

“THE ANTINOMIES OF BOURGEOIS THOUGHT”¹

Only the totality is open

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Of the two terms in the title of *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1971 [1923], hereafter *HCC*), only the latter – by far the most widely discussed – has an essay explicitly devoted to it. It may be argued, however, that if there is a specific chapter on “history”, then it is the central part of the reification essay, “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought” (*HCC*: 110–149). It includes some of the most difficult, but also theoretically intense and politically passionate pages of the whole book. Lukács’s attempt here is to explain the contradictions of bourgeois modern philosophy through the contradictions of bourgeois modern society itself, by distinguishing a reified or “contemplative” mode of thinking, common to both, from an emancipatory or “practical” one imputed to the proletarian class. The difficulty is due not only to the philosophical subject matter,

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

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but also to the fact that, while the bourgeois “standpoint” lies at the core of the analysis and is described in detail, the non-reified one is given its proper name only retrospectively in the final paragraphs:

[German] classical philosophy [...] succeeded in identifying the substance, now appearing for the first time, in which philosophically the underlying order and the connections between things were to be found, namely *history*. The arguments which go to show that here and here alone is the concrete basis for genesis [i.e., the construction of true subject-object identity, G.Z.] are extraordinarily diverse and to list them would require almost a complete recapitulation of our analysis up to this point. For in the case of almost every insoluble problem we perceive that the search for a solution leads us to history (*HCC*: 143, emphasis in the original).

The interpretation thus anticipated, which I will discuss in the following pages, also sheds a possible light from the outset on the present relevance of Lukács’s analysis. The term “antinomy” is used here in the technical sense of an aporetic theoretical situation, wherein both a thesis and its antithesis can be argued for with equal rights – that is, in the sense first developed by Kant in the “Transcendental Dialectic” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998 [1781/1787]: 459–550) and applied by Lukács to the entire tradition of modern rationalism, including Kant himself. Now, reading this chapter today confronts one with a new antinomy, for “praxis” in Lukács’s emphatic – namely revolutionary – sense, which constitutes for him the solution to all antinomies, has meanwhile virtually disappeared from the historical horizon. On one side, one cannot give up the

unity of theory and praxis without falsifying the *theoretical* content of Lukács's position; on the other side, this unity cannot be maintained anymore in any immediate way.² It seems to me, however, that Lukács's argument implicitly allows for at least a partial, somehow Adornian answer to this problem – thought is already a form of praxis, and, more specifically, to *think differently* may already amount to sublating the “contemplative” point of view into the “practical” one.³

Such different thinking, for Lukács, is precisely *historical* thinking in a very distinct sense, namely as the simultaneous overcoming of two “bourgeois” oppositions, that between *form and content* and that between *parts and whole*. Lukács first introduces them at the philosophical level, as two seemingly incommensurable dimensions of Kant's “thing-in-itself”. As he himself seems to imply, to fully understand why they are, in fact, one and the same opposition means to understand his whole argument throughout this chapter.⁴ In what follows, therefore, I will begin with the form-content opposition to elucidate the mutual relationship of capitalist society (1) and modern philosophy (2)

2 This does not mean that it cannot be restored in a *mediated* way, for example in the direction hinted at by the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Yet, in my opinion, the degree of mediation required to this end would already imply a transformation of quantity into quality, thereby an essential change in Lukács's stance on this crucial point.

3 See on this, for instance, Adorno 1998 [1963/1969]: 259–278 and 289–294.

4 “The attempt has often been made to prove that the thing-in-itself has a number of quite disparate functions within Kant's system. What they all have in common is the fact that they each represent a limit, a barrier, to the abstract, formal, rationalistic, ‘human’ faculty of cognition. However, these limits and barriers seem to be so different from each other that it is only meaningful to unify them [...] if it is clear that, despite the great variety of effects, there is a unified explanation for these frontiers” (HCC: 114–115).

as two isomorphic “failing systems”. Finally, I will show how history provides the ultimate unity of – and solution to – the form-content problem and that of totality, and argue for a reversal of traditional assumptions on the latter concept (3). While the implications of Lukács’s case for totality have often been deemed closed and authoritarian,⁵ I will maintain that, for him, a non-reified idea of totality is the *very condition* for epistemological and political “openness”.

1. A failing system, I: society

After outlining the general structure of reification in the first part of the essay, Lukács devotes the antinomies chapter to the distinction between contemplative and practical attitudes, which will then open up the possibility of an autonomous “standpoint of the proletariat” in the third part. This distinction, however, is not adequately captured by the usual notions of thought and action, as becomes clear from the discussion of the still “contemplative” nature of Kant’s subjective ethics. Here one might assume that the actual difference is that between individual and collective action (which, in a sense, will later appear to be indeed the case), but Lukács promptly adds a third, and at first glance rather obscure, definition:

In order to overcome the irrationality of the question of the thing-in-itself it is not enough that the attempt

5 As a paradigmatic example among many, see Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1955]. On Lukács’s concept of totality in the context of Western Marxism, see Jay 1984: 81–127.

should be made to transcend the contemplative attitude. When the question is formulated more concretely it turns out that the essence of praxis consists in annulling *that indifference of form towards content* that we found in the problem of the thing-in-itself (*HCC*: 125–126, emphasis in the original).

The relationship between “the essence of praxis” and “the indifference of form towards content” is not self-evident, but it is Lukács’s central point. To begin clarifying it, a comparison may be useful. The antinomies chapter is undoubtedly the most important foundational text in the Western Marxist tradition on the topic “Marxism and Philosophy”. As is well-known, however, this is the title of another book published in the same year (1923) as *HCC*: Karl Korsch’s attack on the Second International’s theoretical revisionism, akin to Lukács’s in topic and intention, although less discussed and, in fact, far less sophisticated. Against the then widespread thesis of the overcoming of philosophy into Marxist “science”, Korsch suggests an interesting analogy with Lenin’s *State and Revolution* to advocate a “withering away”, rather than a crude “abolition”, of philosophy. This “peculiar parallelism between the two problems of Marxism and Philosophy and Marxism and State” (Korsch 2012 [1923]: 52) is grounded for him in a middle term. Quoting Lenin, Korsch rhetorically asks whether, as in the case of the state, “the neglect of the problem of philosophy by the Marxists of the Second International [is not] also related to the fact that ‘*problems of revolution in general hardly concerned them*’” (ibid., emphasis in the original). The recovery of philosophy, as opposed to mechanistic scientism, is thus understood by Korsch essentially as the

vindication of praxis, freedom, spontaneity – in one word: subjectivity –, as opposed to evolutionary opportunism. So far, the same applies to a large extent to Lukács in *HCC*. Yet, however promising Korsch’s state-philosophy-revolution triangle can be,⁶ the greater subtlety of Lukács’s concept of reification emerges perhaps nowhere better than here. For Lukács’s main Hegelian argument in the antinomies chapter is that the subject is only fulfilled by opening itself to the object – freedom begins with grasping reality as it is –, while, at the same time, this very outcome is prevented by a “purely objective” understanding of the object itself. Conversely and more pointedly: precisely its withdrawal from objectivity makes the bourgeois subject experience the world (and itself) as a mere thing.

This is the core of the dialectic of reification common to the essence of bourgeois society and philosophy, which may be better elucidated starting from the former – that is, from the fetishism chapter in Marx’s *Capital*, pioneeringly acknowledged by Lukács in its full theoretical force.⁷ Here the contradiction already implicit in the dual nature of the commodity as use-value and value, and later developed by Marx into increasingly complex categories (money, capital, surplus value), is deduced in turn from “the peculiar social character of the labor that produces [commodities]” (Marx 1996 [1867]: 83). This is defined as the aggregate of “all the different kinds of *private labor*, which are carried on independently of each other, *and yet are univer-*

6 I intend to show elsewhere that this triangle is constitutive for Adorno’s negative dialectics.

7 I have amended the translation in most of the following quotations from both Marx and Lukács.

sally dependent on each other as [...] branches of the social division of labor” (ibid.: 86, emphasis added). Such labor, thus, has itself a dual nature. It is *mediately social*, for it differs from both *unsocialized* pre-capitalist labor – inasmuch as it is performed for others – and *immediately social* labor – inasmuch as each individual labor process is “private”, i.e., not collectively planned. It must fulfill the double requirement of immediate independence and mediate dependence, which it does by way of exchange relations as the only possible form of retroactively socializing production processes: “each private labor asserts itself as a part of the labor of society only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers” (ibid.: 83–84). Since the economic agents do not speak to each other, they must do so through their objects. The “fetishism of commodities” that famously follows – “thingly relations between persons and social relations between things” – is not just an appearance; rather, as clearly highlighted by Lukács in the first part of the reification essay, these relations “appear [...] *as what they really are*” (ibid.: 84, emphasis added). This is because, within the “exchange relations between the products, the labor time socially necessary for their production forcibly asserts itself like an overriding law of Nature” (ibid.: 86). In other words, as the resultant force of all individual conscious processes, an unconscious and impersonal mechanism arises wherein each “person’s own activity, her own labor is opposed to her as something objective and independent of her, something that controls her by virtue of autonomous laws alien to

human beings” (*HCC*: 87). This “social objectivity of value” (Marx) or “second nature” (Lukács) is produced and reproduced by human agency, therefore also virtually suppressible by it (to this extent, and only to this extent, its “natural” character is a mere appearance); yet, at the same time, it actually asserts itself on any individual agent as a “social-natural” estranged power as long as the capitalist mode of production is not overcome.

Thus, however, the connection posited by Lukács between the part-whole problem and the form-content problem is already clearly given. On one side, reification originates from the fragmentary nature of the capitalist production process, or, more precisely, from the dual character of the commodity-producing labor, as it were intermediate between the absolute dispersion of the pre-modern world and a self-conscious whole. Capitalist society differs from both precisely in constituting a *totality* that, at the same time, is *opaque to itself* and, therefore, *contradictory*; in a sense, it is a failed attempt at a system.⁸ In Lukács’s words, such unsuccessful totalization consists in that only “partial systems” (single production processes or industrial branches, social spheres as distinct from each other as economics, law and politics, etc.) are consciously rationalized, while the social whole remains irrational and uncontrollable. A “law-like” connection between these parts can only be established in an “accidental”

8 It might be argued, therefore (as Adorno and the authors of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* have done), that the *dialectic*, as a system of contradictions, is specific to modern bourgeois society. If so, not only a dialectic of nature – as suggested by (the early) Lukács in a well-known footnote (*HCC*: 24) – but also a pre- or post-capitalist dialectic would be hardly thinkable. Much less could the dialectic be conceived as an *ontology*, as in Engels and the late Lukács himself.

and “mechanical” way, i.e., from the outside (as becomes evident in the recurrent phenomenon of *crisis*):

The capitalist process of rationalization *based on private economic calculation* requires that every manifestation of life shall exhibit this very interaction between details which are subject to laws and a totality ruled by chance [...]. This does not mean, of course, that there can be no ‘law’ governing the whole. But such a ‘law’ would have to be *the ‘unconscious’ product of the activity of the different commodity owners* acting independently of one another, i.e. a law of mutually interacting ‘coincidences’ rather than one of truly rational organization (*HCC*: 102, emphasis added).

On the other side, the consequence of this mutilated rationality is that social agents experience their own world – the product of their labor – as an impenetrable object and, more specifically, as a set of *abstract laws*. Their attitude towards them, for Lukács, can only be that of passive “contemplation”, in the sense that, whether in thought or action, they cannot but adjust to these laws instead of changing them. As a result, nothing qualitatively *new* can appear; rather, the social preponderance of value over use-value is reflected in subjective behavior, insofar as the abstraction from the qualitative *content* of things and processes reduces any experience of objects to *formal* subsumption under unchangeable laws. The same reification process, intrinsic to the socialization of private labor, prevents access simultaneously to the totality and the living substratum of things.

This, according to Lukács, is nothing but the logic of modern philosophy as a whole.

2. A failing system, II: philosophy

The “antinomies of totality and content” (*HCC*: 132) dominate the intellectual trajectory initiated by Descartes and culminating in Kant, which distinguishes itself from pre-modern philosophy in that it “springs from the reified structure of consciousness” (*HCC*: 110–111). As such, it initially parallels the capitalist tendency to rationalize the world, i.e., to free it from any “natural”, traditional, merely given residue. It attempts, therefore, to “generate” reality from thought – to reconstruct and unify the totality of being into a system deducible from a rational first principle, thereby understanding it no longer as something independent from the knowing subject, but as its “product”. Just as in the case of bourgeois practical rationality, however, the theoretical one is also *formal*, that is, identical to the manipulation of objects from the outside with the instrumental aim of subsuming them under laws and, thus, mastering them. Modern philosophy, therefore, assumes as its sole unquestioned model the mathematical calculus, as the method “whereby objects are constructed, created out of the formal presuppositions of objectivity in general” (*HCC*: 112). It is *rationalism* – unlike prior philosophies, an all-encompassing one – in the specific sense “of a formal system whose unity derives from the orientation towards that aspect of the phenomena that can be grasped by the understanding, that is created by the understanding and hence also subject to the control, the predictions and the calculations of the understanding” (*HCC*: 113).

Thus conceived, though, reason inevitably leads to an antinomy in the strict Kantian meaning of the term. On one

hand, no irreducibly given “fact” may be allowed to resist formal reduction, for otherwise the whole purpose of “generation” would be missed and the system would collapse upon itself; on the other hand, a merely formal rationality cannot by definition penetrate a content that is opposed to it at the outset. This dilemma is referred to by the neo-Kantian Emil Lask as “the problem of irrationality”, whereby the “irrational” residue denotes at the same time the *material substratum* of things beyond subjective forms and the *totality* beyond “partial systems” of laws. As anticipated, these are precisely the two dimensions in Kant’s discussion of the “thing-in-itself”, which Lukács introduces at this point as the first clear insight into the antinomical consequences of modern rationalism:

To put it briefly, these problems can be reduced to two great, seemingly unconnected and even opposed complexes. There is, firstly, the problem of matter (in the logical, technical sense), the problem of the *content* of those forms with the aid of which ‘we’ know and are able to know the world because we have created it ourselves. And, secondly, there is 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 (*HCC*: 115, emphasis in the original).

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the former dimension of the unknowable thing-in-itself is the substratum of the single object as opposed to the “phenomenon”, i.e., to the object’s aspect that is commensurable to a priori forms, while the latter meaning is that of the “ideas” as the rational modes of totalizing phenomena

(soul, world, God), whose unattainability by human understanding is demonstrated precisely in the antinomies section of the “Transcendental Dialectic”. According to Lukács, Kant has acknowledged not only the problem, but also the way to its solution, for his famous “primacy of practical reason” in the second *Critique* already implies that a true generation of the object is not possible within theoretical knowledge, but requires the transformation of the subject itself in the direction of free activity. Kant’s formal ethics, however, reproduces the subject-object duality in that the empirical world continues to appear to the individual agent as something alien, determining the concrete content of the moral law from the outside in each given case. The subject is thus constantly torn between the two dialectical extremes of abstract voluntarism and the fatalist resignation to facts, and, in this sense, it falls back into a *contemplative* mode of being. Here Lukács’s initially enigmatic identification of contemplation and formalism begins to get clearer. “The indissoluble links that bind the contemplative attitude of the subject to the purely formal character of the object of knowledge” (or action) manifest themselves whenever the thinking or acting subject, as a form separated from contents, confronts the latter as given objects to which it cannot but passively adjust, so that its “active” intervention is in fact reduced to “the systematic and conscious contemplation of those purely formal connections, those ‘laws’ which function in – objective – reality *without the intervention of the subject*” (*HCC*: 126–128, emphasis in the original).

The contradiction that seemingly arises between the two definitions of rationalism as active generation and contemplation, Lukács says, is neither merely apparent nor a logical flaw; rather, it is precisely the objective contradiction of capitalist socialization. Like the bourgeois private laborer, the bourgeois transcendental subject untouched by the world must also pay a price for the sovereign independence of its production process: that of submitting to its own product as an estranged objectivity. Absolute freedom is dialectically reversed into absolute necessity, pure activity into pure passivity: “even while ‘acting’ [the individual] remains [...] the object and not the subject of events” (*HCC*: 135). Once again, the loss of material *objectivity* means at the same time the loss of power over the *totality*, which is expressed at the theoretical level as the specialization of science, i.e., its fragmentation into independent “partial systems”. In thought as in labor, the specifically modern rationality of the partial process has as its own result the irrationality of the whole:

There appears in the thought of bourgeois society the double tendency characteristic of its evolution. On the one hand, it acquires increasing control over the details of its social existence, subjecting them to its needs. On the other end it loses [...] the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society as a whole and with that it loses its own qualifications for leadership (*HCC*: 121).

The contradiction that appears here between subjectivity and objectivity in modern rationalist formal systems [...], the conflict between their nature as systems created by ‘us’ and their fatalistic necessity distant from and alien to man is nothing but the logical and systematic formulation of the modern state of society. For, on

the one hand, human beings are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them the ‘natural’, irrational and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and ‘made’, a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature [...] a necessity which cannot be grasped *either* in its ultimate substratum *or* in its all-encompassing totality, [...] but [...] can increasingly be penetrated, calculated and predicted in its parts (*HCC*: 128–129, emphasis added).

Interestingly, Lukács inserts here what he cautiously calls an “excursus [...] of no immediate concern to us” (*HCC*: 131), but which is actually pivotal to his case for a reconstruction of Marxist philosophy. It is a critique of Engels’s solution to the problem of the thing-in-itself. For Engels (whom Lukács often quotes approvingly in other respects in *HCC*), Kant’s opposition of phenomenon and noumenon is refuted by “practice, namely, experiment and industry”, through which the alleged “in-itself” of things and processes is appropriated for the aims of the acting subject. Lukács objects that, for the reasons stated thus far, precisely the kind of manipulative “practice” proper to science and technique is, in fact, contemplation: “Inasmuch as industry sets itself ‘objectives’, it is not the subject of the natural laws governing society, but only their object – *in the decisive, i.e. dialectical, historical sense*” (*HCC*: 133, emphasis added). This formulation simultaneously anticipates and overcomes Heidegger’s critique of technique as “metaphysics”, for the final aside is the key to the peculiarity of Lukács’s position and to his argument as a whole. “In the dialectical, historical sense”, becoming “practical”

indeed requires the subject to suppress the object's transcendence; to this end, however, it must not merely appropriate it from the outside, but, on the contrary, self-reflectively recognize itself as part of the objective process, so that, conversely, "the fact that an object is thought of implies at the same time the object's self-consciousness" (*HCC*: 132). Therefore, any understanding of the dialectic itself – as in the Platonic dialectic or Engels's own dialectic of nature – as an external dynamics observed by an immutable subject is, strictly speaking, undialectical. The subject can only generate the object insofar as it is in turn generated by it; the conversion of contemplation into praxis entails the conscious qualitative transformation of both poles at every stage of the dialectical process.

This is the sense of Hegel's answer to Kant's antinomies. According to Lukács, post-Kantian idealism represents a step forward from pre-critical systems, in that it assumes the subject-object duality discovered by Kant and tries to sublimate it into a larger unity:

The greatness, the paradox and the tragedy of classical German philosophy lies in the fact that [...] it no longer dismisses every datum as non-existent [...]. Instead, while grasping and holding on to the irrational character of the actual contents of the concepts it strives to go beyond this, to overcome it and to erect a system. [...] It took the logical opposition of form and content, the point at which all the antitheses of philosophy meet, and drove it to the extremes. This enabled it to make a real advance on its predecessors and lay the foundations of the dialectical method (*HCC*: 117–118).

The origins of the “dialectical method” thus lie in the attempt to understand the opposition as part of a dynamic process, irrationality as itself a moment (albeit necessary) of reason. For this purpose, however, the latter had in turn to change its meaning from merely formal to truly “practical”, i.e., world-generating reason. As seen with Kantian ethics, to conceive the subject as activity the question had to be answered first: *which* subject? If bourgeois philosophy “was not to renounce its understanding of the whole”, Lukács says, “it had to take the road that leads inwards. It had to strive to find the subject of thought which could be thought of as producing existence without any [...] transcendent thing-in-itself” (*HCC*: 122). More precisely, it had to discover a deeper layer of both subjectivity and objectivity beneath their empirical duality, namely an *identical subject-object* from which to deduce “every datum as its product, and every duality as a special case derived from this pristine unity”, “in contrast to the dogmatic acceptance of a merely given reality divorced from the subject” (*HCC*: 123). The answers of the individual idealist thinkers to this challenge correspond to as many dialectical moments in the process towards the solution. In Fichte, the unconditionally active transcendental subject can absorb the empirical opposition insofar as the indeterminacy of pure factuality is itself conceived as an a priori determinacy – “deduced as non-deductible” –, and, in this still quite abstract sense, “produced”. In Schiller as in Romanticism, the generating principle is traced for the first time to a concrete sphere of empirical reality, namely *art* as a kind of rationality which institutes an organic *whole* precisely by virtue of its *non-formal* rela-

tion to contents;⁹ nevertheless, its limitation to a partial sector of social activity reproduces the wider fracture, unless the aesthetic “play drive” either withdraws into subjective contemplation or is mythologized as the objective structure of being. The latter option is that of Schelling, whose ontologization of “intellectual intuition” as the unmediated subject-object identity ultimately amounts to an irrationalist escape from reification.

It is only with Hegel that “the call for an intuitive understanding [...] is clearly, objectively and scientifically stated” and “the genesis, the production of the producer of knowledge”, is resolved into “the question of *dialectical method*” (HCC: 141, emphasis in the original). In the dialectical process, namely, the *determinate* negation of partial moments into a whole proceeds from their immanent content, and the concreteness of the Romantic aesthetic principle is thus transposed to the logical plan that had remained merely formal in Fichte. This is the genuine suppression of “the indifference of form towards content” and, therefore, the finally achieved “practical” transfiguration of the knowing subject as self-consciousness of the known “substance” itself. Hegel’s absolute novelty is that he

was the first to set about the task of consciously recasting all problems of logic by grounding them in the qualitative material nature of their content, in matter in the logical and philosophical sense of the word. This resulted in the establishment of a completely new logic

9 “This principle [of art, G.Z.] is the creation of a concrete totality that springs from a conception of form orientated towards the concrete content of its material substratum. In this view, form is therefore able to demolish the ‘contingent’ relation of the parts to the whole and to resolve the merely apparent opposition between chance and necessity” (HCC: 137).

of the *concrete concept*, the logic of totality [...]. Even more original is the fact that the subject is [not] the unchanged observer of the objective dialectic of being and concept [...]: the dialectical process, the ending of a rigid confrontation of rigid forms, is enacted essentially *between the subject and the object* (HCC: 142, emphasis in the original).

And yet, Hegel also falls into the antinomies of bourgeois thought when it comes to identifying the identical subject-object in actual history. According to Lukács, the whole German classical philosophy culminating in Hegel is at the same time the climax and collapse of modern rationalism, in that it takes on and fully develops the contradictions of capitalist society, but only “on an intellectual and philosophical plane” (HCC: 121). This is because it maintains the bourgeois “standpoint” from which those contradictions necessarily arise; all it can do, then, is to “complete the evolution of class in thought” (ibid.) without resolving the antinomies, for this would require transcending both class and thought. Hegel is the transitional point, inasmuch as the dialectical method does indeed overcome duality, but its limitation to thought ends up reflecting on thought itself as an internal contradiction. In his system, the relationship between the logical and historical developments is not fully clarified and never comes to a complete interpenetration, because the bourgeois Hegel could not recognize the true social subject of totalization – the proletariat. In its place, the “subject of genesis” – the bearer of history – is identified as the mythological “world spirit” acting through the individual “spirits of the peoples”. Aside from any political considerations, Lukács says, from a strictly Hegelian point of view this entails an antinomy, for then

the essence (world spirit) remains separate from its concrete manifestations: “acting becomes transcendent to the agent” (HCC: 146) and the alleged identity is undone. The logic of history is transposed beyond it and history itself, from the vital element of the system, becomes a part of it in the formal sense of an observed object among others: “But in the absence of necessity history relapses into the irrational dependence on the ‘given’ which it had just overcome. [...] Thought relapses into the contemplative duality of subject and object” (HCC: 147–148).

The theoretical totalization of capitalist society has thus failed just as much as the economic one, precisely because its system remained *theoretical* instead of fully identifying with the socio-historical whole. The heritage of German idealism consists in the philosophically unfolded yet unresolved bourgeois antinomies, together with a *method* for their overcoming. Further developing this method, however, requires the transition to the standpoint of a different class. After Hegel, bourgeois philosophy regresses to a pre-dialectical or even pre-critical stance, splitting into the two extremes of mythical irrationalism and resigned positivism, both of which have the same extrinsic, contemplative attitude to the empirical sciences that these sciences themselves have to the world – and, one might add, also parallel the two seemingly opposed bourgeois political tendencies diagnosed by Lenin: respectively, anarchism and opportunism.

3. History and totality

The philosophical dimension first disclosed, although not carried to its ultimate consequence, by Hegel is that of *historical* experience. The meaning of this term in Lukács is to be understood in the most emphatic way: that is, neither as a research field in the reified sense of scientific “partial systems” nor in a merely subjective sense, as a different method or worldview, but as a new subject-object relation and, therefore, a new and deeper mode of being. At the end of his discussion of Kantian ethics, Lukács had remarked that in Kant “freedom is neither able to overcome the sensuous *necessity* of the system of knowledge and the soullessness of the fatalistically conceived laws of nature, nor is it able to give them any *meaning*” (*HCC*: 134, emphasis added) – whereby each term corresponds to one of the two “antinomies of content and totality” examined so far. The “sensuous necessity” is that of the material objectivity estranged from the formal subject, while the “meaning” could only be that of an organically grasped whole, i.e. an intrinsic, not accidental, connection between the parts. Now, Lukács’s magnificent definition of history as opposed to formal knowledge focuses precisely on its unified solution to both of these problems:¹⁰

If genesis, in the sense given to it in classical philosophy, is to be attained it is necessary to create a basis for it in a logic of changing contents. It is only in history, in the historical process, in the uninterrupted outpouring of what is qualitatively new that the requisite paradigm-

10 As emphasized by Lukács himself: “With this point of view the two main aspects of the irrationality of the thing-in-itself, namely the concreteness of the individual content and the totality, are given a positive turn and appear as a unity” (*HCC*: 147).

matic order can be found in the realm of things. [...] *Precisely insofar* [*gerade indem*] as a knowledge adequate to the individual factors is compelled to construct its conceptual system upon content and upon what is qualitatively unique and new in the phenomena, it is compelled at the same time not to let any of these elements to maintain its mere concrete unrepeatable character, but to situate them within the concrete totality of the historical world, the total and concrete historical process itself as their own intelligible dimension (*HCC*: 144–145, emphasis added).

“Precisely insofar”, that is to say: in the layer of reality attained by historical knowledge, single events and processes are ordered into a totality not in spite, but by virtue of their individual and incommensurable aspect. History can only be a “logic of changing contents” because, as in Hegel’s determinate negation, *change* (“the total and concrete historical process”) is produced by material *contents* themselves (“what is qualitatively unique and new in the phenomena”). Lukács’s formulation is strikingly close to that given a few years earlier by a rather different Hegelian philosopher, namely the liberal Benedetto Croce in his *Breviary of Aesthetics*. The conceptual affinities are noteworthy even regardless of a possible genetic influence.¹¹ As a conclusion to his critique of formal classifications of artistic genres, Croce claims:

11 Which, anyway, cannot be excluded and is indeed likely, since Croce’s *Breviary* had appeared in German in the same year (1913) of its publication in Italy and had been widely read. Shortly after *HCC*, for example, it would become one of the main sources for Walter Benjamin’s introductory essay to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In 1915, Lukács had published a review of the German version – preceding the Italian one by two years – of Croce’s *Theory and History of Historiography* (Lukács 2018 [1915]).

Denying theoretical value to abstract classifications was not meant to deny that value to a genetic and concrete classification, which is not then a ‘classification’, and is called *History*. In history, each work of art takes the place awaiting it, that place alone and no other [...]. *And* it is in history [...] – and not in the pyramids of empirical concepts [...] – where we find the link to all works of art or to all intuitions, because in history they appear organically connected, as the successive and necessary stages of the development of the spirit, each one a note of the eternal poem that harmonizes in itself all the single poems (Croce 2007 [1913]: 42).¹²

The conjunction “and” in this passage parallels Lukács’s “precisely insofar”. Despite every stylistic (and political) divergence, here both dialectical thinkers are expressing the same idea. Subjective classifications – “the pyramids of empirical concepts” or, in Lukács’s terms, “partial systems” – fail precisely as such, i.e., as ordering attempts, for the connection of their contents does not organically proceed from one to the other; any such aggregate, being arbitrary, is therefore also inert. History, on the contrary, which is no “classification” in the formal sense, is at the same time the only “genetic and concrete classification”. In it, each individual element is more than the fungible specimen of an abstract category or law and appears, hence, in its intrinsic, irreducible content, “that place alone and no other” – but “precisely insofar” it receives objective ordering, irradiating as it were from that place towards the whole, in a sort of spontaneous communication of material qualities with each other *from the inside*. In Lukács’s words, it is the very “concrete unrepeatable character” of contents that “situates them within the con-

12 Translation amended; the first emphasis is in the original, the second one is added.

crete totality of the historical world [...] as *their own* intelligible dimension” (*HCC*: 145, emphasis added).

In Lukács, this totality is both synchronic (social) and diachronic (historical). It is the suppression of *any* subject-object duality because, for him (as for Hegel), natural objectivity is internalized and thus “sublated” into self-oriented human activity – *spirit* in the idealist dialectic, *labor* in the materialist one. As the real socio-historical process, it already forms the hidden substratum of bourgeois reified life and thought; still, based once again on Hegelian premises, it only comes to full “existence” when brought to consciousness. This, however, is not, as in Hegel and Croce, the contemplative consciousness of the world spirit, but the self-consciousness of specific material relations of production. Lukács’s Hegelian objection to Hegel is that the subject can only recognize itself in the object and be, conversely, the object’s self-conscious moment because the “objectivity” in question is itself, in essence, already *practical* – i.e., a labor process.¹³ And yet, labor as such is too generic a candidate for the bearer of historical totalization. As it turned out, in fact, the entire human historical process that *now* retrospectively appears as a totality has first actually become such in the capitalist socialized world. The whole of *history* is only totalized in the present *social* whole – which, however, is a contradictory one. Due to both of these aspects, as will be shown extensively in the third chapter of the reification essay, the “identical subject-object” of history and of being itself is neither mankind nor even

13 Therefore, Lukács’s later self-objection of an alleged neglect of labor (and, thereby, of nature) in *HCC* seems to me at least a partial (self-)misunderstanding.

modern society. It is the *proletariat* – not just because it is the actually laboring class, which then “makes” reality, but primarily because of its peculiar position in the historical as well as the social whole. Unlike past exploited classes, the proletariat lives in a social totality; unlike the bourgeoisie, however, its objective class interest prompts it to transcend the present “failing system” into a true “system”, that is, a *self-transparent totality*. Therefore, it is the only class in history endowed with cognitive access to the contradictory totality as such – namely, as a totality *and* as contradictory. While Lukács’s formulations can easily be, and have been, misunderstood in an idealistic sense, the proletariat is not ontologized by him; on the contrary, just as in Marx, it has to overcome itself *qua* proletariat in socialist society. It is not, thus, the “identical subject-object” as a Hegelian Absolute, nor, on the other side, merely as an oppressed group, but rather as the sole possible self-consciousness of the actually existing whole.

Similarly, this whole itself should not be understood in a parodic sense as the sum of all facts. This “closed” image applies, as it were, to an *extensive* notion of totality, which still belongs to reified thought. But the above sketched *intensive* concept of a “logic of changing contents”, as a spontaneous ordering of single elements into a meaningful horizon, is not just immune to cognitive “closedness”; rather, for Lukács, it is its direct opposite. The rigidity of formally defined spheres of objects, incapable of an immanent transition from one to another, has, in fact, a paramount corollary: “rationalist thought, by concerning itself with the formal calculability of the contents of forms made abstract,

must define these contents *as immutable* – within the system of relations obtaining at any given time” (HCC: 143–144, emphasis in the original). This is why, Lukács adds, the historical becoming or, in other terms, the appearance of what is qualitatively new, cannot be conceived by rationalism in a processual, but only in a law-like way, that is, as something foreseeable and, thus, precisely *not* as the new. Therefore, “as long as this process and this novelty appear merely as a limit and not as the simultaneous result, goal and substratum of the method, the concepts [...] must preserve that rigid closedness in themselves which only appears to be eliminated by the *juxtaposition* of other concepts” (HCC: 144, emphasis in the original). Only dynamic connections within the historical totality allow for true change (and vice versa), while previously fixed “partial systems” freeze each of their respective contents into a timeless “it is”. The consequence is the overturning not only of traditional understandings of Lukács’s position, but also of the contemporary philosophical mood – *only the totality is “open”, fragments are always “closed”*. If, then, any approach to a given object in terms of what it “is” instead of what it “has become” is affected at the outset by reification, it might be claimed that much of our present mode of thinking on the Left, whether in the analytic or in the poststructuralist form, has meanwhile regressed to “contemplation”. As such, it shows also on the political level the dialectical reversals denounced by Lenin and theoretically clarified by Lukács – the subjective abstractness of empirical “realism” and the passivity of voluntarism. Whatever one may hold of Lukács’s optimism of praxis, or even of the further implications of his concept of total-

ity,¹⁴ one lesson to be learned today from the antinomies chapter is its invitation to compel ourselves – against our innermost impulses – to “dialectical, historical” thinking.

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14 As they revealed themselves in its subsequent fate and, especially, in the debates within the Frankfurt School, see Jay 1984 and, for an updated immanent critique of the reification essay, Postone 2003.

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