

PRESENTATION OF THE DOSSIER

The centennial of *History and Class Consciousness*: Lukács and critical theory today

The year 2023 marked the centennial of the publication of *History and Class Consciousness (HCC)*, by Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács. Considered a founding milestone of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty termed “Western Marxism”, the book has left deep marks in the history of critical currents in philosophy and the social sciences after successive waves of reception around the world. In this sense, if the category “Western” was already a relative one with regard to the author’s native Hungary, the impact of *HCC* beyond Europe – and notably in Latin America – suggests a work of truly global relevance.

HCC has had a turbulent trajectory: denounced in the wake of its publication as a “regression to idealism” by intellectuals of different currents within the Communist International – a criticism that Lukács contested in a text published only posthumously –, it was eventually disavowed by the author himself. Although the book was not reprinted until 1967, pirated copies of the 1923 German original as well as an unauthorized French translation had already been in circulation (especially

within the student movement). The belated official reprint was supplemented by a preface in which Lukács sharply criticized his early work. Even so, and despite the more than four decades – and enormous historical transformations – that separated its first and second editions, *HCC* continued to impact readers with its defense of “orthodox Marxism” and its contributions to the theory of reification, class consciousness, and workers’ organization. The new cycle of reception that began in the 1960s remains open.

In this early work, which bears the marks of a recent transition to Marxism, Lukács combines in an unprecedented way elements of the critique of modern instrumental rationality from emerging German sociology, e.g. the thought of Max Weber and Georg Simmel, with a Marxian theoretical-philosophical framework with strong Hegelian overtones. The originality of his critique of capitalism soon found resonance, for instance, amongst the authors gathered around the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, whose work – both indebted to and critical of Lukács – became known as “critical theory”. At the same time, the book found readers in circles of communists and young intellectuals of the Weimar Republic, in which it exerted, according to a witness of the time, “a profound impact” despite being “horribly complicated” (Hans Mayer, 1970).

In his 1967 critical preface, Lukács states that the intention of republishing his essay collection was “precisely to emphasize their experimental character”. His early essays may “have a certain documental importance”, he conceded, but only “if one adopts a sufficiently critical attitude”. Lukács saw the work fun-

damentally as a product of the 1920s and the revolutionary hopes that propelled the socialist left at that time. Beyond the possible limits of the later Lukács's assessment of his own work, the repeated (and enthusiastic) rediscoveries and (re)readings of *HCC* during a century of reception in the most varied contexts suggest a persistent actuality.

Along these lines, surveying the current usages and debates on *HCC* from a global perspective was the main goal of our call for original contributions. An initial selection and feedback round based on submitted abstracts led to the arrival of manuscripts from across the world. Notably, contributions clustered around only a few of the topics suggested in the call for papers: the majority of submissions approached *HCC*'s conceptual and categorical apparatus and the contemporary relevance of concepts such as "orthodox Marxism", "class consciousness" and "reification" (see the contributions of Fernando Quintana and Leonardo Bruno Lopresti below). In turn, *HCC*'s role as a foundational work of "Western Marxism" or "critical theory" and the question of its theoretical limits and outdated aspects received less attention. In other words, the *actuality* and *soundness* of Lukács's 1923 work drew the most interest.

Conversely, the call for contributions that addressed phenomena of contemporary capitalism, feminist and intersectional perspectives and environmental or eco-socialist debates through the prism of *HCC* did not generate a significant response. Nevertheless, in a welcome development, contributors favored setting Lukács's *HCC* in dialogue with thinkers and traditions less often associated with his work. That is the case of Luis Alvarenga,

whose paper proposes an original dialogue between Lukács, liberation theology and decolonial thought; Till Hahn, in turn, engages with Lukács to refute Giorgio Agamben's critique that the Marxist tradition "lacked a proper theory of time".

Moreover, while the Lukács scholarship has often set his work from the 1920s apart from his later Marxist production, the second largest cohort of papers we received focused on the *continuities* between *HCC* and his later writings. Matthew King and Matthew Sharpe focused on the *Destruction of Reason* (1954), Spyros Potamias on *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* (1963) and Leonardo Bruno Lopresti on the posthumously published *Ontology of Social Being*. Finally, if the philosophical actuality of *HCC* was one of the main threads linking the dossier's original articles, Costas Gousis and Alexandros Minotakis forcefully argue in their contribution that this also applies to the political dimensions of the 1923 work; its "roadmap for social change", the authors claim, is still valid today.

Besides the peer-reviewed original articles, this dossier also includes a book review, a *HCC Reader, Testimonials* by scholars from around the world on the impact of the book and the translation into Portuguese of the text "Georg Lukács und die Kritische Theorie", by Furio Cerutti, including a postscript written by the author for this publication.

Original articles and a book review

As discussed above, in terms of their topics, the original articles of this dossier fall broadly into two groups: 1) reconstructions of the central categories of *History and Class Consciousness* aimed at restoring its actuality for contemporary critical theory and socialist politics; 2) efforts at relating central aspects of *HCC* to Lukács's later writings. Before briefly presenting the articles, we would like to express our deep gratitude to the many reviewers who have agreed to anonymously evaluate the manuscripts and, in our view, greatly contributed to the improvement of the contributions.

The first group opens with “Ética y conciencia de clase: György Lukács y la posibilidad de la ‘dialéctica revolucionaria’ en *Historia y Conciencia de Clase*” (*Ethics and class consciousness: György Lukács and the possibility of “revolutionary dialectics” in History and Class Consciousness*) by **Fernando Quintana** (Queen Mary University of London). The author sets off from the assertion that the contemporary reception of *History and Class Consciousness* tends to separate the revolutionary politics advanced by the work – deemed “obsolete” – from its – “still valid” – critique of reification. Quintana then proposes a return to the dialectical method understood as the “unity between critical social theory and revolutionary political program”, hence, to the original “blueprint” of *HCC*. He structures this effort on a reconstruction of a few of the work's central categories, such as reification and class consciousness, before concluding with a consideration of Lukács's ethical anchoring of the standpoint of the proletariat. Instead of the supposed “metaphysical faculty to

master all of human history with a single glance”, Quintana stresses Lukács’s articulation of the proletarian class standpoint as “the conscious decision to judge each particular aspect of social life according to its objective connections with the whole”. Understood in this manner, this vantage point conserves its validity as the basis for a possible socialist ethics for our times – beyond the reified and formalistic alternatives provided by contemporary moral philosophy.

In “Time’s carcass: Marx and Lukács on abstract time and the capitalist order of appearance”, **Till Hahn** (Leuphana University Lüneburg) reassesses the political stakes of Marx’s concept of time through an analytical effort stretching from Kant’s transcendental aesthetics to Lukács’s reification critique in *HCC*. Against Giorgio Agamben’s claim that Marx lacked a proper theory of time, Hahn argues that the “split between historical time [...] and the ‘dead’ time of capitalist production” is, in fact, central to Marxist thought. Along these lines, Hahn suggests that a linear conception of time is part and parcel of capitalism’s reified order of appearance – as well as a feature of the vulgar Marxism of Social Democrats denounced by Lukács in *HCC*. Hahn then offers a critical reassessment of Kant’s concept of time – illuminated by his analysis of a key passage of Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy*. He concludes the piece with a Lukács-inspired consideration of the relationship between “Kant’s theory of time and Marx’s conceptualisation of capital as an ‘automatic subject’”.

In “Cosificación y reduccionismo idealista en el pensamiento occidental: Un posible diálogo con Lukács y Ellacuría

desde el pensamiento decolonial” (*Reification and reductionism in Western thought: A possible dialogue with Lukács and Ellacuría from decolonial thought*), **Luis Alvarenga** (Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas”) raises the question of the possible convergences between three radical intellectual traditions: Marxism, liberation theology and contemporary decolonial thought. Looking for a bridge between Lukács’s critique of reification in *HCC* and Aníbal Quijano’s concept of coloniality of knowledge, he draws on the thought of Ignacio Ellacuría (1931–1989), a Spanish-Salvadoran philosopher and theologian who fell victim to right-wing violence in El Salvador due to his engagement for social justice. Through the contrast of Ellacuría’s concept of “idealist reductionism” – i.e., the tendency of Western thought to reduce the knowledge of reality to static categories – and Lukács’s analysis of reified thought, the author explores the latter’s decolonial implications. Alvarenga, thus, recovers and expands the anti-colonial strand in Lukács’s reception, one that arguably began with Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) and his statement that “colonization = thingification”.

“Reificación: Continuidades y rupturas del proyecto lukácsiano” (*Reification: Continuities and ruptures of the Lukácsian project*) by **Leonardo Bruno Lopresti** (Universidad de Buenos Aires) is the first of three article contributions to the special issue focusing the relationship between elements of *HCC* and Lukács’s later writings. In the case of Lopresti’s piece, the focus is on the continuities and shifts in the conceptualization of reification in the 1923 volume and in *Ontology of Social Being*, the main focus of Lukács’s production in his final years. After a con-

sideration of the scholarly debate on Lukács's treatment of reification in *HCC*, which Lopresti argues mostly ignores the role of that concept in Lukács's subsequent major works, the author proceeds to tackle this gap with regards to the *Ontology*. He starts with a reconstruction of the theory of reification in *HCC* – going against the grain of contemporary interpretations that ignore its ties to Lukács's analysis of the labor process under capitalism. Then, from his diagnosis of “the absence of a model of praxis in *HCC*”, Lopresti examines Lukács's own attempt to address this issue in the *Ontology* through the analytical centrality of the category of labor. Finally, he reconstructs how reification emerges in that work in articulation – though not identity – with the category of alienation.

In “Lukács's critique of irrationalism, from the antinomies of bourgeois thought to the destruction of reason”, **Matthew Sharpe** and **Matthew King** (both from the Australian Catholic University) challenge the claim of a complete break between *HCC* and Lukács's later works, particularly *The Destruction of Reason* (1954). The authors explore the continuity between these works, written three decades apart, with a focus on Lukács's approach to the “problem of irrationality”, first formulated in *HCC*. In the 1923 work, Lukács located the roots of the irrationalist tendencies of bourgeois thought in the response of German idealism to Kant's antinomies and especially to the question of the “thing-in-itself”, culminating in Schelling's “intellectual intuition”. As King and Sharpe stress, Schelling's recourse to intuition also features as a key building block of what Lukács termed philosophical irrationalism's “aristocratic

epistemology” in the *Destruction of Reason*. In that regard, the text “Grand Hotel Abyss”, written in 1933 but unpublished at the time, emerges as a bridge between the works of 1923 and 1954 to the extent that it denounces the irrationalist undertones not of proto-fascist philosophical frameworks, but rather of positions within the radical left itself – and therein would lie the contemporary pertinence of Lukács’s contributions to the renewal of Marxism.

The search for links between Lukács’s different Marxist phases is also central to **Spyros Potamias**’s (University of Cyprus) contribution, “*Du musst dein Leben ändern*’: The categorical continuity of Lukácsian thought from *History and Class Consciousness* to *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*”. In it, the author forcefully argues for the continuity in the complex of problems approached by Lukács in the two works in question, published in 1923 and 1963, respectively. Potamias supports his claim through a systematic examination of how the fundamental categories of totality, reification, mediation and imputed consciousness, among others, appear in both *HCC* and in the late *Aesthetic*. In each case, the author highlights the differences arising from the four decades of intellectual development that separate both works as well as from the application of those categories to the aesthetic field. The problems of the reification of consciousness and social reality – and of the forces and means necessary to overcome them – emerge as the fundamental threads linking *HCC* and the late *Aesthetic*.

In “The question of organization: Examining Lukács’s conceptual road map for social change”, **Costas Gousis** (Panteion

University of Social and Political Sciences) and **Alexandros Minotakis** (University College Dublin) explore the last – and often overlooked – essay of *HCC*. They argue that Lukács’s reflections on the revolutionary role of the communist party, alongside his notion of the “moment (of decision)”, or *Augenblick*, conceptualized in his unpublished defense of *HCC* (*Tailism and the Dialectic*), represent a situated response to the dilemmas of his time, but is not limited to that. They still offer us, the authors argue, valuable insights to address the theoretical and political challenges of the 21st century – illustrated in the piece by the Greek debt crisis and the events leading up to and following the victory of the “No” in the 2015 referendum regarding the bailout loans. The article emphasizes Lukács’s enduring search for an alternative to the current state of capitalist domination and urges us not to underestimate the role of theory in bringing it about.

The dossier also includes a review of Tyrus Miller’s *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory* (2022), by **Martin Platais** (University of Warwick). Titled “Lukács after Adorno”, the review begins by evoking the intense if fractious relationship between the two thinkers to set up Miller’s original revisiting of Lukács’s work beyond “Cold War lenses”. Platais illuminates Miller’s reappraisal of a range of themes that cut across Lukács’s work (utopianism, aesthetic theory, realism, socialist democracy), including his dialogue with the work of contemporaries such as Bloch and Adorno. He commends Miller’s refreshing effort to bring critical theory to bear on topics such as perversion and utopia in the work of Sade and Fourier, historical events like the

Moscow trials of the 1930s and a Lukács-centered radio play in post-communist Hungary. In light of Miller’s reconsideration of Lukács’s defense of realism, Platais concludes his review with a call for a “realism oriented towards the *untruth* of the present”.

“One thousand and one nights of the totality”: A *History and Class Consciousness* Reader

The collaborative work on this dossier was accompanied by another set of activities centered on *History and Class Consciousness* whose result – a “Reader” encompassing each essay of *HCC*, along with its two prefaces – we are also glad to present here. The Reader is meant not only to introduce each of *HCC*’s essays and to map out some of the most pressing questions and discussions that it has prompted, but also – and perhaps above all – to encourage the readers to engage further with the different aspects of this classic book.

This material is the result of *One thousand and one nights of the totality*, a *HCC* panel series – a “marathon”, as we came to affectionately call it – carried out during the *Historical Materialism* Athens Conference in April 2023 in collaboration with our colleagues **Konstantin Baehrens** (University of Potsdam), **Alexandros Minotakis** (University College Dublin), **Ankica Čakardić** (University of Zagreb), **Eden Young** (Groningen University), **Giovanni Zanotti** (University of Brasília), **Costas Gousis** (Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences), **Anita Zsurzsán** (activist and independent researcher based in

Budapest) and **Dimitra Aliferaki** (activist and independent researcher based in Berlin). The “marathon” took place once again in October 2023, this time as an online series.¹ The idea of a sequential reading of *HCC* in concentrated fashion set off from the assessment that, as is often the case with a “classic”, the 1923 work is typically read piecemeal – single chapters or even parts of them are privileged in most confrontations with the work. In the case of *HCC*, this is reinforced by its peculiar makeup; rather than a traditional monograph, it is a collection of essays – most published before, some written for it – with dates, but not in chronological order.

Against this trend, the “marathon” consisted of presentations on each chapter following the order of the book (due to its extension, the chapter on reification was divided into three; the 1922 and 1967 prefaces were handled separately). This manner of reading revealed how the book is as much grounded in the internal tensions between the essays as it is in the common threads that weave through and connect them.

The “marathon” brought together, moreover, ten contributors from or based in nine different countries and from across the humanities to approach *HCC* beyond the narrow biases of reception within single disciplines or language spaces. Indeed, this was a collective effort from the start: participants met online in preparation of the live events and incorporated insights from the analyses of other essays as well as from audience feedback.

1 All the presentations are available at the YouTube channel of the *Historical Materialism* journal: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=&list=PL0VKWnpAodlBHzaVTPNF0brXVWsM1tpB5>. Our special thanks go to the HM editorial board and especially to Paul Reynolds for supporting us in this initiative.

The texts published here are hence the third approximation to *HCC* by the participants of the marathon within the space of a year and we hope they can also illuminate the ever-renewed engagement with this work – and its critical potency – around the world.

Hence our evocation of the collection of Middle Eastern tales *One Thousand and One Nights*; it too is predicated on a story ever-continued, on a continuously renewed struggle to stave off death. Along those lines, we see Lukács, like Scheherazade, in a restless effort – in his case, to critique and overcome the capitalist-induced reification of social relations and thought; a struggle that must still be fought today and for which *HCC* remains a vital resource.

Translation (and post-script)

In the translation section of the dossier, we are happy to present **Furio Cerutti**'s “Georg Lukács und die Kritische Theorie”, translated for the first time from German into Portuguese by Mariana Teixeira. Originally published in vol. 1 of the proceedings of the 1985 *Bloch-Lukács-Symposium* in Dubrovnik, it was part of the author's investigation project on the history of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and his research at the Max Horkheimer-Archiv in Frankfurt. In this piece, the author discusses the political and methodological background of the philosophical divergences between the author of *History and Class*

Consciousness and the thinkers of the “Frankfurt School”. Considered during the 1960s more or less indistinctly as forerunners of the student revolts, Lukács and the group around Horkheimer actually had, as Cerutti argues, very different perspectives on a range of issues: the critical appropriation of Hegel and Kant, the adoption of a monocentric or a polycentric approach to the critique of capitalism, the diagnosis of the main problematic phenomenon of the time (reification vs. irrationality), the defense of a radical human transformation or of securing the conditions of a better life, as well as the relation of each pole to philosophy and the social sciences.

The importance of the social sciences for engaging with our present with historically adequate tools is stressed by Cerutti in the postscript written for this occasion and published in this volume along with the translation of his article. The author reflects on how historical and personal circumstances have changed in the nearly four decades passed since it was first published, which led him away from “philosophical Marxism as *Weltanschauung*”. He concludes by reminding us that the history of ideas is no innocuous endeavor: “The use of history is never decoupled from responsibility for its implications”.

Testimonies

Lastly, the dossier presents a series of short interviews with scholars who have engaged with Lukács’s work and provided invaluable contributions to its reception across the globe,

namely: **Anita Chari** (Professor at the University of Oregon), **Rüdiger Dannemann** (President of the International Georg Lukács Society), **Ágnes Erdélyi** (former Professor at the Eötvös Loránd University and President of the Lukács Archive International Foundation), **Andrew Feenberg** (former Professor at the Simon Fraser University), **Antonino Infranca** (PhD from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Buenos Aires), **Konstantinos Kavoulakos** (Professor at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), **Michael Löwy** (former visiting Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), **Michael Thompson** (Professor at the William Paterson University) and **Miguel Vedda** (Professor at the University of Buenos Aires).

They were asked to recount their first encounter with *History and Class Consciousness* and to reflect on the aspects of the book that struck them the most, on how it impacted their intellectual or political trajectory, as well as on its relevance and limits for the present time. The truly fascinating responses give us insight not only into the interviewees' individual stories and particular theoretical interests, but also paint a very colorful picture of the book's collective reception within different generations, disciplines, countries and social-political circumstances. The common thread cutting across all testimonies is the extraordinary impact of *HCC* as an experiment in anti-dogmatic Marxism – a work that, despite appearing for the first time one century ago, has not stopped showing its potential for theoretical innovation and for renewing our political energies.

With such a rich palette of contributions, we can hardly be disappointed that the strands of the Lukács reception to which we trace our own philosophical roots, and maintain close ties to, are underrepresented in this volume: namely, the Lukácsian lineages in Brazil drawing from critical theory (Mariana) and focusing on the thinker's late writings (Victor). While not covered in this dossier, Lukács's remarkable and variegated reception in Brazil dating from the 1950s on – we would mention here the works of José Paulo Netto, Marcos Nobre, Celso Frederico, Carlos Nelson Coutinho, Maria Orlanda Pinassi, Ricardo Musse, José Chasin, Mario Duayer, Ester Vaisman, Sérgio Lessa, Carlos Eduardo Jordão Machado, Arlenice Almeida da Silva, Ricardo Antunes and Ivo Tonet, among many others – is certainly a topic deserving of further study.

If the volume ultimately lacked Brazilian contributors, at the end of the peer-review and editing process we were glad to count on contributions from scholars and activists based in or from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, El Salvador, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, the Netherlands and the United States. That level of diversity was unfortunately not matched with regard to gender, at least in the articles section, despite our best efforts to remedy this. As subsequent sections of the dossier demonstrate, however, interest in Lukács has always been and remains strong across the genders.

To close this presentation, we would like to evoke Lukács's urging in *History and Class Consciousness* for us to “to

grasp the present as becoming”,² in the sense that history is intrinsically open and hence subject to transformation, and that to further an emancipatory change we must engage with the present simultaneously as a *product* and the *overcoming* of the past. This means that, in the spirit of Lukács’s understanding of Marxism, we take *History and Class Consciousness* to be at once more *and* less than a “classic”: as soon as it is put in motion through the lenses of our present, it sheds the static character of sacred scripture and reveals its dynamic, potent vitality. This dossier is our invitation to explore these open possibilities.

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2 Cf. LUKÁCS, Georg. “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”. In: *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. R. Livingstone. London: The Merlin Press, 1971 [1923], p. 204 (trans. amended). The expression is also the title of the recently published book by Karl Lauschke: “*Die Gegenwart als Werden erfassen*”: *Inhalt, politischer Kontext und Rezeption von Georg Lukács’ ‘Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein’*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2023.