

**Cornel West, "Lukács: A Reassessment." *Minnesota Review*, 19 (1982), 86-102.**

The antihistoricist climate of postmodern thought makes a reassessment of Lukács refreshing. Despite his incurable nostalgia for the highbrow achievements of classical bourgeois culture, Lukács remains the most provocative and profound Marxist thinker of this century. His major texts display the richness of the dialectical tradition, a tradition which emerged in figural biblical interpretation, was definitively articulated by Hegel and deepened by Kierkegaard and Marx.

This dialectical tradition differs from humanism and poststructuralism in three basic ways. First, the mode of theoretical activity of dialectical thought is *critique*: the demystifying of an apparent static surface and the disclosing of an underlying process whose emergence negates, preserves and transforms this surface. The corresponding mode of theoretical activity of humanist thought is *criticism*: the "civil" procedure of endless correction while remaining on the surface. That of poststructuralism is *deconstruction*: a potentially radical yet ultimately barren operation of ingeniously dismantling humanist thought and (attempting to) disarm dialectical reflection.

Second, dialectical thought is guided by the rhetorical trope of *synecdoche*: of part-whole relations in which a totality serves as the context within which complex levels are mediated and related. Humanist thought is dominated by the rhetorical trope of *metaphor*: of an unmediated identification and resemblance (between subject and object, ideas and world, et. al.) in which correspondence is attained and unity is achieved. Poststructuralist thought is regulated by the rhetorical trope of *metonymy*: of the juxtaposition or contiguity of the free play of signifiers which preclude correspondence and unity.

Lastly, the basic problematic of dialectical thought is *socio-political crisis*: a crisis linked in a complex manner to prevailing structures of domination. The chief aims are to keep alive the notion of a different and better future, to view the present as history and to promote engagement in transforming this present. The major problematic of humanism is the *exercise of heroic individual will*: an activity deeply shaped by the emergence and decline of modern capitalist civilization. The central aim is to preserve the sanctity of individual achievement and defend its nobility at nearly any social cost. The principal problematic of poststructuralism is the *philosophical antinomies of humanist thought*: these antinomies constitute an inescapable yet untenable metaphysics of presence. The major aim is to decenter and therefore break "free" from these antinomies, even though this "freedom" results in mere ironic negativity and severe paralysis of praxis.

Lukács deserves our attention not simply because he believed that the dialectical tradition is the most theoretically engaging and politically relevant of the three. But rather, more importantly, because his major texts enact the most important dialectical reflections in our time. In this essay I will examine Lukács as neither a literary critic nor political strategist, but primarily as a dialectical philosopher. I will focus on his later ontological writings, especially parts of his *Toward the Ontology of Social Existence*. I will suggest that his rich dialectical textual practice is ultimately deficient, that is, not dialectical enough.

### *The Early Period*

In order to understand more fully the latter Lukács, it is necessary to look briefly at his early and middle periods. Gyorgy (Hungarian name for the more widely used German name Georg) Lukács was born in Budapest in 1885, the son of a wealthy banker. Lukács was raised in a flaccid

aristocratic milieu, as evidenced by his early use of "von" in his signature of early writings.<sup>1</sup> Lukács' rejection of aristocratic pretense and bourgeois values was inspired by two of the greatest figures in modern Hungarian literature—the novelist Zsigmond Móricz and the poet Endre Ady—as well as the influential progressive thinker Ervin Szabo. Of these three, it was Ady who had the greatest impact on the young Lukács.<sup>2</sup> While obtaining a degree in jurisprudence at the University of Budapest (1902-1906), Lukács became deeply involved in literary writing and aesthetic theory. Like Ady, he was of "two souls": scornful of the privileged class, hence a bourgeois-democratic revolutionary, and nostalgic for a heroic life of authenticity, therefore of antibourgeois artistic temperament. This predicament led to Lukács' adoption of a tragic view of the world—a moralistic revolt against a corrupt bourgeoisie, opportunist progressive movement and insecure urban intelligentsia. In his noteworthy 1909 essay on Ady, Lukács described the despair of himself and his revolutionary comrades:

Ady's public is absurdly touching. It consists of men who feel that there is no way out except revolution . . . who see that everything in existence is bad, cannot be corrected, and must be destroyed to make room for new possibilities. The need for a revolution does exist, but it is impossible to hope that one could be attempted even in the distant future.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In his superb book, *Georg Lukács—From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (New York: Schocken, 1979), Michael Löwy writes: "One of the most typical expressions of this *arriviste* enthusiasm for the semi-feudal establishment was the buying of titles through which Hungarian big bourgeois, of commoner or even Jewish origin, were 'ennobled.' To take but one example, József Löwinger, director of the Anglo-Austrian Budapest Bank and later of the General Credit Bank of Hungary, was ennobled in 1889 and became József 'von Lukács.' As is well known, this was the father of György" (p. 71).

<sup>2</sup> Lukács wrote in 1909, "Ady is conscience, and a fighting song, a trumpet and standard around which all can gather should there ever be a fight." Quoted in Ferenc Tokéi, "Lukács and Hungarian Culture," *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 47 (Autumn 1972): 119. Quoted also in Löwy, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Löwy, p. 93.

At this point in Lukács' career, he considers socialism to be the only alternative to the present order, but he cannot yet believe in socialism.

The only possible hope would be the proletariat and socialism . . . [but] socialism does not appear to have the religious power capable of filling the entire soul—a power that used to characterize early Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

Lukács is not so much in search of a religion as he is trying to get in touch with that which religion promises: coherence, wholeness and meaning in life. His attendance at Georg Simmel's seminars in Berlin (1909-1910), Windelband's and Rickert's lectures in Heidelberg (1912-1915) and his incessant discussions with Emil Lask and Max Weber would only shape the form which this quest for coherence, wholeness and life-meaning would take. In short, Lukács' early writings—from his first book, *A History of the Development of Modern Drama* (1909, pub. 1911), through *The Soul and the Forms* (1910), *The Philosophy of Art* (1912-1914), *Heidelberg Aesthetics* (1916-1918) to *The Theory of the Novel* (1916)—were neo-Kantian in character and existentialist in content. These works were preoccupied with the clash between the life-world of authenticity, nobility, clarity, honesty and that of inauthenticity, vulgarity, ambiguity and dishonesty. At times, Lukács posits a mediation between these life-worlds, a mediation which takes the form of a mode of cultural objectifications in the world (such as forms in *The Soul and the Forms* and works in the *Heidelberg Aesthetics*). Yet Lukács ultimately rejects such reconciliation and is left with sheer existential despair.

For example, in his poignant collection of essays on such bourgeois anti-capitalist romantic figures as Novalis, Kierkegaard, Theodor Storm, Stefan George and Paul Ernst in *The Soul and the Forms*, Lukács presented a dialectical yet ahistorical, i.e. tragic, vision of modern life. Fueled by a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Kantian dualism of subjective intention and objective causation and filtered through a Kierkegaardian quest for a heroic and authentic life-gesture, Lukács promoted (much like the later Heidegger) a project of passivity, a patient Beckett-like waiting. The only authentic alternatives were a religious expectation of divine grace, or suicide.

This either-or framework—with either passive or destructive results—is best seen in Lukács' crucial 1912 "literary" work, "On Poverty of Spirit" (considered by Max Weber to be on the same par with *The Brothers Karamazov!*). The central issue is suicide; the form is that of a letter and dialogue. After the suicide of his lover, the protagonist eventually commits suicide as the enactment of his genuine rejection of the inauthenticity and vulgarity of modern life.<sup>5</sup> For the young Lukács, the intractability of capitalist society, the arbitrariness of human existence and the failure of modern culture to project a realizable future of wholeness yield existential despair. This worldview results in what Agnes Heller has called "a peculiar mixture of proud aristocratism and submissive humility."<sup>6</sup>

Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel*—in response to World War I, the collapse of the Second International and conceived as the introduction to a book on Dostoevsky—attempted to specify the literary content of his nostalgia for a heroic, authentic life, examine its demise and explore its future possibilities. In short, Lukács' quest for wholeness and totality becomes a search for holistic, totalizing narrative.<sup>7</sup> He finds this ideal state of affairs represented by the Greek epic, namely,

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<sup>5</sup> Note Löwy's comments: "The story is evidently related to the writer's own life: for Irma Seidler, who had a relationship with him in 1908, had just killed herself in 1911 after an unhappy marriage" (p. 103). Löwy fails to add that Lukács' first marriage was an unhappy one.

<sup>6</sup> Agnes Heller, "Von der Armut am Geiste: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács," *The Philosophical Forum* 3 (Spring-Summer 1972): 364.

<sup>7</sup> For a pioneering interpretation of Lukács' texts in his early and middle periods, see Fredric Jameson, "The Case for Georg Lukács," in his fine book, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton:

Homer's poetic narrative. He briefly and therefore crudely sketches the degeneration of this narrative into the modern novel (from Cervantes to Flaubert) in light of the rise of modern experiences of individualism, alienation and time. With the ending of the age of the novel, "the epoch of complete sinfulness" (in Fichte's words), a revised form of the epic poem, of totalizing narrative arrives in the work of Tolstoy and particularly Dostoevsky. As Lukács clearly—hence uncharacteristically—put it in the last paragraphs of this book:

In Tolstoy, intimations of a breakthrough into a new epoch are visible; but they remain polemical, nostalgic and abstract. It is in the works of Dostoevsky that this new world, remote from any struggle against what actually exists, is drawn for the first time simply as a seen reality . . . Dostoevsky did not write novels . . . He belongs to the new world. Only formal analysis of his works can show whether he is already the Homer or the Dante of that world or whether he merely supplies the songs which, together with the songs of other forerunners, later artists will one day weave into a great unity: whether he is merely a beginning or already a completion. It will then be the task of historico-philosophical interpretation to decide whether we are really about to leave the age of absolute sinfulness or whether the new has no other herald but our hopes: those hopes which are signs of a world to come, still so weak that it can easily be crushed by the sterile power of the merely existent.<sup>8</sup>

What is at stake here is not simply a new totalizing narrative nor a new holistic world, but also a new socioeconomic order. And, more importantly, the ethical means to bring it about. Dostoevsky's formulation of "everything is permitted if God is dead" and his probing portrayal of terrorism—in addition to Friedrich Hebbel's *Judith* in which the tyrant Holophernes is murdered and the justification is explored—signify a shift in Lukács' thought from existential concerns to more focused ethical matters. This shift was accelerated by the Russian Revolution. Yet even Marxist revolutionary ideology for the young Lukács lacked an indispensable element—a genuine ethic:

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Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 160-205. Jameson stresses the link between the quest for totality and the concern with narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975), pp. 152-53.

The ideology of the proletariat, its understanding of solidarity, is still so abstract that—whatever importance we attach to the military arm of the class struggle—the proletariat is incapable of providing a real ethic embracing all aspects of life.<sup>9</sup>

This ethical problematic—the is/ought issue and the immoral means to moral ends—plagued Lukács the rest of his writing career. In his equivocal neo-Kantian essay of 1918, "Bolshevism as a Moral Problem," Lukács held to a rigid dichotomy of social facts and human values, empirical reality and Utopian human will. On the one hand, he agreed with Marxism: "The victory of the proletariat is, of course, an indispensable precondition if the era of true freedom, with neither oppressor nor oppressed, is at last to become a reality." On the other hand, he disagreed: "But it cannot be more than a precondition, a negative fact. For the era of freedom to be attained, it is necessary to go beyond those mere sociological statements of facts and those laws from which it can never be derived: it is necessary to will the new, democratic world."<sup>10</sup>

For the young Lukács, the Marxist attempt at a unity of facts and values, reality and human will, is illusory. It tends to elide the differences — moral and empirical ones—in the real world. In this pivotal essay, Lukács ambiguously applauded the proletariat as "the bearer of the social redemption of humanity" and the legatee of German classical philosophy. Yet he questioned whether the proletariat was really "a mere ideological envelope for real class interests, distinct from other interests not by their quality or moral force, but only by their content."<sup>11</sup> His Left neo-Kantianism culminated in his treatment of violence. Reminiscent of John Dewey's critique of Trotsky, Lukács

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<sup>9</sup> Löwy, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.131.

asked whether good can be achieved through evil means, whether capitalist terror can be abolished by means of proletarian terror. Similar to Dewey, Lukács replied:

I repeat, Bolshevism rests on the metaphysical hypothesis that good can come out of evil, that it is possible, as Razumikhin puts it in *Crime and Punishment*, to attain the truth with a lie. The author of these lines cannot share this belief, and that is why he sees an insoluble moral dilemma in the very roots of the Bolshevik mentality.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Middle Period*

Lukács' middle period begins with his December 1918 conversion to Marxism—he was 33 years old. His friend Anna Lesznai noted that Lukács' "conversion took place in the interval between two Sundays: from Saul came Paul."<sup>13</sup> In this period—more accessible and hence well-known to American audiences—Lukács' writings were dialectical in character and political in content. Yet this fundamental shift from neo-Kantianism to Marxism, from existential concerns to political ones pivoted on the ethical problematic (his first essay as a Bolshevik was "Tactics and Ethics"). In his autobiographical testament, he noted:

This key decision for my world view brought about a change in the whole way of life ... Ethics (behavior) no longer involved a ban on everything our own ethics condemned as sinful or abstentionist, but established a dynamic equilibrium of praxis in which sin (in its particularity) could sometimes be an integral and inescapable part of the right action, whereas ethical limits (if regarded as universally valid) could sometimes be an obstacle to the right action. Opposition: complex: universal (ethical) principles versus practical requirements of the right action.<sup>14</sup>

Yet what was new and striking about Lukács' middle period—and decisive in his later works—was his obsession with the scientific status of Marxist dialectics, the objective character of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 132. For the Dewey-Trotsky debate (in 1938), see *Their Morals and Ours: Marxist vs. Liberal Views on Morality* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), pp. 13-52, 67-73.

<sup>13</sup> Löwy, p. 128. Quoted also in David Kettler, "Culture and Revolution: Lukács in the Hungarian Revolution of 1918/19," *Telos* 10 (1971): 68-9.

<sup>14</sup> Löwy, pp. 136-37.



Marxist theory. As the Bolshevik Lukács crept toward Leninism—through ethical ultra-Leftism, political ultra-Leftism and Left Bolshevism—he became more captive to a Marxist version of scientism. Lukács' newly acquired political faith had to be grounded in the nature of social and historical reality. His conversion to Marxism was neither simply a Kierkegaardian leap of faith nor a Pascalian wager on history. Rather it was accompanied by an increasingly intense belief in the scientificity of Marxist dialectics and in the certainty of a totality-in-history.

Lukács' classic work, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), was a thoroughly political work focused on proletarian revolutionary activity against capitalist reification. But one misses a crucial aspect of this masterpiece if one overlooks its philosophical dimension: the attempt to put forward a philosophical foundation for this proletarian revolutionary activity. Lukács' grand attempt to achieve a dialectical synthesis of is and ought, facts and values, politics and ethics, immediate circumstances and final telos, material conditions and human will, object and subject, rests upon claims about the fundamental nature of social and historical reality. And, ironically, these claims rest upon an unarticulated correspondence theory of truth, namely, a theory which invokes agreement with "reality" as the court of appeal for adjudicating between conflicting theories about the world.

On the one hand, it seems as if Lukács recognizes that the theory-laden character of observations relativizes talk about the world such that realist appeals to "the world" as a final court of appeal to determine what is true can only be viciously circular. He appears to realize that we cannot isolate "the world" or "reality" from theories about the world or reality, than compare these theories with a theory-free world or theory-free reality. Since we cannot compare theories with anything that

is not a product of another theory, any talk about "the world" or "reality" is relative to the theories available. At times, Lukács affirms this Peircian-like pragmatic viewpoint:

The historical process is something unique and its dialectical advances and reverses are an incessant struggle to reach higher stages of the truth and of the (societal) self-knowledge of man. The "relativization" of truth in Hegel means that the higher factor is always the truth of the factor beneath it in the system. This does not imply the destruction of "objective" truth at the lower stages but only that it means something different as a result of being integrated in a more concrete and comprehensive totality.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Lukács' realist roots come to light when he admits: "It is true that reality is the criterion for the correctness of thought"<sup>16</sup> And his Hegelian metaphysical biases are revealed when he states:

Thus thought and existence are not identical in the sense that they "correspond" to each other, or "reflect" each other, that they "run parallel" to each other or "coincide" with each other (all expressions that conceal a rigid duality). Their identity is that they are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process. What is "reflected" in the consciousness of the proletariat is the new positive reality arising out of the dialectical contradictions of capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

This philosophical juggling of dialectical pragmatism, philosophical realism and Hegelian idealism breeds confusion. The notion of truth as that-which-holds-in-the-long-run is logically independent of the notion of truth as that-which-reality-determines. And both notions of truth fly in the face of identity-claims about thought and existence within a dialectical process. Lukács' gallant response to neo-Kantian idealism is provocative, but, on a philosophical level, incoherent.

Lukács' attempt to ground the scientificity of Marxist dialectics led him to adopt a form of epistemological foundationism and philosophical realism. He wanted not only assurance that reality

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<sup>15</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

is independent of human consciousness, but also certainty that this reality is inherently dialectical. And the intra-theoretic status of the latter claim simply did not satisfy his need to be scientific, i.e. certain. For example, he characterized class consciousness and the Communist Party as objective possibilities, yet he also set out to show that the dialectical development of social and historical reality held out the promise of the realizable actualization of them. In short, the basic philosophical contradiction in Lukács' thoroughly Leninist classic is that the historicity of Marxist methodology precludes the kind of scientificity of Marxist dialectics he wants. The bugbear of relativism made Lukács tremble, and his response to it was a creative Hegelian Marxist conception of scientific dialectics. To put it crudely, Lukács replaced the prevailing forms of positivistic scientism with a Hegelian form of scientism in the Marxist tradition.

The results of Lukács' appropriation of Hegel in his own work was twofold. First, it facilitated the most powerful theoretical reading of cultural life in capitalist society, thereby bursting out of the economistic straitjackets of the Second International. Second, it promoted Lukács' own valorizing of Hegel's notion of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). This valorizing—intimated in "Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics" (1926) and articulated in "Hölderlin's Hyperion" (1935)—led to Lukács' radical anti-utopianism, "realism," and thereby his surrender to Stalinism. Of course, it is difficult to determine the extent of Lukács' actual belief in Stalinism, yet in light of his practice and support, e.g. his 1929 hypocritical rejection of the "Blum Theses," it seems as if his defense of Hegel's anti-utopianism and realism justified his own reconciliation with Stalinism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> On the relation of Lukács' appropriation of Hegel and his surrender to Stalinism, see Löwy, pp. 193-213.

Lukács' vast intellectual productions between 1926 and 1955 (part of this time he was forced to live in the Soviet Union) primarily consisted of literary criticism and intellectual history. Lukács' novel conception of literary critical realism—enacted by writers such as Scott, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Sholokhov, Gorky and Mann—his rich inquiry into the young Hegel and his hyperbolic history of European Romanticism were his major projects during this period. Despite great energy and scope, these works display a nagging rigidity, reflective of the Stalinist ethos under which he labored.

### *The Later Period*

In 1955, after the initiation of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union and just prior to the Soviet repression of democratic forces in his own Hungary (which resulted in his expulsion from the Party and retirement from the University of Budapest), Lukács stated: "I only began my real oeuvre at the age of seventy."<sup>19</sup> For the first time in over thirty years, he engaged in sustained philosophical reflection. In 1963, he published more than 1700 pages entitled *The Specific Nature of the Aesthetic* (and projected two more volumes) and in 1976 (five years after his June 1971 death) another 1700 pages appeared under the title *Toward the Ontology of Social Existence* (he also had promised an Ethics). Both of these not yet digested works are dialectical in character and philosophical in content: they present a Marxist epistemology and a Marxist social ontology, respectively. In short, they are Lukács' most ambitious philosophical works.

These texts initially strike one as strange primarily because they are written in a philosophical style and terminology reminiscent of pre-World War II Germany. Admittedly, and understandably,

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted from István Eörsi, "The Story of a Posthumous Work: Lukács' Ontology," *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 16 (Summer 1975): 106.

Lukács failed to stay in tune with the latest developments in contemporary Anglo-American and Continental philosophy. For example, despite the avalanche of devastating criticisms by Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Quine of reflection theory in epistemology, Lukács adopts in his Aesthetics the conception of art as a kind of reflection (*Widerspiegelung*), copy (*Abbild*) or imitation (*Nachahmung*) of reality. In this regard, his homage to Lenin's reflection theory in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is embarrassing. Yet Lukács' philosophical realist position in search of ontological grounding led him to the neglected though most fascinating ontological defense of realism in 20th-century German philosophy: the prodigious corpus of Nicolai Hartmann.

Hartmann plays a central role in the later Lukács' ontological writings. Like Lukács, Hartmann's major shift was a revolt against the neo-Kantianism of his youth. This shift consisted primarily of a move from transcendental idealism to ontology, from schemas which constitute the objective (not real) world to phenomenological descriptions of a multitude of modes and strata of Being. In retrospect, it is important to note that it was Hartmann's *Outlines of a Metaphysic of Knowledge* (1921)—not Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927)—which initiated the Continental renaissance of ontology, principally by arguing that epistemology is based on ontology. Furthermore, again like Lukács, Hartmann grappled seriously with ethical issues, eventually arriving at the notion in his magnum opus *Ethics* (1926) that the task of ethics is to enable persons to discern objective values in the world, thereby putting ethical values on the level of science (this strategy was adopted ingeniously by the American realist, W. M. Urban). Lastly, Hartmann's conception of the teleological character of human activity expounded in his work *Teleological Thought* (1951) serves as a major pillar of Lukács' understanding of human labor.

The significance of Lukács' ontological works is twofold. First, it raises the most fundamental questions regarding the status of Marxist discourse. Is Marxism an ontology, epistemology, science and/or theory? How does one justify one's choice among the possible points of theoretical departure—among class, capital formation, reification, contradiction, overdetermination, mode of production, et al.—in Marxism? To what extent can Marxism reject a priori formulations of its central notions and remain Marxism? Second, Lukács' ontological work—much like that of the later Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin and Heidegger—conceives the problem of everyday life as worthy of philosophical attention. His Marxist heritage compels him to understand everyday life as a historical product, hence a dynamic form of social existence. Similar to Lefebvre and the later Sartre, Lukács is sensitive to the kind of everyday life in late capitalist society and raises this issue to a philosophical plane. In other words, beneath the dense ontological inquiry in his later works lurks a central concern which guided his classic *History and Class Consciousness*: a theoretical reading of cultural life in capitalist society.

Yet Lukács' importance lies more in raising questions than providing answers. His ontological writings are to the Marxist tradition what Whitehead's are to bourgeois philosophy: rich in metaphysical speculation, full of fascinating insights, innovative in historical reconstruction of major philosophers, yet difficult to take seriously as contemporary philosophical inquiry. It is not simply that his later writings are antiquated or outdated. Rather it is that, despite their length, they lack the appropriate patience and thorough stick-to-it-ness requisite for coming to terms with the fundamental issues they raise.

For example, it is in no way obvious that there is or can be such a thing as a Marxist ontology or even a Marxist epistemology. After incomplete starts, hints and intimations, Lukács never directly engages this central query in a serious and sustained manner. He shows in a persuasive fashion how Hegel bases his dynamic ontology on his dialectical logic. Lukács then assumes that Marx's historicizing of Hegel's ontology—by concretely contextualizing human labor—yields a social ontology.

It is quite plausible to argue that Marx's critique of Hegel's ontology does not simply reject Hegel's logical foundations but, more importantly, calls into question the very notion of ontology. *Ontologia* as a philosophical term (coined by scholastic writers in the 17th century) was canonized by the German rationalist Christian Wolff (the writer responsible for Kant's "dogmatic slumber" prior to his awakening by Hume).<sup>20</sup> What Wolff had in mind was a deductive method by which the single sense of Being could be disclosed. In our own time, Hartmann and Heidegger breathed new life into the term by both historicizing it and situating it in relation to scientific inquiry. Lukács makes it clear that his ontology is a science: "the science of objective dialectics manifesting itself in reality."<sup>21</sup> He goes as far as to try to revive a dynamic conception of substantiality. Yet Marx's critique of Hegel's ontology was precisely that historical consciousness understood concretely shifted pontifical ontological pronouncements on Being to engaged theoretical discourse about reality. In short, methodological issues and theoretical considerations replace ontological and metaphysical ones. Reality indeed is "outside" of theories, but claims about reality are intra-theoretic. And, given the

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<sup>20</sup> For a brief treatment of the history of ontology, see Jose Ferrater Mora, "On the Early History of Ontology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 24 (1963): 36-47.

<sup>21</sup> Georg Lukács, *Hegel's False and His Genuine Ontology*, chapter III, Part One of *Toward the Ontology of Social Being*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 1:78.

concrete historical character of theories, the clash of major social theories constitutes clashes between historical forces.

In other words, Marx's critique of Hegel's ontology not only puts an end to ontological inquiries but more importantly opens the door to self-reflective methodological considerations on the ideological character of scientific theories. Marx did not explore this path in any systematic way — with the major exception being his demystification of bourgeois scientific theories in political economy. Yet he surely precluded the kind of ontological investigation Lukács attempts.

Why then did Lukács—the greatest Marxist thinker of this century—pursue such a futile project? Chiefly because he never really took the historicist turn that Marx, Nietzsche and others initiated. Notwithstanding his 53 years in the Marxist camp, Lukács remained, in a fundamental way, true to his neo-Kantian idealist problematic. He remained in search of certainty, in need of philosophical foundations. He had to find a secure grounding for his belief in the objective possibility of wholeness and life-meaning.

The central problem for neo-Kantian idealism is agnosticism about reality. Lukács spent most of his life trying to supplant this agnosticism with the Marxist faith that reality is not only "there" but also going "somewhere." Therefore Lukács' historicism did not cut deep enough — at the bottom of it still sat Kant. In fact, Lukács' ontological writings can best be seen as the culmination of his lifelong quarrel with Kant, aided by Hegel, Marx and Hartmann.

If Lukács' profound formulations of Marx's social ontology are viewed as deliberations on the complexity of Marx's theoretical methodology, we can more fully appreciate his contribution to



contemporary Marxist discourse and praxis. For instance, he demythologizes the Althusserian reduction of Hegelian totality to expressive causality:

If we now attempt to summarize what is most essential in Hegel's ontology from what has so far been obtained, we arrive at the result that he conceives reality as a totality of complexes that are in themselves, thus relatively, total, that the objective dialectic consists in the real genesis and self-development, interaction and synthesis of these complexes, and that therefore the absolute itself, as the epitome of these total movements, can never reach a standstill of removed indifference towards concrete movements, that it is rather itself movement, process, as the concrete synthesis of real movements—without prejudice to its absolute character, and that the original form of the Hegelian contradiction, the identity of identity and non-identity, remains insurpassably effective in the absolute too. This dialectical ontological core of Hegel's philosophy stands in evident contrast to the logically hierarchical construction of his system.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to Althusser's claims, Lukács shows how Hegel enables Marx to arrive at an overdetermined conception of contradiction, a flexible yet firm explanatory framework for social activities:

The opposition between "elements" and totality should never be reduced to an opposition between the intrinsically simple and the intrinsically compound ... Every "element" and every part, in other words, is just as much a whole; the "element" is always a complex with concrete and qualitatively specific properties, a complex of various collaborating forces and relations. However, this complexity does not negate its character as an "element."<sup>23</sup>

In fact, Lukács echoes Althusser's sophisticated conception of totality:

Marx warns against making the irreducible, dialectical and contradictory unity of society, a unity that emerges as the end product of the interaction of innumerable heterogeneous processes, into an intrinsically homogeneous unity, and impeding adequate knowledge of this unity by inadmissible and simplifying homogenizations ... Two things follow from this. Firstly, each element retains its ontological specificity ... secondly, these interrelations are not equal value, either pair by pair or as a whole, but they are rather all pervaded by the ontological priority of production as the predominant moment.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Lukács, *Marx's Basic Ontological Principles*, chapter IV, Part One of *Toward the Ontology of Social Being*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1978), II:30.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

Lukács' treatment of Hegel is unique in that he highlights the role of the reflection determinations in the transition from understanding (*Verstand*) to reason (*Vernunft*). This is not surprising given Lukács' attempt to reply to Kant and arrive at reality. This focus enables Lukács to put forward a novel approach to an old Marxist problem: the problem of the relation of essence to appearance:

Hegel's philosophical revolution, his discovery of and focusing on the reflection determinations, consists above all in the ontological removal of the chasm of absolute separation between appearance and essence. In so far as the essence is conceived neither as existing and transcendent, nor as the product of a process of mental abstraction, but rather as a moment of a dynamic complex, in which essence, appearance and illusion continuously pass into one another, the reflection determinations show themselves in this new conception as primarily ontological in character ... That essence and illusion, irrespective of their sharp contrast, belong inseparably together, and that the one can in no way exist without the other, provides the ontological foundation for the epistemological path from understanding to reason; the former remains imprisoned at the level of the immediate givenness of contradiction, which is however itself an ontological property of the complex, while the latter gradually raises itself up to comprehend the complex as a dialectical totality via a series of transitions.<sup>25</sup>

This passage disarms any catechistic Marxist formulations of rigid oppositions between essence and appearance (based on the famous quotation in Volume III of *Capital*). It also situates the philosophical predicament and ontological motivation of Paul de Man's obsession with the symbiotic relationship between truth and error, insight and blindness — a predicament which can only repeat itself and a motivation any Derridean should scorn.

The grandiose conclusions Lukács draws from focusing on the reflection determinations, from following the move from understanding to reason, are exorbitant:

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<sup>25</sup> Lukács, *Hegel's False and His Genuine Ontology*, pp. 82-83.

If we consider Hegel's epistemological path from understanding to reason, its epochal significance is easy to make clear. In contrast to earlier thinkers, or to his contemporaries, Hegel managed to lay the foundations for knowledge of a complex, dynamically contradictory reality, consisting of totalities, something that had defeated the epistemology of his predecessors. He applied the higher level of reason that was now attainable to the entire area of knowledge; he did not remain, as did the Enlightenment, at the level of the understanding; he did not shift rational knowledge, as Kant did, to the unknowable realm of the thing-in-itself, and his criticism of the understanding did not lead him, with Schelling and the Romantics, into the nebulous realm of irrationalism. It is thus quite justifiable to say, with Lenin, that the dialectic is a theory of knowledge. But Marxist epistemology, as a theory of the subjective dialectic, simultaneously always presupposes an ontology, i.e. a theory of the objective dialectic in reality.<sup>26</sup>

If Lukács took historicism seriously, his own conception of ontology as a scientific theory of reality itself would fall prey to the reflection determination machinery. That is, it would include itself in the process of negation, preservation and transformation. Whether the result is post-Marxism, anti-Marxism or neo-Marxism is an open question—with crucial political consequences.

The two linchpins of Lukács' Marxist ontology are his philosophical realist position and his conception of science. Both lead him to conceive of philosophical discourse as a metadiscourse (ontology and epistemology) which grounds the master discourse (Marxist theory) of modern capitalist societies. His philosophical realist position—much like that intimated in *History and Class Consciousness* after the Hegelian smoke cleared—rests upon an "epistemology of mimesis" in which "agreement with reality is the sole criterion of correct thought."<sup>27</sup>

This realist position undergirds Lukács' conception of science as disinterested and objective. His clearest statements about science are found in his *Aesthetics*:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 84. For more on the "epistemology of mimesis" and the "consciously mimetic epistemology of dialectical materialism," see pp. 39-40.

The de-anthropomorphizing of science is an instrument by which man masters the world: it is a making-conscious, a raising up to a method, that form of conduct which, as we have shown, begins with work that differentiates man from animal and which helps make him into a man. Work and the highest conscious form which grows out of work, scientific conduct, is in this case not only merely an instrument for mastering the world, but in its very nature is a detour which enables a rich discovery of reality which enriches man himself and makes him more complete and more humane than he could be otherwise.<sup>28</sup>

Science focuses on Being as such and seeks to re-produce it in its purest possible form which is freed from all subjective additions.<sup>29</sup>

This veneration of science rivals that of the old positivists. And the claim about the humanizing effects of science is a throwback to pre-World War I bourgeois optimism. Lukács remains absolutely silent about the technological character of science and the ideological character of technology.

Lukács' view of science has dire consequences for art and he candidly accepts them: art cannot give knowledge. Science discovers general laws, whereas art discloses a specialness (*Besonderheit*). This specialness consists of an absolute and complete totality; it involves a "return" to the self after acquiring a self-consciousness of the social world. Unlike science, art is anthropomorphic; it begins and ends with the subject while transcending mere subjectivity. Unlike religion, art is this-worldly (*diesseitig*); it makes no claims about transcendent reality or otherworldly redemption.

Lukács' neo-Kantian roots are quite apparent in his view of science: particularly the fundamental distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*. Despite his attempt to reformulate Engels' dialectics of nature and thereby overcome this distinction, his neo-Kantian perspective remains in his crucial dichotomy of natural causation and labor teleology:

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<sup>28</sup> Georg Lukács, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* (Halbbände, 1963), I:158. For English translation, see Kenneth Megill, "Georg Lukács as an Ontologist," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 9 (1969): 344

<sup>29</sup> Lukács, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, II:294-95; Megill, p. 344.

A real ontology of social being is not possible without a correct contrasting of natural causality and labour teleology, without the presentation of their concrete dialectical interconnections.<sup>30</sup>

Lukács relates these two processes in a less rigid and more sophisticated manner than any of the neo-Kantians, including the renegade Hartmann:

The value of this differentiation made by Hartmann should not be underestimated. Separation of the two acts, the positing of the goal and the investigation of the means, is of the highest importance for an understanding of the labor process, and particularly for its significance in the ontology of social being. Precisely here, we can see the inseparable connection of two categories that are in themselves antithetical, and which viewed abstractly are mutually exclusive: causality and teleology.<sup>31</sup>

Natural causality and labor teleology are central categories for Lukács because in the latter lies the uniqueness of human beings. He considers "the genetic leap" (his phrase)—the move from animals to human beings—to have been achieved by conscious goal-directed action:

The overcoming of animality by the leap to humanization in labour, the overcoming of the epiphenomenal consciousness determined merely by biology, thus acquires, through the development of labour, an unstayable momentum, a tendency towards a prevalent universality.<sup>32</sup>

For Lukács, Kant provided the proper starting point on this issue and Marx (mediated by Hegel) arrived at the acceptable answer:

By defining organic life as "purposiveness without purpose," he [Kant] hit on a genial way to describe the ontological essence of the organic sphere. His correct criticism demolished the superficial teleology of the theodocists who preceded him, and who saw the realization of a transcendent teleology even in the mere usefulness of one thing for another. He thereby opened the way to a correct knowledge of this sphere of being . . . but when Kant is analyzing human practice, he directs his attention exclusively to its highest, most subtle and most socially derived form, pure morality, which thus does not emerge for him dialectically

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<sup>30</sup> Lukács, *Hegel's False and His Genuine Ontology*, pp. 53-4.

<sup>31</sup> Georg Lukács, *Labor*, chapter I, Part Two of *Toward the Ontology of Social Being*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980), III:11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

from the activities of life (society), but stands rather in an essential and insuperable antithesis to these activities ... [Hence] Kant had to speak—of course in his epistemologically-oriented terminology—of the incompatibility of causality and teleology. But once teleology is recognized, as by Marx, as a really effective category, exclusive to labor, the concrete real and necessary coexistence of causality and teleology inexorably follows.<sup>33</sup>

Lukács seeks to avoid an old-style teleology which posits a goal for both nature and history while promoting a teleology in the social world. Ironically, his subtle analysis of the interrelation and interpenetration of natural causality and labor teleology is such that he can be accused of a creeping overarching teleology—with the goal of ever-broadening socialization and humanization:

There can be no economic arts—from rudimentary labor right through to purely social production—which do not have underlying them an ontologically immanent intention towards the humanization of man in the broadest sense, i.e., from his genesis through all his development. This ontological characteristic of the economic sphere casts light on its relationship with the other realms of social practice ... This contention is in itself completely value-free.<sup>34</sup>

Lastly, Lukács' philosophical realist position and his conception of science result in his view of philosophical discourse as a metadiscourse which supports the master discourse on modern capitalist societies. At this point, the parallel with Kant is irresistible. To put it crudely, just as Kant's aim was to secure the scientificity of Newtonian physics and leave room for moral action, so Lukács' aim was to secure the scientificity of Marxist dialectics and leave room for political praxis. Both projects assume an uncritical attitude toward the status of their own discourses and an unwavering acceptance of the "sciences" to be legitimated.

What is at issue here is not whether Marxist theory is the master discourse on modern capitalist societies. Despite its rich explanatory power, there is little doubt that Marxist theory is not

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 8, 9-10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

the master discourse on modern forms of oppression. For example, Marxist discourse has no acceptable theory of the specificity of racial or sexual oppression. The major concern here is the relation between believing in the master discourse and justifying that belief by concocting a metadiscourse to ground *the* master discourse. This operation is, in essence, a theological one: an attempt to provide philosophical foundations for a leap of faith or present ontological grounds for a wager on reality. Such leaping and wagering is unavoidable, but the operation itself is deceptive and dishonest. My aim here is not to make us all religionists, but rather to accent the dimension of risk and uncertainty in our most fundamental commitments and convictions.

What is disturbing about Lukács is his reluctance to admit this dimension of risk and uncertainty within his Marxist faith. This reluctance, I suggest, flows from his intense existential bout with neo-Kantian agnosticism about reality; it also reflects a deeply bourgeois worldview in which the slightest acknowledgement of uncertainty and arbitrariness signifies fundamental crisis. This bourgeois worldview—which encompasses many perspectives—consists of a broad set of values and sensibilities over which hangs a heavy cloud of utmost seriousness. Like Nietzsche's "spirit of gravity," it invokes privileged beneficiaries of capitalist fruits making life-and-death decisions in the solitude of their finely decorated writing rooms:

15 December. The crisis seems to be over ... But I look on my "life," my "capacity to go on living" as a kind of Decadence: if I had committed suicide, I would be alive, at the height of my essence, consistent. Now everything is just pale compromise and degradation.<sup>35</sup>

What is missing in Lukács' Marxism is a sense of fundamental openness and flexibility—a protean outlook which embodies the risks and uncertainties which permeate the life-worlds of the

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Lukács' recently discovered journal for December 15, 1911 in Löwy, p.107.

oppressed peoples for whom he struggled. This outlook is absent partly because Lukács' central neo-Kantian problematic—against which he struggled most of his life—was defined initially in a bourgeois academic milieu, in a highbrow aristocratic ambience where proletarian culture dare not tread. Like Sartre, Lukács remained rooted in his intellectual bourgeois beginnings; unlike Sartre, he rarely explored how these beginnings shaped the long and winding Marxist path he blazed.