

Justice and the Good Life in Lukács's History and Class Consciousness

Draft only: not for citation.

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There are seemingly compelling reasons why the social and political thought of Georg Lukács has had little attention paid to it in recent years.¹ Not the least of these is its apparent exclusive focus on class-based forms of social domination and the related claim of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history. What can such an approach contribute to a social conjuncture that is altogether more complex and resistant to democratic transformation? In what follows I will suggest that Lukács's social and political thought contains crucial insights that remain relevant today, notwithstanding its other limitations. Foremost amongst these is the recognition that questions of social justice and questions of the meaningful, good or worthwhile life cannot be separated.

While Lukács does not formulate the problem in this way, I will argue that the concept of critical social theory developed in History and Class Consciousness (HCC) responds to a twofold problem: on one hand, the social injustice following from capitalism as a social system, on the other, a pervasive nihilism resulting from increasing social rationalization. These two problems – the former the preserve of social and political theory, the latter the central concern of philosophical thought – are not reducible to one another and lend his approach its distinctive character. For Lukács, capitalist modernity is both unjust and nihilistic. This implies that modern social institutions produce unjust social outcomes but also – by dint of their self-naturalizing character, by which they place themselves beyond human intervention

and control – a deficit of meaning. Because we lack a basis from which to recognize these institutions as our own socio-historical work and create new ones we are left without a practical standpoint and therefore without a basis to confer meaning on the world.

This original insight of Lukács's social theory, as developed in his landmark essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', is, I will suggest, of continuing relevance to contemporary critical theory. In general terms social and political writing have tended to emphasise the problem of social justice at the expense of the problem of nihilism, while philosophical thought has tended to focus on the problem of nihilism at the expense of the problem of justice. Few projects have succeeded in holding together these two problems and recognising their fundamental entwinement, as Lukács's does. Moreover, within the tradition of Frankfurt School social theory – the tradition arguably inaugurated by Lukács – there is a tendency to see critical theory as nothing more than a branch of moral theory concerned exclusively with questions of social justice. Against this backdrop of the separation of the problems of social justice and the worthwhile life, and the conversion of critical theory into a branch of moral theory, Lukács's approach is perhaps surprisingly relevant to the present.ⁱⁱ

In this chapter, then, I set out the case for a return to a Lukácsian concept of critical theory developed principally, by Lukács, in History and Class Consciousness. I argue that what is important about this conception is precisely the way in which the problem of social justice and the question of the good life are presented as inextricably intertwined. What distinguishes this conception from contemporary conceptions – especially, I argue, those informed by the Communicative-theory approach of Jürgen Habermas and the action-theoretical approach of Axel Honneth –

is the manner in which it allows the question of the good life to continue to be raised. Recent attempts to address the question of the good or worthwhile life and insist on its centrality to social and political thought have generally taken an explicitly anti-modernist form. The neo-Thomistic work of Alasdair MacIntyre and the classical republicanism of Martha Nussbaum spring immediately to mind.ⁱⁱⁱ Lukács's broaching of the question of the worthwhile life, however, has little in common with these approaches. For one there is no attempt in History and Class Consciousness to discern, in a 'doctrine of ends' or concept of natural law, a 'blueprint' of life rightly lived – much less so even than in Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, in relation to which Lukács would later relegate his work.^{iv} While the concept of 'alienated' social activity has a pivotal role in his thought, there is little to suggest, I will argue, that Lukács viewed the restitution of this alienated social activity in praxis as amounting to anything more than the discovery of historically and ontologically novel forms of action.

Lukács develops this conception principally through the generalization of the commodity form – specifically the manner in which this generalization opens up the question of materialist reason as a whole. I focus on this generalization here, and consider its principal implications for both Marxism and critical social theory generally. One perhaps unexpected consequence of this, I will suggest, is the emergence of Lukács as a thinker of ontological novelty rather than of identity – notwithstanding his well-known and often cited proposition of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history (HCC 149).

The proletariat emerges as the putative solution to the antinomies and contradictions of bourgeois society, but it does so by virtue of the fact that it is capable of free, self-initiating action. In other words, it is fated not simply to

reproduce the social relations and institutions that comprise capitalist modernity, but to open up new social relations and create ab nihilo new social institutions. What distinguishes Lukács's account of this action – what he terms praxis – from Kantian and other moralistic approaches is his insistence that it overcome the ‘indifference of form towards content’ that comes to characterise the latter. By this he intends to challenge the ‘logic of subsumption’ – in terms of case and rule – that is ever present in the principal schools of moral theory (HCC 125-26).^v If practical action involves the application of rules then this cannot take the form of the indifferent subsumption of ethical content. Rather the precept or practical rule must be open to the hitherto unthought or radically new. I discuss this in further detail below. Finally I argue that while ontological novelty and identity remain in tension in Lukács's work, this does not detract from the basic conception of critical social theory that he puts forward. Moreover, I will contend that a return to this is necessary if we want to prevent the latter from deteriorating into a branch of moral theory exclusively concerned with issues of justice.

Between Marx and Weber

What is most distinctive about a theory is often what is most contested. This is particularly the case with Lukács's essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, whose generalization of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is frequently singled out as his most significant contribution to both the Marxist tradition and to social theory more broadly. Within the Marxist tradition, Lukács's work represents the founding document of Hegelian or Western Marxism. As such, it rids Marxism of its reductive, positivistic and deterministic elements. Beyond this tradition, it represents the tantalizing bridge between two distinct schools of

sociological theory: between a class-based analysis of society deriving from Marx, and a value-pluralistic or perspectival approach deriving from Weber. The exact manner of Lukács's generalization of the commodity form, however, is often not understood, or is 'written off' as confused. Even Axel Honneth's detailed and – in many ways – admirable reading of the essay appears to pull up short at this generalization, dismissing Lukács's social theory as fundamentally ambiguous – torn between a Marxist/functionalist explanation of social illusion, on one hand, and a Weberian account of inexorable rationalization on the other (RNL 23). To show the shortcomings of Honneth's reading we need to look in detail at Lukács's review of Marx's analysis of the commodity form in order to reconstruct his argument.

The elaboration of the subject-object forms of bourgeois society begins with a commentary on Marx's analysis of the commodity-form, and proceeds to an outline of the subject-object relation constituting the economic aspect of social existence. Lukács cites Marx's famous passage from Capital Vol. 1, chapter 1, in which the mysterious character of the commodity form is addressed (HCC 86). What interests Lukács in this analysis is the way that 'a man's own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him' (86-7). This has, he says, both an objective and a subjective significance: objectively the world of commodities comes into existence, operating in accordance with its own autonomous laws; subjectively, individuals are alienated from their own distinctively human activity (labour) which now appears to them as a commodity like everything else (87).

Lukács goes on to generalize this subject-object relation. After distinguishing between the objective and subjective sides of the productive process in which man is increasingly 'incorporated into a mechanical system' (89) he proceeds to an analysis of other subject-object relations obtaining in bourgeois society in the legal, political

and cultural spheres. In each case, the rationalization of a determinate sphere of human activity is premised upon a similar process of integration into mechanically functioning social-systems. For example, in the context of the emergence of the centralised bureaucratic state, Lukács argues as follows:

The split between the worker's labour power and his personality, its metamorphosis into a thing, an object that he sells on the market is repeated here [in bureaucratic consciousness] too. But with the difference that not every mental faculty is suppressed by mechanisation; only one faculty (or complex of faculties) is detached from the whole personality and placed in opposition to it, becoming a thing, a commodity. But the basic phenomenon remains the same even though the means by which society instils such abilities and their material and 'moral' exchange value are fundamentally different from labour-power. (99)

What is striking in this passage is, first, how the characteristic process of alienation – the 'splitting off' of one aspect of the personality and the opposing of this to the 'total' personality – is not restricted to the experience of industrial labour but extends to clerical work as well. Secondly, and centrally for our focus on Lukács's generalization of the commodity form, the integration of quantitatively measurable human activity becomes the precondition for the rationalization of the administrative sphere or state, just as it did for the rationalization of the labour process.

The same argument is utilized by Lukács in accounting for the emergence of a rational system of law and the reification of the public sphere. Just as the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker become, in the context of the rationalized

labour process, ‘mere sources of error’ (ibid.), so in the administrative and legal spheres individual judgement and discretion are increasingly foreclosed on the grounds that they upset the otherwise predictable outcomes of mechanical social systems (97). Lukács contrasts modern and pre-modern systems of law not because he favours a return to the latter but to highlight the extent to which judgement and the exercise of discretion are precluded by the advent of the former (ibid). Rationalized social systems are ‘mechanical’ precisely because they leave no room – or provide no objective basis – for free, self-originating action. Every action follows from an antecedent cause, and freedom itself is reduced to a subjective vantage point from which to observe and judge the inexorable course of social events (124).

The case is similar in the rationalization of the public sphere. Just as the seamless integration of the labourer or bureaucrat is the precondition of the thoroughgoing rationalization of labour, administration and the legal process, so the self-commodification of the journalist is the precondition for the emergence of what Adorno and Horkheimer will later call the administered public sphere.^{vi} For Lukács, journalism represents the apogee of the capacity for self-reification in as much as the very intuitions, personality and temperament of the journalist are commodified (HCC 100). What appear as irreducible human characteristics which, as such, defy all attempts at commodification, turn out to be all too commodifiable in journalism, and the basis for the thoroughgoing rationalization of the cultural sphere. Moreover, the understandable concern to ‘update’ Lukács’s analysis – replacing it with ever more refined and complex accounts of ‘cultural industries’, each with their own ‘logics’ – runs the risk of overlooking his basic insight: that the commodity form provides the basis for thinking the subject-object relations of bourgeois society in their entirety.

(84)

The ramifications of this generalization with its characteristic constitution of objective and subjective domains are profound and, in my view, have not been fully appreciated by the Marxist tradition.^{vii} It also goes to the heart of Lukács's celebrated 'synthesis' of the social theories of Marx and Weber.

(i) In relation to Marx: Lukács extends Marx's argument about the alienated social activity that appears as an objective characteristic of a thing – its value-in-exchange or price – to the legal, political and cultural spheres. Marxists are familiar with the notion that the domination of use-value by value-in-exchange in the commodity form is premised upon the suppression of concrete (use-value-generating) labour by abstract measurable social labour. This makes possible the notion of 'alienated' social labour inherent in the commodity form. As a consequence, it becomes possible to think an alternative to the distributive and productive decisions that follow the fluctuations of the values of commodities on the market. Instead of these, production could be socialised; such decisions could be the outcome of a process of deliberate planning. The effect would be that fluctuations in value is no longer experienced as a quasi-natural force that determines how resources are distributed and what (and how much) is produced in society. Lukács great innovation, however, is the notion that social activity, not simply labour, is alienated in other aspects of the social structure. This is precisely what Lukács intends with the generalization of the commodity form. The emergence of the modern state with its centralized bureaucracy, the emergence of a rational system of law, and even the emergence of a system of culture, are all predicated on the seamless integration of human social activity into mechanically functioning systems.

If the same fundamental tendency is at work in the productive, legal and administrative and cultural process, then there is no need to theorize social structure in terms of base and superstructure, with the former having ontological primacy over the latter. What is fundamental is not natural man, confronted by nature, reproducing his own material conditions of existence in a position of original scarcity, but the process by which, in modernity, our own activity becomes something independent of us – something that controls us by virtue of an autonomy alien to us (HCC 87). Here, ‘fundamental’ is understood in purely historical terms, alluding to the meaning of the present, not to a speculative philosophical anthropology.^{viii} In other words, the recovery of social activity will not take the form of the reversion to an original nature, as it will do in Lukács’s later work, most notably The Young Hegel. Any trace of a philosophical anthropology is conspicuous by its absence in the Reification essay. Rather the commodity-form – or more specifically, the proletariat, as the self-conscious commodity (HCC 168) – is the central cipher of the present, which makes possible an understanding of the subject-object process that structures society as a whole. It is the historical present brought to self-awareness, for which the model is Hegel rather than Rousseau.^{ix}

(ii) In relation to Weber: Lukács makes the integration of human social activity into mechanically functioning social-systems the basis for the rationalization of productive, legal and administrative spheres that Weber traced in detail in Economy and Society. Lukács thereby challenges Weber’s contention that rationalization is the fate of the West. The possibility that the alienated social activity lying dormant in things could be awoken implies that there is nothing inexorable about rationalization. A further and more significant upshot is that Lukács makes available to a Marxist

approach the critique of enlightenment conceptions of reason that Weber inherits from Nietzsche. This is the drive or will, evidenced in modern rationalism, towards rendering human life in all its aspects increasingly predictable and calculable. So while making rationalization conditional on the prior ‘alienation’ of social activity in reified social structures, Lukács also introduces debates around reason and rationality in Marxist thought.^x Might the form of domination bound up with the suppression of use-value in value-in-exchange actually have its roots in our most fundamental concepts of reason and rationality and the norms and ideals that underpin these conceptions? We are familiar with the idea that we are complicit with social domination insofar as we exercise our economic agency (buying, selling etc) – and even, by extension, our social agency more broadly construed – but does this extend to the activity of expressing our opinions, to concept-formation in the sciences, and to thinking itself? What is at stake in the problem of the commodity, for Lukács, is not simply the extraction of surplus value and the overthrow of class-based forms of social domination, but the very possibility of a meaningful or worthwhile life. What the ubiquity of the commodity form presages is the thoroughgoing rationalization of life to the point where no aspect of human existence – social/political/cultural, inner or outer – is spared the disintegrating effects of societal reification.

Lukács’s generalization of the commodity-form, instead of, as Honneth contends, representing a fundamentally incoherent attempt to marry irreconcilable – class-based and perspectival – approaches in social theory, opens up an entirely original analysis, one that we are in danger of losing today, in which the traditional tasks of sociology and philosophy – to redeem claims of social justice and to account for the possibility of the good life – are interconnected.^{xi} On the basis of his extension of the alienation of labour to social activity in general, Lukács invites us to rethink the

ontological primacy attributed to productive labour in the standard materialist approach.

Before pressing this claim further, however, more needs to be said about how the problem of the commodity relates to the critique of idealist reason. For while the question of the meaningful or worthwhile life arises, for Lukács, in the context of his discussion of the generalization of the commodity form, it is raised much more directly and explored further in his critique of idealist concepts of reason. The critique of idealist reason undertaken in the second section of the Reification essay provides a concept of materialist reason – praxis – that will enable the meaning of the present to be redeemed and the class-based character of society to be overcome.

Reification and Idealism

The continuity between sections one and two of the Reification essay, dealing respectively with ‘The Phenomenon of Reification’ and ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’, is frequently overlooked by commentators and critics. Habermas’s analysis of Lukács’s social theory in Theory of Communicative Action (1984) and Honneth’s analysis of societal reification in Reification: A New Look at and Old Idea (2008) make little or no reference to it.^{xii} Yet overcoming societal reification and resolving the antinomies of bourgeois thought are clearly related for Lukács. In Lukács’s view the central problem that Kantian and post-Kantian idealism grapples with – the problem of the thing in itself – is nothing other than the fetish form of the commodity articulated at the philosophical level.^{xiii} For this reason the understanding and resolution of the problem of the thing in itself is material to a full appreciation of the depth of the problem of reification and its putative overcoming. And while he maintains that no solution to the problem of reification is possible from

the standpoint of ‘bourgeois philosophy’, he clearly views the various attempts by the idealists to surmount the problem of the thing-in-itself as formative for his own conception of reason/praxis.^{xiv} Why does he maintain this?

The principal reason is that he views Kant, and idealism generally, as the philosophical articulation of – and attempt to overcome – the antinomies of bourgeois society. These antinomies relate, as we have seen, to the concrete contents of rationalised social systems which are increasingly unknowable and to the absence of any conception of society as a whole that follows from social fragmentation. Thus, Lukács argues, the more rationalised a social system becomes, the less it is able to relate to the concrete matter it is adjudicating. The specificity of the matter disappears behind the subsumptive logic of case and rule. Similarly, he maintains, the more we master the detail of social existence, the less we are able to understand society – or the social process – as a whole; the more specialised our knowledge of the separate aspects of the social structure, the more we forfeit our ability to understand and direct social events in their entirety (HCC 121). These contradictions are crystallised, Lukács suggests, in the Kantian aporia of the thing-in-itself.

While the problem of the thing-in-itself in Kant’s philosophy is notoriously slippery, it can, Lukács suggests, be reduced to two complexes of problems: the first pertain to the problem of conceptual content; while the second relate to the ultimate objects of human knowledge and understanding (HCC 115). Both sets of problems can be seen to follow directly from Kant’s anthropocentrism (121). For Lukács, Kant’s thought represents a decisive development in western rationalism insofar it suspends debates about our ability to have knowledge of a mind-independent reality and inaugurates the search for the intrinsically human (i.e. finite) forms of knowledge. However, in accounting for the inescapably human forms of knowing – forms of

intuition, categories, transcendental ideas etc. – Kant is forced to acknowledge a moment of ineluctable givenness in the system of reason which, in turn, entails that our conceptual representations are necessarily incomplete. For this reason Lukács maintains that the problem of the irreducible irrationality of conceptual content is tied up with the ultimate unknowability of what were the ultimate objects of metaphysical knowledge: God, soul and world.

This is not the place to evaluate the accuracy of Lukács's reading of Kant. As should be clear in any case, this is not Lukács's central concern in the second section of the Reification essay. Rather he is concerned to show, first, that the seemingly abstruse paradoxes of Kant's cognitive philosophy have a concrete reference to social contradictions and tensions (Löwith, 1993, p.82). For Lukács, the antinomies of content and totality simply are the contradictions of bourgeois society raised to the philosophical level. Secondly, and as becomes clear from the way his argument unfolds, he views the problem of the thing-in-itself as the fundamental aporia of idealism in general, and not simply of Kantian idealism.^{xv} As such, it functions as the key for his critique of idealist reason and undergoes a series of displacements. It appears first as a cognitive problem in the critique of the theoretical philosophy of Kant and Fichte (HCC 121-23); then as a practical problem in the critique of Kant's moral philosophy (123-26); then as an aesthetic question in the critique of Schiller's On the Aesthetic Education of Man (137-140); and finally, as a problem of the historicity of thought and the possibility of a systematic account of reason in Hegel's thought (140-44). The re-cognizing of the various attempts to resolve the problem of the thing-in-itself, across the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic domains, can also be understood as the process by which the central legacy of idealism for a theory of praxis – the dialectical method – is derived. (148)

An example of the importance of this critique for Lukács's concept of praxis can be found in his critique of Kant's practical philosophy. Like Kant, Lukács maintains that practical reason holds primacy over theoretical reason (126). For Lukács, however, Kant's practical philosophy never succeeds in establishing its primacy: it remains 'contemplative' – a mere interpretation of the moral facts (124). Without an account of how moral norms are applicable in principle to the empirical domain – in which whatever occurs does so in accordance with the law of causality – the moral subject will remain quite literally without a world in which to act. The negation of the world as it is in moral action will, in turn, be negated by the world acting in accordance with laws that are impervious to human direction and control. As Lukács puts it elsewhere: 'It is self-evident that a merely subjective decision will be shattered by the pressure of uncomprehended facts acting automatically according to laws' (23).

The recovery of a world in which to act and the establishment of the primacy of reason is achieved through the negation of the empirical world in its immediacy. Here Lukács draws on Hegel's concept of mediation. The factual world organised in accordance with principles and laws is precisely not a given to which the acting subject must adjust, but a mediated reality. By understanding how the facts are constituted as facts – say, through the feedback-controlled method in the empirical sciences – a space is opened up for human agency again. The central model for this in the Reification essay is the recovery of agency that follows from the negation of economic laws in their immediacy.

The primacy of practical reason is also connected to the discovery of the historical dimension of human thought and action for Lukács. Behind the illusion of change in Kant's moral philosophy and his account of historical progress – i.e. the

gradualist account of historical change in the Kantian concept of the ‘infinite task’ – is the real process of socio-historical becoming: the reproduction of social relations in their entirety as a consequence of unconscious (i.e. class-related) social practices.

Lukács’s contention is that through awareness of class – i.e. through the awareness of the contrasting meaning of the experience of reification relative to one’s position in society – reification in its social and philosophical forms is overcome (159-172).

Far from being merely an excursus, the critique of idealist reason is therefore central to the task of overcoming societal reification as Lukács conceives it. Kant’s concept of practical reason, and the notion of historical change allied to it, is a form of pseudo-praxis. The meaninglessness of the empirical world remains untranscended and inimical to human intention and purpose. Without a conception of reason in which the possibility of human action and historical change are accounted for, the resources for overcoming societal reification will simply be lacking.

Ontological novelty or identity?

In outlining the ways in which social critique and the critique of idealist reason reciprocally condition one another in Lukács’s thought, another problem emerges. Do Lukács’s conception of reification and his account of how it is overcome draw too heavily on the idealist tradition? In other words does his account end up incorporating into its basic concepts some of the more problematic elements of idealist thought?

Foremost among these would be the claim that the proletariat represents the identical subject-object of history. Quite apart from how this claim stands vis-à-vis the historical disappearance of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, there is the problem of whether his theory incorporates the speculative principle of identity found in various forms in the philosophy of Schelling and Hegel; in other words, whether

his account presupposes the identity of thought and being or consciousness and reality in the same way that certain forms of idealism are accused of doing. According to this critique, Lukács account of action as mediation draws normative force from the speculative identity of reason and nature, or of thought and being. For example, the resolution of reified 'things' into social processes, and unmediated facts into social tendencies, draws on the uncritical acceptance of innate teleologies in human history. What this implies is that Lukács's claim to have uncovered the historical dimension of human thought and action is flawed because it draws on a dogmatic philosophy of history. The very discovery of the historical domain coincides with its abolition as it comes to be comprehended in a speculative philosophy of history.^{xvi}

Again I think that it is relatively easy to show that this criticism of Lukács is, at the least, summary. One only need look at the importance he attributes to the capacity of any philosophical approach to history to entertain the new. Commenting on the limitation of 18th century materialist philosophies of history (e.g. Holbach's) that attempt to arrive at historical laws that do justice to every foreseeable possibility, Lukács writes:

it is of the essence of such a law that within its jurisdiction nothing new can happen by definition and a system of such laws which is held to be perfect can indeed reduce the need to correct individual laws but cannot calculate what is novel.... But if genesis, in the sense given to it in classical philosophy, is to be attained it is necessary to create a basis for it in a logic of contents which change. It is only in history, in the historical process, in the uninterrupted outpouring of what is qualitatively new that the requisite paradigmatic order can be found in the realm of things. (HCC 144)

The problem with a rationalist approach to history is that it precludes the possibility of the radically new. Whatever happens in history, insofar as it is intelligible, must conform to laws: whatever does not is consigned to the realm of contingency and is unknowable. To allow for the possibility of the historically new, however, the forms imposed on historical events must have a basis in content. It must, in other words, be possible to discern a pre-discursive order to historical events that exceeds existing rational forms.

Lukács is here thinking through the historicity of reason. By opening up a gap between the pre-discursive form of historical events and existing categories of historical comprehension, he leaves room for the emergence of new forms of historical comprehension i.e. new ways of understanding hitherto unforeseen tendencies and patterns in history. The model for this is aesthetic reason, in the sense that aesthetic form is both non-subsumptive and putatively rational. Through the interpretation of artworks it becomes possible to derive new discursive forms that exceed and extend existing categories of understanding. What for romantic conceptions remain features of aesthetic subjectivity are generalised in Hegel's account of the formation of a modern subject whose social and historical formation can be recapitulated and rendered explicit. Lukács follows Hegel in his insistence that an account of the formation of the subject is necessary, but argues that Hegel fails to provide a basis for this subject in the logic of contents. The consequence of this failure is that the subject – absolute spirit – is introduced into history (HCC 162). In contrast, Lukács insists that the subject, and the forms in terms of which history is to be understood, have to, are suggested by history itself. The proletariat and the

categories with which it understands the world begin as pre-discursive intuitions which are only later – retrospectively – given a discursive articulation.

Paradoxically, then, Lukács's claim that the proletariat is the identical subject-object of history is the result of his attempt to historicise both the subject and its basic forms of understanding and action, forms that he takes to have been only partially historicised in Hegel's thought. Only when subjectivity is thought of as historical through and through – with no aspect of subjectivity considered invariant and thereby exempt from the process of historical becoming – will the diremption of subject and object be truly overcome.

Holding fast to the radical historicity of Lukács's project we might conclude that ontological novelty – and not identity – is the animating principle of his thought. Certainly by attending to Lukács's insistence that theory remain open to ontological novelty, the criticism of his thought as metaphysical looks problematic.^{xvii} Does Lukács's conception of praxis draw illegitimate normative force from the principle of speculative identity, or do the fundamental limitations of existing forms of thought and action become apparent only from the vantage point of an experience that exceeds them? If Lukács's concept of praxis draws normative force from anywhere, it is from the negation, pure and simple, of these already existing forms. Thus Lukács argues that the proletariat is driven beyond immediacy simply by the fact that society's concept of the subject is everywhere contradicted by the reality – by the proletariat's existence as pure object, rather than the subject, of social events (HCC 167-68). We might well dispute with Lukács whether the experience of the proletariat continues to occupy the perspective from which the limitations of social categories come into view. To maintain, however, as Habermas and Honneth have, that Lukács's theory of class consciousness rests on a materialization of the identity principle is ill-founded.

This said, the principles of ontological novelty and identity remain in fundamental tension in Lukács's thought. It is not clear, for example, what room Lukács's radically historicised account of the subject and dynamic social ontology leave for an account of social institutions. The dynamization of the social world that seems to follow from the resolution of reified social things into processes appears to conceptualize a de-reified world as one without institutions. Adorno in particular has criticised the extent to which Lukács's theory remains in hock to idealism on this point, emphasising its affinities with both subjective idealism and romanticism (1973: 189-92).^{xviii} Adorno points to the absence of mediation in Lukács's account of overcoming societal reification, and a reluctance to allow new forms of freedom to assume objective, institutional form. There remains, however, an important difference between a reading of Lukács that maintains that the principles of ontological novelty and identity are in fundamental tension and one that uses the identity claim as a pretext for dismissing the contemporary relevance of Lukács's theory of praxis.

Social Praxis

Critical social theory is, for Lukács, informed by a conception of praxis, the fundamental contours of which emerge from the critique of idealism. Praxis succeeds where idealism failed in resolving the antinomies of totality and content. However it does this by assimilating key elements of the idealist project: notably the anthropocentrism of idealism; the primacy of practical reason; a non-subsumptive conception of form found in aesthetic reason; and a mediated account of the subject. Social praxis, for Lukács, therefore, represents an account of the self-determining life which is fundamentally practical. The rationality of this praxis is not something inhering in existing institutions and practices and requiring only cognitive

recapitulation. Rather, it is an emerging form of social life, one not captured by existing social categories, a form of action that is neither objective (i.e. strategic/technical) nor subjective (moral). It is action from the middle. As such it is necessarily improvised and experimental. Maurice Merleau-Ponty captures this nicely in the preface to his classic study of Lukács when he describes Lukács's conception of politics as an 'action in the process of self-invention' (Merleau-Ponty, 1974, p.4). Social praxis cannot appeal to any rule or algorithm for justification because the concepts and forms that will enable the praxical subject to interpret his or her experience are in the process of becoming. These forms do not pre-exist the act itself.

At the same time, rules do not entirely drop out. If they did, social praxis would be indistinguishable from a politics of modus vivendi or muddling through in the absence of norms.^{xix} Lukács makes this point clearly in his discussion of the way in which the category of totality figures in praxis in the final section of the reification essay:

‘[t]he relation to totality 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 towards totality....’ (HCC 198)

If an insight into the total social process were the necessary precondition of praxical action then the categories in terms of which experience could be interpreted would precede the act. For Lukács the issue is not how to render explicit the way norms figure in action, but how the determination of the subject is effected by action. At the same time ‘aspiration towards totality’ is not synonymous with the Kantian

concept of regulative idea, for this would immediately re-open the chasm between subject and object. That praxical action evidences an aspiration towards totality implies nothing more than that its meaning outstrips existing social categories. Filtered through the concept of class, this offers the alternative of unconscious or conscious socio-historical activity. What distinguishes the latter from the former is the recognition that the norms and values in terms of which the bourgeois social-world becomes comprehensible are themselves the products of action.

The Proletariat and the good life

How does Lukács's concept of social praxis respond to the twofold problematic of critical social theory outlined earlier? Although, as a Marxist theory, it responds to the problem of social justice with a politics based on class, there is little evidence to suggest that Lukács thinks that societal reification can be transcended through the overcoming of class division alone. As the subject of the social-historical process, the proletariat is also charged with the task of rendering life meaningful. The prospect of an objective (rule-governed) world sealed off from subjective (moral) action was articulated by Kant in his practical philosophy. Hegel's account of the mediated historical subject was an explicit attempt to transcend this. Thus, on the proletariat, according to Lukács, devolves the twofold task of realizing social justice and rendering social life meaningful.

Does Lukács's contention that the transition to the standpoint of the proletariat dissolves the antinomies of content and totality undermine his account of praxis as ontological novelty? In my view it has to. Against the claim that the proletariat represents the identical subject-object, one should posit Adorno's recognition of the intransigence of capitalism. The implication of this intransigence is an untranscended

dualism of subject and object – or, as Adorno puts it in Negative Dialectics, the fact that ‘objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder’ (Adorno, 1973, p. 5). Ontological novelty, by contrast, cannot ultimately be accommodated under the schema of subject-object identity. Adorno’s acknowledgement does not, then, invalidate Lukács’s basic conception of critical social philosophy; if anything it deepens it. For the imbrication of the problems of social justice and of meaning is not lessened by the adoption of a dualist conception of subject and object, as Adorno’s conception of negative dialectic attests.^{xx}

Lukács opens up an entirely original theoretical perspective in the Reification essay in which the tasks of social critique (realizing claims to social justice) and philosophy (outlining the possibility of the good life under conditions of modernity) are shown to be intertwined. This is accomplished primarily, I have suggested, through the generalization of the commodity form, that is, through the generalization of Marx’s claim that human social activity (abstract labour) appears as the objective property of a thing. This generalization enables Lukács to raise the problem of social rationality and its nihilistic, disintegrating effects, and this, in turn, allows him to pose, within a Marxian framework, the question of the good life. This was a question posed emphatically in Weber’s sociology – Why this life rather than others? – but the social sciences were in Weber’s view severely circumscribed in what they could contribute to this. They were restricted to pointing out the consequences of taking up one value-position over another. Of the value choices themselves, however, nothing more could be said. This was a question of faith and there was ultimately an element of undecidability about the choice of one value over another (Weber, 2009, p. 151).

While acknowledging that the nihilistic effects of rationalism represented a blind spot for Marxist thought – which would ensure that the attempt to redeem

claims for social justice had to fail – the concept of a critical theory of society that Lukács sketches out moves beyond the limitations prescribed by Weber. He is able to do this because he recognised that rationalization is premised on ‘alienated social activity’ lying dormant in reified ‘objects’. The possibility of this social activity awakening, and the transfiguration of the social that would result from this could never, for this reason, be ruled out. This of course was precisely what Lukács envisaged through the figure of the proletariat which, as self-conscious commodity, was capable of bursting through the rigidified subject-object dichotomies that structured bourgeois society. In contrast to Weberian sociology, we should expect substantive answers from Lukács to the question of why this life and not others.

This discussion of the good life has a distinctively modernist inflection as the problem of the possibility of the self-directing or autonomous life. Lukács, however, rejected all essentialist approaches to the question, along with the notion that such a possibility could be ‘specified’ in advance. Whatever meaning the proletariat imparted through its historical and institutional invention would be ultimately transient and subject to decay.

Notes

ⁱ A draft of this chapter was first presented at a symposium on Lukacs’s History and Class Consciousness organized by the Marxism and Philosophy Society in London, February 2010. I would to thank Meade McCloughan for organizing the symposium and for the invitation to speak; my fellow presenters Gordon Finlayson and Michalis Skomvoulis ; and Andrew Chitty, Robert Cannon and all the other participants for their responses and criticisms.

ⁱⁱ See Bernstein (1995): ‘Critical theorists typically fuse a concern for justice with a concern for ‘meaning’ or said otherwise ... they perceive a connection between the problem of domination and the problem of nihilism, where the terms “domination” and “nihilism” recall the dual provenance of critical theory in social science and philosophy’ (p. 11).

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example MacIntyre (1981), ch. 17, and Nussbaum (1986), ch. 1.

^{iv} See, for example, the 1967 preface to HCC: ‘In the process of reading the Marx manuscripts all the idealist prejudices of History and Class Consciousness were swept to one side’ (HCC xxxvi).

^v The classic formulation of this would be Kant’s definition of a practical maxim in the Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (Kant, 2005, p. 71). Closer affinities can be found with the Aristotelian tradition in which all action is held to be singular. See, for instance, Aristotle’s account of the mean relative to us in book II chapter 6 of the Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle, 2002, p. 117)

^{vi} While the claim that Lukács, in the Reification essay, anticipates Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the culture industry would require further argumentation, it is at least clear that the rationalization of culture presupposes the division of the personality and the integration of aspects of this into rational systems. See, for example, the analysis of how cultural products that appear on the market are inevitably pre-classified by the cultural industry (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, p. 125).

^{vii} The exception to this is Karl Löwith’s classic study Max Weber and Karl Marx. In a comparative study of the social theories of Weber and Marx, Löwith offers ontological interpretations of ‘rationalization’ and ‘self-alienation’ that clearly draws inspiration from History and Class Consciousness. See Löwith (1993), pp. 81-82 n36.

^{viii} See Axel Honneth (2007), ch. 1.

^{ix} For this reason Postone's central criticism of History and Class Consciousness – that Lukács treats labour as an invariant, rather than historically mediated category – is highly questionable (TLSD 73). This takes no account of the way that, not just labour, but social activity generally is alienated in Lukács's account of societal reification. Postone effectively criticises Lukács for reductivism when the rejection of this is precisely Lukács's innovation.

^x The question of reason is raised, in submerged form, in the question of method in Marx – most noticeably in Capital Vol. 1 and the Grundrisse – but not in the explicit form in which it is raised in Lukács's work.

^{xi} Contra Honneth: the extension of commodity form to other aspects of the social structure only appears 'arbitrary' if the basic tenets of Lukács's generalization are not elaborated (RNL 77-78).

^{xii} Habermas discusses this briefly in section IV of Volume 1 of The Theory of Communicative Action, but he does not link it to the problem of the commodity. See Habermas (1984), pp. 355-65.

^{xiii} Compare Adorno's description of the exchange relation as the 'social model' of the identity principle in Negative Dialectics (Adorno, 1973, p. 146).

^{xiv} See, for example, the following passage: 'Classical philosophy finds itself historically in the paradoxical position that it was concerned to find a philosophy that would mean the end of bourgeois society, and to resurrect in thought a humanity destroyed in that society and by it. In the upshot, however, it did not manage to do more than provide a complete intellectual copy and the a priori deduction of bourgeois society. It is only in the manner of this deduction, namely the dialectical method that points beyond bourgeois society' (HCC 148). While idealism is unable to

surmount the antinomies of bourgeois society it is able, through the development of the dialectical method to point beyond this. It is this that I am suggesting is ‘formative’ for Lukács’s concept of praxis.

^{xv} A similar reading of idealism as the encounter with unaccountable ‘givens’ can be found in Pinkard (2003). According to Pinkard, Kant bequeaths to philosophy a set of paradoxes. The classical example of this is Kant’s attempted justification of freedom as a ‘fact of reason’ in the Critique of Practical Reason. Thus the fundamental paradox as the principle of freedom is dogmatically asserted. Pinkard views the development of idealism from Fichte to Schopenhauer as the repeated attempt to resolve this paradox.

^{xvi} Adorno (1973), pp. 189-192; Habermas (1974), pp. 157-8; Habermas (1984), p. 362; and Honneth (RNL 27) have all offered versions of this criticism albeit with different outcomes.

^{xvii} See also the following passage: ‘Theory and praxis ... refer to the same objects, for every object exists as an immediate inseparable complex of form and content. However, the diversity of subjective attitudes orientates praxis towards what is qualitatively unique, towards the content and material substratum of the object concerned’ (HCC 126).

^{xviii} See Adorno (1973) pp. 189-192. See also Hall (2011), and Andrew Feenberg’s critique of Adorno’s criticism of Lukács in this volume.

^{xix} For an example of a politics of modus vivendi see Gray (2007), p. 234.

^{xx} I have developed this argument in greater detail in Hall (2011).

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