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Abstracts

Michael J. Thompson (William Paterson University), 'Georg Lukács, Critical Social Ontology and the Renewal of Marxian Philosophy'

This paper argues that a renewal of Marxian philosophy is possible through a re-reading of the work of Georg Lukács and the seminal ideas he elaborated about reason, consciousness, social reality and aesthetics. In this talk, I take Lukács' ideas about social ontology and seek to use them as a bridge for a more rigorous, more critical theory of society and to meet the political challenges of neo-liberal society. More specifically, I will argue that the project of elaborating a social ontology can help us articulate a more satisfying and critical conception of Marxian philosophy and a more politically engaged critical theory of society. I will explore how these social-ontological ideas underpin a critical-evaluative theory of ethics and help re-reify consciousness. Marxian philosophy should therefore be seen as a *critical social ontology*, one that has the capacity to provide ethical-evaluative criteria for judgment, critical-cognitive categories for consciousness, as well as diagnostic-critical categories for comprehending social reality as an objective phenomena.

Konstantinos Kavoulakos (University of Crete), 'What is Reification in Georg Lukács's early Marxist Work?'

A series of confusing uses of the notion of reification within critical theory have contributed to blurring its contours even in the context of its initial formulation in Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. To understand what Lukács might have wanted to denote by this concept one has to search for its origins in his early work and to reconsider its classic conceptualization in the Reification essay from *HCC*. In my presentation I undertake the task of such a clarification.

In his pre-Marxist work Lukács sought to investigate the rationalization process in the Western world and its effects on subjective attitudes and cultural structures. Independently of whether he grounded his approaches on *Lebensphilosophie* or neo-Kantianism, Lukács used a basic explanatory scheme: He located the dominant form of mediation between subject and object and connected it with certain effects on the level of human consciousness and behavior. This very scheme is repeated and refined in *HCC*.

In the Reification essay Lukács uses the neo-Kantian concept of the "form of objectivity" (*Gegenständlichkeitsform*) to grasp the central constitutive form of all kinds of objects in bourgeois society. He interprets Marx's commodity form as the "archetype" of all capitalist objectivity, which consists in converting qualitative contents into quantitative categories. This formal/calculative rationality of exchange penetrates all kinds of objectification in modern society. However, it experiences its own limits in the multifaceted phenomena of crisis that reveal the violence inflicted upon the contents of life.

These aspects of rational objectification must be carefully distinguished from the phenomenon of reification itself. A cautious re-reading of the Reification essay shows that the classic interpretation of Lukács as an idealist who confused reification with objectification (formulated, e.g., by Adorno, Habermas, et. al.), is erroneous. Lukács considered rational objectification as a feature present in all past cultures. In his view, only in its modern, universalized form does rational objectification bring

about the phenomenon of reification, i.e. the de-historization and political neutralization of the social relations that constitute the social system and the dominant forms of consciousness. This systemic, cultural, and political understanding of reification can prove to be fruitful in the context of contemporary discussions on democratic transformative praxis.

Sebastian Sanchez-Schilling, 'Foot or Lukács? The Foundation of Ethics'

Near the end of his life, Lukács desired to work on a Marxist ethics. Before he could begin this, however, he realized that he had to work on an account of social ontology first. At the time of his death in 1971 Lukács had not begun on his ethics, but luckily had left a complete – albeit unrefined – text on ontology, *The Ontology of Social Being*. In this paper I will argue for revisiting this neglected aspect of Lukács' work. Revisiting this work has a dual purpose. Firstly, Lukács demonstrates the importance of ontology, and that it has been to Marxist theory's detriment that it has left analysis of being solely to continental and analytic philosophy. Secondly, and in what will be the main focus of this paper, through providing a foundation for ethics, Lukács' work (and a Marxist account of ontology in general) has an important contribution to make contemporary debates on ethics in philosophy.

An important development in moral philosophy has been the partial revival of neo-Aristotelianism, beginning with the work of G. E. M. Anscombe and Philippa Foot. This was exemplified in Foot's 2001 work, *Natural Goodness*. Here Foot puts forth a naturalistic theory of ethics, where we must evaluate goodness and badness in reference to human beings qua living things. This represents a significant, and important, break with the subjectivism and idealism which dominates most of moral philosophy. However, ultimately, Foot and her fellow neo-Aristotelians can be conceived of as the Feuerbach of ethics. Although their naturalism represents an improvement on the idealism of moral philosophy, as long as it solely conceives of human beings in terms of 'naturalness' it is reductionist and limited.

To put this in Aristotelian terms, Foot emphasises the 'animal' aspect of Aristotle's dictum that humans are 'political animals' at the expense of the political aspect. Lukács work remedies this. We do not just have natural being; we also have social being. As Lukács wrote in the chapter on Marx, "the essential tendency in the self-formation of social being consists precisely in that purely natural determinations are replaced by ontological mixtures of naturalness and sociality [...] and the purely social determinations develop further on this foundation" (1978, p. 9). By recognising the mixture of naturalness and sociality and the purely social which categorises our being, Lukács' account of our being provides the foundation for ethics which our contemporary moral philosophy lacks.

Eleonora Antonakaki Giannisi, 'Contemplative stance or blasé attitude? Simmel as an interlocutor in Lukács's work on reification'

My paper will focus on the notion of passivity and the contemplative stance that Lukács is identifying as one of the main characteristics of reification in his famous work that carries the same name. This stance is informed by various conditions of the capitalist mode of production, many identified by Weber, and in a way furthers the problematic that is introduced in Marx's chapter on the fetishism of the commodities in *Capital, Volume One*. It even expands on it, coming to such conclusions that are very close to Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, even though the manuscripts were not yet published at the time that Lukács was writing on Reification. What is of specific interest for me is to relate this contemplative stance of Lukács' to Georg Simmel's blasé attitude as it has been elaborated in his famous 1903 essay 'Metropolis and Mental Life'. As we know, Simmel was Lukács' teacher and the latter was of course acquainted with his ideas and thought. What I would like to suggest is that the theory of reification that has as a distinct characteristic the contemplative stance that is produced because of the relations of production and is embodied by the individuals, which handle themselves almost mechanically and, in the end, inactively or passively, is actually to a large degree a continuation of Simmel's work that picks up a lot of the themes that are already present in 'Metropolis and Mental Life'. The contemplative stance and the blasé attitude are inextricably linked with each other, as well as with Marx's work on the fetishism of commodities. It will be my aim to elaborate the differences

between these passive stances and engage with them by carrying out a comparison. Why did Lukács decide to change the name that characterizes this attitude? Why does his reference to Simmel remain so brief?

In conclusion, I will focus on the notion of passivity in Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* with reference to Simmel's blasé attitude and Lukács' contemplative stance.

Richard Donnelly, 'Reconsidering the *Blum Theses*: Totalitarianism and the degeneration of bourgeois culture in Lukács's revolutionary middle period'

The reception of Lukács's work since the 1960s has been shaped by debates about how to set the limits of his revolutionary 'middle period', as against his earlier idealist phase and his later Stalinist stage. This paper will argue that the best way to address these debates is through understanding Lukács's middle period as an intervention in two central crises of European society in the 1920s: the crisis of bourgeois culture and the crisis of social democracy. Lukács asserts that these crises are organically related. Understanding Lukács's middle period in this manner allows us to see the problematic ways in which some of his work from the late 1920s has been understood. In particular, an orthodoxy has developed around the *Blum Theses* of 1928 that sees it as a key milestone in Lukács's renunciation of revolutionary internationalism and his embrace of popular frontist rapprochement with the capitalist west. This characterisation of the *Theses* has allowed commentators like Andrew Feenberg (2014) to claim that Lukács was unable to adapt the theoretical tools of his revolutionary middle period to the new problems emerging in advanced societies during the ebb tide of world revolution, such as the rise of fascism. But, as Paul Le Blanc (2013) has shown, this analysis of the *Theses* simply cannot withstand scrutiny: actually, the document is a restatement of the Leninist politics which Lukács's middle period work systematises into a philosophical system. Building on this insight, I will argue that the *Theses* is a political concretisation of some of the salient philosophical themes of *History and Class Consciousness* (1973). The *Theses* extends and develops the diagnosis of a crisis of bourgeois culture in *History and Class Consciousness* to the political level. Lukács argues that the degeneration of bourgeois culture into positivism in the period after it ceases to be a revolutionary class is mirrored during the late 1920s by the bourgeoisie's renunciation of its project of constructing a rational social order in favour of an increasingly technocratic and totalitarian politics. Building upon Richard Westerman's (2018) recent work on the applicability of Lukács's politico-philosophical framework to the current global political conjuncture, I contend that the *Theses* provide us with theoretical tools for analysing contemporary phenomena such as the rise of the authoritarian far-right and the crisis of the liberal centre, as well as the ideological debates taking place over rationality, populism and the technical management of society.