

“HISTORICAL MATERIALISM’S CHANGE OF FUNCTION”

Reflections from the past’s prevented
future

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1. Introduction: the past’s prevented future

A discussion of “Historical Materialism’s Change of Function” (hereafter *Funktionswechsel*) must begin with the questions raised by its inclusion in *History and Class Consciousness*. For multiple reasons, the essay holds a peculiar place in the 1923 work: it is the only text based on a lecture, presented in June 1919 upon the inauguration of the “Institute for Research into Historical Materialism” in revolutionary Budapest. As such, it is the only essay to date from the time of the Hungarian Council Republic. And while not the earliest essay to figure in *HCC* – “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (March 1919) predates the revolution –, it is by far the most heavily modified of the contributions incorporated into the volume. If compared to its original form

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(Lukács 1975 [1919]: 108–123), the revised essay is at least two-thirds longer (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 229–260). Lukács, in fact, seemed aware of the distinctiveness of *Funktionswechsel* within *HCC*; for one, he openly distanced himself from the text’s optimistic thrust, which he attributed to the revolutionary conjuncture of its genesis. His production from the period, he noted in the preface of 1967,¹ made it clear that “enthusiasm was a very makeshift substitute for knowledge and experience” (Lukács 1971 [1967]: xi). Notably, this was already his viewpoint in the preface to *HCC* from Christmas 1922. With less than four years of hindsight, Lukács regarded *Funktionswechsel* as an embodiment of “those exaggeratedly sanguine hopes that many of us cherished concerning the duration and tempo of the revolution” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: xli). Hence, even at the time of *HCC*’s publication, he already considered the essay a document from an apparently surpassed historical juncture.

Yet precisely these aspects of *Funktionswechsel* – its extensive revision and revolutionary tone – also make the essay’s inclusion into *HCC* suggestive. On the one hand, the comparison between the 1919 and 1922 versions provides valuable insight into Lukács’s development as a Marxist in that period; on the other, the essay’s emphasis on the “subjective factor” in revolutionary change testifies to its importance within *HCC*’s overall argument and architecture. In that regard, one trait of the essay that Lukács did not alter for publication in *HCC* encapsulates the place of *Funktionswechsel* in the work, namely, the use of the past tense whenever referring to capitalist exploitation and

1 See Konstantin Baehrens’s detailed discussion of the 1967 preface in this volume.

oppression: “Historical materialism *was* one of the proletariat’s most potent weapons *at a time when it was oppressed* and now that it is preparing to rebuild society and culture anew it is natural to take the method over into the new age” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 223, my emphasis). In other words, even if Lukács revised the essay during a moment of defeat and exile against the backdrop of White Terror in Hungary’s reactionary Horthy government, it embodies a defiant standpoint. Much akin to Ernst Bloch’s later conceptualization of non-contemporaneity, *Funktionswechsel* emerges as a living document from a post-revolutionary society, as a testimony of the *past’s prevented future*.

2. The change of function: transformations of science after the revolution

In Lukács’s perspective, if historical materialism “was” a “method of scientific inquiry” in bourgeois society, one uniquely able to uncover the determinants of that societal formation, that also made it a “weapon” in the proletarian liberation struggle (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 224–225). In *HCC*’s praxis-centered framing of Marxist dialectics, an accurate source of knowledge of society is at the same time an effective tool to transform and reshape it. And because it is a “theory of bourgeois society” rooted in the class standpoint of the proletariat, historical materialism also constitutes a means for that collective subject to achieve preeminence in ideological conflict. This element of Lukács’s argument

in *Funktionswechsel* sees him converge with Antonio Gramsci’s later theorization of hegemony:

Parallel with the economic struggle a battle was fought for the consciousness of society. Now, to become conscious is synonymous with the possibility of taking over the leadership of society. The proletariat is the victor in the class struggle not only on the level of power but, at the same time, in the battle for social consciousness (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 228).

In a post-revolutionary society, in turn, the question of knowledge production and of its leveraging as a tool to transform reality emerges anew. The triumph of the revolution not only paves the way for a new society but calls for a renewal of science and culture. What then is the role – or “function” – of historical materialism in that radically changed environment? That is the question at the center of *Funktionswechsel* – and the reason why I opt for a modified English translation of the essay’s title. While not incorrect, Rodney Livingstone’s translation of “Der Funktionswechsel des historischen Materialismus” to “Historical Materialism’s *Changing* Function” obscures the revolutionary rupture central to the essay’s entire premise; in other words, the fact that the change of function already *occurred* with the shift from a capitalist to a socialist society. The issue is, conversely, how to expand the range and further develop historical materialism as a tool of inquiry now that it inhabits “this home, this workshop” that the “victory of the proletariat” has “built” for it (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 253, translation amended).

3. The peculiarity of capitalist society and the phenomenon of reification

In line with Marx and Engels's own path of inquiry, Lukács grounds his consideration of the conditions for a *post-revolutionary, emancipated society* not only on a clear understanding of the antagonistic societal form that is in the process of being transcended, i.e., capitalism, but also on grasping social structures and ideological phenomena that *predate* it. More concretely, in *Funktionswechsel*, Lukács examines the basis for the validity of historical materialism's analytical "truths" regarding bourgeois society so that he can then establish its viability as a tool of inquiry in the study of pre-capitalist phenomena – among other objects of research. The resulting discussion of what differentiates capitalist society from previous societal forms, though returning to themes of previous *HCC* essays, offers many insights into Lukács's development. Not only because these passages were significantly extended and modified between the 1919 and 1922 versions of *Funktionswechsel*, but also because the issues he approaches are less empirical or historiographical than methodological in nature.

In the 1919 version, Lukács remarks that historical materialism had already begun to be applied to "epochs that preceded capitalism [...] partly with success" or "at least with interesting results" (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 115). Yet, this application had revealed "an important methodological deficiency [...] that is not evident in the criticism of capitalism":

This deficiency consists – in short – in the fact that Marx equates all ideological structures [*Gebilde*] and

judges them equally. For him, all ideologies – legal system, state system, religion, ethics, art, science, etc. – are on the same level, they come about in the same way and are functions of the economic and social order (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 115).

As the passage indicates, the Lukács of 1919 still sees Marx’s materialist framework in a sociological if not downright functionalist light.² In the same vein, Lukács roots the limits of historical materialism’s applicability to pre-capitalist societies in the fact that, “whilst the economy has decisive importance [for the latter], it is not the only determining factor” (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 117); before capitalism, the economy still lacks the “autonomy, closedness, end-in-itself character and immanent legality” (ibid.) that made it legible for historical materialist critique. In that terminology and in the notion of a multi-directional causality in social life – according to which the economy can also be determined by other “factors” depending on the concrete historical constellation – Lukács is very close to the thought of Max Weber. He will reference him explicitly shortly thereafter:

Kautsky’s materialist research into pre-capitalist societies (e.g. early Christianity, history of the ancient Near East) has already proven to be too crude and superficial. But we should concern ourselves with the few scientists

2 Lukács will follow this passage with a commentary on Marx’s appropriation of the Hegelian categories of “absolute” and “objective spirit” (which would have led Marx to exclusively address historical manifestations of the “objective spirit”, as these were the only forces at play in the nineteenth century – cf. Lukács 1975 [1919]: 116–117). For a detailed examination of the differences in how Lukács employs these Hegelian categories in *Funktionswechsel*’s two versions, see Konstantin Baehrens’s discussion of the 1922 preface in this volume.

of the 19th century who *recognized the basic truths of historical materialism and reassessed them thoroughly* in their investigations of the past. I'm thinking here, for example, of Max Weber (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 117, my emphasis).

At this juncture, Lukács still clearly regards the thought of Marx and Max Weber not only as complementary, but indeed as occupying the same analytical ground to some extent. While Lukács will famously reference Max Weber in *HCC*, the passage above was cut from the *Funktionswechsel* essay – in line with his perhaps more circumspect view of how Weber's analyses might provide added insight to Marxist inquiry.³ Alongside this change in perspective, Lukács also reconsiders the question of Marxism's applicability to pre-capitalist formations; his view on the issue in *HCC* is more decidedly positive: “it is evident that [historical materialism] can also be applied to earlier societies antedating capitalism” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 232). He does concede, however, that those efforts face a key methodological difficulty, one that “has been noted by Marx in countless places in his main works” (*ibid.*). Lukács will then reference not Max Weber but Friedrich Engels who “in the *Origin of the Family*” located that difficulty “in the structural difference between the age of civilisation and the epochs that preceded it” (*ibid.*). In other words, the question of the applicability of Marxism hinges on the historical cleavage between societies in which private property and commodity exchange – thus also the commodity form, even if

3 In my discussion of Part I of the reification essay for this volume of *Dissonância*, I argue that Weber's thought is employed less as a direct “complement” to Marxism in *HCC*'s framework than as a source for the anatomy of the reified world, but one which is unable to effectively overcome its fetishized forms.

still in an “episodic” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 84) or occasional manner – and a relevant division of labor have emerged and where they have not. The break, therefore, is not determined *solely* by the rise of capitalism, even if the latter represents a new historical epoch, a qualitative leap in terms of the *generalization* of the commodity form to the dominant form of all social relations and their manifestations (ibid.), thus enabling the genesis of Marxism in the first place.

Lukács’s appropriation of the analytical distinction – following not only the Engels of *Origin*, but also Marx’s critique of political economy⁴ – between pre-capitalist formations where the production and exchange of commodities has emerged and those still under a *communal form of production* in the amended version of *Funktionswechsel* is very significant. It not only signals that Lukács has sharpened his understanding of the difference between capitalist society and the societies that preceded it, but also of the nature of (self-)knowledge achievable within these formations and, finally, of the *negative phenomena* that emerge from and mask their contradictions: alienation and reification. Societies divided in classes, namely, already experience forms of alienation, rooted in the emerging division of labor and resulting forms of oppression (e.g. slavery). Yet, these phenomena cannot be understood in their social basis – i.e., beyond their supposed “natural” foundations – until capitalism has “carried

4 See the passage of *Capital*’s chapter on the commodity on why Aristotle was not able to decipher the roots of the value form. This only became possible, in Marx’s words, “in a society in which the commodity form is the general form of the products of labor, in which, consequently, the dominant social relation between human beings is that of owners of commodities” (Marx 1962 [1867]: 74).

out the actual socialization of all relations” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 237, trans. amended). This condition, which coincides with the subordination of all realms of social life to the economic imperatives of commodity production is, in turn, the basis for the appearance of modern political economy. Nevertheless, that “bourgeois science... even in its best periods” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 231) was never able to peer through the fetishized forms engendered by the capitalist mode of production; only the “Marxist point of view” manages to overcome them as a both a science of the capitalist social totality and a critique of its reified forms. Finally, while it is a product of modern capitalism, Marxism’s defetishising perspective on that societal form equally makes it a valuable tool of analysis for the antagonisms that had characterized earlier formations before they became generalized features of social life (e.g., dispossession of producers, loss of control of the productive process by its human subjects, gender oppression etc.).

4. Reification and alienation

The amendments to the *Funktionswechsel* essay suggest, therefore, that to the Lukács of *HCC*, reification is a capitalist phenomenon, but one with a *pre-history*: without being identical to alienation, it is part of the broader historical arch of that phenomenon. In that regard, if not the term itself, the genealogy of alienation emerges clearly in Lukács’s quoting of Engels to the effect that, once communal production begins to be superseded

by commodity production, “producers have lost control over the general production of their conditions of life” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 239).⁵ Lukács goes on to underline that it was also Engels who “demonstrated how, from the resultant structure of society, consciousness follows in the shape of ‘natural laws’” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 232). Thus, Lukács concludes, a reified standpoint split between invariable necessity and unpredictable chance emerges as “the classical ideological form of the pre-eminence of economics”, and it “becomes more intense in proportion to the degree in which social phenomena escape the control of men and become autonomous” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 233).

Lukács visibly follows Engels in establishing a connection between historical subjects’ reified *forms of consciousness*, on one side, and their *alienated relationship to the products of their labor* (and their productive power itself), on the other. The link between the phenomena of alienation and reification does not, however, make their distinction any less significant. Quite the opposite. Lukács introduces the concept of reification to characterize a specific phenomenon emerging from the envelopment of all societal relations by fetishized forms. Deciphering that phenomenon, in turn, requires 1) understanding its genesis in the “process of civilization that culminates in capitalism” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 237) – which Lukács terms “a lengthy process whose various stages cannot be mechanically separated but merge with each other fluidly” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 233, trans.

5 This quote from *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels 1962 [1884]: 169) is not only mistranslated, but also not properly referenced in the English-language edition of *HCC* (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 232).

amended) –, but also 2) the rupture represented by the “purest [...] subjection of society to societal natural laws”, indeed to its “only pure form”, i.e., “capitalist production” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 237, trans. amended).

Hence, Lukács’s suggestion, in the 1967 preface to *HCC*, that the book’s impact and enduring relevance was related to its treatment of the “question of alienation [...], for the first time since Marx, [...] as central to the revolutionary critique of capitalism” (Lukács 1971 [1967]: xxii) finds strong confirmation in the reworked version of the *Funktionswechsel* essay. Lukács famously attributes his early grasping of alienation – in the absence of Marx’s still unpublished *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, in which it is a central theme – to the problem being somehow “in the air” during the 1920s. That might be so, but Lukács’s reception of Engels in *HCC* lends weight and is complementary to José Paulo Netto’s assertion that the Hungarian thinker arrived at the problem of reification mainly through a “‘symptomatic’ reading of Marxian formulations on [commodity] fetishism (in *Capital*)” (Netto 1981: 32 n.41). The same might be said of his constant – if overlooked – references to Engels’s works of the 1880s in *HCC*. That is the next best pathway to the writings of the young Marx considering that, in that juncture, Engels is revisiting his and Marx’s writings and trajectory in the 1840s, as his work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886) and the associated publication of Marx’s “Feuerbach Theses” two years later attest.

Yet, there was clearly some truth to the “in the air” hypothesis regarding alienation in the 1920s. Lukács’s own

example of a contemporary thinker that also confronted it, i.e., Heidegger (Lukács 1971 [1967]: xxii), did not arrive at the issue via Marx or Engels – though perhaps at least in some part through *HCC*. That pathway meant, however, that Heidegger “sublimated a critique of society into a purely philosophical problem”, converting “an essentially social alienation into an eternal ‘*condition humaine*’” (Lukács 1971 [1967]: xxiv). To that effect, the passage from *HCC* which most closely suggests a possible echo in Heidegger’s later terminology also clearly demarcates the social roots of reified consciousness: “The helpless subjection [*Ausgeliefertsein*] of the human beings of bourgeois society in the face of productive forces finds expression precisely in the ‘sociological’-deterministic [*gesetzmäßig*], in the formalistic rational perspective on history” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 60). Lukács follows that formulation with a quote from *Capital* on “objects which rule the producers” – in another allusion to the problem of alienation – also referencing Engels’s *Origin* (cf. Lukács 1971 [1923]: 49 n.7). In the *Funktionswechsel* essay, Lukács’s reading of Engels provides a key, if overlooked building block to his fundamental theoretical-political conclusion:

Thus we see that the road to an understanding of precapitalist societies with a non-reified structure could not be opened up until historical materialism had perceived that the reification of all man’s social relations is both a product of capitalism and hence also an ephemeral, historical phenomenon. [...] For only now, with *the prospect of reestablishing non-reified relations between man and man and between man and nature*, could those factors in primitive, precapitalist formations be discovered in which these (non-reified) forms were present –

albeit in the service of quite different functions (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 237–238, my emphasis).

Lukács roots his analysis of reification in the critique of socially engendered – hence historically contingent – alienation, thus bringing praxis into the fold. In that regard, by tracing reified forms of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*) back to human beings’ relation to reality – to each other and, crucially, to nature – he both avoided its conceptualization as a mere phenomenon of consciousness and as an immutable “human condition”, thus raising the prospect of its revolutionary overcoming, i.e., through the transformation of the (human and non-human) world.

5. Lukács’s praxis-centered break with neo-Kantianism

Beyond the question of its peculiar place in the overall structure of *HCC*, which I examine at the conclusion of this piece, the *Funktionswechsel* essay is a fertile basis for the study of Lukács’s evolving relationship with his prior philosophical-methodological influences as well as his increased familiarity with the writings of Marx and Engels. These facets of Lukács’s intellectual development between 1919 and 1922 are closely related. This is visible, for instance, in Lukács’s gradual distancing from a *neo-Kantian framing and terminology* in the revised version of *Funktionswechsel*. In the following passage of the 1919 original, for instance, his analytical discourse is still clearly

derived from Max Weber’s, especially his concept of secularization. It was “no accident”, Lukács remarks, that political economy emerged as an autonomous science from the soil of capitalist society, considering that the latter had given rise to the historical novelty of “an economy based on commodity exchange and constituting of *autonomous, self-contained and immanent laws* [*Gesetzen*]” (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 114, my emphasis). In the 1922 version, in turn, that terminology is mostly maintained, but the emphasis shifts from the inherently autonomous *functioning* of the capitalist economy to the reasons for it *appearing as such* to its human subjects: “capitalist society through its commodity and exchange-based organization *bestowed* [*verlieh*] economic life *with a peculiar character* based on autonomous, self-contained and immanent *legalities* [*Gesetzmässigkeiten*]” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 237–238, my emphasis).⁶ Along these lines, only in the later version does Lukács assert that this was “due to the objectification [*Versachlichung*], the reification of social conditions of life” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 238). The concept of reification is, in fact, entirely absent in the essay’s 1919 version; capitalist society’s “forms of appearance” (*Erscheinungsformen*) and peculiar “objectivity” (*Gegenständlichkeit*) only emerge as central analytical problems in the essay’s version for *HCC*.

Was this new framing the result of Lukács returning to his neo-Kantian roots? It is, after all, Lukács himself who states that to Emil Lask, “as for every Kantian, the essence of the theoretical

6 Rodney Livingstone’s translation of this passage is very imprecise (cf. Lukács 1971 [1923]: 232–233).

is objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*]” (Lukács 1918: 353). And that Lask, specifically, was responsible for making objectivity “the central problem of all of logic” (Lukács 1918: 354) as part of his “concretization and completion of a philosophy of validity [*Geltungsphilosophie*]” (Lukács 1918: 349). Yet, in *HCC*, the problem is not “objectivity” as such, but the peculiarly *fetishized* objectivity of capitalist society, hence, not a logical-formal problem for epistemology – the grounds for the “validity” of categories –, but the theoretical-political question of *overcoming* this objectivity in its immediacy. The task that emerges from the latter is, therefore, to find the mediations that enable that objectivity to be transcended, not only *conceptually*, through the critique of reification, but also *politically*, through the actual transformation of its societal determinants – the capitalist economic structure. The social subject of that transformation, the proletariat, is not just the bearer of a revolutionary standpoint, but also of revolutionary activity. In its structure and themes, the *Funktionswechsel* essay embodies that synthesis between theoretical and practical critique, echoing the dual imperative, raised by Marx (1969 [1845]) in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that the “self-dilaceration” of the world must be “understood in its contradiction” *and* “revolutionized in practice” (trans. amended).

What the essay’s revision for *HCC* expresses about Lukács’s development between 1919 and 1922 is, hence, both his clear debt to neo-Kantian thought and the questions it raised, and his *radical break* with its standpoint and approach to those very questions. In that regard, both Michael Löwy’s assertion that Lukács “reformulates” Max Weber’s problematic of ratio-

nalization in a “Marxist (and political) language” (Löwy 1996: 433) and Konstantinos Kavoulakos’s more recent claim that Lukács found “in Marx the *language* that would allow him a complete synthesis and a non-idealist understanding” of “his early views on social rationalization with the problem of the modern form of objectivity” (Kavoulakos 2018: 171–172, my emphasis) fall short in describing the magnitude of the reorientation that Lukács’s turn to Marxism represented. Beyond the adoption of new terminology, that shift embodied a *new relationship with reality*, expressed in Lukács’s trajectory not only at the level of concepts and methodological viewpoint, but also of praxis.

6. The historicity of “nature” as a category

That dual shift in orientation is clearly visible in one of *Funktionswechsel*’s central contributions to the overall reception of HCC, i.e., its passage on the historicity of “nature” as a category. In the 1919 version, the conceptualization of capitalist objectivity as akin to a “second nature” already appears, but is not fully developed: “Therefore it was equally no coincidence that historical materialism arose in a period in which this autonomous economy *had almost become a ‘second nature’*, which was just as independent of human faculties, will and goals as the first, original nature” (Lukács 1975 [1919]: 114, my emphasis). In the HCC version of the essay, in turn, Lukács’s greater familiarity with Marx’s thought and notably with *Capital* are visible in

the heavily revised and expanded passage. After affirming that “historical materialism is, in the first instance, a theory of bourgeois society and its economic structure” and quoting Marx to the effect that theory assumes the “pure development of the laws of the capitalist mode of production” and that these “laws” become more clearly apprehensible the more thoroughly the capitalist mode of production sheds the “remnants of former economic conditions”, Lukács states:

This theory-equivalent condition manifests itself in the fact that the laws of the economy, on the one hand, take command [*beherrschen*] of society as a whole, and, on the other, that they are able to assert themselves as ‘pure natural laws’ [*reine Naturgesetze*] by virtue of their purely economic potency, i.e., without the aid of extra-economic factors (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 253, trans. amended).

Lukács revises his argumentation to more concretely root capitalism’s naturalizing forms of objectivity in its political economy, more specifically, in its faculty of imposing its determinants coercively on workers without (necessarily) employing direct physical violence. As a result, the nature-like objectivity is not framed as an appearance impressing upon human cognition and agency in general, but as a phenomenon rooted in specific relations of production. Along these lines, Lukács will quote the well-known passage of *Capital*’s primitive accumulation chapter on the “mute compulsion [*stummer Zwang*] of economic relations” as the force which “seals the domination of the capitalist over the worker” (cf. Marx 1962 [1867]: 765, my translation).

Thus, to Lukács, the inevitability and law-like character of capitalist relations as a “second nature” is rooted in a historically contingent structure of class power. That framework leads him, in turn, to the key insight – exclusive to the *HCC* version of the essay – that “nature is a societal category”, i.e., that “whatever is held to be natural at any given stage of social development, however this nature is related to man and whatever form his confrontation with it takes, i.e. nature’s form, its content, its range and its objectivity are all socially conditioned” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 234, trans. amended).⁷ Crucially, Lukács does not only reject the positivistic and mechanical representation of the “natural” engendered by capitalism; alongside “nature as the ‘sum of the laws of nature’ (the nature of modern mathematical science)”, the capitalist social structure also engenders its romantic opposite, i.e., “nature as a mood, as the model for a humanity ‘ruined’ by society” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 237). In Lukács’s perspective, therefore, the notion of an unspoiled original unity “in” nature is not an effective alternative to the “fetishized appearance” of capitalist society as a fully artificial complex of apparently “autonomous systems” with their own “immanent legality” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 236, 237); it is rather its necessary complement.

7 In the facsimile edition of *HCC* published by Aisthesis containing the elder Lukács’s marginalia, this is how he comments that passage: “Subjectivistic formulation. The metabolism [*Stoffwechsel*] is missing!” (cf. Lukács 2023 [1923]: 240). The Lukács of the 1960s is not denying the historicity of the category of nature here. His concern is, rather, that the notion that the objectivity of nature is fully historical (or socially contingent) makes it difficult to *embed* humans into extra-human nature, and to concretely theorize their exchange (or metabolism). For a discussion on the concept of nature in *HCC* and its ramifications for eco-socialist debates today, see Alexandros Minotakis’s contribution to this volume.

Lukács clearly indicates in this essay (as elsewhere in *HCC*) that non-reified relations amongst human beings and with nature can be achieved (see the quote that closes item 4 above). Yet, stating that emancipatory possibility does not mean grasping capitalism’s fetishized appearances as “mere ‘errors’ simply to be ‘corrected’ by historical materialism” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 230). A central aspect of his critique of reification is precisely that the ideal forms which that phenomenon produces are “the intellectual, the conceptual [*kategorielle*] expression of the objective-societal structure of capitalist society”; hence, “to overcome it, to transcend it, also means to transcend capitalist society – in thought. It means anticipating its overcoming [*Aufhebung*] with the accelerating power of thought” (ibid., trans. amended).

While this statement seems to indicate that going beyond reified forms is possible as an operation of consciousness alone, Lukács will clearly rectify that notion later in the essay. Once again, he will do so by grounding the phenomenon of reification – and the concrete means to transcend it – on the determinants of the capitalist mode of production; in other words, by taking its “necessity” into account, without fetishizing it into an eternal, immutable condition. The occasion is a critique of gradualist political strategies of socialist transition. Lukács stresses how “economistic vulgar Marxists” overlook the fact that the “capital relation is not merely a technical-productive, a ‘purely’ economic relation [...] but is in the true sense of the word a *social-economic* relation” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 249, trans. amended). Along these lines, Lukács will quote the closing paragraph of *Capital’s* primitive accumulation chapter (Marx 1962 [1867]: 604)

to the effect that “the capitalist production process, regarded in its unity [*Zusammenhang*] or as a process of reproduction, produces therefore not only commodities, not only surplus-value; *it produces and reproduces the capital relation itself*; on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage-laborer” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 256, my translation, emphasis in the original). Lukács then proceeds to clearly draw the practical-political consequences of Marx’s diagnosis: “a change in the course of social development is only possible if it prevents the self-reproduction of the capitalist relation and gives the self-reproduction of society another, new direction” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 249). After this articulation of the *materialist core* of reification critique, Lukács’s effort at translating it politically in the final segment of *Funktionswechsel* will, however, expose some of the tensions inherent in his development as a Marxist in the run-up to *HCC*.

7. The place of “Change of Function” in *HCC*: foregrounding the subjective factor

As I noted in the beginning of this article, the post-revolutionary temporality which underscores *Funktionswechsel* enables Lukács to take a “retrospective” view on the negativity of bourgeois society. Given that Lukács roots the phenomenon of reification in alienated labor and the subjection of workers to the imperatives of the capitalist mode of production, it follows that the revolution brings about transformations across all these planes:

For the organisation of the revolutionary elements as a class not merely ‘as against Capital’ but also ‘for itself’, the conversion of mere productive power into the lever of social change is not just a problem of class consciousness and the practical efficacy of conscious action. At the same time, it signals the beginning of the end for the ‘natural laws’ of economism (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 240).

The revolutionary agency of the proletariat, in other words, not only overcomes reified consciousness but also the actual law-like operation of economic phenomena. In the closing pages of *Funktionswechsel*, this understanding of the transformative role of the working class is taken to its almost demiurgic final consequences. For instance, in the essay’s thematization of crisis. Lukács starts by referencing Rosa Luxemburg to the effect that capitalism is not a homogeneous economic structure, i.e., a mode of production free from pre-capitalist social relations (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 242). From this insight Lukács draws, however, a more problematic conclusion: “But their rivalry is expressed as the insoluble contradiction within the capitalist system itself: namely as crisis. [...] A general crisis always signifies a point of – relative – suspension of the immanent laws of capitalist evolution” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 243). As the elder Lukács will state on the margins of this passage: “False! Crisis in the unity of cap[italist] production. Correct only emphasis on the factor of violence in the solution [to the crisis]” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 249–250, transcription on p. 366). The notion of crisis as a moment of undecidedness or stasis – rather than as an organic expression of the capitalist accumulation process – is translated politically by the Lukács of *HCC*, without further mediations,

into the question of “whether the ‘greatest productive power’ of the capitalist production system, namely the proletariat, experiences the crisis as object or as the subject of decision” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 244). In other words, the activation of the “subjective factor” – the proletariat’s “decision” to enforce its program of transformation – seems to constitute the only decisive lever for the revolution’s success: “And this violence is nothing but the will of the proletariat turned conscious to abolish itself [*sich selbst aufheben*] alongside the subjugating rule of reified relations over man and the rule of economics over society” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 251–252, trans. amended).

The passage is reminiscent of the young Antonio Gramsci, who in his critique of mechanistic strands of Marxism drew similarly messianic political conclusions from his early philosophy of praxis to Lukács’s. The Russian revolution had revealed, Gramsci wrote in late 1917, that “raw economic facts” were not the “ultimate factor of history, but rather man and the society of men” who can come together to shape a “social, a collective will” (Gramsci 2017 [1917]: 70). Once it takes form, this “will” not only allows human beings to intervene upon economic facts, but to “adapt” them, ultimately becoming itself “the driving force of the economy, the shaper of objective reality, which lives and moves and acquires the character of telluric matter in boiling state, which can be channeled in whichever direction and whatever way that will desires it [*dove alla volontà piace, come alla volontà piace*]” (ibid.).

Both the young Gramsci and early Marxist Lukács understood overcoming mechanistic economism as not only a matter

of critique, but as a practical-political process of reshaping the world. Along these lines, Lukács will equate the revolutionary process with the proletariat's forging of a new relationship with reality:

The social significance of the dictatorship of the proletariat, socialization, means in the first instance no more than that this command will be taken out of the hands of the capitalists. As a result, for the proletariat – regarded as a class – the confrontation with its own objectified [*vergegenständlichte*] labor, turned autonomous, is objectively overcome [*aufgehoben*] (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 248, trans. amended).

Put differently, labor's liberation through the conscious wielding of its own productive power leads to the destruction of the capitalist economic structure and its reified manifestations. The notion, however, that "objectified labor" is "overcome" through this process lends weight to the elder Lukács's criticism that, in *HCC*, he conflated the negative phenomenon of alienation – which socialism would transcend – with objectification itself (Lukács 1971 [1923]: xxiii–xxvi). A different interpretation of the passage above is possible, however, if centered on the complement "turned autonomous": the revolution signals that the proletariat concretely overcomes its relationship to objectified labor *turned autonomous*, i.e., its alienated form; it does not overcome objectified labor *as such*. Yet, this and other passages of *Funktionswechsel*'s closing pages contain undeniable oscillations that corroborate the late Lukács's critical reading. "Objectified labor", the "economy" and even "necessity" are all referred to by the Lukács of *HCC* as phenomena that are "transcended"

or “sublated” to some degree in a post-revolutionary situation depicted – more or less literally – as a “reign of freedom”.

The following passage centered on the overcoming of “necessity” is exemplary in this regard. First, there is a more measured consideration that does not equate transcending necessity with abolishing it entirely: “For the first time mankind consciously takes its history into its own hands thanks to the class consciousness of a proletariat summoned to power. This does not negate the ‘necessity’ of the objective economic process, but it does confer on it another, new function” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 250). Yet, Lukács will surprisingly follow it with a much more far-reaching statement: “if ‘necessity’ was until then the positive guiding element in the process, it now becomes an impediment which has to be fought. Step by step it is pushed back in the process of transformation until – after long, arduous struggles – it can be totally neutralized [*ganz ausgeschaltet*] (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 250–251, trans. amended). Commenting on this passage, the elder Lukács will write: “Once more the right tendency formulated in a mechanistic, ultra-left manner” (Lukács 2023 [1923]: 257, transcription on p. 367).

Even if harsh and, at times, seemingly unilateral, the criticism of the elder Lukács is not without grounding on the text of *HCC*. In its maximalist reading of liberation understood as the practical overcoming of previously existing limits, laws and necessity, the Lukács of *HCC* articulates a messianic viewpoint of revolutionary agency that is hardly compatible with the withering tide faced by the communist movement in the 1920s and epitomized by the ascent of fascism in Europe. While often artic-

ulated as a political – if not philosophical – capitulation to Stalinism, Lukács’s distancing from *HCC* in the late 1920s is rather a function of the work’s (relative) inadequacy for a time of major defeats; not only the rise of fascism to power in Italy, Germany and beyond, but the closing horizon of revolution signaled by Lenin’s death and Stalin’s ascent in the USSR.

The notion of a liberated praxis that transcends “necessity” would also be incompatible with Lukács’s reconsideration of the “dialectics of nature” – i.e., from its rejection in *HCC* to its rearticulation in his writings from the 1930s to his late, unfinished *Ontology of Social Being*. Crucially, the elder Lukács attributed a clear practical-political status to the questions surrounding the conception of nature in *HCC*. He claimed that the former had left his “attempt to draw Marxism’s last revolutionary consequences” with “no real economic grounding” considering that the “disappearance of the ontological objectivity of nature” also took away “the foundation of this metabolism [i.e., the labor process] at the level of being” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: xvii, trans. amended). This critique has a marked actuality in a time when the ecological question – or, for that matter, that of social reproduction – is posed; in other words, when the limits to human praxis must be theorized as part of revolutionary transformation, in opposition to its demiurgic or “Promethean” framing.⁸

8 Most recently, Kohei Saito has recovered Lukács’s late thought – including the centrality of the concept of the human species’ labor-mediated “metabolism” with nature – as a key pillar to an eco-socialist perspective for the present (cf. Saito 2023: 73–99).

These criticisms notwithstanding, the location of many of *HCC*’s more subjectivist-messianic passages in *Funktionswechsel* is significant. The essay’s place in the “architecture” of *HCC* can, in that sense, perhaps relativize the ultra-leftist quality of its political ramifications. If *HCC*’s first two essays – “What is Orthodox Marxism?” and “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg” – embody “theory” and its last three – from “Legality and Illegality” to the essay on organization – correspond to “praxis”, then the middle ones – “Class Consciousness”, the reification essay and *Funktionswechsel* – arguably constitute the “mediation”. The latter, in this regard, also form a unity: while “Class Consciousness” stresses the objective grounding of the standpoint of the proletariat and the reification essay the tension between constraining factors to revolutionary praxis and the class standpoint and self-activity necessary to overcome them, *Funktionswechsel* foregrounds the “subjective factor” in revolution (in both conceptual and practical-political terms). Read in isolation, each of the middle essays can lend weight to the over-stressing of one of these elements. This hypothesis puts the limitations of *Funktionswechsel* – as well as the question of its inclusion in the book despite already being “outdated” in the eyes of its author by 1922 – in a new light. The “truth” of *HCC* emerges, ultimately, in the whole – in the structure of the work as a self-contained publication –, hence also in its internal tensions. Those tensions, namely, evoke a standpoint of totality with regard to the work understood in another sense. More specifically, a standpoint that encompasses Lukács’s development as embedded in the concrete situation of Central Europe in the early

1920s within a world that the Russian revolution had unquestionably changed for good; just not in the sense that those “exaggeratedly sanguine hopes [...] concerning the duration and tempo of the revolution” had projected.

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