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*Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy, and Aesthetics*

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## Georg Lukács Reconsidered

Paul Stasi

What are we to make of the work of Georg Lukács today? On one hand, his Marxism seems irredeemably idealist, discovering the proletariat through the abstractions of Hegelian logic rather than a strict attention to political reality. On the other hand, his politics seem hopelessly compromised through his adherence to party discipline and Stalinist orthodoxy. Too idealist and yet not idealist enough, Lukács is a quintessentially untimely figure. Intellectually, his central category of totality — the “essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel” — has been the centerpiece of poststructuralist and post-Marxist attacks on identity thinking, while his often-reductive and prescriptive aesthetics advance a reflection theory of art tied to a representational theory of knowledge long since overthrown.<sup>1</sup> Committed to the progressive values of the Enlightenment, reason and truth, Lukács would appear to have no home in the contemporary world of theoretical skepticism.

History, too, could be said to have passed him by. The disappearance of the Soviet Union and the manifest absence of a world proletariat can make his political commitments seem quaint or old-fashioned, part of the nineteenth-century social formation out of which he emerged, even as movements such as Occupy Wall Street openly disavow the party politics to which Lukács was dedicated. While it is, perhaps, a stretch to say, as Michael J. Thompson does in his engaging edited volume *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy, and Aesthetics*, that Lukács’s writings “have fallen into almost total neglect,” it is nevertheless true that he is remembered more as the untimely figure sketched above than as a thinker with any contemporary relevance (1).

Nevertheless, the very forces that make him seem irrelevant are those that reveal ourselves to be most in need of his lifelong “hatred and contempt” towards the bourgeoisie and their forms of economic domination — prime among them reification and that “central, structural problem of capitalist society in all aspects,” the commodity form — even as his understanding of the crisis as the moment when the apparent fragmentation of the capitalist social order gives way to the totality that lies beneath finds objective confirmation in the daily news of a tottering world economic system.<sup>2</sup> The dominance of capitalism only makes Lukács’s thought more, rather than less, relevant. Indeed, to argue that the fall of the Soviet Union invalidates Lukács’s critique is to adhere to a kind of vulgar determinism, one that believes in such a tight link between thought and historical moment as to imagine that that thought’s force disappears when history changes. Just as the progressive heritage of the bourgeoisie was something Lukács believed could help guide the transformation of the present, even as it was tied entirely to the historical conditions out of which it emerged, so too could Lukács’s thought help us navigate our contemporary capitalist world, despite its obvious relationship to his own social order.

Here we can follow the lead of Lukács himself who, somewhat scandalously, proclaimed that even if “recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx’s individual theses,” Marxism would necessarily survive due to the power of its method.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I would like to suggest that Lukács’s method is what remains, despite the obvious fact that the course of events has outstripped his ability to perceive them. The key to this method is the elucidation of the links between abstract philosophical thinking and the historical situations it seeks to understand. For historical forms, including philosophical thought, by their very nature have an innate tendency towards reification. If we believe, along with Lukács, that intellectual formations arise due to the needs of a particular time, they nevertheless persist past the time of their making, and in this way court reification. This reification can, however, “be overcome only by constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development.”<sup>4</sup> The overcoming of reification, that is to say, requires the continual confrontation of form with historical content.<sup>5</sup> What prevents us from understanding Lukács, then, is less history itself than the reified modes of intellectual justification recent history has produced: prime among them poststructuralism or, as Fredric Jameson once helpfully put it, the cultural logic of late capitalism. For a contemporary Left that speaks the language of barred subjects, absent centers, and historical rupture remains trapped in the contentless form of contemplative consciousness Lukács spent a lifetime decrying.

Something like this point is made in Thompson’s introduction, which takes as its starting point the continued necessity of Lukács’s particular form of ideology critique. Thompson wastes no time in getting to the heart of his argument:

Today, with futility, an atrophied left searches for ethical and political coherence in writers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and others that epitomize the essence of what Lukács saw as the great pathology of modern thought: the detachment of consciousness from its social and material context. A genuinely radical politics requires a rational confrontation with the mechanisms of the modern social order, and Lukács was consistent in seeing the material base that leads to an exaggerated subjectivity and its concurrent irrationalism as well as the political and ethical motivational paralysis that results from its reifying tendencies. (1)

Eschewing fashionable forms of post-Marxism, Thompson's volume makes a simple claim: "In the face of postmodernism and poststructuralism — themselves simply expressions of an irrationalism that could have been taken straight from the pages of Lukács's *Destruction of Reason* — as well as an ascendant capitalism and neo-liberal ideology, we are faced once again with constructing a radical yet coherent alternative to the present social order" (7). This alternative, for Thompson, is "a humanist ethical tradition with an objective understanding of social reality," which his volume seeks to ground in Lukács's philosophical writings (7).

Curiously, given the focus of the introduction, there is little direct engagement with the various ideologies that have come between us and Lukács. Nor is there, with few exceptions, any sustained attempt to reconstruct Lukácsian categories in light of present-day events. Instead what we find are a series of readings of Lukács's writings that work against the dominant caricature of his thinking, disclosing agency where we have tended to find determinism, and shedding new light on questions of form, subjectivity, and, above all, reification. What emerges is a figure whose lifelong concern was with the fundamentally philosophical problem of how to actualize human freedom within the unfree world of commodity capitalism.

In what follows, I will suggest that this problem should be understood less as part of Thompson's "humanist ethical tradition" than as a critique of that same tradition from the famous "standpoint of the proletariat." For whether analyzing Hegel or the novels of Walter Scott, Lukács always proceeds from a partisan perspective, one that refuses transcendental formalism in the name of proletarian interest, even if it most often articulates this interest as being coterminous with that of humanity itself. Ultimately, I will argue that this notion of historically determined interest might be the best weapon Lukács offers us to fend off both the contentless reifications of contemporary Leftist theory and the supposedly neutral structures of our neoliberal capitalist order. To make this point, I would like to turn first to Lukács's early essay "Tactics and Ethics" to understand exactly what ethics meant for the young Lukács, before returning to examine the essays in Thompson's volume in light of this analysis.

### Tactics and Ethics

Written in 1919 at the time of Lukács's conversion to Marxism, "Tactics and Ethics" reveals the continuity between his early "romantic anti-capitalist" works, written under the aegis of Simmel and Weber, and his later Marxist classics. The basic outlines of the piece are clear: it seeks to square the ethics of individual action with the tactics required by a collective revolutionary movement within a Marxist philosophy of history. The Kantian dilemmas of is and ought, necessity and freedom, are thus reframed in terms of the revolutionary struggle, making the essay a relatively obvious thematization of Lukács's newfound Marxist commitments. What is compelling about the essay, however, is less the continuity it displays between the two halves of a career typically understood to be quite distinct from each other, but rather the ways it tries, but does not quite succeed, in suturing this gap. The seams in Lukács's argument are as instructive as its conclusions, revealing the necessary impossibility of that great intellectual dream: the unity of theory and practice, fact and value. In doing so, Lukács suggests the fundamental limits of a purely philosophical approach to the problem of creating a just social order, as the ideal of a transcendent ethics gives way to the historically determined content of the proletarian revolution.

Lukács begins by distinguishing the goals of socialism from what he disparagingly calls utopian revolutions. Socialism, he declares, "is anything but utopian in the sense that its attainment would entail the absorption of ideas hovering outside or above society."<sup>6</sup> Dropping into Hegelian language, he argues that because "the Marxist theory of class struggle...changes the transcendent objective into an immanent one...the class struggle of the proletariat is at once the objective itself and its realization."<sup>7</sup> Here we encounter, for the first time, the conceptual problem that emerges so forcefully in *History and Class Consciousness*, as it seems as if knowledge alone creates an objective change in the social order. A similar view emerges from the following quotation:

The sense of world history determines the tactical criteria, and it is before history that he who does not deviate for reasons of expediency from the narrow, steep path of correct action prescribed by the philosophy of history, which alone leads to the goal, undertakes responsibility for *all* his deeds.<sup>8</sup>

We find ourselves, here, in the world of Hegelian telos as Lukács seems content to rest with the contemplative consciousness he will spend much of *History and Class Consciousness* denouncing. Tactical criteria are decided by *the philosophy of history alone*. And yet, at the same time, Lukács claims that "it is never possible to know in advance which tactical step will succeed in achieving the ultimate objective."<sup>9</sup> We have arrived at an aporia, for there is a correct path to follow, and yet it remains impossible to ascertain. On one hand, ethics — which Lukács claims "has no meaning except in relation to the individual" — have been eviscerated due to the objective correctness

of history's path.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, tactical arguments are made irrelevant. If we can never know the outcome of our action in advance, despite its being latent in our historical moment, then what criteria would allow us to choose one path over another?

Sensing this problem, Lukács renews his inquiry, disclosing something like a Kantian categorical imperative repurposed for revolutionary aims. The individual, he argues, "must act as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world's destiny."<sup>11</sup> Each individual is therefore responsible for all the actions undertaken in the name of communism, should she choose the path of revolution, or for all the evils brought about by capitalism, should she abdicate. Thus ethics, for Lukács, virtually requires an awareness of tactics; the acting subject "must know under what circumstances and how he acts."<sup>12</sup> Lukács continues, "for every socialist, then, morally correct action is related fundamentally to the correct perception of the given historico-philosophical situation, which in turn is only feasible through the efforts of every individual to make this self-consciousness conscious for himself."<sup>13</sup> Morally correct action becomes a problem of "ethical self-awareness," the realization that "only he who acknowledges unflinchingly and without any reservations that murder is under no circumstances to be sanctioned can commit the murderous deed that is truly — and tragically — moral."<sup>14</sup> The moral individual "sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea."<sup>15</sup> And that higher ideal, of course, is socialism.

There are two important ideas I wish to tease out of this argument. The first is the way in which Lukács understands the ethical act not as something that adheres to a set of transcendent principles but rather as something coterminous with tactical or pragmatic aims. The ethical act, for Lukács, is one undertaken in order to realize the principles of socialism. And since these principles are the "means whereby humanity liberates itself," they necessarily transcend the realm of individual action.<sup>16</sup> Ethics, then, is no longer conceived as a normative realm that guides individual action, but rather as a realm of interest. The ethical act requires the sacrifice of the individual for the collective good in an individual act that mirrors the larger historical goal it seeks to attain: namely, the realization of a socialist world understood as the overcoming of individual interest in the name of our common humanity.

We can see here, quite clearly, how Lukács must have understood the various compromises his lifelong party membership required of him: as a sacrifice of his own moral purity in the name of a higher ethical good. Objectively we can say that history has proven Lukács wrong. He chose Stalin, and Stalin did not succeed in liberating humanity. But what of those who, out of principle, rejected the Soviet Union? They, too, it would seem, have failed to achieve the liberation of humanity. If Lukács has, on his conscience, the blood of all those murdered in Stalin's name, the rest of us presumably "bear the same individual responsibility for the destruction entailed" by imperial capital.<sup>17</sup> We seem to have found the desired unity of theory and practice, as individual acts find their place within the larger movement of history.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, this larger movement remains necessarily opaque to the individuals situated within it, and here we come to the second, and perhaps more important issue the essay raises. For what Lukács's failure to achieve a satisfactory resolution to his dilemma at the level of abstract argumentation shows us is the *limitations of philosophy itself*. Philosophy can never know, in advance, the movement of history. Theory is thus no substitute for practice, even as practice cannot proceed without theory. The two are constitutive of one another in a dialectic that cannot be synthesized: practice guided by a theory that will necessarily be rethought in light of the outcomes of this practice.<sup>18</sup> Another way to think about reification, then, is as a misunderstanding of this dialectic, either through an undue emphasis on one of its constitutive parts or as the imagined reconciliation of what are, and must remain, irreconcilable levels of social reality.

### Reification and Form

Lukács's work, of course, often seems to artificially resolve this dialectic in favor of one side or the other, a fact which produces the split in the critical reception between the Hegelian and the Stalinist (even if thinkers such as Althusser believe the two to be one and the same). Divided into three sections — “Lukács's Philosophical Legacy,” “Extending Aesthetic Theory,” and “Perspectives on Critical Theory” — Thompson's volume combats this reception by treating Lukács as a serious philosophical thinker, one whose work cannot simply be dismissed by its adherence to either an outdated philosophical system or a historically superseded politics. However, in spending the majority of its time correcting misunderstandings of Lukács's work through close attention to textual argumentation, the volume often courts the very reification of philosophical categories Lukács worked strenuously to overcome.

The first section focuses primarily on the place of subjectivity within Lukács's theory of historical action. Stephen Eric Bronner's “Lukács and the Dialectic: Contributions to a Theory of Practice” provides a helpful overview of the precise innovations *History and Class Consciousness* made to the Marxist theory that preceded it, prime among them the shift from understanding Marxism as a science to conceiving of it as a “critical method” that must be subjected to history (16). According to Bronner, “consciousness of freedom and the ability to act as a historical agent” become the key terms for a reimagined Marxism. Michael Lowy, similarly, finds in a reading of *Tailism and the Dialectic* — Lukács's long-unpublished defense of *History and Class Consciousness* — that “the key element” in Lukács's “polemical battle is [his] emphasis on the *decisive revolutionary importance of the subjective moment in the subject/object historical dialectics*” (68). In the same vein, Stanley Aronowitz, via a somewhat Sisyphean defense of Lukács's *Defense of Reason*, describes its scathing critique of Nietzschean philosophy's inability to conceive of “genuine historical transformation” (60).

These arguments will not surprise those steeped in Lukács's work, but they do provide a powerful counter to the dominant view of Lukács as a historical determinist.

At the same time, this investment in the subject and its philosophical derivations risks occluding the specificity of the capitalist world that was always Lukács's object of critique, while at the same time overstating the importance of the subject that the capitalist world produces. This issue emerges most clearly in Tom Rockmore's essay "Lukács and the Recovery of Marx after Marxism." Arguing that Marxism "consists in denigrating Hegel and philosophy in general, which it links to modern capitalism," Rockmore insists that Lukács discovers, instead, a "post-Marxist interpretation of Marx," one whose "main source is Fichte's theory of the subject as active" (34, 48). Thus, "Marx's theory is finally not centered only on human being in capitalism, which is an aspect, even a central aspect, but finally no more than an aspect of the deeper problem of the self-development of human being as human in and through human activity in a social context" (47). Not entirely false, this statement nevertheless reveals the bias of a philosopher who decides that the philosophical problem is "deeper" than the social one. No doubt many who read this volume will not share Rockmore's view, despite the impressive way in which he discloses Lukács's debt to Fichte and Hegel.

A similar problem can be seen in the collection's second section concerning aesthetics. Here we find essays on the relationship between Adorno's and Lukács's competing notions of realism, the place of time within Lukács's conception of literary form, the "poetic strength of thought" Lukács disclosed within Dante, Goethe, and the Hungarian writer Imre Madách, and, finally, an analysis of the "premodern political ethics" of Walter Scott's clan novels (116, 128). Each of these essays is not without insight, however they tend to confine themselves to readings of the individual texts under consideration without much attention to the implications these readings might have for either their historical moment or our contemporary concerns.

A brief comparison with Timothy Bewes's and Timothy Hall's companion volume — *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetic, Politics, Literature*, also published by Continuum in 2011 — is instructive in this regard.<sup>19</sup> While Norman Arthur Fischer's essay, in the volume under review, promises to describe "The Modern Meaning of Georg Lukács's Reconstruction of Walter Scott's Novels of Premodern Political Ethics," this meaning seems to consist primarily in the idea of "fusion" — a "measure of the extent and nature of the identification that a character...has with the larger ethical and political goals, problems, and feelings of their time" (131). Thus Scott's premodern novels succeed in generating characters tied to their premodern social world. This argument is persuasive enough, but what exactly it has to do with the contemporary world is unclear. Taking up a similar topic, John Marx's "The Historical Novel After Lukács," published in Bewes's and Hall's volume, analyzes the "forms of assemblage" present in Scott's premodern novels that "exacerbate heterogeneity from the contrasting containment of the heterogeneous that [Lukács] associates with bourgeois nationalism."<sup>20</sup> These forms of assemblage then reappear in contemporary novels such as Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, allowing us to see how we might take Lukács's categories and apply them to contemporary literature.

Similarly, while Peter Uwe Hohendahl is certainly right to note that both Adorno and Lukács “understand the novel...as a literary form defined by the social and economic conditions of modernity” (91), David Cunningham’s essay on “Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics” fills in this claim with content, arguing that what distinguishes the novel is its ability to make “visible the irresolvable gap between the forms of abstraction intrinsic to modern social being and...the concreteness of ‘things’ and of individual experience.”<sup>21</sup> In these two examples, we can see how the essays in Thompson’s volume might have benefited from the extension of their textual and philosophical arguments out into the world or practice.<sup>22</sup>

Such an extension finally occurs in the volume’s last, and therefore strongest section: the one concerning critical theory. Here we find powerful reconsiderations of two key Lukácsian terms: form and reification. Taking up Lukács’s early work *Soul and Form*, Katie Terezakis discloses the social nature of form, as it concerns both artist and critic:

By imposing form, an individual articulates the relationships that lay claim on her or him; by interpreting form, the critic discloses the dynamics of meaningful dependencies and contests of authority, personal and ideological. Thus for both the maker of form and the reader of form, the animation and logic of human relationships is the fundamental concern. (219)

This realization, in turn, leads to a ringing critique of contemporary academic and critical practices, which entirely ignore the “deteriorating conditions” of the contemporary university that exist alongside the ever-present pressure to publish. This critique is worth quoting at length:

A contemporary aesthetic criticism which ignores this context neglects its own conditions of entitlement, and thus its ability to speak meaningfully from within the tide of productivity-for-productivity’s sake. For in the university culture within which the contemporary critic must live, the emphasis is on full capacity production, regardless of need or use. And that this should be considered par for the course, that frenzied production and the quantifiable standards of academic success based upon it should be considered natural and fair, without consideration of the social conditions of production and its significant effects, is the very definition of fetishism. (224)

The academic subject’s consciousness here is as reified as any other, the “reification of consciousness,” as Hohendahl argues, applying “not only to factory labor but equally to science and philosophy” (87). In a precise analogy to Lukács’s historicization of

the novel form, Terezakis concludes by claiming that a historicization of academic labor through an understanding of its historically conditioned *form* becomes a way to overcome its reification.

A similar point is made in Andrew Feenberg's essay "Reification and Its Critics." Disclosing a theory of mediation Lukács himself only partly articulated, Feenberg claims that "human action in modern societies, whether capitalist or socialist, continually constructs reified social objects out of the underlying human relations on which it is based" (185). Reification is, thus, a problem of modernity that would persist in any future socialist world. "The chief difference," Feenberg concludes, "between capitalism and socialism is not that the one is reified and the other entirely free of reification, but rather that one stands or falls with reification while the other can support a continual mediating and transforming of reified social objects in order to realize the potential of those sacrificed dimensions" (185). As we saw earlier, what is important here is the continuous nature of the dialectic, as reified objects are mediated through a notion of historical totality that must itself be continually reimagined in the light of historical action. The overcoming of reification is not, then, something that occurs once and for all. It is rather a process, even as totality in Lukács is, according to Jameson, best understood as a method.<sup>23</sup>

The volume's remaining essays best exemplify this method, largely through a critique of the ways in which Lukács's theories have been modified by Jürgen Habermas and, most recently, Axel Honneth. Thompson provides, perhaps, the sharpest statement of the distinction between contemporary critical theory and Lukács. With Habermas,

We are concerned with a moral philosophy which is epistemological and intersubjective, but removed from the concern with the ways in which social power is constituted by institutional logics grounded in capitalist economic life. The initial starting point of critical theory has now been eclipsed. (235)

Konstantinos Kavoulakos makes a similar claim: "Habermas has already drawn in his moral philosophy a clear distinction between universalizable *moral norms* and *values* or *conceptions of the good*, which are tied up with a context-bound form of life and are, consequently, relative. The task of the philosopher is reduced to a reconstruction of the necessary and universal presuppositions of the discursive validation of norms" (153). Honneth's theory of recognition ends up with a similar problem. Failing to deal "effectively with the crucial problem of the *critical evaluation of the concrete contents of a form of life*," his moral world remains entirely formal (155). Lukács, however, as Timothy Hall suggests, attempted to "ground a critical theory of society in the concept of praxis," one in which "ethical value" would not be understood as "separated from the material conditions of society" (201, 243). Indeed, the latter is the very definition

of reification, which it was the task of the proletariat to overcome.

In contemporary thought this reification is most visible as the reification of difference, shorn of any historical or social content. As Kavoulakos notes, contemporary critiques of “historico-philosophical reflection...imbued as they are with the historicist spirit of ‘multiculturalism’...dismiss any other universality beyond the universality of difference. They are forced thus to translate urgent substantive demands...into the vocabulary of human rights. In this way, however, they lose sight of the wider social dimensions of these problems” (151). Several issues coincide here. The first is the link between the contemporary fetish of difference — as pronounced in poststructuralist thought as it is in the politics of multiculturalism — and the abstractions of human rights discourse. The second concerns the belief in a universal history which contemporary post-Marxist thinkers tend to find so reprehensible in Lukács’s writings, preferring instead irreconcilable differences, resistant particulars, and dominance without hegemony.<sup>24</sup> These concepts, though, are best understood as reifications of today’s contemporary neoliberal order, which thinks of itself in terms of flows and flexible capital and, in doing so, tends to hide its own concentration of power in the “neutral” discourse of markets and finance. This neutrality is, of course, only a contemporary version of Lukács’s contemplative consciousness, which reduces the human subject to the observer of a set of mechanical laws which exist outside of that subject and her historical grounding. It is easy to observe here both the historical determinism of vulgar Marxism and the absent center of contemporary post-Marxism, dialectical opposites finding their unity with the capitalist world they each imagine themselves to oppose.

In contrast, Lukács represents a strong form of partisanship, most visible in his much-maligned distinction between imputed and empirical consciousness. Often understood — even by Lukács himself — to be a philosophical sleight of hand, this distinction, in fact, represents one of Lukács’s greatest theoretical interventions. For it, too, produces a dialectical reversal of a powerful kind. Empirical consciousness, presumably meant to be objective, is, in fact, subjective, prone to all the ideological distortions to which humans are prey, while imputed consciousness, itself entirely a philosophical construction, names a knowledge tied irredeemably to the social order. Imputed consciousness, that is to say, is the objective moment in the dialectic of thought and social ground. By casting his lot with imputed consciousness Lukács is suggesting, first of all, that “the standpoint of the proletariat” is not an empirical category tied to one’s identity. It rather names a structural feature of social reality. For class, as E.P. Thompson told us long ago, is a social relation, one that is transpersonal, and it thus belongs to a different order of reality than those other identities of race, gender, and sexuality with which it is falsely united.

Class, that is to say, is not subsumable to a multicultural politics built on difference and the importance of subjective identity. Nor can it fall prey to the neutrality of bourgeois liberalism. Instead, a class standpoint is necessarily partisan:

The objective reality of social existence is *in its immediacy* ‘the same’ for both proletariat and bourgeoisie. But this does not prevent the *specific categories of mediation* by means of which both classes raise this immediacy to the level of consciousness, by which the merely immediate reality becomes for both the authentically objective reality, from being fundamentally different.<sup>25</sup>

Austerity, for instance, means something fundamentally different to those who impose it than to those on whom it is imposed, a differential understanding of the world born out of distinct experiences. If all perspectives are interested, then, it makes no sense not to choose one. In another striking dialectical reversal, Lukács seems more true to the Nietzsche he hated — whose basic insight was to see the interested nature of all ostensibly disinterested discourses — than to those contemporary post-Marxists for whom Nietzsche is an inspiration. Nietzsche may have been on the side of the aristocrats, but at least he understood the partisan nature of the struggle.

The importance of the proletariat, then, transcends their particular presence in the world. To be sure, we must not be too hasty to jettison this category altogether, as millions of Chinese citizens are being turned into factory-working proletarians, while the absence of factories in the supposedly post-industrial West is only the latest manifestation of class warfare rather than a reason to imagine its absence. Indeed the transfer of wealth upwards in society has increased dramatically in the last ten, if not thirty years, and the need to disclose the partisan nature of our social reality has only become more urgent.

To speak of the relationship between working-class wage stagnation in the West and the factories of China is to suggest another way in which Lukács’s categories must be rethought, for obviously enough he concerned himself with Europe and, in doing so, tended to think in terms of nations rather than world systems. Our notion of what counts as proletarian must be expanded, becoming something like Kavoulakos’s “under construction collective subject that remains internally heterogeneous” (165).<sup>26</sup> If Lukács lacked “an analysis of the complex ‘intersubjective process’ which constitutes the relationship of a particular social group to reality” there is nothing, Kavoulakos concludes, that prevents us from making up for the deficit ourselves (165). We can certainly do so, as long we keep the ethical goal of socialism in view at all times, subjecting our necessarily reified historical conclusions to the stern discipline of that “insuperable barrier to a rationalist theory of knowledge,” history itself.<sup>27</sup>

### Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectic*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971 [1923]).
2. Lukács, *History* xi, 83.
3. *History* 1.
4. *History* 197.
5. That Lukács himself did not always perform this intellectual activity — relying, most notoriously, in his critique of modernism on a reified notion of the historical novel — does not change the fact that this lesson can be drawn from his work.
6. Georg Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings, 1919-1929*, trans. Michael McColgan (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 5.
7. Lukács, *Tactics* 5.
8. *Tactics* 6.
9. *Tactics* 5.
10. *Tactics* 7.
11. *Tactics* 8.
12. *Tactics* 9.
13. *ibid.*
14. *Tactics* 11.
15. *Tactics* 10.
16. *Tactics* 6.
17. *Tactics* 8.
18. Lukács offers here something like Marx's famous remarks from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Proletarian revolutions, however, such as those of the nineteenth century, constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruption of their own course." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," trans. Ben Fowkes, *Marx's Political Writings Volume 2: Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2010) 143-249.
19. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds. *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics, Literature* (London: Continuum, 2011).
20. Bewes and Hall, *Dissonance* 189.
21. *Dissonance* 61.
22. It is worth noting, however, that this extension into the world is not a feature of every essay in Bewes's and Hall's volume. Nor does its absence trouble each of the essays in Thompson's collection. While generally strong, each volume has the typical ups and downs of edited collections.
23. "As far as Lukács is concerned, the conception of totality outlined in *History and Class Consciousness* must be read, not as some positive vision of the end of history in the sense of Schelling's Absolute, but as something quite different, namely a methodological standard." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 52.
24. A strong defense of universal history that dismantles the reifications of difference in the work of the Subaltern Studies group can be found in Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2013).

25. *History* 150.
26. Neil Larsen's excellent "Lukács sans Proletariat, or, Can *History and Class Consciousness* Be Historicized?" takes up a similar concern. See Bewes and Hall 81-100.
27. *History* 144.