

LUKÁCS'S 1967 PREFACE TO *HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS*

by Alfredo Lucero-Montaña

Georg Lukács in his 1967 "Preface" of *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) criticizes his deviation from Marxism. In his attempt to explain all ideological phenomena by reference to their basis in economics, he failed to use a fundamental Marxist category, that is, the human activity *per excellence*, labour: "labour as the mediator of the metabolic interaction between society and nature, is missing" (p. xvii). The consequence of this omission means "the disappearance of the ontological objectivity of nature upon which this process of change is based. But it also means the disappearance of the interaction between labour as seen from a genuinely materialist standpoint and the evolution of the men who labour" (*Loc. cit.*). Here Lukács recalls Marx's great insight that "even production for the sake of production means nothing more than the *development of the production energies of man, and hence the development of the productive of the wealth of human nature as an end in itself*" (*Loc. cit.*).

Lukács' attempt to restore the nature of Marx's theories by renovating and extending Hegel's dialectics and method led him to its opposite: an abstract and idealistic approach of the central concept of *praxis*. Nevertheless, Lukács' subjectivism gave rise to a key explanatory concept of the historical process, namely, the "imputed class consciousness". But this consciousness was in fact isolated from any sort of praxis, that is, it was a pure contemplative consciousness. As a result, the absence of a basis in real praxis leads to its opposite: a relapse into idealistic contemplation. In Lukács's own words: "my account of the contradictions of capitalism...is unintentionally coloured by an overriding subjectivism" (p. xviii).

One of Lukács' main concerns is the question of alienation. This question is treated as central to the critique of capitalism, and which has its theoretical and methodological roots in the Hegelian dialectics. At the time the problem of alienation was dealt in Hegelian terminology, that is, "its ultimate philosophical foundation is the identical subject-object that realizes itself in the historical process...when the highest stage of absolute spirit is attained...by abolishing alienation

and by the return of self-consciousness to itself, thus realizing the identical subject-object” (pp. xxii). Of course, in Hegel this process arises in a logical and philosophical form, while in Lukács “this process is socio-historical and it culminates when the proletariat reaches this stage in its class-consciousness, thus becoming the identical subject-object of history” (*Ibidem*). This appears as if the Hegelian theses has found “its authentic realization in the existence and the consciousness of the proletariat”, and in turn provides “a philosophical foundation for the proletariat’s efforts...to conclude the ‘prehistory’ of mankind” (p. xxiii). But Lukács rightly dismisses the notion of a purely metaphysical realization of the identical subject-object, and more important, he also rejects the constitution of an identical subject-object by self-knowledge—however perfect that self-knowledge is—yet truly based on an adequate knowledge of society. This has a distorting effect on the understanding of the historical process: “The proletariat seen as the identical subject-object of the real history of mankind is no materialist consummation that overcomes the constructions of idealism. It is rather an attempt to out-Hegel Hegel” (p. xxiii). That is, an attempt “to homogenize” reality, to process history above every possible reality.

Certainly, Hegel is the first philosopher to stress the concept of alienation as the fundamental problem of the place of man in the world. However, in the term “alienation” he includes every type of objectification, that is, alienation is identical with objectification. According to Hegel, when the identical subject-object transcends alienation it must also transcend objectification at the same time. But as the subject takes back the object, which exists only as an alienation from self-consciousness, this would mean the end of objective reality and of any reality at all. Here the irreducibility of the object is ignored, and the objectivity is reduced to the pure determinations of the subject. Though these determinations are abstract, because the subject’s activity is conscience in a purely theoretical way. Lukács acknowledges this fundamental and crude error. “For objectification is indeed a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated from human life in society...[because] every externalization of an object in practice...is an objectification” (p. xxiv).

This follows from the false opposition of fundamental categories (dualism), that is, from the misunderstanding about the dialectical unity subject/object. The fundamental theoretical

claim of the dialectical conception does not lead to a negation of the object or the subject, but to the separation of both, that is, the idea that they are sides of reality constituted by and for themselves, and therefore, rationally separated.

The traditional materialism, for instance, conceives the relation subject/object as an *opposition*. Here reality is seen as something constituted by itself, and not as a product of social activity, that is, separated from its relation with the subject. Marx criticism aims this misconception when he introduces the notion of 'praxis': "The chief defect of all previous materialism (including Feuerbach's) is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the *object* or *perception*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence in opposition to materialism the *active* side was developed by idealism—but only abstractly since idealism naturally does not know actual, sensuous activity as such" (Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach).

In other words, social reality does not exist as an object by itself, but as a product of subject activity. Here is important to establish that the subjective element in the constitution of reality does not arise from the theoretical activity only, but from all the forms of social practice. In short, the relation subject/object is a phenomenon endowed with unity, that is, the terms of the relation does not take place outside it.

Thus the fundamental claim of dialectics consists in the affirmation of the unity or the relation subject/object as the comprehensive basis of the social process. In the dialectical conception of the subject/object—where each one appears as a relation or unity of it, and not as a piece of that relation—men are not outside the world, or standing in front of reality; existence does not take place on the margins of the world, or outside of social reality where they constitute themselves as subjects. In other words, the subject and the object reciprocally constitute themselves in the construction of reality, where one moment of this reality is the subject's praxis, and the other, is related with the social materiality in the constitution of subjectivity.

Marx thought the historical process as a *totality* endowed with an internal coherence, in which every part is conditioned by the whole and, at the same time, the rest is conditioned by

each part. Thus this notion led Marx to claim that the socio-historical process is an intelligible, coherent, structured and dynamic reality, but this reality can only be understood and penetrated as a totality by means of a rationality that endows the unity of theory and practice. The world can only be understood by means of that principle. “The coincidence of the change of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be comprehended and rationally understood only as...practice” (Marx’s third thesis on Feuerbach). Certainly, Hegel stated that “truth must be understood and expressed not merely as substance, but also as subject”, but Marx discovered ‘the truth as subject’, that is, as *praxis*.

Lukács asserts that “only the class can actively penetrate the reality of society and transform it in its entirety” (p. 39). Thus class criticism provides the dialectical unity of theory and practice, and it means “the relation to society *as a whole*” (p. 50). When this relation is established, men’s consciousness of its existence emerges as a twofold dialectical determination: “as something which is *subjectively* justified in the social and historical situation...[and] at the same, time, *objectively*, it bypasses the essence of the evolution of society and fails to pinpoint it and express it adequately...it appears as a ‘false consciousness’” (*Ibidem*). In other words, this “false consciousness” may be seen as something that fails *subjectively* to reach its own ends, while realizing the objective aims of society.

The analysis of the dialectical determination of consciousness allow us to distinguish between “the naive description of what men in fact thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history...and the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation” (p. 51). The class consciousness consists in “the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed’ to a particular typical position in the process of production” (*Ibidem*). Here we must recall Marx’s insight: “Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness” (*The German Ideology in Selected Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, p. 112). Thus the analysis does not infer the real social relations of men from what they think or believe, but determines what men believe from their real social relations. Lukács in this order of ideas asserts that “class-consciousness implies a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one’s own socio-historical and economic condition. This condition is given as a definite structural relation...which appears to

govern the whole life. The 'falseness', the illusion implicit in this situation...it is simply the intellectual reflex of the objective economic structure" (p. 52).

How can an effective class-consciousness be achieved? For Lukács, the ideological maturity of a social class becomes when it acquires a true understanding of its class situation and a true-class-consciousness, to wit, it becomes a class 'for itself'. This means that the class—subject to the modes of existence of capitalism—must transcend its *reified* mode of existence. Lukács remarks that "modern capitalism does not content itself with transforming the relations of production in accordance with its own needs. It also integrates into its own system those forms of primitive capitalism that led an isolated existence" (p. 93). The forms of capitalism adulterate man's life forms, since in the relations between men--as well as the relations between man and objects that should gratify their real needs--lies hidden a 'commodity relation'. The reified mind does not recognize these 'commodity relations', and moreover regards them as true-value forms of life. The reason for this Lukács claims is that: "The divorce of the phenomena of reification from their economic bases...is facilitated by the fact that the [capitalist] process of transformation must embrace every manifestation of the life of society if the preconditions for the complete self-realization of capitalist production are to be fulfilled" (p. 95). Man's life relations are mediated by objects, which its "commodity character" distorts them.

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