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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE YOUNG LUKÁCS

by ANDREW FEENBERG

George Lukács, a Hungarian born in Budapest in 1885, was educated in Germany during the liveliest and most creative period of German philosophy since the first half of the nineteenth century. Max Weber, Lask, Husserl and Dilthey were the great teachers of the time, breaking new ground in the study of Kantianism, phenomenology, sociology and cultural history. Heidegger, Jaspers, Thomas Mann and many others who have since become leading lights in the intellectual world were contemporaries and fellow students of Lukács'. He was among the most brilliant. Already in 1911 he published a short book called *Soul and Form* which foreshadowed the later development of Existentialism in its concern for authenticity and the philosophy of death. In 1916, Lukács published *The Theory of the Novel*, a fundamental work of literary criticism, which in many respects culminates the development of the German aesthetic theory of Schiller, Schlegel and especially Hegel.

After the war, Lukács joined the Communist Party and returned to Hungary to serve as Minister of Culture under Bela Kun. There he brought his early work to a close with the publication in 1923 of his most important book, *History and Class Consciousness*, perhaps the most valuable contribution to Marxist theory since the time of Marx and Engels themselves. In this last book, Lukács attempted to show the fundamental connection between Marxist theory and the proletarian revolution. In the course of this analysis, he demonstrated for the first time the profound importance of Hegelian dialectic for the thought of Marx.

It is primarily *History and Class Consciousness* with which I will be concerned here. The book itself has had an interesting history. In 1924 the Fifth Congress of the Communist International condemned it as idealist and revisionist. Shortly thereafter, the German Social Democrats also denounced it, thus isolating it completely from the world socialist movement. On both sides the authorities preferred to stick to a positivist and pseudo-scientific interpretation of Marx. Lukács silenced himself and continued to work privately for many years, limiting his interests exclusively to Marxist literary criticism. His early work was not reprinted. After the initial stir died down it lay forgotten by all but a few social theorists and Marxist philosophers in Western Europe, became more and more difficult to find, and, until its translation into French in 1960, was known mainly by reputation. As the French translators of the book say, "*History and Class Consciousness*, one of the masterpieces of twentieth century Marxist thought, was expelled from history and consciousness without gaining the slightest hold on the (proletarian) class."

Although we in the United States know practically nothing of the early work of George Lukács, the few obscure books of his youth, written shortly before and after the First World War, have been of crucial importance for the intellectual development of contemporary Europe. Many of the most interesting ideas in recent European thought stem directly from Lukács, particularly in the field of Marxist philosophy and scholarship. The list of writers influenced by one or another of the protean transformations of his youthful genius includes some of the most brilliant names in French and German literary criticism,

philosophy, and sociology: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lucien Goldmann, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, Karl Mannheim, etc.

Europe found in Lukács a profoundly creative thinker who was able to bring aesthetics, philosophy and social theory alive in new and fruitful ways, infused with political consciousness and moral concern. In this same period, radical thought in America suffered under the weight of heated ideological debates that were neither creative nor realistic. Perhaps one significant cause of the general theoretical vacuity of the radicalism of our unhappy thirties was the absence of an intellectual influence like Lukács. But then we scarcely read Marx, so little were we prepared to move on to advanced developments of Marxist theory such as one finds in the work of Lukács.

Today, as we enter a new phase of Leftist activism in America, we must strive to avoid the errors of the thirties. The "New Left" is largely aware of this problem, but so far it has tried to solve it merely by renouncing ideology and cooperation with the Communist Party. But few ever believed that ideology or Party were ends in themselves. Their sole value to radical action is their ability to instruct and guide action toward a better society. The assumption that the failure of a particular theory and a particular political group signifies the failure of all theory and all groups is singularly unimaginative. Furthermore, the basic problems of radical action are not even touched by these dogmatic refusals of everything vaguely resembling the past of Leftist politics in the United States. For the refusal of all ideology and theory that is so prevalent on the Left today is just the other side of the substitution of ideology for reality in the thirties.

We do not move towards concrete reality by merely refusing, however self-consciously, to understand its basic structure through the application of social theory. A strong political position cannot be built on muckraking appeals to the "facts" and an unreflective commitment to democratic and human values. We do not, of course, need party ideologues prepared to espouse a given line in pseudo-philosophical language, and unfortunately a certain amount of this persists. But we do need to think clearly and deeply about the basic theoretical and philosophical questions that arise in the context of radical action in an advanced society. From this point of view, it may be of great value to return now to the work of the man who, more than any other, contributed to the creation of a sophisticated and important school of Marxist thought in Europe, one capable - if not of overthrowing bourgeois culture - at least of holding its own within it.

THE NEW SCIENCE OF GEORGE LUKÁCS

Yet in spite of the failure of Lukács' work, and in spite of the far more serious failure (for Marxist thought) of the Western European Communist movement to make a revolution, *History and Class Consciousness* served as the principle source of an intellectual movement in Europe which continues to produce an extremely significant challenge to traditional thought and scholarship. The irony is perfect: the radical young Communist, Lukács, devotes his best energies to creating a Marxist theory that would definitively and decisively tie Marxist thought to the revolutionary action of a proletariat that was to transform all of Europe in short order; but the work of this same revolutionary becomes instead the inspiration for an intellectual movement which is more and more conscious of the fact that it is impotent to lead a revolution. Yet it was precisely this conversion of

Marxism into a scientific tool of cultural scholarship that Lukács had hoped to combat by turning social theory toward its revolutionary function! How can this be explained?

Partly, of course, by the fact that once expelled from history, class, and consciousness, Lukács' ideas could only be influential as ideas and not as practical guidelines of revolutionary action. Partly also because the Party failed to grasp or was unable to act upon his grim warning of the danger of the *embourgeoisement* of the Western proletariat, and stuck to a naive view of the revolutionary potential of Europe. But most importantly because Lukács brought to bear on the problems which concerned him a formidable knowledge of Marxist thought and methodology, an understanding which could be built on for many years afterwards in the construction of a highly developed Marxist cultural thought. This contribution centers primarily around the connected ideas of Marxist dialectic, and a concept of the radically creative function of class consciousness in social life.

Those engaged in historical, literary and philosophical studies have often been more repulsed by the crudity than by the materialism of typical Marxist scholarship. Marxists tend to become "vulgar" Marxists when they write on cultural problems, reducing the spiritual life of society to rough schematizations of economic structure. It is obvious that something is wrong when Dostoevsky becomes a "petty bourgeois obscurantist" whose work is to be explained by his adherence to the ideologically "reactionary" theories of Russian populism. But Marxist cultural research does not necessarily involve attacking a delicate and complex organism with a blunt instrument. A long section of *History and Class Consciousness* is devoted to an exploration of the place of Marxism in the classical German philosophical tradition of Kant, Fichte and Hegel. In the course of these analyses, Lukács demonstrated in practice that Marxism is not limited to mere schematizations of "reactionary" and "progressive" cultural achievements in relation to economics.

Marx believed that economic production is not simply an economic activity, but is in fact the total production of a whole form of life, of a way of understanding the world and of acting in it. This far the vulgar Marxists Lukács so vigorously opposed were able to go, but they could not grasp Marx's deepest insights into the nature of the economy itself. Marx saw this economy which lay at the root of social life as itself a social form, a system of relations between men and men and between men and things. Lukács revived and expanded this theory, showing that even technology depends essentially on the basic forms of human relations within society. Assembly line production, for example, cannot be understood without studying the class structure of the society which invented it and which permitted and encouraged its use. Because Lukács saw class consciousness as fundamental to the material basis of society, he did not attempt to reduce culture to purely economic categories, but instead viewed the economy as an integral and fundamental part of culture.

It is from this point of view that Lukács asserts that society is the product of human thought and action, and not an unconscious and determined part of nature. This means that the truth of society lies not in abstract scientific laws, but in the concrete historical activity of men. Culture too appears as a historical product and not as an ahistorical originality or a mere adjunct of technology. Because it is through culture that each class brings to consciousness and fulfills its own historical role within the limits set for it by its place in the process of production. Lukács insists on the dynamic, historical character of human society, on the development of newness and change in history through the conscious and unconscious activity of man.

Thus Lukács opposed the spontaneous, historical life of society to the dead movements of the inorganic world, in which atemporal scientific laws reign over the process of change. This great emphasis on the place of class consciousness, class activity and class relations in the historical development of society allowed him to create analyses of social phenomena that were both materialist in orientation and yet not schematic and pseudo-scientific reductions of the human world to economics. He placed consciousness at the very center of economics and history, refusing to consider it as a "spiritual" epiphenomenon of economic production as so many Marxists have. The result was a profound clarification of the relations of values and facts in history, of thought and action, of the production of material and spiritual life. From this point of view, Marxism as a serious cultural science became possible for the first time.

THE IRONIC VISION

Happy is the age which can read in the starry heavens the mapped out paths which are open to it and which it may follow! Happy is the age whose paths are lit by the light of the stars! For it everything is both new and familiar; everything is adventure, but everything belongs to it. The world is vast, and yet it finds itself at ease there, because the fire which burns in the soul is of the- same nature as the stars. The world and the self, light and fire are clearly distinguished, but they are nevertheless not really strangers to each other, because fire is the soul of all light and all fire is decked out in light. Thus no act of the soul fails to find its meaning and its completion in this duality: perfect in its sense and perfect for the senses; perfect because the soul's act separates off from it, and become autonomous, finds its own meaning and draws this same meaning around itself like a circle.

The Theory of the Novel

These first sentences of *The Theory of the Novel* describe ancient Greece, a society which, Lukács believed, lived in the immanent and immediate presence of the totality. This concept of the totality which is central to *History and Class Consciousness* must be understood in its original significance for the author in his earlier work on literature. Such unfortunate attempts at social theory as Karl Popper's *Poverty of Historicism* have struggled unsuccessfully with the idea of the totality because they have failed to see that it is not merely a collection of knowledge, a sum total, but rather a form and structure of life itself.

The Theory of the Novel was an attempt to produce a general theory of the function and evolution of literature in the West since the time of the Greeks, with primary attention centered on the novel, the form of modern literature. This was no doubt too much to ask from a short essay of 135 pages, but in spite of its limits the book contains both genial analyses of specific literary works and a vision of life that bore fruit in all of Lukács' later writings. Lukács worked with three basic concepts here: the totality, life, and essence. The relations of these terms in literature was supposed to reflect the real character of the life-forms of the periods in which literary works appeared. Lukács described his task as the

study of these "transcendental topographies", atemporal forms of literature and life. To each topography corresponded a particular form of literary expression, the novel, tragedy, etc., which was a purified reflection on the real structure of life.

The totality is the relation of life and its meaning. When essence, the meaning of life, can be discovered in things just as they are, when life offers an objective meaning in which men discover themselves, then there is a totality. The proper literary form of this age is epic poetry, the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. Here life, the ordinary existence of men, is already infused with a meaning and a grace which can become art or virtue or happiness simply in a heightened consciousness of existing. In this world there is no opposition between duty and reality, between art and mundane existence, between the individual and the community, between, ultimately, the human soul and the world in which it finds itself. Every act and every object in this world are, just as they are, artistic and ethical in their natural form. The gods are companions, not judges of men. The tools and the speech of everyday life are poetic, and find literary expression as they really are, without lyrical or illusionary aesthetic transformation. This is the world in which the totality is immediately given in life: "The totality of being invested with form, where the forms are not constraints, but simply the taking consciousness of, the bringing into the light of day of that which sleeps as obscure aspiration at the heart of everything which should receive form. The totality exists there where knowledge is virtue and virtue happiness, there where beauty manifests the meaning of the world."

The novel is an epic form and therefore like the classical epic poems it too must be based on a fundamental community of the hero and his world, essence and life. The Greek epic showed the commensurability of man and his life by revealing the already perfected form of this life, raising reality to the ideal effortlessly and honestly. But the novel moves in precisely the opposite direction: it demonstrates the unity of man and the world by showing that both are degraded and false, that whatever essential meaning man opposes to the degradation of reality is itself degraded. The world of the novel, the modern world, is defined by a set of hardened and rigidified conventions which once had a meaning in which man could express himself but which have now become dead obstacles to human freedom. Essence and meaning are no longer immanent to life, but exist only in the soul of the hero as ethical demands which he opposes to this social life that has lost its truth, this "second nature." Thus Emma Bovary judges and condemns the restricted and banal life of the provincial bourgeoisie which surrounds her in terms of romantic ideas of love and freedom.

But if the world has lost its poetry and become prosaic, the poetry of the hero's soul is a lie. Modern man has discovered that the forms of art and life are not objective realities, but creations of the soul. This discovery deprives the forms themselves of their application to reality. They are no longer true, but have become simple dreams. And since the hero must nevertheless live and act in the world, these dreams can only enter reality in the degraded form of illusions. The ideals of the hero are abstract and false, no more true than the degraded world to which they are opposed. Hence the importance of the theme of disillusionment in so many great novels.

Corresponding to every illusion is inevitably a disillusionment, and thus the search of the hero of the novel for the totality is a constant process of gaining and losing illusions in the experiences of life. But even though the ideals of the hero are untrue, they are still capable of revealing the inadequacy of reality. The ideals which the hero opposes to the

world are false, but they express that nostalgic yearning of man for an age in which the totality is immediately given in life, and therefore the failure of the hero condemns the world to nothingness. This condemnation cannot be ethical, however, for the ideals of the hero are false. Instead, the novel is a form in which ethics is converted into its aesthetic basis, in which the conflict of the hero and reality highlights the origin of ethics in the aesthetic structure of the totality.

The ideals of the hero, in their necessary failure, show that for the individual reality denies its proper aesthetic form, the totality. But the search of the hero in which this is discovered can still be given aesthetic form: the novel can be written. The totality, the life in which man's destiny is objectively present in reality, is absent from the world of fact, but it is still available in art in the form of the novel. But the totality of life and its meaning on which the novel is based is an abstract totality, made possible only by the abandonment of every ideal in the absolute disillusionment of the hero at the end of the novel. The totality only exists in the form of the novel and the mind of its author, and not in reality.

Because the novel is the history of the failure of a search for the secret totality of life in which man and the world are not alienated, but exist in harmony, its hero must live in opposition to reality as it is. He must be a "criminal or a madman", and the author must view him ironically. The hero's actions are constantly set off by the narrator of the novel in irony. The novelist, having already attained the ironic vision of reality in which every ideal is devalued, must see his hero's life in the light of its inevitable failure. Irony is the pure aesthetic possibility of freedom and the aesthetic form in a world in which both man and society are degraded and false. Irony shows the ideals of the hero to be false gods, demons, which possess him and drive him to assert himself against a brutal reality. It is only by this abscise of irony that the ground can be cleared for a new world, for new forms, for the true gods of the future.

The Theory of the Novel ends with a chapter on ' "The Transcendence of Social Forms of Life", a utopian reflection on the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Lukács considers these Russian novelists as striving to go beyond the form of the novel toward a new transcendental topography in which the totality will be restored in its pure immediacy. But there is no appreciation here of the requirements of a real material practice in the world to create this form in reality itself. As Lukács later explained, *The Theory of the Novel*, like Existentialism, was a combination of leftist ethics and rightist metaphysics, of political idealism and the traditional concept of reality before which consciousness was a helpless spectator, unable to actively create a new world. Thus like Existentialism today, this book was unable to indicate a real means to suppress the "world of the novel" and pass on to a more fulfilling form of life.

THE REIFIED SOCIETY

History and Class Consciousness resolved this difficulty by converting the aesthetic categories of *The Theory of the Novel* into historical categories of Marxist revolution.

At the time Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness*, Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 had not yet been published by the Russians. The manuscripts showed clearly the dependence of Marxist thought on Hegel and provided a possible foundation for a non-positivist Marxist science of society. But its basic problem, the analysis of "alienation," was scarcely glimpsed by later Marxists who possessed only

scattered references to it in Marx's mature writings. It was Lukács who first drew attention to the fundamental importance of alienation, or "reification" as he called it, for Marxist thought. The validity of this extraordinarily brilliant insight, which led Lukács to an extremely Hegelian formulation of Marxism, was later confirmed when the Manuscripts were published, revealing the background to the section on the "Fetishism of Commodities" in Capital and the "Theses on Feuerbach" which had been Lukács' inspiration.

Lukács takes as his point of departure the idea that merchandise, commodities, are the central concern of the analysis of capitalist society, because merchandise is not simply one aspect of this society, a limited economic category, but the basic form of objectivity for the society as a whole. Every manifestation of bourgeois social life assumes the form of merchandise or some correlate of this form. In the commodity market human relations are converted unconsciously into objective things. The basis of this process is what Marx called "the fetishism of commodities." Every commodity in bourgeois society is at once a thing made by human labor to fulfill definite human needs, and an object which confronts the individual as possessing in itself a purely quantitative value indicated by its price. Although production is really a human relation between the producer and the consumer, in capitalist society this relation is hidden behind the more obvious relation of the producer to his salary and the consumer to the commodity and its price. Thus the concrete connection between production and consumption is replaced by the abstract medium of the market, both of labor and of products. The commodity appears in this process as a thing which has an objective value, apart from the human relations in which it is involved. This objective value, this price, is of course not real in any scientific sense, but it does rule the process of exchange because society has formed itself in accord with it.

This fetishism of commodities Lukács calls "reification," which in its general character is the form of objectivity within bourgeois society as a whole. In a reified society, human activity and the goods produced by this activity are alienated from the actor and the producer. The commodity that is placed on the market, be it the personality of the individual which he "sells" to another, or the product of the individual's labor, or the thing he buys, is viewed as a part of an objective system of laws and relations between it and other commodities. The personality which one sells is not a free human being, but a limited and restricted "product" which is set up more or less successfully in terms of the social requirements of society. The product of the individual's labor does not belong to him, nor does it fulfill his needs, but is simply the means to receiving a wage. In itself, this product belongs to another, to the capitalist, who is equally uninterested in it, having decided to produce it in order to make profits. The object on the market is given a price in terms of the competitive necessity of selling it for approximately the price of other similar items. Thus its value is set not so much by human need as by its relations with other commodities.

Everywhere the same structure rules: social objects, based on human relations, are transformed into natural objects, independent of man, things ruled not by human freedom and choice, but by eternal and unchanging laws of nature. Production itself and the process of exchange on the market are viewed as alien and self-moving, following their own "scientific" laws. The individual confronting this society is at best capable of using its laws manipulatively to his own advantage, but never of changing them. At worst he is even denied this minimum creativity of seeking profit and becomes himself the pure object of

the laws which rule production and distribution, obeying them constantly in his work and in his daily life. And this structure actually holds objectively as well as subjectively within bourgeois society. The reality of reification allows human activity, production, distribution! etc. to be rigidly quairtified and controlled in terms of the laws they obey. Thus the basic trait of bourgeois society is its constant attempt to calculate and rationalize the whole social world.

This attempt, however, fragments the traditional irrational unity of the commodity, the work which produces it and the use to which it is put. It generates specialization and the division of labor into its rational elements. But this transformation of the meaning of the object from something a man makes by himself and for himself into an assembly line product belonging to someone else also transforms the subject which produces it. In the rational process of capitalist production, individual human qualities of the worker become simple sources of error. Man no longer appears as the real motor force of production but becomes simply an element within the productive process, and since this latter is primarily mechanical, man too must take on mechanical attributes to participate in production.

The worker's machines face him in their completion and their independence. They determine the type and quality of his work, not vice versa. The worker must submit to the discipline imposed on him by the machine, and the more advanced is the mechanization of the worker's factory, the more this discipline consists in simply contemplating and controlling from the outside the nearly self-sufficient productive activity of the machine. Work becomes a contemplative attitude in relation to a mechanical process governed by the laws of nature and wholly independent of consciousness. Not even the work of the entrepreneur can escape this reified form. Although he appears to be active and original, in fact this activity amounts to nothing more than another form of calculation and contemplation, the object being profit rather than production.

The unique character of capitalism lies in the fact that for it reification is a universal form of life. There is no socially significant enclave that is above reification, either spiritually in the form of a mystical or religious dogma, or socially in the form of an unproductive aristocracy. Vestiges of these phenomena remain in capitalist societies, but the driving tendency is to enforce rationalism and a formal equality of all men, tying them in some fashion to the productive process, and defining every kind of knowledge as rational. The universality of capitalist reification stems from the fact that only in bourgeois society is all labor free labor. Here the worker submits to oppression out of his own freedom, thereby defining the destiny of mankind as a whole in terms of the structure of work. Work is no longer the fate of animals and slaves, but becomes the unique human possibility. Thus mechanization and calculation embrace every aspect of life and for the first time in history the economy assumes a unitary appearance, under a unified set of laws, affecting the whole of social life.

Consciousness in this society is itself reified. It cannot provide a real liberation from reification because it approaches its objects "immediately", that is, because it fails to discover underneath reification the real human relations which have projected it forth. Instead of mediating its reified objects in the totality of relations and actions out of which they emerge, it accepts the fundamental reality of reification. On the one hand reified consciousness may oppose "values" to the world of fact - duties, ethical obligations, ideals. But in doing so it sets up an insurmountable barrier between what is and what ought to be. For these values find their being in their pure subjectivity, in the fact that they represent

precisely what does not exist. Once they enter the real world, through ethical action, progress or whatever, they too become part of the reified reality which it is the function of value to reject and transcend. Thus in the mechanical, atomistic world of capitalist society subject and object, value and fact appear in radical opposition to each other. On the other hand, reified consciousness can content itself with elaborating the laws of reified life. By abandoning the empirical, qualitative aspects of experience, it can formulate more or less exact calculations and predictions in every sphere. Partial, abstract systems of laws can be constructed, each one embracing a specific segment of social life in a form that allows it to be successfully manipulated and used for individual advantage. But then human faculties, both spiritual and material, appear not as parts of an organically united person, but as commodities in a world of objects, to be exchanged for other commodities. The inner freedom and unity of the person is completely lost.

Thus the rationality of bourgeois society is not itself rational. Each system of laws developed to calculate and control reality must suppress the unique and the individual in its field. Since it is only in the qualitative and historical aspect of experience that the real necessary connections between different kinds of experience can be made, the relations between the different systems of laws cannot be found. Moral values are incapable of humanizing this dehumanized world, and become wholly irrelevant to its movements. All this comes out most clearly in the economic crises of capitalism. Here the irrationality of the total process of society, the inner connections of which remain inevitably hidden, breaks out in a dramatic manner. The totality escapes the reified consciousness and fails to rule its forms of life and its institutions, but it is the absent reality of the society and it makes its absence felt constantly in unseen ways and more obviously in the crises.

At this point it is necessary to forestall a possible misunderstanding. If the totality is lost for bourgeois society, this is no accident, no simple failure of vision on the part of the bourgeoisie themselves. The mediation of reified society by the real historical and human relations on which it is founded is not a simple scientific question, to be resolved at the level of methodological disputes. Nor for that matter is this loss of the totality simply a question of the class interests of the bourgeoisie. Capitalist society is reified not only for consciousness, but in fact. Its institutions, its economic structure, its social relations themselves really assume the form of natural things. Thus the application of the method of the natural sciences to society, which Lukács deplures, is not altogether wrong. The only way to refute this procedure is to show that bourgeois society, behind the veil of reification, contains a creative force prepared to suppress reification in fact, in reality, a class prepared by revolutionary means to restore the totality. Short of this, the demonstration of the human meaning of society is if not impossible, of no practical importance or interest at all. But this means that to transcend reification intellectually, bourgeois society must be left behind, not only in theory, but also in practice; because, "On the ground of bourgeois society, a radical modification of point of view is impossible."

TOTALITY REGAINED

Lukács insists that reification is an appearance, but not, as we have seen, because it is philosophically false or factually unreal. Reification is appearance because reified society, by its very nature, must generate its own contradiction in the proletariat. It is at this point that the significance of Hegelian dialectic for Lukács becomes clear. Hegel's

thought is based on the idea that things do not exist independently of their relations. The being of any object is a mediated being in the sense that the relations in which this object finds itself define it as a thing. The totality, the ultimate horizon of relations in which particular things arise, is essentially historical, a process of structuration and destructuration of relations and objects in time. The object is a combination of realized actuality and unrealized potentiality; it is only part of what it could and should be by its very nature, as a seed is both actually a seed and potentially a blooming plant. It is this which Hegel calls the negativity and the falsehood of the object. Historical movement in this totality is motivated by this inadequacy and negativity of the object.

It is in relation to "negativity" that history appears in its full metaphysical importance for Hegelianism. For the process in which the thing struggles with its limited, false actuality in realizing its potentialities is an historical process. The object carries in itself in its relation to the totality the power to evolve toward its true form. The study of history is the study of the internal mediations within the totality that drive this evolution forward. Thus mediation cannot be applied to objects intellectually, but must be discovered in their immanent, real structure as they exist in the totality. And, similarly, this totality is not a mere intellectual tool, but is the actual reality of history and objects.

Lukács interprets Marxism from this point of view, placing the relations and the historical tendencies of things in the fore and demanding that the mediation of capitalist reality rest on the real negativity of bourgeois society and not simply on an intellectual construction. Reification provides the key to this analysis, because it is the material expression of the negativity of bourgeois society for the proletariat.

Reification, the social reality of capitalism, confronts both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, but their points of view on this reality are radically different. The bourgeois sees himself as an object within the reified world of production in so far as he recognizes his impotence to really alter this world. He must accept it and "adjust" to its demands. But at the same time, he feels that he is the active subject of this process of adjustment; he feels that he has the ability to act in the capitalist world, to create and destroy, by accepting its premises and manipulating it to whatever extent he is able. This illusion of activity hides the real truth of his existence from the bourgeois. Unconsciously, behind this individualist facade, the real subject of the activity which each bourgeois claims as his own is the bourgeoisie as a class. It is the class as a whole which produces and reproduces capitalist reality, that reality within which the individual bourgeois acts.

On the other hand, the proletarian apprehends himself as a pure object within this same society, because whenever he is tempted to regard himself as the active creator of his own life, society brings him up short and shows him that he is simply another cog in the productive apparatus. He is thus forced to recognize that his whole existence is part and parcel of the production of capital. All the bourgeois categories of abstract quantity and reification appear to him in their most universal form, as applying to him, as defining his place within a finished world of things of which he becomes a part by selling his labor. And this sale of his own labor, this surrender of a part of his life to another is as abstract and reified as possible. Unlike the bourgeois who sees his work not so much as the sale of himself as "intellectual activity" or "responsibility", the worker sells only his physical strength. The human essence of the worker is of no economic value and therefore does not have to become a commodity for him. Unlike the bourgeois, whose deepest human

possibilities are put at the service of capitalism, the worker retains an unreified reserve within himself.

It is this unfree freedom of the worker which creates the possibility of a transcendence of reification, in theory and in practice. Labor is a commodity like any other in capitalist society. The work of the worker belongs to the capitalist to whom it is sold. But this alienation of the worker's work is a conscious act on the part of the worker, who, unlike the material products of capitalism, must transform himself, out of his freedom, into a commodity. Yet his humanity rebels against this transformation; it refuses to accept oppression, degradation, humiliation as a simple fact of nature, imposed on the whole working class by laws as uncontrollable as those which rule the weather. Thus the worker turns towards his own position in society and perceives it as at once that of a thing and that of a person compelled by other persons to become a thing. The worker becomes conscious of himself as a commodity, as merchandise, and at the same time recognizes that this reified self which he assumes within bourgeois society is not his full reality. The worker becomes the self-consciousness of commodities and also the consciousness that the whole reified structure of bourgeois society is an appearance behind which acts, unconsciously, the bourgeoisie as a class.

As the self-consciousness of commodities, the proletariat is also the self-consciousness of the whole commodity society. Because proletarian knowledge is in immediate relation to its object, the class consciousness of the proletariat has the inherent power to attain knowledge of the totality of bourgeois society. The proletariat, as the self-consciousness of bourgeois society, is both object and subject of its knowledge. The proletariat is thus able to break through the veil of reification and discover behind it the concrete historical process in which the bourgeoisie imposes reified forms on society. Reality is understood, and every particular fact of daily life finds its true meaning in its dialectical relations to the whole evolving structure of society. No isolated, reified things appear for this consciousness which cannot be understood in their true basis in the totality of human relations and historical processes of which reality is composed.

It is from this point of view that the proletariat opposes its dialectical science to the bourgeois, naturalistic sciences of society. This latter works with "facts" which it discovers immediately in experience, and draws these facts together under specialized laws having the form of eternal principles. But society is a constant process of evolution and within this process it is change itself which is the highest reality. The facts gathered by bourgeois social science are already out of date by the time they can be subsumed under laws, for the laws themselves are changing as society evolves, and it is from out of these laws, understood now not as atemporal rational principles, but as immanent, real historical tendencies, that the specific facts emerge. Thus a true science of society cannot imitate natural science. Nature is not a process of consciousness and history and therefore is not dialectical. Society, on the contrary, is fundamentally dialectical, and therefore the only way to understand it is to place oneself directly in the center of the process of history. No purely contemplative knowledge of society is possible.

It is for this reason that the class consciousness of the proletariat is not simply a contemplative knowledge of the scientific conditions of bourgeois society. This class consciousness is the self-consciousness of bourgeois society, and as such it stands not only in an immediate theoretical relation to it, but is also, as knowledge, a practical modification of it. For once the proletariat recognizes that reification is appearance.it

dedicates itself to abolishing reification. It transforms itself from the passive object of the historical process into the active, revolutionary object of this same process. And in this passage of theoretical knowledge into practice, the proletariat takes possession of history, not in an intellectual knowledge of the past, but in practical power over the present. History becomes the stage on which the proletariat plays out its destiny, and the present, as the moment of decision in which this destiny is appropriated, becomes the central concern of proletarian thought and action. For, "Only he who has the vocation and the will to give birth to the future can see the concrete truth of the present."

It is this that is meant by Lukács when he speaks of the unity of theory and practice. Theoretical knowledge, in the case of the proletariat, passes over immediately into practical action and the power of consciousness within (not against) society is suddenly revealed. Consciousness becomes here a creative force within history, not an external spectator. And with this discovery, a radical alteration of the concept of truth must be admitted. For if things cannot be understood in their truth except in so far as they are seen as becoming; if this becoming is itself incomplete and unfinished; and if within this becoming, consciousness of becoming itself plays a role in the final result, then the older notion of truth as the correspondence of the idea with reality must be abandoned. That is to say, if the truth of reality lies not in its present state of existence as reification, but in some future state which is being created, in part by human activity and thought, then for the individual in the present, true knowledge of reality is not a mere idea, but is dependent on his own active contribution to the future. Thus truth cannot be known except in the active commitment of the proletariat to the creation of the future.

It is of vital importance to grasp clearly the relation of the class consciousness of the proletariat and the historical world in this theory. The proletariat is the self-consciousness of history and its creative force, but this does not mean that the proletariat fulfills its destiny by realizing an ideal in the future. The "final goal" of the revolution does not lie outside or beyond reality in some ethical realm unconnected with experience in the present. On the contrary, revolution is only possible in the present because already the "final goal" is immanent in bourgeois society. The totality of real relations and processes which is the truth, this totality in which reification dissolves and humanity is restored, is already available to the proletariat within bourgeois society. It is the ruling principle of its thought and action. It is, if not fully known in its whole extent and meaning, already discovered as the Archimedean point from which the social world is controlled. Thus the proletariat is in a unique historical position: it serves the function of liberating the forces of the future, which without its conscious intervention would continue to lie dormant, and these forces of the future are precisely its own liberation.

But it must not be forgotten that the totality is not something external to the proletariat. The proletariat is both the central fact within the totality and the self-consciousness of the totality. From this point of view, the class consciousness of the proletariat is the reality of the totality, because without this consciousness, the future cannot emerge in its true form. Without the conscious act of the proletariat there is no totality, but only the fragmented, reified world of capitalism. Thus the destruction of bourgeois society "is only possible if the contradictions immanent in the historical process become conscious. The dialectic of this evolution moves objectively toward this stage without, however, being able to attain it by virtue of its own dynamic. It is only if the consciousness of the proletariat is able to reach this level that the consciousness of the

proletariat first becomes the consciousness of the historical process itself, that the proletariat emerges as the identical subject-object of history, that its praxis becomes capable of transforming reality. If the proletariat is incapable of accomplishing this step, the contradictions will remain unresolved and the dialectical mechanism of development will reproduce them at a higher level, in a modified form with an increased intensity. There lies the objective necessity of the evolutionary process. The action of the proletariat can never be anything but the concrete practical realization of the next step in the evolution of history." The totality, the guiding intention of revolutionary action, in accordance with the actual reality of society, thus reigns over the whole revolutionary process in the class consciousness of the proletariat.

THE FINAL IRONY

With *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács found the path that led beyond the world of the novel into a new realm of classical perfection in which the totality is again given immediately in life. Now the golden age reappears in the creative action of the proletariat as it builds the future within the present. The novel, in despair of ethics, converted it into aesthetic form, but the proletariat succeeds in transforming ethics into historical action. The proletariat, a successor to the criminals and madmen who are the heroes of the great novels, actually succeeds in realizing its ideal, in rediscovering its soul in the totality, against reified society. That irony with which the narrator of the novel treated his hero now becomes the final irony of bourgeois society and the world of the novel as a whole: that its most despised element, the working class, should perform an absolute and revolutionary critique of it in theory and in practice. And this irony has a positive content. It is not purely aesthetic, having no direct relation to life, but exhibits the totality again in a society of free and universal men, a society in which essence and life finally meet again in the totality. In a sense, the proletariat is the epic community itself arising in the world of the novel as the true subject of revolutionary irony.

In the Twenties Lukács scarcely foresaw the failure of communism in the West, but already he had provided for this possibility theoretically by connecting the revolution to the free action of the proletariat and not to blind economic forces. This free action was to be based not simply on the actual level of class consciousness possessed by the proletariat in 1923, but on its possible consciousness, the limits of its possible understanding of society set by its place within the productive process. But, even if the proletariat fails to attain this maximum of possible consciousness in fact, even if it fails to make a revolution, these outer limits of proletarian thought still represent the outer limits of knowledge of society within bourgeois society. And in fact the proletariat did fail in the West, but for that space of time within which its possible consciousness is the knowledge of reality, before bourgeois society passes on to a higher level of contradiction, it is still possible for certain individuals to appropriate this possible consciousness of the proletariat and on its ground to build a scientific Marxist cultural theory to complement the economic and social theory developed by Marx himself.

This is what has been happening in Europe since the writing of *History and Class Consciousness*. It was Lukács' great sensitivity to the life of forms, to "transcendental topographies", and his understanding of social reality, that permitted him to initiate this movement. His work made it possible for others to use Marxism concretely and significantly in the unveiling of reification, of tradition, of every obstacle to a clear view of

the human basis of society, in the study of the relation of culture to class consciousness and social reality. For behind every one of his specific ideas and analyses lay the dialectical method, and this method retains its validity in the face of the collapse of specific ideas on history and society. In a sense, then, the failure of the theory as a practical movement becomes irrelevant in so far as it has achieved scientific success. But this success not only confirms the theoretical validity of the theory; it is also conditioned by the practical exigencies of the realities the theory describes. As the situation in which the proletariat might attain the maximum possible consciousness of the whole society disappears, so will the intellectual possibility of producing scientific Marxism. Thus Marxism in Europe will suffer the final irony of presiding scientifically over its own demise.

What then is the ultimate value of the theory? In the United States we have probably already passed the point where the proletariat is a progressive force, much less a revolutionary one. Already the historical process is attaining a higher stage of contradiction in which the proletariat will not play a central role. In this new situation, the method of Marxism remains a possible method of radical social theory, but very little of Marx's or even of Lukács' specific ideas will still be acceptable. At one point in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács explains the relation between this method and the facts it brings to light. "If one assumed, even without admitting it, that contemporary research had proven the "factual" inaccuracy of every particular affirmation of Marx, a serious orthodox Marxist could unconditionally recognize all these new results, reject every individual Marxist thesis, without for an instant being compelled to renounce his Marxist orthodoxy. Orthodox Marxism does not, therefore, signify an uncritical belief in the results of Marx's research, a "faith" in one thesis or another, nor is it the exegesis of a "sacred" text. On the contrary, orthodoxy in the Marxist sense, refers exclusively to method. It implies the scientific conviction that dialectical Marxism is the correct method of research, that this method can only be developed, perfected and deepened along the lines set out by its founders; and that all attempts to transcend or improve it have only led to its trivialization, have only made of it an eclecticism, and could only lead to this."

Thus the study of the great dialectical thinkers, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, is as necessary today as in the past. But now we are compelled to return to the essence of the dialectical method, in the attempt to apply it to our contemporary situation, free from those of its past results which have been outdated. Even though we must still attempt to create a dialectical theory uniting the divergent aspects of the totality, this theory will have to be original, and for it Marxism will be, for the most part, past history. There can be no substitute for informed and deep reflection on the present state of our society. If Lukács can teach us anything, it is that Marxism itself cannot be such a substitute.