THE QUESTION OF ORGANISATION

Examining Lukács's conceptual road map for social change

Costas Gousis*

Alexandros Minotakis**

ABSTRACT

One hundred years after its publication, *History and Class Consciousness* remains an indispensable guide to social change. Contributing to the broader discussion about Lukács and critical theory today, this article explores aspects of Lukács's contribution to a philosophy of the party, his distinctive approach to political practice and his defence of the alternative. Drawing from contemporary re-readings of his work, the concepts of *reification*, *totality*, and *mediation* are explored highlighting the importance of the book's often-overlooked final essay towards a methodology of the problem of organisation. Further, it draws attention to *Tailism and the Dialectic* and the concept of *Augenblick* ("*moment*"), shedding light on Lukács's understanding of the complex relation between objective and subjective factors in the course of historic development. The above discussion is situated

* Postdoctoral researcher in Democracy and Crisis (Democrisis project, funded by HFRI-ELIDEK) at the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece. E-mail address: gousisk@yahoo.gr. ORCID: 0009-0008-9622-7627.

** Postdoctoral researcher in Digital Policy at the University College Dublin, Ireland. E-mail address: alexandros.minotakis@ucdconnect.ie. ORCID: 0009-0001-9294-4564.

within the atmosphere of the early 1920s and the dilemmas and new challenges posed by the 1917 October revolution. At the same time, throughout his vast and often contradictory work Lukács offers concepts, methodologies, and tools to address the crucial theoretical and political challenges of the 21st century. Until the end of his life Lukács devoted all his efforts to the renaissance of Marxism and remained committed to the cause even in the most unfavourable conditions. Thus, this article concludes with some reflections on Lukács's potential revival and its significance for emancipatory perspectives arguing that in an era of political defeat and seemingly insurmountable strategic dead-ends, there is a lot to learn from his legacy.

KEYWORDS

Lukács; organisation; philosophy of praxis; moments of decision

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A QUESTÃO DA ORGANIZAÇÃO

Examinando o itinerário conceitual de Lukács para a mudança social

RESUMO

Cem anos após sua publicação, *História e consciência de classe* continua sendo um guia indispensável para a mudança social. Contribuindo para a discussão mais ampla sobre Lukács e a teoria crítica atual, este artigo explora aspectos da contribuição de Lukács para uma filosofia do partido, sua abordagem singular da prática política e sua defesa de uma alternativa. Com base em releituras contemporâneas de sua obra, os conceitos de *reificação*, *totalidade* e *mediação* são explorados, destacando a importância do ensaio final do livro, muitas vezes negligenciado, sobre uma metodologia do problema da organização. Além disso, chama a atenção para *Reboquismo e dialética* e o conceito de *Augenblick* ("momento"), lançando luz sobre a compreensão de Lukács acerca da complexa relação entre fatores objetivos e subjetivos no curso do desenvolvimento histórico. A discussão acima está situada na atmosfera do

início da década de 1920 e nos dilemas e novos desafios impostos pela revolução de outubro de 1917. Ao mesmo tempo, ao longo de sua vasta e muitas vezes contraditória obra, Lukács oferece conceitos, metodologias e ferramentas para enfrentar os desafios teóricos e políticos cruciais do século 21. Até o fim de sua vida, Lukács dedicou todos os seus esforços ao renascimento do marxismo e permaneceu comprometido com a causa mesmo nas condições mais desfavoráveis. Assim, este artigo conclui com algumas reflexões sobre o potencial renascimento de Lukács e seu significado para as perspectivas emancipatórias, argumentando que, em uma era de derrota política e becos sem saída estratégicos aparentemente insuperáveis, há muito a aprender com seu legado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Lukács; organização; filosofia da práxis; momentos de decisão

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In memory of Giorgos Maniatis
(1949–2023)

Introduction: Lukács's philosophy of praxis and the project of the renaissance of Marxism

During the late 1960s Lukács was a living legend, an unstoppable writer expanding his thoughts, developing new concepts and reflecting on his own experiences of two world wars, socialist revolutions and counterrevolutions, fascism, and the antifascist victory. Most importantly, he had a lifelong commitment – effective even in the period he was struggling with cancer – to the project of a socialist renewal and the renaissance of Marxism in the West, the Soviet Bloc, and across the globe. In

his interview – perhaps the last one before his death in 1971 – to the Italian sociologist Franco Ferrarotti, Lukács identified the lack of revolutionary theory as the most important weakness of that period:

> What is happening is grotesque. Lacking a theory, Marxists are condemned to trail along after daily events. Collective movements erupt and are called 'spontaneous' – the movements of students, the young and so forth – and then the Marxists run to catch up with events, to understand them after the fact. Their theory is little more than a rationalization of their surprise (Lukács cited in Ferrarotti 1972: 30).

The most important consequence of the absence of a general theory of society, as Lukács often argued, is an exclusive orientation to tactical decisions, the priority of tactics over strategy and the loss of a grand historical perspective. He explicitly referred to the discrepancy between the organisational strength of the Italian Communist Party and its small theoretical weight:

> No doubt Togliatti was a first-class politician, even a great tactician. Perhaps his theoretical curiosity was limited. They tell me he had the habits of a good bureaucrat. Again and again, we are left only with the tactics (ibid.: 32).

Alongside communist parties, Lukács harshly criticized Western left-wing intelligentsia, a considerable part of which, according to Lukács's famous phrase, "has taken up residence in 'Grand Hotel Abyss'", "a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.

And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered" (Lukács 1971: 22). In parallel, Lukács was very critical of "mediocre professors" in the Soviet Bloc who "under the banner of *Diamat* explain the problems of the world by mechanically applying simplistic formulae which they repeat with catechetical monotony" (Lukács cited in Ferrarotti 1972: 32).

By contrast, Lukács considered the student and the anti-war movement, which was springing up all over the world in the late 1960s, an exceptionally positive phenomenon and had a dialectical understanding of its difficulties in these early stages to make itself conscious, to outline an alternative perspective. Of course, he was critical of what he used to call "romantic revolutionism", a view on rupture as a "spectacular and immediate radical-revolutionary overthrow, a happening"; at the same time, he drew parallels with the Luddites of the 19th century who, as he commented, "did not produce more than the negativity of violent protest, but they were still a forerunner of the revolutionary proletarian movement" (Lukács 1991: 88).

In his later work and especially in his grand, albeit unfinished, contribution to a dialectical ontology of social being, Lukács would develop a philosophical understanding of the importance of choices and alternatives. As part of this endeavour, Lukács tried to reconstruct humankind's evolutionary leap by concentrating on labour as the organic process of exchange between humans and nature, distinguishing them from other

beings and creating the basis for a distinct social ontology. Lukácsian ontology describes social evolution as a cluster of teleological positings[1] which take place under given conditions and correspond to specific needs and purposes. In order to substantiate this analysis, Lukács expands Marx's thought on the significance of labour, in order to bestow upon it an all-encompassing dimension as a "model for any social practice", crucial "in understanding other social teleological positings because it is their original form as far as being is concerned" (Lukács 1980: 3).

As such, the concept of social impasses and situations of non-existent alternatives is alien to Lukács's thought. In this sense, perceiving social evolution as a "chain of alternatives" (Lukács 1980: 31) means rejecting the view that the course of history is predetermined. This, in turn, implies that contemporary capitalism constitutes neither the "end of the road" for humanity, nor the perfect deployment of human's so-called "true essence". At the same time, this does not imply that the advent of a communist society is predetermined; rather, it lies within the realm of humanity's choices. At the centre of his later thought was the process of socialist democracy, the democratization of everyday life, the hypothesis and strategy of existing socialism changing from within. Lukács's theoretical framework creates a moral and political obligation to always seek the

1 Teleological positing is the process described by Marx in his seminal comparison of the labour process of animals and humans: "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many architects in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement" (Marx 2004 [1867]: 273-274).

alternative in any given situation, to grasp the next link of the chain that facilitates dialectic transformations even in seemingly hopeless situations, or in Lukács's vocabulary a *revolutionary Realpolitik* (Lukács 2009). The central idea is that every condition, however adverse that may be, can be overcome. Or, as Lukács used to say quoting Lenin: "there is no situation without a way out", a phrase that became Lukács's motto throughout his life.

In his personal as well as political life, Lukács often came face-to-face with seemingly hopeless situations. This stance against hopelessness became a guide to Lukács's own biography and political activity, which evolved under immensely unfavourable conditions and extreme dangers after the defeat of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. In the decades that followed, Lukács developed his reputation as a person that quickly denounced his own opinions in order to avoid rupture with the party apparatus. At the same time, it is true that the work of Lukács always tended to polarize readers quite sharply – a fact, according to Eagleton (cited in Corredor 1997: 145), "in itself symptomatic of a set of contradictions or ambivalence in that work". We would certainly agree that his life and his work are full of contradictions, and it is no coincidence that you can find admirers and adversaries of Lukács among the multiple traditions within Marxism until today. At the same time, as George Steiner pointed out, Lukács lived the 20th century like few people on the planet, bearing witness to its many historical events, being what the Greek word "martyras" originally means: not "martyr", but "witness" (Steiner cited in Corredor 1997: 70).

Turning attention to the bigger picture, Thanasis Vakalios[2] has highlighted the fact that in the work of Lukács the contradictory trajectories of the communist movement and socialism found their theoretical expression, including major ideological issues and debates, impasses, anxieties, expectations; a genuine Marxist trajectory and contribution symptomatic of the way and the degree that Lukács interpreted and practiced Marxism as a "philosophy of praxis" (Vakalios 2006: 233). In agreement with Vakalios, we would argue that, while the work of Lukács is vast and contradictory, there is a thread that ties his approach from the turbulent 1920s until the end of his life, pointing to the unity of Lukács's thought.

Lukács was himself very cautious not to "iron out the glaring contradictions" of his work "by artificially constructing an organic development and fitting it into the correct pigeon-hole in the 'history of ideas'", as he expressed it in the 1967 Preface to the new edition of *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1972: X). The long-awaited republication contributed to creative engagements with Lukács's work of the early 1920s as part of the broader context of 1968 radicalism. Lukács became one of the key inspirational figures for parts of the global movement, including for leading young activist figures, like Rudi Dutschke. After Dutschke and other student activists visited Lukács in his apartment in Budapest in the spring of 1966, he noted in his diary:

2 Thanasis Vakalios (1929-2018) was a Greek anti-fascist resistance fighter in WWII and a political refugee in Budapest, where he studied philosophy and became a student of Lukács. He was a prominent intellectual of the Marxist Left and an emeritus professor of the Democritus University of Thrace, in Greece.

> I asked him about debates inside the Hungarian Communist Party during the 1920s. And he was astonished that a young socialist from West Berlin was crazy about details of Communist Party history. He was not so satisfied with that and was eager to discuss with us about more recent issues rather than the period of the 1920s (Dutschke cited in Dannemann 2008: 274, our translation).

Indeed, Lukács was not satisfied with easy comparisons[3] and scholastic debates on the communist movement of the 1920s and emphasized that a fruitful contribution to Marxism requires a purely historical treatment of that period. It is, in this regard, within the context of a century-long perspective that we return to *History and Class Consciousness* in this paper. First, we explore the concepts of reification, totality, and mediation in junction with the work's often-overlooked final essay on the question of organisation. Secondly, we bring into the discussion the concept of the "*Augenblick*", on which Lukács elaborated in his manuscript *Tailism and the Dialectic.* While the manuscript was never published, Lukács wrote it as part of his defence of *History and Class Consciousness* against charges of "idealism" and "subjectivism" adding to a dialectical understanding of the complex relation between subjective and objective factors in the historical process. This way, we aspire to show that one hundred years after its publication, *History and Class Consciousness* remains an indispensable guide to social change, providing a conceptual

3 Visible in his reaction to communist parties of Western countries constant labelling the radicalized youth as "ultra-leftist". Lukács argues that applying a book written by Lenin in 1920 to American youth of 1969 or sustaining that Lenin's criticism of Roland-Holst can be made to fit Dutschke would be terribly mistaken (Lukács 1970: 43).

road map to deal with theoretical and political challenges in the 21st century.

Lukács's philosophy of the party as the crucial contribution of *History and Class Consciousness*

> Organisation is the form of mediation between theory and practice. And, as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by virtue of this mediation (Lukács 1972: 299).

To understand Lukács's contribution to a methodology of the problem of organisation, we begin with an examination of reification as it relates to the problem of immediacy. As Mark Fisher notes, one of the key conceptual insights of Lukács is that immediacy is reifying, since it is inherently ideological, and ideologically mystifying, turning "what is always a process of becoming – which is open-ended and therefore changeable – into something that is fixed and permanent" (Fisher 2020: 116). Lukács points out that reification is the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society. This is, according to Lukács, the reason why large sections of the proletariat remain intellectually under the tutelage of the bourgeoisie and even the severest economic crisis fails to shake them in their attitude (Lukács 1972: 314). Hence, they remain imprisoned within the confines of capitalist thought and reject as impossible

the emergence of anything that is radically new of which we can have no "experience" (ibid.).

Is there a way out? Lukács firmly defends the hypothesis that reification can 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, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development (ibid.: 197). Only then does the concept of "totality" – a political battleground as Eagleton (cited in Corredor 1997: 136) describes it – becomes effectively central, meaning a set of relations not given in immediacy (Fisher 2020: 117). Or, as Frederic Jameson (2001: 38) puts it, at some very basic level the "aspiration to totality" simply means the ability to make connections. Under capitalism, from a social, political, and philosophical perspective, the proletariat is a game changer since it has the potential to grasp the totality, what Jameson calls the "epistemological privilege". As he explains:

> It is the very commodification of the proletariat which gives it that privilege. It is rather because the proletariat has become nothing but a commodity (the commodity of labour power). It is because the proletariat is literally nothing, owns nothing, has no identity, that it can learn, not just something, but everything. This is Lukács's epistemological version of those 'radical chains' celebrated by the young Marx (ibid.: 40).

For Jameson, the epistemological "priority" of "proletarian consciousness", as a class or collective phenomenon, has to do with the *conditions of possibility* of new thinking inherent in this

particular class position (Jameson 2004: 145). New thinking in this case means the capacity to think in terms of process as contrasted to reification, which Jameson sees as "blocks and limits to knowledge", "what suppresses the ability to grasp totalities" (ibid.: 146).

Both Jameson and Fisher have related the standpoint of the proletariat to feminist standpoint theory drawing on the work of Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding etc. Building on the feminist practice of consciousness raising as a form of grassroots knowledge-production, Fisher elaborates on standpoint epistemology and explains that a standpoint is different from a point of view; it is related, rather, to the complicated question of consciousness, hence, is not given in immediacy and, most importantly, has to be constructed by practice:

> You see yourself as a member of the proletariat – or, in Hartsock, you see yourself as a woman. You don't see yourself as an individual in that way. But this is hard work. [...] I might well know that I'm a worker, or I might well know that I'm a woman oppressed by patriarchy, but it's different being able to constantly act on that knowledge, or to act in terms of that knowledge, because all the other pressures coming from immediacy are going in the other direction (Fisher 2020: 120).

In a similar vein, Jameson argues that the most authentic descendance of Lukács's thinking is to be found among certain feminists appropriating the unique conceptual move of *History and Class Consciousness* for a whole program, namely standpoint theory. That is, according to Jameson, the most original feature of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", the

very "move" or "step" on which the whole argument turned: the insistence, not on abstract concepts such as "class" or "production", but rather on group experience (Jameson 2004: 144). Indeed, as Harding points out, "standpoint theories argue for 'starting off thought' from the lives of marginalized peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives" (Harding 2004: 128).

Jameson raises an important point when he claims that group experience is so central for Lukács, since some of his critics have argued exactly the opposite, that the concept of concrete totality escaped him and that he never made the actual voices of the workers the new point of departure (Dunayevskaya 2002: 222). Before proceeding with the question of organisation, a closer look to Lukács's biography could be very useful focusing on the early 1920s, namely, the period when *History and Class Consciousness* was written. In his article "Spider and Fly: The Leninist Philosophy of Georg Lukács", Paul Le Blanc (2013) provides some interesting details of Lukács's activities as a revolutionary exile in Vienna.

Lukács had no hesitation in risking arrest to travel from Vienna to Budapest during the Horthy dictatorship for weekly clandestine meetings with leading Communist workers in Budapest to organize study groups, to discuss the tactics and methods of working within the trade unions and oversee the party's semi-legal press. He was working closely with the leader of the

railway workers' union Jenö Landler and led together a faction opposing an ultra-left sectarian orientation represented by Béla Kun in the Hungarian Communist Party. As a working-class militant in Vienna at the time, Sandor Vajda, later recounted, Lukács encouraged him to take seriously the realities around him, to discuss with his colleagues and write down his observations of the workers' living and working conditions, what they read, what they talked about on the job, their thoughts on the current regime and on communism (ibid.: 54). As Le Blanc concludes: the "Lukács of the 1920s was absolutely clear that there can be no revolutionary Marxism detached from the actual lives, consciousness and struggles of the working class" (ibid.: 53).

At the same time, Lukács understood that there are great divergencies in the maturity of class consciousness attained by workers within economically similar strata and the process of acquiring consciousness does entail a terrible internal ideological crisis for the proletariat (Lukács 1972: 304). On this basis, Rees explains that since some sections of the workers become class conscious before others, the key to the role of the revolutionary organisation is that as many of these workers as possible should band together in a party in order to hasten the process by which their fellow workers also become class conscious (Rees 2000: 15).

Along these lines, Lukács sees the Communist Party as one of the most important intellectual questions of the revolution (Lukács 1972: 299). As he states: "Every 'theoretical' tendency or clash of views must immediately develop an organisational arm if it is to rise above the level of pure theory

or abstract opinion, that is to say, if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfilment in practice" (ibid.). In agreement with Rosa Luxembourg that the function of the party lies first and foremost in the political leadership of the whole movement – and not in the technicalities of the preparations for the mass strike and in supplying its leadership – Lukács (ibid.: 298) proceeds with a deep dive into those organisational factors that render the party of the proletariat capable of assuming political leadership.

At this point, we would like to bring into our discussion Guy Debord's critical comments on Lukács's conception of the party. While in *Society of the Spectacle* Debord creatively develops Lukács's concept of reification, he disagrees with Lukács on the theory of the communist party and argues that Lukács had drawn an "imaginary portrait" of the party and described "as actual merits of the Bolshevik party everything that the Bolshevik party was not" (Debord 2005: 64). In our view, Debord is presenting Lukács's conception of the party as idealized and static, while Lukács explicitly states that the struggle against the effects of reified consciousness is a lengthy laborious process full of stubborn battles. Lukács is well aware of the fact that "if reification is overcome at one point the danger immediately arises that the state of consciousness that led to that victory might itself atrophy into a new form of reification". As he adds:

> The party as a whole transcends the reified divisions according to nation, profession, etc., and according to modes of life (economics and politics) by virtue of its action. [...] Its closely-knit organisation with its result-

> ing iron discipline and its demand for total commitment tears away the reified veils that cloud the consciousness of the individual in capitalist society (Lukács 1972: 399).

At the same time, Lukács is cautious to criticize a situation in which the party consists merely of a hierarchy of officials isolated from the mass; a party of ordinary members given the role of passive onlookers, whose criticism, as he adds, will at best be of the *post festum* variety (at congresses, etc.) which will seldom exert any decisive influence on future actions (ibid.: 336–337). As Panagiotis Sotiris correctly points out, instead of using simple "military" metaphors of the party as leadership or "general headquarters", Lukács speaks about spaces of collective thinking, practice, and transformation (Sotiris 2019a:11). Indeed, as Lukács (1972: 335) describes it, the inner life of the party is "one unceasing struggle" against its capitalist inheritance. And this statement is anything but an idealized imaginary portrait of the party. Peter Thomas (2013) draws an interesting parallel between Lukács's conception of the party as a laboratory and Lucio Magri's relevant formulations clarifying that the party:

> does not represent a mere 'instrument of action' in the hands of a pre-existent historical subject with its own precise character and goals, but instead represents the mediation through which this subject constitutes itself, defining its own aims and historic goal (Magri 1970: 100–101).

The same goes for the correct relationship between class and the party. It's a constant and constantly renewed effort, whose criterion and guide, as Lukács emphatically argues, can

be found nowhere but in the class consciousness of the proletariat:

> On the one hand, the real, objective unity of class consciousness forms the basis of a dialectical alliance despite the organisational separation of class from the party. On the other hand, the prevailing disunity, the differing degrees of clarity and depth to be found in the consciousness of the different individuals, groups and strata of the proletariat make the organisational separation of the party from the class inevitable (Lukács 1972: 322).

Hence, the correct relationship between class and the party is dependent on the party's ability to evade the "sectarianism – opportunism" complex. Lukács explains that sect-like organisations artificially separate "true" class consciousness from the life and development of the class. As a result, the historically necessary and hence dialectical separation of party organisation from the masses freezes into permanence. On the opposite side, the organisations of opportunists achieve a compromise between these strata of consciousness on the lowest possible level, or at best, at the level of its average members. Subsequently, basing itself on an existing average, the organisation is doomed to hinder development and even to reduce the general level of consciousness (ibid.). In other words, the organisations of opportunists merge entirely with the spontaneous instinctive movement of the masses and sacrifice every criterion by which to judge correct action objectively. That is, as we will see below, precisely what "Tailism" means, namely, the politics of following the masses rather than leading them.

To sum up, we dare to argue that the message in the bottle we receive from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* is to be found in its final essay, "Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation". This crucial contribution highlights the need for a consciously organised militancy, representing "the highest objective possibility of proletarian action available at a given point in time" (ibid.: 327); a consciously organised militancy always already self-critical and oriented towards totality, ready not to "recoil before the inchoate enormity of its own aims" (ibid.: 314) at the decisive moment, ready to fight until the end; an end which is not a pre-determined destiny and lacks all guarantees for its realization. Jameson (2001: 39) argues that *History and Class Consciousness* was precisely that "philosophy of the party" that seemed missing from a later Marxism-Leninism. In that sense, as Jameson adds, it is "an unfinished project" and "an open Leninist book", that "wherever else it sends us, it also ought to send us back to the fundamental philosophical problem of the party itself, and in particular of the Leninist Party" (ibid.).

The "*Augenblick*" of crisis – Towards a radical theory of the moment

> What is a 'moment' [*Augenblick*]? A situation whose duration may be longer or shorter, but which is distinguished from the process that leads up to it in that it forces together the essential tendencies of that process and demands that a *decision* be taken over the *future*

> *direction of the process*. That is to say the tendencies reach a sort of zenith, and depending on how the situation concerned is handled, the process takes on a different direction after the 'moment' (Lukács 2000: 55).

A defence of the centrality of Lukács's methodology of the problem of organisation was reinforced after the discovery of Lukács's manuscript *Tailism and the Dialectic* in the archives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow during the 1990s. Lukács's reply to critics of *History and Class Consciousness* was most probably drafted in 1925 or 1926 and was never published until its recent discovery. In his defence of *History and Class Consciousness* against the attacks by Abram Deborin and László Rudas, Lukács identifies the essay "Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Political Organisation" as the crucial essay in his book (Lukács 2000: 94).

In what follows, we turn attention to *Tailism and the Dialectic* focusing on the concept of *Augenblick*. Lukács highlights the need for an analysis of classes in bourgeois society that "has attained this special sort that has never existed before in history (an adequate conception of the social whole) and function (a real and conscious influence on the historical process), in the form of proletarian class consciousness" (Lukács 2000: 54). As Barker and Cox (2002: 4) point out, a distinctive feature of Lukács's theorisation of processes is the fact that processes concatenate into what Lukács terms "moments of decision" ("*Augenblicke*"). Once again, the question of the interplay between political subjectivity and objective conditions comes to the fore. As Lukács explains:

> The dialectical interaction of subject and object in the historical process consists in the fact that the subjective moment is, self-evidently as I stress again and again, a product, a moment of the objective process. It works back on the process, in certain historical situations, whose emergence is called forth by the objective process, and gives it direction. This working back is only possible in praxis, only in the present (that is why I am using the word 'moment' – in order to highlight this practical and contemporary character). Once the action is completed, the subjective moment slots back into the sequence of objective moments (Lukács 2000: 56).

Löwy (2011: 96) aptly notes that "there is a dialectical interaction between subject and object in the historical process, but in the *Augenblick* of crisis, this component [i.e., the subjective one] gives the direction of the events, in the form of revolutionary consciousness and praxis". Through his reading of Lenin and the Russian revolution, Lukács concludes that "insurrection as an art is, then, one moment of the revolutionary process where the subjective moment has a decisive predominance" (Lukács 2000: 58). While Lukács is cautious to avoid claiming that "only" the class consciousness of the proletariat is the driving force of revolution, he emphatically argues that in certain situations it is unquestionably the decisive element (ibid.). Lukács's thought, in this regard, is significantly influenced by Lenin's letters in the months prior to the revolution, especially his letter titled *Marxism and Insurrection,* addressed to the Central Committee of the party on September 13–14, 1917. In that text, Lenin begins by stating the importance of treating insurrection as an art and continues by stating that:

> It is precisely the present moment that the Party must recognize as the one in which the entire course of events has objectively placed insurrection on the order of the day and that insurrection must be treated as an art, it will perhaps be best to use the method of comparison, and to draw a parallel between July 3–4 and the September days (Lenin 1964: 23).

Then, he goes on to state that "the objective conditions exist for a successful insurrection" (Lenin 1964: 25). While emphasizing the transformation of objective conditions, Lenin attempts to persuade the central committee of the importance of actions, of choices made by a political subject that *at this specific moment* understands the chance and possibilities that have opened. The importance of timing is emphasized in a new letter to the central committee, one day prior to the revolution:

> I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread [...]. History will not forgive revolutionaries for procrastinating when they could be victorious today (and they certainly will be victorious today), while they risk losing much tomorrow, in fact, they risk losing everything. [...] To delay action is fatal (Lenin 1964: 234–235).

As Eagleton (2003) comments on the era of Bolshevism, "theory had at times to hobble hard to keep abreast of what was happening on the streets [...], while the Bolshevik uprising struck hard at the kind of Marxism for which human agency was an agreeable bonus". Of course, understanding which moment is decisive depends on the *concrete analysis of the concrete situation which is "the culmination of all genuine theory, its*

consummation, the point where it therefore breaks into practice" (Lukács 2009: 42).

Criticizing Lukács, Bronner (2011) seems to equate the fundamental tenets of HCC – and, implicitly, the concept of *Augenblick* – as an idealized form of *politics of will* that produced a rupture with the tradition of the Second International. While Lukács conceptualized his contribution as a complete break from the evolutionism of social democracy, he did not propose a subjectivist approach as the antidote to the mechanistic determinism of the past. Lukács realized that such an approach runs the risk of theorizing an ever-present revolutionary situation. However, he shielded himself from such a distortion by referring to the "incorrect application" of the theory of the moment, considering it as one of the traits of "left communism" to have been criticized by Lenin. As Lukács notes:

> Such a 'left' theory of moments ignores precisely the instant of dialectical change, the concrete, revolutionary essence of the 'moment'. Insurrection as an art is turned into insurrection as a game. The well warranted active role of the subject turns into an empty phraseology of subjectivism (Lukács 2000: 59).

To put it differently, while Lukács is attacking a tailist-fatalist concept of process as underestimating the active and conscious role of the subjective moment and excluding any moment of decision, at the same time he is cautious to emphasize that these moments do not float freely in the air and cannot be brought about wilfully but are occasioned by the objective process (ibid.). In that sense, Lukács's defence of *History and*

Class Consciousness can be better understood as a further inquiry into Leninist methodology. Undoubtedly, *Tailism and the Dialectic* expands the concept of the decisive moment and the importance of timing in revolutionary politics. However, many of these points were already developed in Lukács's study of Lenin's thought published in 1924. An illustrative passage in this sense regards the emergence of a revolutionary situation:

> The actual time and circumstance are hardly ever exactly determinable. But the tendencies which lead towards it and the principal lines of the correct course of action to be taken when it begins are thereby all the more determinable. The party's activity is based on this historical understanding (Lukács 2009: 32).

In conclusion, the organisational form of the party is "awarded" the title of "revolutionary" by its understanding of and intervention in the historical process, or to put it differently, by preparing itself, the working class, and its allies for these decisive moments. The preparation of revolution, which Lukács describes as a basic element of Leninism, is irreconcilable with a tailist perspective since the latter replaces "preparation" with "anticipation" (Lukács 2000: 62). Lukács is explicitly clear on this matter when he states that "the subjective moment reaches in this 'moment' its comprehensive significance precisely because and inasmuch as it has already acted consciously and actively during earlier developments" (Lukács 2000: 58).

Lukács, above all, understood that class struggle does not develop in a uniform-straightforward manner; rather, there are crucial nodes where the balance of forces is radically trans-

formed, one way or the other. In that sense, the *Augenblick* needs to be understood in the broadest sense and it should not be restricted to revolutionary situations. This is an important point implying that Lukács sees Leninism not only as the seizing of the moment but most of all as concrete radical practice under concrete circumstances in a both calm and decisive movements. As Lukács expressed it in the Postscript he wrote in 1967 for his book on Lenin: "the figure of Lenin as the very embodiment of permanent readiness represents an ineradicable value – a new form of exemplary attitude to reality" (Lukács 2009: 97).

In lieu of an epilogue: Thoughts on Lukács and the communist hypothesis from the 1960s to the 21st century

In an interview that Lukács gave during 1968 and was published – at Lukács's request – after his death in the *Australian Left Review*, Bernie Taft (1971) said at the end, "Comrade Lukács, you seem rather pessimistic". He replied: "No, I am optimistic for the 21st century". Of course, Lukács was never naive and had a deep understanding that a "solution" developed along capitalist lines "would lead over a long period of crises, civil wars and imperialist world wars on an ever-increasing scale to 'the mutual destruction of the opposing classes' and to a new

barbarism" (Lukács 1972: 306).[4] Lukács didn't live to see the counterattack of the capitalist classes in the 1980s, the neoliberal counter-reform, the collapse of Soviet Union, the triumphalist declaration of the "end of history" during the 1990s, the outbreak of wars, the capitalist crisis of 2008, and the return of the fascist threat.

In his reflections on the return of the politico-strategic question, Bensaid (2010) explained that from the Thatcher/Reagan years, the strategic debate seemed to have fallen to level zero, what he called "an eclipse of strategic reasoning". As he added elsewhere:

> The withdrawal from politics found expression in what could be called a 'social illusion', by analogy with the 'political illusion' of those criticised by the young Marx for thinking 'political' emancipation being fully realised through the achievement of civil rights as the last word in 'human emancipation'. There was a symmetrical illusion about the self-sufficiency of social movements reflected to a degree in the experiences after Seattle (1999) and the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (2001) (Bensaid 2006).

In that context, the actuality of aspects of Lukács's later thinking is striking: aspects of "romantic revolutionism" which remind us of Bensaid's analysis of the anti-globalization move-

4 In the same spirit, in his 1968 book, *The Process of Democratization*, Lukács (1991: 88) poses the theoretical question of whether bourgeois democracy is a real alternative for the systemic crisis of socialism and notes: "Our answer is a clear decisive: No. Never!". As Lukács commented, if a socialist state converts to the alternative of bourgeois democracy, most probably the CIA would make this state into another Greece, referring to the seven-year long military dictatorship that ruled Greece starting on April 21, 1967.

ment; difficulties of counter-movements, like the anti-austerity movements in the 2010s, to outline an alternative; political, organisational and theoretical inabilities of the Communist Parties, or even, with few exceptions, the absence of impactful Communist organisations; and, last but not least, the role of the majority of the intellectuals living forever in the Grand Hotel Abyss, or *Airbnb Abyss* to be more up to date.

At the same time, in the period after the 2008 global capitalist crisis, debates around the Communist hypothesis started to attract serious attention. It is striking that the international discussion of the communist hypothesis, as Peter Thomas (2013) notes, "has quickly developed into a debate regarding the adequate party-form for radical politics today". Considering this renewed interest in the question of organisation, we would like to add our voice to those who insist that Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* has a lot to offer to these debates, pointing to a theory of political subjectivity and a theory of the party that is able to theoretically and practically "seize the day". Furthermore, mass mobilizations against crisis and austerity in the past decade have often been linked to questions of how to bring about effective social transformations, as social movements sought to overcome their role as mere protests or expressions of discontent. In that respect, social movement theory sought to develop a notion of the decisive moment, without expressly referencing Lukács. Fominaya (2017) has emphasized the importance of rupture in the neoliberal consensus, as social movements intervene in the public sphere, effecting political change. Della Porta (2020) speaks of "critical junctures" where "routine protests" are set

aside and the possibility of a radical transformation emerges, following a process of "cracking-vibrating-sedimentation". These conceptualizations emphasize the notion of crucial nodes where the direction and the intensity of social struggle hang in the balance. More precisely, Gaitanou fittingly employs the notion of *Augenblick* in order to discuss the ways "the actual movement of real people can intervene decisively in certain crucial moments", namely, "in those moments that the role of class consciousness is fundamental [...] therefore history as a process is defined as a field of possibilities (Gaitanou 2019: 139).

Along the same line of thought, we conclude that "*Augenblick*" is a valuable tool for understanding the ebbs and flows of social conflicts, of the rise and (possible) fall of radical and militant tendencies nowadays. In the turbulent past decade, a number of decisive moments arose where the *objective possibility* of social transformation was present. Through a "Lukácsian politics of the 21st century" we may reflect upon the defeat of leftist-radical tendencies within the vast majority of those decisive moments and address questions and strategic dead-ends that emerge in contemporary struggles. While a thorough examination of the Greek case is out of the scope of this article, we will conclude by relating Lukács's theory of the moment to the Greek referendum of July 2015. A challenge for future research would be to rethink this case as an *Augenblick*, a decisive moment when the "essential tendencies" of the previous period culminated into the choice between "Yes" (to a new bailout package and austerity measures) and "No" (which pointed to a potential rupture with the Eurozone and the European Union).

After winning the January 2015 legislative election with an explicitly anti-austerity agenda, the SYRIZA-led government began negotiations with Greece's three main creditors (the EU, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund – known as the Troika) regarding the terms for further bailout loans. In the early morning of June 27, 2015, Prime Minister and SYRIZA leader, Alexis Tsipras, announced that a referendum would be held on July 5, 2015. The victory of the "Oxi" ("No") vote (61.3%) has been aptly described as a "tremendous show of determination from the part of the subaltern classes" (Sotiris 2017). The way that the Greek ruling class and its international allies framed the referendum fostered polarization, climaxing to a point where "the pre-referendum debate, and in particular the ideological tone set by both Greek media and European Union representatives, meant that most voters who voted NO at least accepted as a risk a broader rupture with the Eurozone" (Sotiris 2019b: 276).

However, for these possibilities to be fully realized, the intervention of class-conscious political subjects was essential. At this point, SYRIZA, the dominant party of the anti-austerity bloc was trapped within a strategy of left Europeanism and was both unable and unwilling to organize a social and political alliance that would utilize this moment to radically transform the Greek social formation, in a process of rupture with the Eurozone and the bailout mechanisms. A week after the referendum, Tsipras returned to Athens from Brussels having agreed to a third Greek bailout on neo-colonial terms, worse than the one

rejected by the 61.3% of the voters in the referendum. As Perry Anderson aptly remarked:

> In calling for a resolute 'no', and within little more than a week demanding a submissive 'yes', Syriza has turned its coat with a speed not seen since war credits were supported by European social democracy in 1914, even if this time a minority of the party has saved its honor (Anderson 2015).

Like Marx, Lukács did not give us "recipes for the cookshops of the future" and reference to Lukács's work can lead to different political outcomes concerning the burning question "What is to be done?" at the present time. As Marcello Musto described it: "maybe our situation today is more similar to a pre-1848 context, a scenario marked by eclecticism and enormous confusion on the meaning of Socialism itself" (Musto cited in Oittinen and Maidansky 2010). Under these circumstances, there might be no fast forward to a new "1917" and no viable "copy-paste" of Lukács's interventions in the 1920s. However, based on our call for a "political" return to *History and Class Consciousness* from a century-long perspective, in this article we tried to shed light on the following aspects which retain a definite contemporaneity, namely: a) a philosophy of the party, b) a theorisation of processes, c) a theory of the moment and d) a defence of the alternative. Certainly, there is a lot of work to be done, but as Lukács will always remind us:

> We must not forget that history takes some big jumps. I saw the collapse of the Hapsburg and Romanoff empires; they looked stable and seemed everlasting in

> their time. Much depends on every communist being conscious of their task (Lukács cited in Taft 1971).

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