

“TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY OF THE PROBLEM OF ORGANISATION”

The organisation as a defetishising machine

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Lukács decided to close *History and Class Consciousness* with an essay on the problem of organisation. After several hundreds of pages in which he exposed his understanding of Marxist dialectics and analysed the major impasses of recent revolutions, he will finish by problematizing what he considers as the lack of a theory of organisation within the contemporary communist movement. He will outline the constitutive traits and habits of the organisations of his time, putting above all social democracy and ultra-leftist sectarianism in the crosshairs of criticism as the two extreme “poles” of reified Marxist politics.

Reification, the Lukácsian notion which relies on Marx’s idea of social relations becoming a “res” (thing) under the pre-

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valence of capitalist commodity exchange, turns out to be, besides an economic problem of bourgeois society, an organizational one: not only economic relations get reified under the prevalence of commodity exchange, but also, as part of the social whole, and among further instances of the latter, *revolutionary organisation(s) themselves*. For Lukács, it is actually no surprise that revolutionary organisations reproduce the pathologies of the society they belong to. Surprising is rather the fact that communist organisations as collective subjects of emancipatory politics are not aware of it.

Starting from this diagnosis, Lukács will shed light on the binarist dipoles that capitalist social structure and its ideology, bourgeois thought, have established and naturalised as separate, and how this logic is reproduced within communist organisations. He will refer, for instance, to the relationship between the *individual* and *collective* planes or between *duty* and *freedom*, and the political stakes of sublating those separations, precisely through a form of organisation that comprehends the conditioned, historical character of their separateness and aims at bridging it. Healing this separateness within the boundaries of the capitalist condition is necessarily a *twofold process*: it involves, firstly, the theoretical operation of reconstructing, *on the level of thought*, the isolated elements as parts of an existing, yet “false” totality, and showing its vulnerable spots which the oppressed might attack and overturn. Secondly, it involves the political operation, *on the level of praxis*, of rendering this potential overturn practical.

It is because of the decisive role of that second level that Lukács explicitly extends his ambition in regard to dereification from Marxist theory to revolutionary politics in the chapter on organisation. For, in Marxist terms, dereification does not really take place if it is merely an epistemological accomplishment. It needs to be rendered practical, and, to Lukács's understanding, this can only succeed through the subject-organisation that enables the transition from *conceived* to *realised* freedom, i.e. from theory to practice.

1. The problematic lack of a Marxist theory of organisation

As mentioned in the beginning, Lukács opens the organisation chapter with a provoking statement: Marxism lacks a theory of organisation. This is his point of departure for what follows and the one that traverses the whole chapter. Communist parties and their intellectuals, he argues, have prioritized analyzing “the problems presented by the economic and political situation, [and] by their tactical implications” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 295) but neglected the no less important issue of organisation.

They operate in this field following mainly their intuition, which fairly enough relies on loads of direct political experience. However, anticapitalist class struggle cannot just rely on immediate experience, because, as Lukács demonstrated in the previous chapters of *HCC* and as mentioned above, immediate

experience in capitalism remains mystified. It remains mystified, because social relations get reified through commodity exchange, hence appearing as suprahistorical and isolated from each other. Regarding this lack of a theory of organisation, Lukács writes:

[N]o really vital theoretical energy seemed to be left over for the task of anchoring the problem of organisation in communist theory. [...] If much activity in this sphere is correct, this is due more to correct revolutionary instincts than to any clear theoretical insight (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 295).

According to Lukács, existing organisations do not only operate in a purely empirical manner, but also a properly reified one: they perpetuate their “default” mode, neglecting to actualize their insights in order to keep step with the historical process. This happens, for instance, when certain tactics get established because they have been successful once, even when more recent conjunctures call for new political tools. That is the phenomenon Lukács has in mind when he refers to “the unconscious, theoretically undigested, merely ‘organic’ [*gewachsen*] character of the existing organisations” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 297).

Hence, the ultimate consequences of a missing theory of organisation seem to be, firstly, *the neglect of the relationship between organisation and revolution*, rendering it impossible to inscribe the strategic, long-term horizon of overcoming capitalism within the daily praxis of an organisation. Secondly, the resulting *lack of a compass for the formation of political coalitions*

due to the absent concrete link between daily praxis and revolution.

It is for the above reasons that Lukács stresses the inapt efforts of communist organisations to balance between empiricism and dogmatism: *empiricism* in the sense that their practice is directly dictated by the facts as such – as if the facts were immediate instances stripped off of bourgeois ideology –; and *dogmatism* in the literal sense of dogma, i.e., the practice of isolating single premises, rendering their contents into reified, decontextualised principles.

2. Organisation as mediation between theory and praxis

So Lukács moves in the organisation chapter from the real shortcomings of the existing communist organisations to the attempt to figure out what communist parties should do in his view. He draws on several aspects, all of which go back to his central position, which I referred to in my introduction:

Organisation is the form of mediation between theory and practice. And, as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by virtue of this mediation (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 299).

Lukács will bend the stick in both directions: not only is it crucial to render epistemological emancipation practical – and so to transition *from theory to practice* –, but practical emancipa-

tion is itself an intellectual matter, so that it is also necessary to go all the way back, *from practice to theory*. This is why he considers organisation not merely as a question of everyday, immediate political practice, but also as an “intellectual” question. It is intellectual in so far as organisation needs to reconstruct the historical process in each moment in order to take this or that decision. This is the meeting point of history, totality and organisation, between theory and practice.

The relation between theory and practice returns repeatedly within *History and Class Consciousness*. What is new here is the concretization of this relation in the form of organisation. This concretization consists in making explicit that it is through the mediation of political organisation that theory loses its theoretical one-sidedness and is rendered practical. Respectively, it is again through the mediation of organisation that practice surpasses its immediate, contingent character and develops strategic insights. The function of organisation is, therefore, to dissolve the reified condition of both theory and practice.

Let us look closer at this matter. In his trajectory towards the organisation chapter, Lukács has already established the separation that theory and practice undergo within bourgeois society. Bourgeois thought, as a product of the latter, remains stuck in its idea – equivalent to the capitalist division of manual and intellectual labour – that there can only be two separated realms: the realm of thought and the realm of action. It observes practice as an unmediated, non-intellectual activity lacking presuppositions and thought as an equally unmediated, yet intellec-

tual activity. Both derive, in bourgeois thought, from the individual will of the *homo oeconomicus*, i.e., the individual who rationally seeks their interest, while structural determinations posed on individuals remain out of the frame.

Lukács opposes such a separation of being and thought, of practice and theory, for it basically reflects, as mentioned above, the capitalist split of intellectual vis-à-vis manual labour and the dominance of the former over the latter. Notably, Lukács considers conceptual labour (*Begriffsarbeit*) itself as a form of practice: this conception of theory as practice belongs to the aspects of German idealism's legacy that Lukács wishes to preserve. Theory is thus to be understood itself as a form of practice – in the same vein, Althusser suggests in *For Marx* the notion of *theoretical* practice as a form of practice interconnected yet distinct from *political* practice (Althusser 1996). I turn to Althusser's notion of theoretical practice because, while overcoming the bourgeois binarism of theory and practice, it also sheds light on their internal distinction. Just as Lukács underlines in the organisation chapter, the existing bourgeois separation between theory and praxis needs to be taken seriously into account, if it is to be overcome. Theory might itself be a form of practice, yet in bourgeois society it only becomes *political* practice if it achieves a shift from epistemological to political status. That conversion is predicated, in turn, on its influence on the existing relations of power in favour of proletarian class struggle.

In *Capital's* section on commodity fetishism, Marx understood the distinction between theoretical and political practice in a similar way when he argued that demystifying fetishism *on*

the level of theory does not simultaneously overcome fetishism as an *ontological instance* of capitalist socialisation:

The belated scientific discovery that the products of labor, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labor expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind’s development, *but by no means banishes* the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labor (Marx 1976 [1867]: 167, my emphasis).

Now let us look more closely at how Lukács himself distinguishes theoretical from political practice:

Every ‘theoretical’ tendency or clash of views must immediately develop an organisational arm if it is to rise above the level of pure theory or abstract opinion, that is to say, if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfilment in practice (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 299).

On the level of pure theory the most disparate views and tendencies are able to co-exist peacefully, antagonisms are only expressed in the form of discussions which can be contained within the framework of one and the same organisation without disrupting it. But no sooner are these same questions given organisational form than they turn out to be sharply opposed and even incompatible (ibid).

Organisation is thus a crucial mediation in the sense that Marxist theory, by being translated organisationally, becomes involved in the stakes of class struggle. If conceiving totality means to decipher the mechanisms of class domination of the bourgeois class over the proletariat that prevail behind reified capitalist social relations, then organisation – be it the communist party or other organisational forms – needs to be understood

as a “defetishising machine” (as Victor Strazzeri recently underlined¹). Only thus translated does theory manage to cause shifts in the power relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. For, while bourgeois binarisms are still in effect, the key challenge is to avoid falling into the “Hegelian trap” of handling theoretically sublated dichotomies as already practically sublated. Conversely, there might be a radicalizing, emancipatory potential in stressing precisely that which is still separated, instead of treating the bridging effort as already accomplished.

References

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1 Reference to Victor Strazzeri’s intervention during the “HCC marathon” that took place in the context of the *Historical Materialism* Conference in Athens (April 2023) and in the YouTube Channel of the *Historical Materialism Journal* (October 2023, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwUckT02AX4&list=PL0VKWnpAodlBHzaVTPNF0brXVWsM1tpB5>).