

The Dialectic and 'The Party': Lukács' History and Class Consciousness reconsidered

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The startling discovery, made several years ago in an archive in Moscow, of a heretofore unknown manuscript defending HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS by its author, Georg Lukács, seemed destined to impel a reconsideration of one of the most important chapters in the history of Marxism.

From the moment of its publication in 1923, HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS was renowned for its creative attempt to restore the revolutionary character of Marx's thought through an extension and renovation of Hegel's dialectic. Neither the Communist International's denunciation of the book in 1924, nor Lukács' later "self-criticism" of it when he capitulated to Stalinism, lessened its appeal for several generations of radicals drawn to its innovative discussion of class consciousness and reification and its daring critique of Engels for failing to fully grasp dialectics. Nevertheless, Lukács' failure to speak out in defense of his book following the attacks on it in 1924 led many to conclude that he had immediately abandoned its perspective.

Now that the manuscript of Lukács' defense of HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS—entitled TAILISM AND THE DIALECTIC, written in 1925 or 1926—has been published and translated into English (Verso, 2000), it becomes possible to see to what extent, if any, the history of Marxism needs to be rewritten after all.

FROM PHILOSOPHY TO 'THE PARTY'

Though TAILISM AND THE DIALECTIC puts to rest the notion that Lukács renounced HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS as soon as it was attacked by the Communists in 1924, anyone looking for a serious defense or development of its philosophic concepts will be disappointed. Lukács does not discuss the major theoretic concepts in HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS. He is mainly concerned with responding to the charge leveled by Abram Deborin, a Russian theorist, and László Rudas,

of the Hungarian Communist Party, that his stress on “subjective” factors like class consciousness meant that he downplayed the centrality of Lenin’s notion of a “vanguard party.”

Lukács’ effort to answer Deborin and Rudas shows the limits of taking the ground of one’s opponent. It is not he, Lukács says, who downplays “the role of the party,” but his critics. He refers to “the open Menshevism of Deborin and the tail-ending of Rudas.”

Lukács’ defensiveness on “the party” has to be seen in the context of the times. Though few party hacks were likely to wade through Lukács’ dense discourses on dialectics, any sign of lack of enthusiasm for the “vanguard role” of the Bolshevik Party would have earned him instant expulsion from the Communist movement. Yet Lukács’ focus on “the party,” which takes up over half of *TAILISM*, is not disingenuous. It represents a genuine effort on his part to defend his overall theoretic position—even though “the party” is directly discussed only in the final (and perhaps least read) essays in *HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS*.

In *TAILISM*, Lukács contends that Deborin and Rudas suffer from a “vulgar view” of history in that they downplay subjective agency. For them, society is just an extension of nature. The subjective element is minimized as is the role of class consciousness itself.

In contrast, Lukács writes, “Everything depends on class consciousness, on the conscious will of the proletariat. This is where the moment of decision lies....The fate of the proletarian revolution depends on the subjective element.”

But this doesn’t mean that Lukács stresses mass self-activity. He writes, “There is a distance between the consciousness of the situation that the proletariat **ACTUALLY** possesses and the consciousness that it **COULD** have.” What “bridges” that distance is “the party.” “The task of the proletarian party is to overcome the distance between being and consciousness.”

Lukács therefore says, “Lenin’s organizational forms are essential....In no way are they, as Rosa Luxemburg thought, useless ‘paper’ guarantees....The organizational forms of the proletariat, in first rank the party, are real forms of mediation, in which and through which develops and is developed the consciousness that corresponds to the social being of the proletariat.”

Lukács even goes so far as to quote approvingly Lenin’s 1903 statement that “class political consciousness can be brought to the workers **ONLY** from without, that is, only from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.” Lukács adds: “The

consciousness of the masses AT ANY ONE TIME does not develop independently of the party.”

Decades later, in his Preface to the 1967 edition of HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS, Lukács said his book had tried to “out-Hegel Hegel.” It appears that his 1925-26 “defense” of it tried to out-Lenin Lenin. Of course, at the time no one, Lukács included, had any inkling that Lenin had written a detailed study of Hegel’s SCIENCE OF LOGIC in 1914-15 which went further philosophically than even Lukács in embracing such Hegelian concepts as “subjectivity,” “self-movement,” and “transcendence.” But since Lenin kept his Hegel notebooks to himself and never connected his philosophic reorganization to the question of “the party,” it made no impact on the “Leninists.”

In any case, it is clear from TAILISM that despite all of his emphasis on “class consciousness,” for Lukács it isn’t the proletariat which is the SUBJECT of history, but rather the PARTY.

This should come as no surprise. In the period in which he wrote TAILISM (1925-26), Lukács published essays on Moses Hess and Lassalle, in which he reconciled himself to established “Marxism.” Moreover, the tendency to fetishize the party is evident even in

HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS.

It is true that organization is only fully discussed at the end of the book. And it is also true that, whether in the 1920s, when it first appeared, or the 1960s, when it was the rave of the New Left, what excited everyone was not the book’s discussion of organization, but its probing of alienation, reification, and dialectics, especially in the essays “What is Orthodox Marxism?” and “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”

The truth, however, is that Lukács’ organizational “orthodoxy” on “the party” flowed from his original philosophic contribution—his essay on reification.

To Marx, reification refers to the process whereby living labor is transformed into a thing through the regimen of the factory clock—by the worker being subjected to the discipline of socially necessary labor time. Lukács, in contrast, treated reification as a universal, as what affects everyone. Not only is labor reified, turned into a thing, he argued; in capitalist society, our THOUGHT is reified as well.

This theory of reification has proved immensely popular since it seems to explain everything—from the commodification of culture to the increasingly one-dimensional

character of capitalist ideology. Yet it places advocates of revolutionary transformation in a thorny contradiction.

To Marx, the reification of labor is met by the resistance of the laborer who resists from within the effort to transform her laboring activity into a component part of capital. But if even our thought is reified, wherein resides the internal point of resistance? It is impossible, from the vantage point of Lukács' theory of reification, to answer the question. Either one gives up the effort to postulate a subject of resistance altogether (as did the Frankfurt School and the postmodernists), or one reaches for an outside force to resolve the contradiction—the vanguard party. The latter became Lukács' approach.

Lukács' defense of HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS makes EXPLICIT what should have been clear all along—that his original philosophic categories are unable to account for proletarian self-activity and so he ends up deifying “the party.”

DIALECTICS VS. ENGELS

This is not to say that organization is the only issue taken up in TAILISM. The latter part of it contains some interesting material related to dialectics of thought.

In response to Deborin's attack on him for critiquing Engels' effort to connect dialectics to nature, Lukács shows he wasn't saying that dialectics applies only to society and not to nature. Instead, HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS argued that there is no IMMEDIATE link between dialectics and nature since our “metabolic interchange with nature” is mediated socially.

TAILISM also returns to Lukács' critique of Engels for claiming that “practice,” especially the progress of experiment and industry, will prove the incorrectness of Kant's notion of the “thing-in-itself.” HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS brilliantly demolished this claim, showing that “in fact, scientific experiment is contemplation at its purest.”

TAILISM lacks the audaciousness of his earlier critique of Engels, but neither does it take it back. Lukács says that Engels failed to understand that for Kant “practice” actually confirms the validity of the “thing-in-itself.” He writes: “It is thoroughly possible to be an agnostic in a philosophic sense in relation to reality, without bringing this agnosticism to bear on one's practical attitude to the external world.”

In the few places where Lukács discusses Hegel, we get some brilliant insights, as when he writes: “Categories that in Hegel himself, in the most abstract and idealist part of his

LOGIC (“The Logic of the Concept”) form the peak of his system, become real, practical moments of the proletarian class struggle.” Unfortunately, he does not develop this. By the end he retreats to saying, “If Marx, in overturning Hegel’s philosophy, has at the same time rescued its real core, then he precisely rescued most from the Logic of Essence.”

Even when he is most philosophic, however, the question of organization takes precedence. Again and again Lukács insists that class consciousness can only be attained through the agency of “the party.”

VANGUARD FETISHISM TODAY

Lukács’ vanguardism is being touted as the “newness” of TAILISM, as seen from the Introduction to it by John Rees and the Postface by Slavoj Žižek.

Rees, a Trotskyist, is ecstatic at finding that Lukács fetishized “the party” since he is a vanguardist too. His discussion of the theoretic issues borders on the banal: “Lukács rediscovered the idea that a social construct, the market, appears to the actors trapped within it as a natural necessity, which imposes a pattern on their lives in a manner that they themselves are powerless to resist.... This is precisely the idea of Marx’s writings on alienation and commodity fetishism.”

Nothing is further from the truth. To Marx it is not “the market” that defines alienation and commodity fetishism, it is the perversity of capitalist production, wherein the machine assumes mastery over the living laborer. Marx never tired of showing that what happens in “the market” is simply a consequence of the alienation of labor at the point of production. Rees’ vulgarization not only turns Marx on his head, it hardly does justice to Lukács.

A much more serious analysis is provided by Slavoj Žižek’s Postface. Žižek is drawn to Lukács’ embrace of Lenin’s theory of organization because for him it represents a break from the notion that revolution depends on “objective conditions.” To Žižek, revolution depends on The Event, the willful act of intervening at a crucial juncture to seize the initiative. Lukács’ emphasis on “the party,” he argues, restores the subjective, willful component of Marxism against objectivistic tendencies.

On these grounds Žižek, like Lukács, rejects Luxemburg’s emphasis on spontaneity and revolutionary democracy in her debates with Lenin. Lenin’s contribution, Žižek says, was “to take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and intervening, even if the situation was ‘premature,’ with a wager that the very ‘premature’ intervention would radically change the ‘objective’ relationship of forces.”

What Zizek fails to notice is that Luxemburg's debates with Lenin were never about whether or not to "seize the moment." As Luxemburg wrote in REFORM OR REVOLUTION, "Since the proletariat is not in the position to seize political power in any other way than 'prematurely,' the objection to the 'premature' conquest of power is at bottom nothing more than a general opposition to the aspiration of the proletariat to possess itself of state power."

Moreover, Luxemburg hailed the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 on the grounds that "they alone dared." And she took the initiative in leading the 1919 German Revolution, even though she realized that the masses were ill-prepared and could suffer a defeat. At no point did Luxemburg display any reticence about "seizing the moment" "prematurely."

What was at issue in Luxemburg's critique of Lenin was the need not to contain the revolution within narrow party dictates which vitiate revolutionary democracy. She argued that the suppression of revolutionary democracy AFTER the seizure of power would compromise the liberatory character of the revolution itself.

Zizek, to the contrary, writes: "Here, we should reject this blackmail (as Lukács does à propos of Rosa Luxemburg): there are no 'democratic' procedural rules one is a priori prohibited to violate....The political legacy of Lukács is thus the assertion of the unconditional, ruthless, revolutionary will, ready to 'go to the end,' effectively to seize power and undermine the existing totality....Lenin was right: after the revolution, the anarchic disruptions of the disciplinary constraints of production should be replaced by an even stronger discipline."

Clearly, what matters for Zizek is the seizure of power, and not what happens after. The question facing this generation, however, is not "how to seize power," but how to ensure that the revolutionary process continues after the seizure of power—that is, for the revolution to continue "in permanence" until all forms of alienation are totally uprooted.

Luxemburg's emphasis on spontaneity and revolutionary democracy remains a key component of the effort to work this out for our times. Even here, of course, we must be critical, since she too held to the elitist concept of the "party to lead" and never related dialectics to revolutionary organization.

As TAILISM AND THE DIALECTIC makes clear, Lukács didn't either. His legacy leads, as does post-Marx Marxism as a whole, to a cul-de-sac on the question of organization. A totally new beginning must be made, which cannot be found within the

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parameters of either a purely political critique of “Leninism” or a philosophic one which shies away from jamming together dialectics and organization.

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