

ANDREW FEENBERG

Post-Utopian Marxism:

Lukács and the

Dilemmas of

Organization

INTRODUCTION: LUKÁCS, LUXEMBURG, AND LENIN

Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* contains one of the most important discussions of organizational questions to emerge from the tumultuous period immediately following World War I. Unfortunately, Lukács's contribution is little studied or discussed today and widely misunderstood. Typically, he is viewed as a proto-Stalinist by critical theorists in Germany and America and as a romantic irrationalist by Marxist scholars under the influence of Louis Althusser and Lucio Colletti in England, France, and Italy. Michael Löwy's careful study of Lukács's position in its historical context shows that neither of these interpretations is correct. Löwy argues convincingly that Lukács has an original conception of politics that is still of interest.¹

Indeed, Lukács can be seen attempting to construct a theory of mass politics at a decisive juncture, just before its degeneration at the hands of modern political parties, the media, and bureaucratic dictatorships. He still hoped that the existential involvement of the masses in historical action could ground a learning process leading to higher levels of freedom and individuality. Not just Lukács, but also Korsch, Gramsci, and other Marxist theorists in the 1920s devised personal versions of Leninism as a

1. For examples, see Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 34–36; Louis Althusser, et al., *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Maspéro, 1967), vol. 2, 104. Cf. Michael Löwy, *Pour une sociologies des intellectuels révolutionnaires* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), 203–25.

framework for transforming the defensive working-class counterculture inherited from the Second International into a base for aggressive anti-capitalist propaganda and action. They were more or less aware that they were in struggle with a new form of mass society, a more powerful adversary than anything the nineteenth century had been able to produce. This awareness showed up in a new emphasis on "consciousness," "hegemony," "spiritual factors." They hoped that the experience of political action would produce a historical subject with unprecedented resistance to bourgeois culture.

The problem as it appeared in this early period concerned the possibility of mass enlightenment on the basis of Marxist theory in opposition to a rising tide of reactionary beliefs supported by the established cultural institutions. More precisely, the revolutionaries needed to work out the relation between the scientific content of Marxist theory, to which the party had access, and mass action, the radical tendency of which made Marxist ideas credible to workers.

The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct Lukács's solution to this problem as it grew out of his evaluation of the work of Ron Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, and then to consider the inauspicious theory of the socialist state that caps it. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács wrote that "the question of organization is the most profound intellectual question facing the revolution."² Lukács's intense interest in what might normally be seen as technical political problems was connected to the intensity of revolutionary expectations in his day. He wrote, "Only when the revolution has entered into quotidian reality will the question of revolutionary organization demand imperiously to be admitted to the consciousness of the masses and their theoreticians" (HCC 297). It is in this context that Lukács studied the debates of Luxemburg and Lenin, not merely as political disagreements, but as indices of the changing relation of Marxist theory to historical reality.

In the language of the Second International, the dispute between Luxemburg and Lenin concerned the relative importance of "spontaneity" and "consciousness." These terms refer respectively to uncontrolled mass ac-

2. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Boston: MIT Press, 1968), 338; hereafter referred to as HCC in the text.

tion and party-directed activities. It is important not to confuse "spontaneity" in this Second International sense with romantic notions of the uncaused or the unmotivated. Lukács, for example, explained that "the spontaneity of a movement . . . is only the subjective, mass-psychological expression of its determination by pure economic laws" (HCC 307). "Consciousness," on the other hand, suggests such instrumental notions as "theory" and "planning." According to Lukács, the debate over the relative importance of spontaneity and consciousness goes very deep to the heart of the Marxist conception of the revolution, for "the question of how to organize a revolutionary party can only be developed organically from a theory of revolution itself" (HCC 297). Lukács claimed that Luxemburg's emphasis on spontaneity was due to a conception of the revolution as primarily social rather than political, as a product of the laws of motion of capitalism's contradictory economic structure. On the other hand, Lenin's emphasis on consciousness reflected a concept of the revolution as the political transcendence of the-determinism of the economy.

At the time Lukács was writing, Luxemburg's thought was a locus classicus among Western Marxists. Lukács started with a spontaneist conception of the revolution, derived in part from Luxemburg, and moved gradually toward a position more nearly consistent with Lenin's actual practice. *History and Class Consciousness* worked out Lukács's changing position on the question of organization in the course of two essays on Rosa Luxemburg, the first written in 1921, the second exactly one year later. However, if Lukács finally preferred Lenin's organizational methods, he continued to believe that it was Luxemburg who "saw the significance of mass actions more clearly than anyone" (HCC 298). And as late as Lukács's *Lenin* book, he continued to analyze the phenomenon of the soviets or councils in Luxemburgian terms as expressing the breakdown of the reified boundary between economics and politics that underlies bourgeois society.³ His interpretation of Lenin, furthermore, revealed an implicit rejection of much of Lenin's own self-interpretation, particularly the theory of "consciousness from without." Thus in his early Marxist works, Lukács seems to have attempted a synthesis of ideas drawn from both Luxemburg and Lenin.

3. Georg Lukács, *Lenin*, trans. N. Jacobs (London: New Left Books, 1970), 67–68.

REFLEXIVE SUBJECTIVITY

Lukács's reflections on organization address the vexed question of the relationship between Marxist theory and working-class practice. The problem arises because, given its independent "scientific" origin, Marxism's tie to the labor movement might be merely contingent and conjunctural. Marxism and the working class might have joined together through a happy mutual misunderstanding and not be essentially related at all. As Lukács wrote: "The issue turns on the question of theory and practice. And this not merely in the sense given it by Marx when he says in his first critique of Hegel that 'theory becomes a material force when it grips the masses.' Even more to the point is the need to discover those features and definitions both of the theory and the ways of gripping the masses which convert the theory, the dialectical method, into a vehicle of revolution. . . . If this is not done that 'gripping of the masses' could well turn out to be a will o' the wisp. It might turn out that the masses were in the grip of quite different forces, that they were in pursuit of quite different ends. In that event, there would be no necessary connection between the theory and their activity" (HCC 2). Lukács's response was formulated in terms of what I will call Marx's "reflexive" concept of subjectivity.

The concept of subjectivity in Marx's early writings was deeply influenced by Hegel's critique of the Jacobin experience in the French Revolution. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel claimed that the Jacobins attempted to impose a moral truth directly and immediately on society in ignorance of the deeper level of social reality from which actual development arises. But, Hegel and Marx both argued, morality is a functional element within society and not a standpoint on society. They agreed in rejecting the complete disconnection of supposedly absolute ethical and political imperatives from actual social life. If societies can be ordered in a normative continuum, as both Hegel and Marx believed, it must be in terms of standards other than moral ones.

In the light of Hegel's criticism, Marx was anxious to avoid a purely political moralism that would be based not on real social tensions but on abstract principles in the Jacobin manner. Marx's original discussion of these problems is found in several early essays in which he attempted to distinguish his position from utopian communism and the Jacobin-Blanquist revolutionism of his day. In the early 1840s, when Marx elabo-

rated this position, he was writing under the influence not only of Hegel, but also of Feuerbach, whose theory of religious alienation he attempted to generalize to include morality and the state. Just as Feuerbach reduced religion to its "human basis" in the alienated community, so Marx projected the "social" as the hidden unity of the contraries into which life was divided in alienated class society. The return to this basis would require not the reform of the state but its abolition and, correspondingly, not the *moralization* but the *abolition* of property-based civil society, dialectically correlated with the state. Communism, in his view, could not be a utopia imposed from above against private interests, for the very act of imposing "utopia" would reproduce the basic ill, the split between ethics and reality. A revolution that aims to bring morality down to earth, to realize morality by making it a feature of daily life, rooted in the interests and culture of the people, could never succeed on the basis of state action.

Thus he argued in "Critical Notes on The King of Prussia and Social Reform" that the proletariat cannot base its revolution on abstract ethical exigencies imposed by the state against the real interests they must by definition contradict insofar as they take on an ethical form. The proletarian goal is not merely to change the state by infusing it with correct moral principles, but far more radically to destroy the state. The proletariat should avoid politics, except for purely negative purposes, and should instead concentrate on social action toward the end of creating a wholly new type of society in which politics will be unnecessary.⁴

These concepts had a lasting impact on Marx's self-understanding as a revolutionary theoretician. For if Marxism is not merely a disguised ethical exigency from which the state would necessarily be reborn after the revolution, it must stand in a new relation to the class it represents. Starting from the critique of morality, Marx arrived at a general concept of revolutionary subjectivity as the "reflection" of life in thought. Marx introduced this reflexive concept of subjectivity to describe a type of revolutionary theory and consciousness that grows out of historical "necessity" instead of being imposed "abstractly" on the basis of pure moral principle. Rejecting moralism, Marx wrote in a famous early letter, "Until now the philosophers had the solution to all riddles in their desks, and the stupid outside world

4. Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 350.

simply had to open its mouth that the roasted pigeons of absolute science might fly into it.”⁵ By contrast, Marx claimed, his theory simply explains to the “world” “its own actions” and thus articulates the historically evolved content of the social movement. He wrote, “We merely show the world why it actually struggles; and the awareness of this is something the world *must* acquire, even if it does not want to.”⁶ And in his essay “On the Jewish Question,” Marx concluded, “It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive toward thought.”⁷

In the early writings, reflexive subjectivity corresponds to social revolution just as abstract ethical subjectivity corresponds to political revolution. The one emerges from the “social instinct” of the proletariat and articulates the inner meaning of its actions, while the other reflects the opposition of “ought” and “is” as they are experienced by the isolated individual in bourgeois society. But later writings are ambiguous, conserving only traces of this original concept of subjectivity, as, for example, in a passage in the preface to *Capital* where Marx writes of his critical method that “so far as such criticism represents a class, it can only represent the class whose vocation in history is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes—the proletariat.”⁸ This passage continues to suggest that Marxism is somehow rooted in the life experiences of the working class, although unfortunately Marx never explained exactly how and to what extent.

Marx made a similar point more explicitly in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with respect to the petty bourgeoisie. Marx writes: “Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drives the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the political and literary representatives of a class

5. Ibid., 212.

6. Letter from Marx to Ruge (Sept. 1843), *ibid.*, p. 214 and quoted in HCC 77.

7. Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 53–54.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Modern Library, 1906), vol. 1, 20.

and they class they represent.⁹ Even this rudimentary theory was left behind in his mature writings, where he offered programmatic references to the "determination of thought by being" and "historical necessity" in place of the more precise concept of reflexivity. Although this deterministic language is often seen as a concession to scientism, it also serves the same function as the earlier theory of reflexive consciousness in avoiding political moralism.

Lukács did not arrive at Marx's reflexive concept of subjectivity directly through the reading of Marx but indirectly through Marx's own Hegelian sources. Lukács's pre-Marxist *Theory of the Novel* recapitulated Hegel's critique of abstract ethics. In that work, Lukács depicted the novelistic hero as the bearer of a degraded idealism necessarily correlated with the degraded reality of bourgeois society. From the ironic standpoint of the novelist and critic, reified society and the nostalgia for meaning are features of the same desolate spiritual landscape. By the time he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács had concluded that achieving transcendence would require forms of collective opposition unavailable to the individual in bourgeois society and open only to the class. Like the early Marx, Lukács was determined to find a way to renew the theory of revolution that avoided the pitfalls of individualistic moralism. Reflexive subjectivity offered a solution that could also form the critical link between Lukács's interpretation of Marxism and classical German philosophy. Thus, Lukács noted that "the deep affinities between historical materialism and Hegel's philosophy are clearly manifested here, for both conceive of theory as the self-knowledge of reality" (HCC 16). For Lukács, as for Hegel and the early Marx, consciousness conceived as self-knowledge transcends the opposition of thought and being, subject and object, "ought" and "is." This is the secret of what he called the "post-utopian attitude to history" (HCC 78).

THEORY AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN LUXEMBURG

Rosa Luxemburg's theory of mass action recovered the Marxist concept of reflexive subjectivity from the complete oblivion into which it had fallen in

9. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 121.

the Second International. Her theory was inspired by the 1905 Russian Revolution, the first major mass struggle for socialism since the Commune of Paris.¹⁰ This was an immense, spontaneous social movement which quickly passed from basic economic protest to quite sophisticated social and political demands and the creation of a new kind of revolutionary organization, the "Soviet" or factory council.

The orthodox Marxism of the day held that the historical necessity of the movement toward socialism was manifested in gradual union and parliamentary struggle. More activist strategies, and especially violence, were dismissed as ultraleft voluntarism. The Russian experience suggested a different way of connecting revolutionary politics with historical determinism. The struggles of 1905 were violent and yet they clearly emerged from the deepest determining forces of the historical process rather than from the insurrectional fantasies of political leaders. In Luxemburg's interpretation of this movement, spontaneity reconciles subject and object in history. In the spontaneous struggle, the proletariat at one and the same time realizes the necessity of the historical laws and imposes its will and consciousness on the world.

Luxemburg argued against the pseudoscientific understanding of theory prevalent in the Second International. She proposed a historical concept of theory as a prolongation of action, the articulation of its inner meaning. Ideas are the highest product of theory but they represent the lowest level of class consciousness. Mere opinions are what Luxemburg calls a "theoretical and latent" class consciousness. Class consciousness achieves full development not in this contemplative form, but in the "practical and active" expression of class aspirations and solidarity in revolutionary struggle. Theory must cease to be a mere representation of the inner meaning of class struggle to become consciousness as a historical force in that struggle.¹¹ As Lukács was later to explain it, "Proletarian thought is in the first place merely a theory of praxis which only gradually transforms itself into a practical theory that overturns the real world" (HCC 205).

For Luxemburg, as for Lukács, the party played a decisive role in the

10. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970).

11. *Ibid.*, 199.

passage from theory to practice, the latent to the active. "Organization," Lukács wrote, "is the form of the mediation between theory and practice" (HCC 299). To the temporarily latent character of the socialist goal corresponds the historical reality of the party. In relation to the masses, "the party is the objectification of their own will (obscure though this may be to themselves)" (HCC 42). What is latent and theoretical at any given moment must be made present organizationally if it is later to become practical in struggle. Like theory, the party represents the still-latent meaning of struggles that need only achieve sufficient breadth and intensity to express themselves in revolutionary consciousness. Theory and party organization are thus joined to historical necessity by their expressive, hermeneutic function, which is to grant conscious and explicit form to the implicit content of the spontaneous struggle. They overcome utopianism and moralism insofar as they derive historical necessity from spontaneity.

From this Luxemburgian standpoint, political direction no longer has any of the voluntaristic traits Marx rejected. It does not change the fundamental orientation of the movement, but rather expresses the significance of ongoing actions, thereby aiding the actors to clarify their own goals. "It [the party] must immerse its own truth in the spontaneous mass movement and raise it from the depths of economic necessity, where it was conceived, on to the heights of free, conscious action. In so doing it will transform itself in the moment of the outbreak of revolution from a party that makes demands to one that imposes an effective reality. This change from demand to reality becomes the lever of the truly class-oriented and truly revolutionary organization of the proletariat" (HCC 41-42). Luxemburg's theory of organization had such a great impact on Lukács because it dovetailed neatly with his own Hegelian interpretation of Marx's reflexive concept of consciousness. But did this theory offer an adequate explanation for the revolutionary movements which followed the First World War? Its intellectual elegance and consistency with Marxism were no substitute for this ultimate test, which took the form of a confrontation with Lenin's very different approach and with the reality of the Russian Revolution. Lukács's reexamination of the debates between Luxemburg and Lenin left him firmly committed to practical Leninism, although we will see that he did not accept Lenin's own self-interpretation and attempted to substitute something quite different for it.

LUXEMBURG OR LENIN

Luxemburg's theory of the revolution is more faithful to Marx than any later contribution. However, just for that reason she cannot accurately describe many important features of the revolutionary process that followed World War I. The world had become so very unlike Marx's that his ideas about revolution, even as developed by Luxemburg after 1905, were seriously misleading. Luxemburg, Lukács believed, had "the illusion of an 'organic', purely proletarian revolution" (HCC 303). Her image of the revolution was unrealistically simple in three important respects: her extension of the concept of the proletariat to cover the widest masses of the population; her "over-estimation of the spontaneous, elemental forces of the Revolution," and her tendency to believe in an "ideological organic growth into socialism" (HCC 278-79). She consistently overestimated the unity of the proletariat and the proletarian character of the revolution, minimizing the organizational consequences of divisions within the class and the complexity of alliances with nonproletarian strata and classes: "This false assessment of the true driving forces leads to the decisive point of her misinterpretation: to the underplaying of the role of the party in the revolution and of its conscious political action, as opposed to the necessity of being driven along by the elemental forces of economic development" (HCC 275).¹²

Lenin's party maintained a considerable independence from the mass of workers and on occasion took initiatives without much regard for proletarian spontaneity. In Luxemburg's theory, the independence of the party would be the death of the dialectic in which it raises the level of struggle of the masses through articulating the implicit content of class action. Lenin's conception of a disciplined minority leading the mass movement appeared to her to be a voluntaristic illusion, already transcended by the Marxist conception of social revolution. Party and class are not two distinct objects for Luxemburg, but dialectical moments of a single collective subjectivity. The party, quite simply, can never take the class as its object, either of knowledge or of action. Rather, the role of the party is to be the extreme limit of the subjectivity of the class, the prolongation of class action toward self-awareness. If for Lenin the party should be pictured one step ahead of

12. For a critique of Lukács's critique of Luxemburg, see Michael Löwy, "Lukács et Rosa Luxemburg: La Théorie du Parti," in *L'Homme et la Société* 43-44 (Jan.-June 1977).

the class it leads as a vanguard, for Luxemburg the party is better imagined behind the class, pointing in the direction in which the class is already half-consciously moving.

This difference shows up significantly in their views on the role of tactical planning in the revolution. They were, of course, in complete agreement on such basics as the importance of the party's role in disseminating revolutionary political propaganda in times of social peace, and in the belief that the workers will revolt the sooner and the more successfully, "the more rapidly and more deeply, more energetically the educational work of social democracy is carried out amongst them."¹³ And they could also agree on the need for a party organization to coordinate socially or geographically separated struggles. But beyond this minimum the disagreement begins, Lenin holding that the party can at least try—and sometimes succeed—in directing the struggle according to a tactical plan, Luxemburg dismissing this goal as impossible and indeed harmful to the movement.

Luxemburg believed that the spontaneous tactical line that emerges from class struggle is superior to any plan of the party leadership. To the extent that the necessary struggle is the spontaneous struggle and the party a subordinate product of this spontaneity, the very idea of tactical planning of the revolution is a contradiction in terms. Even when wrong, the class movement's spontaneous choices have the pathos of historical necessity about them and form an integral part of the learning process of the class. "Let us speak plainly," she wrote, "historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee."¹⁴ She concluded: "In general, the tactical policy of the Social Democracy is not something that can be 'invented.' It is the product of a series of great creative acts of the often-spontaneous class struggle seeking its way forward. . . . The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of the historical process comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process."¹⁵

The key practical difference implied by this disagreement concerns the

13. Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike," 199.

14. *Ibid.*, 130.

15. *Ibid.*, 199.

role of insurrection in proletarian revolution. Marx's critique of Jacobin methods was prolonged in Luxemburg's theory of the mass strike as the form of movement of the social revolution. Luxemburg argued quite correctly that a revolutionary mass strike cannot be planned and controlled in its technical details by a political party; however, she failed to understand the limitations of the mass strike, which, by itself, is insufficient to assure victory. As Trotsky later explained the problem: "Whatever its power and mass character, the general strike does not settle the problem of power; it only poses it. To seize power, it is necessary, while relying on the general strike, to organize an insurrection."¹⁶ In this task tactical planning is essential, as Lenin was the first to understand clearly.

Lukács argued that Luxemburg's theory of the revolutionary process was at least partially invalidated by the practical lessons of the Russian Revolution. Luxemburg had followed Marx in attempting to restrain the political will of the working class so that it would listen to the deeper voice of its social instinct. But in the context of the revolutionary crisis following World War I, political will was an increasingly important condition of social advance. Lenin appeared to Lukács to have solved the problem of joining the one to the other. The remaining difficulty was to reconcile Lenin's practical methods with Marxism, and this was the task Lukács set himself. Lukács's attempt to produce an independent theory based on Lenin's practice seems to have been motivated in part by an implicit critique of Lenin's own self-interpretation. Certainly the Russian defenders of Leninist orthodoxy sensed the incompatibility of Lukács's Leninism with their own. If Lukács himself never openly addressed the problems in Leninist theory, it was no doubt because he felt it would be impolitic to do so, and perhaps also because in the early 1920s strictly philosophical disagreements with Lenin did not seem as important as practical agreement.

Unlike Lukács, Lenin had remained faithful to the "orthodox" epistemology of the Second International "Center," as represented by such thinkers as Karl Kautsky and G. V. Plekhanov. The reified categories Lenin derived from this epistemology penetrated his own self-interpretation, contradicting the revolutionary tendencies of his thought. Orthodoxy's

16. Leon Trotsky, "Les problèmes de la guerre civile," in *Initiative Socialiste* 17 (June 1968): 9–10. Cf. also Victor Serge, *L'An I de la Révolution Russe* (Paris: Editions de Delphes, 1965), 96.

chief theoretical positions included evolutionary determinism, theory as pure science, and organization and strategy as technical application of this science. These positions had achieved a sort of classical coherence in the Second International where they rationalized the basically reformist practice of the movement. After World War I, these same ideas were thrust into the whirlwind of revolutionary action with confusing results.¹⁷

Lukács's reinterpretation of Lenin must be understood in the context of attempts in the West to break with the orthodox Marxism in which Lenin still believed, and to devise a version of Leninism compatible with the emphasis on revolutionary subjectivity that had emerged as one of the chief characteristics of the postwar offensive. These attempts had in common an implicit rejection of the authoritarian implications of Lenin's technicism, inherited from his orthodox philosophical teachers. Lenin himself was insensitive to these implications. Technicism offered a language in which to articulate his practice in a revolutionary crisis. He believed that the revolutionary movement could not spontaneously resolve the crisis it provoked, but awaited the action of a conscious minority for its resolution. History would have to become the object of knowledge and technique to realize its "necessary" progress. Lenin took it for granted that the party could *use* the laws of history to achieve historically possible ends.

From this point of view the entire society, including the proletariat, appears as an object, relatively predictable and subject to control from above. Historical necessity is not so much discovered in the gigantic power of its unfolding, as it is for Marx and Luxemburg, as grasped technically in the interests of power. So obvious and unobjectionable did this instrumental perspective seem to Lenin that he naively claimed that "Marxism . . . places at their [the party's] disposal the mighty force of millions and millions of workers."¹⁸ This approach to history contradicts the original Marxian reflexive theory of subjectivity, designed to transcend precisely such a voluntaristic conception of struggle. It seemed therefore to revive the Jacobin-Blanquist revolutionary methods that Marx had long ago rejected. The old orthodoxy had never had to face these paradoxical consequences of its technicist interpretation of Marxism because its union and

17. For a stimulating if contentious survey of the period, see George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

18. V. I. Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin* (New York: Bantam, 1966), 89.

parliamentary practice could easily be seen as expressing the long-range historical necessity of capitalist social evolution. But in an insurrectionary context, the theory revealed its anti-Marxist implications with a vengeance, particularly in Lenin's reliance on Kautskian "consciousness from without" to justify a type of political vanguardism Kautsky would never have condoned. This argument, contained in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, deserves further consideration for what it shows about the doctrine Lukács passed over in silence in elaborating his own interpretation of Leninism.¹⁹

Like his orthodox teachers, Lenin believed that Marxism was a pure science, that it came "from without" and was in no way a product of proletarian class struggle, even if it took that struggle as its privileged object of study. This Kautskian position corresponded to a respectable epistemological model of science and assigned revolutionary intellectuals the missionary role of spreading socialist ideas, the source of which was to be sought in Marxism rather than in the spontaneous ideology of the proletariat. Lenin carried the argument still further, claiming that the spontaneous beliefs of the proletariat simply reflected bourgeois ideology, "because it is more fully developed and because it possesses immeasurably more opportunities of being distributed."²⁰ Having denied all ideological creativity to the mass of workers, Lenin proceeded to sharpen the separation between the working class and the theoreticians of socialism. In Lenin's view, theory came from "science" and not from the working class and its struggles. Lenin considered this distinction so important that to avoid any confusion he called "the intellectuals," including Marx and Engels, "representatives of the propertied classes."²¹ And, at another point, he insisted that when workers participate in creating socialist theory, they "take part not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians . . . ; in other

19. The silence is broken in Lukács's recently published *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. E. Leslie (London and New York: Verso, 2000). Here Lukács explains Lenin's theory of consciousness from without in terms of what I call exemplary action. The proletariat, he claims, is unique because in certain specific types of situations it can grasp the results of action taken by the party on the basis of a correct theoretical knowledge of the society rather than on the basis of its own average thoughts and feelings, and, in the heat of the moment, leap to the higher level of understanding of society exemplified by the party's acts. This corresponds rather well to Lenin's sense of what he was actually doing, but not to his theoretical account, as I argue here.

20. Lenin, *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 130.

21. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 122.

words, they take part *only* to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and advance that knowledge."²²

Once Lenin's argument is pursued to its logical conclusion, the orthodox premises from which he began yield an absurd result. Here theory grips the masses with a vengeance. The proletariat achieves nothing "on its own," for its spontaneity has been reduced to bourgeois ideology and its socialist theoreticians are "intellectuals," "scientists," and come from an epistemological beyond or from the bourgeoisie. The rigid opposition of "within and "without" has converted the proletariat into an ideological tabula rasa. Why did Lenin push orthodoxy to these absurd conclusions? This appears to have been the only fundamental philosophical argument he could formulate for justifying the creation of a vanguard party. Unfortunately, the argument is incompatible with Marxism, which is refuted in its basis if it cannot find in the proletariat a reality that "strives toward thought" even as revolutionary ideas strive to enter reality as a material force.

Consistency should not be considered a virtue in arguing for a position as overdrawn as Lenin's, and Lenin was not in fact perfectly consistent. Many other passages in his writings show that he did not want to pay the full price of overthrowing Marxism to defend his theory of the party. Even *What Is To Be Done?* offered an alternative theory according to which "the 'spontaneous element', in essence represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form."²³ Here the class "strives toward thought" as Marxism requires. But this alternative remained undeveloped, no doubt because Lenin did not know how to reconcile it with his vanguardism. The conclusion is inescapable that Lenin lacked the theoretical means to develop a properly Marxist explanation for his own practice.

THE "ACTUALITY" OF THE REVOLUTION

Confronted with the success of Lenin's organizational innovations and the incompetence, at least in Marxist terms, of his philosophical explanations for them, Lukács attempted to reduce the tension between theory and practice. He reformulated the debate between Luxemburg and Lenin in

22. Ibid., vol. 1, 130.

23. Ibid., vol. 1, 121.

historical terms, situating their principal ideas with respect to different stages in the revolutionary process. Lukács's first sketch of such a theory is to be found in an article originally published in *Die Internationale* in 1921. Here he defended the new insurrectional tactic of the German Communist party, which Clara Zetkin had attacked in the name of Rosa Luxemburg's theory of revolutionary spontaneity. Lukács asked: "Do the relations between party and mass remain the same in the course of the entire revolutionary process, or is this relation also a process, which actively and passively undergoes the compulsion of the dialectical transformation and overthrow of the total process?"²⁴

In reply he suggested the basis of his later theory of the revolutionary process: the idea of a changing relation between spontaneity and consciousness in the course of history. Lukács distinguished two main stages. Throughout the first and longest stage, mass action is essentially spontaneous. It arises "reactively" under the immediate compulsion of the economic laws, and all the party can do is to bring the meaning of such actions to consciousness. During this stage, "the economic and consequently the political and ideological process" has "the necessity of a 'natural law.'" ²⁵ To this situation there corresponds the "classical" conception of Marxism, as represented by Marx, Engels, and Luxemburg, with its emphasis on historical inevitability and the expressive role of the party. But, there is another side to the Marxist theory of revolution, which emphasizes the goal of "human control of history," the "realm of freedom." It is true, Lukács admitted, that in classical Marxist thought this goal is always put off to a future socialist society. But Lukács argued that freedom is not so much a realm as a process, and one which begins already in the revolutionary movement itself. If the "leap" into the realm of freedom discussed by Marx and Engels is conceived as a sudden break in the continuity of history, then freedom becomes a transcendent ideal, not a living force, and the problem of moralism reappears. On the contrary, it must be seen as the result of a gradual development in which, with the approach of the revolution, consciousness plays a prefigurative role.

Thus Lukács distinguished a second main stage in the revolutionary

24. Georg Lukács, "Spontaneität der Massen, Aktivität der Partei," in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), 136 (my translation).

25. *Ibid.*, 137.

process, the stage of the final crisis of capitalism, during which the growth of freedom is reflected in a more active role for the party. During this stage, the party may have to follow a vanguard strategy such as that of the Russian or German Communists, energizing the working class by providing an example of a revolutionary initiative to help it overcome its "lethargy."²⁶ Lukács did not retain the exact terms of this discussion in *History and Class Consciousness* and *Lenin*, but he continued to develop the idea of a gradual change in the relation of spontaneity and consciousness in the course of the revolutionary process. Indeed, *Lenin* was based on the theory of the second stage: "Lenin's concept of party organization," he wrote there, "presupposes the fact—the actuality—of the revolution."²⁷ This idea was brought in constantly to explain the differences between Lenin's approach and traditional Marxist strategy and organization.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács argued that as the revolution approaches, the next step on the path to socialism becomes less and less obvious; the spontaneous reaction of the class to the operation of the economic laws is no longer an adequate guide and actions must be based increasingly on the objective potentialities of the society. Instrumental considerations take their place alongside expressive ones in the life of the party: "The closer this process comes to its goal the more urgent it becomes for the proletariat to understand its own historical mission and the more vigorously and directly proletarian class consciousness will determine each of its actions. For the blind power of the forces at work will only advance 'automatically' to their goal of self-annihilation as long as that goal is not within reach. When the moment of transition to the 'realm of freedom' arrives this will become apparent just because the blind forces really will hurtle blindly towards the abyss, and only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe" (HCC 69–70). Here was to be found the justification for Lenin's apparent voluntarism. As the theoretician of the final crisis of capitalism, Lenin understood the increasing role of consciousness better than the representatives of the "classical" Left. His break with the organizational and strategic theory of the Marxist tradition looked like a return to Jacobin-Blanquist methods out of the distant past, but in fact, Lukács argued, this

26. Ibid., 141.

27. Lukács, *Lenin*, 26.

was no nostalgic backward glance but a much-needed adjustment of the working-class movement to the demands of the new revolutionary era.

PARTY, CLASS, AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

This historical justification of Leninism raises once again the problem of the deeper relation of theory and practice that Marx originally addressed with the concept of reflexive subjectivity. Even if the sort of party Lenin created is the most effective in a revolutionary crisis, it remains to be seen if anything more than opportunity links it to the proletariat. This is not a merely theoretical concern, as the history of Stalinism has shown. It is unfortunate that Lukács's early interpretation of Leninism should now be widely condemned as Stalinist when in fact he was attempting to replace the implicit technicism of Lenin's own self-interpretation that bore such bitter fruit under Stalin.²⁸

Marxists were well aware that theory contained contents with no immediate relation to the everyday life of the working class, for example, abstract ideas about the circulation of money or the schemata of reproduction of capital. These ideas can be called "proletarian" only in the very limited sense that they, like Marxist thought in general, lie under the horizon of the class standpoint of the proletariat. This horizon, Lukács argued, is defined by the possibility of a dialectical transcendence of bourgeois reification, both in practice and theory. But such ideas do not bring the meaning of any specific action to consciousness. They thus "represent the proletariat," in Marx's phrase, only scientifically, not as moments in its self-consciousness.

The Leninist dilemma of theory and practice arises when the success of the movement depends on translating ideas of this type into action. What happens when the mere addition of self-consciousness to action is insufficient, when "what must be done" no longer follows in a smooth continuum along the path of the actualization of the latent meaning of spontaneous action? Lenin argued that in this situation the party must come forward as an independent historical subject. The masses then appeared as just another objective condition the party had to take into account in

28. For a further discussion of Lukács's theory of class consciousness and the party, see Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 5.

pursuing its goals. What is lost in this account is the complex communicative and social dimension of the interaction of party and class. It is this interaction that must explain the authority of the party, which has no coercive basis and which is not itself technical. Lukács tried to reconstruct this aspect of the relation in a way more consistent with Marxism.

There are good practical reasons for doing so, Lukács argued. The risk of sectarianism is obvious when theoretically inspired party initiatives leave the masses far behind in order to respond "correctly" to objective instrumental requirements. Thus Lukács wrote, "The Communist Party does not function as a stand-in for the proletariat even in theory" (HCC 327). In sectarianism one can see clearly the dialectical correlation of technicism and ethical idealism: the party may unconsciously fall back into a moral stance in relation to society, posing ethical exigencies disguised as scientific certainties. Sectarianism can be avoided only where the party continues to advance the proletarian learning process. The trick is to do so offensively, without simply following the class (HCC 320–21, 326–27).

Surprisingly, this analysis of sectarianism corresponds precisely to the theory widely attributed to Lukács by recent scholarship. Kolakowski, for example, argues that since, according to Lukács, proletarian class consciousness is embodied in the party, the party can safely ignore the empirical consciousness of the proletariat and act on its own. For Lukács, he concludes, "the party is always right."²⁹ Yet what Lukács actually says is that given the active role of the party, it must possess the correct theory to survive, "for otherwise the consequences of a false theory would soon destroy it" (HCC 327). What Kolakowski misses is Lukács's attempt to overcome Lenin's technicist self-understanding, and to explain the actual social learning process Leninism implied for Western revolutionaries in this period. (This is, of course, not to say that they succeeded in performing according to Lukács's prescriptions.)

Lukács argued that it is necessary to distinguish "classical" expressive acts of the party, which follow and render explicit the content of class action, from a new type of exemplary party intervention that precedes class actions, the necessity of which it makes visible to the class for the first time. In both cases the party's acts are doubly meant, once in function of the

29. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: 3—The Breakdown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 282.

particular objective they aim at, and then a second time in function of their expected impact on class consciousness. But in the era of the actuality of the revolution, the passage from latent theoretical concepts to practical and active class consciousness must be immensely accelerated to coincide with the rhythms of instrumental effectiveness in a political crisis. This coincidence can be achieved where, by their exemplary form, instrumental actions also serve to advance consciousness. Thus Lukács wrote: "The struggle of the Communist party is focused upon the class consciousness of the proletariat. Its organisational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle for its interests on its behalf and in its place. . . . Should it do this, as occasionally happens in the course of revolution, then it is not the first instance an attempt to fight for the objective goals of the struggle in question (for in the long run these can only be won or retained by the class itself), but only an attempt to advance or accelerate the development of class consciousness" (HCC 326).

But what is to guide the party in making such daring thrusts beyond the achieved level of working-class consciousness? And what guarantees that it will really remain the party of the class in engaging in such prefigurative actions? Lukács's theory of class consciousness was designed to solve these problems by explaining the dependence of the party on the class even in the second stage, characterized by party autonomy and conscious initiative. Lukács distinguished between the *concept* of class consciousness, based on the objective determinants of the everyday activity of the class, and the *actual thoughts and feelings* of members of the class. The former were derived by theoretical analysis and the latter observed empirically. "Class consciousness," as Lukács now defined it, would be the *significance* of class action represented as "objectively possible" contents of consciousness with which members of the class *might* articulate the meaning of their lives. Experience showed that the results of empirical observation often deviated significantly from theoretical expectations. In practice, the objectively possible beliefs described in the theoretical model had to compete, and not always very successfully, with ideas borrowed from other classes or developed idiosyncratically from a mixture of sources. The revolution was to be the process in which the gap between model and reality was gradually reduced (HCC 51).

The relation of party and class can be analyzed on this basis in a way that does justice both to Marx's and Luxemburg's insistence on the reflexive

nature of class consciousness, and to Lenin's insistence on the independent role of theory. The party attempts to interpret the situation of the class in accordance with the concept of class consciousness, understood as the unarticulated meaning of class actions *some of which have not yet occurred*. This meaning can be "imputed" to the class in the expectation that, if it is correctly interpreted, the class will recognize itself in the party's language and acts. The translation of these imputed contents back into action by the class completes the cycle in which class consciousness advances to higher levels. In this model of the development of class consciousness, the ideas the party brings to the class come both "from without," in the sense that they arise from theory, and "from within," in the sense that they reflect the (future) truth of class action. Lukács's theory worked well in saving the classical reflexive concept of theory and the party, while also accounting for the increasingly common situations in which theory could identify instrumentally decisive tasks not taken up spontaneously by class action.

Note, however, that here Lenin's scientific-technical self-understanding is completely inverted. The party does not become the subject of history through its independent actions. Rather, these actions pose the party as an object before the class. Thus Lukács described the party, even at its most active, in the passive mode. He called it the "visible and organised incarnation of (the proletarian) class consciousness" (HCC 42). And, he wrote: "The Communist party must exist as an independent organisation so that the proletariat may be able to see its own class consciousness given historical shape. And likewise, so that in every event of daily life the point of view demanded by the interests of the class as a whole may receive a clear formulation that every worker can understand. And, finally, so that the whole class may become fully aware of its own existence as a class" (HCC 326).

The party does not have "at its disposal" millions of proletarians, but on the contrary, it is those millions who have the party at their disposal, to believe or disbelieve, to accept or reject, to follow or oppose on the basis of its success in discovering and communicating the next "objectively possible" step in the evolution of class consciousness. The apparently contingent technical relation of party to class in Lenin's theory is subordinated here to a deeper "internal cause" that makes this technical relation possible in the first place. The party, even in its acts, becomes the objectification of class consciousness. It is not a mechanism of social control in the service of

the revolution; it is there to be "seen," and the sight of it inspires the overthrow of the society.

THE STATE AND THE MASS

Lukács's synthesis of Luxemburg and Lenin drew both expressive and instrumental forms of action together under the reflexive concept of subjectivity. Although he lacked the term, Lukács clearly grasped the concept of exemplary action, which supplied the mediating link between the apparent contraries. The synthesis broke down, however, when Lukács turned from explaining the relation of party to class before the revolution to their relation afterward in the socialist state. Once the party's acts became acts of state, the informal popular controls under which it developed could no longer ensure its subordination to the class, and yet Lukács proposed no new controls capable of preventing a regression to Jacobin voluntarism. Lukács's discussion of socialism is nevertheless interesting as an attempt to sketch the outlines of a public sphere based on a social movement rather than on "politics" in the usual sense of the term. The bourgeois parliamentary public sphere was to be transcended through forms of collective action that went beyond mere verbal propaganda addressed to the individual consciousness of the isolated voter. The social basis of this new public sphere was the Soviet, or workers' council, which overcame the isolation of the individual and the split between economic and political life on which this isolation is based.

Lukács's description of the Soviets has a distinctly Luxemburgian cast, and reflects her own analysis of similar phenomena in the 1905 Revolution. For both Luxemburg and Lukács, the Soviets represent the point of transition from a reactive spontaneity under the impulse of the economic laws to a creative social movement capable of restructuring society. To explain this transition, Lukács framed Luxemburg's analysis in terms of his theory of the transcendence of reification in a proletarian consciousness oriented toward the "totality" of society. Here is a long passage that summarizes this extraordinary theory:

The Soviet system, for example, always establishes the indivisible unity of economics and politics by relating the concrete existence of men—

their immediate daily interests, etc.—to the essential questions of society as a whole. It also establishes the unity in objective reality where bourgeois class interests created the “division of labor” above all, the unity of the power “apparatus” (army, police, government, the law, etc.) and “the people.” . . . Everywhere, the Soviet system does its utmost to relate human activity to general questions concerning the state, the economy, culture, etc., while fighting to ensure that the regulation of all such questions does not become the privilege of an exclusive bureaucratic group remote from social life as a whole. Because the Soviet system, the proletarian state, makes society aware of the real connection between all moments of social life (and later objectively unites those which are as yet objectively separate—town and country, for example, intellectual and manual labor, etc.—it is a decisive factor in the organization of the proletariat as a class.”³⁰

This description of the Soviets begins to suggest a theory of socialist citizenship, and as such it marks a definite advance over most Marxist discussions of socialist politics, which waver between utopian speculation and unimaginative appeals to the example of existing bourgeois democratic forms. And yet it is puzzling that neither here nor elsewhere did Lukács discuss the institutional aspects of the socialist state, such as voting, the organization of public debate, competition between parties, the rights of individuals and groups, and so on. How important is the missing institutional theory from a Marxist standpoint? Given Marx’s frequent criticism of the limitations of capitalist democracy, and the latter Communist record in this regard, one might imagine that Lukács’s omission is quite “orthodox.” Yet the one text in which Marx examines workers’ power, *The Civil War in France*, contains extensive discussion of the institutional structure of the socialist state. This discussion is governed by the original impulse of Marx’s early critique of political revolution, which is the search for a way of subordinating the new socialist state to the social movement. Marx judges some means inherited from capitalist democracy effective for this purpose (such as voting), and others counterproductive (such as separation of powers). Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, it is

30. Lukács, *Lenin*, 67–68.

clear that he took seriously the danger of a new dictatorship arising on the back of the revolution. How could he not with the example of the two Napoleons fresh in his mind?

Rather than developing an institutional theory of this sort, Lukács juxtaposed his theory of the Soviets with a theory of the vanguard party derived from the first few years of the Russian example. He wrote that "the party's role in a revolution—the masterly idea of the early Lenin—is even more important and more decisive in the period of transition to socialism than in the preparatory period."³¹ And he argued that the apparent contradiction between the authority of the party and the democratic tasks of the revolution is in fact "the dialectically correct solution to the objective contradictions" of the situation.³² This only makes sense if the mechanisms that ensured the subordination of the party to the class before the revolution will work afterward to prevent the autonomization of the state. But that is not the case. As we have seen, Lukács made a convincing case for the idea that before the revolution the party could lead through exemplary actions lying at the intersection of instrumental and communicative exigencies. In this way the party would advance the movement politically while retaining and enlarging its base of popular support. But after the revolution the situation has changed, and the party is not forced to seek compromises between the instrumental requirements of effective strategic action and the communicative conditions of maintaining a leading relationship to the class. Instead, the party focuses on gaining control of a new base of power, the coercive and administrative institutions of the modern state and the tremendous propaganda means at its disposal.

What difference does this make? The Soviets cannot play the role in relation to the new state played earlier by proletarian spontaneity as a corrective and verification of the party's line. The party's existence is no longer rooted in a mass learning process; it now finds itself at the summit of the technical bureaucracies in charge of running an industrial society in which workers appear as simple subordinates. Where before, Lukács could

31. Ibid., 86.

32. Ibid., 87. Contrary to Kolakowski, statements such as these were not meant to justify eliminating the Soviets in favor of the party (Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 283). Lukács still regarded the Soviets as the core of the socialist state. Lukács's problem in this period was that he affirmed *both* Soviets and party without offering an adequate account of their relations.

write that the "consequences of a false theory would soon destroy" the party, now it is the people who must pay the price for their leaders' errors (HCC 327). The back-and-forth movement from party to class, consciousness to spontaneity, through which both were supposed to advance in synergy, is replaced by the command structure of modern management. By no stretch of the imagination can the acts of the party at this point be described as moments in the self-reflection of the class.

One might argue that Lenin had few choices as a leader of a historical movement while still expressing concern about the direction he was compelled by circumstance to take. Certainly the single-party state established in Russia ought to have been a subject for concern among Marxists, if for no other reason, on the basis of a reading of *The Civil War in France*. It seemed obvious to Marx in 1871 that new institutional structures of socialist democracy would be required to maintain the social and emancipatory character of the movement. Yet it was not at all obvious to Lukács, nor to many others in his position in the 1920s. Instead, he arrived theoretically at the same contradiction at which Lenin arrived practically: the assertion of the simultaneous and increased role of both the masses and the Communist party in a single-party Soviet state. In practice, this contradiction was resolved by the collapse of the social movement and the creation of a new kind of tyranny without precedent in Marxist theory.

The inability of most revolutionary Communists in the 1920s to foresee and forestall the Stalinist catastrophe was due to a deep failure of theory and imagination. The cause of this failure was twofold. On the one hand, thinkers and activists like Lukács and Lenin confused emergency measures taken in the shadow of a revolution in a backward country with fundamental changes in the nature of the public sphere under socialism. On the other hand, and as a result of this first error, they underestimated the validity of the classic teachings concerning the political and legal preconditions of democracy developed in the course of several centuries of bourgeois and Marxist reflection and experience. The consequences of this failure are still very much with us and represent the inner theoretical limit of the dominant forms of Communism down to the present day.³³

33. Lukács himself never transcended them. See his *The Process of Democratization* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991). For a contemporary account of the problems in the Marxist theory of the state, see Paul Thomas, *Alien Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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EDITED BY JOHN P. MCCORMICK**

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2002

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Printed in the United States of

America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan

Typeset in Minion by Keystone

Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-

Publication Data appear on the last
printed page of this book.