.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, Lukács seems to attribute no ethical validity to Hegel's notion ethical life.

At this stage of his philosophical career, instead, Lukács identifies (first) ethics with Kant's moral theory centered around the categorical imperative. Formulating his theory of second ethics, however, Lukács goes beyond both Kantian formal moral imperatives (first

¹⁰⁸ On Lukács's critique of Hegel in his pre-Marxist writings, see Matassi (2008: 107–117).

ethics) and Hegel's ethical life. Lukács believed, along with other thinkers of his generation, that while a Kantian first ethics deprives the ethical imperative of any concrete content, Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, on the contrary, subjects ethical imperative to the effective reality of ethical content. Lukács theorized instead, an ethics of immediate imperatives of the heart, that although non-formalistic and, thus, non-utopian, were aimed at the reality beyond the actually existing one. Borrowing from Bloch's term, one could say, that a "concrete utopia" was a guiding thread of Lukács's pre-Marxist ethics.

2. From Meister Eckhart to Dostoevsky: The Origin of the Notion of Second Nature in Lukács's Pre-Marxist Writings

In the German-speaking philosophico-theological tradition, the notion of reification goes back as far as Meister Eckhart,¹⁰⁹ whose mystical theology had a significant impact not only, as is well known, on the formation of Hegel's and Heidegger's thought,¹¹⁰ but also on that of the young Lukács. Throughout his sermons and writings, the medieval Dominican preacher warned against the risks of reification of the soul, seeing human psychological dependence on thinglike images and representations as a principal obstacle to the detachment

¹⁰⁹ See János Weiss, *Verdinglichung und Subjektivierung: Versuch einer Reaktualisierung der kritischen Theorie*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015), 11–12. In his reconstruction of the tradition of reification, Weiss locates Eckhart's thought at the origin of the critical theory of thinghood. For the discussion of Eckhart's reception in Marxism, see Alois Haas, "Meister Eckhart im Spiegel der marxistischen Ideologie," in *Sermo Mysticus: Studien zu Theologie und Sprache der deutschen Mystik* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1979), 238–54.

¹¹⁰ Cyril O'Regan, "Hegelian Philosophy of Religion and Eckhartian Mysticism," in *New Perspectives on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, (ed.) D. Kolb (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 109–29; John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 9–46.

(*Abgeschiedenheit*) from everything creatural necessary to achieve a God-like freedom within a non-psychoic spiritual domain. From this perspective, Eckhart defines the original unreified subjective dimension as a “little castle in the mind”:

It is free of all names and devoid of all forms, entirely bare and free, as void and free as God is in himself... [T]his castle is one and simple, an identical unity so highly elevated above every mode and above every power that no power nor any mode can ever look into it, not even God himself.¹¹¹

This “little castle” indicates the direction for a dereifying return to an antecedent state. Eckhart’s claim is that a pure spiritual principle exists within the human mind, after which a detached subject should strive; here, “spiritual” stands for imageless, non-representational, and nameless. Hence, we are dealing with a radical model of both *res* and reification. Heidegger observes that, in Eckhart, “thing” is a generic term indicative of the being of anything posited, and it can denote even the soul or God:

Meister Eckhart uses the word *thing* (*dinc*) for God as well as for the soul. God is for him the “highest and uppermost thing.” The soul is a “great thing.” This master of thinking in no way means to say that God and the soul are something like a rock: a material object. Thing is here the cautious and abstemious name for something that is at all.¹¹²

Thus, Eckhart’s mystical proposal for achieving detachment is no less than a radical method for overcoming reification. It is the call to return to a pre-originary origin (*ursprung*) in which, as Reiner Schürmann argues, “the will sets itself loose from any principle; it is

¹¹¹ Meister Eckhart, “Sermon: Jesus Entered,” in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy*, (ed. and tr.) R. Schürmann (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 3–8, here 7–8.

¹¹² Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (tr.) A. Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 161–80, here 174.

anarchic.”¹¹³ In order to escape the reifying attitude, the subject of detachment has to liberate her mind from alien determinations, even if these determinations concern God’s own names: such naming would imply representing God as a created thing and thus perverting God’s nature, as well as perverting the nature of the mind by subjugating it to determinate being.

Naturally, introducing terms such as “psychological” and “reification” to the discussion of a medieval author risks anachronism. But the use of this terminology retains its relevance as long as we bear in mind that we are dealing with the reception of Eckhart within the anti-psychologistic currents of thought of German philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹⁴ Lukács was part of a genuine Eckhart renaissance during this time.¹¹⁵ Eckhart’s critique of the soul, understood not only as a mere receptacle of thinglike images but primarily as the most hidden and therefore most menacing thing, was welcomed by young thinkers seeking a way out of the dead-end of a psychologism that reduced consciousness to a spatiotemporal thing, analyzable by means of the natural-scientific method. For Lukács and his peers, such scientific rationality endangered the last remaining idea of autonomous subjective agency, which had already been undermined by the development of modern forms of life.

¹¹³ Reiner Schürmann, “Commentary on Sermon: Like a Vase of Massive Gold,” in *Wandering Joy*, 117.

¹¹⁴ The psychologism debate is reconstructed by Martin Kusch in *Psychologism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1995). For the reception of Eckhart in twentieth century philosophy, see Dermot Moran, “Meister Eckhart in Twentieth-Century Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, (ed.) D. Moran and J. Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 669–98.

¹¹⁵ See Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity*, (tr.) A. Schindel and A. Vanides (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 12. Among the protagonists of the Eckhart revival, Flasch names thinkers as diverse as Robert Musil, Karl Mannheim, Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, Gustav Landauer, Lukács, and even the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg.

Husserl's critique of the reification of consciousness, first formulated in *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* (1911/1912), was well-known. In this manifesto on the phenomenological method, Husserl claims that "to follow the model of the natural sciences almost inevitably means to reify consciousness."¹¹⁶ In other words, consciousness is reified if it is methodologically derived from the corporeal world of spatially extended things that are describable on the ground of natural causal laws. For Husserl, this was the case with the strands of modern experimental psychology that treated consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon of objective physiological processes. What interests us in Husserl's account is that if, on the one hand, he conceived reification as a "pathology" deeply rooted in the phenomenon of modernity and having substantial practical implications for our lives, on the other hand, he also thought of this pathology as entirely internal to scientific thought and, as such, a "theoretical error," a "fruit of a methodological prejudice."¹¹⁷ Hence, for Husserl, we also have to seek a dereifying solution within the methodological domain, namely, within the new phenomenological method aimed at exposing the effective non-deterministic functioning of conscious life.

It might be worth noting that, in his attempt to revitalize the theory of reification Lukács formulated in *History and Class Consciousness*, Honneth returns to terminology that

¹¹⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, (tr.) Q. Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 104.

¹¹⁷ Matteo Giannasi, "Epistemologia della reificazione: Diagnosi, prognosi e terapia in Husserl," in *Teorie della reificazione: Storia e attualità di un fenomeno sociale*, (ed.) A. Bellan (Milan: Mimesis, 2013), 191–214, here 193–94. See also Christian Lotz, "Reification through Commodity Form or Technology? From Honneth back to Heidegger and Marx," *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2013), 184–200, here 184 n. 1. For a detailed discussion of the relation Lukács-Husserl, see Richard Westerman, "The Reification of Consciousness: Husserl's Phenomenology in Lukács's Identical Subject-Object," *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2010): 97–130.

echoes Husserl's critique of naturalist psychology one hundred years earlier. In Honneth's account of self-reification, the subject enters into a reifying self-relationship by approaching her own mental states cognitively, as "these states are grasped as given, thing-like objects...[and] the subject experiences her own feelings as 'internally' self-contained and static objects that are to be uncovered" (R, 73). This self-reification points to the fact that the subject has forgotten an originally non-reified and affirmative self-relationship: a primordial recognition of one's genuine feelings and desires. However, unlike Husserl's methodological resistance to reification, Honneth responds to the cognitivist error of his interpretation of the reifying attitude with a normative remedy that consists in *remembering* that the subject's "desires and feelings are *worthy* of articulation and appropriation" (R, 74; my emphasis). The introduction of Honneth's thesis on dereification at this point in our argument serves to show that the inner development of Lukács's theory of reification from a pre-Marxist to a Marxist phase contains the elements of a potential Lukácsian anti-critique of the theoretical positions that sought to correct or revitalize his original theory.

But it is time to ask why the young pre-Marxist Lukács pursued a model for dereified subjectivity in the works of a medieval preacher rather than in the detailed analyses of consciousness presented by Husserl. Why is it Eckhart's detached "nobleman" that appears as the prototype of a dereified subject rather than a phenomenologist? And why did Lukács not even contemplate the subjective recognition of the worthiness of one's own mental dispositions as a possible way out of reification?

The germs of Lukács's later critique of reification are certainly present in his early project of anti-intellectualist ethics, which he began working on before, and further

developed during, the First World War.¹¹⁸ In one text of this period, “On Poverty of Spirit” (1912), Lukács observed that nothing could be further from Eckhart’s intention than promoting “mysticism as a life-style”; rather, for Lukács, Eckhart’s thought is fundamentally “practical-ethical” and “worldly-active.”¹¹⁹ Indeed, detachment is only indicative of one side of dereification in Eckhart, a passive-receptive preamble to a proper dereifying *practice*. If a detached subject permanently strives to maintain her distance from things, this in itself does not break the dependence on thinghood. A detached subject also has to return to worldly affairs.¹²⁰ Accordingly, instead of being oriented to contemplation or monastic refuge from worldly things, Eckhart enunciates “a call for a certain type of *existence* among things.”¹²¹ Lukács correctly understands Eckhart’s dereifying solution to be practically motivated and this, in his eyes, constitutes the Dominican preacher’s advantage over the excessively theoretical approaches to reification among Lukács’s contemporaries.

For Lukács and like-minded young thinkers, with the eruption of the Great War, any methodological way out of reification appeared flawed, and their hopes were instead directed towards the idea of a conciliation of theory and praxis. At this time, Lukács had already distanced himself from any approach that saw reification as a source of epistemic error and conceived dereification as an adjustment of epistemic attitudes. And it is in these intense years of theoretical reconsideration that Lukács abandoned, once and for all, any neutral-

¹¹⁸ In-depth discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but for more see Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Ästhetizistische Kulturkritik und ethische Utopie: Georg Lukács' neukantianisches Frühwerk* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 177–202.

¹¹⁹ Georg Lukács, “On Poverty of Spirit: A Conversation and a Letter,” *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 3, no. 34 (1972): 371–85, here 376.

¹²⁰ Schürmann, “Like a Vase,” 117.

¹²¹ Reiner Schürmann, “Commentary on Sermon: Jesus Entered,” in *Wandering Joy*, 45; my emphasis.

observer standpoint towards reality that would leave intact the ontological relation between the acting subject and the sphere of objectivity in favour of an engaged encounter with the world. At that time, along with Eckhart, Lukács named Kierkegaard's Abraham, Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, and Alyosha Karamazov as prototypes of dereified subjectivity. He defined them as "Gnostics of deed," saying "their thinking left the purely conceptual realm of knowledge" in favor of a "knowledge of men that illuminates everything, a knowledge wherein subject and object collapse into one another."¹²²

However, at this stage of Lukács's philosophical maturation, overcoming the division between subject and object still presents itself as an ethical ideal. In the outline of the ethical theory scattered throughout his unfinished book on Dostoevsky¹²³ and *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), Lukács's understanding of the subjective stance towards thinghood is still profoundly Eckhartian. Reified objectivity is semanticized thanks to the wide-ranging term "formation" (*Gebilde*), which encompasses the whole domain of exterior, ossified, and purely factual objectivities that appear to a subject (a non-psychological soul¹²⁴) in dead and emptied-out forms, deprived of the living element of interiority that had previously brought them to life. Formations are here indistinctly understood as self-referential political, religious, and legal institutions, or even cultural objects in which subjectivity is not able to recognize itself anymore. In genuinely Eckhartian style, Lukács also conceives dereification

¹²² Lukács, "On Poverty of Spirit," 375. On the absence of distinction of subject-object distinction in Eckhart's conception of being as operative unity (*einheit im gewürke*), see Reiner Schürmann, "Commentary on Sermon: Proclaim the Word," in *Wandering Joy*, 183.

¹²³ Georg Lukács, *Dostojewski: Notizen und Entwürfe* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985). For the presence of Eckhart in this book, see 148, 162, 173.

¹²⁴ The "psychological subject" is defined by Lukács as belonging to "external world [*das psychologische Subjekt...zur Aussenwelt gehört*]" (*ibid.*, 174). Lukács's critique of the subject of psychology in his early-Marxism is discussed further below.

as “the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved” these formations.¹²⁵ We will later see the term “awakening” reappear with a completely new, historically concrete meaning in Lukács’s early-Marxist interpretation of the dereification of subjectivity.

But why is the model of subjectivity that Lukács identified at the “Eckhartian” stage of his philosophical career insufficient for overcoming reification? In this section, I will argue that a new figure of reified subjectivity can only be adequately conceptualized by first paying attention to the transformation of the theory of objectivity, of thinghood as such, in Lukács thought. Then, after discussing Lukács’s renewed conception of objectivity, gained by assuming the historical standpoint of the critique of capitalism, I will claim that the key for dereification in Lukács lies in subjectivity, in particular reified subjectivity. This concept of reified subjectivity will, furthermore, show both continuities and discontinuities with Lukács’s previous understanding of reification.

The distance between Eckhart’s and Lukács’s accounts of dereification can be preliminarily assessed through two terms of central importance for Eckhart’s thought: *gelâzenheit* (or *Gelassenheit*) and *Vergessenheit*. *Gelâzenheit*, or releasement, is key to understanding the paradoxical nature of the special modality of existence among things advocated by Eckhart. If we still consider the Eckhartian mode of detachment as a dereifying operation, then this dereification consists in letting things be. From this perspective, thinghood still appears as fixed, alien, and autonomous, but this only constitutes an occasion for self-dereification to the extent that the subject does not intend to reject or negate the thinglikeness of things by turning away from them, but rather, thanks to releasement,

¹²⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, (tr.) A. Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 64.

actively lets things be in their unmodifiable being. However, although Eckhart's *gelâzenheit* leaves things to subsist in their standalone being, this operation does not have the ambiguous practical neutrality that it will acquire in Heidegger's reading, which is "in contradiction neither with the most abject political regimes nor with the most authentic experience of God."¹²⁶ In Eckhart, *gelâzenheit* is functional for acquiring a new attitude to life, which is obtained by forcing the empty God towards the emptied-out subject.

Notwithstanding the strong practical overtones of Eckhart's *gelâzenheit*, in Lukács's Marxist philosophy, dereification, including dereification of subjectivity, assumes radically new, praxis-focused importance. The idea of dereification as praxis, in the strict sense attributed to it by Lukács, is conceptualizable only as a structural "transformation of forms of objectivity that shape the existence of human beings" (Lukács 1971: 186; see also 177). The paradoxical active passivity or passive activity, the attitude of accepting the pre-constituted forms of objectivity that ground the appearance of objects in their immutable thinglike character, as implied in *gelâzenheit*, is defined throughout *History and Class Consciousness* as a "contemplative" attitude and opposed to a new transformative standpoint towards objectivity. Hence, in Lukács's form of Marxism, dereification assumes a double task from the very beginning, including both a theoretical critique of the forms of appearance of objects under capitalism, and active engagement in practices aimed at transforming such forms of appearance.

Vergessenheit, or forgetfulness, meanwhile, indicates an even larger discrepancy between Eckhart's ethical and Lukács's Marxist accounts of reification. In Eckhart's thought, forgetfulness is a positive mode of existence that enables one to engage with things

¹²⁶ Schürmann, "Proclaim the Word," 201.

“*sunder warumbe*, without a why.”¹²⁷ Furthermore, if the idea of forgetfulness is at all adequate for revitalizing Lukács’s notion of reification, it would at best negatively describe the state of affairs under reification. But even a Honnethian idea of reification as the forgetfulness of antecedent recognition would be vulnerable to the same critique that motivated Lukács’s abandonment of his previous ethical Eckhartianism. Hence, even if we consider the two opposed meanings of *Vergessenheit* in Eckhart and Honneth, namely, as a remedy against reification and the cause of it, we do not get to the bottom of Lukács’s idea. Now, let us examine Lukács’s novel definition of thinghood, which, according to the dialectical framework of *History and Class Consciousness*, also explains the reification of subjectivity. Since our goal here is limited to pinpointing the paradigmatic shift in Lukács’s view of objectivity (and, consequently, subjectivity), as entailed by his adoption of a Marxist perspective on society, we will mostly consider the first section of the central essay in *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” which should suffice to illustrate this change.

In the next chapter, I will look at the shortcomings of the ethical conception of reification according to Lukács, and I will discuss his transition from an ethical critique of reified subjectivity to a dialectical one, as presented in the central essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”¹²⁸ Lukács’s early-Marxist dissociation from both epistemic and ethical approaches to reification does not mean he fully abandoned these dimensions of inquiry, but rather it shows the necessity of integrating them into the critique of the socio-historical reality of capitalism. Lukács was

¹²⁷ Schürmann, “Like a Vase,” 109.

¹²⁸ An analysis of the elements of ethical idealism in Lukács’s first Marxist period exceeds the scope of this paper. For a detailed discussion, see David Kettler, “Culture and Revolution: Lukács in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19,” *Telos*, no. 10, 35–92.

convinced that the structure of social life, along with epistemic and ethical critiques of reification, can only lose its partially abstract character after identifying a rational core of reification in capitalistic categories. Reflecting first on reified objectivity and then on reified subjectivity in the following sections will therefore, surprisingly, anticipate a Lukácsian response to any normative of cognitive reinterpretation of reification, including that of Honneth.

3. Lukács's Marxist Conception of Reification: The Commodity-Form as the Dominant Form of Objectivity in Capitalist Modernity

In the following, I will consider Lukács's transition from an ethical perspective on reification to one informed by his new acquaintance with dialectical social theory, identifying a shift in the conceptualization of thinghood with respect to his previous account. At this point, understanding the historically determined character of the *res* of reification becomes indispensable for an adequate comprehension of the reification of both objectivity and subjectivity in Lukács. In this context, I will look at Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, since it provides the model for Lukács's description of the appearance of all social phenomena in capitalism.

One could by no means argue that Lukács's ethical critique of reification was completely ahistorical. On the contrary, it was rooted in a strong historico-philosophical view about the essence of modernity. However, at this ethical stage, Lukács at best targeted the categories of the capitalist economy sporadically, without identifying a clear structural principle. Starting with the "Reification" essay, however, the notion of reification is used to investigate the way in which the commodity-structure shapes the various manifestations of life under modern capitalism. As a result of his reading of the first chapter of Marx's

Capital, Lukács identifies the commodity-structure as “the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its life-expressions” (Lukács 1971: 83; trans. mod.); it is “the universal category of society as a whole” (Lukács: 1971). Lukács thus conceives of the commodity-structure as a true “paradigm,”¹²⁹ an all-pervasive categorial framework of capitalism: it constitutes the immanent condition of possibility and determines the mode of appearance of objects in their commodity-form in a society based on generalized commodity exchange. At the beginning of the essay, Lukács deals with Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism and identifies it with Marx’s own conception of reification:

The essence of commodity-structure...is that a relation between people takes on a thinglike character and thus acquires a “spectral objectivity”...that in its strict, apparently fully-enclosed and rational autonomy conceals every trace of its fundamental essence: the relation between people. (Lukács 1971: 83–84; trans. mod.)

In dealing with Marx’s account of thinghood in capitalism, Lukács is first struck by how products of human labour appear to social actors, and to their producers in the first place, as governed by the “natural laws” of exchange. Marx argues that in the process of producing a commodity, *social* labour (a “relation between people”) conducted by *private*, isolated producers is expressed as the commodity’s exchange value and, in this sense, the social character of labour immediately appears to become an objective property of the commodity

¹²⁹ The term “paradigm” is used here in the sense set out by Giorgio Agamben in *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, (tr.) L. D’Isanto and K. Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 21–22: reification is a “general rule” of capitalist society, but not something that can be applied to any single phenomenon from the outside. Rather, “it is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule.” In this sense, commodity is “an *exemplar* of a general rule that can never be stated a priori.” Commodity is an elementary form, a structuring principle that becomes intelligible only in its sensible manifestations at different layers of life under capitalism and that does not idealistically subsist outside these manifestations.

object, as if it were autonomous from the conditions of its production.¹³⁰ Thus, there is an ontological inversion within the commodity: what is essentially social appears natural.

Lukács also refers to this passage from *Capital*:

[T]he products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.... [T]he 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 therefrom.¹³¹

This quote describes the opposite inversion of social and natural qualities within the commodity to the one set out in Lukács's discussion of commodity fetishism above. By presenting themselves in the form of exchangeability, commodities appear as social things, and their qualitative material aspects, represented by their use value, appear as mere expressions of their abstract exchange value. Thus, a commodity-thing is a fundamentally split bearer of both use value and exchange value.¹³²

At this point, let us ask ourselves whether epistemic or ethical models of dereification could be developed based on this reimagined conception of thinghood. Would, for example,

¹³⁰ See Hans-Georg Backhaus, "On the Dialectics of the Value-Form," *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 1, no. 99 (1980): 99–120, here 107–108.

¹³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, (tr.) B. Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 165; trans. mod. following [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm], accessed December 3, 2018. Lukács quotes from this passage in Lukács 1971: 86.

¹³² In the effective practice of exchange, this immanent opposition within a commodity-thing is represented by an external one, namely, the opposition between the commodity-form and money-form of commodity. See Marx, *Capital*, 199. However, neither use value nor exchange value are to be understood as properties of things themselves: they exist only in a value or exchange relation in which a thing *qua* commodity stands with respect to other commodities. See, Christian Lotz, "Gegenständlichkeit—From Marx to Lukács and Back Again," in *Critical Theory and the Thought of Andrew Feenberg*, 71–89, here 83.

a corrected method or an adjusted epistemic, ethical, or normative attitude at least suffice to “penetrate the veil of reification” (Lukács 1971: 86)? The answer to this has to be negative for at least two reasons.

First, the phenomenon of reification implied in capitalism is not a misperception, an erroneous attitude, or an ethical fallacy. It rather demonstrates how things necessarily appear and are experienced under capitalism. Instead of being rooted in our mental representations or in physico-chemical qualities of natural things, objects present themselves in their *real categorical* form of objectivity.¹³³ And if all social objects in capitalism tend to appear in an abstract form, the origin of this mode of appearance is to be sought in the concrete social practice of generalized commodity exchange, which constitutes these objects in their abstract thinglikeness.¹³⁴

By critiquing subjectivist theories of value, Marx had already expressed his conviction that the effective critique of capitalist economic categories has to lie in the exhibition of “the social conditions which make the existence of value-form necessary.”¹³⁵ Lukács echoes this sentiment by conceiving commodity as a universal category of social being, grounded in concrete commodity relations (Lukács 1971: 86). Similar to Marx’s critique of subjectivism in economics, Lukács identifies subjectivism as a limitation of economic theories that, instead of effective laws of production and circulation of goods, take the subjective comportment (*subjektiven Verhaltungen*) of individuals as their departure point with respect to understanding markets (Lukács 1971: 104). Hence, depriving reified

¹³³ For a detailed exploration of this argument, see Lotz, “Gegenständlichkeit,” 77ff.

¹³⁴ This process is elsewhere referred to as “real abstraction.” For the use of the term in Georg Simmel and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, see Helmut Reichelt, “Marx’s Critique of Economic Categories: Reflections on the Problem of Validity in the Dialectical Method of Presentation in *Capital*,” *Historical Materialism*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2007): 3–52.

¹³⁵ Backhaus, “Dialectics of the Value-Form,” 107.

phenomena of their economic-ontological foundation equals, for Lukács, depriving them of their intelligibility as such (Lukács 1971: 95).¹³⁶

The second reason that previous solutions to reification are insufficient for Lukács lies in his newly acquired belief in social revolution as the key to overcoming reified forms of social organization. This aspect of Lukács's theory, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper, since it represents an advanced stage of his overall conception of dereification. The main issue at stake for Lukács in his project of dereification, from a Marxist perspective, is to identify a fissure, a negative moment within the picture of all-pervasive reification that could reveal the split nature of all objectivity under capitalism rather than persistently reproducing representations of objects in self-enclosed monadic perfection.

Before discussing Lukács's view on reified subjectivity in capitalism, let us take a look at two different, and seemingly opposed, meanings of the term thinglikeness (*Dinghaftigkeit*) used by Lukács. The first is the most recurrent and refers to the appearance of social relations as natural things, as well as the tendential increase of the mediation of relational categories through thinglike forms. But when Lukács uses the term "natural," he does not use it exclusively in relation to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. He also draws upon Max Weber's conception of modern rationalization, contending that so-called instrumental rationality, based on the formal calculation of technical factors directed to reach expected results, has pervaded all spheres of the human lifeworld, resulting in the rigid parcellation, fragmentation, and formalization of modern existence. In this scheme, all social phenomena appear as idealized and formalized objects, analysable in terms of causal laws understood in the mathematical, natural-scientific tradition. Within this framework, social

¹³⁶ It is worth noticing that Lukács, following Marx, conceives economic categories ontologically, as "forms of existence, determinations of existence [*Daseinsformen, Existenzbestimmungen*]" (Lukács 1971: 57; trans. mod.).

objects are engaged with only inasmuch as they are predictable, quantifiable, comparable with one another, and instrumentally manipulable. Such is the case with economic laws, where the movement of commodities acquires a nature-like autonomy with respect to any subjective agency. But, as we have already seen, this mode of appearance cannot be reduced to a methodological confusion rooted in the application of natural-scientific methods to social analysis. Instead, Lukács argues that naturalistic approaches to society are only particular cases of a deeper ontological inversion at the core of how social interactions are effectively structured. In other words, the ontological status of social reality under capitalism lends itself to being investigated naturalistically.

The second use of thinglikeness in Lukács seems to be an inversion of the first. Here, the term *Dinghaftigkeit* denotes a loss of the original distinctive features of objects as soon as they become commodities. As mere equivalence of exchangeability, an object conceals those aspects that had individuated it from the diverse ocean of other things and that conditioned the possibility of it entering into relations of exchangeability as such. As Lukács writes,

This rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—thing-character of all things [*Dingcharakter aller Dinge*]. When use-values appear universally as commodities they acquire a new objectivity, a new thinglikeness [*Dinghaftigkeit*] which they did not possess in an age of episodic exchange and which destroys their original and authentic thinglikeness. (Lukács 1971: 92; trans. mod.)

Thus, a commodity-object can have a thinglike form and not have it at the same time. It assumes a thinglike form by concealing, as exchange value, the social relations incorporated in its body (social labour). And it loses its thinglikeness in the sense that, thanks to the value-form, it then appears as an abstract object, deprived of its original distinctive qualities.

This novel sense of thinghood in Lukács's Marxist paradigm leaves no space for a merely epistemic or ethical-normative interpretation of the phenomenon of reification. Neither conceptual level can be isolated from the general framework of the interpretation of capitalist economic categories. In the following section, I will therefore discuss this updated notion of thinglikeness in light of Lukács's conception of reified subjectivity under capitalism.

4. Reified Forms of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity

In the following, I will discuss the repercussions of the natural-scientific conception of objectivity employed in the capitalist organization of the labour-process for the constitution of reified subjectivity under capitalism. I shall claim that Lukács's notion of initial dereification is achieved through the illumination of an affective level of reification, in which the categories of capitalist economics, such as abstraction and quantification, far from being merely mental constructions, are experienced directly by subjects. This should bring us closer to grounding the claim that Lukács's underlying intention was to present reification as both a theoretical-reconstructive and an experiential-genetic concept. To paraphrase a well-known Kantian tenet, Lukács's idea was that for the reconstruction of the origin of reified forms of objectivity not to be empty, it must be translatable into a critique of concrete experiential structures of reification; and this critique, in order not to be blind, must in turn be rooted in a genealogy of the elementary forms that organize our experience under capitalism. Only these two layers of reification taken together can lead to a third conception of reification, understood as a practico-critical concept. Finally, I will identify identifying both the limits of recognitional approach to reification, and its value in highlighting possible developments of the Lukácsian model of subjectivity under late capitalism. This will be

done, however, without renouncing the original socio-economic context of Lukács's theory of reification.

I have already explored Lukács's definition of the commodity-structure as an all-pervasive form of objectivity that shapes the appearance of *all* objects in their necessarily thinglike form within capitalism. We have also seen that the abstract character of this mode of appearance is not illusory, but rather that it has to be traced back to the social practices that generate it, such as commodity exchange. In this section, I will show how, according to Lukács, this account of objecthood is key to understanding capitalism's peculiar object: the subjectivity of the worker. I will claim, moreover, that the awareness of reification is not disclosed cognitively. Thus, if understood as a mere mental category, reification remains inaccessible to critique, since it gives no criteria for identifying its qualitative content. Such content has to be sought at the point where it first becomes accessible to reflection, namely, in the affective experience of reified subjectivity.¹³⁷

Following the previously established principle of the universality of the commodity-structure, Lukács maintains that "the subject of the exchange is just as abstract, formal and reified as its object" (Lukács 1971: 105). This leaves no doubt that, in Lukács's account of reification, each subject of capitalist society is subsumed under the laws of reification. However, not everyone is a *dialectical* subject of reification in the sense understood by Lukács. Only a worker *qua* mere possessor of the commodity labour-power falls into this category. This might not be immediately obvious, because, as a member of capitalist society, the worker is a part of the same reified social world as the capitalist. And thanks to the rule

¹³⁷ The discussion of the affective, somatic, and sensuous registers of critiquing capitalism is a guiding thread in Anita Chari's *A Political Economy of the Senses: Neoliberalism, Reification, Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For a discussion of Lukács's theory of reification from this perspective, see chapter four, "Lukács's Turn to a Political Economy of Senses."

of the commodity-form, this shared world undergoes an ever-expanding homogenization of all spheres of life under the principle of commodification. In order to provide a detailed picture of this process, Lukács refers extensively to Weber's well-known description of the "iron cage," an unescapable bureaucratic machine governing modern politics, law, business, industry, and even academia. Among other exemplars of reified consciousness under capitalism, Lukács identifies journalism with its abstract, fragmented, and depersonalized style of subjective expression (Lukács 1971: 100). Moreover, we could name countless occasions where *all* subjects are equally subjected to scientific methods—*i.e.*, treated as abstract objects that are analysable, divisible, and manipulable in accordance with the rules and experimental procedures of the natural sciences (the world of medicine serving as just one example).

I believe, however, that the real target of Lukács's critique of the natural sciences is their *use* exclusively for purposes of capital accumulation, their full integration into a rationally organized dominion of capital over the worker.¹³⁸ This is, first of all, evident in the fact that objects and processes can be infinitely disaggregated into isolated parts and then strategically rearticulated to achieve increased productivity of labour. If assessed from the standpoint of capital, the capacity of modern science to isolate segments from the organic texture of the natural world and construct scientific theories for cognitive and technological purposes is thus seen as functional for capitalistic organization of the labour process.

Now, let us look at the issue of class distinction in Lukács's account of levels of reification. The true link between the reified form of objectivity incorporated within commodity and the reification of the subject passes precisely through the reification of the

¹³⁸ For a discussion of a non-neutral character of science and technology in capitalist work organization, see Raniero Panzieri, "Sull'uso capitalistico delle machine nel neocapitalismo," in *Lotte operaie nello sviluppo capitalistico*, (ed.) S. Mancini (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 3–23.

just-mentioned work organization. Under such systems of organization, the “finished article ceases to be the object of the work-process. The latter turns into the objective synthesis of rationalized special systems whose unity is determined by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other” (Lukács 1971: 88). The material outcome of the abstract labour-process is just as much an abstract commodity-object.

Inevitably, this requires the producing subjectivity, the worker, to be subject to the same principle of abstraction as the commodity. Objectively, this implies that a subject is reduced to a passive element within a highly standardized, repetitive, mechanical system of actions that she finds herself able to perform passively, or *contemplatively* as Lukács terms it.

Subjectively—and here we witness the unity of epistemology and ontology that characterizes the theoretical framework of *History and Class Consciousness*—the subject of reification becomes a “psychological subject.” This should not, however, be understood as an absurd claim about workers lacking an interior psychic dimension before being subsumed under reification. What Lukács means is that the worker increasingly becomes a subject construed on the ground of experimental psychology: a previously non-existent theoretical notion that acquires substance within the capitalist organization of the labour-process. This is the case with Taylorism, described by Lukács as follows:

With the modern “psychological” analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanisation extends right into the worker’s “soul”: even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts. (Lukács 1971: 88)¹³⁹

¹³⁹ For a post-Fordist interpretation, see Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, (tr.) F. Cadel and G. Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

The analysis that Lukács has in mind does not refer to the acquisition of new knowledge, but it does point to the proper constitution of a reified subject of capitalism. As we saw in Eckhart, reification of subjectivity consists in the fact that the reified subject, the “soul,” is understood as nothing but a reflection or even assumption of the structure of objectivity that it confronts. But instead of reflecting the generic category of any positive being, here the reified subject is invested with a historically peculiar form of objectivity: that of the commodity.

5. Self-Reification of Subjects and the Horizon of Dereification

But if the commodity-form is all-embracing and has invaded both objectivity and subjectivity, how should one conceive dereification? In the following, I will briefly explore Lukács’s idea of the commodified subject’s experience of the reifying effects of capitalism. This view will contrast with any conception that treats Lukács’s theory of an identical subject-object as offering a quasi-miraculous solution to the problem of reification, where the exploited proletariat automatically becomes the revolutionary subject thanks to mere acquisition of awareness of her position within society which thus breaks the spell of reification. I believe that such criticisms are made possible only by ignoring the role of affectivity in reification. Moreover, we will see that the limit of Honneth’s reactualization of Lukács’s notion of reification lies in the separation of the (correctly thematized by Honneth) affective dimension of experience from the critique of economic categories of capitalism. At the same time, though, Honneth’s analyses allow us to raise questions about the status of the subject in Lukács, which should be taken into consideration in further attempts to conceptualize subjectivity in capitalism.

We have seen how capitalist work organization requires introducing a “psychological subject” to optimize the productivity of labour. This, in turn, requires the extension of the process of abstraction beyond any natural limit, which is made possible by diminishing qualitative aspects of the life of the worker in favour of abstract quantitative determinations (Lukács 1971: 166). As part of this, labour time is increased by negating workers’ free time and any claims derived from the lived experience of workers. The principle of abstraction thus comes into conflict with the lives of subjects and the triumph of quantification appears as a direct negation the worker’s needs, desires, projections, and intentions.¹⁴⁰ Existentially, the methodological spectre of the “psychological subject” is thus nothing more than a repressed subjectivity formed in negative affective experience under capitalism. Such a subject relates to her own psycho-physical life as a disengaged and disassociated observer of quantified objective processes, which is to say that the multilayeredness of individual life becomes inaccessible to the subject: her most distinctive individual features appear to her as extraneous (Lukács 1971: 89). It is precisely through the depersonalizing effects of reification that the repressed worker identifies herself within the totality of thinglike objects that constitute the social texture. The consciousness here at work is again “psychological”:

For, as in the science of psychology, this might very well be consciousness “of” an object, one which without modifying the way in which consciousness and object are related and thus without changing the knowledge so attained might still “accidentally” choose itself for an object.... [K]nowledge acquired in this way must have the same truth-criteria as in the case of knowledge of “other” objects (*ibid.*, 168–69).

¹⁴⁰ See Rüdiger Dannemann, *Das Prinzip Verdinglichung: Studie zur Philosophie Georg Lukács* (Frankfurt: Sendler, 1987), 103–104.

Psychology, as understood by Lukács, is a contemplative science in the sense that it promotes passive acceptance of the status quo of subjectivity as a mere spatiotemporal thing (Lukács was rather unfamiliar with the concept of depth psychology). The subjective functioning of “psychological” consciousness is limited to the acquisition of pre-constituted objective self-knowledge following fixed patterns of subject-object relations. The same necessity that means social actors perceive commodities as governed by objective natural laws—thus concealing their double social-natural character—also presents subjectivity to itself and fellow social actors as identically structured. Thus, genuine subjectivation in capitalism consists in a necessary *self-objectivation in a thinglike form, modelled according to the commodity-structure*.

What, then, triggers a genuine dereifying process? According to Lukács, the dialectical contradiction of reification lies in how the blind expansion of capitalist abstraction becomes a directly perceived *qualitative* deprivation in the lives of workers, allowing the direct affective experience of the principle of capitalist abstraction through commodified self-perception. As Andrew Feenberg observes, “workers themselves are the proximate object of this initial dereification because they cannot accept immediately their own form of objectivity under capitalism as commodified labour power.”¹⁴¹ Lukács’s underlying idea here is that only negative affective experiences of corporeal and/or psychic repression can lead to qualitatively new cognitive awareness within capitalism. Beyond any unexplainable idealistic leap from individuals becoming conscious to successful collective praxis, Lukács lucidly identifies a basic level of the split self-experience of subjects under

¹⁴¹ Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School* (London/New York: Verso, 2014), 237.

capitalism, an experience that is nonetheless a precondition for genuine subjectivation. This subjectivation would be a different register of self-objectivation, not modelled on the thinglike form of commodity. This is dictated by a worker's direct experience of the limits of the at-first-apparently-unlimited expansion of the principle of abstraction derived from the commodity-structure. Only such subjectivation, Lukács argues, can constitute the framework for dereifying praxis, but even this does not automatically *realize* such praxis.¹⁴²

The self-experience of the worker as a commodity is thus different from any other encounter with the world of commodities: such experience is immediately practical since the effects of reification at an affective level immanently produce an unarticulated, pre-categorical, but nonetheless not-entirely-blind dereifying tendency in the subject. Thus, the practicality at issue here does not consist in the ethical correction of subjective attitudes, as in Eckhart, nor in the Husserlian methodological critique of naturalism. Significantly, Lukács again mentions the term “awakening” in this context, but in a completely different sense than he used it in his previous ethical work. This is not a call for a mystical awakening; rather, it shows that an awakening that depends on direct, corporeal experience of the *real* categories of capitalism, such as abstraction, is unintelligible outside the historical context of capitalist reification. Let us look at the crucial passage on this basic step of dereification in Lukács's writing:

[W]hen the worker knows himself as commodity his knowledge is practical. *That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge.* In this consciousness and through it the special objective character of labour

¹⁴² On this point, throughout *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács mentions other conditions that prompt dereifying praxis, such as, objectively, the capitalist social order entering a stage of overt crisis or, subjectively, conscious political organization.

as a commodity, its “use-value”...which like every use-value is submerged without a trace in the quantitative exchange categories of capitalism, now awakens and becomes *social reality*. (Lukács 1971: 169)

The immediate experience of the unreifiable rest behind the concrete commodity that the subject embodies, and which is ultimately ungovernable via capitalist abstraction, constitutes the experiential basis for further dereifying attitudes. The awakening of the commodity-character of labour in consciousness means precisely that, on the ground of negative experience of reification within capitalist work organization, the affective life of a subject opposes itself to its unlimited reduction to exchange-value and persists in its qualitatively perceivable features. It is important to precise, however, that the fact that this level of experience is negative means that such experience is nothing *beyond* the reification. Lukács’s idea is that all classes are subjected to laws of reification. Thus, worker’s experience can be nothing more than experience of a *structural non-accessibility of reified life* on behalf of a worker. In more theoretical terms, it is the tendency towards the inclusion to laws of reification (be this inclusion exclusive as it may) that constitutes the first moment of critiquing of the impossibility of the system of reified laws as such. In this perspective, there is a fundamental contradiction between formal and material side of this inclusive exclusion, whereby the worker is formally included, but materially excluded from the overall system of the valorization of capital. I will come back to this point in the chapter *III.I*.

The possibility as such of irreducibility constitutes the framework for bringing the social character of *any* attempt of such reduction to reflection and points to a possible social source of overcoming this impasse. Moreover, when Lukács talks about practical knowledge in this context, he must have in the first place meant non-predicative experience, even if he did not use this term. It could not be otherwise if we keep in mind his extensive critique of

cognitive approaches to conscious life throughout *History and Class Consciousness*. In reification, affective experiences that are not reflected upon are the origin of a general and not-yet-articulated sphere of needs that becomes a motivating force for dereification. Hence, the self-objectivation of otherwise unconscious economic mechanisms through affective self-experience of a reified subject represents the genetic moment of a potential irruption of reflexivity within the commodity-structure of capitalist society.¹⁴³ And this experiential framework lays the ground for further methodological, ethical, or normative conceptualization of reification under capitalism. The thinglike character of capitalistic economic categories acts upon unconscious structures of subjective life in a way that means they preclude their own accessibility or full conceptualization by subjects; nonetheless they exist and are operative without being recognized.¹⁴⁴ It is precisely in the intensification of the clash between capitalist rationalization and the lived experience of subjects that these structures re-emerge as available for conceptualization: “the problem of labour-time...shows reification at its zenith” (Lukács 1971: 167). With such awareness, the commodity principle that structures capitalist society becomes accessible to the subject *from within* her affective life and not as an object of theoretical knowledge, where it would lose its dialectical and dereifying character.

For this reason, any amnesiac theory of reification cannot but distort the original terrain of Lukács’s reification critique, which is only conceivable in relation to the categories

¹⁴³ For a criticism of this view, see Frank Engster, “Lukács’ Existenzialismus: oder Die Selbstreflexion der Produktivkraft durch das Selbstbewusstsein der Ware Arbeitskraft,” in *Klasse. Geschichte. Bewusstsein: Was bleibt von Georg Lukács’ Theorie?*, (ed.) H. Plass (Berlin: Verbrecher, 2015), 33–77.

¹⁴⁴ See Lucien Sebag, *Marxisme et structuralisme* (Paris: Payot, 1964), 89.

of capitalist society. This is why, for example, Honneth's attempt to revitalize Lukács's notion of reification on the ground of recognition theory, albeit praiseworthy for striving to complement the Lukácsian account with a deeper understanding of the subjective and intersubjective layers of reifying mechanisms, nevertheless risks remaining a set of decontextualized, ahistorical judgements about a "forgetful" subject if separated from the socio-economic terrain of critiquing capitalism. Thus, in the final section of this paper, I will conclude by briefly discussing the limits and merits of the recognitional approach to reification. Furthermore, I will look at how assessing the recognitional account of reification may suggest a possible development of Lukács's account of reified subjectivity in late capitalism.

6. A Normative Approach to Reification: A Critique and Partial Appraisal of Honneth's Approach to Reification

Honneth's reappraisal of Lukács's notion of reification has at least three merits. First, it draws attention to the centrality of reification in Lukács's early Marxism, where reification encompasses, among other things, the reification of subjectivity. Second, it reveals that reifying patterns still pervade contemporary existence. Third, via extensive use of contemporary philosophical and psychological literature, Honneth identifies profound structures of reification that shape our lived experience at the affective level.¹⁴⁵ This level of

¹⁴⁵ This aspect of Honneth's interpretation has been recognized, albeit not without critical assessment of Honneth's overall interpretation, by Stéphane Haber, *L'Homme dépossédé. Une tradition critique de Marx à Honneth* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009), 181–99; and Franck Fischbach, *Sans objet: Capitalisme, subjectivité, aliénation* (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 97–112.

reification, as I have tried to show, is also present in Lukács, even though he does not provide an in-depth analysis of the functioning of these mechanisms.

Honneth's account of reification has also a substantial flaw. The first and main difficulty lies in the fact that Honneth isolates his account of the affective dimension of reification from the critique of economic categories of capitalism. In order to ground the priority of a non-reified state of recognition, Honneth employs variety of theoretical positions, including not only Martin Heidegger's notions of "care" and "solicitude" and John Dewey's prioritization of "involvement" over a neutral-observer stance (Honneth 2008: 28–40), but also Michael Tomasello and Peter Hobson's "emotional identification or attachment" (43–44), and Stanley Cavell's "acknowledgment" (47–52). A common thread among these positions, according to Honneth, is that all these authors in one way or another give central importance to pre-reflective, empathetic engagement with oneself, others, and the natural world with respect to objectifying attitudes.¹⁴⁶

As we have seen in previous sections, Honneth conceives dereification as the forgetfulness of recognition (Honneth 2008: 52ff.). He also defines the act of reification as follows: "[I]n the course of our acts of cognition, we lose our attentiveness to the fact that this cognition owes its existence to an antecedent act of recognition" (Honneth 2008: 59). From this perspective, any reference to social practices that necessarily generate reified social forms at a determinate stage of human history is lost. In Honneth's account of

¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Paolo Virno, in *Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*, (tr.) L. Chiesa (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2018), grounds his model of original recognition via the non-reflective neuro-physiological empathy generated by mirror neurons. However, Virno also cautiously identifies natural species-specific sources of misrecognition and conflict codified in human verbal language, particularly in its syntactic ability to negate originally recognized givenness.

reification, the reified subjectivity of capitalism leaves the scene to make room for a generic normative affective subjectivity. And as I have shown, for Honneth, the reification of a subject becomes a normative task for a subjectivity that can deliberately decide to attend to the qualitative dimension of another person, nature, or its own mental life. But Lukács had already rejected this way out of reification when he abandoned his ethical Eckhartianism. Furthermore, notwithstanding the profound foundational and historical differences between Eckhart's and Honneth's theories, they display some structural similarities, at least regarding the reification of objectivity: here, reification is rooted in a defective way of approaching thinghood, while the remedy consists in adjusting this attitude via one's own spiritual or normative powers. But I would claim that the revolutionary character of Eckhart's theory, which strives for new practical ways of existing among things, places the Dominican preacher closer to the pathos of the Lukácsian reification critique than to Honneth's normative conception of reification.

Also, the idea that the self-reification of subjectivity can be derived by adopting a specific cognitive stance to one's mental states was known to Lukács well before Honneth discussed this idea, in the form of Husserl's critique of naturalistic approaches to consciousness. This view was insufficient in terms of its inability to offer an ontological interpretation of the rootedness of reified categories, such as the commodity-structure, in the objective socio-economic processes of capitalism. It was also completely alien to the standpoint of praxis advocated by Lukács, which aimed to effectively transform the forms of objectivity that govern the totality of life-expressions in the world shaped by generalized commodity exchange.

To sum up my critique of recognitional stance to reification, its main weakness from a socio-critical standpoint lies in its structural inability to mediate between different (affective, cognitive, intersubjective, socio-economic) levels of reification. Nonetheless, I consider Honneth's attempt to take a new perspective on reification an important step in revitalizing Lukács's critical concept. It sheds light on how Lukács does not provide a satisfactory account of either subjectivity or intersubjectivity. Lukács's account of individual consciousness, moreover, is scattered through his work and defining it exhaustively is beyond the scope of his project. What we can learn from Honneth's reading of Lukács's notion of reification, then, is that a serious reappraisal of Lukács's work can demand developing exactly those elements of his thought that, even if they are rudimental and implicit in his work, might have important implications in practice.

PART III.
THE UNITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE:
LUKÁCS'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

1. The Natural and the Social in History and Class Consciousness: Lukács and Bloch

We have seen that Lukács's attitude toward modern natural science is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity. Lukács seems to concede indisputable validity to the modern natural-scientific method where its coherent application to natural phenomena achieves scientific and technological progress. In this sense, it represents the superiority of modern science with respect to its pre-modern equivalents. At the same time, however, Lukács argument contains implicit elements that suggest the structure of modern science is itself subject to capitalist reification and that the latter cannot be comprehended without interrogating the former.¹⁴⁷

I have argued that both positions are in a sense true for Lukács, who believed that the modern capitalist form of social organization allowed science to make radical breakthroughs in the history of its development, but who also believed it should be possible to use science

¹⁴⁷ According to Vogel (1996: 39 ff.), this implicit tendency in Lukács's view of science is obscured in favor of a countertendency present throughout *History and Class Consciousness*, which sees the method of natural science as something neutral only if correctly applied to its proper domain: the natural world understood as separate from the social realm. I will argue that this view is only partially correct.

for ends other than the exclusively capitalist goal of increasing profit and, to this end, reducing the social and natural lifeworld to calculable and manipulatable units.¹⁴⁸ But could any such third way resist either being reduced to a romantic critique of *Zivilisation* or the violent domination of nature by capital? Lukács offers no full account of such an approach. Nonetheless, there are hints, here and there, that suggest he held it possible to have a dialectical view of nature, irreducible to an Engelsian “dialectics of nature,” which he criticized extensively in *History and Class Consciousness*. In order to trace this hidden conception of the natural in Lukács, I would like to examine his dialogue with Ernst Bloch as it is presented in Lukács’s early Marxist work.

In one passage of *History and Class Consciousness*, where Lukács considers the essentially ahistorical character of reified forms of thought – manifest most clearly in “*the problem of the present as a historical problem*” – he rebukes the view that this blindness toward the historicity of social phenomena could be reduced to “external pressures,” such as class interests (Lukács 1971: 151, 340). Instead, he identifies a deeper structural source of the constitutively ahistorical standpoint that defines reified forms of consciousness. To illustrate this, he borrows several notions from his friend and intellectual soulmate from his Heidelberg years, Ernst Bloch.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ The same view holds for capitalism as such: Lukács never intended to deny the progress achieved by capitalism in favor of some sort of pre-capitalist romanticism. Instead, following Marx, he believed that overcoming capitalism must be seen as a dialectical realization of capitalism’s historical potential, both as its *Verwirklichung* and *Aufhebung*.

¹⁴⁹ Lukács and Bloch got acquainted in Berlin in 1909 while both took part in the private seminars of Georg Simmel. Their true friendship and intellectual kinship, however, only began in Heidelberg, where Lukács joined Bloch in 1912, and where both were active members of *Weber-Kreis*. The intellectual “symbiosis” between the two was so strong that any differences in their thought, according to Bloch, were “created merely artificially and of little importance [*nur künstlich erzeugt und wenig bedeutsam*]” (Bloch 1977: 104). Bloch also mentions two things that interrupted their

In particular, Lukács refers to Bloch's theory of the darkness of the lived moment (*Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks*), an overriding topic in Bloch's body of work. First conceptualized in Bloch's early Expressionist book *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), the notion was subsequently reformulated in his monumental *The Principle of Hope* (1954, 1955, 1959) and then once again in *Experimentum Mundi* (1975), Bloch's final philosophical testament.

The argument Bloch develops is phenomenological and anthropological at the same time. The darkness of the lived moment originates in how our direct lived experience tends to obscure what we know about ourselves and the world. As Bloch puts it, "we are located in our own blind spot" (Bloch 2000: 200). In line with the intellectual heritage of religious existentialism – which should not be surprising given the spiritual atmosphere in Heidelberg

friendship. From Bloch's perspective, the first and less important one was already present during their time together in Heidelberg and concerned Lukács's neoclassicist view of art, as well as his intolerance toward the expressionist movement that Bloch admired. This disagreement reached a point of no return during a debate in the late 1930s that saw Lukács opposed to Brecht on the artistic and political relevance of expressionist art. Brecht, supported by Bloch among others, resolutely defended expressionism (*Expressionismusstreit*) against Lukács's realist critique, which he developed throughout the 1930s (see Mittenzwei 1974). The second and true reason for a rupture in their relationship, however, regarded Lukács's turn to "orthodox Marxism," seen as too radical by Bloch, and Lukács's supposed criticism of Bloch's refusal to take the same path: "*kühlte sich unser freundschaftliches Verhältnis ab, als er sich [...] dem orthodoxen Kommunismus anschloß. [...] Lukács kritisierte damals vor allem, daß ich nicht den gleichen politischen Weg einschlug wie er*" (Bloch 1977: 114). However, by the end of the 1960s the coolness in their relationship began to thaw, with Bloch even dedicating his book *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz* to his "*Jugendfreund Lukács.*" Unfortunately, although the book was written between 1936 and 1937, it was gradually reviewed and expanded between 1969 and 1971 before being published in 1972, so Lukács, who passed away in 1971, did not live to see this. Like their youthful split, their late rapprochement was motivated ethically and politically rather than just theoretically. The turn of 1971, five months before Lukács's death, saw both engaged in a European appeal in defense of Angela Davis, initiated by Lukács, then supported and signed, among others, by Bloch.

– Bloch describes human subjectivity as “being-unfamiliar-to-ourselves, being-enfolded, being-missing” (Bloch 2000: 200). And while not arguing that the subject is a carrier of “false consciousness,” he nonetheless suggests that the very function of consciousness is to reproduce the darkness of the lived moment:

[T]his function operates only indirectly, either punctually, as actual momentariness, or, when it wants to get nearer to participation, then spatially or spherically, so that the dispersed subject’s consciousness arrives at basically only the past and its laws, without ever being able to advance into the flowing future, let alone the great presentness. (Bloch 2000: 201)

Bloch’s conception of consciousness in these terms has striking similarities to Lukács’s definition of empirical consciousness in *History and Class Consciousness*. Moreover, Bloch’s phenomenological description of the “subject’s present condition” in terms of “still dispersed, unassembled, decentralizing... function of consciousness” (Bloch 2000: 200–201) brings us back to Lukács’s critique of the chaos of lived experience in his pre-Marxist aesthetic works, which were heavily influenced by both *Lebensphilosophie* and Neo-Kantianism. But this is to be expected given the intense intellectual symbiosis established between the two thinkers in their Heidelberg years. As Bloch once noted, the intellectual kinship between the two was so strong that *The Theory of the Novel* could have been written by Bloch and *The Spirit of Utopia* could have been just as easily attributed to Lukács (Bloch 1977: ?). This is surely an exaggeration, albeit a telling one, especially if we bear in mind Bloch’s claim regarding the theoretical divergence between them that had already begun during their time in Heidelberg.

Nonetheless, I believe there is a seed of truth in Bloch’s statement. Lukács’s employs further images from Bloch’s thought to better illustrate negative aspects of the capitalist worldview. For example, he uses Bloch’s notion of the landscape painting as an

example of structural invisibility of the distance that must necessarily separate subject and object, for the spectator to be able grasp of the landscape as such; the lack of such distance would result in the immediate experience, sabotaging the perception of any landscape. In Lukács's view, this is also the case with "abstract totality" that structures the intelligibility of capitalist social order, whereby subject and object are separated by invisible distance, the perception of which must be precluded to the contemplating spectator (Lukács 1971: 158–159).¹⁵⁰

Another example in favor of Lukács's and Bloch's intellectual symbiosis is represented by Lukács's intentional use of Bloch's notion of "dead space [*schädlicher Raum*]" in his theorization of the structural "blindness," proper to social agents under capitalism, towards the historical aspects of their existence. Dead space is antinomic per definition, as it grounds the possibility of experiencing reality precisely on the obfuscation of the experienced reality itself.¹⁵¹ These examples show that the apparently "sociologistic" theoretical apparatus of *History and Class Consciousness*, of which Bloch accused Lukács in his review, contains more "creative" elements that Bloch himself wanted to admit. On the contrary, the Marxist Lukács constantly borrowed from Bloch's philosophy, proving Lukács's substantial appreciation of Bloch's own attempt to harmonize the social and the natural in his philosophy.

¹⁵⁰ For an excellent analysis of the role of spectator in Lukács's theory of reification, also with reference to Alois Riegl's philosophy of art, see Westerman 2018.

¹⁵¹ As Cat Moir (2020: 22) aptly points out: "the German term 'schädlicher Raum' refers to the volume of air enclosed in one end of a piston or cylinder at the beginning of a stroke. Bloch makes frequent use of it throughout his corpus in reference to the unrealised present. In its technical context, it is usually translated either as 'clearance space' or 'dead space'. 'Dead space' has the advantage of preserving the negative connotation associated with the German 'schädlich', meaning 'damaging'."

2. A Dialectical Epistemology of Historical Totality: Lukács's Unorthodox Interpretation of Historical Materialism

The function of historical materialism and, more generally, the status of the Marxist method is central to *History and Class Consciousness*, which was, to borrow Fredric Jameson's (1988) description of Lukács's work, an "unfinished project." Even the subtitle of the book (i.e. *Studies in Marxist Dialectics*) suggests such centrality. But while Lukács's early Marxist magnum opus contains various methodological reflections, only two essays directly focus on the methodological status of knowledge: "What is Orthodox Marxism?" and "The Changing Function of Historical Materialism." The latter, however, is permeated with "exaggeratedly sanguine hopes" towards "the duration and tempo of the revolution" (Lukács 1971: xli), as Lukács noted in his original 1922 preface.

Nevertheless, after having exposed – in his self-critical 1967 preface to the second volume of the Luchterhand edition of his works – the practical and theoretical errors that he had committed during the months of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, Lukács said that when reflecting on this period "after an interval of nearly half a century," notwithstanding a certain "abstract utopianism" that he by then believed had guided his cultural politics, he was surprised his past activities had proved so fruitful, offering possibilities of continuation (*Fortsetzbares*). Immediately afterward, referring to the same fruitful period, Lukács found it important to point out that "remaining on the theoretical level...the first version of the two essays...date from this period. They were revised for *History and Class Consciousness*, but their basic orientation remains the same" (Lukács 1971: xii).

In this section, then, I will examine the central methodological issues found in these essays, as well as those not contained therein but of high relevance to them, such as how

they relate to the ideas of “class” and “totality.” After that, I will address some recent readings of “historicity” in *History and Class Consciousness*, such as those of Konstantinos Kavoulakos and Judith Revel, comparing them to an older interpretation of Lukács’s historical materialism proposed by Merleau-Ponty. Finally, I will examine Lukács’s account of historical materialism and materialist dialectics (in the second essay, he uses these terms interchangeably) to see whether the above-mentioned possibilities of continuation (*Fortsetzbares*) are still present in a modern context. In other words, I will investigate whether these texts have retained their relevance after a full century.

I will immediately anticipate my hypothesis regarding that last point: Lukács’s idea of the relationship between the historical character of a method and its theoretico-practical function in a dynamic social totality mean the essays of *History and Class Consciousness* are still relevant for modern readers. Lukács is interested in the function of the Marxist method when considered as a unity of theory and praxis (in the sense of there being a constant interdependence between the two). In such a theory, methodology cannot be, following Descartes, a regulated, calculable, and certain procedure. And instead of attempting to ground an infallible scientific method before investigating the truth of things, Lukács makes use of Hegel’s idea, formulated in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, that the essence of the dialectical method is constituted by “the cold advance of necessity in the Thing” (Hegel 2018: 7).

Following Hegel, however, Lukács did not consider such a “Thing” as an isolated object lying beyond the knowing subject. Rather, both philosophers viewed it as pointing to a dynamic between the objective processes of the “reality” that we seek to know and the “subjective act” of knowing, where both poles necessarily affect each other while being structurally intertwined. This presupposes a particular connection between theory and praxis where, on the one hand, praxis is intended as a theoretically molded transformative,

historical, and collective practice (a “comprehensive praxis,” as Lukács put it in his later preface [1971: xix]), while, on the other hand, theory is not only a coherent discourse but a theory of practice, constantly shaped and adjusted by transformative activity. It is precisely the practical moment of theory that, according to Lukács, allows Marx to overcome the Hegelian understanding of theoretical function as a mere conceptual comprehension of reality.

A fundamental condition of the unity of theory and praxis is the “emergence of consciousness,” which, as Lukács maintains in “What is Orthodox Marxism?,” must “become the *decisive step* which the historical process must take towards its proper end.” In addition, according to Lukács, “the historical function of theory is to make this step a practical possibility” (Lukács 1972: 2). Here, we have a provisional definition of the purpose of this theory: the function of historical materialism is to contribute to the practical possibility of the emergence of consciousness. However, this “emergence” is not the mere genesis of individual self-perception, but rather an extended and uneven collective process of becoming that applies to an entire social group, such as a class. Such consciousness appears through “a series of breakthroughs in knowledge” of historical tendencies that allow positing and pursuing concrete, limited, and precarious collective ends (Kavoulakos 2011: 163). Such an end is constituted, for Lukács, “by the wills of men, but neither dependent on human whim, nor the product of human invention” (Lukács 1971: 2). And to avoid conceiving collective practical ends as a chaotic agglomerate of individual interests – with some prevailing over others – he believes we need to think of society in terms of class and totality.

For Lukács, the paradigmatic agent of emancipatory social action was the working class. If we think of this exclusively as the class of industrial workers during the first

decades of the twentieth century, then Lukács's theory may seem outdated.¹⁵² But if, in broad terms, we instead consider the proletariat as the working class of wage or salary earners who do not own the means of production but who do produce commodities (goods or services) while being expropriated of their surplus labor time by capital, then Lukácsian (and Marxian) vocabulary can be used here without any concern.¹⁵³

As for the concept of the proletariat in *History and Class Consciousness*, I would like to turn to a recent paper by Kavoulakos. Without denying that we always find concretely acting historical subjects behind the term, Kavoulakos says that, from a theoretical point of view, the proletariat:

[I]s a theoretical construct, through which Lukács seeks to address the problem of the emergence of a supra-individual meaning of individual subversive acts, a meaning that does not fully correspond to the conscious intents of the particular individuals who carry them out, but it is reconstructed by the theorist. (Kavoulakos 2011: 163)¹⁵⁴

However, a theorist that confronts this non-correspondence between conscious individual intentions or acts and their supra-individual meaning must try, notwithstanding

¹⁵² For a “workerist” and somewhat reductive interpretation of Lukács's left-communist (*linkskommunistische*) and a skilled-worker oriented judgment about the “real composition” of the proletarian class as already substantially outdated during the years that *History and Class Consciousness* was composed, see Cacciari: 1972: 7–66.

¹⁵³ Recently, Roberto Fineschi (2008: 143) has attempted to rehabilitate Marx's concept of *Arbeiter* by turning to its original meaning of “the worker,” “the one who works,” or “the one who realizes the labor process.” A similar definition of *Arbeiter* allows Fineschi to affirm that “the wage form does not mean only the factory, but rather the realizing the labor process as a moment of capital” (Fineschi 2008: 143).

¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Fineschi, in his interpretation of the concept of “class” in *Capital, Volume I*, also maintains that “class,” for Marx, is a “logical-functional notion” at the first level of analysis and “can serve as a sociological classifier” only in “the next moment,” that is, only “when it [is] used as an analytical category” (Fineschi 2008: 142). These two levels of analysis are thus interdependent but

their difference, to maintain the two poles in a determinate relation. Merleau-Ponty expressed a similar methodological requirement in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, where he wrote that “the relations among men [transformative collective praxis included] are not the sum of personal acts or personal decisions, but pass through things, the anonymous roles, the common situations, and the institutions” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 32). In other words, human relations are mediated by what is often understood as the objective side of social interaction.¹⁵⁵

In addition, like subjective consciousness and intentional processes, objective mediation through things is, for Lukács, also subject to reification under capitalism. In this context, the function of historical materialism would be to identify and critique the reified, naturalized, and oppressive aspects of social mediation through things. At a practical level, this reification can be overcome not by abolishing mediation in favor of some sort of

irreducible to each other. Analogously, Lukács’s historico-functional notion of ascribed (class) consciousness should be located within its respective level of analysis without being in any way contradicted by the lack of attention he paid to sociological inquiry into “class composition” (see note 4). Instead of marking the failure of Lukács overall project, this empirical lacuna makes it, at worst, incomplete.

¹⁵⁵ Some critics, however, tend to obscure how Lukács viewed the sphere of subjective self-relation, intersubjectivity, and the society-nature relationship as possible only due to each being mediated via objective forms of what he called the concrete historical totality. For instance, Stefano Petrucciani, drawing on a sociological tradition ranging from Émile Durkheim to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, suggests that Lukács’s theory of reification contains a substantial flaw: it cannot distinguish between a spontaneous tendency towards reification, which is present in all societies in the form of social facts, social constraints, and nature-like institutions, and the specific reification characteristic of capitalist modernity (Petrucciani 2018: 82–85). In doing so, Petrucciani’s critique follows in the footsteps of Lukács’s later self-critique, erroneously attributing confusion between the notions of objectification and alienation to *History and Class Consciousness*.

immediacy (as is the case in reactionary myths of a return to some lost original totality), but through re-appropriation of the democratic uses of such mediation.

But let us return to the proletariat. Kavoulakos suggests that “every socio-historical period has its own the proletariat” because the proletariat “represents the historical process of self-constitution of an internally contradictory collectivity that changes the world” (Kavoulakos 2011: 164–165). Of course, the term “proletariat” is not completely empty of qualitative or normative content, as not every group of subjects will fall under this category simply because they are transforming the world. To clarify this, Lukács introduces the notion of the world-historical role of the proletariat. In this regard, Kavoulakos aptly notes:

[The] world-historical role of the proletariat is not a metaphysically determined truth, nor is it inscribed in some timeless essence of the proletariat. It relies “merely” on the dialectical development of the historico-philosophical judgement that human beings exist in order to become free and their history is – in a constantly redefined, nondeterministic sense – the progress of this freedom. (Kavoulakos 2011: 165–166)

A similar reading of Lukácsian “historical teleology” in terms of freedom, as proposed in *History and Class Consciousness*, is present in Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation, which valorizes Lukács’s definition of the proletariat as an “intention of totality” (or the “totality in intention”) and relates it to concrete struggles to meet human needs. Merleau-Ponty suggests that capitalist development, due to its structural limits, has proven unable to satisfy the individual and social needs of the majority, thus failing to fulfil its emancipatory function. According to Merleau-Ponty:

The realization of society that capitalism has sketched, left in suspense, and finally thwarted is taken up by the proletariat, because, being the very failure of the capitalistic

intention, it is, by position, “at the focal point of the socializing process.” The “socializing” function of capitalism passes to the proletariat. (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 45)

What most interests Merleau-Ponty is that the (previously) progressive socializing function of capital was “taken up by the proletariat.” This is because the proletariat is the only class whose most immediate social demands do not contradict the interests of society as a whole and thus can be considered universal. In addition, Merleau-Ponty stresses one idea that is firmly held by both Marx and Lukács: that it is under capitalism that the socialization of the productive forces of labor comes into being for the first time in human history. Marx argued that the constantly growing division of labor, cooperation, employment of technology, and science in the production and expansion of the world market results in the universal interdependence of human persons. For Marx, and for Lukács, this means that the first true social totality has its historical genesis in capitalist society.

However, in capitalism, the process of socialization remains subordinated to the valorization of capital, which constitutes a structural contradiction. In this sense, forms of life that “were at first a projection of human freedom” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 40) were transformed into burdens upon losing their emancipatory potential. In Lukácsian terms, capitalism is a real social totality, but, at the same time, social agents are necessarily “unconscious” of it being so due to capitalism manifesting itself as an assemblage of distinct systems within which we find ourselves required to act intermittently.

The process of becoming “conscious” implies a shift from a compartmentalized standpoint (capitalism as an aggregate of heterogeneous systems) to a standpoint of totality (capitalism as a homogeneous social realm), which has both practical and methodological consequences. On the one hand, it means the collective project of progress “passes” to the proletariat, which represents the standpoint of totality with respect to social needs. On the

other hand, it also “passes” to historical materialism as a theoretical and practical critique of capital from the proletarian standpoint of totality.

At this point, I would like to address a recent interpretation of the concept of totality in Lukács proposed by Judith Revel. Curiously, Revel identifies in Lukács, via Merleau-Ponty, a predecessor to Foucault’s radical concept of the historicity of political subjects and power. For Revel, the historico-philosophical approaches of both Lukács and Merleau-Ponty involve “an ‘open’ history and dialectics without a possible [final] synthesis,” which is also what connects these thinkers to Foucault (Revel 2015: 17). Revel hypothesizes that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophico-political thought constitutes a link between the “Marxist heterodoxy of Lukácsian type” and “Foucaultian reflections on [a form of] history that [is] not only discontinuous but [also] determining and determinate, [historically] stratified and original, sedimented and suspended at its limits – ‘*histoire déjà faite*’ and ‘*histoire se faisant*’, [a process of both] accumulation and invention” (Revel 2015: 27).

Moreover, particularly with regard to Lukács and Foucault, Revel maintains that a unique understanding of the concepts of totality and totalization lies at the center of this relationship. In her reading of “What is Orthodox Marxism?,” she identifies an opposition between the whole, understood in Lukácsian terms as a “signification (*Sinngebung*) of transcendent and mythological or ethical nature,” and the totality, which:

does not only exclude any form of transcendence, but [is rather defined] by its [position at] the exact intersection between the accumulation and sedimentation of historical strata, on the one hand, and the growth of class consciousness, which is never a product of a “disinterested observer,” on the other.... The totality is...a provisional threshold of recapitulation of historical stratification, which means, as Lukács [himself] notes, that

“the methodological point of view of the totality...is a product of history.” (Revel 2015: 24)

In this view, the Lukácsian idea of history as “*the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man*” (Lukács 1971: 186) acquires centrality. Revel argues that Foucault omits any reference to Lukács in his work due to a core misunderstanding: the idea that when Lukács refers to the “whole” as a supra-historical transcendent element, this “corresponds to what Foucault, in the *Archeology of Knowledge*, calls...‘totality,’ by using the term in a way that is radically opposed to the Lukácsian use of it” (Revel 2015: 24). Therefore, according to Revel’s interpretation, the Foucaultian “totality” equates to understanding history “as a continuous development and fulfilment of a pre-given *telos*” that has nothing to do with the Lukácsian conception of totality as dynamic, as “a radical historicization” from a concrete, historically immanent standpoint (Revel 2015: 24).¹⁵⁶ In order to illustrate this, Revel refers to the following passage from “What is Orthodox Marxism?”:

[The ultimate goal is not] a “duty,” an “idea” designed to regulate the “real” process. The ultimate goal is rather that *relation to the totality* (to the whole of society seen as a process)...Every attempt to rescue the “ultimate goal” or the “essence” of the proletariat from every impure contact with – capitalist – existence leads ultimately to the same remoteness from reality, from “practical, critical activity” and to the same relapse into

¹⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Kavoulakos’s recent interpretation of Lukács’s early Marxism is driven by the idea of the processes of “subjectification” (Kavoulakos 2018: 177) and “dereification” (Kavoulakos 2018: 194) being subject to a radical form of historicity. Against critiques that claim Lukács had an abstractly idealistic concept of revolutionary praxis, Kavoulakos sees dereification as “an open project that permanently needs adjustment,” possible only against a concrete horizon of lived reality in which “the dialectical process of revolutionary subjectification always presupposes what it negates, that is, capitalist reification.” (Kavoulakos 2018: 197).

the utopian dualism of subject and object, of theory and practice. (Lukács 1971: 22; quoted in Revel 2015: 25)

To summarize Revel's interpretation, the image of history as an immanent and productive mold, produced by the concrete praxis of subjects and, in turn, producing this praxis and these subjects themselves,¹⁵⁷ constitutes the thread that brings us indirectly from Lukács's ideas to Foucault's genealogy of power and modes of subjectification. Defective as this comparison may be, if we also consider other aspects of Foucault's thought identified by Revel – such as the microanalysis of singular and discontinuous subjectification processes, which is almost entirely absent from Lukács's dialectical epistemology of the totality – her article represents an original attempt to explore the relevance of *History and Class Consciousness* in French philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s beyond the more obvious candidates such as Lucien Goldmann or Kostas Axelos.

But let us return to the question: What is the function of historical materialism? In “The Changing Function of Historical Materialism,” an essay for which the historical context of its composition is particularly relevant, Lukács distinguishes between the theoretical and practical aspects of the method. Regarding the former, Lukács affirms that historical materialism has fulfilled its function as long as it can account for the function of objects of inquiry with respect to the social totality that makes them intelligible: “the intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong” (Lukács 1971: 13). Furthermore, the theoretical aspect of the method is articulated on two temporal levels: knowledge of the past and knowledge of the present. It is worth noting again, given the year the essay was written, that Lukács classed past societies

¹⁵⁷ In this sense, Lukács and Foucault would share a constructivist approach to the genesis of the subject and human nature.

as either pre-capitalist or capitalist. However, the core of his argument lies in the observation that it was acceptable to “apply historical materialism in its classical form rigorously...to the history of the nineteenth century” (Lukács 1971: 238) because of its reified social structuration, but that this is not true for pre-capitalist societies.¹⁵⁸ The reason Lukács provides brings us back to the idea of capitalism as the first immanent social totality: “in such societies economic life did not yet possess that independence, that cohesion and immanence, nor did it have the sense of setting its own goals and being its own master that we associate with capitalist society” (Lukács 1971: 238).

At the same time, Lukács also identifies a practical function of the method. He argues that, in capitalist society, the main function of historical materialism lies in “the field of action” (Lukács 1971: 224) rather than in theoretical research. From this point of view, historical materialism was a tactical, strategic tool for proletarian action, “so that the proletariat could understand a situation and so that, armed with this knowledge, it could act accordingly” (Lukács 1971: 225). Therefore, seen from a purely theoretical perspective, historical materialism reveals itself as a heteronomous weapon of struggle.¹⁵⁹

It would seem, then, that Lukács suggests that historical materialism had to preserve its practical function prior to the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but after

¹⁵⁸ By “classical form,” Lukács means the form best suited to comprehending the socio-historical constellation in which the method was formulated: historical materialism as a self-reflection of capitalist society.

¹⁵⁹ A concrete historical example would be the materialist critique of religious consciousness found in the writings of Marx and Engels. From a proletarian standpoint, it was not the theoretical precision of the analysis that really mattered, but the practical implications that this critique had for emancipatory struggles in contexts where ecclesiastic structures were involved in the oppression of impoverished masses, supportive of the interests of the oppressors, and defensive of the naturalized status of the historical contradictions of capitalism.

this triumph of the proletariat, the theory should lose its practical aspect and become purely scientific knowledge of a pre-capitalist past, of the “prehistory of mankind.”¹⁶⁰ This seemed inevitable given the assumption that, with the revolution, the self-critique of capitalism was progressively “approaching completion” (Lukács 1971: 253). Due to its rootedness in the experience of the revolution, moreover, this idea was undoubtedly present in the essay from 1919 and, for this reason, it might interest today’s readers only from a historical point of view. However, Lukács believed that taking power was not sufficient in order to revolutionize sedimented social practices, because even after the success of an armed revolt “society is still under the sway of purely capitalist forms of production” (Lukács 1971: 253). In other words, revolution is both a leap and a process (Lukács 1971: 252), and the leap alone is insufficient. Thus, taken in its pure form, the above-mentioned interpretation of Lukács’s view of historical materialism appears to be oversimplified.

Lukács was, however, convinced the mere fact the struggle was starting to experience visible practical success had to produce a shift in the function of historical materialism. I would like to argue that Lukács’s theoretical strength and his usefulness for us lies in this non-deterministic and dialectic account of the method. It implies that the method, so understood, must undergo constant re-articulation and functional shifts in light of new historical contingencies.

As an example, Lukács mentions the transformation of a rigid and traditional “historico-materialist” understanding of the base–superstructure relation in times of crisis. Under “normal” capitalist conditions, characterized by the absence of crisis, the economy

¹⁶⁰ At least in the opinion of one of the first critics of *History and Class Consciousness*, József Révai: “Der ‘Funktionswechsel’, der mit dem Sieg des Proletariats eintritt, bedeutet die Aufhebung des Kampfcharakters des Marxismus, das Hervortreten seiner rein wissenschaftlichen Elemente, sein Zugewendet-sein der Vergangenheit” (Révai 1925: 234).

dominates individual and social consciousness by appearing “in non-economic, ideological forms” (Lukács 1971: 252). However, even under such conditions, capitalist development is characterized by a permanent and latent crisis,¹⁶¹ whose most evident expression is the existence of the proletariat. As Lukács notes, “[t]he proletariat is...at one and the same time the product of the permanent crisis in capitalism and the instrument of those tendencies which drive capitalism towards crisis” (Lukács 1971: 40). When this latent crisis comes to the surface of social reality, it always implies “the objectification of a self-criticism of capitalism” (Lukács 1971: 253) in the sense that cultural (“non-economic”) forms of economic domination lose their efficacy and appear as a plain power discourse. Consequently, as soon as the economic nature of social struggle becomes manifest,

¹⁶¹ It is worth emphasizing that Lukács uses the concept of *Krisis* in a wider sense than just economic. His idea was that “the particular symptoms of crisis appear separately (according to country, branch of industry, in the form of ‘economic’ or ‘political’ crisis, etc.)” (Lukács 1971: 75). However, he also believed that the crisis of capitalist social organization would manifest itself at all levels of social reality in certain historical constellations. This was the case with the Great War and the immediate post-war period. Regarding the war-related devastation of the Hungarian economy, Ivan Berend wrote that “conscription and casualties...and the military use of horses nearly crippled the unmechanized system of agriculture, the leading branch of the economy. Output was only one-third of prewar levels in 1919. Restrictions were so severe that in 1918, production of industrial consumer goods stood at one-third of the prewar level. Even the production of strategic goods such as iron and steel decreased by half...The printing of more money to finance the war effort devalued the currency. By the end of the war the value of Hungarian crown had fallen by 60 percent...Hungarian currency became worthless” (Berend 1998: 225). These factors, together with others such as the realization of the inevitability of Austro-Hungarian military defeat, increased desertions from the army, and food riots led to a profound political crisis, which was crucial for Lukács’s historical judgment about the possibility of a final victorious revolution. However, in Lukács cultural take on capitalism, all truly revolutionary praxis is motivated by a perception of the situation as a total cultural event that gives holistic expression to the above-mentioned aspects of capitalism’s crisis.

economic language also receives increased theoretical attention.¹⁶² At the same time, Lukács shared the Marxist idea that the crisis would only appear as an unexpected catastrophe for “bourgeois” thinkers. Thus, while the function of historical materialism in a pre-revolutionary context consisted in anticipating the overt eruption of latent crises to prepare the proletariat for action at an opportune moment, it nevertheless had to start changing in the direct aftermath of a revolution.

The success of the October Revolution in Russia, the beginning of the German Revolution and, finally, the establishment of Hungarian Soviet Republic were seen, by Lukács, as both expressions of attempts to address what he believed to be an “extremely acute” (1971: 253), “ultimate” (282), or “final” (313) crisis of capitalism. Lukács’s believed that, during the revolutionary period in Hungary, this extreme crisis came to constitute a hard-to-define transition zone where the function of historical materialism was starting to shift from being a theoretic-practical tool, used to reinforce the struggle, to becoming a “method of studying” capitalism as a “prehistory of humanity,” or in other words, a way to view it in a more distanced manner, “more clearly and completely” (Lukács 1971: 253).¹⁶³

¹⁶² The most recent example of this is the increased theoretical interest in economic problems after the global financial crisis. As a result, numerous philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, and cultural theorists turned their attention to topics such as the credit crisis, the financialization of the economy, the undermining of labor markets, sovereign debt, redistribution of wealth and income, etc.

¹⁶³ In other words, historical materialism is to assume the role of a philosophical history of capitalism. Behind these lines, one may certainly hear an echo of Hegel’s famous claim, expressed in the preface to *Outlines of The Philosophy of Right*, that “as the thought of the world, it [philosophy] appears only when actuality has completed its process of formation and attained its finished state” (Hegel 2008: 16). In Hegel’s view, a conceptual grasp of historical reality becomes truly possible when the reality that we are trying to conceptualize can be clearly determined in its substance, namely, when such a reality already belongs to the past, when “a shape of life [has] grown old” (Hegel 2008: 16). In my view, however, Lukács seems to imagine a possible application to capitalism of the same idea that Marx had previously formulated with respect to pre-capitalist

As we have already seen, this shift does not imply completely abandoning the practical function of historical materialism. Rather, the change concerns the “tactical” side of the method. It is still about the critique of capitalism, but instead of being a weapon of offense it is reorganized for defensive means and directed towards critique of sedimented capitalist forms inside a newly instituted republic. Lukács was explicit about how this defensive critique could lead society to the “control and domination of production and to the liberation from the compulsion of reified social forces” (Lukács 1971: 253).

At a methodological level, control over production even implies the abolition of the dominant economic categories that define historical materialism itself. Lukács does not treat the centrality of economic language during acute periods of crisis as an end in itself; instead, it he sees it as performing a disclosive function, since the economic sphere finally appears for what it really is: a form of dominion based on force and necessity. According to Lukács, once this economic reality is brought to light, no ideology of liberty or cultural values can be used to “adorn” it. However, this is not because all ideologies suddenly and miraculously disappear, but rather “just because those contents which were before called ‘ideology’ now

societies. In the 1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse*, first published by Kautsky in “Die Neue Zeit” (1903) and thus probably known to Lukács by 1919, Marx writes: “Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allow insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.” (Marx 1993c: 105).

begin...to become the real goals of mankind” (Lukács 1971: 252). Lukács firmly believed that the values of liberty, universal human emancipation, and *Kultur* in general should become new structuring principles of social life. And this required not “abolishing” the economy as the necessary domain of human needs but acquiring a more democratic way of controlling it.

In relation to this final point, Lukács attributes a further function to historical materialism: creativity and innovation. He writes: “No analysis of the past, however careful and exact, is able to give satisfactory answer to this problem [the conscious control of production]. Only the – unprejudiced – application of the dialectical method to this wholly novel material will suffice” (Lukács 1971: 253). What he means is that to avoid pure dogmatism, historical materialism must attend to the present situation and not merely rely on lessons from the past. However, this is not an invitation to start construction *ex nihilo*. Rather, Lukács’s idea is that past knowledge has to be “dialecticized” through a wholly new experience. If there is to be an antidote to “the compulsion of reified social forces,” it has to lie, first of all, in new and inventive applications of historical materialism to “novel material.” At the same time, however, this novel material must inevitably affect the structure of historical materialism itself, “with all the modifications which a fundamentally and qualitatively novel subject matter must entail for any unschematic method such as the dialectic” (Lukács 1971: 247).

It is only in this sense that Lukács’s invitation to apply historical materialism to itself becomes intelligible. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the characteristic of historical materialism...is to apply itself to itself, that is to say, to hold each of its formulations as provisional and relative to a phase of development and, by constantly refining itself, to proceed towards a truth which is always to come” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 55). This vision of Lukács’s version of historical materialism as dialectical, provisional, and intrinsically

teleological (“a truth which is always to come”) corresponds to Merleau-Ponty’s own “expressive” take on dialectics, which is substantially compatible with the overall dialectical conception framework of *History and Class Consciousness*. With respect to Merleau-Ponty’s dialectics of expression, Sandro Mancini observes as follows:

What contradistinguishes philosophical expression from other forms of expression is its awareness of the necessity of the dialectical nature of expression. In fact, only in philosophy does it become clear that expression is not the immediate externalization of a meaning hidden and already complete. Its specific task is to delineate the gap which separates the two poles – expression and expressed – and which in distinguishing them unites them in a dialectical relation, at once of identity and of difference. (Mancini 1996: 391)

What is Lukács’s philosophy of praxis if not an unceasing critique of the possibility of externalizing an already complete meaning? Needless to say, the hopes, challenges, and risks related to a unique historical constellation were at the center of Lukács’s concern. It is hard to avoid the impression that there is no similar “revolutionary” climate, at least in its traditional sense, in today’s political scene. Nor it is imaginable to use historical materialism in order to study our “pre-capitalist past”: capitalism’s self-criticism does not seem to be “approaching completion” anymore. Nonetheless, as I have argued, the flexibility of the Lukácsian formulation of historical materialism leaves space for further reformulations. It would thus be fruitful to investigate whether and how this conception might work in the

context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism and its present crises,¹⁶⁴ as well as with the various new attempts to provide a consistent answer to these crises.¹⁶⁵

Importantly, however, unlike most of his Marxist contemporaries, Lukács was keen to avoid rigidly schematic determinations of history, methodology, or the relationship between theory and praxis. To summarize, Lukács's approach to method is open and attentive to the latent potentialities of the present: an approach that implies endeavoring to identify self-renewing and renewable dynamic totalities to engage with. And although it may seem we are yet to define any sort of "collective" subject of action in a modern context, a mere commitment to pursuing the "essential determinants" that connect theory and practice already brings us closer to the *ethos* of Lukács's dialectical method.

3. The Critique of Law and the Problem of Violence in Lukács's Political Theory: Lukács in Light of Walter Benjamin and Vice Versa

Lukács tackles the problem of violence already in his pre-Marxist writings composed during the World War I. For example, in a review to the German translation of Vladimir Solovyov's writings, Lukács expresses himself critically towards Solovyov's optimism towards war and public violence. Lukács takes as an example Solovyov's unilateral ethical justification of

¹⁶⁴ For instance, Massimo De Carolis (2017) has recently argued that the neoliberal paradigm is undergoing a profound crisis because of a structural contradiction between the universalist idea, advanced by neoliberal thinkers, of the "cosmic order" of the market – which was meant to protect late-modern societies from the risk of "feudalization" – and the global processes of "re-feudalization" that neoliberal governance has actually produced.

¹⁶⁵ For the debate around the critique of contemporary forms of capitalism in view of some of the key terms within this theoretical constellation, such as "empire," "radical democracy," "multitude," "exodus," "autonomy," "hegemony," and "the common," see Kioupiolis and Katsambekis (2014).

killing in war that is not to be considered a murder. Lukács comments on a passage from Solovyov:

Wenn er von Krieg und Mord, in gehässiger, stellenweise witziger Polemik gegen Tolstoj Spricht, sagt er, dem Töten im Kriege fehle Zum Mord die Absicht “besonders bei der heutigen Art der Kriegführung, bei der aus weittragenden Gewehren und Geschützen auf einen sehr weit entfernten und daher unsichtbaren Feind geschossen wird. Nur in Fällen, wo es wirklich zum Nahkampf kommt, entsteht für den einzelnen Menschen die Gewissensfrage, wie er handeln soll...” (Lukács 2018: 626).

Not being satisfied with simplistic solutions of any kind in a matter as delicate as violence, Lukács dedicates much of his attention to ethical reflections on violence in his texts that immediately precede his turn to Marxism, as well as his attempts in Marxist theory. In order to examine the nature of Lukács’s critique of law and subsequent reflections around the status of extrajudicial violence, I shall address his conception in light of the contemporaneous reflections of Walter Benjamin. Such parallel analysis may result as enlightening at least in two ways. First, these conceptions of violence could be seen as two of the earliest and most explicit theoretical responses to the revolutionary events in Russia, Hungary and Germany following the First World War from thinkers who had a direct impact on the Frankfurt School. Second, I suggest that, in their theorizations of violence, both present irresolvable aporias which remain almost unchanged in our own time. Lukács and Benjamin experienced turbulent years of European uprisings and their violent suppressions. For this exact reason, they were occupied by theoretical problems which might sound worrying to a contemporary reader: the possibility or otherwise of justifying an act of murder, the status of violent insurgencies, the dialectics of legality and illegality, the critique of police and militia, drawing utopian or anarchic conclusions.

Both philosophers sought “another form of violence” that would differ from that associated with domination and oppression: an expiatory, purifying and self-denying form of

violence. I shall not assume either of these positions, as I find both unpracticable in their own way. Rather, I conceive of them as limit concepts. But could it be any different? Would it be possible to formulate a non-contradictory, normatively justifiable and directly applicable theory of violence? I believe that this question is far more than trivial. Let's take the example of Lukács. It is true that the Hungarian philosopher refused to present "even in outline a theory of violence and its role in history." But given that Lukács imagined the passage to a "non-reified" form of social life as a complex and uneven process that comprises not only "conscious," "active" and "practical" but also "violent" moments, how should one understand overcoming reification once the element of violence is eliminated?

In the following, I shall argue that both Benjamin and Lukács assume a historico-philosophical (*geschichtsphilosophisch*) position as a departure point for their analyses of violence. Moreover, I shall demonstrate that although there are some points of similarity between their thought, Benjamin and Lukács arrive at fundamentally different, if not incompatible, conclusions. I shall then argue that the key difference lies in divergent understanding of two crucial concepts: the means–ends relationship and the messianic.

a) *Dialectics of Law and Violence in Lukács*

In an article from late 1918, "Bolshevism as a Moral Problem," Lukács confronts the problem of Bolshevik violence, identifying it as an irresolvable moral dilemma. Although he defines the proletariat as a true "messianic class of world history", namely, "the agent of the social salvation of mankind" (Lukács 1977b: 421), Lukács warns against the possibility of "unpardonable sins and innumerable errors" (Lukács 1977b: 422) that is intrinsic in any form of decisionism. As a result, Lukács expresses his preference for a democratic path to socialism. The problem of violence reappears in a radically different light in the essay "Tactics and Ethics" (1919), where Lukács aims to provide a moral ground for violent tactics

within revolutionary praxis. Here, the methodological revolutionary standpoint (*Standpunkt*) seems to take away “the moral *raison d’être* and the historico-philosophical appositeness of both present and past legal orders” (Lukács 2014: 4). In this essay, the question of legality and illegality is thus reduced to an ethically neutral and tactically motivated interrogation of the nature of the *means* that might be employed in order to reach the ultimate revolutionary *ends*. At the same time, the adequacy or otherwise of the means is judged from the viewpoint of philosophy of history. Lukács criticizes artificial and ahistorical separations of means and ends, asserting that the “transitional stages” between the two are “conceptually indeterminable”: “the ‘means’ are not alien to the goal [...]; instead, they bring the goal closer to self-realization.” As an example, he says that “the class struggle of the proletariat is at once the objective itself and its realization” (Lukács 2014: 5).

Even though Lukács tries to avoid any rigid means–ends separation by understanding both as moments of a qualitatively indivisible process, it is quite clear that means remain subsumed to their ultimate ends. This allows Lukács to give a paradoxical a moral ground for revolutionary violence by introducing the tragic ethics of sacrifice. To this end, Lukács invokes the figure of Russian revolutionary Boris Savinkov, who saw “not the justification [...] but the ultimate moral basis of the terrorist’s act as the sacrifice for his brethren, not only of his life, but also of his purity, his morals, his very soul” (Lukács 2014: 11). In the end Lukács draws the following conclusion, which at the same time represents the common thread of the whole essay: “only he who acknowledges [...] that murder is under no circumstances to be approved can commit the murderous deed that is truly — and tragically — moral” (Lukács 2014: 11).

Curiously enough, a few years later the topic of nature and the legitimacy of the murderous deed will reemerge in Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1920-1921).

Benjamin's argument is that no violent deed can be judged according to commandment "Thou shalt not kill":

Those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken. It exists not as a criterion of judgement, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it. Thus, it was understood by Judaism, which expressly rejected the condemnation of killing in self-defense (Benjamin 1986a: 298).

I will get back to Benjamin shortly. For now, this passage is notable because these are the precise terms in which Lukács, during the period of his "extremist ethics," described the resistance of socialist revolutionaries. Under the circumstances of oppression, it is up to individuals and communities to assume, in the silence of profound solitude, responsibility for a most terrible crime. And this decision cannot be justified if not by self-defense.

In "The Social Background of the White Terror" (1920), written after the failure of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, Lukács proposes a distinction, quite common in that period, between the White Terror and the Red Terror. Lukács conceives of the White Terror as an absolute end in itself, or as an absolute means employed by a dominant class in order to maintain the status quo of oppression. In this sense, the White Terror is fundamentally *offensive*. Meanwhile, proletarian terror is distinguished, in Lukács's view, by a purely *defensive* character and thus can constitute only a "secondary means" in the struggle against the offensive forces of counterrevolution. Therefore, even if the Red Terror at first appears to be necessary for defensive reasons, it can never be an end in itself since the end it serves is the construction of a common life unstructured by class.¹⁶⁶ In this new world, moral

¹⁶⁶ Lukács defines the Red Terror as *Verteidigung* and the White Terror as *Selbsterhaltung*; see Lukács (1975b: 228–234).

affection, solidarity and self-discipline “would take the place, in the regulation of all activities, of the coercive power of the law” (Lukács 2014: 49; trans. modified), while violence would progressively lose its function. The violence of the revolution would therefore be a purifying and self-destructive violence, a type of violence that would gradually extinguish itself.

Lukács’s most articulate discussion of violence can be found in “The Changing Function of Historical Materialism” (1919), which was composed during the Hungarian Soviet Republic while he served as Commissary of General Education. First, this writing offers a critique of the attempts made by “vulgar Marxist economism” to draw a rigid line between violence and economics. He suggests that this methodological conviction can only lead to denying the role of violence “in the transition from one economic system to another” (Lukács 1971: 239). In Lukács’s words, such an approach to the history of economic forms “bases itself on the ‘natural laws’ of economic development which are to bring about these transitions by their own impetus and without having recourse to a brute force lying ‘beyond economics’” (Lukács 1971: 239). Hence, the radical separation of violence and economics cannot but appear as an “inadmissible abstraction.” In other words, Lukács’s position entails that any socio-economic transition – including the transition to socialism – is possible only by virtue of extra-economic violence which disrupts the “normal” course of economic development as grounded in naturalized economic legality.

One might object that Lukács always considered “class consciousness” and “conscious action” to be key elements of the revolutionary organization of a class. Nonetheless, the historical form of proletarian organization also points to a qualitative transformation of forms of social life. It expresses “the beginning of the end for the ‘natural laws’ of economism” (Lukács 1971: 240). As Lukács has it, the “‘greatest productive power’ is in a state of rebellion against the system of production in which it is incorporated. A

situation has arisen which can only be resolved by violence” (Lukács 1971: 240). One cannot avoid the impression that, for Lukács, violence and class consciousness are complementary terms. In this scheme, violence comes to indicate the *practical* character of collective consciousness, while class consciousness seems to semantically rearticulate the concept of violence in terms of *rational* collective practice rather than mere use of force.

Furthermore, the law is also, according to Lukács, inseparable from violence and any distinction between the two “is not susceptible to an analysis in terms of jurisprudence, ethics or metaphysics, but only as the social and historical difference between different types of society” (Lukács 1971: 241). In societies where a pre-capitalist mode of production is prevalent, systemic stabilization by means of extra-economic violence takes form of the “rule of tradition and of an order ‘pre-ordained by God’, while under capitalism, where this stabilization means the stable hegemony of the bourgeoisie within an uninterrupted, revolutionary and dynamic economic process, [...] it take[s] the shape of the ‘natural rule’ of the ‘eternal iron laws’ of political economy” (Lukács 1971: 241). However, both cases have common ground in the fact that “every society tends to ‘mythologise’ the structure of its own system of production, projecting it back into the past” (Lukács 1971: 241) in order to assure itself of the system’s dominion over present and future. We will later see how the mythical dimension of violence reappears in Benjamin. For now, though, Lukács concludes that “the *birth* and the triumph of this system of production is the fruit of the most barbaric, brutal and naked use of ‘extra-economic’ violence” (Lukács 1971: 241). The differences between the use of naked violence and the rule of law in order to assure social stability appear, for Lukács, to be merely historical, instrumental and functional elements of any given social order. That is to say, the difference is merely between overt and covert rule by violence. We might legitimately ask, then, whether there is any difference between proletarian and bourgeois use of violence.

The fundamental difference, for Lukács, is the actual historical and ethical *function* of violence: in the age of social revolutions, he says, violence can be “put to the service of man and the flowering of man. [...] [T]his violence is nothing but the will of the proletariat which has become conscious and is bent on abolishing the enslaving hold of reified relations over man and the hold of economics over society” (Lukács 1971: 251–252). Thus, it appears that the central historico-philosophical function of the proletariat in world history is by no means determined by its economic supremacy. Lukács argues that “economic superiority takes the form of a series of violent measures and it is self-evident that the effectiveness of these measures depends on whether the class gaining supremacy in this way has the–world historical–preparedness and the mission to advance society” (Lukács 1971: 242). To conclude, one might say that Lukács defines violence as a means to the ultimate end of an unreified society where violence would never again become an end in itself and would only maintain a minimal necessary function as a “secondary means.” I suppose that the problem of reading essays from Lukács’s so-called *linkskommunistisch* period consists exactly in the difficulty of imagining a direct reintroduction of his revolutionary tactics in today’s context. However, the strong point of his revolutionary theory, in my opinion, lies in his “anti-putschist approach” to social change, in his insistence on the necessity of strategy, in the conscious moment of collective organization, and, finally, in the requirement for class consciousness to be objectively possible from a historical standpoint.

b) *The Messianic Reading of Violence in Benjamin in Light of Lukács’s Moral Emphasis in the Problem of Violence*

On the subject of violence, Benjamin wrote his essay “Critique of Violence” and the related fragment “Life and Violence” (1920-1921). During this time, and arguably also later on,

Benjamin was distant from any historically-immanent revolutionary perspective, including Marxism, which he only adopted in 1924. His stance at that time was that of “theocratic anarchism” (Scholem 2003: 103), as he later defined it. Nonetheless, I believe that his thought on violence presents some interesting moments of intersection between his and Lukács’s conceptions.

The ambiguity concerning Benjamin’s political stance before 1924 is a much-debated issue. However, I shall follow Anson Rabinbach’s interpretation of Benjamin’s political engagement. During his stay in Switzerland in 1919, Benjamin met Ernst Bloch, who by that time had already become a socialist. Rabinbach argues that, despite sharing an understanding of the messianic, their friendship “revealed a substantial area of conflict: politics” (Rabinbach 1997: 54). Rabinbach suggests that “in their conflict the ethical dilemma inherent in the messianic idea surfaced with uncharacteristic sharpness” (Rabinbach 1997: 54). Moreover, in Bloch’s case “the messianic and the political [...] [were] completely identical: the radical idea of a community of the just and this-worldly redemption [...] [was] simply one side of the otherworldly longing” (Rabinbach 1997: 54). A passage from the first edition of *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) leaves no doubt about Bloch’s opinion regarding revolutionary violence: dominion and power must be opposed “with appropriately powerful means, like a categorical imperative with a revolver in your fist.”¹⁶⁷ Interestingly enough, Rabinbach observes that Benjamin’s philosophy of language at that time also reflected his “antipolitics”: “For Benjamin – Rabinbach continues – the instrumentalization of language in all political judgement made it complicit in violence” (Rabinbach 1997: 54). At the same time, against all interpreters who characterize Benjamin’s thought as unpolitical before his

¹⁶⁷ The first German edition of *Spirit of Utopia* has it as follows: “*Das Herrschen und die Macht an sich sind böse, aber es ist nötig, ihr ebenfalls machtgemäß entgegenzutreten, als kategorischer Imperativ mit dem Revolver in der Hand*” (Bloch 1918: 406)

turn to Marxism in 1924, Richard Wolin included, Rabinbach suggests that “Benjamin conceived, as did Bloch, of esoteric messianism as a form of politics, as a politics against politics in the prewar and war epoch” (Rabinbach 1997: 57).

I shall turn now to Benjamin’s conception of violence. His goal was to offer a critique of violence that would go beyond a circular explanation that draws on the conceptual pair of “justified means” (positive law) and “just ends” (natural law).¹⁶⁸ I cannot offer a detailed analysis of these concepts here, but it is important to note that violence, for Benjamin, cannot be grounded as either an ultimate end or a means to an end, but only as pure means. The conceptual means–ends pairing inevitably refers to the law and thus to violence, since Benjamin believed that all violence is lawmaking or law-preserving. Benjamin employs the Sorelian anarcho-syndicalist distinction between political strikes and a general proletarian strike. Political strikes serve only to reinforce the state, as they vindicate the improvement of labor conditions and, for this reason, are aimed at modifying the law. Hence, political strikes must be lawmaking and thus violent. However, a general proletarian strike, and here Benjamin quotes Sorel, “clearly announces its indifference toward material gain through conquest by declaring its intention to abolish the state.”¹⁶⁹ By not intending to continue with the interrupted work even after securing new labor conditions, those involved in a general strike have no end and thus the strike is a pure means, although Benjamin seems to suggest that the genuine goal would be a new kind of non-capitalist labor, namely, a type of labor that is not subsumed by law. However, means–end relationships for Benjamin are always related to violence and thus to law.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Benjamin (1986a: 277–278).

¹⁶⁹ G. Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*. Paris: M. Rivière, 1999, 250; quoted in Benjamin (1986a: 291).

Although we find no explicit emphasis on the relation between violence and economics in Benjamin's reflections from 1921, Benjamin and Lukács seem to share an analogous position regarding the relationship between violence and law. According to Benjamin, "lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence" (Benjamin 1986a: 295). This reminds us of the Lukácsian thesis of the extra-judicial origin of law. Moreover, Benjamin is opposed to the mythical dimension of lawmaking, based as it is on having power and dominance over living beings, just as in the Lukácsian conception of the White Terror or classist rule in society. However, the violence that Benjamin opposes to mythical violence is not ethical or revolutionary violence but divine violence, which nonetheless shares important similarities with Lukácsian "proletarian violence." Benjamin puts it as follows: "[I]f mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood" (Benjamin 1986a: 297). Lukács, in similar terms, defined the White Terror as "aggressive" (Lukács 1975b: 233) "violent, bloody, impure, proper to any type of oppression [*gewalttätige, blutige und schmutzige Ausdruck der Unterdrückung überhaupt*]" (Lukács 1975b: 231). Interestingly enough, both Lukács and Benjamin identify a particular zone where violence tends to become law and, in the final analysis, go beyond it. This is the case of police or militia violence.

For Lukács, militias which protect the law and suppress proletarian revolutions seem to exceed their own limits and direct themselves towards the exploiting classes: "with [the] White [T]error[,] the militia [has] acquired class consciousness. It has recognized the unique guarantee of oppression and of proper existence in the possession of arms" (Lukács

1975b: 234).¹⁷⁰ For Lukács, then, under the White Terror, the entire state apparatus was employed for violence (gendarmerie, police, bureaucracy, etc.). For Benjamin, the police appear as law-making and law-preserving at the same time, which “marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain” (Benjamin 1986a: 287). One could think here of the violent military assaults against the masses in post-*Spartakist* Berlin.

Another parallel between how these thinkers conceive of violence is revealed in the already mentioned fragment “Life and Violence.” Here, Benjamin suggests that original violence, as manifest in the gesture of self-defense, should not be judged as pernicious. At the same time, however, Benjamin expresses conviction that violence cannot be defeated by means of violence, but only via moral affection and only without contradicting the existence of the original violence.¹⁷¹ Meanwhile, as we have already seen in Lukács, a society grounded on affection is an ethical society and can *follow* only from the necessarily violent abolition of previously reified legal structures. In this sense, Lukács adopts affection as a regulative idea, not as an ethical norm for the present. From Benjamin’s ateleological perspective, however, examples of affection appear as always already immanent to everyday

¹⁷⁰ In the given passage Lukács significantly describes the militia as “brute force [*Brachialgewalt*]. The German translation has it as follows: “*Im weißen Terror wurde die Brachialgewalt klassenbewußt. Sie ist darüber im klaren, daß die Aufrechterhaltung der Unterdrückung und auch die ihrer eigenen Existenz nur solange gesichert ist, solange die Waffen in ihren Händen liegen. Die Waffe gibt sie also um niemandes Willen aus der Hand und sie kann es nicht dulden, daß jemand bei der Anwendung der Waffe hineinredet.*”

¹⁷¹ Benjamin (1982: 791): “*Daher kann Gewalt nicht mit Gewalt bekämpft werden, und die Frage entsteht: wie denn die Menschen in der freien Gemeinschaft ihres Lebens sicher sein sollen? Nur die Neigung entwaffnet in ihr die böse Tat, die ursprgl. Gewalt als solche aber wird gar nicht angetastet.*”

human practices, such as peaceful “diplomatic transactions” (Benjamin 1986a: 293), and, most importantly, “the proper sphere of ‘understanding’, language” (Benjamin 1986a: 289). Language serves Benjamin as a paradigm of pure means.

However, despite certain similarities in the conceptions of violence formulated by Benjamin and Lukács, their conclusions are less compatible. I would like to argue that the main reason for this is their diverging, if not opposing, understanding of the messianic. While Lukács conceives expiatory violence as an intra-historical and eventually self-abolishing means to the ultimate end of ethically grounded, classless society, in “Theologico-Political Fragment” (1921) we find Benjamin’s idea that “nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic” (Benjamin 1986b: 312). Within the framework of Benjamin’s ateleological philosophy of history, “the Kingdom of God” does not constitute “the *telos* of [the] historical dynamic” (Benjamin 1986b: 312). This relationship between the messianic and historical time appears to be the inverse of Lukács’s. As Benjamin puts it, “the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom” (Benjamin 1986b: 312). In other words, the historical and the profane are self-referential, but when fulfilled as such, namely, exactly as historical and profane, they could assist an irruption of the messianic that would qualitatively upset the normality of historical time. In light of this, we can now comprehend why the *telos* of Benjamin’s politics cannot lie in the Messianic Kingdom, but rather in the happiness of living beings.

This brings us to another parallel with Lukács. The theme of misfortune and suffering occupies a significant place in both Benjamin’s and Lukács’s thought during the period discussed here. But, once more, the two philosophers arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions. In “Tactics and Ethics” Lukács interrogates himself on the differences between the ethical and the historico-philosophical meaning of guilt and sacrifice:

[E]thical self-awareness makes it quite clear that there are situations — tragic situations — in which it is impossible to act without burdening oneself with guilt. But at the same time, it teaches us that, even faced with the choice of two ways of incurring guilt, we should still find that there is a standard attaching to correct and incorrect action. This standard we call sacrifice. And just as the individual who chooses between two forms of guilt finally makes the correct choice when he sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea, so it also takes strength to assess this sacrifice in terms of the collective action. In the latter case, however, the idea represents an imperative of the world-historical situation, a historico-philosophical mission (Lukács 2014: 10).

The contents of this whole passage represent something that Benjamin leaves outside his conception of the messianic. Misfortune and suffering reveal themselves, in Benjamin, as belonging to “the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart” (Benjamin 1986b: 313), beyond history and revolutionary politics. Only by seeing this can we understand Benjamin’s hope for what he defines as a “politics of nihilism” (Benjamin 1986b: 313), a form of politics that must exclude the messianic. Moreover, as a sphere of pure means, politics must leave aside law and violence. The type of violence that Benjamin deems appropriate to the political sphere is the pure and immediate divine violence which would suspend the mythical forms of law and abolish the state, thus grounding a new historical epoch. There is little doubt that, precisely because of its pureness and immediacy, this type of violence becomes invisible to men:

But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means. Less possible and also less urgent for humankind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such

with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men (Benjamin 1986a: 300).

If one ventured to ascribe a political meaning to this passage, one may conclude that it is the Sorelian general proletarian strike that reappears in these lines. Thus, we can finally summarize Benjamin's idea of revolutionary violence as a spontaneous general interruption and suspension of work, a violence that is neither lawmaking, nor law-preserving, hardly calculable or predictable by human intellect. In my opinion, the strength of Benjamin's argument, as opposed to Lukács, lies in the search for a third way, another form of violence that is not reducible to either bourgeoisie or proletarian violence, or to White or Red Terror, but a paradoxical and self-annihilating form of non-violent violence. Lukács, however, would have probably criticized Benjamin's approach as a "romanticism of illegality" (Lukács 1971: 263, 70) or accused him of a "putschism" (Lukács 1976b: 47–57) that overestimates the spontaneous moment of revolt, leaving aside organizational, strategical and class-conscious aspects.

The urgency to draw attention to the understanding of violence in Lukács and Benjamin is far from motivated by the direct political "actuality" or applicability of these concepts. For some, they might even represent the most unactual, contradictory and inapplicable moments of their thought. At the same time, I suggest that even this supposed non-actuality might be helpful in raising new questions about the different moments within their thought that are strictly related to the problem of violence. Lukács's and Benjamin's conceptions of violence were not intended as self-referential, nor were they designed to ground violence per se. Rather, the relevance that the concept of violence acquired in their thought during the given historical period reveals a philosophical motivation that is beyond just theoretical. It reminds us that, notwithstanding the different visions of violence derived from diverging views of the means–ends relationship and incompatible ideas of the

messianic, in both cases we deal with thinking that is profoundly immersed in history, and specifically, motivated by the reaction to the tragic experience of the First World War. Here, I have completely obscured Benjamin's overall reception of Lukács's works, including the importance that the discovery of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) had in Benjamin's thought from 1924 up until his death in 1940 (Benjamin 1980: 171; Benjamin 1994: 244, 248), to which I will come back later.

The absence of serious philosophical discourse on violence in our days does not mean that we live in less turbulent times. On the contrary, this could be a mere symptom of resignation when confronted with the widespread anesthetization of the phenomenon of violence, where media depictions of violence are so familiar yet distant that violence itself seems mundane, throughout many of today's developed societies. Hence, apart from merely testifying their intellectual and moral integrity, Lukács's and Benjamin's attempts to think through the issue of violence could also suggest a direction for responsible contemporary thought.

4. Normative and Dialectical Conceptions of Political Agency

The concept of ascribed class consciousness has been critiqued since the appearance of *History and Class Consciousness*. Critics have usually pointed to the "metaphysical" (Marck 1929: 132-133), "hypostatic" (Rudas 1971: 124), "mythological" (Révai 1971: 191), "moralistic" (Meszáros 1972: 81, 85-86), or even "objectivistic" (Horn 1972: 280; Sartre 2014: 90-91, 94) character of consciousness obtained by means of ascription. There have also been numerous attempts to conceive Lukács's theory of class consciousness in terms of its transcendental constitution (Krahl 1971: 172; Cerrutti 1980: 112-115). These approaches are limited by their unilateral agreement that Lukács introduced abstract moral imperatives

for action due to his inability to discover concrete mediations that would lead to the material constitution of class consciousness (Hermann 1978: 138; Amodio 1980: 151). This conclusion is possible only if one ignores Lukács's historico-dialectical view of the self-experience of labor-power as the basic level of the constitution of class consciousness. Nonetheless, Lukács believed that the historical sense of a dialectical process could not be explained by drawing on its "processuality" as such. Dialectical processes generate objective possibilities of praxis, but these must be assessed from a determined theoretical standpoint and meet the normative conditions dictated by the historical standard of the situation deemed to have practical potential. What is more, objective possibility and its assessment alone do not produce historically significant praxis. Lukács saw praxis as a dialectical unity of three moments: objective possibility, its theoretical assessment, and the kairological intervention of subjects organized in a party.

Right after his conversion to Leninism in the early 1920s, Lukács sought to reinterpret its underlying philosophy. Indeed, it was the organizational shape (*Gestalt*) of the party and its position within the conceptual constellation of class consciousness that Lukács was concerned with in the first place. For Lukács, a party's organization "is the form of mediation between theory and practice" (Lukács 1971: 299). Thanks to this, the constellation of class consciousness becomes more than just a theoretical construct. Lukács's believed that the form of the Leninist party offered direct insight into the historically visible structure of proletarian class consciousness (Lukács 1971: 326). While it has often been observed that Lukács prioritizes consciousness over economical determinants, one should not forget that this consciousness is rooted in objectivity. The constitution of class consciousness takes place together with the "co-constitution" of its objectual pole, without which it would remain

an empty directedness, an anticipatory “aspiration towards totality.”¹⁷² Since practical consciousness was at stake for Lukács, its object relation could not but be discovered on the historical horizon of praxis. Lukács conceived the organizational shape of the party as an objectively possible structure of collective action that met the normative standards of consciousness aimed towards totality. Lukács therefore thought that the Leninist party-organization could give a historical expression¹⁷³ and sense to collective actions, as well as allowing practically intentioned consciousness to avoid solipsism and perform reconsiderations. In this sense, Enzo Paci defined Lukács’s idea of praxis as “the projecting prefiguration” that “guide[s] my actions by departing from the reconsideration in the present and controlling my actions according to a style of reciprocal conditioning of individualities and groups” (Paci 1972: 333).¹⁷⁴ In other words, the practical *Gestalt* of the party allows class consciousness to measure and correct its own attitudes towards objects of praxis.

¹⁷² The German expression Lukács uses is “*Intention auf die Totalität*,” which has a clear phenomenological origin. It points to the fact that this aspiration/intention “does not need to become explicit, the plenitude of the totality does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action. What is crucial is that there should be an aspiration that action should serve the purpose [...] in the totality” (Lukács 1971: 198). For a socio-phenomenological meaning of the above-mentioned expression, see Merleau-Ponty 1973: 45. For the significance of Husserlian phenomenology to Lukács’s theory of consciousness, see Westerman 2010.

¹⁷³ On the “expressive function” of party organization, see Feenberg 2014: 240.

¹⁷⁴ In addition, Paci ably observes: “[T]he most common error is to consider unavoidable what is expected and to consider anticipation or prefiguration (*Vorerinnerung*) as a mathematical prediction or fatality” (Paci 1972: 333). An excellent account of Paci’s phenomenological Marxism is offered by Sandro Mancini (2005: 305–333). With respect to Paci’s reading of *History and Class Consciousness*, Mancini (2005: 309) aptly points out that, albeit adopting Lukács’s critique of reification in his interpretation of Marxist view of intersubjectivity, Paci cushions “Lukács’s emphasis on the proletariat as identical subject-object of the history;” instead, Paci understands “Marx’s notion of structure” as “constituted intersubjectively, to the extent that, in Marx, it embodies the sphere of needs and operations of social subjects.” Defining the party as a historical *Gestalt* of

In the “Preface to the New Edition (1967)” of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács returns to his use of ascription.¹⁷⁵ Here, Lukács’s well-known self-criticism was at work. The late orthodox Leninist Lukács accused his younger self of substituting concrete political analysis for an “intellectualist” notion of ascription. In turn, ascribed class consciousness seems to have been structurally unable to connect theory and praxis except by a “miracle.” Ironically, the “miracle” the late Lukács had in mind was the same “mystery” that early Marxist Lukács criticized in Kelsen’s legal theory. In Kelsen, the “mystery” regarded the difficulty of immanently explaining the historical genesis of norms from within the normative sphere. In Lukács, the “miracle” was the difficulty of articulating “correct and authentic class consciousness” ascriptively (i.e., normatively). Late Lukács concluded that both he and Lenin sought to ground collective action “from outside”: Lenin in political terms, Lukács ascriptively. Hence, implicit in Lukács’s retrospective critique of ascription is the refusal of the neo-Kantian conceptual apparatus employed in his own early Marxism.

Beyond this analogy, however, I retain that the conception of Leninist party in Lukács is a theoretical projection deriving from Lukács’s philosophical idea of communism. For this reason, Lukács’s early Marxist work does not represent either a manual for Leninist

class consciousness Lukács’s gives a concrete expression to his phenomenology of praxis. The constitution of practical consciousness requires a phenomenal manifestation to make its own anticipations visible (“in Erscheinung treten,” Lukács 1971: 266). Therefore, any attempt to reduce the relation between class consciousness of the proletariat and the party to the affirmation that “party is distinct from class, like consciousness from man” (Agamben 2005: 32) misses what is at stake in Lukács’s formulation; see Luciano Amodio 1980: 134. Thus, far from remaining practically unconscious in the absence of the party, class consciousness finds in the party a measure for its own projections. In this sense, Ursula Apitzsch (1977: 102) observes that the organizational form of the party stands to praxis as a form of something that already has a form and an organization of something that is already organized (“*Form einer Form, Organisation von Organisation*”).

¹⁷⁵ The following quotes are from Lukács 1971: xix.

politics, or any kind of *Parteisoziologie* in the spirit of Max Weber and Robert Michels. The so-called *Organisationsfrage* attracted Lukács's attention not –or not in the first place– because of its tactical and strategic contents, but rather for it offered him a concrete occasion to reflect upon the relation between the single and the whole, activity and passivity, theory and practice, being and consciousness. In this sense, Luciano Amodio is correct in claiming that Lukács's adhesion to Leninism was a choice motivated more politically than philosophically (Amodio 1967: 422).

It is important to remember that Lukács's real aim is not that of defending a determinate class position. According to Lukács, in modern capitalist societies, “the growing class consciousness that has been brought into being through the awareness of a common situation and common interests is by no means confined to the working class” (Lukács 1971:173-174). His genuine methodological preoccupation was to theorize a political consciousness that would be able to condense both particular and general interests under a qualitatively new viewpoint, revealing their intimate interconnectedness. The choice to assume the proletarian stance was therefore motivated by the historico-philosophical reading of the significance of the proletarian class situation within the totality: an intellectual assuming the proletarian standpoint, in Lukács view, was in adequate epistemological position not only to grasp, but also to formulate a practical solution to acute social contradictions that Lukács and his generation were facing. In this sense, the particular class perspective reveals itself as a function of the totality.

Hence, Lukács idea is that it is a peculiar dialectical situatedness of the proletariat within the society, the striving to surpass the immediacy of its structuring forms, the “aspiration towards society in its totality” that represent the historical significance of this figure. The dialectical character of the proletariat consists in the fact that as a class it

teleologically strives to-wards its self-abolition which is possible only in a society that would cease to be structured in classes. Lukács puts it as follows:

This is the reason why its logic does not permit it to remain stationary at a relatively higher stage of immediacy but forces it to persevere in an uninterrupted movement towards this totality, i.e. to persist in the dialectical process in which the immediacies are constantly annulled and transcended (Lukács 1970: 174).

The ‘logic’ that Lukács takes under examination, is the objective logic of the proletarian class position within the totality. In other words, it expresses the fact the proletariat as a class aspires towards the society as a whole “regardless of whether this aspiration remains conscious or whether it remains unconscious for the moment” (Lukács 1971:174).¹⁷⁶

As I have shown, the dispositive of ascription does not represent an unconscious remnant of Lukács’s previous philosophical apprenticeship that he was unable to overcome and that would have made his thought logically inconsequential (Rudas 1971: 118-119). In ascription he sought another form of causation that could connect the moments of the

¹⁷⁶ This expression could point to a hidden influence Ernst Bloch’s conception of “not yet conscious (*Noch-Nicht-Bewußte*)” on Lukács’s understanding of a historically significant, yet still unconscious, collective action. Already in his doctoral dissertation from 1909, Bloch traced the origin of categorial thinking back to a “not yet conscious intention” (*zu einer [...] noch nicht Bewußten Intention*)“ (Bloch 1985: 90). Further, in the first edition of his *Spirit of the Utopia* Bloch introduces the messianic conception of a “not yet existing” and argues for an active historical “directedness toward a not yet existing messianic goal above the world (*Gerichtetsein [...] auf ein noch nicht daseiendes messianisches Ziel über der Welt*)” that however remains, for Bloch from 1918, “unfigurative (*unbildliche*)” (Bloch 1918: 322). By tying together theory and praxis Lukács aims to historicize this messianic goal by rendering it ‘figurable’ from the standpoint class consciousness. Bloch himself seems to admit this in his mostly favorable review of *History and Class Consciousness* where he defines Lukács’s approach as follows: “becoming conscious, becoming actual as the most important constitutive element in the process of the manifestation of reality” (Bloch 1923–1924:162[it]).

constellation of class consciousness non-deterministically. This required making class consciousness not only the point of convergence for the temporal registers of past, present, and future, but also of theory and praxis, where the scientific reconstruction of objective possibilities is practically-oriented and acquires its historical meaning if activated by the subject of the action.¹⁷⁷ The practical moment of subjective agency finds its theoretical equivalent, within the constellation of class consciousness, in the dispositive of ascription that complements it, locating it in the world-historical context,¹⁷⁸ the dialectical view of reified psychological consciousness, and self-consciousness of the commodity labor-power.

In summary, profound contradictions of a present historical situation generates imperatives for society as a whole and against which a theoretician can measure: 1) the capacity or otherwise of psychological consciousness to assess interests that could motivate meaningful collective actions; 2) the adequacy of social groups (classes) to meet the historical requirements of these actions, assessed on the ground of objective possibilities; 3) the organizational adequacy of the party in representing the theoretico-practical mediation of psychological and ascribed class consciousness; and 4) the accountability of the party's leadership in assuming such a task of mediation. Moreover, ascription also gives a normative meaning to Lukács's concept of the party as an open form of organization (Dannemann 1987: 106-108). Indeed, if the political party loses its connection to its members, the gap between two consciousnesses is only enlarged.

¹⁷⁷ Significantly, Lukács (1923: 164) defines his subject of the action as the “we” of the genesis: “[...] *das Subjekt der Tathandlung, das ‘Wir’ der Genesis*” (Lukács 1923: 164).

¹⁷⁸ As Konstantinos Kavoulakos (2011: 165-166) has it, the world-historical role that Lukács attributes to the proletariat relies “on the dialectical development of the historico-philosophical judgment that human beings exist in order to become free and their history is—in a constantly redefined, nondeterministic sense—the progress of this freedom.”

Hence, Lukács's theory of class consciousness was intended not to "reify" Leninism, but, on the contrary, to make the party itself "imputable" of misaction in case of an eventual self-referential or even totalitarian derivation of its praxis. Seeing class consciousness as a historical constellation, ascription allows judging historically not only the correctness or erroneousness of actions but also of omissions: that which is not done but ought to be given the historical horizon of possibilities. Without comprehending this normative element, Lukács's self-critical pathos remains in partial obscurity. The elements of this "ascriptive" reasoning are implicitly present in the later stages of Lukács's work.¹⁷⁹ His self-critiques are therefore an expression of a sense of responsibility towards the historical becoming of consciousness, understood both dialectically and normatively. As I have argued, this does not mean, however, that Lukács's understanding of historical normativity is completely disconnected from the social realm.

5. The Legacy of Lukács in Western Marxism and Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

In Lukács scholarship, it is widely accepted that he had a fundamental impact on the development of Western Marxism. In the introduction, for instance, I mentioned the influence Lukács had on the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the philosophical theories that found favor in the student and New Left movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁸⁰ In these contexts, his critique of reification inspired theories that emphasized the historical and praxis-oriented character of philosophical thought and sought theoretical and practical renewal of democratic societies under late capitalism.

¹⁷⁹ See also Meszáros 1972: 30.

¹⁸⁰ Commenting on the history of Lukács's reception in Anglophone countries, Erhard Bahr defines the decade beginning with the early 1960s as "*die angelsächsische Lukács-Renaissance*" (Bahr 1973: 70–75).

These readings were largely anticipated by Merleau-Ponty, who made an important step toward popularizing the notion of “Western Marxism” in his *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955).¹⁸¹ At the center of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is the Lukácsian notion of an open historical totality, as opposed to a “dogmatic philosophy of history” or “ideology of the progress” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 35, n. 9). For Merleau-Ponty, the strong emphasis on the praxis-adjusted constitution of historical categories that characterized Lukács’s view of social totality made his conception of history more useful for renewing Marxism than the view proposed by the official version of historical and dialectical materialism that reigned in the Soviet Union.¹⁸² In this sense, it therefore offered a “Western” alternative to the diffusion of Soviet model of Marxism in Western countries. Three years after the publication of Merleau-Ponty’s book, another “Western Marxist” whose philosophical formation was remarkably shaped by an encounter with *History and Class Consciousness*, Herbert Marcuse, launched a heavy critique of the whole theoretical and practical development of Marxism-Leninism, from Lenin to Stalin, in his *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (1958). With his “immanent critique” of Soviet Marxism “from without” (Marcuse 1958: 10),

¹⁸¹ The English translation of chapter two of *Adventures of the Dialectic* was later republished in 1970 by the philosophical journal *Telos* amid the second wave of Lukács’s reception in Western Europe and North America. In turn, the journal’s first editor-in-chief, Paul Piccone, offered two key contributions toward reevaluating *History and Class Consciousness* within the intellectual milieu of the American New Left. Both articles appeared in *Telos*; see Piccone (1969, 1972).

¹⁸² See Merleau-Ponty’s appreciation of Lukács’s rebuttal of Bukharin’s hypothesis in *Theory of Historical Materialism*, where he says that “the date of events and the speed of the historical process are not predictable because we have ‘not as yet’ the knowledge of their quantitative laws” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 52, n. 31). Such predictions are not possible due to the nature of social institutions, which are conceptualized in terms of “tendencies” and “events,” and thus *per definitionem* irreducible to exact knowledge.

Marcuse, however, represents a singular case within almost the entire pantheon of Western Marxism.¹⁸³

At the time *History and Class Consciousness* was rediscovered in the West, Lukács's theoretical and practical commitments had already changed significantly. In 1930–1931, Lukács spent a year at the Marx-Engels-Lenin institute in Moscow, where he was first able to study the young Marx's previously unpublished *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844. As Lukács points out in the 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, the discovery of Marx's manuscripts "completely shattered the theoretical foundations of what had been the particular achievement" of his early Marxism, namely his reification theory (Lukács 1971: xxxvi). Famously, Lukács concluded that while he had critiqued both "objectification" and "alienation," erroneously reduced to single common denominator of "reification," in his early Marxist book, Marx had already shown that "that objectification is a natural means by which man masters the world and as such it can be either a positive or a negative fact," and "[b]y contrast, alienation is a special variant of that activity that becomes operative in definite social conditions" (Lukács 1971: xxxvi). And although I would argue against Lukács's negative assessment of his own early work, this well-known self-critical impulse extends throughout his philosophical career. Forced as this self-diagnosis may be, the rebuttal of his own previous thought led him to the next phase in his intellectual development.

In the 1967 preface, Lukács also recalls the second realization he had at the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute: this concerned "the necessity of erecting a systematic aesthetics on the foundations of dialectical materialism," which motivated his shift toward a theory of

¹⁸³ Slavoj Žižek aptly notes that there was an "almost total absence of theoretical confrontation with Stalinism in the tradition of the Frankfurt School" (Žižek 2001: 92).

reflection and, more specifically, his critique of the naturalism prevailing in previous versions of Marxist aesthetics, such as those of Plekhanov and Mehring, in favor of a newly acquired realist perspective (Lukács 1971: xxxvii). Notwithstanding Lukács's continual insistence on the genuinely dialectical character of his theory realism in its rebuke of "the idea of the 'photographic' reflection of reality,"¹⁸⁴ which he considered characteristic of both Marxist and non-Marxist sociology, Lukács's switch to realism marked, in the eyes of many "Western Marxists," the end of his Western intellectual experience.

In the 1961 essay "Reconciliation Under Duress," Adorno famously condemned the realist Lukács in terms of "*sacrificio dell'intelletto*" (Adorno 1980: 152), which has had a lasting impact on his reception within the Frankfurt School. According to Adorno, Lukács would have sacrificed his philosophical originality, still present in his works *Soul and Form*, *The Theory of the Novel*, and to a limited extent in *History and Class Consciousness*,¹⁸⁵ to the official theoretical dogmas of the Soviet Party. Moreover, in Adorno's view, Lukács's "efforts to bolster up the naive Soviet verdict on modern art, i.e. on any literature which shocks the naively realistic normal mind, by providing it with a philosophical good

¹⁸⁴ One of the most philosophically sophisticated criticisms of literary naturalism that Lukács developed in the period can be found in the essay *Narrate or Describe?* (1936). While naturalism, due to its static focus on detail, describes (*beschreibt*) social events from the perspective of an observer (*Zuschauer*) "as social facts, as results, as *caput mortuum* of a social process" (Lukács 1970b: 114), the standpoint of narration (*Erzählen*) is one of a *Mitleben*, immanent to the events themselves in their interconnection within a dynamic social totality. Therefore, thanks to a narrator, "we can experience events which are inherently significant because of the direct involvement of the characters in the events" (Lukács 1970b: 116).

¹⁸⁵ However, taking into consideration other works by Adorno, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), co-authored with Horkheimer, and *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Timothy Hall (2011a: 69) demonstrates that Adorno already perceived Lukács's "critique of reification" as "all too appropriate by authoritarian currents in the communist movement—above all, Stalinism."

conscience, are carried out with a very limited range of tools, all of them Hegelian in origin” (Adorno 1980: 157). He continues this criticism elsewhere, saying that “Literature that is valid in itself is separated from literature that is valid in Soviet terms, which is supposed to be ‘correct’ by virtue of a sort of ‘act of grace’ on the part of the World Spirit” (Adorno 1980: 166). In other words, Adorno viewed Lukács’s theory of realism as a peculiar amalgam of “vulgar Hegelianism” and Stalinism.¹⁸⁶ Curiously, Adorno’s unilateral critique echoes Lukács’s early Soviet critics, such as Lászlo Rudas, Abram Deborin, and Grigory Zinoviev, who dogmatically saw him as deviating from the official Marxist orthodoxy prevailing in the Communist International.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ In this respect, Peter U. Hohendahl (1987: 36) observes that “Adorno’s critique of Lukács’s aesthetic theory has its exact parallel in his critique of Lukács’s social theory, especially of the socialism of the Soviet Union and its Eastern allies. Therefore, in Adorno’s eyes, Lukács’s concept of socialist realism is no more than the expression of Stalinist terror. It effaces, among other things, the essential category of aesthetic autonomy.” Nicholas Vazsonyi (1997: 11–59) presents a similar hypertrophic treatment of Lukács’s thought, finding prefigurations of his future theoretical and ethical acceptance of Stalinism in *Aesthetic Culture* and *Soul and Form*.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Kavoulakos 2018: 4. Most interventions in the discussion (or, more precisely, condemnation) of *History and Class Consciousness* by “orthodox Communists” in the mid-1920s can be found in a volume edited by Adorno’s students F. Cerutti, D. Claussen, H.-J. Krahl, O. Negt, and A. Schimdt titled *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein heute*. This was published in 1971 by Amsterdam-based publishing house De Munter, the same publisher who first reprinted the original edition of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1967. Israel Vainshtein offers a more acute, even if still biased, review of Lukács’s ideas in his article “G. Lukács and His Theory of ‘Reification’” [*G. Lukach i ego teorija “oveschestvlenija”*], which appeared in the Soviet Union’s foremost philosophical and socio-economic monthly journal, *Under the Banner of Marxism* [*Pod znamenem marksizma*], in 1924. The advantage of Vainshtein’s interpretation with respect to the aforementioned attacks on Lukács lies in the fact that he goes more deeply into Lukács’s theory of reification and not only critiques it from the standpoint of *diamat*, but also grounds his analysis on solid knowledge of Marx’s critique of political economy and the theory of commodity fetishism in particular. For instance, Vainshtein borrows the definition of commodity fetishism as “a general theory of the production relations of capitalist society [*obscheij teorieij proizvodstvennih otnoshenij kapitalisticheskogo obschestva*] from Isaak

But what about Lukács's reception within post-Soviet Russia? Does it, as a whole, share the criticism of Lukács's Marxism expressed by Adorno and the theoreticians of the Communist International? I will argue this is not the case. The history of Russian Lukács reception contains an alternative narrative of Lukács's overall impact on Soviet and post-Soviet philosophical thought.

Beginning with the fall of the Soviet Union, Lukács's dialectical epistemology of the totality, as conceptualized in *History and Class Consciousness*, started to attract attention from several Russian scholars seeking non-deterministic and philosophically sophisticated interpretations of Marxism that could not be reduced to the official Soviet versions of *istmat* and *diamat*. Without wanting to abandon the Marxist theoretical legacy entirely, then, these scholars felt the need to leave behind the dogmatic forms of Marxism-Leninism that used to dominate the Soviet public intellectual scene, and therefore reevaluated the tradition of creative and open Marxism, one of the first examples of which is represented by Lukács's writings from the early 1920s.

By 1937, Russian existentialist philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, in *The Origin of Russian Communism*, already viewed Lukács as “the most interesting and philosophically cultured of communist writers,” describing him as someone “who writes in German and displays great acuteness of mind, [and] makes an original, and, in my opinion, a true judgement about revolution” (Berdyaev 1948: 105). For Lukács, the notion of revolution stems from his dialectical epistemology of the totality. And Berdyaev correctly grasps that, for a Lukácsian “revolutionary,” “there are no *separate* spheres; he tolerates no division of life into parts, nor will he admit any autonomy of thought in relation to action or autonomy

Rubin's studies on the value-form and opposes it to Lukács's presumed psychologization of the phenomenon of reification in terms of an “inclination of consciousness [*sklonnosti soznaniya*]” (Vainshtein 1924: 24).

of action in relation to thought” (Berdyaev 1948: 105). Strikingly, Berdyaev stands out as an acute interpreter of Lukács’s overall theoretical intentions due to his insights on Lukács’s understanding of revolution as a philosophical description of the conditions of possibility of social change, without identifying any sort of “manual for revolution action” in *History and Class Consciousness*. This aspect of Lukács’s thought is at the core of more recent Russian interpretations of Lukács.

In his extensive introduction to the Russian edition of *History and Class Consciousness* (2003), titled “History, Consciousness, and Dialectics: Young Lukács’s Philosophical-Political Thought in the Context of the 21st Century”¹⁸⁸, Sergej Zemlyanoj stresses that, in relation to the overall Russian philosophical reevaluation of Lukács, Berdyaev focused on the “activity-oriented” side of Lukács’s thought, which was incompatible with theoretical and practical postulates of reflection and correspondence theories of truth that predominated in Soviet Marxism. In addition, Zemlyanoj argues that *History and Class Consciousness* is driven by an “antireductionist pathos,” which is derived from a highly elaborate view of the dynamic and bidirectional relationship between the subjective and objective poles of socio-historic totality.

A Russian translator and interpreter of Lukács, Sergej Potseluev, in his 2001 paper “The Hungarian Philosopher’s Russian Theme: The Meaning of Russia in the Philosophy of Young Lukács,”¹⁸⁹ ably demonstrates how the utopian and future-projected motivations for Lukács’s thought originated in his readings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, even before his turn toward Hegel and Marx, as well as in the political and cultural ideas of Slavophilism and

¹⁸⁸ *Istorija, soznanie, dialektika. Filosofsko-politicheskaya misl’ molodogo Lukacha v kontekstah XXI veka*: Zemlyanoj 2003.

¹⁸⁹ “Russkaya tema vengerskogo filosa: mesto Rossii v filosofii molodogo D. Lukacha.” Potseluev 2001.

Russian populism (*narodnichestvo*). In particular, Potseluev stresses the notion of Russian “soul (*dusha, Seele*),” that, during World War I, Lukács persistently opposed to the “Spirit (*duh, Geist*)” of the belligerent Europe and, in particular, Wilhelmine Germany. Moreover, Potseluev points out that the “goodness of the heart” that Lukács identifies as a motivating force for Dostoyevskian characters in his pre-Marxist thought represents a paradigm of non-normative ethics, grounded in non-intellectualistic imperatives (the so-called “second ethics,” “the ethics of the good,” or “the ethics of the heart”). Lukács believed such an ethics would steer clear of ossified conventions of a culture that had discovered the possibility of its own renewal in war. Strikingly, the “Russian standpoint” of Potseluev allowed him to anticipate much of the recent Lukács scholarship in identifying some of the crucial concepts of *History and Class Consciousness* as already present, albeit in a purely ethical form, in Lukács’s pre-Marxist writings. The “Russian theme” in Lukács is also at the center Zemlyanoy’s 2006 paper “The Spiritual Quest of Young Lukács.”¹⁹⁰

Another point of convergence between Lukács’s early Marxism and the tradition of antidogmatic Marxism in Russia is elaborated by Sergej Mareev in his detailed 2008 study *From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács, Vygotsky, Ilyenkov*.¹⁹¹ In Mareev’s view, Lukács and Lev Vygotsky founded traditions of cultural-historical and antireductionist Marxism – philosophical and psychological, respectively – that were immediately repressed by the official organs of the Communist International in defense of the purity of “dialectical materialism.” In addition, Mareev claims that “the lineage of Lukács-Vygotsky” was further developed by Russian dialectical philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, whose death by suicide in

¹⁹⁰ “Duchovnije iskaniya molodogo Lukacha:” Zemlyanoy 2006.

¹⁹¹ *Iz istorii sovetskoj filosofii. Lukach, Vygotsky, Ilyenkov*: Mareev 2008.

1979 ended the development of creative Marxism in the Soviet Union.¹⁹² Influenced by both Lukács and Vygotsky, Ilyenkov accepted Lukács's challenge of renovating Marxism through Hegelian dialectics while also retaining Vygotsky's assimilation of Spinoza's insistence on mind–body unity.¹⁹³

Beyond the above-mentioned introduction to *History and Class Consciousness*, Potseluev examines other aspects of “reification” in his 1993 article “G. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*: History, Class Consciousness, and Romantic Anti-Capitalism.”¹⁹⁴ In this article, while conceding there are moments of “romantic capitalism” even in Lukács theory of reification, Potseluev refuses to reduce his critique to “abstract voluntarism.” Meanwhile, Aleksandr Dmitriev's 2004 study *Marxism Without the Proletariat: Georg Lukács and the Early Frankfurt School from 1920–30*¹⁹⁵ presents a well-contextualized, historically informed account of Lukács's theory of reification within Eastern and Western Marxism during the second and the third decades of the twentieth century. Finally, Aleksandr Stikalin wrote a noteworthy 2001 intellectual biography of Lukács, *György Lukács: Thinker and Politician*,¹⁹⁶ of which there is no equivalent among Western

¹⁹² Naturally, there were numerous noteworthy representatives of this approach in the Soviet Union, such as “G. S. Batishev, G. P. Shchedrovitsky, E. G. Yudin and others,” leading to a certain “cult of activity” (*deyatel'nost'*; *aktivnost'*) in Soviet philosophy (Titarenko 2015: 58).

¹⁹³ Curiously, the thinkers that most influenced Ilyenkov's philosophical career include two dialecticians (Hegel and Lukács) and two philosophers of immanence (Spinoza and Vygotsky). The originality of Ilyenkov's theoretical accomplishment lies in his attempt to reconcile these apparently opposed intellectual tendencies.

¹⁹⁴ “*Istorija i klassovoe soznanye D. Lukacha: teoria oveshestvleniya i romanticheskij antikapitalizm*.” Potseluev 1993.

¹⁹⁵ *Markszim bez proletariata: Georg Lukach i rannaya Frankfurtskaya škola, 1920-1930-e gg.* Dmitriev 2004.

¹⁹⁶ *Djėrd' Lukach – mislitel' i politik*: Stikalin 2001.

biographies due to the weight it gives to the Soviet Russian reception of Lukács's works, as well as to little-known biographical and intellectual aspects of Lukács's permanence in the USSR.

Concluding Remarks

In this work, my underlying claim is that Lukács's early Marxist philosophy is characterized by a continuous struggle to mediate between theoretical and practical categories of thought. I argue that his dialectics should be considered neither as a traditional Marxist critique of Hegel nor a "neo-Idealist" recovery of Hegelian dialectics contra Marx, but rather a novel conception of dialectics informed by both approaches. Throughout, I refer to this methodological standpoint as a dialectical epistemology of the totality, referring to the how Lukács adopts a middle position between the dialectics of Hegel and Marx. While critics like Stefano Petrucciani (2018: 81) accuse Lukács of abandoning the Kantian idea, partially assimilated by Marx in his arguments against Hegel, of there being a constitutive limit to human knowledge that precludes any identity between subject and (natural) object, I argue that Lukács's critique of naturalism in social philosophy does not necessarily exclude the existence of this fundamental non-identity. In fact, we have seen how other critics, such as Komesaroff and Vogel, impute to Lukács an uncritical acceptance of the validity of the natural sciences when applied to nature and a refusal of the same when applied to society. According to this critique, Lukács is guilty of positing a radical gap between nature and society. As I have shown, though, these interpretations do not fully grasp the overall theoretical aim of Lukács's critique of naturalism in social philosophy, yet such critiques also refute accusations of the absolute identity of subject and object in Lukács's thought if we understand "identity" here as implying a total absorption of the natural by the social.

Instead, I claim that behind Lukács's "identical subject–object" lies a historicist-praxialist conviction that practical forms of knowledge remain unintelligible as long as laws of nature, with their atemporal validity, immutability, and explanatory efficiency within the domain of natural sciences, are taken as a vantage point for interrogating innovative social agency. For Lukács, social phenomena, including their interrelation, development, and their relationship with the natural, should first be conceptualized on the ground of historically shaped categories of praxis-oriented philosophy. For Lukács, such categories are in turn not given as pre-constituted but rather emerge from a practically engaged desire to comprehend the social world holistically in pursuit of an emancipated society.

In this sense, I believe that Lukács's dialectical epistemology of the totality offers a valuable perspective, on the one hand, into the relationship between social norms, rules, and institutions, and, on the other hand, into social change. It allows us to understand that the historical events that, from time to time, renew our social lives should not be viewed as mere evolutionary developments, but rather as significant social shifts with a revolutionary structure.¹⁹⁷ These shifts imply the innovation and transformation of the patterns of social rules and norms that constitute the ordinary framework of social life. Lukács believed that dialectical thought allows us to grasp the dynamic structure of social norms in times of crisis and can thereby reveal previously unseen ways for conceptualizing these novel situations. Conversely, Lukács was convinced that non-dialectical thought cannot help but see such transformative events as crises, catastrophes, or quasi-miracles. For example, forms of thought that naturalize the rules of social life in terms of immutable laws of nature tend to perceive cyclic economic crises or human-inflicted "natural" disasters as ungraspable irrational errors that quasi-miraculously interrupt the normality of the rationally functioning

¹⁹⁷ See Hindrichs 2017.

system. Understood thusly, Lukács's dialectical thought retains its relevance even in modern philosophical debate that aims to envisage theoretical and practical models for a more emancipated global society.

Further developing the Lukácsian theory of reified subjectivity could be particularly interesting in our age of technological and digital expansion of reification, especially with its all-embracing algorithmization of everyday experience and our growing affective, emotional, creative, and imaginative involvement in the processes of capitalist valorization. Lukács's message is that, regardless of any new accounts of subjective reification or methods of escaping such reification that we might develop, we should not renounce critical enquiry regarding the historically defined forms of objectivity that structure our world. Finally, the intrinsically political relation between the one and the many in Lukács's philosophy of "class" consciousness remains relevant for future attempts to conceptualize new forms of democratic participation in shaping our common lives.

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