

Immediacy and Experience in Lukács' Theory of Reification*

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ABSTRACT. This paper studies the relationship between consciousness and social existence in Georg Lukács' early Marxist works through a consideration of his concept of reification. Understanding reification as the process underlying capitalist society's immediate form of objectivity, I designate dereification as the cultivation of a mediated form of consciousness. In order to better understand the experiential aspects of this cultivation, I supplement my reading of Lukács' theory of reification with attention to Walter Benjamin's treatment of experience in capitalist society. I argue that Benjamin's distinction between experience as the shock of isolated events [*Erlebnis*] and experience as a long-term practice [*Erfahrung*] helpfully illuminates Lukács' conception of dereification, allowing us to see the latter as a long process of cultivation. This account ultimately leads to a consideration of the formal role played by the party – as the facilitator of the working class's self-education – in Lukács' philosophy of social praxis.

KEYWORDS. Reification, Experience, Lukács, Benjamin, Critical Theory, Education

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** I would like to thank Delia Popa, Harrison Farina, and two anonymous referees for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper.



Widespread interest in the concept of reification, and its seemingly limitless applicability to life under capitalism, are perhaps related to the way this concept works across the methodological distinctions adopted by various critical studies of society. Reification stands, as it were, between lifeworld and system, agency and structure, praxis and theory, and ultimately between subjective experience and its objective determination. This characteristic of Lukács' theory of reification lends his work an uncanny quality today, as though an adequate understanding of this concept would require us to break out of the current forms in which critical social and political theory have settled. This is especially apparent in the conjunction – central for Lukács – between the experience of living under capitalism and the possibility of resisting it. If human consciousness is not only affected, but profoundly shaped by capitalist social reality, how is resistance to this social totality possible? How can a social order that ensures an apparently total integration of forms of life and thought, come to produce the possibility of something new? How is social experience related to social transformation? Although Lukács' answer to these questions, the growing revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat, is often seen as a dogmatic political mistake, I argue that it opens reflection on the complex role of educational development and political organization in social change.

Some theorists diminish the tension between socially conditioned experience and the possibility of revolutionary transformation by designating realms of human experience untouched by economic relations, thus demarcating the proper area for the working of economic rationality. Accordingly, these theorists often minimize the power of capitalist social relations in conditioning human experience and decrease the importance of capitalist relations in structuring the social field.¹ From this perspective, there is no need to resist capitalism

¹ E.g., HABERMAS 1984 [1981]; HONNETH 2008 [2005]. For a critical discussion grouping Lukács with Habermas's and Honneth's theories of reification, see O'KANE 2021.

in its entirety, since injustice stems from a deviation from rationality – such as the incursion of one value sphere onto another – rather than from the rationality of capitalist society as a whole. Others address this problem by taking issue with its purported assumption of a unified subject in whom experience and social transformation can be correlated. According to these critiques, social theory must do without identitarian concepts such as a subject of history whose experience could make a difference for the social totality.² This line of thinking might result in a theoretical retreat from practical questions, or an anticipation of the moment of revolutionary transformation's arrival. Implicit in each of these tendencies is a rejection of Lukács' theory of reification for its alleged idealism.³ Lukács is variously guilty, according to his numerous critics, of an exaggeration of the influence of economic relations on human experience, of a reliance on a subject able to unify experience and transformative critique, and of a mythological universal history of guaranteed progress. At the same time, as numerous recent works have shown, many of the arguments leveled against Lukács proceed from a misreading of his work, or an interpretation that overshadows its most thought-provoking elements by overemphasizing its problematic ones.⁴ In order to assess Lukács' treatment of the relation between social experience and revolutionary social transformation, we must better understand the way this problem is viewed in his work.

In Lukács' early Marxist works, we find a fundamental critique of capitalist society and culture that nonetheless holds open surprising possibilities for their transformation. Capitalist society works, in part, by getting its members to uncritically accept their experience. In this function, reification is a masking process that casts historically dynamic forms of life and thought as immediate and unchanging (Section 1). The process of dereification thus involves the cultivation of

2 *E.g.*, ADORNO 1995 [1966], 189-92, ALTHUSSER & BALIBAR 1979 [1965], 139-43.

3 An important early criticism along these lines is also found in JAY 1984, especially at 112-7.

4 *E.g.*, LÓPEZ 2019; KAVOULAKOS 2018, 2011; FEENBERG 2011, 1981a, 1981b; and the essays collected in SMULEWICZ-ZUCKER 2020, THOMPSON 2011, and BEWES & HALL 2011.

critical experience throughout the working class – including its individual members, its forms of organization, and the class as a whole. Accordingly, we can better understand Lukács’ treatment of the “becoming-conscious” of the proletariat by attending to the mediated character of developmental experience, drawing on Walter Benjamin’s distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (Section 2). This reading of Lukács’ treatment of reification will allow us to understand the education of the proletariat as an endless task of cultivating new mediations, a task whose subject has not yet arrived. An open-ended process of developing class consciousness, as we will see, is the charge of the revolutionary party – an institution committed to the historical formation of the revolutionary subject (Section 3). In closing, we will note that a clearer understanding of the party’s transcendental function as a facilitator of cultivation allows us to critically view the rigidity of political organizations in many of their manifestations, while maintaining the commitment to a critical theory oriented toward the transformation of life and thought (Section 4). As a philosophy of social praxis, Lukács’ theory of reification highlights the need for a transformation of culture,⁵ effected by the self-education of the wishes and desires, the experience and theoretical awareness, of those living under capitalism.

1. Reification as immediacy

The central essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, «Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat», contains Lukács’ infamous account of capitalism’s structuring influence on forms of thought and social existence. «Reification», according to Lukács, «is the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society».⁶ Since this phenomenon designates a shared relation between consciousness and social existence, between forms of thought and forms of life, it

5 For more on culture in Lukács, see: FEENBERG 1986; 1981, SCHMIDT 1975, and KETTLER 1971.

6 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 197.

affects everyone within the same society. In this way, Lukács argues that reification is a more general problem «growing out of the fetish character of commodities»,⁷ relating this conception to Marx's treatment of the commodity in the first volume of *Capital*. In its immediate appearance in capitalist society, social labor appears in the form of a commodity, which masks the underlying antagonistic social relations making this appearance possible.⁸ The reified consciousness of capitalist society emerges from the commodity fetish when the capitalist process of production becomes the «dominant form of metabolic change»⁹ in society. Through this qualitative change the commodity fetish which had before been merely incidental and occasional, becomes the form through which social reality is necessarily grasped. With the birth of capitalist society, the *calculative objectivity* of capitalist relations is transformed, through universalization, into *reification*.¹⁰

As an immediate form of social consciousness, reification structures the possibility of experience. In this way, it designates the «effects of the social order... upon consciousness».¹¹ On the one hand, the objects of production (commodities) are increasingly divided by a specialized and rationalized labor process. The commodity thus loses «its unity as a use-value»,¹² and becomes the result of standardized and precisely calculated technological processes. As use value is eclipsed by exchange value, the conceptual apprehension of everyday objects becomes more and more calculative and instrumental. On the other hand, the subjective dimensions of the labor process, the laborers themselves, are reduced to mere objects.¹³ The worker is internally split by the demands of the production process, through a rationalized division of labor; thus, their labor power «is detached from the whole

7 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 84.

8 See: MARX 1990 [1867], 165ff.

9 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 84.

10 KAVOULAKOS 2018, 134ff.

11 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 97.

12 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 89.

13 «[The human worker] is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system.» LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 89.

personality and placed in opposition to it, becoming a thing, a commodity».¹⁴ Through this process, workers are isolated from one another by an individualism that is a «reflex in consciousness of the fact that the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society».¹⁵

According to Lukács, capitalist society has not only succeeded in dramatically transforming the conditions of production and reproduction of life under its economic compulsion but has also transformed its own appearance to those living within these conditions. As a form of objectivity, reification reflects the objectification of capitalist production in the realm of consciousness in general. The social world of capitalism thus appears as a fortuitous composition of isolated facts. From within the «readymade, immediate reality»¹⁶ of society, consciousness grasps its elements without an appreciation for the way they are produced. The worker’s own alienation thus appears to them as a part of the natural order, just as the capitalist’s domination appears to them as the product of their individual agency. In both cases, social relations which are in fact the product of a distinct historical process appear as a transhistorical ‘second nature’. As these conditions develop, the force of reification in consciousness is deepened: «Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man».¹⁷ The forms of thought specific to capitalist social production structure humankind’s consciousness by structuring the social world in which it lives. Lukács thus characterizes the immediately available forms of reified consciousness as necessary illusions.¹⁸ They are illusory because they obscure the historical relations underlying their apparent objectivity. They are also necessary, however, since society’s

14 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 99.

15 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 92.

16 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 181.

17 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 93.

18 «[I]f this atomization is only an illusion, it is a necessary one.» LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 92.

immediate appearance is truly expressive of the social and material conditions of life under capitalism.

Capitalism as a political-economic system has a need to deceive its members about its own nature, regardless of their place in the production process – although it is also the case that different social locations bear a different relationship to reified consciousness, as we will see at the end of this section. What is clear from this initial characterization of reification as an immediate structure of social existence and consciousness, however, is that this phenomenon is neither purely normative, nor purely epistemological, but bears on both these dimensions at once; the effect of reification is more fundamental than a mere misapprehension of an object by a subject, or a dehumanizing distortion of the subject's inner dignity.¹⁹ In both these cases, the relationship between subject and object remains intact. But reification centrally concerns the immediate, apparently rigid and atemporal relationship between subject and object. In this way, the study of this phenomenon – as a study of *history* – has a priority over the theory of knowledge and theory of morality taken separately. Any stable division between these modes of inquiry, like the divisions between separated scientific fields, is itself the result of a reified social totality.²⁰

Reification produces not only the immediate understanding of workers as unchanging objects, but also the abstract separation between life and thought, social existence and social consciousness. For this reason, the forms of objectivity immediately available within capitalist society are not merely the result of a lack of education or an epistemological mistake. Instead, these forms are necessary, in the sense that they reflect the categorical structure of social reality. This means, among other things, that reified thought can be theoretically developed with a high degree of detail. For this reason, the second part of Lukács' essay addresses "the antinomies of bourgeois thought"

19 JURGA (2019, 18ff) similarly argues that Lukács' theory of reification contains an implicit critique of its normative or epistemological reinterpretations.

20 See, e.g., Lukács' remarks on the specialist disciplines (LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 6).

through a detailed treatment of the history of German philosophy starting from Kant and continuing up to the neo-Kantian tradition.

The distinction of classical German philosophy lies in the way it attempts to construct a universal rational system, despite the difficulties posed by the “irrational”, “material”, or the “other” of formal and logical thought in all its forms. To illustrate this problem, Lukács turns first to Kant’s theory of the thing-in-itself, which seems impossible to incorporate into his system, but nevertheless spells out a limiting principle for it. As an index of irrationality, the thing-in-itself represents two major limitations faced by reason attempting to expand its applicability indefinitely. On the one hand, the extension of rational forms falters in its designation of the content of cognition, which it cannot cast in a rational form without sliding into solipsism. On the other hand, this extension encounters the impossibility of conceiving its own subjective contribution as a total system of reality, without taking reason beyond the bounds of possible experience. The thing-in-itself thus either spells out the inability of rationality to conceptually grasp the contents of experience in their entirety, or its inability to guarantee the total agreement of its system with reality.²¹

These «antinomies of totality and content»,²² devised to maintain the integrity of the system despite the threat posed by reason’s irrational other, strengthen reason’s supposition that its own formal and rational mode of knowledge is the only possible one, and hence its inability to recognize the material historicity of consciousness. This problem, while highly concentrated in Kant, is fundamentally rooted in the capitalist form of objectivity which was dawning as his work was being received. Attempts to extend rationality to the irrational after Kant have thus faltered in their efforts between a naïve rationalism that would deprive the irrational of «content and actuality», and a merely descriptive empiricism extending the reach of the irrational to the very forms of rationality themselves.²³ These alternatives are

21 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 115.

22 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 132.

23 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 118.

merely two complementary expressions of the social basis of bourgeois German philosophy. They stem equally from «the attempt to universalize rationalism»,²⁴ implicit both in the form of thought specific to German idealism, and to the capitalist form of life through which it developed. In this way, this philosophical tradition reflects the life basis of its social existence.²⁵

In bourgeois society, the capitalist relations of production exert increasing power over social existence. The social world is, in a historically novel way, the result of human industry and rational planning. At the same time, however, the idea that humans have created society is met with difficulty when it comes to understanding and controlling this creation as a whole.²⁶ The mediated and rational character of society proliferates in a dizzying array of partial systems, each with its own logic, but without an overarching organizing principle. The form of rationality structuring society thus attains a masking function, and the production of the social world is hidden by a veil of immediacy. The «double-tendency» of this society, according to Lukács, is expressed in philosophy through the irreconcilable antinomies and contradictions it encounters in its self-understanding.²⁷ These stem from the dogmatic way in which philosophical method elevates formal rationality as the sole way of adequately apprehending reality, and opposes this form to a host of irrational and alien contents.²⁸

Thought seeking to separate itself from society as a total process determining it, «bears the stigma of immediacy. That is to say, it never ceases to be confronted by a whole series of ready-made objects that cannot be dissolved into processes».²⁹ This is also true in the sciences,

24 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 116-7.

25 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 112.

26 «On the one hand, [the bourgeoisie] acquires increasing control over the details of its social existence, subjecting them to its needs. On the other hand, it loses – likewise progressively – the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society as a whole and with that it loses its own qualifications for leadership.» LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 121.

27 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 121.

28 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 121.

29 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 205.

for which the assumption of a given content incapable of further rational elaboration has facilitated the development of increasingly exact, but ontologically superficial, inquiries. Thus, the commodity form is the «social premise» for the staggering productivity of the sciences.³⁰ For the social sciences in capitalist society:

[Their] underlying material base is permitted to dwell inviolate and undisturbed in its irrationality ('non-createdness', 'givenness') so that it becomes possible to operate with unproblematic, rational categories in the resulting methodically purified world. These categories are then applied not to the real material substratum (even that of the particular sciences) but to an 'intelligible' subject matter.³¹

Jurisprudence and economics, to take two examples of scientific elaborations of the immediate consciousness of capitalist society, are incapable of understanding the process of development underlying the objects they take for granted (*e.g.*, value, rights). Since these sciences proceed from the rational forms in which society immediately appears, they are able to effectively organize the social world under the current modes of production.³² They are uncritical, however, in the sense that the actual ontological realities they study, as products of becoming in history, are methodologically proscribed.³³ For a science turning its back on the essentially mediated – historically produced – character of its immediate objects of study, reality thus becomes a series of partial systems, admitting of no unifying principle.³⁴

30 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 6.

31 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 120.

32 See MARX (1990 [1867], 169) on this character of the categories of bourgeois economics.

33 The core theme *Capital* is a theory of reification, according to Lukács, although Marx did not always give this phenomenon the same name. See LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 183.

34 «The more highly developed [science] becomes... the more it will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand, *its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp*». LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 104.

While it is true, as we have seen, that reification structures the reality of all members of capitalist society, it is not true that all live this reality in the same way. Since they occupy different roles in the process of social production through which these forms attain their immediacy, different classes are differently situated with regard to social objectivity. Since the illusions propagated by the dominance of the commodity form support the broader interests of the bourgeoisie, this class is able to view the reified world as the product of its own action without encountering a contradiction in its immediate consciousness. Although the bourgeoisie is able to preserve an illusory realm of action for itself in the reified reality of capitalist society:

[...] the worker, who is denied the scope for such illusory activity, perceives the split in his being preserved in the brutal form of what is in its whole tendency a slavery without limits. He is therefore forced into becoming the object of the process by which he is turned into a commodity and reduced to a mere quantity. But this very fact forces him to surpass the immediacy of his condition.³⁵

The form of self-alienation specific to the proletariat's position in the social order sets a mechanically objectified part of the individual (their labor power) against their total personality. In this way, when the proletariat understands itself according to the immediate form of social objectivity (*i.e.*, as a commodity), it is felt as a problem, since the «mechanical existence hostile to life and... scientific formalism alien to it»³⁶ contradict the worker's life experience. While the forms of immediate social consciousness are agreeable to the bourgeoisie's fight for self-preservation, then, the proletariat's self-interest, as Marx had seen, lies in the abolition of the whole.³⁷ For this reason, in the proletariat, «the reified character of the immediate manifestations of

35 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 166.

36 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 109.

37 *E.g.*, MARX and ENGELS 1956 [1844], 51; see LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 149.

capitalist society receives the most extreme definition possible».³⁸ Among the workers, it is thus harder for the immediate forms of consciousness characterizing bourgeois society to develop into a theoretical system, since the worker's self-conception as a subject of action is «an illusion... destroyed by the immediacy of his existence».³⁹

If reification characterizes the immediate forms of life and consciousness in capitalist society, the proletariat's unique interest in abolishing this society finds expression through its paradoxical relation to this phenomenon. The proletariat's tendency towards a mediation of social forms is not owing to some privilege on its part, or an innate insight into the social process, but rather to the fact that these immediate forms of appearance create a realm of objectivity organized against the proletariat's life. Lukács writes:

By becoming aware of the commodity relationship, the proletariat can only become conscious of itself as the object of the economic process... But if the reification of capital is dissolved into an unbroken process of its production and reproduction, it is possible for the proletariat to discover that it is itself the *subject* of this process even though it is in chains and it is for the time being unconscious of this fact.⁴⁰

Developing the consciousness of the proletariat requires dissolving the fixed objects and stable separations of capitalist society through historical mediation, beginning with the self-conception of the worker as a commodity. In the worker alone is this dissolution a social possibility, since «[f]or the proletariat to become aware of the dialectical nature of its existence is a matter of life and death».⁴¹ The workers' experience of the social world drives their consciousness towards a historicization of the immediate second nature of the capitalist world. But before we turn to dereification as the cultivation

38 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 149.

39 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 165.

40 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 181.

41 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 164.

of mediations, we must clarify the specific conception of *experience* allowing for this cultivation.

2. The fragmentation of experience

Through reification, a form of objectification which began as an economic process attains a cultural dimension, encapsulating the medium through which subjectivity and objectivity are realized. Andrew Feenberg thus characterizes reification as, «the form of objectivity in terms of which capitalist society produces the objects of experience», locating this form of objectivity in the fundamental cultural conditions of existence in capitalist society.⁴² But differently situated members of society experience the same reality differently, on account of their conditions of life and their place in the production process. Here, however, the category of experience presents some difficulty. While Lukács seems clearly committed to the idea that a differential experience of reified social totality represents the only hope for humanity (*via* the proletariat), there is no fully developed theory of experience in *History and Class Consciousness*.⁴³ What kind of experience is able to move past the immediate forms of consciousness that imprison even the pursuit of modern science and philosophy in capitalist society? In exploring this question, we will briefly consider Walter Benjamin's distinction between two forms of experience, a distinction bearing close affinities to Lukács' theory of reification.

In his essay «On Some Motifs in Baudelaire», Benjamin outlines a distinction between two modes of experience which appears to be influenced by Lukács' account of reification and immediacy.⁴⁴ The

42 FEENBERG 1981a, 33, 28.

43 All the same, Lukács is deeply influenced by neo-Kantian debates on experience (see: LOTZ 2020; KAVOULAKOS 2018), and connections between his works and the phenomenological tradition have also been drawn (WESTERMAN 2019, 2010; GOLDMANN 1977 [1973]).

44 For a helpful discussion of Benjamin's reading of Lukács and the affinities between their respective critiques of reification, including a discussion of Benjamin's reception of Lukács' thought, see JEŽ 2020.

modern age is distinctive, according to Benjamin, in its increasingly total organization of social experience. The experience of capitalist immediacy is that of the isolated event – *Erlebnis*. Benjamin describes this form of experience with reference to the shock [*Chockerlebnis*] felt by members of a bustling crowd as they bump against each other and orient themselves with traffic signals.⁴⁵ *Erlebnis* is marked by reflexive passivity and the repetition of a perpetual present. In contrast to *Erlebnis* is experience as a long-term process of development and transformation – or *Erfahrung* – a form of experience with a temporally extended character, in which sense impressions attain their importance within the context of a developing whole. The reflections in this essay turn around the way in which capitalist society is predicated on the economic, technological, and cultural replacement of *Erfahrung* with *Erlebnis*.

The social world in which experience is increasingly characterized by the isolated quality of *Erlebnis* is precisely the reified world of capitalism. Returning to the pedestrians, Benjamin writes: «The shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*] which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the isolated ‘experiences’ of the worker at his machine».⁴⁶ The division of labor, and particularly in this essay the rise of unskilled machine labor, leads to a devaluation of any form of experience that develops over time. The worker is increasingly transformed into an automaton, as the work process becomes more and more “rational”. Mirroring Lukács’ discussion of the labor process, Benjamin describes how the repetition of simple tasks replaces the more integrated and time-intensive production of the pre-capitalist era: «The unskilled worker is the one most deeply degraded by machine training. His work has been sealed off from experience; practice counts for nothing in a factory».⁴⁷ Like the figure of the gambler in Baudelaire’s poetry, the worker’s activity can be understood as a repetition of isolated, atomistic gestures without the

45 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 329.

46 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 329.

47 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 329.

development of an internal sensibility or habitual practice. Experience for both figures becomes the recording and reproduction of brute facts.

The affinity between the experiences of the worker and those of the gambler is related to the fact that each figure illustrates an underlying tendency of capitalist society, related to its structuring of the social world. Drawing on Georg Simmel's sociology of the senses, Benjamin describes the way even the sensory experience of life in the city is divided up by the realities of mass transportation, creating subjects accustomed to viewing each other for hours at a time without speaking.⁴⁸ In this connection Benjamin also treats the technology of film, through which «an event – an image and sound» may be captured in an 'objective' fashion at any point in time. According to Benjamin, these technologies and the social changes attending them represent «important achievements of a society in which long practice is in decline».⁴⁹

The distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* is thus *critical*, thematizing the effect of capitalist social relations on experience. The more experience is confined to the isolated shocks of *Erlebnis*, the less members of society are able to think about themselves as beings with a history, capable of development. The eclipse of *Erfahrung* is thus the result of «a crisis in perception itself»,⁵⁰ in which «technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training».⁵¹ Just as it affects the working conditions of individuals, the pervasiveness of immediate experience leads to a devaluation of forms of work that stress a mediated, developmental process, such as handicrafts or intellectual work.⁵² In capitalist society, humanity has no apparent need for the long practice of experience. The prison of immediacy which Lukács had identified with reification is here not merely a conceptual distortion but is understood to affect the faculties of the

48 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 341.

49 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 337.

50 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 338.

51 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 338.

52 BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 329.

senses themselves.⁵³ Capitalist domination, as Lukács had also seen, is also the domination of the conditions for the possibility of sensible experience, of space and time.⁵⁴

The evocation of *Erfahrung* puts Benjamin's understanding of experience in the realm of educational formation [*Bildung*]. Experience as *Erfahrung* is about allowing for the development of a subject for whom the shocks of immediacy can become moments in a historical process.⁵⁵ The importance of this formation process is not directly measurable but lies in the possibility of its long cultivation. In this way, the relationship between knowledge and the development of the subject of experience that had been so important for German philosophy is restored. As in this tradition, for which the philosophical undertaking is continuous with a form of education,⁵⁶ Benjamin's works seek to cultivate a form of experience that gathers up the fragmented elements of the present and incorporates them into a

53 «In spleen, time is reified: the minutes cover a man like snowflakes. This time is historyless, like that of the *memoire involontaire*... Every second finds consciousness ready to intercept its shock.» (BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 336)

54 «Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things'» (LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 90). For a helpful treatment of time in capitalism, see: LOTZ 2014.

55 The relationship between this conception of *Erfahrung* and the discussion of «now-time» [*Jetztzeit*] in the theses «On the Philosophy of History» – in which the past is «blasted out of the continuum of history» (BENJAMIN 2003b [1940], 395) in a moment of revolutionary rupture – opens an important question that cannot be fully addressed here. Does the «Baudelaire» essay's discussion of *Erfahrung* outline a different conception of history, according to which the long development of experience is more important than the shock of the revolutionary moment? If we understand Benjamin's treatment of *Erfahrung* in this essay less as a call for a romantic return to the past, and more as an index of the centrality of education for historical thinking in general, I believe we can see some lines of continuity between these two essays. Even in the later theses, the possibility of a revolutionary *Kairos* is linked to a «tradition of the oppressed» capable of making use of this moment (BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 392), bringing Benjamin's early and persistent focus on educational tradition into contact with his later reflections on revolutionary political possibility. I thank both anonymous reviewers for urging me to address this connection.

56 The continuity is especially clear in Hegel, for whom the *Phenomenology* assumes the form of, «the detailed history of the education of consciousness itself [*Bildung des Bewußtseins selbst*] to the standpoint of Science» (HEGEL 1977 [1807], 50).

new work. In this «education of spirit»,⁵⁷ the aim is neither to fully clarify consciousness divorced from life, nor to merge both into a false feeling of unity, but to mediate them over the course of historical becoming. The education of thought and sensibility is thus not only about cognitive ability or theoretical awareness, but about a new and renewed self-consciousness, including a renewed sensibility to history.

3. Dereification and the cultivation of mediation

The distinction in temporal forms of experience highlighted by Benjamin indexes a transformation in capitalist society taking place on economic, technological, and interpersonal levels at once – thus affecting a *cultural totality* – in which experience itself is shattered along with the subjective and objective aspects of capitalist production. With these reflections, we can further understand Lukács' account of the proletariat's process of developing consciousness [*Bewußtseinsprozeß*].⁵⁸ Lukács' aims, as we saw in the first section, are not merely of an epistemological or moral kind. They lie rather in social praxis, in the actual possibility of transcending the immediacy of reified social existence and thought. This section will treat dereification as the cultivation of mediations, and thus the formation of critical experience as *Erfahrung*.⁵⁹

The proletariat's transcendence of immediacy depends on its ability

57 In an early methodological precursor to the «Baudelaire» essay, Benjamin views his project as the «ascetic schooling of spirit» (BENJAMIN 2019 [1928], 39).

58 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 76 ; 1977 [1923], 251. See SCHMIDT (1975) for a profound account of Lukács' intervention into discussions of *Bildung* throughout his early works.

59 It is necessary to note here that Lukács, like Benjamin (see n. 55 above), is not committed to a conservative return to prior modes of education. In his philosophical treatment of proletarian *Bildung*, Lukács struggles to describe a form of cultivation going beyond earlier conceptions of this process, particularly in the sense that the dialectical formation of the proletarian consciousness cannot be sheltered by already-existing institutions and sociocultural forms. Unlike earlier accounts of *Bildung*, in which spirit «is forced to draw its strength at regular intervals from sources *outside* of the movement of its own contradictions» (SCHMIDT 1975, 28), the proletariat must itself create the milieu supporting its development.

to develop what György Markús calls «that ‘ladder’ of social praxis, which would allow not the cognitive individual, but the struggling class to reach – starting from immediacy – the standpoint of its own ‘world-historical mission’, the standpoint of totality». ⁶⁰ The «ladder of social praxis» described by Markús is akin to the way the labor struggle, despite temporary «immediate results», in the language of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, aims for an «ever-expanding union of the workers». ⁶¹ That the central concern of *History and Class Consciousness* turns on social praxis means that it requires an outline of the proletariat’s self-education. Lukács thus closes the «Reification» essay with a reference to Marx’s *Third Thesis on Feuerbach* about the «education of the educators». ⁶² The centrality of the «practical-critical activity» ⁶³ of self-transformation clarifies why Lukács’ history cannot be one without a subject. ⁶⁴ If this project aims at the *development of consciousness*, it must maintain an idea of a subject of development – even if this subject is in an indefinite and open-ended process of formation. ⁶⁵

The «ideological maturity [*ideologischen Reife*]» of the proletariat results from a practical process of development, attained through the «object lessons [*Anschauungsunterrichtes*]» of class struggle. ⁶⁶ On a theoretical level, this development involves a constant attempt to mediate the contradictions arising from the proletariat’s life experience. As Lukács writes,

[Reification] can be overcome only by constant and constantly

60 MARKÚS 1982, 157.

61 MARX and ENGELS 1988 [1888], 218.

62 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 208.

63 MARX 1972 [1845], Thesis I.

64 Lukács thus writes in his unpublished defense of *History and Class Consciousness*: «I am indeed ‘subjectivist’ enough not to underestimate educational work...», implying that those who charge him of subjectivism underestimate the need to prepare for the revolution (LUKÁCS 2000 [1925/6], 62-3).

65 «One property of consciousness is that it is educable. The agent for this self-education of man... is socialist democracy» (LUKÁCS 1991 [1968], 97). Other works emphasizing the educational dimension of Lukács’ project include: LÓPEZ 2019 and LANNING 2009.

66 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 76.

renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating all the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the innermost meanings of these contradictions for the total development.⁶⁷

Combating reification requires the vigilant and continuous attempt to historicize the contents of consciousness by relating them to the broader dialectic for which they are moments. This process cannot take the form of «a straightforward progression of the immediately given (with its 'laws') but only [of] a consciousness of the whole of society acquired through manifold mediations».⁶⁸ In the theoretical self-clarification of proletariat, an apprehension of the whole of society is acquired through a continual struggle that refuses to stop at any given level. This is necessarily an ongoing process, because mediation and immediacy are not terms with which we can classify a single level of objectivity or social reality but are instead «related and mutually complementary ways of dealing with the objects of reality».⁶⁹ For this reason, «the series of mediations may not conclude with unmediated contemplation: it must direct itself to the qualitatively new factors arising from the dialectical contradictions».⁷⁰

In its life, the proletariat experiences a form of self-objectification that pushes it to grasp the essentially produced character of all the forms that appear natural within capitalist society.⁷¹ Understanding

67 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 197; original emphasis.

68 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 179.

69 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 156.

70 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 179. See a similar formulation in the 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* (1971 [1923], at xv).

71 One clear distinction between Benjamin and Lukács is that for the latter, the proletariat is uniquely capable of resisting the reification structuring the entire social order. For both authors, the experience of worker at the machine is taken as an analogue for capitalist social relations in general (BENJAMIN 2003a [1940], 329; LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 98). But the proletariat's experience, according to Lukács, renders this class less susceptible to ideological mystification, since the reified social relations determining society both inside and outside of the factory affect its very life. See Schmidt 1975, 28-33, for a helpful discussion. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the possibility of dialectical insight into

these forms as historically conditioned yields the «qualitative, living core»⁷² of social life. The struggle for the form of understanding proper to its social location accordingly finds the proletariat opposing not only the bourgeoisie, but also itself, in the sense that it must overcome its previous consciousness and attachments. This self-reflective consciousness thus necessarily leads to a change in the object of knowledge – the proletariat itself.⁷³ In his comments on this dimension of the theory of dereification, Daniel Andrés López thus writes: «Lukács views dereification as a process of self-education by a subject-object in becoming».⁷⁴ The proletariat struggles, in other words, to use its experience in order to develop itself further – making itself into something else – by overcoming the tendency of consciousness to ossify into the passivity of the subject of Benjamin’s *Erlebnis*. Combating reification thus turns the proletariat’s transcendental possibility of developing itself, a possibility irreducible to the empirical reality of this class’s current level of consciousness. The task of facilitating the proletariat’s *critical experience* of capitalism falls, in Lukács’ work at this stage, on the revolutionary party as the institutional facilitator of this self-education.

Revolutionary communist parties, according to Lukács, are distinctive for the way they push the awareness of the class past the immediacy of the present. While reformist parties prevent the workers from «turning their attention to the totality»⁷⁵ – pushing instead for finer divisions among the working class – communist parties are oriented toward equipping the class for a historical struggle through which it will become the universal class:

society does not belong to a single class or shared social relation, but to a distinct mode of reflection. Further work on this connection would necessarily engage with the historical transformations of work since the early 20th century, transformations that might require substantial modifications in the way the working class’ distinctiveness is conceived.

72 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 167.

73 «[A]n adequate, correct consciousness means a change in its own objects, and in the first instance, in itself». (LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 199).

74 LÓPEZ 2019, 141.

75 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 310.

What was novel in the formation of the Communist parties was the new relation between spontaneous action and conscious, theoretical foresight, it was the permanent assault upon and gradual disappearance of the purely *post festum* structure of the merely 'contemplative', reified consciousness of the bourgeoisie.⁷⁶

The party, as an organization mediating theory and praxis,⁷⁷ and thus «a concrete mediation between man and history»,⁷⁸ facilitates the proletariat's attack on the contemplative and formal rationality that constitutes thought under capitalist social relations. In this way, the party carries out both the political aspect of the class struggle, and what Karl Korsch calls the «intellectual action (*geistige Aktion*)» of deepening the workers' consciousness of society's contradictions.⁷⁹ If the latter struggle is to succeed, the workers will have to overcome not only the social relations of capitalist society, but the separations between subject and object, theory and praxis, thought and social existence implied in the contemplative stance. People «brought up and ruined by capitalist society»,⁸⁰ must be able to collectively recover the possibility of their own historical development, in a political education that cannot be reduced to mechanical training or contemplative reflection.

Since it requires a development of a different kind of experience than either machine labor or contemplation, the slow realization of class consciousness involves more than a transformation of either actions or thought, taken separately. For one thing, it is clear from the foregoing that transcending the immediacy of capitalist society requires a detachment from the forms in which this society presents itself,

76 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 317.

77 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 299.

78 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 321.

79 KORSCH 2008 [1923], 97. I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me notice this connection.

80 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335.

implying an affective change as well as a conceptual one. Lukács thus writes that, in overcoming the second nature of reified social thought and existence, the workers «must cease to feel the excessive respect they have had for their accustomed social environment».⁸¹ The demythologization of fetishized reality requires new forms of sensibility and experience as well as new conceptual mediations. But on a still deeper level, the process of dereification cannot be solely a matter for «cognition», since reification is not merely a mental phenomenon. As Konstantinos Kavoulakos aptly notes: «Because the problem of reification pertains to both being and thought, its resolution... cannot be confined to a transformation of consciousness, but must include the practical alteration of reality itself».⁸² The proletariat cannot achieve the transcendence of immediacy through thought alone (attempting, in this way, to out-Hegel Hegel⁸³), nor merely through a modification of the party's hold on external forms of power,⁸⁴ but must develop the *lived experience* of the working class through struggle.

Since reification applies both to existence and to consciousness, the struggle against this phenomenon requires a specific form of flexibility. The dialectic of history, which is just that of existence and thought,⁸⁵ does not develop in a predictable way fitting of formal rationality, but as a series of immensely complex events. The learning experience of the workers thus demands an open-ended understanding of the social world, as Lukács continually stresses:

The emergence of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary fronts is full of vicissitudes and is frequently chaotic in the extreme. Forces that work towards revolution today may very

81 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 334.

82 KAVOULAKOS 2018, 133.

83 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], xxiii.

84 This complicates the view that Lukács' theory of revolution aims merely at the proletariat seizing the existing state and ordering it more rationally (e.g., O'Kane 2021, 78ff). Lukács' remarks on «communist arrogance» after the seizure of state power (LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335) are also notable in this regard.

85 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 321.

well operate in the reverse direction tomorrow. And it is vital to note that these changes of direction do not simply follow mechanically from the class situation or even from the ideology of the stratum concerned. They are determined decisively by the constantly changing relations with the totality of the historical situation and the social forces at work.⁸⁶

In its struggle within the ever-changing «constellation of social forces»,⁸⁷ the party cannot rely on a rigid application of categories but must constantly adapt its understanding to the situation at hand. Even the attempt to expel reified forms of thought «cannot be determined in advance», since, «[i]f reification is overcome at one point the danger immediately arises that the state of consciousness that led to that victory itself might atrophy into a new form of reification».⁸⁸ The «open project» of «permanent adjustment» to the revolutionary situation finds the proletariat transforming itself in the context of a long struggle, in which new forms of immediacy – and thus renewed needs for mediation – continuously appear.⁸⁹ In this way, the party is an empirical realization of the transcendental possibility of the proletariat's self-cultivation.

In its most important function, the party is meant to develop the consciousness of the working class, which means its ability to see its immediate experience as historically produced. Through an «arduous process of experience [*Erfahrung*]», according to Lukács, workers engaged in class struggle are able to gain «a correct understanding of [their] own class situation».⁹⁰ The party, as an institution facilitating this understanding, provides the historical form through which the proletariat is able to turn its setbacks – including those stemming from the workers' distorted self-understanding – into concrete means of

86 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 311.

87 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 312.

88 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 334.

89 KAVOULAKOS 2018, 197.

90 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 326.

learning.⁹¹ In a discussion of the tendencies of workers raised in capitalist society toward individualism and the routinized power structures of domination, Lukács writes:

These tendencies will necessarily persist in the Communist Party which after all has never claimed to be able to reform the inner nature of its members by means of a miracle. And this is all the truer for the fact that the requirements of purposeful action also compel the party to introduce the division of labor to a considerable degree and this inevitably invokes the dangers of ossification, bureaucratization and corruption. The inner life of the party is one unceasing struggle against this, its capitalist inheritance.⁹²

In recognizing the tendencies of reified forms of life and thought to affect the party's struggle, Lukács points to a core function of the party to slowly transform the consciousness of its members, and thereby to come closer to realizing the «objective possibility» of the consciousness of the entire class.⁹³ Part of this struggle involves combating the forms of experience shared by party members who have been turned to «automata», to use Benjamin's characterization. From what we have seen here, this struggle requires a coordinated effort of a political institution – an «organizational device»⁹⁴ – waging the class struggle and transmitting its lessons to the mass of workers. Although the war against the party's «capitalist inheritance» characterizing this institution's inner life is here seen to demand the «conscious subordination» of the total personality «to the collective will»,⁹⁵ it is important to understand the role fulfilled by party discipline on its own terms. The unending search for mediation, for a form of experience allowing for development and change over time without

91 «*Erziehungsmittel*»: LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 72; 1977, 249.

92 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335.

93 See KAVOULAKOS 2018, ch. 8.4, for a helpful discussion of objective possibility.

94 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335.

95 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335.

settling into the ossified immediacy of capitalist society, requires an «unceasing struggle»⁹⁶ involving an increasing degree of coordination among individuals, the political institutions through which their interests are fought for, and ultimately the entire class. The party's role as an organizational device of the working class is to secure the possibility of the latter's historical development – providing us with both this institution's function and the touchstone for its criticism.

4. Conclusion: Revolutionary culture and organization

We have seen in this paper that the conception of political practice found in Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* requires close attention to the dynamics of immediacy and experience in his theory of reification. Not only is Lukács in the early Marxist period concerned with developing an account of reification that breaks out of the divisions into which the philosophy of his contemporaries had settled, but he views the success of dereification as relying on a process of education. By specifying the relationship toward experience demanded by the historical learning process of the workers, we have also been able to more clearly designate the formal role played by the party in Lukács' essay on the methodology of organization. Although the received view is that this essay finds Lukács at his most dogmatic, we saw that the main function of the party lies in its capability of supporting the development of consciousness as an open-ended process of mediation. In this way, remembering the importance of reification as a cultural phenomenon, we might say that Lukács' critical theory of society relies on institutions aimed at the development of a revolutionary culture, including both the theory of working class struggle and the transformation of collectivities towards an overcoming of their «capitalist inheritance».⁹⁷ This form of praxis,

96 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335.

97 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335.

which we might call the cultivation of revolutionary culture,⁹⁸ is an important focus of critical social theory interested in understanding the dialectic between social experience and social transformation.

Since Lukács' theory of the party and its historical function is a facet of his work receiving much criticism,⁹⁹ it also bears mentioning that more clearly understanding the party's relation to the cultivation of critical experience yields a perspective from which the more problematic aspects of this theory might be better understood. Attention to the function played by the party in *History and Class Consciousness* allows for a clearer understanding of the role of organizations in a critical social theory recognizing the need for a thoroughgoing transformation of society.¹⁰⁰ If the latter project necessarily involves the conscious transformation of experience toward the development of a historical sensibility, it is essential to consider the role of political institutions and collective formations in facilitating this transformation without sliding into dogmatism. Lukács himself recognizes the need for this kind of consideration, in stressing the essentially anti-dogmatic character of the party oriented toward the destruction of reified forms of consciousness. Inflexible political parties concretize the reified forms into which capitalist society has cast its members.¹⁰¹ The critical search for mediation would see behind these experiences a concrete historical process, and thus a moment from which we can learn, rather than the immediate mark of

98 The «cultivation of culture» or «culture of cultivation» (*Bildungskultur*) is a term given by Karl Mannheim to the intellectual stratum in a work clearly deeply influenced by his initial reading of *History and Class Consciousness* (MANNHEIM 1982 [1924], 269). For works drawing a connection between Mannheim's early conception of the intellectual stratum as the milieu capable of supporting society's intellectual development, and the transformation of Lukács' thought after the Hungarian revolution, see SCHMIDT 1975 and KETTLER 1971.

99 For a recent example, see JAY 2018.

100 A longer study would have to discuss Lukács' turn, for example in «Tailism and the Dialectic» (2000 [1925/6]), toward a less open-ended conception of the party. See LÖWY 2011, 67; and 1979 [1976], chs. 4-5.

101 «Theoretical dogmatism is only a special case of these tendencies towards fossilization to which every man and every organization is incessantly exposed in a capitalist environment.» (LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 335).

human nature or its inevitable manifestation in organizations.¹⁰²

The possibility thus remains that we can think the party critically through Lukács – beyond the immediacy of its one-sided acceptance or facile rejection – owing to the way in which reification has played out in the historical experience of this organizational form.¹⁰³ That Lukács nevertheless overestimated the ability of a political institution demanding the commitment of the «whole personality and whole existence» to develop an internal culture of open criticism and constructive cooperation,¹⁰⁴ is perhaps more related to his historical circumstances than to a fundamental theoretical oversight. While there is virtue in wariness toward the tendencies to oligarchy, rigidity and bureaucratization attending many forms of political organization, these tendencies are nevertheless precisely those reflexes of consciousness and social existence that the working class must struggle against in its attempt to transcend the immediacy of current conditions. While acknowledging these risks, Lukács' conception of the development of class consciousness highlights the need for concrete organizations of the working class, oriented to the slow work of building this class's consciousness, rather than a fatalistic acceptance of capitalist disaster, or a contemplative anticipation of the revolutionary event whose moment might never come.

102 A prominent example of the latter response (and of its dangerous political potential) is found in Robert Michels' 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' (MICHELS 2016 [2011]), and his turn from Social Democracy to fascism in the 1920s.

103 Additionally, a longer version of this project would necessarily engage with more recent attempts to theorize the party along similar lines (see, *e.g.*, DEAN 2016 and ŽIŽEK 2002), as well as critics of the centrality of the party (see, *e.g.*, RANCIÈRE 2011 [1974] and LACLAU and MOUFFE 2014 [1985]).

104 LUKÁCS 1971 [1923], 336.

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