

# “THE STANDPOINT OF THE PROLETARIAT”<sup>1</sup>

Reification’s necessary counterpart

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“The Standpoint of the Proletariat” is the last and longest part of the reification chapter, which is probably the most notorious and debated essay of *History and Class Consciousness*. While the first two parts of the essay – “The Phenomenon of Reification” and “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought”<sup>2</sup> – laid out in great detail how reification dominates, respectively, capitalist society as a whole and bourgeois philosophy in particular, this last part is focused on the possibility of *overcoming* reification. That is why these parts should not be read separately, but rather in close relation to one another, lest we remain confined to either the negative or the positive dimensions of Lukács’s complex approach to reification in his analysis of capitalism.

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

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2 Cf. the texts by Victor Strazzeri and Giovanni Zanotti in this volume.

In this text, I will first briefly reconstruct Lukács’s arguments developed in this section regarding the possibility of grasping capitalist society in its totality from the standpoint of the proletariat, and then I will propose some observations about the afterlife of this highly contested, yet in my view still very fruitful idea, arguing for the need to avoid both a theory of reification without the concept of standpoint and a theory of the standpoint without the concept of reification.

## Summary of the text

The third part of the reification essay is further divided into six subsections, the content of which can be thus systematized (the titles are mine):

1) *Immediacy and mediation*: In the first subsection, Lukács shows how immediacy and mediation are moments of the dialectical process of totality and points out that, although one must *start* from immediacy in order to reach the totality, it is crucial not to stop there; one must seek to overcome this immediacy through the mediations that underlie any given objective reality. Lukács stresses that this is precisely what bourgeois thought is unable to do: its contemplative attitude prevents it from pointing beyond what is immediately given, which leads to a rigid understanding of reality and thus, ultimately, to the suppression of history itself. Hence, although the proletariat and the bourgeoisie share, in its immediacy, “the same” objective reality of social existence,

this does not prevent the specific categories of mediation by means of which both classes raise this immediacy to the level of consciousness [...] from being fundamentally different, thanks to the different position occupied by the two classes within the ‘same’ economic process (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 150).

II) *The standpoint of totality*: In the second subsection, Lukács sets out the reasons why only the proletariat can have access to the standpoint of totality that allows for the overcoming of immediacy, and thus of reification. For Lukács, both the proletarian and the bourgeois have their consciousness reified (as he argued in Parts I and II of the essay), but the workers experience this reification in their own immediate reality, and going beyond it appears for them as a matter of life or death (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 164). The bourgeois, by contrast, feel comfortable in their reification – since, in their immediate reality, they appear not as objects, but as the subjects of that reality. This amounts to why each class has an opposing *impulse* towards overcoming reification. Workers might come to perceive the existence of reification, moreover, because they sell only a portion of their faculties (their labor power) as a commodity, while the members of the bourgeoisie sell the whole of their personality, their entire “soul” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 172).

III) *The subject of history*: The third subsection points to the fact that the proletariat can be recognized as the true subject of history when it overcomes the immediacy of reified reality and moves from the self-consciousness of the commodity to the self-consciousness of society in its historical development. This is not merely a movement on the level of consciousness, but also of

praxis, since for the proletariat “this ability to go beyond the immediate [...] means the *transformation of the objective nature of the objects of action*” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 175, emphasis in the original), that is: “since consciousness here is not the knowledge of an opposed object but is the self-consciousness of the object, *the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object*” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 178, emphasis in the original).

IV) “*Facts*” and *tendencies*: In the fourth subsection, Lukács claims that with the abandonment of purely immediate reality, the very conception of reality is altered. When free from the bounds of immediacy, the “*facts*” that make up empirical reality can be considered less real than the general *tendencies* of total development (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 181). Tendencies contain the general meaning of historical development, the movement of totality, as opposed to mere facts, crystallized and naturalized, i.e., not dissolved into processes (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 184).

V) *The class and the individual*: In this process, Lukács argues in the fifth subsection, human beings have become the measure of all (social) things (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 185). Not just any individual human being, but rather the concrete, social, historical human being, embedded in society – in other words, the class. In Lukács’s words:

The individual can never become the measure of all things. For when the individual confronts objective reality he is faced by a complex of ready-made and unalterable objects which allow him only the subjective responses of recognition or rejection. Only the class can relate to the whole of reality in a practical revolutionary way (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 193).

VI) *History and praxis*: Finally, in the sixth subsection, Lukács summarizes the main ideas presented in the essay, especially with regard to the relationship between being and thinking and the role of praxis. He ends the text with a reminder that the historical development has thus far placed the proletariat in the position where the transformation of society is both *possible* and *necessary* – but that this transformation must be the free act of the proletariat itself (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 209).

## **The reception of Lukács's theory of the standpoint of the proletariat**

As we can see, Lukács closes this section – and hence the reification essay as whole – in a rather optimistic note. In the early 1920s, a proletarian revolution on a large and even global scale seemed not only possible and necessary, but almost imminent, and Lukács's text meant to conceptualize the unique potentiality inherent in the position of the proletariat to carry out such a revolution.

Since then, as the prospect of a world revolution faded farther and farther in the horizon, so did Lukács's theory of the standpoint of the proletariat fall under attack and remained in oblivion for many decades. While his account of reification, as exposed in the previous parts of the essay, is often still considered to be very perceptive in terms of understanding contemporary phenomena of capitalist society, the theory of the standpoint of the proletariat frequently appears as an outdated

“workerism” that has been disproved in the court of history and serves more as a document of a somewhat naïve and distant past than as a conceptual tool with which to address the present.

I would claim, however, that the two levels, so to speak, of Lukács’s essay – the diagnosis of the pervasiveness of reification, on the one hand, and the possibility of its overcoming from a standpoint grounded in its contradictions, on the other – should not be read separately if we are to grasp the essay’s full potential. Next, I will outline the consequences of the unilateral readings of Lukács’s main essay in *History and Class Consciousness*.

#### *A. Reification without standpoint*

The tendency to discard Lukács’s approach to the uniqueness of the standpoint of the proletariat and to focus on his conceptualization of reification appears, for example, in the fact that the first part of the essay is often read, and sometimes even published, separately from the other two. This dismissal of the standpoint of the proletariat can also be seen in a more explicit manner, for instance, in Max Horkheimer’s inaugural text on “Traditional and Critical Theory” (Horkheimer 2022 [1937]), in which he states that the truth can no longer be considered to be destined to any predetermined group, or in Habermas’s criticism of the proletariat as a mythological macro-subject in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984 [1981]). This pessimism with regard to the revolutionary potential inherent in the position of the proletariat might be understandable under the circumstances in which these texts were written – the mass

adherence of German workers to Nazism in the case of Horkheimer and their integration into the post-war social-democratic order in the case of Habermas. But it seems that this position misses Lukács's point that:

with the increasing intensification of this antagonism, there grows for the proletariat both the possibility of putting its positive content in the place of the emptied and bursting husks, as well as the danger of – at least temporarily – of submitting ideologically to these emptiest and most hollowed-out forms of bourgeois culture (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 208, trans. amended).

This echoes the distinction between *empirical* and *imputed* class consciousness, which he develops in more detail in the essay on “Class Consciousness”. There are differences between that chapter and this section on “The Standpoint of the Proletariat”,<sup>3</sup> but both texts refuse any empiricist, immediate, and crystalized reliance on the subjective beliefs of individual workers. In this sense, perhaps it would make more sense to talk instead about a distinction between *immediate* and *mediated* class consciousness.

For Lukács, moreover, reification and the standpoint of the proletariat as the standpoint of totality are internally connected. It is in the nature of reification – in “the formal character of its own rationality” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 101, trans. amended) as opposed to the living content of the human exchange with nature and other humans – to create its own limits and therefore the possibility of its overcoming *precisely* from the standpoint where this contradiction is experienced in its most acute form.

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3 Cf. the text by Eden Young in this volume.

Whether this possibility is taken to its conclusion remains an open question, one to be answered not in theory, but in praxis, and in connection with the prevailing social conditions of the time.

### *B. Standpoint without reification*

Let us now turn to the other side of this coin, namely: the afterlife of the idea of a privileged standpoint from which to observe and understand society, and discuss what happens when it loses its connection to an analysis of reification – that is, when we have standpoint without reification.

While today few would claim Lukács’s account of the standpoint of the proletariat exactly as he formulated one century ago – and we cannot forget that, later in his life, Lukács himself became a harsh critic of his early work –, there have been attempts to update it. One such attempt was carried out by feminist Marxists, especially from the 1970s on, producing a current of thought known as Feminist Standpoint Theory. In fact, one of the main proponents of this approach, Nancy Hartsock (2019 [1998]), draws explicitly on Lukács to make the case for the emancipatory potential lying dormant in women’s experiences in patriarchal-capitalist societies.

The goal here, however, is not to address the convergences and divergences between this strand of feminist thought and Lukács’s conception of the standpoint of the proletariat,<sup>4</sup> since to deal with this issue in an adequate manner it would be neces-

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4 For further discussions on this topic, cf. Feinberg 2020, Jameson 2009 [1988], Scott Cameron 2005, Stahl 2023, and Teixeira 2020.



sary to delve more deeply into other topics and areas of research (such as, notably, the feminist theory of social reproduction). My aim is rather to draw attention to a more recent strand in the field of social epistemology that is sometimes taken as a direct by-product of Feminist Standpoint Theories and which encapsulates a conception of standpoint without reification. In the last decades, the conception that all knowledge is situated and that this is a valuable epistemic factor – rather than a failure in reaching purely “objective” science – has been gaining increasing currency in academia. This stance has the merit of challenging the mainstream assumption that knowledge is (or can and should be) neutral, disembodied, and value-free. However, we should make it clear that a purely perspectivist approach was not what Lukács developed in the reification essay and that such relativism tends to neglect the structuring effects of phenomena like domination and exploitation.

Lukács’s point was not that, since all knowledge is produced from specific positions in society, “the more the merrier” when it comes to piling up perspective on top of perspective in order to attain a picture of society as diversified and exhaustive as possible. Quite the contrary, Lukács was very critical of the idea that understanding reality as a totality would require aggregating as many particular descriptions as possible in order to paint an extremely detailed canvas. He argued, instead, that there is a standpoint that allows for a qualitatively more penetrating insight, one that is capable of tearing a hole in the veil of reified thought because it points not to the bad infinity of perpetual addition, but rather to the internal connections and medi-

ations between isolated “facts” (grasped now in the form of processes and tendencies). Lukács does not claim that from the standpoint of totality it is possible to see all things as they “really” are – as if it could access the Kantian things-in-themselves – but to meaningfully grasp their *genesis* and their *position* in the broader context in which they are embedded.<sup>5</sup>

In the Hegelian terms employed by Lukács, the object of knowledge from this standpoint is not *being*, but *becoming* (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 181). And in a world characterized by reified contradictions between mediation and immediacy, living and dead labor, content and form, labor and capital, forms of subjectivity and forms of objectivity, etc., the standpoint that harbors the potential to grasp the underlying mediations – and to do so in the form of praxis – is the standpoint at the core of these relentless contradictions, which in turn relentlessly pushes it forward.

## Concluding remarks

There are certainly many issues in Lukács’s proposal that I have not addressed and that need further development and discussion. The aim here has been solely to argue that understanding reification and the standpoint of totality as interconnected dimensions of the analysis of capitalism makes the reading of

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5 See the text by Giovanni Zanotti on “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought” in this volume for a similar understanding of totality as an open process of interconnected moments rather than a closed system of independent unities.

the central essay of *History and Class Consciousness* more interesting and productive for us today.

I would even suggest, albeit admitting that further developments would be required to demonstrate it, that perhaps posing the discussion in these terms might help to illuminate the debate about intersectional struggles without falling into two traps: on the one hand, a radical pluralism that considers all standpoints as equally sound and forceful and ends up homogenizing them, or, on the other, a doctrinaire refusal to engage seriously with what it derogatorily labels as “identitarian struggles”.

In any case, Lukács’s theory of reification, when considered together with its counterpart, the moving totality that might be grasped from the practical standpoint of proletariat, is much more sophisticated and complex than a hasty, unilateral reading suggests.

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