

## Spider and Fly: The Leninist Philosophy of Georg Lukács

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### Abstract

From 1919 to 1929, the great Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács was one of the leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party, immersed not simply in theorising but also in significant practical-political work. Along with labour leader Jenő Landler, he led a faction opposing an ultra-left sectarian orientation represented by Béla Kun (at that time also associated with Comintern chairman Zinoviev, later aligning himself with Stalin).

If seen in connection with this factional struggle, key works of Lukács in this period – *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought* (1924), *Talism and the Dialectic* (1926) and ‘The Blum Theses’ (1929) – can be seen as forming a consistent, coherent, sophisticated variant of Leninism. Influential readings of these works interpret them as being ultra-leftist or proto-Stalinist (or, in the case of ‘The Blum Theses’, an anticipation of the Popular Front perspectives adopted by the Communist International in 1935). Such readings distort the reality. Lukács’s orientation and outlook of 1923–9 are, rather, more consistent with the orientation advanced by Lenin and Trotsky in the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Communist International.

After his decisive political defeat, Lukács concluded that it was necessary to renounce his distinctive political orientation, and completely abandon the terrain of practical revolutionary politics, if he hoped to remain inside the Communist movement. This he did, adapting to Stalinism and shifting his efforts to literary criticism and philosophy. But the theorisations connected to his revolutionary politics of the 1920s continue to have relevance for revolutionary activists of the twenty-first century.

### Keywords

Communism, Leninism, dialectics, revolution, Hungary

In this new period of global crisis and upsurge, a recurring pattern essential to the dynamic of capitalism, a multiplicity of urgent questions are raised. Just as was the case in the early decades of the twentieth century, these range from elemental issues of ethics (what is right, what is wrong, what is one to do) to more complex questions regarding the interplay between struggle and consciousness, between militant minorities (vanguards) and mass layers of the population, between revolutionary organisation and revolutionary tactics.

The story and ideas of philosopher-activist Georg Lukács, particularly from 1917 to 1929, are compelling particularly as we wrestle with the realities and possibilities of our own time. His engagement with Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and the revolutionary experiences of 1917–21 propelled him to develop a remarkable orientation that found literary expression in writings intimately connected to revolutionary practice – ranging from *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923 to the so-called ‘Blum Theses’ of 1929.

The fact that Lukács partly retreated from this achievement, under the immense pressures of Stalinism, has obscured much of what that remarkable contribution represented. Our purpose here will be to suggest a reconstruction of this early revolutionary achievement, which can contribute important elements to the perspectives of tomorrow’s activists. Through extensive examination of what he wrote in key works of this period, combined with an effort to interweave texts with practical-political contexts (hopefully brought closer to life even with anecdotes), something will emerge – with luck – that we can fruitfully embrace.

In an academic discussion club with which Georg Lukács was involved before he became a Communist, one of his associates challenged: ‘Isn’t there a deep inner bond between the factory owner and the worker?’. Lukács replied: ‘Yes, quite decidedly. The same as that between the spider and the fly in its web.’<sup>1</sup> The sticky, multi-threaded web of capitalism engages us all, down to the present, in this intimate relationship – yet Lukács as much as any of his contemporaries devoted considerable intellectual labour to defining the nature of the web and (at least in the 1920s) pointing to ways and means of snapping its bonds. These labours were permeated with a materialist understanding that ideas are grounded in our social reality but can be a force for helping us transform reality, especially if our ideas reflect the dialectical (contradictory, interactive, evolving) totality of that reality.

The discovery and publication of Georg Lukács’s *Tailism and the Dialectic* is an event of importance for more than one reason.<sup>2</sup> Lukács was one of the great European intellectuals of the twentieth century – any newly discovered work by him would naturally merit attention. This particular work necessitates a re-evaluation of Lukács in a particularly interesting period of his life. In the early years of the Communist movement following the publication and flurry of polemical assaults on his ‘forbidden’ masterpiece *History and Class Consciousness*, the embattled theoretician composed an explication and defence, previously unknown, which sheds light on the nature of that

1. Leviné-Meyer 1973, p. 71.

2. Contained in Lukács 2000, which includes the text plus an informative Introduction by John Rees and a stimulating Postface by Slavoj Žižek.

masterpiece and on Lukács's own political location. And the 'new' work itself arguably constitutes a quite valuable contribution to the advance of Marxist philosophy and politics.

A common re-telling of the Lukács story runs roughly like this: A radicalised intellectual is horrified by the imperialist slaughter of World War I and inspired by Russia's proletarian revolution of 1917. He joins the newly-formed Hungarian Communist Party and is immediately swept up in revolutionary events in his homeland associated with the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. First churning out a flurry of eloquent ultra-leftist writings, by 1923 he produces a highly intellectualised volume, saturated with Hegelian interpretations of Marx and a glorification of Lenin's elitist theory of organisation which idolises the Communist Party as the fount of all revolutionary wisdom. But the brilliant book is too unorthodox for the bureaucratic-authoritarian leaders of the world Communist movement, who denounce it. True to his convictions, Lukács himself acknowledges the wisdom of the Party and repudiates his work. This is a pattern that will be followed more than once in his life as he becomes enmeshed in the web of Stalinism. The ultra-leftist intellectual evolves, in violation of his better self, into a defender and ornament of totalitarianism, only breaking from it (somewhat incompletely) in 1956.<sup>3</sup>

The reality is more interesting, and *Talism and the Dialectic* is a key for helping us to a truer understanding of the reality. In particular, it helps us to clarify aspects of Lukács's thinking and to retrieve important insights of the revolutionary Marxist orientation represented by Lenin and some of his more thoughtful comrades of the post-1917 period.

### Aspirations and dilemmas

'Ethics relate to the individual', wrote a 34-year-old Georg Lukács in 1919, 'and the necessary consequence of this relationship is that the individual's conscience and sense of responsibility are confronted with the postulate that he must act as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world's destiny, the approach of which is inevitably helped or hindered by the tactics he is about to adopt.' The Hungarian philosopher and cultural critic closed off the path of escape for those wishing to evade this challenge: 'In the realm of

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3. Such a version of Lukács's story circulated within the Communist movement, as reflected in Borkenau 1962, pp. 172–4, and Ypsilon 1947, pp. 152–9. More modern versions of the story can be found in Lichtheim 1971; Kolakowski 1978, pp. 253–307; and Kadarkay 1991.

ethics there is no neutrality and no impartiality; even he who is unwilling to act must be able to account to his conscience for his inactivity.’<sup>4</sup>

The next comment is a profound challenge for anyone, like Lukács himself, who in this period was drawn to the Marxist banner of socialist revolution: ‘Everyone who opts for communism is therefore obliged to bear the same *individual* responsibility for each and every human being who dies for him in the struggle, as if he himself had killed them all.’

And then this cultured son of the bourgeoisie deepened the argument into an irrevocable break from his class: ‘But all those who ally themselves to the other side, the defence of capitalism, must bear the same individual responsibility for the destruction entailed in the new imperialist and revanchist wars which are surely imminent, and for the future oppression of the nationalities and classes.’ Such a starting-point in the early Marxist ‘career’ of this middle-aged intellectual promised a remarkably vibrant contribution to the living body of revolutionary theory and practice.

In fact, the quality of his thought might have placed Georg Lukács at the level of such Marxist theorists as Luxemburg, Trotsky and Gramsci had his revolutionary consistency and intellectual integrity not been so badly compromised by a quarter-century adaptation to Stalinist authoritarianism. Much in his later philosophical and literary analyses, as well as a courageous anti-Stalinism in the 1950s, prevent one from dismissing the ‘mature’ Lukács, but these cannot compare with the contributions made before the onset of his fatal political disorientation stretching from 1930 to 1956 (and in some ways to the end of his life).

This disorientation is particularly striking because Lukács had provided a brilliant and comprehensive interpretation of Marxism – stretching from *Tactics and Ethics* (1919) to ‘The Blum Theses’ (1929) – which stands, philosophically and theoretically, as one of the most profound expressions of Bolshevik politics in the twentieth century.

His earliest efforts to give philosophical expression to the Bolshevik ethos could take odd and even contradictory form. On the one hand, in 1918, he wrote that ‘Bolshevism rests on the metaphysical notion that good can come from evil, that it is possible . . . to lie ourselves through to the truth’, and that ‘liberty can be attained through oppression’, and he concluded that such a position must be rejected.<sup>5</sup>

Yet within days of writing this he decided to join the Hungarian Communist Party, and went on to insist: ‘The human ideal of the realm of freedom

4. Lukács 1972, p. 8.

5. ‘Bolshevism as a Moral Problem (1918)’, in Zitta (ed.) 1991, pp. 40–1.

must... be a conscious principle governing the actions and motivating the lives of all communist parties from the very moment of their inception.' Emphasising that this involves not only organisational forms, consciousness-raising through education, speeches and literature, but especially 'what communists themselves achieve as human beings', he wrote: 'The Communist Party must be the primary incarnation of the realm of freedom; above all, the spirit of comradeship, of true solidarity, and of self-sacrifice must govern everything it does.'<sup>6</sup>

It is not clear that he fully rejected his earlier view of the 'moral problem' of Bolshevism. Ilona Duczynska and others have suggested that the Lukács of the early 1920s sought to 'dialectically' reconcile the two notions. It could be said that the failure of reality to conform to this theorisation finally dislodged the passionate dialectician from practical political work – that when the ethics of evil surpassed the ethics of freedom and solidarity in the practical organisational life of the Stalinised Communist movement, Lukács chose to abandon any efforts at political leadership in the movement, instead making do with more abstract philosophical and literary pursuits. Yielding to the temptation of reducing Lukács's revolutionary career to the dramatic playing out of stark formulations from 1918, 1919, and 1920, however, prevents one from considering a far more interesting reality.

In fact, the more mature practical-political approach Lukács developed in the 1920s had implications for the development of an ethical resolution to which we shall return at the conclusion of this essay.

### Achievement's context

For a politically mature expression, one must turn to his *History and Class Consciousness*, which sought to 'integrate Lenin's theory of revolution organically into the overall framework of Marxism', as Lukács himself put it.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider how to place this work in its context. John Rees, prefacing an extremely positive reading, has asserted that this book was 'born in the greatest period of advance the world has ever seen', constituting 'a reflection on three revolutions – the Hungarian, the Russian, and the German – shot through with a new understanding of Marxism based on Lukács's studies in exile.' On the other hand, in a more critical reading, István Mészáros has stressed that it was written 'against the background of the military defeat of the Hungarian Council Republic and the restoration of

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6. 'The Moral Mission of the Communist Party', in Lukács 1972, p. 69.

capital's international dominance and stability, after the short revolutionary interlude initiated by the Russian Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Both points are well taken, yet Lukács himself emphasised a different aspect of the context in his fragmentary autobiographical notes – ‘crucial for the whole enterprise: the method and contents of the Hungarian factional struggles’. And more:

Relationship to Landler. The theoretical importance of ‘minor’ causes of the party split. My attention shifted from the ‘great’ questions (their existence perhaps only postulated) to the actual problems of the movement – here: the effect revolutionises.<sup>8</sup>

As these notes suggest, *History and Class Consciousness* paralleled – and would have been impossible without – his commitment to the faction inside the Hungarian Communist Party led by Eugen (or Jenő) Landler. A veteran of the left wing of the socialist movement and leader of the railway workers’ union, Landler – remembered years later as ‘the truest of the true’ even by such a disillusioned ex-Communist as Franz Borkenau – represented a practical working-class opposition to the ultra-leftist and bureaucratic-sectarian party leadership of Béla Kun. Four decades later, Lukács described Landler as being ‘notable not only for his great and above all practical intelligence but also for his understanding of theoretical problems so long as they were linked, however indirectly, with the praxis of revolution. He was a man whose most deeply-rooted attitudes were determined by his intimate involvement in the life of the masses.’ Lukács saw a sharp contrast between Kun’s demagoguery, dishonesty and glory-seeking, and the qualities of Landler:

Landler was different from Kun – and this is what made me become his loyal supporter – in that he had no program which he could have used to appear before the world as a leader of the Communists. He simply concerned himself with the practical possibilities of reviving the Hungarian movement. That made a great impression on me, and from then on I supported him enthusiastically.<sup>9</sup>

After the bloody defeat of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, Kun sought to establish a super-centralised Hungarian Communist Party built up among exiles living outside of Hungary – seeking ‘to create a movement

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7. Rees 1998, pp. 202, 210; Mészáros 1989, p. 250. The interpretation by Rees – part of an outstanding larger study of Marxist dialectics – is consistent with that presented here.

8. Lukács 1983, pp. 160–1.

9. Borkenau 1962, p. 124, also pp. 108–33, 171–5; Lukács 1971a, p. xv; Lukács 1983, p. 75; also see Molnar 1978, pp. 10–30, and Szabo 1975, pp. 155–84.

from above, directly from Moscow', as Lukács put it, that would then be transplanted onto native soil. 'Landler took a very skeptical view of such a proposal, arguing that the real movement would have to originate in Hungary and that the émigrés could not do anything but assist it from abroad by virtue of their more advanced ideological development. In the eyes of the Landler camp the émigrés were always subordinate to the indigenous movement.'<sup>10</sup>

While the entire Communist movement of this period was afflicted by what Lukács has termed a 'messianic sectarianism', in his view Kun represented one of the most destructive variants of the trend. 'I attribute the fact of this trend... not having become the sole dominating one, to the underground Hungarian movement, to Jenő Landler's and Janos Hirosik's influence in the first place. The opposition headed by Landler and Hirosik took a determined stand against Béla Kun's bureaucratic utopias... and – in the true spirit of Lenin – strove to deduce the political and organisational tasks of the communist movement in Hungary from the actual problems of the real situation in that country.'<sup>11</sup>

Lukács himself was centrally involved in the underground Communist Party in Hungary. Some saw him as 'the philosopher lost in the jungle of conspiratorial party work'. But he had no hesitation in risking arrest in order to travel from Vienna to Budapest for weekly clandestine meetings with leading Communist workers in Budapest to discuss 'the tactics and methods of working within the trade unions', to lead study groups, and oversee the party's semi-legal press. (His underground party name was 'Blum', and workers described him as 'a frail man who smokes cigars during party meetings'.)<sup>12</sup> While left-wing intellectuals and sectarian groupuscules have all too often lost sight of the fact, the Lukács of the 1920s was absolutely clear that there can be no revolutionary Marxism that is detached from the actual lives, consciousness and struggles of the working class.

10. Lukács 1983, pp. 74, 79.

11. Fekete and Karadi (eds.) 1981, p. 119.

12. Kadaray 1991, pp. 262, 292; Fekete and Karadi (eds.) 1981, p. 141. Such a simple description was a tell-tale identification of Lukács regardless of underground precautions. He was 'a man whose powerful intellect was matched only by his lack of physical substance', Ernst Fischer wrote many years later. 'It was as though his mind had constructed this tough and delicate frame with the utmost economy so that only the minimum worldly provision would have to be made for it, and all else could be requisitioned for thought.' (Fischer 1974, p. 404.) Hungarian comrades of the 1940s and '50s recalled: 'György Lukács always had a cigar in his mouth. Whenever he entered the door of Party headquarters, the Academy of Sciences, the University, or the Writers' Association, the inevitable cigar was always there, clamped between his lips... He was a shortish man, wrinkled and restless of face. He was over sixty, but his eyes frequently sparkled with childish pleasure and excitement – usually when he was explaining something.' (Aczél and Meray 1959, pp. 57–8.)

A working-class militant in Vienna, Sandor Vajda, later recounted how Lukács encouraged him to take seriously the realities around him, and to write down his observations of the workers' living and working conditions, what they read, what they talked about on the job, their thoughts on the current regime and on communism. 'I showed him my notes about the workers' lives: the squabbles of women, the factory meetings, the quality of textiles we produced, the prices and wages in the textile industry', he later remembered. 'I wrote about what was said during lunch breaks, including some interesting comments of workers.' He recalled Lukács's comments: 'It is often the insignificant and seemingly meaningless human acts that become important.'<sup>13</sup>

Lukács later recalled that 'the correct policy of the Landler faction began to bear fruit. The Party, working in conditions of strict illegality, steadily increased its influence on the left wing of the Social Democrats so that in 1924–25 it came to a split and the founding of a Workers' Party that would be radical and yet legal.' Covertly led by Communists associated with Landler, this Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, according to historian Miklos Molnar, was able to develop some national and even international influence as it 'attempted to establish a common plan of action with the Social Democratic party and . . . published periodicals, participated in the organisation of social struggles, and conducted an energetic agitation in the poorest regions, particularly in the countryside.'<sup>14</sup>

One additional element in this crystallisation of the Lukács achievement was international. Lukács himself later emphasised:

We were all messianic sectarians. We believed that the world revolution was imminent. The Hungarian work was determined by Landler's realism on actual Hungarian questions. This produced a dualism. Internationally we were messianic sectarians, in Hungarian affairs we were practitioners of *Realpolitik*. This dualism finally resolved itself in favor of realism with the Blum Theses.<sup>15</sup>

By 'messianic sectarian', however, he was not referring to the perspective represented by Lenin, who (Lukács stressed in his brief Lenin book of 1924) was no less committed to 'the actuality of revolution'. Rather, he was referring to an 'ultra-left' political current targeted by Lenin's polemic *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* (1920) and even more sharply criticised at the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921. Central to the 1921 controversy was the notorious March Action of 1921, which involved a disastrous effort by the Communist Party in Germany (supported both by Béla Kun and

13. Kadarkay 1991, pp. 286–7. It is bizarre that Lukács's biographer likens efforts at gaining detailed information of working-class life to spying by the USSR's secret police.

14. Lukács 1971a, p. xxviii; Kadarkay 1991, p. 28.

15. Lukács 1983, p. 76.



Lukács, among others) to seize power in a minority putsch – going against the sentiments of the great majority of the German workers influenced by the Social-Democratic Party. Lenin had sternly lectured them that a Communist Party could not ‘replace the proletariat as the spontaneous historical agency’, elaborating:

He who fails to understand that in Europe – where nearly all the proletarians are organised – we must win over the majority of the working class is lost to the Communist movement. If such a person has not yet learned this in the course of the three years of a great revolution, he will never learn anything . . . We achieved victory in Russia, not only because we had the undoubted majority of the working class on our side (during the elections in 1917 the overwhelming majority of the workers voted for us and against the Mensheviks), but also because half the army – immediately after we seized power – and nine-tenths of the peasantry – within the course of a few weeks – came over to our side.<sup>16</sup>

Lukács later noted: ‘At that time Trotsky himself had not been a Trotskyist but supported Lenin’.<sup>17</sup> In summing up the Third Congress, Trotsky had commented on the ‘revolutionary subjectivism’ of the ultra-leftists which ‘mistakes the second or fifth month of pregnancy for the ninth’. He observed that the failure of the mass revolutionary upsurges that shook Europe in 1919–20 had made the working class more cautious – not because workers ‘have become less revolutionary, but because they are less naive and more exacting.’ He elaborated:

They have understood and sensed that the prerequisite for success is a firm leadership, that one must know how to calculate and plan, that revolutionary strategy is indispensable. . . . Only that party will be able to lead them in decisive battles which reveals in practice, under all conditions and circumstances, not merely its readiness to fight, i.e., its courage, but also its ability to lead the masses in struggle, its capacity to maneuver in attack or retreat, its skill in leading them out of the line of fire when a situation is unfavorable, its ability to combine all forces and means for a blow, and, in this way, systematically to enhance its influence and its authority over the masses.<sup>18</sup>

The Congress advanced a perspective of careful party-building and serious efforts to advance class consciousness through organic connection with the actual struggles of the working class – engaging in trade union work, reform

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16. Quoted in Le Blanc 1993, p. 275. For a slightly different translation, see Lenin 1973, pp. 474–5.

17. Lukács 1983, p. 98.

18. Trotsky 1972, p. 295.

struggles, and united fronts. In other words, the perspectives of the Comintern's Third Congress represented on an international plane the orientation advanced by the Landler faction inside Hungary. Lukács's embrace of the perspectives of the Comintern's Third Congress is an essential component of what he became in this phase of his political evolution.

### **Pre-mature 'Popular Frontist'?**

The culmination of this phase of Lukács's life came after the 1928 death of Landler. Lukács assumed leadership of the faction at a moment when it was becoming obvious that the increasingly Stalinist-dominated Communist International – under an ever more bureaucratic-authoritarian interpretation of its 'Bolshevisation' policies – would not tolerate any resistance to its political dictates. Lukács committed political suicide by advancing the 'Blum Theses', essentially challenging the application in Hungary of an 'ultra-left' zigzag advanced by the Stalin leadership at the Comintern's Sixth World Congress. The faction quickly disintegrated as many of its members transferred their allegiance to Béla Kun.

The 'Blum Theses' were – as Lukács later commented – 'a precise expression' and 'a theoretical résumé' of the political orientation of the Landler faction. At the same time, he asserted, they were fully confirmed by 'the Seventh Comintern Congress and the policies arising from it'. Or, as his one-time student István Mészáros put it, 'they anticipate the strategy of the "Popular Front"'.<sup>19</sup> While this undoubtedly represents the way that the politically compromised Lukács later chose to see himself, it seriously distorts the reality of both the Landler faction and the 'Blum Theses'.

The Seventh Congress of the Communist International of 1935 marked, as E.H. Carr commented, 'the twilight of the Comintern'.<sup>20</sup> The organisation lingered on until 1943, but it never had another congress after this one. The original purpose of the Comintern had been to organise and mobilise men and women throughout the world for the purpose of bringing about revolutions in various countries of workers and the oppressed masses, culminating in socialism on an international scale. By 1935, however, the Comintern had been fundamentally compromised by the corrupted personalities and bureaucratic apparatus dominating the 'socialist homeland', the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and increasingly its revolutionary purpose was subordinated to the foreign-policy priorities of the Stalin leadership.

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19. Lukács 1983, pp. 79–80; Mészáros 1972, p. 136.

20. Carr 1982.

From 1928 through 1934, the line of the Comintern had been characterised by the sort of ultra-left and 'bureaucratic-sectarian' approach that was utterly inconsistent with the orientation both of the Landler faction and of the Comintern's own Third Congress of 1921. This had contributed to the disastrous inability of the large German Communist Party to form a united front with the German Social-Democratic Party to prevent the coming to power of Adolf Hitler's Nazi dictatorship. The victory of German fascism created a new situation in world politics, one which posed an increased threat to the security of the USSR. The Stalin leadership (while never ruling out the possibility of seeking a non-aggression pact with Hitler) urgently and actively called for the development of a global alliance of 'democratic' forces – including 'progressive' layers of the capitalist class and their political representatives – to block the expansionism of Germany and its Italian and Japanese allies (the so-called 'anti-Comintern Axis'). The line shaped at the Comintern's Seventh Congress, known as the Popular Front strategy, conformed to this orientation.

Comintern chairman Georgi Dimitrov clearly identified the defining principle underlying the new strategy: 'Now the toiling masses in a number of capitalist countries are faced with the necessity of making a definite choice, and of making it today, not between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism.'<sup>21</sup> Instead of utilising the united front tactic to draw together all workers for victories in the class struggle as part of a strategy leading to socialist revolution, the Comintern advanced a Popular Front strategy to save bourgeois democracy: united efforts of Communist and Socialist workers, joined with farmers, small business people, and others – including those liberal (and even conservative) sectors of the capitalist class feeling threatened by the rise of fascism – in order to form broad electoral alliances that would establish 'Popular Front' governments. These governments would preserve both democratic political forms and capitalist property relations, implementing some social reforms beneficial to workers and others in the 'lower classes' while also following a foreign policy that maintained friendly relations with the USSR and resisted the expansionism of the Axis Powers.

The 'Blum Theses' were fundamentally different. One of the key slogans it calls for stands in direct contradiction to the defining principle of the Popular Front: 'Fight against the slogan of "democracy or fascism", which misleads the workers.' Another slogan: 'No pact with the bourgeoisie. Class against class – long live the alliance of workers and peasants.' Drawing various elements from the democratic perspectives that Lenin articulated in 1905, in the World War I

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21. Dimitroff 1938, p. 110.

period, and at the Third Comintern Congress, they advanced a perspective, under the banner of replacing Hungary's dictatorship with a republic, of fighting for democratic rights and advancing the struggle for economic justice of the workers and peasants, culminating in 'a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' that would grow over into a full-blown workers' government and transition to socialism.<sup>22</sup>

A starting-point of the 'Blum Theses' involves an understanding of the centrality of imperialism to capitalism, and of the desire of increasing numbers of capitalists to secure the American model of 'democracy' – one 'in which every possibility for the free development, accumulation and expansion of capital is given, while at the same time the external forms of democracy are preserved – but in such a way that the working masses cannot exert any influence whatever on the actual political leadership.' In addition, the development of the global economy generates a need to prevent the organisations of the working class, especially trade unions, from maintaining their independence. Instead there is a need for bureaucratic structures, government controls, legislatively required arbitration, etc., to enforce harmony between employers and workers. Such an approach has been given the label of *corporatism* by some analysts.<sup>23</sup>

This corporatist approach to maintaining the health of capitalism was most dramatically advanced by ex-socialist Benito Mussolini with the establishment of his fascist dictatorship in Italy. In fact, Lukács speaks of two variants of 'fascism': one democratic (the American model), and one authoritarian (the Italian model). Lukács notes that the reformists of Social Democracy, themselves entrenched in the old trade-union bureaucracies, prefer the American model and 'nowadays pose the question as: democracy or fascism?'. He argues: 'By posing this question it hides from the workers the real class goals of the kind of democracy which is possible under present-day imperialism, and it lends its support to the suppression of class struggles, the institutional prevention of wage struggles, the fascisation [actually corporatisation, or subordination to the state] of the trade unions, and the integration of social democracy and the trade-union bureaucracy into the fascist [i.e., corporatist] state apparatus.'<sup>24</sup>

This forms the analytical framework within which Lukács articulates a revolutionary strategic orientation for Hungarian Communists:

During this struggle, the high-point of which is necessarily the fight to achieve democratic dictatorship, the party must retain its earlier slogan of the 'republic.'

22. 'Blum Theses', in Lukács 1972, p. 251.

23. Lukács 1972, pp. 243–4. For a discussion of corporatism consistent with this usage, see Miliband 1971, pp. 127–30.

24. Lukács 1972, pp. 244–5.

As long as the tranquil and unruffled power of large-scale landed property and large-scale capital expresses itself in advocating the coronation of the legitimate king, the struggle for the republic will also continue to represent, in the eyes of the masses, the struggle for all basic liberties, for the right to combine, assemble, and even to strike. . . . Naturally, the party must not, either now or in the future, employ the republican slogan in isolation. The republican slogan can only be used in the sense of a struggle for total democracy, for the republic headed by a government of workers and peasants, a struggle against the democratic liquidation of democracy, a fulfillment of the slogan, 'Class against class,' a mobilisation for the struggle which had to be conducted to secure democratic dictatorship. . . . There must be no concessions to the view that this is 'a long way to socialism' or that maintaining production and providing for the working class are interests which call for very different policies, etc. All party members must understand that what is at issue is a question which is fundamental to the transition from bourgeois revolution to the revolution of the proletariat; they must understand that the power of large-scale landed property and large-scale capital cannot be destroyed except by this kind of revolution, and that the remnants of feudalism cannot be wiped out except through the elimination of capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

There is nothing here of the People's Front orientation advanced by Dimitrov, Stalin and other Comintern leaders in 1935. E.H. Carr has commented on 'the silent relegation of the proletarian revolution to as inconspicuous a place as possible in the proceedings and resolutions of the seventh congress', adding that 'Lenin's "united front" had been designed to hasten the advent of the proletarian revolution', while 'Dimitrov's "popular front" was designed to keep the proletarian revolution in abeyance in order to deal with the pressing emergency of Fascism.'<sup>26</sup> It is obvious that the 'Blum Theses' remain consistent with the revolutionary perspective of Lenin that Lukács had embraced by 1922.

The newly-discovered *Tailism and the Dialectic* (1926) comes third in the major works reflecting Lukács's 1920s theoretical achievement, the others being *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), *Lenin – A Study in the Unity of His Thought* (1924) and 'The Blum Theses' (1929). The achievement involves what is in many ways an unsurpassed expression of Marxist and Leninist theory, an expression intimately connected in Hungary with the practical working-class radicalism of the Landler current.

25. Lukács 1972, pp. 248–9, 251.

26. Carr 1982, p. 426. The importance of Stalin's behind-the-scenes involvement in the development of the new line is clear from his correspondence with his lieutenant V.M. Molotov, which refers – in regard to the 1935 Seventh Comintern Congress – to 'spending a lot of time with the Comintern members', makes positive reference to the reports by Dimitrov and Togliatti, and concludes that 'the draft resolutions came out pretty well'. See Lih, Naumov and Khlevniuk (eds.) 1995, p. 237.

### Revolutionary Marxism and ‘orthodox’ critics

Steeped in European ‘high culture’ and revolutionary working-class politics, Lukács offers in these four works a remarkable blend – subtle yet tough-minded – of Hegelian dialectics, Marxist social and economic analysis, and Leninist politics. Most frequently commented on is the fact that in *History and Class Consciousness* he produced a remarkable Hegelian reading of Marx’s *Capital* which independently reproduced the then unknown conceptualisation of ‘alienation’ contained in Marx’s yet-to-be-discovered *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. But there is much more to Lukács’s 1923 masterpiece: in particular, there are insightful elaborations on the nature and development of class consciousness, a discussion which has remained vibrant down to our own time. In addition, one finds a sophisticated fusion of classical Marxism with the revolutionary strategic, tactical and organisational orientation of Russian Bolshevism. Marx and Lenin are presented as if *Capital* leads logically and necessarily to *What Is to Be Done?*.<sup>27</sup>

It is significant, but hardly surprising, that the book became a polemical target. Béla Kun and others in his faction among Hungarian Communists would obviously need to find fault with it and denounce it as ‘un-Marxist’. But there were also reasons within the Communist International for then-President Gregory Zinoviev to attack the volume and its author. Of course there was the prevalence of émigré Hungarians – in particular, Kun and others in his faction – among Comintern functionaries, and their political alignment with the Comintern leaders (whether this was Zinoviev or, later, Bukharin, and finally Stalin), but more significant was a deepening crisis developing within 1920s Bolshevism.

An aspect of this crisis involved a dispute inside the Russian Communist Party initiated, covertly, by Lenin in alliance with Trotsky, and then resumed by Trotsky after Lenin’s death, challenging policies associated with an increasingly dominant triumvirate of Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and Stalin. A lack of sufficient democracy and principled functioning, and also a politically disorienting approach to revolutionary possibilities in Germany were among the points of contention. Trotsky issued a polemic calling for a ‘New Course’ in the Soviet Republic, and in another – ‘Lessons of October’ – he condemned the bungling, through excessive caution, of revolutionary opportunities in

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27. Indispensable for the serious scholar and activist seeking to comprehend Lukács is Löwy 1979, with a fine discussion of *History and Class Consciousness* on pp. 168–92. A thoughtful appreciation of Lukács’s achievement is Perkins 1993. An incredibly rich and detailed textual analysis is provided in Mészáros 1995, pp. 282–422. Also see Mészáros (ed.) 1971.

Germany – pointing the finger at Zinoviev who (he emphasised) had displayed similar hesitations on the eve of the 1917 October Revolution.<sup>28</sup>

Zinoviev and those around him defended their authority by orchestrating a generalised campaign against ‘Trotskyism’ (alleged to be anti-Leninist and a deviation from Marxism) in the Communist movement, and also by tightening organisational norms and the borders of ‘political correctness’ in the Comintern. This included intimidating potential ‘leftist’ opposition through attacks on intellectuals such as Lukács and Karl Korsch who formed – Zinoviev alleged – ‘an extreme left tendency growing into theoretical revisionism’.<sup>29</sup>

An additional concern among the leaders of the increasingly bureaucratized and authoritarian Communist movement, István Mészáros has suggested, is the emphasis Lukács’s book places on the vibrant workers’ democracy represented by the soviets (councils). Mészáros points out that in 1923, ‘where workers’ councils still existed, they had effectively lost all their power’. Connecting threads with Trotsky’s critique could be imagined in the passages of Lukács’s book glorifying the soviets, which ‘had become a tragic reminder of the contradiction between the original aspirations of the revolution and the sociohistorical constraints which by then actually prevailed also in postrevolutionary Russia.’<sup>30</sup>

It could be argued that all of this was related to limitations in the Marxist education of many leading Bolsheviks. It is certainly the case that a profoundly influential interpretation of Marxism – in which many Russian, German and other Marxists were trained in the years before World War I – involved a relatively one-sided and mechanical economic and historical determinism that Lukács attacked as being insufficiently dialectical. This could all too easily degenerate into a fatalism which restrained its adherents from attempting to influence events in a revolutionary direction. A consequence might involve an underestimation of the revolutionary potential of the working class, and might cause such ‘vulgar Marxists’ to tail-end behind so-called ‘objective conditions’. In addition to Kun and Zinoviev, full-scale attacks were launched by a Marxist philosopher in the Soviet Union named Abram Deborin, and by László Rudas, who had become Kun’s ideological hatchet-man in the Hungarian party. They accused Lukács of ‘subjectivism’ and of a philosophical ‘idealism’ that contradicted the dialectical materialism associated with Marx.

*Tailism and the Dialectic* is a powerful polemic which effectively defends *History and Class Consciousness* from its critics but also explains essential aspects of Leninist politics in a manner that continues to resonate after six

28. See Lewin 1970, Carr 1969, Block (ed.) 1975, and Trotsky 1975.

29. Löwy 1979, pp. 168–9.

30. Mészáros 1989, p. 312.

decades. Even touching on a limited portion of that work here will give a sense of this.

### Reality, consciousness, action

In his polemic, Lukács reproduces the assertions of Rudas expressing a particular interpretation of Marxist ‘materialism’ that has been influential among rather diverse currents in the socialist movement – whether ‘progress-is-inevitable’ reformists or adherents of revolution’s inevitability or spontaneists and dogmatists of various persuasions. ‘Today’s society is subjected to certain laws, which prescribe the future direction of society just as necessarily as the direction of a stone that has been thrown is prescribed by the laws of gravity’, Rudas explained. ‘The stone does not know that its fall is prescribed necessarily by natural forces, and it might just as well be the case at this moment that it knows nothing of its role either.’ But, said Rudas, ‘since the proletariat consists not of stones but of people, who possess consciousness, so they will become aware of their historic mission in time.’ With the philosophical flourish that ‘I know as a materialist that consciousness depends on social being’, Rudas elaborated: ‘Since this being is constituted such that the proletariat through its suffering, etc., is absolutely of necessity forced into action, so too is it absolutely necessary that in time its consciousness will awaken.’<sup>31</sup>

This approach, according to Lukács, is neither Marxist nor Leninist nor correct – rather, it represents an historical fatalism that results in causing would-be Marxists to ‘tail-end’ after events rather than helping to shape the future. This touches on the relationship between ‘*objective*’ conditions (existing social and economic realities) and ‘*subjective*’ factors (the consciousness and activity of the working class and of revolutionary groups). Lukács shows that both Marx and Lenin correctly saw a fundamentally different relationship between objective conditions and subjective factors than is expressed in Rudas’s explanation.

First of all, while it is possible for the working class – due to its location in capitalist society and the ‘objective’ conditions (living conditions, working conditions, experiences and relationships related to these) bearing down on it – to develop an accurate understanding of its situation that could lead to revolutionary class consciousness, it is not the case that workers always develop such consciousness. There is often a significant gap between the ‘ripeness’ of objective conditions (the blatant oppressiveness and destructiveness of capitalism, intensified suffering among the masses of people who are part of the

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31. Lukács 2000, pp. 66–7.



working class) on the one hand, and on the other hand a level of consciousness among a majority of workers that fails to grasp clearly the sources of their misery and what to do to end it. Many workers have an insufficient level of knowledge and revolutionary determination even under the most oppressive conditions. A failure to understand this possibility could cause one to incorrectly conclude that the absence or failure of a revolution proves its impossibility because the 'objective' conditions were presumably lacking.<sup>32</sup>

Bad conditions are not inevitably reflected in an increasingly revolutionary consciousness of workers. Among the first layers of the working class to turn to socialism and labour action, assuming a vanguard position within the class as a whole, have not been the most oppressed unskilled workers, but rather the less downtrodden skilled workers. At the same time, this same relatively 'privileged' layer of the working class can be, and historically often has been, an 'aristocracy of labour' that follows an utterly 'opportunistic' policy, that – as Lenin put it – sacrifices the basic interests of the mass of workers in favour of the temporary interests of a small number of workers. An example would be skilled workers adopting a narrow 'pure and simple' trade unionism that cares for the needs of a small number of organised workers (themselves) while excluding women, immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, unskilled and unemployed workers, and in general rejects broader social concerns. There is nothing that inevitably pushes this layer in the direction either of opportunist labour aristocracy or principled revolutionary vanguard. What is decisive is the ability revolutionaries within this layer, as within the entire working class, have to organise for the purpose of winning their workmates, and their sisters and brothers in the working class as a whole, over to a revolutionary understanding of what's what and what's needed.<sup>33</sup>

In arguing against a fatalistic approach, Lukács poses the question of what are the boundaries between objective conditions and subjective factors. Rudas 'conceives the opposition of subject and object undialectically, inflexibly', whereas the correct (and Marxist) approach is as complex and interactive as the relationship between being and consciousness. Lukács pursues this philosophical difference on the plane of practical politics, focusing attention on the perspective advanced by Lenin during World War I: 'Because it is not the case that out of every revolutionary situation a revolution transpires, but only out of such a situation where, in addition to the objective conditions outlined previously, a subjective factor comes along, namely the capability of the revolutionary class to carry out revolutionary mass actions that are of sufficient

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32. Lukács 2000, pp. 66–8.

33. Lukács 2000, pp. 68–9, 70.

strength to break the old government (or shake it), which never, even in a period of crisis, “collapses” unless one “rattles” it.’ Lukács goes further in drawing our attention to Lenin’s most practical appeal at the Second Congress of the Comintern (1920) that ‘we must now “prove” through the praxis of revolutionary parties that they are sufficiently self-conscious to forge organisations, contacts with the exploited masses, that they possess determination and knowledge to exploit this crisis for the benefit of a successful, a victorious revolution.’<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, the subjective factor here has sufficient relative autonomy that it can (and must) decisively impact on the objective situation – just as ‘objective reality’ itself is insufficient, simply on its own, to generate revolutionary consciousness within the working class. Successes or failures on the part of the workers’ movement shape the subsequent objective realities within which the working class later finds itself, which means that ‘objective causes were . . . previously subjective ones’, and that ‘people actually – and not only in their imagination – make their own history.’ More than this, the development of class consciousness and class struggle do not occur ‘as a continuous intensification, in which development is favorable to the proletariat, and the day after tomorrow the situation must be even *more* favorable than it is tomorrow, and so on.’ To the contrary, it involves a profoundly dialectical process in which ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ factors interact in ways that preclude the revolutionary-fatalist ‘inevitable’ of Rudas. ‘It means rather that at a particular point, the situation demands that a decision be taken and the day after tomorrow might be too late to make that decision.’<sup>35</sup>

At certain points everything depends on class consciousness, which plays a decisive role in the dialectical interaction with objective factors in the historical process. This is the key to Leninism. ‘How is it possible even to imagine Lenin’s basic idea of the preparation and organisation of revolution without such an active and conscious role of the subjective moment?’ Lukács stresses: ‘Moments that are consciously *made*, that is to say brought into being by the subjective side’, involving ‘purely subjective’ qualities such as ‘decisiveness, moral superiority’, at certain points in the political process ‘have decisive predominance’, although they cannot play their role independently of social and economic development. Over time the dynamic and interactive blend of objective and subjective factors can result in the emergence of a Communist Party which could have the potential to concentrate and advance the subjective factor to such an extent that – at the decisive moment – it would provide effective leadership for a socialist revolution. ‘The subjective moment

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34. Lukács 2000, pp. 101, 50–1.

35. Lukács 2000, pp. 52, 55.

reaches in this “moment” its comprehensive significance precisely because and inasmuch as it has already acted consciously and actively during earlier developments.<sup>36</sup>

Lukács quotes Lenin: ‘It depends on us.’ He is referring to the more conscious and organised activists and revolutionaries in the working-class movement. This does not mean the party substituting itself for the working class, but instead helping the working class to become an effective revolutionary force. He challenges those who explain Communist failures by viewing the working class as ‘immature’ or ‘wavering’. If the working class ‘is subjectively too immature for revolution, then evidently that has objective, social causes, on whose ranks, however, an extraordinarily large role is played by subjective moments that have become objective moments.’ The development of the working class as revolutionary force is a process which must be understood

not as an evolutionary one or an organic one, but as contradictory, jerkily unfolding in advances and retreats in every – apparently – calm moment. ‘There is no moment,’ say the organisational theses of the Third Congress [of the Comintern], ‘when a Communist Party cannot be active.’ Why? Because there can be no moment where this character of the process, the germ, the possibility of an *active* influencing of the subjective moments is completely lacking.<sup>37</sup>

### **Class consciousness and organisation**

In responding to critics of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács offers striking formulations regarding class consciousness that – as in his discussion of the subjective/objective dialectic – underscore the logic of Leninist organisational perspectives. We already saw an important aspect of this in the comparison of possible ‘revolutionary’ as opposed to ‘opportunistic’ orientations among skilled workers that could make them either part of a revolutionary vanguard of the working class or part of a self-interested ‘aristocracy of labour’. Lukács makes a distinction between revolutionary working-class consciousness and the actual consciousness of workers. The revolutionary party plays an essential role in establishing and spreading true class consciousness. But what is it that makes one form of consciousness more ‘true’ or ‘correct’ than another?

Lukács addresses the question quite directly. ‘The answer is simple: because one consciousness corresponds to the economic and social position of the class as a totality, while the other sticks at the immediacy of a particular and temporary interest.’ The outlook which involves a more thorough, factually

36. Lukács 2000, pp. 56–7, 58.

37. Lukács 2000, pp. 60–2.

complete understanding of reality and one's place within reality, and in addition, the outlook which provides the most adequate guidelines for action, is the superior outlook. He notes that such a level of consciousness does not arise spontaneously but must involve a certain amount of deliberation. It is possible for many workers (sometimes a majority) not to have deliberated sufficiently to come to such a level of consciousness. Lukács repeats from his own *History and Class Consciousness* that class consciousness represents 'the thoughts and feelings that men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising in it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say, it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation.'<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, this begs the question: with what justification does Lukács identify this 'correct' consciousness as class consciousness? This was precisely the question posed in the polemic levelled against him by Laszlo Rudas. Lukács answers that 'any agitator or propagandist' could respond by

asking Comrade Rudas whether he may not speak of class-conscious workers *in contrast* to those who are not class-conscious (who are just as much workers whose thought is just as much determined by their proletarian being). He would ask Comrade Rudas whether he had the right to dispute the proletarian class consciousness of a strike-breaker, indeed, even a wavering worker. And, in appealing to the class consciousness of workers through an analysis of the objective situation and the slogans that follow from it, does he have the right to awaken or heighten this class consciousness?<sup>39</sup>

Lukács links Marx and Lenin. Marx says that class consciousness is not 'a matter of what this or that proletarian or even the whole proletariat *imagines* for itself as a goal at any point', and Lenin says that 'the communists are only a drop in the ocean of people. They will only be in a position to lead the people, to take them down the right path, *if they correctly define the path.*' There is need for 'an organisation of class-conscious elements of the proletariat' for helping to answer the questions of '*how*, on the one hand correct recognition of the class position of the proletariat ("level of consciousness" in Lenin, "sense of the historical role of the class" in me) can be raised to an ever higher level, that is to say, become ever more correct in terms of content, ever more to the actual situation. . . . [and] *how*, on the other hand, this consciousness can be *made* conscious in as large a section of the class as possible . . .'<sup>40</sup>

38. Lukács 2000, pp. 71–2.

39. Lukács 2000, p. 72.

40. Lukács 2000, pp. 73–4, 77.

The organisation that communists create for the purpose of accomplishing such a task is the revolutionary party. This is the target of many anti-Communist critics. ‘The party is the visible embodiment of class-consciousness, the sole guarantor of the correct political orientation of the proletariat and the sole exponent of its “real” will’, is how Leszek Kolakowski sums up Lukács’s views, and thus ‘we arrive at the desired conclusion: the party is always right.’ Perhaps something akin to this crystallised for Lukács in the 1930s when he declared that ‘only Lenin and Stalin, and the Bolshevik Party they founded and led, were and are able to sweep away the so-called theories of revisionism in all domains of Marxism,’ etc., etc.<sup>41</sup> But this despairing (and, given his residency in Moscow, also fearful) adaptation to Stalinism constituted a break from the perspective articulated in the 1920s. For his conception of the revolutionary party was thoughtful, critical-minded, with revolutionary optimism seasoned by a practical-minded seriousness. In fact, *Tailism and the Dialectic* focuses our attention on moments when the party is wrong.

Noting that the ‘raising of the level of class consciousness is ... not an endless (or finite) progress, not a permanent advance towards a goal fixed for all time, but itself a dialectical process’, Lukács even suggests that ‘an unsuccessful action of the proletariat, caused by vacillation or the low level of consciousness of the vanguard, can change the objective situation in such a way that further development – in a certain sense – sets in at a lower level.’ In such a situation, he argues, it is essential that the revolutionary party avoid placing the blame for such a development on ‘objective’ causes (which ‘looks, at best, like fatalism’). He highlights the need for ‘Bolshevik self-criticism with its unprecedented significance for the development of parties, and mediated to the whole proletariat through those parties.’ The ability for revolutionary activists to self-critically examine their activities means that, when a party is organised and functioning according to Leninist principles, ‘the development of the level of class consciousness can be more strongly encouraged through mistakes that are correctly recognised and, correspondingly, thoroughly corrected.’ There are similar formulations in Lukács’s *Lenin*: ‘The party called upon to lead the proletarian revolution is not born ready-made into its leading role: it, too, is not but is *becoming*. And the process of fruitful interaction between party and class repeats itself – albeit differently – in the relationship between the party and its members.’<sup>42</sup>

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41. Kolakowski 1978, pp. 281, 282. The 1930s Lukács quote is from Lichtheim 1971, p. 104.

42. Lukács 2000, p. 78; Lukács 1971b, pp. 37–8.

### In defence of vanguard organisation

The ‘organisational forms recognised and applied by Lenin’ are designed to help committed revolutionary activists to ‘work out rather practical measures from a correct knowledge of the historical process as a whole, from the totality of its economic, political, ideological, etc., moments’, Lukács explains. ‘These practical measures are those with whose help, on the one hand *one part* of the proletariat is raised to the level of consciousness that correctly corresponds to its objective position in the totality, while on the other hand, the broad masses of workers and other exploited people can be led correctly in their struggles.’<sup>43</sup>

The ‘one part’ of the working class that can develop the high level of class consciousness that Lukács talks about represents a revolutionary vanguard layer. It is the nucleus around which increasing numbers of workers may rally. It constitutes the energetic, insightful, experienced elements that provide leadership in social struggles. By definition, and in historical reality, this may be (and in a revolutionary situation needs to be) a growing percentage of the working class as a whole, but does not and cannot constitute the entire working class or even the majority of the workers. ‘But even in this portion of the working class,’ Lukács asserts, ‘consciousness does not only not arise “by itself,” but not even as an immanent result of its immediate economic position and the inevitable class struggles that develop from it at the base.’ He goes on to affirm Lenin’s notorious point in *What Is to Be Done?* that socialist consciousness (what Lukács calls ‘correct class consciousness’) must be brought to workers from outside of the working class.<sup>44</sup>

If one believes that Marxism provides the best orientation for workers to understand and change the world, of course, then, there is a case to be made for this apparently elitist assertion. After all, Marx and Engels were not proletarians. Lukács himself, however, says that in spite of this there is ‘a dialectical interrelationship between this “from without” and the working class.’ He explains that ‘while Marx and Engels stem from the bourgeois class, the development of their doctrine is, nevertheless, a product of the development of the working class – of course not in any immediate way. And not only the doctrine itself; even elements of its foundation (Ricardo, Hegel, French historians and socialists) more or less consciously summarise in thought that social being out of which and as a part of which the proletariat arose.’<sup>45</sup> This coincides with a point made ten years later by the Polish revolutionary Marxist

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43. Lukács 2000, pp. 81–2.

44. Lukács 2000, p. 82.

45. Ibid.

Franz Jacobowski, a Polish Trotskyist influenced by Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*:

Of course it cannot be denied that [non-working-class] intellectuals founded and developed Marxist theory. But Marx and Engels and their descendants could only do so from the standpoint of the proletariat and in close contact with the proletarian movement. Marx and Engels were the founders of the First International and 'introduced' their theories into the workers' movement, but they could only work out these theories because there was already an existing proletarian movement for them to observe. Among the English Chartists and French Blanquists and other similar groups they found not only a movement but also, from the beginning, the content of a consciousness to which their theory gave form and expression. Theory and the working-class movement, therefore, do not develop along parallel lines that only meet in an external sense; they form a unity of living interaction.<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, Lukács affirms that Lenin is 'profound and correct' in denying that 'the whole working class can "spontaneously" reach the level of consciousness that corresponds to its objective economic position.' Only an understanding of this – the 'outsideness' of such knowledge and insight to the majority of workers – makes it possible to increasingly win workers, and finally a working-class majority, to this level of class consciousness. Lukács accepts Lenin's insistence that revolutionary class consciousness necessarily includes but also goes beyond the simple confrontation of workers and bosses at the workplace. This means that 'the spontaneous struggle of the proletariat will not become its genuine "class struggle" until the struggle of the proletariat is led by a strong organisation of revolutionaries.' He by no means assigns leadership to bourgeois intellectuals such as himself, nor does he view intellectuals and workers as distinct categories. Within the revolutionary party 'all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, must be effaced.'<sup>47</sup>

What is essential is that increasing numbers of workers develop revolutionary class consciousness. According to Lukács, 'forms of organisation are there in order to bring this process into being, to accelerate it, in order to make such contents conscious in the working class (in a part of the working class), which once made conscious turn the workers into class-conscious workers, precisely those contents that correspond as adequately as possible to their objective class situation.' This involves far more than simply socialist educational work:

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46. Jacobowski 1990, p. 121. For more on Marx and Engels 'learning from the proletariat', see Therborn 1976, pp. 326–35.

47. Lukács 2000, p. 83.

‘Every Bolshevik knows exactly that “the struggle over consciousness” embraces the whole activity of the party, that its struggle against the class enemy is inseparable from the struggle for the class consciousness of the proletariat and for making conscious the alliance with the semi-proletarian layers (as much in these layers as in the proletariat). For the consciousness of the masses at any one time does not develop independently of the party’s politics, and the class consciousness embodied in it.’<sup>48</sup>

### Confronting limitations

Yet there are gaps – ultimately fatal gaps – in Lukács’s discussion of the ‘forms of organisation’ required to advance the working class as an effective revolutionary force. In *Talisman and the Dialectic* there is no discussion of the internal structure and functioning of this vitally important organisation. In other works from this period, Lukács offers only very general and sometimes ambiguous formulations. There is reference to party leaders and party members, the need for centralisation and discipline, and also the necessity of self-criticism. We have noted that Lukács, in his book on Lenin, indicates the need for members to engage in ‘a process of fruitful interaction’.

In *History and Class Consciousness* he had gone somewhat further. ‘If every member of the party commits his whole personality and his whole existence to the party,’ according to Lukács, ‘then the same centralising and disciplinary principle will preside over the living interaction between the will of the members and that of the party leadership, and will ensure that the will and the wishes, the proposals and the criticisms of the members are given due weight by the party leaders.’ He argued against ‘blind trust’ of the membership in the leadership, and against restricting criticisms by members to rare and special occasions that would prevent them from exerting ‘any influence on future actions’. He stressed the need for ‘true democracy’ in a context of an active membership sharing a revolutionary programmatic commitment, ‘closely integrated and collaborating in a spirit of solidarity’.<sup>49</sup>

But there is no elaboration of institutional forms within the revolutionary party that would guarantee freedom of written as well as oral debate, especially in regular pre-convention discussion periods, the right of organised oppositional currents, the supremacy of the elective principle and majority rule (subordination of leadership to membership), and the encouragement of relative autonomy for local party units. All of these things were aspects of

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48. Lukács 2000, pp. 84–6.

49. Lukács 1971a, pp. 336–7.



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