Revisable A Priori as a Political Problem: Critique of Constitution in Critical Theory

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Abstract:

According to the received view, Marxian (ideology) critique and Foucaultian (genealogical) critique constitute two divergent approaches of critical theory that have remarkably different goals and little in common. In this article, however, we identify a guiding thread that connects the Marxian and Foucaultian traditions and motivates a distinctive approach within critical theory we call the 'critique of constitution'. The problem of restricted consciousness, we show, is the core problem in common between Michel Foucault's critical history of thought and Georg Lukács's theory of reification which underlies the tradition of Western Marxism and Frankfurt School critical theory. The problem concerns the limits of intelligibility and, by the same token, the apparent inevitability of the given social ontology. Our sense of what is possible depends on what we are able to think. But we know from the history of sciences that the limits of intelligibility change, thereby also altering our sense of what is possible. This becomes a political problem in connection with the intelligibility of *social* reality, because our restricted consciousness limits the alternatives we can so much as consider and seek to bring about. The critique of constitution, then, aims to expand the scope of possibility by revealing the contingent formation of the given limits of intelligibility. We argue that this is the paramount political task for Foucault and Lukács alike, other important differences notwithstanding.

Keywords: Foucault; Lukács; critical theory; revisable a priori; critique; forms of objectivity; restricted consciousness; reification; obviousness; freedom.

> For anyone who sees things in such immediacy every true change must seem incomprehensible.
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> – Lukács 1971a: 154

> As soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible.
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> – Foucault 2001b: 457

1. Introduction

It is commonplace to contrast Marxian ideology critique and Foucaultian genealogical critique as two strands of critical theory that have divergent objectives and little in common. In this article, however, we identify a guiding thread that connects the Marxian and Foucaultian traditions and motivates a distinctive approach within critical theory we call the 'critique of constitution'. Unlike varieties of ideology critique and immanent social critique, which define

the task of critique as identifying and rectifying something that is wrong in the given social reality, the critique of constitution aims to enlarge the scope of possibility. To appreciate this task of critique, one needs to grasp why the expansion of the limits of possibility is a formidable challenge in its own right. The possibilities we are able to recognise depend on what is intelligible. The critique of constitution emerges from the insight that the constitution of social reality is itself a social process that unfolds in history. It is, therefore, helpful to present the critique of constitution against the backdrop of a transformation in Kantian epistemology in the early twentieth century, which led to a historically dynamic understanding of the constitution of experience in terms of the revisable a priori (Friedman 2001). We will argue that, in different ways, Georg Lukács and Michel Foucault explore that topic as a political problem by interrogating how the intelligibility of social ontology is constituted in historically changing terms. The core problem for both is that the intelligibility of social reality depends on taking or treating some aspects of social ontology as fixed, as though they were inevitable. It is the problem of restricted consciousness (Owen 2002) in the domain of social reality. We will show that Lukács's Marxian theory of reification and Foucault's critical history of thought are two different attempts to address the problem of restricted consciousness. They provide two articulations of the critique of constitution that seek to reveal the contingency of the given limits of intelligibility and thereby expand the scope of possibility for a transformation of social ontology, including what Foucault (1997a: 315) calls 'a historical ontology of ourselves'.

Our argument should be read as a rational reconstruction of the critique of constitution from within the history of critical theory. To be clear, we are not tracing a history of influence but reconstructing different articulations of the problem of restricted consciousness. To that end, the readings of Foucault and Lukács we present are sharply focused, indeed selective. In thus identifying a guiding thread that connects Foucault's critique to the Marxian tradition, however, we are building upon the results of recent Lukács scholarship that underscores the neo-Kantian framing behind his theory of reification. As we will explain, the New Lukács Reading shows that the interpretations of reification in terms of alienation (Jaeggi 2014) or recognition (Honneth 2008) fail to grasp the core topic which is the constitution of intelligibility. Given Lukács's historicised Kantian outlook, then, the articulation of a link between his work and Foucault's critical history of thought seems no longer unthinkable. On the contrary, Tivadar Vervoort (2018: 125) and Daniel López (2019: 90n20) have recently noted the potential fruitfulness of that connection, but without exploring it in any detail.

This article begins to fill out that gap, with the ultimate aim of showing how Foucault's critical history of thought can be brought into a fruitful conversation with parts of the Marxian tradition of critique. In this regard, one should not underestimate the centrality of Lukács's philosophy. Lukács is arguably the founder of Western Marxism and, consequently, also a central figure for the Frankfurt School. Although he quickly fell into disrepute due to his Leninist messianism and political engagement with the Soviet Union, Lukács's intellectual position makes him a pivotal figure for any attempt to connect Foucault and Marx in terms of a shared conception of critique. Within the space of this article, we can only briefly indicate that the question of constitution is decisive also for Marx. Arguably, Marx's *Capital* is 'a critique of political economy' fundamentally in this sense, namely an inquiry into the constitution of political economy as an apparently inevitable social ontology.[1] In the end, we argue, the fruitfulness of bringing together Foucaultian and Marxian approaches lies in the complementary relationship between systems of thought and materialism, which the shared conception of critique enables us to begin to articulate.

We will proceed as follows: in the next section, (2), we will first introduce the idea of a critique of constitution and define the problem of restricted consciousness it addresses. Sections (3) and (4) locate the problem of restricted consciousness and the critique of constitution in the works of Foucault and Lukács, respectively. We then explain, in section (5), why restricted consciousness is a political problem, what is its source, according to Foucault and Lukács, as well as how they respectively understand the connection between widening the scope of possibility and the ideal of freedom that motivates the critique of constitution. The analogy we will thus articulate between parts of Foucault's and Lukács's work has five steps: (I) the critique of constitution as a remedy to the problem of restricted consciousness, (II) an understanding of constitution in terms of social practices, (III) an explanation of constitution's apparent inevitability in terms of immediacy, and therefore obviousness, of the practice, (IV) the need for a historical dimension to reveal the contingency of the apparently inevitable patterns of immediacy and obviousness, (V) the ideal of freedom as the source of motivation for the critique of constitution that enlarges the scope of possibility and thus enables thoroughgoing social transformation.

2. The Critique of Constitution in Critical Theory

In this section, our topic is the orientation in critical theory, which makes the constitution of experience the target of critical work.[2] This approach inherits from Kant the view that experience is conceptually constituted, but its orientation is defined by two commitments that mark a decisive divergence from Kant's original account. First, critical theory is concerned with the conceptual form, which makes the experience of objects intelligible, only insofar as it is contingent and, therefore, revisable. Second, critical theory seeks to explain the constitution of experience in terms of social practices that unfold in history. As already noted, we call this line of critical theory the critique of constitution. The idea of a critique of constitution, in contrast to ideology critique and varieties of immanent social critique, has been observed in the literature on critical theory (Hoy and McCarthy 1994; Lotz 2014; Pitts 2018; McNulty 2022) so we do not claim it as our original discovery. Yet, we are unaware of any systematic study of the critique of constitution as one guiding thread within critical theory.

2.1. Three kinds of critique within critical theory

The common failure to identify the critique of constitution as one possible approach within critical theory, broadly construed, bolsters the received view which portrays Marxian critique and Foucaultian critique as key representatives of two opposite approaches whose objectives diverge and are not easily combined. In David Owen's (2002) terms, the central division lies between (Marxian) ideology critique and (Foucaultian) genealogical critique. However, by explaining the idea of a critique of constitution and identifying its central role for Foucault and Lukács we will show that the received view is highly misleading. We agree with Owen (2002) that genealogical critique focuses on the problem of restricted consciousness. But we argue that it is precisely this problem which motivates the critique of constitution as one guiding thread within critical theory. Thus understood, as we will show, genealogical work becomes properly understood as a dimension of the critique of constitution.

Today the field of critical theory is much broader and more complex, however, than Owen's core distinction suggests. Few theorists advance ideology critique in terms of

'false consciousness' anymore. Two developments have replaced that approach. First, non-cognitivist ideology critique locates ideology not in beliefs but in socially coordinated dispositions, including their institutionalisation, and targets dispositions that promote injustice (Balkin 1998; Haslanger 2012; Jaeggi 2009). Second, the programme of social critique undertakes to diagnose pathologies of social life, on the basis of the normative commitments that already organise the given set of practices (Honneth 2007; Jaeggi 2018). Its method of immanent critique may scrutinise the coherence of the normative commitments as such or, more characteristically as 'second-order critique', their current form of institutionalisation (Jaeggi 2009). Such 'second-order' examples include the critique of instrumental rationality (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) and the critique of the colonisation of the life-world as well as the distortion of relationships of communication (Habermas 1984) or recognition (Honneth 2007, 2008). In addition, Titus Stahl's 'immanent metacritique' is an approach that 'takes into view the constitution of social practices as such' and focuses on their 'basic constitution' as practices (Stahl 2022: 259). Despite Stahl's interest in the constitution of practices, however, he continues to define the task of critique as a resolution of social contradictions. We will return to the close connection between immanent metacritique and the critique of constitution below.

For the purpose of our argument, it is crucial to appreciate what all the above approaches have in common but the critique of constitution lacks. They envision critique as an inquiry whose aim is to reveal that something is somehow wrong. False consciousness, dispositions promoting injustice, contradictory forms of institutionalisation and social pathologies constitute different accounts of the wrong that is the object of critique. The critique not only identifies the wrong but also helps rectify it, for instance, by producing 'reflective unacceptability' in its addressees (Celikates 2018). In contrast, the critique of constitution has an altogether different goal, namely to show that something is possible. The critique of constitution does not ask whether the given social order is justified or not. Instead, it seeks to show that the given social order is not inevitable, thereby opening up space for freedom and social transformation. But enlarging the space of possibility might seem like a trivial task if one lacks a proper understanding of the obstacle. Therefore, to explain the difficulty, let us trace the thread of critical theory we study to some key developments in Kantian epistemology during the early decades of the twentieth century. As we will see, the difficulty arises from the twofold status of a priori principles: they define the kinds of objects we are able to think about but they are also revisable.

2.2. The revisable a priori

In 1920, Hans Reichenbach argued, in response to Einstein's theory of general relativity, that Kant's apodictic conception of a priori principles that constitute experience must be rejected. Instead of jettisoning the a priori altogether in favour of thoroughgoing empiricism, however, Reichenbach (1965) insisted that the constitutive function of a priori principles is indispensable, even though the principles might change in the course of inquiry. As Kant had shown, Reichenbach emphasised, the intelligibility of experience requires a conceptual form that is not simply given through sensation but instead constituted in the form of principles. Responding to the emergence of non-Euclidean geometry to which Einstein then assigned a constitutive role in the theory of general relativity (*cf.* Friedman 2001), Reichenbach concluded that the constitutive function of a priori principles in Kantian epistemology must be severed from an apodictic status. According to Reichenbach (1965), a priori principles are both constitutive of the objects of knowledge and revisable, as illustrated by the development of spacetime theories

from Newton to Einstein. Reichenbach thus articulated a crucial new task for Kantian epistemology, which resulted in a host of relativised accounts of the constitutive yet revisable a priori in the following decades (Lewis 1929; Carnap 1937; Sellars 1953; Putnam 1962; *cf.* Friedman 1999; 2001). What unifies this family of views, in contrast to empiricism, is the commitment, in Reichenbach's words, to 'Kant's great discovery' that 'the object of knowledge is not immediately given but constructed, and that it contains conceptual elements not contained in pure perception' (1965: 49).

What are these conceptual elements that play a constitutive role? According to the Kantian answer these authors adopted and elaborated, the a priori component of experience consists of conceptual rules. Not only do the rules regulate the use of concepts in judgments, but they also constitute the content of the concepts being used. Thus, the rules define what is thinkable as they constitute the limits of intelligibility. For instance, consider a question at the core of the transformation in spacetime theories that ushered in Reichenbach's view of revisable a priori principles. Can parallel straight lines intersect? In Euclidean space, the answer is 'no' and this is a conceptual truth. It is constitutive of the concept of a straight line that they never intersect. Crucially, it is impossible for them to intersect within the framework of Euclidean space because it provides no conceptual possibility for envisioning how the two lines could intersect. When this impossibility is expressed in the form of a principle, it is an a priori principle constitutive of the given conceptual framework. However, as Reichenbach observed, this principle had been rejected in Einstein's theory of general relativity. As a result, within its non-Euclidean framework the answer to the above question is 'yes'. For the purpose of our argument, the key lesson Reichenbach and his followers drew from this scientific revolution can be summarised as follows: the limits of intelligibility – what is conceptually possible and what is not – change when the a priori principles change. In other words, the revisable a priori makes the limits of intelligibility revisable as well.

2.3. The critique of constitution

While scholars have acknowledged the constitution of the intelligibility of social reality as one central topic in critical theory, (Hoy and McCarthy 1994; Lotz 2014; 2017; Pitts 2018; McNulty 2022), only rarely has it been linked with the above development in Kantian epistemology. As Christian Lotz observes, the connections between different schools that were active and fertile within German philosophy at the time, have become largely overlooked or forgotten in contemporary discussions on critical theory (2017: 71–72). It bears emphasising, therefore, that the constitution of experience, not in transcendental but historically dynamic terms, is the key topic that connects the orientation in critical theory we examine and the above development in the philosophy of science as two dimensions of the same transformation of Kantian epistemology. As we will show, Lukács, too, writing around 1920, defines his object of study as *Gegenständlichkeitsformen*, namely the forms of objectivity that make social reality intelligible in capitalist society. To be sure, for Lukács[3] and many subsequent critical theorists, the topic of constitution is limited to the intelligibility of *social* reality. At the same time, however, it is a question of studying the constitution and transformation of social ontology, for the ontology of the social world depends on how we make sense of social reality and of ourselves in it. The constitution of intelligibility affects not only subjects but also objects as the objects are thinkable to subjects.

We use Owen's (2002) term 'restricted consciousness' to name the problem that motivates the critique of constitution within the social domain. The problem concerns the limits of

intelligibility that constrain not only the alternatives we can envision in thought, but also the alternative social realities we can intentionally try to bring into existence. The critique of constitution, then, targets the fake inevitability of the given social ontology, for instance the reified social relations of production (Lukács) or the understanding of sexual conduct in terms of a determinate 'sexuality' that defines one's identity (Foucault). In both cases, as we will see, critique seeks to enlarge the scope of discursive possibility by identifying the given limits of intelligibility and revealing their contingent nature. The critique of constitution assumes no positive role to determine what direction social change ought to take, if any, but this is not a defect because here critique receives its motivation in response to the problem of restricted consciousness (*cf.* Jaeggi 2018 for an opposite view). The task of revealing that the apparently inevitable is, in fact, contingent motivates genealogical work as an element of the critique of constitution. Hence, when genealogy pertains to possibility and not to justification (e.g. Lorenzini 2020), it is because genealogy has been undertaken from the perspective of the critique of constitution.[4] In the cases we study, genealogy emerges naturally as a dimension of such critique because the revisable a priori is formed implicitly in discourse as a social practice, entangled with other social practices, not as explicit principles. Therefore, a history of the interlocking practices is required in order to explain how the given conceptual form came into being. In different ways, it is this commitment to the priority of social practices over propositional knowledge that makes Foucault and Lukács recognise, each in his unique manner, that genealogy is an element of the critique of constitution.

3. Foucault: Historical A Priori

In Foucault's narrative, the task of critique arises from the historicity of reason, whose importance in France was appreciated by authors working in the history and philosophy of sciences. Foucault explicitly acknowledges the parallel between this tradition of French *épistémologie* and Frankfurt School critical theory:

> If one had to look for something that corresponds to the work of Cavaillès, Koyré, Bachelard, and Canguilhem outside of France, no doubt one would find it in the Frankfurt School. … In the history of sciences in France, as well as in German critical theory, it is fundamentally a question of examining a reason whose autonomous structures bring with it the history of dogmatisms and despotisms – consequently, a reason that has an effect of overcoming only if it comes to liberate itself from itself. (Foucault 1998a: 469, trans. mod.)

Thus, Foucault suggests that the problem which French epistemology, including his own work, and German critical theory have in common is the problem of restricted consciousness. Within this shared framing, which clearly excludes some important threads of German critical theory, reason's self-overcoming is not a shift from false consciousness to truth, but, as Foucault explains in his own account of critique, a process of enlarging the scope of discursive possibility and thereby the scope for 'the indefinite work of freedom' (1997a: 315, trans. mod.). Notwithstanding Foucault's criticisms of the Frankfurt school regarding the theory of the subject, we find it instructive to present our argument against the backdrop of the convergence Foucault delineates in the quoted passage between French and German philosophical traditions around the topic of reason's historicity. Given Lukács's role as a founding figure of this thread of critical theory, it is not surprising that here Foucault (1998a: 468) also mentions Lukács (*cf.* Foucault 1998b: 443).

Foucault's Kantian background is well-known (e.g. Allen 2003; Djaballah 2008). And so is the Kantian shape of his overarching project to study historically changing configurations of the conditions that constitute human subjects as objects of knowledge. 'To the extent that Foucault fits into the philosophical tradition, it is the *critical* tradition of Kant, and his project could be called a *Critical History of Thought*' (Foucault 1998c: 459). Thus begins the dictionary entry Foucault pseudonymously wrote about his philosophy, where the guiding theme of the constitution of experience is explained thus:

> In sum, the critical history of thought is neither a history of acquisitions nor a history of concealments of truth; it is the history of truth-claims [*véridictions*] understood as the forms according to which discourses capable of being determined true or false are attached to [*s'articulent sur*] a field of things. What were the conditions of this emergence, the price that was paid for it, so to speak, its effects on reality and the way in which, linking a certain type of object to certain modalities of the subject, it constituted the historical a priori of a possible experience for a given time, area, and individuals. (Foucault 1998c: 460, trans. mod.)

Although Foucault here sums up his philosophical trajectory with the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to trace the Kantian theme of the constitution of experience, transposed to the field of history, throughout Foucault's oeuvre.[5]

In the course of the 1960s, the archaeology of knowledge took shape as Foucault's distinctive approach to the topic of the historical constitution of experience. As one might expect, Foucault frames the topic in terms of an a priori component of knowledge that is historically dynamic. In *The Order of Things*, for instance, Foucault defines the historical a priori as 'what, in a given period, carves out in experience a field of possible knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in it, endows everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which a discourse that is recognized as being true can be held about things' (2002a: 172, trans. mod.). This conception of the historical a priori as a set of constitutive rules received its mature formulation in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, a methodological treatise, after a crucial shift in approach that has been called Foucault's 'pragmatist turn' (Tiisala 2015: 659–60). While Foucault had used the metaphor of an archaeology of knowledge to suggest that the constitutive rules that function as a historical a priori are hidden below discursive awareness, he had not even tried to explain how these rules can be both implicit and historically changing. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault ascribes the constitutive rules to discourse as a social practice and argues that they operate as implicit rules of a practice without having been represented as statements (2002b).

The unconscious status of the rules that function as a historical a priori makes the problem of restricted consciousness especially challenging. One can try to change only what one is able to think about. For Foucault, therefore, an essential task of critique is to bring into discursive awareness the implicit system of constitutive rules that function as a historical a priori. In this respect, as Foucault notes, critique is 'archaeological in its method' (1997a: 315). But the goal of critique is not merely to disclose the system of rules that constitute the given limits of intelligibility. The ultimate aim is to enable the overcoming of those limits, unless they are truly necessary. When discussing *History of Sexuality*, Foucault sums up this general orientation of his work, thus: 'its goal was to know to what extent thought's work of thinking about its own history enables thought to overcome what it thinks *silently* and to think *otherwise*' (1985: 9, trans. mod., added emphasis). While archaeology uncovers the silent thought that is operative as implicit rules of a discursive practice, critique's genealogical aim is to destabilise the apparent inevitability of the limits of intelligibility that silent thought constitutes. As we will see in section 5.1., Foucault's technical term *les évidences* singles out this object of critique.

4. Lukács: Forms of Objectivity

In contrast to Foucault, the Kantian background of the young Lukács has only recently been discovered. Lukács's seminal *History and Class Consciousness* was long read exclusively in terms of Hegelian Marxism and, consequently, its essential neo-Kantian influences were mostly neglected. In the last decade, however, a more historically informed interpretation – which we term the New Lukács Reading (*cf.* Lotz 2021) – has emerged. The major contributions of Andrew Feenberg (2011b; 2014; 2015a), Konstantinos Kavoulakos (2014; 2018), Richard Westerman (2019; 2020) and Christian Lotz (2020) have made Lukács newly relevant for the contemporary discussions around Marxism and critical theory by reinterpreting his theory of reification in its original neo-Kantian context, thus clarifying its central concepts and aims. Before this turn, Lukács was largely dismissed in key works dealing with the foundations and history of critical theory (e.g. Benhabib 1986; Wiggershaus 1994) despite his central importance (see Feenberg 2011a; 2017; Kavoulakos 2017; Miller 2022). Today, the New Lukács Reading allows a more accurate assessment of the true significance of reification theory for critical theory and beyond. By framing Lukács's account of reification properly from the perspective of the constitution of the intelligibility of social reality, we will show that the main aims and foundations of Lukács's critique of reification coincide remarkably with Foucaultian critical history of thought.

In the standard interpretation, Lukács's theory of reification is usually read alongside Marx's theory of alienation of the *1844 Paris Manuscripts*.[6] Some contemporary readings still see the concept of reification as largely synonymous with alienation (e.g. Jaeggi 2014), yet according to the New Lukács Reading it is misleading at best, if not simply mistaken, to equate the two. Alienation should be understood as a result of reification whereas we are here concerned with the phenomenon of reification itself.[7] The key to a proper understanding of Lukács's account of reification is the concept 'form of objectivity' (*Gegenständlichkeitsform*) which denotes the general mode of intelligibility of objects. In Feenberg's words, it 'refers to the way in which objects present themselves to a specific look' (2020: 18). The concept was neglected and mistranslated for decades but the neo-Kantian character of this organising concept is today recognised. Objects are rendered intelligible to subjects by their form of objectivity which thus has a constitutive role in the subject's experience. Lukács borrowed the concept from his neo-Kantian teacher and friend Emil Lask (1875–1915) whose influence on him was profound but long neglected (Kavoulakos 2018; 2014; see also Rosshoff 1975). In Lask's work, a form of objectivity denotes the general form of categorial constitution of objects – the way of being intelligible (thus, rational) in a certain way – at the most abstract level (Kavoulakos 2018: 23–24; *cf.* Hobe 1971: 364ff.). In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács applies the Laskian concept as a historically and socially dynamic category which grounds his account of reification.

In the opening key passage of his essay on reification, Lukács states: 'the structure of commodity-relations [can] be made to yield the archetype of all forms of objectivity in the bourgeois society' (Lukács 2013: 257 / 83, trans. mod.).[8] This is possible, Lukács later explains, because, in capitalism, 'all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the forms of objectivity of the abstract elements of the concept formation of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature' (Lukács 2013: 310 / 131, trans. mod.). With this enigmatic statement, Lukács concisely defines reification: the form of objectivity of natural entities – essentially determined by natural laws – comes to form the intelligibility of social entities as well. Human relations are transformed in this way because

technical rationality and the logic of commodity fetishism, both inherent to the functioning of capitalism, encroach on all social life.[9] Lukács develops his theory on the basis of Marx's analysis of fetishism, as presented in *Capital I* and *III* (Lukács 2013: 257–8 / 84). Hence, simply put, reification means this categorial transformation of social objects through the form of objectivity of natural necessity: Social reality – simple relations between people or, more often, their institutionalisations – is rendered intelligible only as law-following quasi-natural entities. As Lotz summarises: 'Reification is precisely the name for the reflexive category of (capitalist) objecthood as being applied equally to social subject and social reality' (2020: 29). Therefore, when understood through the form of objectivity, reification is 'the principle of intelligibility' of capitalism (Feenberg 2014: 78).

With this formulation, it is clear that the Kantian question about the constitution of objects of knowledge, yet in a socially articulated and historically dynamic form, lies at the heart of Lukács's concerns. It is this feature that separates Lukács's theory from the otherwise very similar approach Stahl presents as 'immanent metacritique'. It, too, 'takes into view the constitution of social practices as such' by focusing on 'their basic constitution' and Stahl specifically provides the critique of reification as an example of such immanent metacritique (2022: 259). However, Lukács's theory of reification is more general and fundamental than the analysis of the basic constitution of practices, for Lukács assigns to the form of objectivity ontological powers not found in Stahl's analysis of the constitution of social practices: 'Existence means, therefore, that something exists in a determinate form of objectivity [*daß etwas in einer Gegenständlichkeit von bestimmter Form existiert*]: that is, the determinate form of objectivity makes up that category to which the being in question belongs' (Lukács 1983: 142, trans. mod.).[10] Hence, the constitution Lukács is interested in is not confined to the constitution of practices but essentially includes the conditions for the intelligibility of objects – and, thus, the constitution of social ontology (*cf.* Lukács 1978).

In this sense, Lukács's theory is essentially 'a metatheory, or a critique of the forms of our discourses and practices towards society' (Westerman 2020: 32). Analogously to Foucault's 'historical a priori', Lukács's 'form of objectivity' explains the constitution of experience in historical terms. What is more, he shares with Foucault the view that the constitutive rules which define the limits of intelligibility (be they designated as the 'historical a priori' or the 'form of objectivity') are not represented as such but instead they reside on the level of what is done in practices. We will return to this issue in sections 5.1. and 5.2.

5. Why Is the Revisable A Priori a Political Problem?

To sum up, we have argued that the critique of constitution is motivated by the problem of restricted consciousness and that both Foucault's critical history of thought and Lukács's theory of reification address this problem, specifically with respect to the constitution of social reality. Foucault's historical ontology studies the limits of intelligibility from the perspective of the formation of subjectivity, whereas Lukács's theory of reification analyses the historical form of objectivity which determines the intelligibility of social reality in capitalist society. Therefore, both philosophers are Kantian in the same sense. They analyse the constitutive a priori in order to reveal that it is, despite the appearance to the contrary, revisable.

The emphasis on social ontology helps to explain why the revisable a priori is a political problem, in addition to the epistemic issues restricted consciousness involves. It is politically problematic if the given social reality seems inevitable. We can intentionally try to change something, about ourselves or our relations with others, only if we are able to think about it as an object of our own action. As we have seen, however, Foucault's historical a priori and Lukács's form of objectivity are enabling conditions for thought that, by the same token, institutes limits of intelligibility. Within the given limits of constitution, fundamental social change can be as impossible to comprehend as two parallel lines intersecting in Newtonian universe (*cf.* Lukács 2013: 336–37 / 154). Therefore, for both Lukács and Foucault, the broadening of consciousness is a necessary first step towards change. They both maintain that this step is achieved by gaining awareness of the given constitution of intelligibility, crucially, including awareness of its historically contingent status. To that end, Lukács and Foucault agree, the critique of constitution needs a historical perspective, a genealogy that explains how the given limits of intelligibility were formed in the field of social practices.

Before discussing the ideal of freedom as the motivation for the critique of constitution, and the decisively different conceptions of freedom Foucault and Lukács respectively rely on, it is important to examine how they explain the source of restricted consciousness. Important differences notwithstanding, structurally, both Foucault and Lukács locate the problem at the level of socially coordinated habits that function as the bedrock of the shared practices through which social reality acquires intelligibility. Whereas Lukács singles out the immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*) of our relationship to these socially coordinated habits as the problem, Foucault's rarely discussed remarks on *les évidences* as the ground-level obviousness that organises social practices articulate a similar view. Indeed, as we will show, combining Lukács and Foucault one might say that the critique of constitution targets the obviousness of the given limits of intelligibility, which is based on our immediate, thus obvious or self-evident relationship to the habitual ways of acting that constitute and reproduce those limits.

5.1. Foucault on *les évidences*

What is the source of restricted consciousness, according to Foucault? As the idea of an archaeology of knowledge suggests, Foucault holds that the constraint of apparent inevitability is buried, in some sense, at the basic level of what is done in social practices, discursive and otherwise, including the points of linkage between the two (Foucault 1998c: 462). This means that the 'present limits of the necessary' Foucault's critique scrutinises are not articulated as statements of rules (Foucault 1997a: 313, trans. mod.; *cf.* Tiisala 2015: 659–60). Foucault does not offer a systematic account of the source of these limits, but his remarks on *les évidences* – that which is obvious and therefore goes without saying – indicate how he understands their functioning. Therefore, by analysing Foucault's largely overlooked but remarkably consistent use of the term *les évidences* we can gain a more detailed picture of how he understands the source of restricted consciousness and, relatedly, its dissolution through critique (*cf.* Tiisala 2017).[11]

It is important not to confuse *les évidences* with the concept of evidence, in its standard epistemological use. Foucault's topic is neither the justification of beliefs nor what people judge to be necessary, but, as we have seen, the historical constitution of new fields of knowledge about human beings. Instead of assuming that objects are automatically given to subjects in an intelligible form, Foucault's critical history of thought seeks to explain how the semantic relationship between the two poles is constituted in social practices. In

Foucault's words, it is 'the "practices" understood as ways of acting and thinking at once, that provide the key of intelligibility to the correlative constitution of the subject and the object' (1998c: 463, trans. mod.). The constitution is conceptual, but Foucault maintains that concepts receive their identity from patterns of language use that are governed by the implicit rules of a discursive practice (2002b). Therefore, the constitution is not a separate process, but integral to discourse as a social practice, wherein it consists of patterns of reasoning that define conceptual resources for the inquiry. Foucault uses the term *les évidences* to mark such patterns of reasoning, when they are so congealed that they seem inevitable. Crucially, the constraint these patterns create is not external to thought, but, as Foucault once put it, such patterns of reasoning function as 'a positive unconscious of knowledge' (2002c: xi). They constitute limits of intelligibility as an integral element of the constitution of thought in a given discursive practice.

Multiple times Foucault states explicitly that the target of his critical project is obviousness, *les évidences*. In 1981, when summarising retrospectively the overarching aspiration of his work, Foucault puts it, thus: 'I wanted to reintegrate a lot of the obviousness [*évidences*] of our practices into the historicity of some of these practices and thereby rob them of their obviousness, in order to give them back the mobility which they had and which they should always have in our practices' (Foucault 2014: 243, trans. mod.). Again, the same year, Foucault explains the task of critique, as follows:

> A critique does not consist in saying that things are not well the way they are. It consists in seeing on what types of obviousness [*sur quels types d'évidence*], familiarities, acquired and unexamined ways of thinking the practices one accepts are based. …
>
> Thought does exist beyond and below systems and edifices of discourse. It is often hidden but always animates everyday behaviour. There is always a little bit of thought even in the stupidest of institutions, even in silent habits.
>
> Critique consists in uncovering that thought and trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious [*aussi évidentes*] as people believe, making it so that what is accepted as going without saying no longer goes without saying. To perform critique is to make it difficult to make moves [*gestes*] that are too easy (Foucault 2001b: 456–57, trans. mod.).

Foucault's critique uses historical work to destabilise the obviousness of given patterns of thought and action by revealing their contingency. This genealogical dimension of Foucault's critical history of thought consists in 'rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, obstacles, plays of force, strategies, and so on, that have, in a given moment, given shape to that which subsequently will function as obviousness [*évidence*], universality, necessity' (Foucault 2001a: 226–27, trans. mod.). As already noted, such historical work is meant to enlarge the scope of freedom, specifically 'to extract from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking, what we are, do, or think' (Foucault 1997a: 315, trans. mod.). To that end, Foucault employs a historiographical technique he calls *événementalisation*.

> What does *événementalisation* mean? First, breaking the obvious [*les évidences*]. It is a question of making a 'singularity' emerge, where one is quite tempted to refer to a historical constant or to an immediate anthropological trait, or furthermore to something that similarly seems obvious to everyone. To show that it was not 'as necessary as that'. … Breaking the obvious, these obvious elements [*les évidences*] on which our *savoir*, our acceptance, our practices rely. Such is the first theoretical-political function of what I call *événementalisation* (Foucault 2001a: 226, trans. mod.).

We see the method at work, for instance, in *History of Sexuality*, which undertakes 'to confront this very everyday notion of sexuality, step away from it, put into test its familiar *obviousness* [*éprouver son évidence familière*]' and thereby 'to analyse sexuality as a historically *singular*

form of experience' (Foucault 1997b: 199, trans. mod., emphasis added). Although Lukács never conducted genealogical research, it is remarkable that he, too, strongly underscores the need for a historical perspective as an element of the philosophical attempt to reveal the contingency of the given limits of intelligibility, as we will see below.

5.2. Lukács on technical rationality and fetishism

Lukács's answer concerning the source of restricted consciousness is more systematic yet also more generalising than Foucault's. Whereas Foucault is typically clear about the circumspect scope of his studies on restricted consciousness, or, the 'present limits of the necessary', Lukács's object of study is nothing less than the totality of capitalist society. His theory of reification seeks to explain why a specific form of objectivity, which constitutes the intelligibility of social reality and, thus, functions as the revisable a priori, comes to define the whole of social life; that is, why reification encroaches on everything. Lukács states unequivocally: 'The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it' (2013: 260 / 86). Hence, while Foucault does not study the obviousness of some all-encompassing 'present limits of the necessary' but instead specific domains of the constitution of intelligibility, Lukács strives for a conclusive answer concerning the limits of 'capitalist intelligibility' and, hence, the resulting restricted consciousness.

Consequently, Lukács also has two wide and generalising answers to the question about the origins of the revisable a priori. The source of restricted consciousness is, for Lukács, the interplay of technical rationality and fetishism. The hegemonic form of objectivity finds its archetype in commodity relations because of commodity fetishism (Lukács 2013: 257 / 83). As analysed by Marx, the commodity form together with the value forms dictating exchange on capitalist markets leads with dialectical necessity to the inversion (*Verkehrung*) of human relations and commodity relations. As a result, the social network of human agents behind the economic functioning of society appears only as relations between commodities and their immutable 'societal natural properties' (*gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften*) (Marx 1990: 165, trans. mod.). When the commodity form becomes the 'universal category' of a society, as Lukács writes, the inversion is generalised and results in reification of 'all of its expressions of life' (Lukács 2013: 259 / 85, trans. mod.).

How, then, does the commodity form become the 'universal category' of society? Lukács answers this question indirectly in the second part of his reification essay, 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought'. The often neglected part presents an analysis of technical rationality in the form of a history of philosophy (see Hall 2011). To summarise Lukács's intricate argumentation, he aims to show that 'traditional philosophy' (especially German Idealism) is actually unselfconscious 'theory of culture' which 'reflects on cultural structures – forms of objectivity – that it misinterprets as eternal principles' (Feenberg 2014: 91). Through this he argues that philosophical antinomies are merely abstract expressions of the practical social antinomies of the technical rationality which becomes the hegemonic form of rationality and makes 'calculability' and technical control the only legitimate forms of reason: '[T]he rational and formalistic mode of cognition is the only possible way of apprehending reality' (Lukács 2013: 299 / 121). Strictly speaking, Lukács does not explain in detail why technical rationality has historically become hegemonic.[12] That is, Lukács himself does not present a detailed genealogy of technical rationality. His analysis, however, aims to show how technical

rationality, once hegemonic, produces abstract and practical antinomies and enables the reifying form of objectivity to become pervasive.

As already indicated, Lukács and Foucault share a practice-based approach to the critique of constitution. As for Marx commodity fetishism is practical and comes about because of actual practices shaped by certain categorial forms (Oittinen 2017), reification and the resulting apparent inevitability is for Lukács similarly performative (see Feenberg 2011a). As Lukács writes in his later work, the 'forms of objectivity of social being grow out of natural being in the course of the rise and development of social practice' (Lukács 1978: 7, trans. mod.).[13] Therefore, only concrete change of the practices can effectively change things (Lukács 2013: 393–394 / 205). The aim of critique is to enable the overcoming of the dominant form of objectivity through 'transformative praxis' (*cf.* Feenberg 1999) by allowing the subjects (for Lukács, that is, the proletariat) to become conscious of the non-necessity of its social background (Lukács 2013: 363 / 178). This anchors Lukács's understanding of the task of critique to the same basis we have above identified in Foucault: The obviousness has a habitual practical basis – Lukács writes of habits of thought and feeling (336 / 154) – which historically informed critique aims to undermine. Lukács's concept of immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*), borrowed from Hegel, functions analogously to Foucault's notion of obviousness:

> [W]hen the historical is methodologically unified with the philosophical perspective, it becomes clear that, taken by itself, each thing must remain fixed in immediacy. This means that the real philosophical 'deduction' of a concept or of a category can only consist in its 'production' and in the demonstration of its historical genesis, and that history also consists in the uninterrupted change of those forms which the preceding undialectical thought, fixed in the immediacy of its present, had viewed as eternal and supra-historical forms (Lukács 1971b: 28, trans. mod.).

By combining historical and philosophical analyses into critique, the obviousness and 'naturalness' of the immediately given can be overcome. Lukács thus recognises the need for genealogy, which, again, is unsurprising considering the nature of his project as a critique of constitution and the very title of his work, *History and Class Consciousness.* However, Lukács himself did not engage in genealogical research in the Foucaultian sense; his theory is rather directed towards demonstrating the need for such genealogical 'unification' of 'the historical' and 'the philosophical perspective.'[14]

5.3 Freedom: self-determination and materiality

Some aspects of the parallel we have described between Foucault and Lukács are striking, namely the Kantian framing of the problem of restricted consciousness and the shared insistence that only with the help of a historical perspective can critique reveal the contingency of the immediately given and therefore apparently obvious limits of intelligibility. Moreover, for Foucault and Lukács alike it is the ideal of freedom that provides the motivation for the critique of constitution. However, this is also the point where very significant differences emerge between their outlooks. Only in part is this divergence due to the difference in scope between Lukács's account of reification as a totalising process that permeates the whole social ontology of capitalist society, on the one hand, and Foucault's focus on the historical ontology of ourselves in connection with specific developments in the human sciences, on the other. More fundamentally, it reflects the different conceptions of freedom that motivate Foucault and Lukács, respectively.

Foucault underscores that while critique's aim is to enlarge the scope of freedom as self-determination, this does not mean liberation once and for all, nor does the acquired freedom

have a determinate content. Instead, it is a question of 'work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings' (1997a: 316). Foucault's characterisation of this work as 'the indefinite work of freedom' indicates that there are two points that separate his view from those that are organised around the horizon of emancipation (1997a: 315, trans. mod.). First, critique provides no direction to the work of freedom it enables. Since the value of autonomy lies in self-determination, as Tiisala has emphasised, it is crucial that individuals can choose how to use the new possibilities critique opens up (2017: 14–16). Second, freedom for Foucault is not the terminal state of a process of liberation, but an ongoing practice, an integral element of one's life as a thinking being (Foucault 1997c). The task of philosophy, then, understood as 'thought's critical work on itself', is to scrutinise and expand the limits within which we undertake this work of freedom (Foucault 1985: 9, trans. mod.).

However, Foucault explicitly cautions against projects that seek to transform society in its totality, sometimes in the name of freedom. '[W]e know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions' (Foucault 1997a: 316). In contrast 'to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century', Foucault insists that the work of freedom should be channelled into specific struggles and guided by an attitude of experimentation (316). No doubt, some would invoke Lukács's account of revolution as a paradigm of the approach Foucault rejects: Lukács infamously maintains that a communist vanguard party needs to set the revolution in motion by propagating the 'correct' class consciousness (Lukács 2013: 2009). Revolution is Lukács's solution to reification as the total problem of modern society. Of course, the problems of such 'totalisation' have long since been demonstrated (see e.g. Jay 1984). But it is crucial to realise that from the perspective of critique of constitution, the need for a revolution is independent of the scope that reification actually has. Therefore, it is possible to accept Foucault's demand and simply treat the struggle against reification as a specific struggle among many others.[15] The key point is that, also for Lukács, it is the ideal of freedom that motivates the critique of constitution and by means of a revolution, as he argues, the overcoming of the given limits of intelligibility.

What, then, is the discrepancy between the conceptions of freedom Foucault and Lukács, respectively, rely on? For Foucault, freedom is self-determination, but Lukács is a Marxian materialist who understands freedom, fundamentally, as a question concerning the organisation and distribution of the necessary reproductive labour in society. As Lukács and Marx acknowledge, human life is forever bound to the necessity of reproduction carried out through labour (see e.g. Lukács 1978). There will never be a time when humans no longer need food, shelter and other means of subsistence and, therefore, the organisation of the material reproduction is perpetually topical (Lukács 2000). The capitalist relations of production are essentially based on unequal relations of power which divide the burden of reproduction unevenly, thereby limiting the scope of self-determination for most while expanding it for some. Thus, the materialist perspective reveals that freedom as self-determination is an ideal whose full realisation requires a transformation of social relations, specifically that the burdens of inevitable material reproduction be distributed equally among members of society.[16] The ideal of freedom as self-determination cannot be separated from material equality. Given these more demanding conditions for freedom, reification and revolution remain topical. From this angle we can appreciate that the underlying motive which drives Lukács to advocate a Leninist strategy is, in the last instance, democratic freedom as the actualization of self-determination. Lukács himself later made this clear when emphasising that 'true socialism' entails a 'new

concept of democracy' which is only realised when all forms of 'exploitation and oppression of humans by humans, of social inequality and unfreedom disappear' (Lukács 1967: 407). However, it is crucial to see that while reaching these goals necessarily requires revision of the limits of intelligibility such concrete transformation is not inherently bound to Lukács's Leninist solution (see Feenberg 2015a).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, let us recall what Foucault says, in an interview conducted in 1983, about the prospects of Marxian philosophy:

> It is clear, even if one admits that Marx will disappear for now, that he will reappear one day. What I wish for … is not so much the defalsification and restitution of a true Marx but the unburdening and liberation of Marx in relation to party dogma, which has constrained it, touted it, and brandished it for so long (Foucault 1998b: 458).

Foucault's relationship with Marx, disentangled from the history of French Marxism, is a major topic in its own right (*cf.* Foucault 2007). Here we only want to briefly explain why we contend that the specific task of critique which links Foucault's critical history of thought and Lukács's theory of reification can and should be further traced back to Marx. As some important contributions (e.g. Allen 2022; Oittinen 2017; Lotz 2015) have already shown in different ways, Marx's *Capital* is fundamentally a critique in the specific sense we have named 'the critique of constitution'. To see this, consider Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism. The analysis is critical, because it reveals the social constitution of commodity exchange, which political economy presents in the guise of inevitability (*cf.* Oittinen 2017):

> The forms which stamp products as commodities and which are therefore the preliminary requirements for the circulation of commodities, already possess the fixed quality of *natural forms of social life* before man seeks to give an account, not of their historical character, *for in his eyes they are immutable*, but of their content and meaning. … The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this kind. They are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production' (Marx 1990: 168–69, emphases added).

Fetishism is not false consciousness: When the social relations appear only as relations between commodities, they do not appear as something they actually are not, as Lukács, too, emphasises (2000: 79–80). Marx is beautifully clear about this fact: The social relations '*appear as what they are*, i.e. they do not appear as immediately social relations [*als unmittelbar gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse*] between persons in their work, but rather as material [*sachlich*] relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx 1990: 166, trans. mod., emphasis added). From this perspective, Marx's extensive historical exploration in *Capital*, including that of original accumulation, is motivated as a genealogical dimension of the critique of constitution, whose aim is to demonstrate the contingent nature of the given social ontology (Allen 2022).

Overall, we have argued that an enlarged scope of freedom can be gained by means of the critique of constitution. This freedom consists of possibilities released from fake inevitability. As Foucault observes, 'one can perfectly well study historically that which reason experiences as its necessity, or rather that which different forms of rationality give as being necessary to them, and find the networks of contingency from which it has emerged' (Foucault 1998b: 450).

To be precise, necessity functions at two levels in the critique of constitution. In capitalism, it is necessary that social relations between producers only appear as relations between commodities. But the capitalist system and its constitutive forms themselves are not necessary, as critique seeks to show.

What remains necessary, however, is society's material reproduction, assuming that society continues to exist over time. From the materialist perspective, as we have seen, freedom is won from that material necessity, which means that the topic of freedom cannot be separated from the question of the social organisation of unavoidable reproductive labour. By articulating a link between Foucaultian and Marxian traditions in terms of the critique of constitution, we aspire to facilitate future research that will integrate this materialist approach with insights of Foucault's work. The question of metabolism between society and nature will only become more and more acute as the ecocatastrophe advances. This is why Lukács's Marxian critique has recently become topical in eco-Marxian theories of capitalism and in ecocritical theory (see e.g. Saito 2023; Cassegård 2021). If critical theory wishes to have a say in these discussions, the insights of materialism Lukács helps us to appreciate should not be neglected.

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Notes

1. For interpretations of *Capital* along these lines, see Oittinen 2017, Allen 2022.

2. It is important not to confuse the critique of constitution with the quasi-transcendental project of 'reconstructive science' by Jürgen Habermas (1984), which uses history to justify, not to destabilise, the given system of thought, *cf*. Benhabib 1986: 264ff.

3. We will mainly limit the scope of our discussion to the young Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* and some immediately following works of the 1920s. Whether or not and in what form the critique of constitution remains topical in Lukács's later works is a subject for further research.

4. We do not claim that the critique of constitution always requires genealogy, nor that genealogy has no other philosophical use. We are aware that genealogy's function is often understood in terms of debunking the warrant for given beliefs, including normative beliefs. However, this is not how Owen connects genealogy and critique. By embedding Owen's account of genealogical critique into our account of the critique of constitution, we hope to elucidate the function genealogy can have independently of questions of justification.

5. For a study of the historical a priori in Foucault's earliest period, during the 1950s, see Basso 2022.

6. The *Paris Manuscripts* were published in 1932, nine years after Lukács's work.

7. The emphasis of the standard interpretation on the results of reification is, however, unsurprising since, as János Weiss has noted, Lukács himself 'is not primarily all that interested in the phenomenon of reification but much more so in its effects on persons and on human ways of life' (Weiss 2015: 63).

8. The first page number refers to the German original in the Georg Lukács Werke (Luchterhand/Aisthesis) edition, the latter indicates the corresponding page in the English translation of 1971 by Rodney Livingstone. The English translation regrettably loses sight of the key concept entirely as it is mistranslated into various different forms. We modify all translations to restore the concept of 'form of objectivity'.

9. *Cf.* Habermas's thesis on the colonisation of the lifeworld as a reformulation of this idea, Habermas 1984: 399.

10. The cited passage is from one of Lukács's last texts. See Lotz 2020 for an illuminating further discussion of Lukács's categorial social ontology and its (often forgotten) continuity with *History and Class Consciousness*.

11. Fréderic Gros (2004) explicitly links Foucault's philosophical project to obviousness (*les évidences*) but does not explain this concept or demonstrate that Foucault consistently uses it to define the target of critique.

12. This was later addressed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought' anticipates interestingly and closely the later work by Horkheimer and Adorno who do not refer to Lukács, however (see Feenberg 2015b).

13. David Fernbach replicates Livingstone's mistranslation of 'form of objectivity' in his translation of chapter four of *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*. It is interesting to note the clear continuity between *History and Class Consciousness* and Lukács's later social ontology – in the standard reading of *HCC*, no continuity whatsoever is usually perceived.

14. In relation to the 'missing genealogy' and in general, it should be kept in mind when reading *History and Class Consciousness* and especially its theory of reification that Lukács saw his theory as 'a sketch, an outline drawing' of a future 'large-scale research project' (Dannemann 2015: 115). The reification essay was never intended as a complete, finished theory.

15. It can be argued that not even Lukács himself believed revolution could solve all social ills (Lukács 2013: 394 / 206).

16. Lukács did not discuss this sufficiently in *History and Class Consciousness* but, as we know today, he corrected the omission in 1925–26 in the *Tailism and the Dialectic* (which he left unpublished) with the concept of social metabolism (*gesellschaftlicher Stoffwechsel*) (Lukács 2000: 97ff.), and more fully in his later *Ontology of Social Being*.

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