

# “CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS”

Between interests and experience

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In “Class Consciousness”, the third chapter of the *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács makes a distinction between the empirically given consciousness of the working class and *class* consciousness, also called imputed consciousness. This distinction was significant for the legacy of this book, both in terms of theorists from the Frankfurt school, who considered this concept’s usefulness for ideology critique (Geuss 1981), and for feminist standpoint theory (Jameson 1988). Whereas Lukács coins the distinction in chapter 3, it is often also read into chapter 4, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”. In this contribution, I will tease out a difference in the grounding of class consciousness in these chapters. In a nutshell, I argue that the class consciousness chapter seems to rely on a conception of class interests that objectively follow from the class position of the proletariat. In the reification chapter, on the other hand, the collective experience of the proletariat is the basis for the poten-

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tial of class consciousness to develop. Following an evaluation of the merits and problems of both accounts, I will connect them to the concept of reification, and point to a tension within the concept of class consciousness as the standpoint of the proletariat. The tension in question is that between understanding the standpoint as 1) an epistemologically privileged position, and 2) the self-realization of the proletariat into a class. I will conclude with a suggestion for what can be recovered from “Class Consciousness” based on these interpretations, concerning the role of the party and the significance of this tension in the concept of class consciousness.

## **What is class consciousness?**

First things first: what is the distinction in question, why is it important, and what is meant with the claim that class consciousness needs to be *grounded* on something? A circumscribed answer to these questions follows. The question Lukács is trying to answer in “Class Consciousness” is what the role of class consciousness is in the class struggle of the proletariat under capitalism. In order to answer this question, Lukács needs to describe what class consciousness is, and determine whether it can be described in the abstract or if the proletariat’s class consciousness is unique when compared to other classes throughout history. According to Lukács’ analysis in this chapter, the proletariat is distinct due to its contradictory position as both the subject and object of the production process under capitalism.

Never before has a class existed that would be able to abolish class itself by universalizing its own condition.

The distinction between empirical consciousness and class consciousness, in turn, is based on the specific character of the capitalist mode of production. In short, empirical consciousness refers to the actual psychological states of individual workers or the working class as a whole, whereas class consciousness is “the sense, become conscious, of the historical role of the class” (Lukács 1971: 73). Class consciousness of the proletariat for Lukács means an understanding of society in processual terms and the ability to conceive of the totality of society – its historical character – by avoiding the naturalization of capitalism’s contingencies as universal laws. From this analysis of capitalism follows the insight that it is in the interest of the proletariat to abolish the current relations of production and replace them with a classless society. These “true” interests are obscured and distorted by the bourgeois ideology that holds that the rule of the market is an unchangeable law of nature so that capitalism, once it was established, became the only conceivable mode of production.

The distinction is important because it has a practical dimension. Different conceptions of class consciousness lead to different answers to the question of its role in class struggle. Consequently, different Marxist traditions would give diverging answers to this question: compare, for example, Lukács’s position that revolution can *and* must be the free act of the proletariat with Maoist and Kautskyian approaches to understanding the relationship between the vanguard and the masses (cf.

Molyneux 1985). Lukács’s particular conception of class consciousness is the foundation for this position on questions of socialist political strategy.

Lastly, what does it mean to talk about different conceptions of the grounding for class consciousness? There is an epistemological question about class consciousness, namely that if it is not what the proletariat is thinking right now, on which basis can it be determined? Different grounds would presumably lead to different accounts of what the content of class consciousness actually is. I will discuss two interpretations of class consciousness, the first we can call an interest-based account, the second an experience-based account.

### **Class consciousness as based on objective class interests**

In the “Class Consciousness” chapter, the picture of imputed class consciousness that is presented seems to follow objectively – almost mechanistically – from the class’s position in the economic structure of capitalism. Lukács describes it as such:

by relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which human beings would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society (Lukács 1971: 51, trans. amended).

In this conception, class consciousness is based on the interests of the proletariat that follow from their class position. They concern interests in the relationship of the proletariat *as a class* to the mode of production, i.e., not all workers' individual interests – and these interests exist regardless of whether the people they pertain to follow them, or even are aware of them. But the crucial part is that Lukács claims that if they would have perfect knowledge about their situation, proletarians would understand the possibility of and desire for a socialist revolution following from the position and character of their class. This implies that this inclination towards revolution is an objective quality of the position itself, since it is independent of the subject taking up that position.

Although this interpretation of class interests seems to have fallen out of fashion in the century since this text was written (Feinberg 2020), there are certain merits to an account that starts from the systemic nature of capitalism. This is the case especially when compared to accounts of feminist consciousness that rely on more subjective bases like individual experiences, which leave open what constitutes both the shared character of the consciousness and its relationship to truth or objectivity (cf. a similar discussion in feminist epistemology: Hennessy 1993). In the class interests picture, one should be able to “scientifically” determine what the proletariat’s class consciousness would consist in. In the same vein, this approach is able to very clearly distinguish between class consciousness and empirical consciousness. Since there is no necessary link posited between the contents of the proletariat’s empirical conscious-

ness at any given point to describe how class consciousness comes about, this leaves class consciousness free to be determined on its own terms.

There are, however, also some rather glaring problems with this account, the biggest worry being that it might lead to an unfruitful political strategy. Since this picture seems to imply that the largest obstacle to revolution is the imperfect information of the proletariat, this would mean that if they had the correct knowledge about their real interests, revolution would certainly follow. How realistic is this? Surely there is more to the formation of a political subject, a movement, than having the correct analysis. The strategy for socialists to follow would be simply to make people aware of their interests. But this misses an important dimension of class struggle – it is not clear that “gaining” this knowledge from some source would directly translate into political struggle, especially if one conceives of the role of the party to then bring this consciousness to the proletariat *as if from the outside* (Lukács 1971: xviii; cf. Lenin 1963). Underlying this picture is a very static conception of political struggle. It lacks a sense of the proletariat’s development into a subject that defines the end-goal *in the struggle* itself, which results in both a very static, passive conception of the proletariat and a very voluntaristic conception of the vanguard.

As we learned from Alexandros Minotakis’s contribution about Lukács’s Marxist method (reference to be added later), Lukács is clear that a description of empirical facts can never in itself be a prescription for action. In this light, the quote about class consciousness can seem puzzling. It would seem that what

Lukács is saying is that there are certain facts about class position which, if known, would lead the proletariat to act in a determinate way. If this is how we interpret class consciousness, it would contradict Lukács's own critique of empiricism. It is, of course, possible that he would contradict himself in the book; but there is also a further possible interpretation, namely, that Lukács is emphasizing *one aspect* of class consciousness in this essay. Looking at the reification chapter shows us another of its dimensions and, taken together, they disclose a nuanced perspective on the dynamic of class consciousness.

### **Class consciousness as based on collective experience of industrial wage labor**

Although the distinction between class consciousness and empirical consciousness is not *explicitly* referred to in the reification chapter, another conception of the basis for class consciousness can be teased out of the chapter on the reification of the proletariat. This comes to the fore in Frederic Jameson's reading of Lukács, specifically in his tracing of the heritage of Lukács's standpoint theory to the feminist standpoint theories of the 1980s in the essay "History and Class Consciousness' as an Unfinished Project". In fact, as it is conceptualized in feminist standpoint theory, the standpoint is always a *potential* at first, and must be struggled to be achieved. This maps onto the fact that the empirical consciousness of the proletariat is distinct from the class consciousness they would have if they realized

the proletarian standpoint. Jameson (1988: 215) describes Lukács’s characterization of the basis for proletarian class consciousness as the “epistemological priority of the experience of various groups or collectivities”, in this case that of the “industrial working class”. What distinguishes the industrial working class is “its experience of itself as wage labor, or in other words as the commodification of labor power” (idem: 218). This reading, Jameson makes explicit, is based mainly on the reification chapter.

The key is the experience of the proletariat of itself as reified, as a commodity. It is the experience of this deep contradiction of the mode of production that drives the proletariat beyond the immediacy of capitalism and to be able to conceive of the abolition of the current state of affairs. The epistemological priority of the standpoint of the proletariat, in this perspective, consists in the negative moment of finding oneself in a contradiction and the corresponding impulse to move beyond it. Along these lines, class consciousness is also *self-knowledge* in a double sense. It is knowledge of a collective subject’s own position in capitalism and knowledge of itself as a class understood as collective *self-consciousness* – in that process becoming a political agent. In Lukács’s words from the reification chapter: “when the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practical. That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge” (Lukács 1971: 169). In this perspective, class consciousness is synonymous with the proletariat’s self-realization as a class.



One of the merits of this account is that it does not seem to run into the issues that the class interest-based account encounters. Rather than a subject-independent conception of class interests, the experience-based account starts from the experiences that the proletariat is assumed to share qua their shared structural position. However, experiences cannot themselves be enough, since in that case there would be no difference between empirical and class consciousness. Perhaps we have a feeling that things cannot go on as they are doing now, but there is not really a basis for delineating how things could be otherwise. Therefore, if the standpoint of the proletariat *is* the coming to be of the proletariat as a class itself, that still leaves the transformation of experiences to consciousness to be explained.

### **Can the conceptions complement each other?**

Based on these diverging conceptions, I conclude by suggesting that to understand the standpoint of the proletariat we cannot disregard the perspective offered in the class consciousness chapter. Of course, the class struggle cannot be fully predicted to follow mechanistically from a given starting point. There is a level of development of the political aims of the proletariat that can only come about in the struggle itself. But at the same time, Marxists *can* and *need to* understand what the contradiction is that the proletariat finds itself in; hence, based on the study of history and the analysis of capitalism, to assert the

ways that the proletariat can win its struggle against capital. Class struggle consists of both the experienced contradiction that could drive the proletariat into action, and a perspective for the way forward. Both these negative and positive moments can be contained in the concept of a standpoint.

To understand how the contradiction comes about, and to understand what the proletariat’s self-knowledge comes down to, the subject-independent qualities of the class position and interests of the proletariat cannot be avoided. Without an analysis of the class interests of the proletariat, one would be left in a void with regard to the positive claim for which kind of action the proletariat should take to respond to its contradictory position. It seems as if this would lead to a kind of pure spontaneism, whereby the political goals could only be formed in the immediate action of the masses. However, it would be wrong to conclude from Lukács’s seeming self-critique of the revolutionary significance of forces external to the proletariat that in his view the party should take a tailist approach and merely follow the masses. There is a leading role for the party, which has to do with the careful analysis of the class position of the proletariat and the interests that follow from it; the party is charged, namely, with developing these insights into *socialist theory*, in order to push the class struggle towards strategies that can succeed.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Contra Lukács’s revision in the 1967 preface, *this* conception of the role of the vanguard party remains consistent with Lenin’s account. Certain passages in Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* can be interpreted as making the case that class consciousness as a whole must be imparted to workers by the intelligentsia (Lenin 1963: 63). Yet, upon closer reading one sees that this refers specifically to *socialist theory*. Lenin, however,

On the other hand, the voluntaristic conception of the party simply bringing the right analysis to the proletariat and thereby inciting the revolution is also something Lukács does not avow. That is because the party, properly conceived, does not fully stand outside the proletariat, but is in dialectical relationship with it as the organized element of and for the class (Leblanc 2013: 68–70). The party does not bring the truth to the proletariat from the outside, but is an organic element of the class struggle, a mediating element between the proletariat’s objective situation, its militancy, and its self-consciousness. In this picture, the revolutionary vanguard plays a vital role in the development of the class consciousness of the working class itself. Neither is a successful socialist revolution imaginable without a proper theoretical understanding of the class dynamics under capitalism, nor can it be done by anyone other than the working class *as a class*. Therefore, both of these conceptions of class consciousness, the analysis of the proletariat’s position and the self-realization of the proletariat as a class, as a political subject, need to be understood together.

Hopefully, this sheds light on the meaning of Lukács’s claim about the “perfect knowledge” of class consciousness, which would stay obscured if not read in combination with the other parts of the book. If we want to retain the distinction between imputed and empirical consciousness – which is necessary for the possibility of class formation in a moment where

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also acknowledges the partially spontaneous nature of working class consciousness and the coming to be of labor movements. The dual-sided interpretation of class consciousness set forth in this contribution, thus, seems compatible with the Leninist account of the vanguard.

class consciousness is not shared broadly – then having a conception of class interests is crucial. And whereas the “Class Consciousness” chapter provides a limited understanding of class consciousness, rather than discard it as incompatible with the more developed reification chapter, it still highlights one aspect of class consciousness that is integral to understanding its full scope.

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