LUKÁCS'S CRITIQUE OF IRRATIONALISM

From the antinomies of bourgeois thought to the destruction of reason

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ABSTRACT

Challenging claims of a complete intellectual and political reorientation, this paper argues that Gyorgy Lukács's post-war critique of the forms of irrationalism characterising reactionary and proto-fascist thinking in *Destruction of Reason* carries forward a critique of bourgeois philosophy looking back to Lukács's critique of "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought" in *History and Class Consciousness*. Part 1 examines Lukács's claims in *History and Class Consciousness* that Kantian philosophy and the oppositions it sets up – between theoretical and practical reason, science and morality, triumphant understanding and the unavailability of the totality and opacity of the "thing-in-itself" – reflect in the contemplative sphere the concrete contradictions of bourgeois-capitalist society. Part 2 shows how

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Lukács's account of the genesis of modern philosophical "irrationalism" in Schelling directly situates this as arising out of the "problem of the irrational" reflected in the antinomies of Kantian critical philosophy, by positing an intellectual intuition putatively capable of transcending the limits of finite understanding and granting access (for an elite few) to an "abyssal" suprarational Ground of experience. In the concluding Part 3, we contend that, as *Destruction of Reason* tracks the devolution of philosophical irrationalism into far-Right ideology in the 20th century, the 1933 essay "Grand Hotel Abyss" critiques the recurrent gesture of radical intellectuals to funnel their dissatisfaction at capitalist reification into exotic invocations of "spiritual crisis" which leave the political-economic dimensions of capitalist societies unexamined, because they lean on the same irrationalist premises established in Schelling's irrationalist response to the antinomies of bourgeois thought. In the contemporary situation, as the far Right reemerges, and academic social critique continues to draw on premises drawn from irrationalism, Lukács's position assumes new pertinence.

KEYWORDS

Lukács; antinomies; irrationalism; intellectuals; Grand Hotel Abyss

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A CRÍTICA DE LUKÁCS AO IRRACIONALISMO

Das antinomias do pensamento burguês à destruição da razão

RESUMO

Desafiando as afirmações de uma reorientação intelectual e política completa, este artigo argumenta que a crítica de Gyorgy Lukács no pós-guerra às formas de irracionalismo que caracterizam o pensamento reacionário e proto-fascista em *Destruição da Razão* leva adiante uma crítica da filosofia burguesa que remete à crítica de Lukács às "Antinomias do pensamento burguês" em *História e consciência de classe*. A Parte 1 examina as afirmações de Lukács em

História e consciência de classe de que a filosofia kantiana e as oposições que ela estabelece – entre razão teórica e razão prática, ciência e moral, entendimento triunfante e inacessibilidade da totalidade e opacidade da "coisa-em-si" – refletem na esfera contemplativa as contradições concretas da sociedade burguesa-capitalista. A Parte 2 mostra como a abordagem de Lukács sobre a gênese do "irracionalismo" filosófico moderno em Schelling o situa diretamente como decorrente do "problema do irracional" refletido nas antinomias da filosofia crítica kantiana ao postular uma intuição intelectual supostamente capaz de transcender os limites do entendimento finita e de conceder acesso (a uma elite de poucos) a um fundamento (*Ground*) suprarracional "abissal" da experiência. Na Parte 3, por fim, defendemos que, à medida que *A destruição da razão* segue a evolução do irracionalismo filosófico na ideologia de extrema-direita no século XX, o ensaio "Grande Hotel Abismo", de 1933, critica o recorrente gesto de intelectuais radicais de canalizarem sua insatisfação face à reificação capitalista para invocações exóticas de "crise espiritual" que deixam de examinar as dimensões político-econômicas das sociedades capitalistas, porque se apoiam nas mesmas premissas irracionalistas estabelecidas na resposta irracionalista de Schelling às antinomias do pensamento burguês. Na situação contemporânea, em que a extrema-direita reemerge e a crítica social acadêmica continua a basear-se em premissas retiradas do irracionalismo, a posição de Lukács assume uma nova pertinência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Lukács; antinomias; irracionalismo; intelectuais; Grande Hotel Abismo

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Introduction

György Lukács's great 1923 work, *History and Class Consciousness* (hereafter *HCC*) was always divisive. Ernst Bloch's review attests to this. Bloch praised the work as one which "leads Marx back to Hegel to a significant extent, and leads the

latter meaningfully beyond himself". At the same time, he anticipated the criticisms the book would draw from the Russian Marxists and the "usual philosophy scholars" alike, the latter of whom would fail to appreciate it, given their "deeply uninvolved, purely contemplative attitude" (Bloch 2020: 10). Lukács's critical self-reflection in the 1967 Preface to the new edition of *HCC* has often been appealed to, so as to posit a radical and complete break in his work, separating this classic founding work of Western Marxism from such texts as *The Destruction of Reason* (hereafter *DR*) of 1954. The latter is a text which has attracted far less critical appraisal (but cf. Snedeker 1985/1986; Rockmore 1992; Koves 1997; Aronowitz 2013; Bellamy Foster 2023), and has even sometimes been framed as nothing short of a "philosophical apologia for Stalinism" (Traverso 2021: xiv). This paper challenges claims of such a complete intellectual and political reorientation, or alternatively, of an alleged identification of Lukács at any period with the forms of irrationalism he targets.[1] We will argue that Lukács's post-war critique of the forms of irrationalism characterising reactionary and proto-fascist thinking carries forward a critique of bourgeois philosophy looking back to Lukács's "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought" in *HCC*, which was also developed in his landmark 1933 criticism of "radical" bourgeois thought, "Grand Hotel Abyss" (Lukács 2017 [1933]).

So, to be very clear: we are in no way propounding an undialectical, and in our view unsustainable, claim to *total* con-

1 Cf. Lucio Colletti's presentation of Lukács as a Bergsonian (Colletti 1973). For a criticism of Colletti see Feenberg (2014).

tinuity in Lukács's thought between 1923 and 1954. As he makes clear, whether in "How did fascist philosophy come about in Germany?" of 1933, or in the aforementioned 1967 "Preface" to *HCC*, his later thought includes partial breaks with earlier stances. As early as 1933, Lukács criticises *HCC* for being too idealistic, and falling into what he terms inefficacious "ultra-left" tendencies, in contrast to how he has come to now understand dialectical materialism. He also recants his "false polemics" against Engels' notion of the dialectic of nature, which restricted dialectical thinking to the knowledge of human society (Lukács 1933a). Our argument here addresses his readings of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, and the notion of irrationalism, which he notably does not at any point in these self-criticisms link to his departures from positions in *HCC*.

As we will examine in Part 1, Lukács' *HCC* claims that Kantian philosophy and the great antinomies it sets up – between theoretical and practical reason, science and morality, triumphant formal understanding and the unavailability of the totality and opacity of the "thing-in-itself" – reflect in the contemplative sphere the concrete contradictions of bourgeois-capitalist society. This is a society in which the advances of science and material production mean human beings collectively can comprehend and control more of nature than ever before. At the same time, human beings' own material productions and institutions increasingly confront us as inhuman, hostile, reified, and alien.

Part 2 then argues that Lukács, far from *wholly* breaking with this earlier criticism of the tendencies of bourgeois thought,

develops this critique into the concept of "irrationalism" in *DR*. Kant's thought already posits an unknowable thing-in-itself, and gestures in the direction of a contemplative resolution of the antinomies of bourgeois thought in aesthetic perception and the idea of a (for him, unavailable) intellectual intuition. As Lukács reads Schelling, the latter breaks with Hegel's dialectical response to Kant. He does so by openly elevating an intellectual intuition putatively capable of transcending the limits of finite understanding and identified in his early work with the activity of aesthetic genius. Lukács contends that this "aristocratic epistemology", which claims access (for a few) to an "abyssal" suprarational Ground of reason which would resolve the antinomies of bourgeois thought, sets out the fundamental patterns of the later forms of irrationalism which would eventually pave the way towards the vulgarised formulations of National Socialist ideology.

In the concluding Part 3, we contend that the 1933 essay "The Grand Hotel Abyss" already critically draws on the analysis of "Antinomies" in *HCC* and forms a bridge towards the position of *DR*. It does so however in order to critique the recurrent gesture of non-Marxian, bourgeois intellectuals who accept irrationalist premises, and are thereby led to funnel their dissatisfaction at capitalist reification into exotic invocations of "spiritual crisis". This kind of position, Lukács contends, leaves the political-economic dimensions of capitalist societies unexamined, and at best justifies forms of contemplative withdrawal in the face of rising fascism. We close by suggesting that reading Lukács's developing critiques of irrationalism in the context of

today's growing capitalist crisis, whilst academic critique in the humanities still widely leans on orientations drawn from the philosophical irrationalism which Lukács criticised, poses a newly-contemporary challenge.

Part 1: from the problem of irrationality to the genesis of irrationalism

Immanuel Kant in his three *Critiques*, as is well known, claims that prior Western philosophy had failed to be sufficiently critically self-aware of the boundaries of reason. As he writes, the domain of knowledge:

> [...] is an island, enclosed by nature within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth – enchanting name! – surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprise which he can never abandon and yet he is unable to carry to completion (Kant 1998: 396 [B294–5]).

Faced with the conditioned objects of our experience, reason as a faculty impels human beings to seek out the total series of the conditions. In this way, we come inevitably to speculate concerning whether the world had a beginning, and whether it has a limit, on the immortality of the soul and the freedom of the will, as well as on the existence of an unconditioned being (God). Nevertheless, Kant's claim is that we can

only certify claims to knowledge concerning events, processes, and things which fall within the scope of possible experience. When we seek to go beyond this "island of truth", equally compelling, reasoned cases can be made for both sides of the "antinomies" that our reasoning allows us to envisage: that there both must be, and can't have been a beginning to the universe (first antinomy), for example, or that the will must be free, and yet that it also cannot be free (third antinomy). The "Transcendental Dialectic" within the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998: 399 ff.) is then dedicated to showing how the antinomies are resolvable, if inquirers consent to accept the limitation of their epistemic capacities.

The price Kant pays for his critical resolution of the insoluble problems which had beset prior metaphysics, however, is that his own resulting system is riven by a set of irresolvable contradictions. There are the contradictions between phenomena and "noumena", the objects we experience and things-in-themselves, the empirical-psychological self and the transcendental subject, the formal-categorical demands of rational morality and sensual-natural desires, and not least, the theoretical and practical modalities of reason. According to Lukács's "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought" in *History and Class Consciousness*, it is exactly Kant's willingness to posit and accept as irresolvable these fundamental oppositions in his philosophy which attests to his significance:

> Kant's greatness as a philosopher lies in the fact that [...] he made no attempt to conceal the intractability of the problem by means of an arbitrary dogmatic resolution of any sort, but that he bluntly elaborated the con-

> tradiction and presented it in an undiluted form (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 134).

So, Kant's "Transcendental Dialectic" in *Critique of Pure Reason* claimed to trace the irresolvable antinomies of prior metaphysical philosophers back to their cause (the failure of philosophers to attain critical self-awareness). What Lukács attempts in his Marxian dialectic in "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought" is to show that the contradictions which cut across Kant's philosophical system are the reflections, in the field of philosophy, of contradictions in the new bourgeois-capitalist societies emerging in Europe from out of the age of revolutions:

> Classical German philosophy [*klassische deutsche Philosophie*] arises at a point of development where matters have progressed so far that these problems can be raised to the level of consciousness. At the same time this takes place in a milieu where the problems can only appear on an intellectual and philosophical plane. This has the drawback that the concrete problems of society and the concrete solutions to them cannot be seen. Nevertheless, classical philosophy is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the very end – on the plane of philosophy. […] And – in thought – it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind's development can at least be seen as a problem (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 121).

Lukács's response to Kant is in no sense a reductive one. The antinomies within Kant's own thought have specifically intellectual bases, which Lukács subjects to philosophical cri-

tique. In particular, in a way which points towards the concerns of *DR*, Lukács contends that Kant's thought confronts, and fails to resolve, what he calls "the problem of irrationality [*das unerledigte Irrationalitätsproblem*]" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 120, trans. mod.). This problem results from Kant's ambition, then the ambition of the German idealists who followed him, to generate a philosophical system capable of explaining the totality of all phenomena:

> a co-ordination, or rather a supra- and subordination of the various partial systems of forms (and within these, of the individual forms). The connections between them must always be thought of as 'necessary', i.e. as visible in or 'created' by the forms themselves, or at least by the principle according to which forms are constructed. That is to say, the correct positing of a principle implies – at least in its general tendency – the positing of the whole system determined by it [...] every given aspect of the system should be capable of being deduced from its basic principle, [...] it should be exactly predictable and calculable (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 117).

The ambition to create such a totalising rational-deductive system explaining everything, Lukács contends, reflects the early modern confidence in the successes of the natural sciences. This confidence informed an unexamined presupposition, to which Kant gave voice in his idea of a "Copernican revolution": the idea that human beings can only know what they make, or at least, what they can posit or construct by themselves. Modern philosophy, Lukács contends, "refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it

instead as its own product" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 112). Only the latter is "rational", whereas everything that would be given to human experience, and which we did not create, would be "irrational". However, when we reflect on how, or from what, such a system might emerge, and be able to explain its own conditions of possibility, problems immediately emerge:

> even the purely formal delimitation of this type of thought throws light on the necessary correlation of the rational and the irrational, i.e. on the inevitability with which every rational system will strike a frontier or barrier of irrationality (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 114).

In Kant's system, Lukács observes, the problem of irrationality shows itself in his recourse to the idea of the thing-in-itself. The thing-in-itself has several distinct functions within Kant's system. What unites them "is the fact that they each represent a limit, a barrier, to the abstract, formal, rationalistic, 'human' faculty of cognition" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 114). At what we might term the "micro" level, there is a need to presuppose that, beyond individual things as we experience them ("phenomena"), these things would exist independently of our experience of them. At the same time, we cannot know that such experience-independent things exist (not at least, without the kind of proof Kant will attempt in his "Refutation of Idealism"), or in what manners they could exist. For, *ipso facto*, they lie beyond the range of our experience of them as phenomena "given" to us through our sensible intuition:

> the sensuous faculty of intuition (which furnishes the forms of understanding with content) is in reality only a

> receptive quality, a capacity for being affected in a certain way by ideas. [...] The non-sensuous cause of these ideas is wholly unknown to us and we are therefore unable to intuit it as an object [...] Lukács 1971 [1923]: 115).

Then again, at the "macro" level, the notion of things-in-themselves haunts Kant's system in the aforementioned "Transcendental Dialectic". At issue here, as Lukács glosses, "the problem of the whole and of the ultimate substance of knowledge, the problem of those 'ultimate' objects of knowledge which are needed to round off the partial systems into a totality, a system of the perfectly understood world" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 115).

Lukács's interest lies in how this leaning of Kant's system on the positing of things-in-themselves which we cannot know represents an affront to the modern philosophical desire for systematicity. On one hand, the principle of systematisation is "not reconcilable with the recognition of any 'facticity', of a 'content' which in principle cannot be deduced from the principle of form and which, therefore, has simply to be accepted as actuality" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 117). On the other hand, in Kantian critical philosophy:

> pure reason is unable to make the least leap towards the synthesis and the definition of an object and so its principles cannot be deduced 'directly from concepts but only indirectly by relating these concepts to something wholly contingent, namely possible experience' (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 116).

Kant attempts to give rational grounds to his system by way of a recourse to practical reason. To recall: Kant proposes

that we cannot experience freedom as we experience a table or any other sensible, phenomenal object or event. Yet given the alleged "facts" of our moral experience, we must *presuppose* that we ourselves – moral subjects – are free to act based on reasons which transcend the given data of our experiences, and the given desires of our empirical psychology. The ongoing quest for a pure moral will, meanwhile, gives us reasons to postulate the immortality of the soul, and even (Kant contends) the existence of God. The same problem of irrationality however recurs within the range of this famous "primacy of practical reason", Lukács observes (cf. Kant 2004: 164–178). For Kant's alleged facts of moral experience are precisely non-rational "givens". They therefore cannot be rationally posited or created by the subject. On the other hand, as soon as the morally free agent seeks to exercise its noumenal free will, which would transcend irrational determination by phenomenal reality, they are forced to draw the content for their formal deliberations from the externally given world in which the person contingently finds themselves:

> The moment this ethic attempts to make itself concrete, i.e. to test its strength on concrete problems, it is forced to *borrow* the elements of content of these particular actions from the world of phenomena and from the conceptual systems that assimilate them and absorb their 'contingency' (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 124–125).

It is with principal reference to Kant, therefore, that Lukács feels licensed to conclude that, whilst "classical philosophy" – his term here for German idealism – "mercilessly tore to shreds all the metaphysical illusions of the preceding era", it

remained itself "as uncritical and as dogmatically metaphysical with regard to some of its own premises as its predecessors had been towards theirs" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 121). At the same time, as we indicated above, on the basis of his Marxist dialectic, Lukács (1971 [1923]: 128) contends that this metaphysical inconsistency is "the highest intellectual expression", in the domain of philosophy, of competing dynamics operating within the newly-emergent bourgeois societies of post–1789 Europe, "the social and historical background which threw up these problems" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 137). On the one hand, capitalist societies, buoyed by the new sciences, were acquiring increasing control over all aspects of human existence, subjecting the natural world to human needs and intentions. Given the liberal capitalist bequeathing of matters of collective, material and social reproduction to the "invisible hand" of market competition, the governing classes were losing "the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 121). At the individual level, subjects increasingly confront a wholly human-created environment, in which all of the challenges which could emerge are amenable to coordinated rational solution and control. Liberal thought encourages each individual to think of herself as an isolated atom, an "individual, egoistic bourgeois", prey to "market forces" as inscrutable and indifferent to their flourishing as the untamed natural realities that had environed our ancestors (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 135).

This leads to a divided existence. Bourgeois societies establish themselves as masters of a natural world ordered according to the mathematizable regularities of the positive sciences, Yet,

individuals confront a reified, alien social totality which reduces their scope for action to almost nought (cf. Lukács 1971 [1923]: 135). Lukács brilliantly argues that it is this divided existence that finds philosophical expression in the antinomies of Kantian philosophy. The implication of his position is also clear: to the extent that these material and historical realities stay in place, bourgeois thought will necessarily reproduce different metastases of Kant's antinomies, and his wrestling with the problem of irrationality (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 120; see Part 3). In "Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought" itself, Lukács lists the post-Kantian "rejection of every 'metaphysics'", the pursuit of specialized sciences "without making the attempt to achieve a unified mastery of the whole realm of the knowable" (which we can still see today, amongst other places, in so-called "analytic philosophy"), and also, "varying theories centring on the notion of fiction" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 119–120).

What concerns us immediately here is how the philosophical situation set up by Kant's antinomies, and his recourse to the "things in themselves", was experienced by Kant's immediate successors as profoundly intellectually unsatisfactory, if not agonizing. The demand for systematicity shaping modern thought could not rest within a Kantian "island of truth" so clearly crosscut by irreconcilable oppositions and hemmed in by agnosticism.[2] In Fichte already, the attempt was made to go beyond Kant's humble self-limitation about the things-in-them-

2 In § 77 of the *Critique of Judgement* Kant himself invoked the possibility of an intellectual intuition, an *intellectus archetypus*, which could directly experience things-in-themselves, but refused to credit this as more than "a mere idea where human judgment was concerned" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 139). See Part 3 below.

selves, and to develop what Lukács already calls a "doctrine of irrationality [*Irrationalitätslehre*]" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 119, trans. mod.). At issue is Fichte's philosophical claim to have identified an irrational ground, "of which no account can be given", for the world of our reasonable experience:

> It was Fichte in his middle period who saw this problem most clearly and gave it the most satisfactory formulation: 'the absolute projection of an object of the origin of which no account can be given with the result that the space between projection and thing projected is dark and void; [...] the *projectio per hiatum irrationalem*' (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 122).

In Fichte's later work, the grounding irrational datum would become the famous "absolute I" or "Ego", a "subject-object" which would be the transcendental origin of the world which it would also experience.[3] In a remarkable passage, Fichte hence states:

> We have seen all actual knowledge as being necessary, except for the form of 'is', on the assumption that there is one phenomenon *that must doubtless remain as an absolute assumption for thought and concerning which doubt can only be resolved by an actual intuition* [...] [W]e can perceive the definite and qualitative law in the content of one part of this fact, namely the ego-principle [...] for the *actual* content of this intuition of self we can merely perceive the fact that one must exist but cannot legislate for the existence of *this one* in particular. At the same time we note clearly that there can be no such law and that therefore, *the qualitative law required for this*

3 See footnote 19, where Lukács writes: "[r]eaders unfamiliar with the terminology of classical philosophy are reminded that Fichte's concept of the ego has nothing to do with the empirical ego" (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 212 n.19).

> *definition is precisely the absence of law itself* [...] (Fichte cited in Lukács 1971 [1923]: 122).

Readers of *DR* will recognise that, in this passage,[4] Fichte gives voice to a distinct constellation of philosophical positions which Lukács will come to call "irrationalism" in later writings. There is the appeal to an "actual intuition" which would transcend the boundaries of ordinary experience, and which, as Lukács notes in "Antinomies", will soon enough become linked in Fichte to a philosophical freighting of aesthetic experience, as the vehicle to "transform transcendental experience into a common one" (Fichte cited in Lukács 1971 [1923]: 138). There is the denomination of an inexplicable ground for "all facticity" which this "actual intuition" would access, residing in the "ego-principle". There is also the way that, in a philosophical slight-of-hand, the irresolvable problem of groundlessness *itself* – the "absence of law itself", in the above quote – becomes its own solution or grounding principle. With Fichte's positing of such an irrational ground for possible experience, unavailable to forms of scientific or dialectical cognition, we encounter an avatar of the kinds of foundational principles (creativity, will, will to power, life, the *elan vital*) which will soon be elevated by later irrationalist thinkers.

4 We stress that this criticism of Fichte in no way prevents Lukács from also being able to see in Fichte's turn towards practical reason a step forward, in line with his general dialectical procedure of reading (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 123).

Part 2: Schelling and the Genesis of Irrationalism from out of the Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought

The critical narrative that would wholly divide Lukács's critique of "irrationalism" in *DR* from his critique of the antinomies of bourgeois thought in *HCC* therefore pushes against significant overlaps in his readings of the classical bourgeois thinkers in these texts. It is not simply the decisive presence of Kant and Fichte in both texts which is at issue, nor even that the genesis of *DR* can be traced in pieces written over the intervening decades (Lukács 1934; 1936; 1934–48; 1942a; 1942b; 1951a; 1951b). It is also his manner of critiquing the philosophers whose work he assesses, tracking the path from the problem of irrationality that bedevils Kantian critical philosophy, to the embrace of irrationalism. Lukács maintains the materialist stance of reading the antinomies and agonies of 19th century German philosophy, whilst holding to the notion that "internally [...] philosophers are always tied – consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or involuntarily – with their society, a specific class in it, and the forward- or backward-oriented endeavours of the class" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 102). No matter how great a thinker or thinkers might be, he contends, the problems they pose, and the manners in which solutions are sought or "alternatively [are] evaded and fled from, [vary] qualitatively in accordance with the historical situation and the historical evolution of the class struggles" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 103).

Intellectually, *DR* makes clear that irrationalism is a response to just those philosophical problems which Kant confronted so honestly: "the limits of the determinants of under-

standing", giving rise to irresolvable contradictions or antinomies (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 97). In response to "the very questions resulting from the limitations and contradictions of thinking governed simply by understanding" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 97), Hegel would set out an expanded conception of dialectical reason. By contrast:

> Irrationalism [...] stops at precisely this point, absolutizes the problem, hardens the limitations of perception governed by understanding into perceptional limitations as a whole, and indeed mysticises into a 'supra-rational' answer the problem thus rendered artificially insoluble. The equating of understanding and perception of the limits of understanding with perceptional limitations as a whole, the introduction of 'supra-rationality' (intuition, etc.) when it is possible and necessary to proceed to a rational perception – these are the most universal hallmarks of philosophical irrationalism (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 97–98).

With this philosophical move, as Lukács specifies, irrationalism is born out of a "hypostasization" of the inability of specific forms of philosophical cognition and concepts to comprehend reality. Irrationalism transforms this inability into a claimed "inability of thought, conceptions and rational perception *in general* to master the essence of reality intellectually" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 100, italics ours). If we ask why the same problem complex, the problem of irrationality which Kantian philosophy posed, should lead in Hegel to attempts to resolve it by the development of philosophical dialectic and the historicization of reason, whereas on the other hand, in Fichte, then Schelling, Schopenhauer and others, it would lead into postula-

tions upholding "that the reality confronting thought represents an area beyond reason" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 99), for Lukács, the answer to this question transcends "intellectual and philosophical considerations" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 100). He proposes that what is at issue is "the class situation and class allegiance" of the philosophers, as well as their responses to the developments of the sciences of their times (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 100).

As for Lukács's account of that situation in Germany in the decades following the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars (cf. Lukács 1942a; 1942b), it should not surprise us that it accords closely with his account of the antinomies of bourgeois society we have seen are identified in *HCC*. On the one hand, there was the contradiction between the societal development of technoscientific rationality and the alienation of individuals within that society, as well as periodic economic crises beginning in the first decades of the 19th century (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 110). On the other, the French revolution's pronouncing of liberty and equality as ideals in whose name the bourgeois classes challenged the hegemony of the traditional feudal powers (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 129) collided with the emergence of forms of organised labour which would appeal to these bourgeois ideals to challenge the relations of production enshrined by the bourgeoisie, on the Left (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 129–130). Then there was the imperative ideological need of feudal-absolutist forces to reconstruct the order that had been broken up by the French revolution (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 129).

As we saw in Part 1, the contradictions of the new bourgeois society, and their reflection in the antinomies of Kantian

philosophy, created the demand for the post-Kantian German idealists to go beyond the limits of bourgeois rationalism. Hegelian philosophy attempted to understand the new order in a historical and dialectical manner, positioning the French revolution in light of a larger rationality informing historical change. At the same time, the philosophy of the age not only reflected the social crises but also contemporary crises within natural-scientific thinking. Advances in the sciences saw the discovery of new phenomena, particularly in biology and chemistry, which in turn further called into question the Newtonian mechanical-metaphysical model for understanding nature. The "static-geometric method" which characterised "the great seventeenth-century systems", Lukács contends, came increasingly under challenge from forms of natural-historical approaches, in which the new findings were subsumed within models which interpreted "the prehuman and sociohuman world as a uniform historical process" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 132).

In these intellectual and sociohistorical conditions, forms of idealist historical dialectic, including in the young Schelling, became the philosophical bearers of the progressive forces within German society. These forces were engaged in an "effort to master intellectually the basic problems of scientific progress after the French revolution in the age of upheaval in the natural sciences" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 132). Their claims however never went uncontested – not least in Germany, wherein relatively backward social conditions, and the combined absence of a bourgeois revolution and national unification, had left the forces of feudal reaction hegemonic, including in the state bureaucra-

cies. Hegelian idealism was answered at first in Germany by what Lukács calls "romantic pseudo-historicism". This looked back to Edmund Burke's critique of the revolutionaries, and the "historical law school" which attempted to delegitimise the French revolution in light of a "general irrationalizing of history" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 130–131). However, such was the progressive force of "the idealist, historically oriented dialectic" surrounding Hegelian thought that, soon enough, the reactionary forces became disappointed with these means to counter it. At this point, "the need arose to go beyond Burke philosophically and to 'deepen' his theories in an irrationalist fashion" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 133). In this way, within Germany, the "philosophical rationale of modern irrationalism sprang up on the basis of the struggle for the new dialectic, in the counter struggle" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 133).

It is within this context that the young Schelling developed his dialectical method. Schelling's primary interest, in his earlier work, was natural philosophy: "Schelling's 'genuine youthful idea' was centred upon the discovery and philosophical formulation of the dialectic to the process of natural development" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 138). As a follower of Fichte, he aimed "to build a philosophy of nature into Fichte's theory of knowledge" (Lukács 1975 [1948]: 216). The possibility of such an amalgamation was futile, however. For, as Lukács explains in *The Young Hegel* (henceforth *YH*), and as we saw in Part 1, Fichte's solution to the Kantian problem of the thing-in-itself, and the limits of understanding, is through hypostasising the

transcendental subject to the position of a supra-rational, world-founding transcendental subject-object:

> He regards the universe as something 'posited' by the Ego (a concept which for him is not identical with the empirical consciousness of particular human beings) and consequently it is something that can be known perfectly by this imagined, mystificatory subject. According to Fichte, the Ego created the universe and for that reason can have knowledge of it, since – according to Fichte – apart from the universe as 'posited' by the Ego, nothing either can or does exist at all (Lukács 1975 [1948]: 233; cf. Lukács 2021 [1954]: 135).

Fichte's bid to resolve the Kantian antinomies by taking subjective idealism to an extreme (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 135) is incompatible with the centrality of the objective in the nature philosophy of Schelling. Lukács nevertheless argues that Schelling's objective idealism never fully overcame the insoluble problems that beset Fichte's subjectivism. These are the problems of the alleged intuitive access to the thing-in-itself, and on the other hand, the impossibility of establishing any objective, ego-independent reality. Schelling's supreme principle – what Lukács describes as "a materialist-atheist version of [the] Spinozist substance rendered active, mobile, and evolutionary" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 137) – oscillated between "an approximation to philosophical materialism (independence of consciousness) and an idealist-pantheistic conception of God" concretised in nature and history (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 136). This ground was "at the same time meant to exist objectively, i.e. independently of human consciousness, and yet to have something of con-

sciousness about it" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 136).[5] In this philosophy, indeed, and in the person of the philosopher or artist themselves (see below), "the unconscious productivity of nature" would nevertheless "come to consciousness and self-consciousness" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 142).

In the young Schelling, this oscillation between "progressive and reactionary tendencies in objective idealism" is particularly strong, but the upper hand is gradually given to the irrationalist dimension (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 137). This is evident when examining Schelling's answer to the question of "*how*, with the aid of *what* organ, can this knowledge of the universe be obtained" (Lukács 1975 [1948]: 245)? Whilst Kant's formulation of the *intellectus archetypus* was merely speculative (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 139), for Schelling, a supposed direct "intellectual intuition" of things becomes the centre of his epistemology. It is the "'organon' of philosophical knowledge" which transcends the categories of understanding. It grants the philosopher a form of knowledge which, due to its "intrinsic nature", would secure a "qualitatively superior, dialectical stance to reality" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 138–145; cf. Lukács 1975 [1948]: 246–247). For Hegel, "the bridge from understanding [*Verstand*] to reason [*Vernunft*] is a supersession [*Aufhebung*]" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 144). Therefore, he rejects the static, Kantian antithesis of the discursive and intuitive. By contrast, Schelling accepts this antithesis uncritically. There can be no "dialectical bridges" or "mediating

5 Cf. Johnson (forthcoming: 16): "Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, from its 1797 inception onwards, repeatedly engages in a panpsychist spiritualization of the natural world; it treats a singular, unified Nature-with-a-capital-N as ultimately and fundamentally a gargantuan cosmic mega-organism endowed with its own God-like subjectivity".

links" between understanding and what intellectual intuition would access. The young Schelling instead utilises dialectical logic to expose the immediate contradictions of the categories of understanding. This then would "prepare the ground for intellectual intuition and the leap into authentic, intuitive philosophy" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 146); a leap which once undertaken negates all the previous categories of understanding:[6]

> This knowledge must be an absolutely free knowledge precisely because all other knowledge is *not free*. It must therefore be a knowledge not attained through proofs, conclusions or the mediation of any concepts at all, and thus altogether an intuition (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 144–145; cf. Schelling 1978 [1800]: 27).

Significantly, this also means for Schelling that the intellectual intuition at the ground of his objective idealism is "not something which can be taught" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 144; cf. Schelling 1859: 361), nor should it "be obliged to pay special heed to those incapable of it. It is more proper to cut off access to it sharply and to isolate it from ordinary knowledge on all sides such that there is no road or footpath from one to the other" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 144; cf. Schelling 1859: 362). In this way, we find in the young Schelling the first developments of a key feature of subsequent philosophical irrationalism. This is an "aristocratic epistemology" that limits the organon from which knowledge is obtained to a few

6 Therefore, intellectual intuition is something which stands above and beyond any doubt: "it is that which can be presupposed straightaway and entirely unsummoned, and in this respect it cannot even be called a postulate of philosophy" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 144; cf. Schelling 1859: 361).

select "geniuses" of higher insight.[7] The philosophers of the Enlightenment, seeing themselves as the champions of a pending democratic upheaval, also saw it as "self-evident that knowledge of truth was accessible, in principle, to everybody who obtained the factual prerequisites" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 147). Hegel's rational dialectics argues for the accessibility of truth for all: "as the *science of reason*, philosophy is of its very nature, by virtue of its general mode of existence, available *for all*" (Hegel cited in Lukács 1975 [1948]: 431). By contrast, Lukács notes, Schelling's is an epistemology "designed to create an unbridgeable gulf between the 'chosen' and the mob" (Lukács 1975 [1948]: 430). Despite the secular and objective overtones, it is underscored by a metapolitical elitism in which "perception of the Deity is only possible for those whom God has chosen" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 148).

If we ask therefore "but how can this intellectual intuition, consigned eternally to a chosen few, be demonstrated?", the demonstration, Schelling argues, is found in the aesthetic realm. Again, he pioneers here a feature of philosophical irrationalism,

7 As Lukács argues in 1933 Schelling's aristocratic epistemology has a social character which is subsequently apparent in Neo-romantic ideology and Fascism: "This aristocratic epistemology is an old heirloom of Romanticism (Schelling's intellectual intuition) […]. As much as this ever more openly emerging aristocratism of epistemology was draped in a 'timeless, supra-social and supra-historical' veil, its social character is clearly evident here. On the one hand in the skeptical-agnosticistic attitude towards the objective results of the natural sciences, which expresses the tendency of the parasitic bourgeoisie of imperialism, which, for reasons of the development of capitalist production, needs the further promotion of the individual results of natural science, but tries to ideologically barricade itself against drawing ideological consequences from the study of natural laws. On the other hand it is perhaps even clearer that the category 'life' is increasingly and more explicitly limited to the 'chosen ones', the geniuses (to the upper class of rentiers of monopoly capitalism)" (Lukács 1933b).

whose devolution into forms of fascist ideology Lukács is concerned to chart in *DR*. Just as Schopenhauer would claim that art can access the noumenal Will underlying ordinary experience, Schelling already positioned artistic genius as "the 'organon' of world perception" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 151). For as intellectual intuition "cannot be interpreted or communicated through description, nor through concepts" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 152; cf. Schelling 1978 [1800]: 229), Schelling posits that it can only become objective through a "second intuition", that is, what he terms "aesthetic intuition". The "objectivity of intellectual intuition is art itself" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 152; cf. Schelling 1978 [1800]: 229), he claims. And this, along with "the creative genius's procedure, becomes the very 'organon' of philosophy" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 151), which can reveal "the objective reality of the world of things-in-themselves" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 152):

> If aesthetic intuition is only intellectual intuition become objective, then it is self-evident that art is the sole organon, both true and permanent, and document of philosophy, constantly verifying afresh what philosophy cannot represent externally, namely the unconscious in action and creativity and its original identity with the conscious. Art, for the philosopher, is supreme precisely because it opens up to him the innermost sanctuary, so to speak, where it is as if a single flame consumes in permanent and original union that which is divided in nature and history and that which must eternally flee from itself in life and in action, just as in thinking. The view which a philosopher forms of nature artificially is the pristine and natural one for the artist (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 152–153; cf. Schelling 1978 [1800]: 231–232).

While the initial manifestations of irrationalism first emerge in the young Schelling, in the late Schelling these undergo a shift which sees even the relative progressive tendencies of his earlier period extinguished and irrationalism fully embraced. This shift coincides with Schelling's move from Jena to Würzburg in 1803, which saw his definitive break with the influence of Hegel and Goethe (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 155). The philosophical impact of Schelling's throughgoing embrace of reactionary positions is reflected in the 1804 text *Philosophy and Religion*, in which the organon of philosophy has now shifted from art to religion. For Lukács the salient component of this is that the late Schelling, contra the young Schelling, "no longer viewed the absolute, the object of intellectual intuition, as the cosmos of the things-in-themselves" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 159). Rather the absolute is something singular which may only be encountered directly. For the late Schelling, the world cannot be described or explained rationally at all: "[f]or only a combination can be perceived through description, while the singular needs to be intuited" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 159; cf. Schelling 2010 [1804]: 15).[8] The knowledge which had its foundation in natural philosophy in the younger Schelling has become the "purely mystical knowledge of God" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 159). The world itself becomes increasingly opaque to rational explanation:

8 Moreover, the previous coherence of the universal and particular, that is, the very problem which intellectual intuition sought to solve, is now questioned: "That the whole absolute world with all its gradations of beings is reduced to the absolute oneness of God, so that nothing in that world is truly particular […]" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 159; cf. Schelling 2010 [1804]: 24).

> In short, there is no permanent bridge from the absolute to the real, and the origin of the sensory world can only be conceived as a complete breakaway from absoluteness, through a leap (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 159; cf. Schelling 2010 [1804]: 26).

For Lukács, this mystical rejection of evolution not only marks a distinctive break from his earlier natural philosophy. As we have stressed, throughout Lukács's corpus, whether it be "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought", *YH* or *DR*, he maintains that philosophy, including in its contradictions and recourse to irrational grounds, is an intellectual expression of the "objective dialectic of reality" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 247), including its contradictions and irrationalities.[9] Here it is no different, for the later Schelling's idea of the world as a fall from God is confirmed through an appeal to the myth of a golden age, as opposed to "a culture that had sunk from an earlier height and disfigured remnants of earlier science, symbols whose meaning seems to have

9 Cf. the following passages: "The task facing the historian of classical German philosophy can be defined as the need to provide a concrete account of the fruitful effects of this 'active side' for dialectics. He must show how the reflection of great, world-historical events in a backward Germany produces this idealist abstraction from real human activity and at the same time he must demonstrate that this abstract and partly distorted reflection of reality leads philosophers to their original insights into specific general principles of activity, movement, etc. The task of the historian would be all too simple if he could rest content with a demonstration of the negative consequences of Germany's backwardness. The world-historical role of classical German philosophy in the history of human thought is a fact that must itself be explained in Marxist terms from the concrete state of society at the time. Thus Marx and Engels have provided us with a key to the critique of classical German philosophy" (Lukács 1975 [1958]: xxv); "[…] every philosophy's content and method are determined by the class struggles of its age. Although philosophers – like scholars, artists and other ideologists – may more or less fail to recognize it and sometimes remain totally unaware of it, this conditioning of their attitude to so-called 'ultimate questions' takes effect notwithstanding" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 313).

been long forgotten" (Schelling cited in Lukács 2021 [1954]: 160; cf. Schelling 2010 [1804]: 45). The progress induced by the French revolution, its (partial) liquidation of the feudal regimes, and the ensuing problems, such as the antinomies of bourgeois thought, are not approached by the late Schelling in a concrete and forward-orientated dialectical manner *à la* Hegel. Schelling, instead, prefers the path backwards to a restoration of the supposed golden age, once more pioneering a key feature of subsequent irrationalism: the hostility to the idea of progress and the production of competing forms of elegiac, mythical philosophies of history.

As Lukács therefore shows in *DR*, Schelling's successive engagements over the course of three decades with the epistemological problems of the age, aiming to leap out of the antinomies of bourgeois thought, one by one embraced the foundational tendencies of irrationalism: aristocratic epistemology (the hypostasization of intuition), the positing of a suprarational *Grund* to reality, the fetishization of the aesthetic, the turn towards the religious, and the rejection of dialectics and any sense of human progress. As in *HCC*, and indeed in *YH*, he also however stresses that "the inner development of Schelling's philosophy itself matters far less than the change in the objective social situation in Germany and the change of fronts it evoked in the philosophical conflicts" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 161). Whether Schelling himself was fully aware of this political role, when he was summoned to Berlin in the 1840s, does not decisively matter. His religiously-inflected irrationalism had been embraced by Prussian reactionary circles around Friedrich Wilhelm IV as the most

up-to-date means to challenge the forms of Left Hegelianism which had furnished "an ideological basis for the ultra-Leftist bourgeois democrats' struggle on the eve of democratic revolution" (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 165, cf. 168).

As the contradictions of German society became more acute, following unification, rapid industrialisation, the bid for imperial power, defeat and national humiliation in World War 1, Lukács shows how the philosophical irrationalism Schelling was the first to chart would be radicalized. This constellation of ideas would directly inform "the National Socialist outlook" developed by its leading ideologues (Lukács 2021 [1954]: 8; cf. 1942b; 1948, 1951a). More widely, it would create the conditions for Nazism's favorable popular reception as a salvific response to the crises.

Part 3: The Grand Hotel Abyss and the Left in a New Period of Irrationalism

There are clear continuities in Lukács's corpus, then, alongside the breaks that his self-criticisms identify. The continuities reside both in his continuous critical analysis of philosophers' posing and seeking to respond to the antinomies of bourgeois society, and in his conception of philosophy itself as an intellectual expression of the socio-political crises and class struggles of the period. *HCC* shows how in Kant, and in Fichte, the antinomies of bourgeois society are reflected in philosophical thought. It is above all through examining Schelling in *DR* that Lukács shows how this unresolved philosophical "problem

of irrationality" which *HCC* identifies (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 121) develops into the forms of philosophical irrationalism. Schelling's philosophical evolution, away from Hegelian dialectics, pioneers a trend which Lukács argues then becomes dominant in bourgeois philosophy more widely, outside of the Marxist orbit (Lukács 2021; 1934; 1936; 1934–48; 1942a; 1942b; 1943; 1948; 1951a).

Whilst our acknowledgement of the continuity between *HCC* and *DR* is rare in the secondary literature, we note that it is not unheard-of. In *Lukács: Praxis and The Absolute*, for example, Daniel Lopez contends that the concept of irrationalism is a "subterranean theme in *History and Class Consciousness*" (Lopez 2019: 514) in the ways which we have examined, and which are also arguably evident in *YH*.[10] However, Lopez maintains that in *DR*, this concept "is exaggerated to a parodic, intellectually tragic extent" (Lopez 2019: 514). For Lopez, Lukács is incorrect to claim that irrationalism is the dominant trend in post-Hegelian bourgeois philosophy. Instead, Lopez argues that philosophy maintains the ability to reflect on the antinomies of bourgeois life and thought, in ways which would furnish "the social grounds for both theory and philosophy" (Lopez 2019: 400).

10 The presence of this theme in *History and Class Consciousness* is also recognised by Andrew Feenberg, however, he does not explicitly acknowledge a connection with *The Destruction of Reason*. "Lukács himself rejects irrationalism as an immediate reflex of reification", Feenberg claims. "The value of formal knowledge in the face of 'living life' may be questioned (see irrationalist philosophies from Hamann to Bergson)", but, Lukács writes, reification is not thereby transcended: "Whether this gives rise to ecstasy, resignation or despair, whether we search for a path leading to 'life' via irrational mystical experience, this will do absolutely nothing to modify the situation as it is in fact" (Feenberg 2014: 131).

Whilst passing the same negative judgement on *DR* as Lopez, Enzo Traverso in his 2021 Preface to the new edition of the text proposes a radical break between *HCC* and this later writing. *DR* for Traverso is a dated ideological relic. Its admitted "greatness" is obtained solely through "historicizing" the text as a document attesting to mid-century Stalinism, in its triumphal moment after the defeat of the Nazis between 1942–45. Traverso disputes whether we can seriously uphold Lukács's analyses of German Idealism, particularly Schelling. He also disputes the role played by irrationalism in creating the cultural preconditions for the rise of fascist ideology. Indeed, for Traverso, in alleged contrast to the Lukács of *HCC*, the Lukács of *DR* would "reduce dialectic to teleology and intellectual history to a form of deterministic causality" (Traverso 2021, xxxvi). It is this supposed regression from a more sophisticated philosophy of history contained in *HCC* to a deterministic type in *DR* which is the crux of Lukács's "Stalinism" in Traverso's eyes.

There seem to us to be real issues of intellectual politics which underlie the continuing attempts to sideline Lukács's *DR*, including by quarantining it wholly from *HCC*, despite the clear continuities we have established here between the two texts' analyses. These issues are flagged when Traverso avows that reading *DR*, for him, is an exercise in grasping "the logic of an enemy within the Left", a remarkably frank declaration (Traverso 2021: xi).[11] Traverso again seems to us to be

11 The striking fact remains that *The Destruction of Reason* is the only dedicated book by a leading 20th century philosopher of note addressing the vital issues surrounding how a nation renowned for its poets and thinkers like Germany could become responsible for organized genocidal barbarism, rationalized by appeal to racial pseudo-science

acknowledging the polemical subtext surrounding the continuing widespread dismissal of *DR*, when he notes that:

> In recent decades, the critique of Enlightenment [which is central to irrationalism as analysed by *The Destruction of Reason*, MK & MS] shifted from the right to the left, to the point of becoming a kind of umbrella under which many left-wing 'posts' and '-isms' found a shared home. Anti-universalism, anti-humanism, anti-historicism, subjectivism, cultural relativism and racialism became the banners of a variety of philosophical currents, from poststructuralism to postmodernism, passing through postcolonial studies and feminism (Traverso 2021: li).

From this perspective, Lukács's position in *DR* is extremely troubling: that thinkers from Nietzsche to Heidegger – who have been presented as doyens of the non-Marxian New Left – developed a lineage of irrationalist thought which formed the bases of interwar fascist ideology.[12] We want to close, therefore, by proposing a different, post-Lukácsian response to the reception history of Lukács's works. This would be to propose that, if in *DR* Lukács describes the way that philosophical irrationalism formed a cultural precondition (note: not a simple "cause") for the formation of fascism, then, the 1933

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and a plague of irrationalist millenarian fantasies.

12 In a recent article on present day irrationalism, John Bellamy Foster also notes the remarkable lack of a close analysis of uncritical dismissal by critics of *The Destruction of Reason*, and the underlining political motives: "[…] *The Destruction of Reason* was not subject to a systematic critique by those who opposed it, which would have meant confronting the crucial issues it raised. Instead, it was dismissed vituperatively out of hand by the Western left as constituting a 'deliberate perversion of the truth', a '700-page diatribe', and a 'Stalinist tract'. As one commentator has recently noted, 'its reception could be summarized by a few death sentences' issued against it by leading Western Marxists" (Bellamy Foster 2023).

piece "Grand Hotel Abyss" (written at the same time as *How did fascist philosophy come about in Germany?*) is his critical analysis of non-Marxian, broadly left-liberal thinkers' embrace of the same irrationalist premises as the fascists. As a result of accepting this rightwing epistemology, their criticisms of capitalist societies are effectively corralled into forms of abyssal despair which had rendered them powerless in the face of the rise of fascism around Europe, and Nazism in Germany.

The denizens of "The Grand Hotel Abyss" are intellectuals who cannot directly ideologically sanction capitalism by writing hymns to the free market and entrepreneurship. They are too aware of, and dismissive of, the capitalist massification of culture (cf. Lukács 1969). At the same time, as Marx had charged against the young Hegelians, they hold to the intellectualist position that ideas alone, their own stock in trade, shape sociopolitical reality (Lukács 2017 [1933]: 6–7; 1969: 127–130). This means that they tend to be unable to grasp the political-economic conditions of capitalist crises. Instead, they compete in proposing more "profound" analyses of these conditions, pointing to forms of more or less hopeless cultural or spiritual crisis: the crises of nihilism, the loss of religion, the loss of meaning, the decline of the West. What results is a kind of false radicalism which serves to steer intellectual discontent away from anything like pro-socialist concerns:

> While the little satirist, who is terrified of losing his shop, is frightened that women will be socialized in socialism, the feral petty bourgeois must be thought to be led 'beyond socialism'. He must be shown how inconsistent, how dogmatic, how skewered the

> socialism of the workers' movement is, that for the 'free spirits' [i.e. Nietzsche's term] something much more radical must be sought and found if problems are to be solved 'in truth' [...] (Lukács 2017 [1933]: 19).

What is striking, firstly, about this piece today is how the features of this abyssal non-Marxian intellectual radicalism that Lukács identifies are uncannily prescient of those which Traverso identifies in the preceding quote: *viz.* those of the famous "posts" (post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-Marxism) of the last half century. There is amorphous utopianism with no concrete sociopolitical or economic corollaries, "because it revolutionizes not only (or not at all) the 'surface' phenomena of economic life, but also man himself, soul, spirit, worldview" (Lukács 2017 [1933]: 19). There is "subjectivist sophistication and radical relativism" (2017 [1933]: 20), opening onto what we today call "post-secular" reconsiderations of revealed religions as equally valid world-narratives with even the sciences. And there is the "general disbelief in progress" (Lukács 2017 [1933]: 22) which contributes to an overwhelming affect of contemplative despair. What is striking, secondly, about this constellation of "abyssal", irrationalist opinions of the Grand Hotel intellectuals, is how they reproduce the very responses to the antinomies of bourgeois society identified in *HCC*, which Lukács in *DR* contends formed the ideological preconditions for the forms of barbarous, active nihilism of European fascism.

There is one thing that the abyssal cultural-spiritual radicalism of the non-socialist intellectuals cannot abide, Lukács

claims. This is any crossing of the "invisible border" (Lukács 2017 [1933]: 13) between ideas and signifiers – cultural critique, however so "radical" – and considerations of the material, socioeconomic conditions in which culture is generated and disputed, of the kind we have seen Lukács himself employing in his critique of irrationalism (cf. Lukács 1969: 127–128; 129–130). Such "vulgar materialism" or "economism" – as critics tend to style it – challenges the idealistic autonomy of thought which intellectuals vocationally cherish. It also contests the supra-political status of the intellectuals themselves, as somehow above "all of that". Lukács's dialectical accounts, not simply of the problem of irrationality which has be-devilled modern philosophy since Kant, but the irrationalisms of the Far Right and elements of the bourgeois intelligentsia in *DR* and "Grand Hotel Abyss" decisively cross the invisible border into a consideration of the material and political determinants and functions of high philosophy or "radical theory".[13] This would provide a more critical, Lukácsian explanation of why *DR* in particular might have faced such continuing hostility, despite the wealth of materials it analyses, and the importance of its subject matter. Yet, Lukács's crossing of this "invisible border" is

13 Adorno's relationship to Lukács is complex, and beyond the scope of this article. Lukács in 1933, when he penned "Grand Hotel Abyss" (which remained unpublished at that time), does not mention Adorno, showing that this critique was developed before, and independently, of his encounter with Adorno's work. Famously, he aligns Adorno with the "grand hotel" in the 1962 "Preface" to *The Theory of the Novel*, although the accuracy of this charge would require independent treatment. We note that Adorno's dismissal of *DR* as "the destruction of Lukács's reason" is widely known. However, it is less noted that this claim is comparatively undeveloped, in the context of an essay which is more largely devoted to aesthetic considerations. Adorno's brief dismissal of the text, spanning only a few lines, unfortunately leaves Lukács's dense analyses of Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Chamberlain, etc., unexamined.

also why his position is arguably so important to reconsider today as irrationalism again multiplies on the political Right.

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