

“THE PHENOMENON OF REIFICATION”¹

Georg Lukács as a Marxist

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1. Introduction: Georg Lukács as a Marxist

History and Class Consciousness's extensive central chapter, titled “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, embodies the most substantial result of Georg Lukács's “apprenticeship years” in Marxism. By that I mean the period from when he first joined the Hungarian Communist Party (December 1918) to when he finished *HCC*, four years later, in December 1922. The reification essay was written for *HCC* – alongside the book's closing essay on organization –, but “reification” is likely the last thing Lukács wrote; it is the only essay without a date, so it can be assumed that it was finished with the book itself. Also due to its subject and scope, the essay can be viewed as the culmination of four years of dedicated study of Marx and

1 Part I of the chapter “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”.

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the Marxists. Considering the essay’s relevance a hundred years after its publication, that is a considerable achievement.

It is important to note, however, that Lukács had had at least a decade of intellectual activity before his pathway as a Marxist even began in 1918, which helps explain the magnitude of his accomplishments after four short years of identifying as one. I emphasize this aspect so we grasp *HCC* as a culmination but, at the same time, as a *waystation* in Lukács’s developmental process as a revolutionary intellectual. That process had a decisive impulse when he joined the communists in the aftermath of the Russian revolution; it lasted until the late 1920s, at least regarding his *initial* confrontation with the Marxist tradition. That intellectual relationship – and its development – would continue, of course, for many decades until his death in 1971.

But studying Marxism is not the only thing Lukács was doing in those four “apprenticeship years” leading to the milestone that was *HCC*. He was heavily involved in political work and within a few months of becoming a Marxist, had risen to a leading figure in the Hungarian Council Republic, the short-lived Hungarian socialist revolution, which lasted from 21 March to 1 August 1919. That is why I argue that, for all the theoretical and thematic twists and turns in Lukács’s pre-Marxist phase, and for all the periods we can parcel out his subsequent trajectory as a Marxist, the most significant rupture in his life is the one in late 1918–early 1919, when *he became one*. Because his adherence to Marxism did not only represent an intellectual break; it coincided with his passage from critical observer to revolutionary activist, from a member of intellectual circles to a

participant in a mass movement, from an academic thinker to a party one: in short, it was the most significant “turn of fate” in his life – a term Lukács used in an essay from 1944.² That is because it represented a radical transformation from the standpoint of theory *and* praxis. The contemplation of those two dimensions will also provide the key for my brief overview of part I of the “reification essay”, dedicated to the “Phenomenon of Reification”. This contribution will, namely, focus on situating the main essay of *HCC* within Lukács’s early Marxist production as well as on providing keys to understand its scope and the interpretation of its main arguments and concepts. While discussions on the reification essay have long polarized *HCC*’s vast reception, I hope that this contribution – along with the other interventions in this volume – can contribute to reading Lukács’s still highly compelling contribution *afresh*.

2. Lukács as an “orthodox innovator” in Marxism

The theme of this brief analysis of the reification essay is “Georg Lukács as a Marxist”. It is rooted in two paradoxes that accompany the essay’s reception and, by extension, that of *HCC*. While Lukács opens the book with a claim to “orthodox Marxism”, calling for a return to Marx’s *method*,³ he is curiously most often associated with conceptual *innovations* in Marxism (most

2 See “Schicksalswende” (Lukács 1967 [1944]) in the essay collection *Schriften zur Ideologie und Politik* edited by Peter Ludz.

3 See Alexandros Minotakis’s contribution on *HCC*’s “What is Orthodox Marxism?” in this volume.

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notably through his critique of reification). In short, Lukács as an “orthodox innovator” provides the *first paradox*. On the other hand, *HCC* is often associated with Lukács’s *pre-Marxist* recoveries, especially his Hegelian perspective, and non-Marxist *influences*: notably his Neo-Kantianism. I will return to these labels – and what they refer to – later in this essay. I am referencing them because the *second paradox* of *HCC*’s reception is that of Lukács as an “orthodox Marxist” who innovates *by drawing on non-Marxist sources*.

The first of these paradoxes is only apparent. A call for going back to the roots of a theory or genre is not necessarily in contradiction with opening its horizons. In Lukács’s specific case, orthodoxy is opposed to dogmatism, i.e., to considering Marx and Engels’s writings as holy script to be followed to the letter and without question. On the other hand, Lukács also opposed his brand of orthodoxy to “revisionism”. That is, the idea of “updating” Marx’s method because a supposedly radically new reality confronts the socialist movement. Lukács contemplates both dimensions of his concept of orthodoxy in a passage from his 1920 essay on the centennial of Friedrich Engels’s birth:

The tenders of bourgeois ‘science’ and of petty bourgeois ‘socialism’ will label me a quibbler, a Talmudist. Yet, if we go back to them [i.e., to Marx and Engels, V.S.], we do so to learn *their method*; to understand *how it is possible to serve the unitary interests of the proletarian revolution under permanently changing circumstances with changing tactics* (Lukács 1976 [1920]: 175).

In that regard, what are Lukács's "orthodox" innovations in *History and Class Consciousness*? I summarize them in three interrelated "recoveries": 1) of the dialectic in Marxism; 2) of the revolutionary *character* of the dialectic; 3) and of praxis as the revolutionary *lever* of Marxist dialectics. In what follows, I briefly examine all three, also exploring how Lukács refined his view of these recoveries between when he first formulated them in early 1919 and their articulation in *HCC* four years later. There is a clear basis of comparison for this effort, namely, the contrast between the original form of the essays that make up *HCC* and their revised variants for that work.

3. Lukács's recovery of Marxist dialectics

In the first version of "What is Orthodox Marxism?," published on the eve the Hungarian revolution in March 1919, Lukács already categorically refutes the notion that Marx's method needs to be "improved" or "further developed" in any way. Those that attempted to do so, he stressed, only "flattened" (*verflacht*) it, that is, over-simplified it (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 63) – a formulation that was incorporated into *HCC* practically unchanged (see Lukács 1971 [1923]: 1). Lukács referred specifically to attempts at eliminating the dialectical character of Marx's method (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 64–65). The problems inherent in those efforts are summarized in the following passage of the 1919 version of "Orthodox Marxism": "Without the dialectic we would be *lost* in a labyrinth of disordered facts, impossible to

put in order, and whose consideration would be useless as orientation to our action” (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 65).

Hence, what is at stake is not simply how to better gain knowledge of reality, how to grasp it, but rather how accurate knowledge of reality is a necessary means to effectively *transform it*. In other words, rather than an *epistemological* issue, an issue of the relation of knowledge and reality, Lukács evoked a practical-political one: not what we can and cannot know, but how we can *change things*. In that regard, the recovery of dialectical thought – against revisionists’ “flattening” of Marxism – is central to both 1919 and 1922 versions of “What is Orthodox Marxism?”. Yet, key differences emerge in *how* Lukács characterizes the dialectical dimension of Marxism. These shifts merit attention because they provide clues as to why Lukács arrived at the concept of reification. What is common to both versions is the notion that a dialectical perspective is decisive, because it rejects binaries: between theory and praxis, subject and object, concepts and reality. But there is a telling change of *emphasis* in this regard in *HCC* compared to his earlier formulations. In 1919, Lukács frames the dialectical unity of theory and praxis as follows:

Theory can only be revolutionary *insofar as it overcomes [aufhebt] the difference between theory and practice*. Inasmuch as the mere fact of the correct train of thought produces an essential change in the object towards which the thought is directed, the consistent realization of the correct thought results in the transformation of reality (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 63).

In other words, effectively grasping reality *immediately* coincides with transforming it, that is, with overcoming (or superseding) the gap between theory and praxis. Put shortly, the binary is transcended through the dialectical *identity* of the opposing terms. The Hegelian roots of that formulation are underscored by Lukács in a subsequent reference in the 1919 text. The “dialectical method, which Marx incorporated from classical German philosophy, especially from Hegel” is revolutionary, Lukács states, because it understands concepts not as “rigid schemes, which – once established – can never be altered”. On the contrary, to Hegel – and to Marx following him – “concepts are not isolated thought formations to be understood abstractly, but rather *living realities* which bring forth a permanent process of shifts and leaps” (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 64).

In the version of “What is Orthodox Marxism?” published in *History and Class Consciousness*, in turn, Lukács grounds the revolutionary character of the dialectic not in its positing of the inherent “fluidity” of concepts, but in how it sets out from the necessary *interrelationship* between subject and object in the historical process. This shift is crucial because it evokes praxis: “in all metaphysics”, Lukács writes, “the object remains untouched and unaltered so that thought remains contemplative and fails to become practical: while for the dialectical method, the central problem is *to change reality*” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 3).

Based on this notion, the Lukács of *HCC* introduces more layers of differentiation in how he understood the unity of theory and praxis. Theory becomes the “intellectual expression of the revolutionary process”, that which temporarily “becomes

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fixed, so that it may be generalized, communicated, utilized and developed” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 3). The unity of theory and praxis is no longer understood simply as “identity”.

In *HCC*, moreover, the function of theory changes with the introduction of a further element, namely, the category of *mediation*. “The dialectical relationship”, Lukács writes, has a “dual determination” or a dual mandate: “the simultaneous recognition and overcoming of being in its immediacy” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 8, trans. amended). Put differently, dialectics must grasp reality beyond the form in which it presents itself immediately under capitalism. To accomplish this, dialectical thought must “search for the mediations” that allow phenomena to be “detached from the immediate form in which they are given” and connected to their core or essence while, at the same time, and this is crucial: understanding that this form of appearance is a product of the historical process, hence, not false in the sense of an illusion. It is, rather, “necessary, because it emerges from the soil of capitalist society” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 8, trans. amended).

4. Revolution as overcoming the immediately given: Lukács’s critique of reification

From his first Marxist texts, Lukács posited that to radically transform reality it is necessary to get to the core of the historical process through the correct class standpoint. In *HCC*, however, this layer of appearances converting the forms of capi-

talist society into seemingly “eternal and immutable” entities rather than historical and transitory ones becomes a central problem. Hence, if the revolutionary movement is to succeed politically, it must reach beyond the immediately given, not only in terms of embodying a real alternative to bourgeois society, but also through its ability to transcend how that societal formation appears in its immediacy. Yet, there is no one-step solution to getting to the core or essence of reality; the mode of appearance of phenomena under capitalism, which envelops all societal forms, can only be transcended when the system itself is overcome: this appearance is a necessary one (“*Dieser Schein ist als Schein notwendig*”, Lukács 2023 [1923]: 103).

This is where the concept of reification and its critique come in. Lukács’s fundamental conceptual innovation in *HCC* tackles the question of why capitalist society not only produces and reproduces relations of production, but also the *specific mode in which they appear* to its human subjects. In other words, it produces a material world, and as part of that process, a *certain appearance of that world* that is rooted in the determinants of the capitalist mode of production – most notably the commodity form and its generalization. That mode of appearance is false if taken in its immediacy; yet it does not constitute a mere “illusion” – in the sense that it cannot be overcome simply by an operation in the realm of consciousness.

These insights testify clearly to Lukács’s development as a Marxist thinker even within the few years separating his entry into the Hungarian Communist Party and the publication of *HCC*. The concept of reification is still absent in the writings of

1919. In those early Marxist essays, the standpoint of the proletariat is, in effect, *immediately* revolutionary, theory and praxis immediately coincide. What changed in the intervening years to foster a new standpoint? Did Lukács deepen his knowledge of Marxism in that interval? He clearly did and I will return briefly to *how* he read Marx (and Engels) and to the question of his non-Marxist influences below. But intellectual development does not tell the whole story. In the years that preceded the publication of *HCC*, Lukács experienced the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution, forcing him to exile in Vienna in 1919; he also bore witness to the resilience of the capitalist system, countering expectations that the outbreak of the Russian Revolution had signaled the beginning of a general collapse of the established order. Capitalist society had proved durable even where a context of deep crisis and a sizeable revolutionary worker’s movement were present, most notably in Germany. Lukács’s attempt to reckon with these defeats is visible in a shift of emphasis in his interlocutors. His texts from early 1919 are still focused on critiques within the left; whether of social democrats’ inability to go beyond the limits to political action set by the bourgeois order, or of the blind spots of anarcho-syndicalists who advocate its total negation (but in such an abstract manner that they equally fail to build towards an actual alternative). In *HCC*, the critiques of vulgar Marxism and ultra-leftist tendencies remain present, but much more space is reserved to the analysis and critique of bourgeois thought and the pathways to overcome its lingering influence. It is no coincidence, in that regard, that the problem of reification first appears in Lukács’s work in the first

version of the essay on “Class Consciousness”, from April 1920. In *HCC*, in turn, “Class Consciousness” comes immediately before the reification essay. In other words, *overcoming reified consciousness* emerges as not just a condition but indeed as a central element of the struggle to transcend the capitalist societal order. Here is a clear example of the significance of Lukács’s suggestion in the 1922 Preface that the ordering of *HCC*’s chapters is indicative of their “concrete unity” (*sachlicher Zusammenhang*). The three-part structure of the reification essay is, in turn, equally purposeful and telling. A passage from the conclusion of *HCC*’s “What is Orthodox Marxism?” provides a concise illustration of this fact:

The task of orthodox Marxism, its victory over Revisionism and utopianism can never mean the defeat, once and for all, of false tendencies. It is an ever-renewed struggle against the insidious effects of bourgeois ideology on the thought of the proletariat (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 24).

The anatomy of the “insidious” or – in a closer translation – “alluring effects” of bourgeois ideology is examined in the reifications essay’s first part (“The phenomenon of reification”); the second part (“The antinomies of bourgeois thought”) presents a critique of those “false tendencies”, i.e., of the reified forms of consciousness that characterize bourgeois thought; the third section (“The standpoint of the proletariat”), in turn, approaches the revolutionary class standpoint through which they can be broken in an “ever-renewed struggle”.⁴

4 See the analyses of parts II (Giovanni Zanotti) and III (Mariana Teixeira) of the reification essay in this volume.

Along these lines, a brief definition of Lukács’s concept of reification and its critique might be equally articulated in three parts. Under capitalism, subjects enter into a contemplative attitude towards objects (and relationships) as “things” (1); this is concurrent with the apparent “thingification” of subjects themselves as mere (isolated) objects (2) by the world formed by those very things they have no control over (3).

5. Beyond Max Weber: the contested roots of reification critique

Lukács’s most notable source for this conceptualization is Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Capital*. Yet, a passage from the *Theories of Surplus Value*, which Lukács will refer to throughout his work – from the *Moses Hess* essay (1926) to the *Young Hegel* (1938) – reinforces how much his critique of reification draws from (and develops) aspects from Marx’s critique of political economy. In the context of a commentary on Thomas Hodgskin, Marx draws attention to how that economist is correct to point out that, in the capitalist mode of production, “the effects of a certain societal form of labour”, i.e., of labour that is based on commodity production and exchange value, “are ascribed to the object [*Sache*], to the products of that labor”. As a result, “the relationship [of production] itself is fantasized to exist in thing-like form [*dinglicher Gestalt*]” (Marx 1968 [1863]: 290). Yet, Hodgskin is convinced that this is “a purely subjective deception [*Täuschung*]” rooted in

the “deceit and interests of the exploiting classes”. “He does not see”, Marx stresses, “how that mode of representation arises from the real relation itself”, in other words, “the latter [the relation of production] is not an expression of the former [its mode of representation], but the other way around” (ibid.). That is because:

In capital, the effects which things [*Dinge*] possess as objective aspects [*gegenständliche Momente*] of the labor process are attributed to *them* as their own properties in their personification, their autonomy with regards to labor. They would cease to have these effects if they were to cease to confront labor in this *alienated form* [*entfremdete Form*] (ibid.).

Put briefly, Marx makes two main points in these passages. First, that things take a life of their own in capitalism. This is rooted in the fact that capital – to a very real extent – exerts command over its human subjects (even if it is a product of their labor). Second, that this specific relation between people and what they produce – here clearly qualified as alienated by Marx – generates a fetishized representation of social relations: they appear in a “thing-like form”.

From this vantage point, Lukács’s critique of reification emerges as a (plausible) organic extension of Marx’s critique of the fetish-like character of the commodity. The fact that all products of labor are commodified under capitalism (hence also humanity’s metabolism with nature) alongside most social relations (in the form of relations of exchange and exploitation) means that they appear to its human subjects as commodities themselves – hence from a *quantitative* rather than qualitative

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perspective; in a fragmented and isolated form. Moreover, with the tendency to be parceled into self-contained units or specific sectors with their own ever more formal and formally rational manner of functioning, and a corresponding level of specialization of those that produce and manipulate them. The result is a fragmented reality where the whole is a dead canvas of free-floating atoms and self-referenced units. Lukács’s innovation consists in understanding the universal character of this mode of appearance under capitalism, i.e., the generalization of reified forms beyond the “objective factors of the labor process” and the realm of production proper:

And there is, naturally, no form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which human beings can bring their physical and psychic ‘qualities’ into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. We need only think of marriage (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 112, trans. amended).⁵

Both the passage from the *Theories of Surplus Value* and this quote from *HCC* – where Lukács points to the reification of reproduction and affective relations through the “marriage-form” – put the second paradox I had mentioned earlier regarding Lukács’s reception in a different light. That is, they cast doubt on the notion that Lukács was only able to innovate as an orthodox Marxist because he engaged with non-Marxist authors.

5 In a significant mistake, Rodney Livingstone translates “Und es gibt naturgemäß keine Form der Beziehung der Menschen zueinander” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 112) for “there is no *natural* form in which human relations can be cast [...]”. The term “*naturgemäß*” is an adverb in the sentence (“naturally”), not an adjective (“natural”) referring to human relations. The notion of a purely natural form of human relations – not least gender relations, which Lukács goes on to mention – runs counter to *HCC*’s central naturalization critique.

That is what, in a long-standing feature of *HCC*'s reception, is attributed as one of the roots of Lukács's specific contribution to Marxism – for instance, attributing his diagnosis of the generalization of fetishized forms to all societal phenomena to the influence of Max Weber's theory of rationalization. This is not without reason: Lukács's dialogue with Weber's work and the presence of the latter's categories and terminology in *HCC* is undeniable.⁶ Yet, I quoted Marx on the "thing-like form" taken on by relations of production to emphasize that while Lukács was no doubt impacted by Max Weber's thought, he does not *need* it to theorize reification.

The reference to marriage, in turn, highlights that Friedrich Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is just as crucial a reference in the conceptualization of how the commodity-form historically put its mark on non-economic phenomena even before capitalism universalized this phenomenon. In that regard, even if Neo-Kantianism unquestionably made Lukács more attuned to the problem of the rela-

6 Lukács's dialogue with Max Weber was first highlighted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a central element of his 1955 work *Adventures of the dialectic*: "It is only by beginning with Weber, and with this Weberian Marxism, that the adventures of the dialectic of the past thirty-five years can be understood" (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1955]: 29). While the centennial of *HCC* brought back references to this topic (cf. Cohen 2023), Michael Löwy's approach, stressing "appropriation" instead of "influence" in the Weber-Lukács relationship, remains the most fruitful: "The issue here is not to draw attention to the 'influence' of Weber on Marxist thinkers, but to the way these thinkers were able to appropriate for themselves Weberian concepts as analytical tools complementary to Marxian dialectics, in order to develop a deeper and (often) more radical critique of capital" (Löwy 1996: 432). In that regard, despite its status as a common refrain of the Lukács reception, a more systematic confrontation of his work – including beyond *HCC* – with Weber's remains an open task. For a recent consideration of this problem, see Teixeira 2023.

tionship between concepts and reality, and what lay behind the “validity” of concepts, that does not necessarily make Lukács’s Marxism Neo-Kantian. Thus, overcoming the second paradox of Lukács’s reception – the notion that his path-breaking Marxism is owed to non-Marxist influences alone – means grappling with two conflicting ideas in terms of Lukács’s relation to bourgeois thought. While he is clearly in dialog with and indeed partially incorporates the results of the most lucid representatives of bourgeois philosophical and social thought of his time, *History and Class Consciousness*, nevertheless, also constitutes the most radical critique of those schools of thought to date.

This is most visible in Lukács’s relationship to the work of his erstwhile mentors Weber and Georg Simmel. Because they were able to identify the phenomenon of reification, their work could be relied upon as a source for the anatomy of various aspects of the reified world – the state, the legal system, key aspects of social life etc. Lukács, therefore, relies on them for what Mariana Teixeira termed “the phenomenology of the dilacerated subject” (cf. Teixeira 2020). But Lukács is very explicit that these same thinkers – for all their lucidity – cannot grasp “the grounds, the genesis and the necessity” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 109, trans. amended) of the phenomenon of reification. Their inability to go beyond the reified world – indeed, their “critical” elevation of that immediate appearance “as the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world presented to us humans” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 110, trans. amended) – is rather akin to its ultimate consecration. In this regard, his relationship to a thinker like Max Weber mirrors

Marx's relationship to bourgeois political economy. As Lukács highlights in part III of the reification essay, Marx

explicitly attributed the mistaken ideas of bourgeois economists concerning the economic processes of capitalism to the absence of mediation, to the systematic avoidance of the categories of mediation, to the immediate acceptance of secondary forms of objectivity, to the inability to progress beyond the stage of merely immediate cognition. [...] It is important to realise at this point that although bourgeois thought only landed in these antinomies after the very greatest mental exertions, it accepted their existential basis as self-evident, as a simply unquestionable reality. Which is to say: bourgeois thought entered into an unmediated relationship with reality as it was given (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 156).

In other words, bourgeois thought – even in its most critical varieties – is characterized by an *unmediated relationship with immediate (capitalist) reality*. Hence Lukács's effort throughout *HCC* to introduce mediations of various orders into the relationship of revolutionaries with the world so they might go beyond its immediate manifestations (to transform it, overcome its capitalist, antagonistic form). These mediations, i.e., dialectical theory, the proletarian class standpoint and revolutionary organization, non-coincidentally provide what is arguably also the three-part structure of *HCC*. They also indicate that this is a work of revolutionary theory in the sense that it emerged from within a mass movement and communist organization and, more specifically, from an intellectual that embraced and intervened in a revolutionary conjuncture. If there is no revolution without revolutionary theory, the latter also needs, feeds

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off what Lukács termed, in a reference to Engels, the “revolutionary life principle”: that is what gives *HCC* its specific impulse and actuality for the wide collection of readers it continues to garner a hundred years after its publication.

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