

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE: RECONSTRUCTING LUKÁCS'S STANDPOINT THEORY

*ESTRUCTURA SOCIAL Y PRIVILEGIO EPISTÉMICO:
RECONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA TEORÍA DEL PUNTO DE VISTA DE LUKÁCS*

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ABSTRACT

Lukács is widely recognized as being the first critical theorist to have explicitly developed the idea of a “standpoint theory”. According to such a theory, members of oppressed groups enjoy an epistemic privilege regarding the nature of their oppression. However, there is no agreement regarding what precise argument Lukács offers for his claims regarding the alleged epistemic privilege of the working class. Additionally, it remains unclear whether later feminist standpoint theories share any continuity with Lukács’s argument. In this analysis, I identify four arguments for the epistemic privilege of oppressed groups that could be attributed to Lukács. I argue that, although Lukács does not consistently endorse any specific argument, the most promising interpretation suggests that epistemic privilege arises from a contradiction between the norms that guide the self-understanding of such groups and the effects of the social practices they are socially obligated to engage in.

KEYWORDS: Standpoint theory; Lukács, Georg; epistemic privilege; immanent critique; social epistemology.

RESUMEN

Lukács es ampliamente reconocido como el primer teórico crítico que desarrolló explícitamente la idea de una “teoría del punto de vista”. Según esta teoría, los miembros de los grupos oprimidos gozan de un privilegio epistémico respecto a la naturaleza de su opresión. Sin embargo, no hay acuerdo sobre el argumento preciso que Lukács ofrece para sus afirmaciones sobre el supuesto privilegio epistémico de la clase obrera. Además, sigue sin estar claro si las posteriores teorías feministas del punto de vista comparten alguna continuidad con el argumento de Lukács. En

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este análisis, identifico cuatro argumentos a favor del privilegio epistémico de los grupos oprimidos que podrían atribuirse a Lukács. Sostengo que, aunque Lukács no respalda sistemáticamente ningún argumento específico, la interpretación más prometedora sugiere que el privilegio epistémico surge de una contradicción entre las normas que guían la autocomprensión de dichos grupos y los efectos de las prácticas sociales a las que están socialmente obligados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teoría del punto de vista; Georg Lukács, privilegio epistémico, crítica inmanente, epistemología social.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lukács's ([1923] 1971a) essay on "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" is widely recognized as having introduced the idea of the "epistemic standpoint" of the oppressed into critical social thought. In the essay, Lukács introduces this idea in relation to the working class: As a group, he argues, the working class is systematically privileged insofar as it has access to a view of capitalist social reality that is more scientifically accurate than that of other groups. It is this idea that was later taken up by other forms of standpoint theory to argue for the claim that members of oppressed groups – for example women in general (Hartsock 1983), or black women in particular (Collins 1986) – are particularly well-positioned to begin a process of epistemic liberation that can ultimately yield superior scientific insights into the structures of oppression to which they are subjected.

While it is widely acknowledged that these later theories were inspired by Lukács, it is often unclear which of the features of Lukács's account they reproduce and where they deviate from his approach. This is mainly because there have been surprisingly few attempts to spell out in detail, and in the language of contemporary philosophy, the argument that Lukács actually makes in the "Reification" essay in support of the working class's epistemic privilege. The most influential interpretations of Lukács's work (for example, Arato and Breines 1979: 135; Feenberg 2014: 237) devote very limited space to the issue and, as I will discuss, often endorse particular interpretations without considering alternatives. There are also very few authors who attempt to connect Lukács's argument to contemporary epistemological debates and to provide an interpretation of how it fits into the range of available positions.

This baffling omission in the literature urgently needs to be addressed, and this for two reasons. First, as a matter of intellectual history, it is impossible to

evaluate the extent to which later feminist epistemology was influenced by Lukács's arguments if we do not know what these arguments are. Second, providing a clear answer to the question of which is the epistemic argument contained in Lukács's text is also systematically important. Feminist standpoint theories have been the subject of much debate over the last decades, in particular with regard to whether they are merely an application of a general empiricist thesis, whether they can do without essentialist commitments, and what political consequences follow from them (for some contributions to this debate, see Fricker 1999; Harding 1992; Weeks 1998; Wylie 2003; Táíwò 2020; Dror 2023). These debates have led to a shift in theoretical attention to concepts such as epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). If we want to find out whether this is evidence of the limitations of particular standpoint theories or of standpoint theories as such, however, it is useful to examine Lukács's version in particular. Surprisingly, there has yet to be a systematic attempt to bring Lukács's theory into conversation with other theories in social epistemology.

In this article, I aim to take initial steps towards opening such a conversation. I pursue two distinct goals: First, I want to examine the precise structure of the arguments that we find in Lukács's proposal for a standpoint theory. As I will argue, Lukács's arguments do not amount to a unified standpoint theory. Rather, we find a number of relatively independent ideas, some of which stand in tension with one another. Therefore, a second goal is to determine whether there is a plausible argument for standpoint theory that is broadly consistent with Lukács's premises, even if there is not enough evidence to argue that it was Lukács's actual view. I will argue not only that there is such an argument – based on what I will call an “immanent critique” interpretation of the standpoint – but also that this version of Lukácsian standpoint theory is of more than historical interest. In particular, this Lukácsian model provides a valuable alternative that is not vulnerable to the most important objections that have been raised against contemporary forms of standpoint theory.

The article proceeds as follows. In section 2, I provide a more systematic introduction to the idea of a standpoint, based on more recent literature. This is necessary to delineate what kind of argument we are precisely looking for in Lukács. In section 3, I briefly introduce Lukács's main claims about the standpoint of the working class, and I distinguish between a fully realized and an initial standpoint, arguing that the question at the heart of this article concerns the search for a theory of the initial standpoint. In sections 4 to 7, I distinguish four potential ways of interpreting Lukács that have been or can be

reasonably defended: the empiricist interpretation, the interest interpretation, the agency interpretation, and the immanent critique interpretation. I discuss these interpretations both in terms of their consistency with the explicit claims made in the “Reification” essay and in terms of the systematic plausibility of the resulting forms of standpoint theory. I conclude that the immanent critique interpretation both yields a consistent reading of Lukács and is the most plausible defense of standpoint theory generally.

2. STANDPOINT THEORIES

It is common to describe standpoint theories as arising from the Marxist tradition (explicitly in Hartsock 1983; Mills 1988; Fricker 2007; Toole 2019) in general, and to see Lukács’s theory as the historically first version of an explicit standpoint theory. Most of the actual debate and theoretical exploration of standpoint theories has, however, taken place not within Marxist theory but in feminist epistemology, especially from the 1980s to the early 2000s. In this section, I want to examine which conception of standpoint theory is actually shared by Lukács and the later debate. This conception can then be used to identify which of Lukács’s claims are central, and which are more marginal to the project of constructing such a theory.

According to a widely shared conception, a standpoint theory is a theory about the connection between knowledge and social context that endorses three distinct claims (see Hartsock 1983; Wylie 2003; Intemann 2010). The first is a claim about the *situatedness of knowledge*: All standpoint theories assume that social location influences what subjects can come to know and how they can come to know it. “Social location” is understood as the position of the subject in larger social structures of power and domination (Wylie 2003: 31; Mills 1988: 245). At least in principle, this means that standpoint theories go beyond the (trivially true) claim that our epistemic position and location (for example, our exposure to various forms of evidence) matters and instead argue that subjects in different social locations will be unequally capable of acquiring certain kinds of knowledge, even when they have access to the same evidence.

On the surface, the situatedness thesis may look similar to contemporary forms of contextualism in epistemology, but it is not one of them. Contextualists argue that social context plays a role in determining when we may *attribute* knowledge to others (Rysiew 2023). Standpoint theory, by contrast, is not primarily concerned with the standards for knowledge attribution. Rather, standpoint theories typically adopt

an “invariantist” claim about knowledge (Stanley 2005: 85) – i.e., the claim that attributions of knowledge have context-invariant truth conditions and that whether these conditions are *actually met* for a number of important beliefs substantively depends on the social circumstances of the subject whose knowledge is at issue.

The situatedness thesis is usually contrasted with an allegedly predominant assumption in traditional epistemology that treats epistemic subjects as “disembodied” (Harding 1992: 452). From this perspective, not only is the fact that epistemic subjects have different actual bodies generally overlooked, but, more broadly, it is assumed that people’s epistemic situations can be described in abstraction from the non-epistemic circumstances in which they find themselves – in particular from their position in structures of class, gender, and race.

The situatedness thesis is compatible with a whole range of claims, not all of which are part of standpoint theory. In particular, we might expect that differences in social power and privilege will typically translate into corresponding differences in epistemic position – such that those who are privileged socially are also privileged epistemically. For example, we might argue that people who have access to certain kinds of education can often acquire a more sophisticated vocabulary. If we assume that experience and/or the acquisition of knowledge often presupposes the availability of certain kinds of conceptual resources, this would seem to represent one straightforward way in which our epistemic capacities depend on social status. Miranda Fricker has introduced a similar idea in the context of debates about hermeneutical injustice that comes down to the claim that it is not only *access to* conceptual resources but *power over* conceptual resources that accounts for such differences (Fricker 1999: 209). Those who are socially powerful will typically shape the shared conceptual resources of a linguistic community such that they are better suited to making sense of their experiences than those who belong to subordinated groups, which will result in differences in knowledge. From different theoretical starting points, Jason Stanley has argued that poverty often results in a reduction in knowledge since the stakes involved in decisions that rely on certain beliefs are often higher for the economically disadvantaged, which increases the threshold for when such beliefs constitute knowledge (Stanley 2015: 253-58).

The distinctive character of standpoint theory only emerges once we also consider its second central component: the inversion thesis. The inversion thesis is the claim that, at least sometimes, social oppression translates into epistemic privilege. This entails that the oppressed may, under certain circumstances and in specific domains, be privileged insofar as they possess a unique capacity to acquire knowledge.

Two qualifications are important here. No major standpoint theorist has argued that members of oppressed groups have epistemic privilege *tout court*. This would be implausible for many reasons, one of which is the fact that there are many forms of specialized technical and theoretical knowledge that are accessible to people only as the result of extensive training and education, or only with the help of expensive equipment, conditions that are typically enjoyed by the socially powerful. Standpoint theories therefore usually make a *domain-specific* claim: They argue for the epistemic privilege of the oppressed when it comes to the fact, nature, and/or causes of their oppression (Dror 2023: 624).

A second qualification is provided by what is often called the *achievement thesis*. This is the claim that the epistemic standpoint that accounts for this privilege is not an intrinsic feature of the position of the oppressed, but must be struggled for (Hartsock 1983: 288; Toole 2019: 600). In particular, it is plausible to suppose that members of oppressed groups are only better positioned to achieve knowledge once they have a set of concepts and theories available – concepts and theories which they must then construct as part of a scientific and political struggle.

However, combining the inversion thesis with the achievement thesis risks trivializing the basic idea of standpoint theory. If the achievement thesis is just the claim that members of oppressed groups are more likely to arrive at knowledge if they are epistemically lucky in some sense, then it is trivially true, since this is true for anyone.

To avoid this problem, the most plausible reconstruction of standpoint theory in general will be one that incorporates the following three claims:

1. In virtue of their social position, members of oppressed groups all have feature *F*.
2. Under certain conditions – in particular, in contexts in which they can make use of concepts and theories that are specifically geared towards helping them make use of *F* for the purposes of acquiring knowledge – *F* can ground a specific capacity *C* to acquire knowledge about the nature, sources and causes of their oppression.
3. Non-members of the relevant group do not have *F* and therefore will not develop *C*, even under the conditions referred to in (2). However, they may have other non-group-specific capacities to acquire the knowledge at issue, although typically these capacities will be less reliable than *C*.

Formulating the issue this way makes it clear that we are not merely dealing with the trivial claim that epistemically fortunate circumstances make it more likely that those who encounter them will acquire knowledge. Rather, there must

be a substantive difference between groups that accounts for epistemic privilege, even if there is no exclusive access to knowledge. This substantive difference must be spelled out in terms of a group-specific feature (as in 1), and this feature must be such that it only becomes epistemically productive under specific circumstances (as in 2), thus substantiating the achievement thesis.

That this is a promising way of analyzing standpoint theory can also be seen if one considers that both feminist standpoint theories and Lukács can be read as trying to provide a specific sociological backstory that substantiates and specifies these claims.

This does not mean, however, that determining what *F* consists in each of the different accounts, how it is systematically connected to an oppressed position, why it is in principle absent from other groups, and how it affects epistemic opportunities is in any sense a trivial matter. In fact, not only is there substantive disagreement within feminist epistemology about what precisely justifies these claims, but scholars have also attributed very different views to Lukács (for recent examples, see Feinberg 2020; Teixeira 2020; Bueno 2022). Before we can begin to examine what the most defensible version of standpoint theory is, it is therefore necessary to briefly examine what Lukács says about standpoint theory and then survey the options for interpreting his remarks and for building a systematic argument.

3. LUKÁCS'S STANDPOINT THEORY

Lukács argues that the “standpoint of the proletariat” yields a particular form of scientific knowledge about society that stands “on a higher scientific plane objectively” (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 163). In particular, the working class occupies a unique position, Lukács argues, insofar as it is capable of breaking through the illusionary “immediacy” that is generated by capitalism. What Lukács refers to as “immediacy” is a particular way in which social facts appear to, and are understood by, agents. To understand a social fact (for example a law-like social regularity, or the necessity of performing certain actions to achieve a certain result, given a set of institutions) “immediately” is to grasp it in a way that does not disclose the way in which both the fact in question and the concepts we employ to grasp it are embedded in, and constituted by, a social “totality” (Ibid. 162; Lukács [1923] 1971b: 13) that is the result of a historical development.

In other words, Lukács endorses a form of social and historical holism – each individual social fact is constitutively dependent on its relations to all other social facts in society, and that totality by itself is constitutively dependent, through its

embedding, on a larger process of social development. While this claim holds for all forms of society, it is a peculiarity of capitalism that the particular structure of society systematically makes its truth inaccessible to subjects. Because the reproduction and the historical development of the social totality is by and large the result of individual, isolated productive activities that are coordinated through an anonymous market, from the standpoint of each producer this activity appears to take place against a fixed background of social facts which it cannot influence.

The opposite of “immediacy” is the Hegelian category of “mediation” (see Lukács [1923] 1971a: 156). A scientifically superior analysis of society would understand all social facts (correctly) as being “mediated” by – that is, dependent on – the larger totality, the process of historical social development, and ultimately the collective human activity that constitutes that process.

Under capitalism, history is to a great extent a matter of the sum of unintended consequences of individual activities that are conducted without any intention of having the effects at issue. This process therefore lacks a subject that can understand it as its own conscious effort. However, Lukács argues, the working class occupies a special position in the process in two respects: First, the activities of its members (namely, laboring) provide the constituent parts of that unconscious process. Therefore, the working class is connected to the totality and to history in a way that other groups are not. Second, it has the capacity, in principle, to transform itself into a collective subject that can unify its agency (Ibid. 197) and transform history into a planned, consciously organized activity, at which point it will have created the conditions necessary for breaking through “immediacy” and understanding every part of that activity in its relation to its whole.

While this Utopian vision of a *fully realized standpoint* has attracted much commentary and criticism (Habermas [1981] 1984: 364; Jay 1984: 98-116), it is clearly not the only interesting part of Lukács’s standpoint theory. Beyond claiming that there is a potential future in which the working class as a unified agent enjoys an epistemic position that allows it to construct a scientifically appropriate conception of society, Lukács also at least strongly suggests that there is something in the initial condition of workers in capitalism that makes it possible for them to break through ideological “immediacy” in a unique way. In other words, workers under capitalism occupy an *initial standpoint*, according to Lukács (see Lukács [1923] 1971a: 189; Feinberg 2020: 193). That is to say, they are epistemically privileged not in the sense that they possess knowledge that others do not have, but in the sense that they are in a position that uniquely enables them to begin a process of epistemic self-liberation and that other groups are not so positioned.

Lukács expresses this thought by saying that, on the one hand, “the objective reality of social existence is in its immediacy ‘the same’ for both proletariat and bourgeoisie” (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 150). On the other hand, “the bourgeoisie is held fast in the mire of immediacy from which the proletariat is able to extricate itself”, where this difference is an “expression of the differences between the social existence of the two classes” (Ibid. 163). Not only does the working class have a capacity that the bourgeoisie lacks, but “proletarian thought is necessarily driven to surpass [...] immediacy” (Ibid. 167). In other words, the relevant capacity is one that *must* become actualized at least to a minimal degree. But what precisely is the difference between the two classes that accounts for this ability, which is already present in the working class’s initial situation? Here, Lukács offers a number of suggestions that do not straightforwardly add up to a unified theory.

The two most important arguments that Lukács offers concern (i) a contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity that arises only from a proletarian position and (ii) the idea that certain kinds of knowledge constitute self-knowledge for proletarians but not for members of other groups. The first argument is concerned with the way in which “the worker is placed *wholly* on the side of the object” (Ibid.: 167, emphasis in the original) in capitalism, which induces a “split between objectivity and subjectivity” (Ibid.: 167) in the worker’s consciousness. This split is what drives the worker’s consciousness beyond immediacy. The second argument starts from the premise that any knowledge about the worker’s own social existence that he can subsequently acquire will involve his becoming “aware of himself as a commodity” (Ibid. 168); i.e., it will result in the “self-consciousness of the commodity” (Ibid.: 168). However, it is not the mere emergence of self-consciousness that is decisive, Lukács argues, since *only* the self-consciousness of the worker with respect to their labor power’s being a commodity “brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge” (Ibid. 169). Unfortunately, Lukács does not specify what this objective change precisely consists in and immediately reverts to an epistemological claim according to which workers first gain insight into the particular use value of their labor power – its capacity to generate surplus value – and the social constitution of its commodity nature, which then leads them, somehow, to recognize the social constitution of all commodities.

As I will discuss later, these two steps, which I regard as the core of Lukács’s argument, are supplemented by a range of other, supporting considerations. However, it is already obvious at this point that Lukács’s argument is not one that is self-evident, but rather requires contextualization and interpretation. In

what follows, I will examine four interpretations of Lukács that either actually exist in the literature or are at least *prima facie* plausible readings of Lukács's argument. Some of them rely on more general argumentative strategies that have also independently been endorsed and developed by other standpoint theorists.

The first idea identifies the privilege attributed to oppressed groups with their specific access to significant forms of social *experience*. Second, we can identify the relevant feature in terms of group-specific *interests* in specific forms of knowledge. Third, it could be argued that oppressed groups are compelled to acquire certain kinds of knowledge to make sense of their own *agency*. Fourth, we can argue that oppressed groups are subject to *contradictory norms* regarding how they ought to understand themselves – contradictions that ultimately lead them to reject such norms, thus removing a systemic obstacle to acquiring knowledge. I call these four options the *empiricist* interpretation, the *interest* interpretation, the *agency* interpretation, and the *immanent critique* interpretation.

I will argue that there are good reasons – including systematic reasons – to reject the empiricist and the interest interpretations. Both the agency interpretation and the immanent critique interpretation are supported by the text of the “Reification” essay to some degree, but I will ultimately conclude that Lukács does not offer a consistent defense of either of these options. I will conclude that immanent critique is not only the most defensible option for a standpoint theory that broadly coheres with Lukács's premises, but also the most plausible version of standpoint theory in general.

4. THE EMPIRICIST INTERPRETATION

Empiricist standpoint theories argue that the main grounds of the epistemic privilege of oppressed groups is their access to specific experiences which constitute evidence for a range of true beliefs about their situation, turning them into knowledge.

While almost all standpoint theories agree that the experience of oppressed groups provides a starting point for the process of epistemic liberation, empiricist theories endorse a narrower, but intuitively plausible, story according to which immediate (or “lived”) experience provides *justification* for certain beliefs. Experiences are grounds for epistemic privilege if there are some experiences that oppressed groups have exclusively, or if these experiences are systematically more accessible to them. If this is true, then members of other groups are epistemically disadvantaged. Even if they can acquire the beliefs in question, they will lack certain bases of subjective justification. This means that certain experiences are

necessary or at least provide a particularly good basis for gaining certain kinds of knowledge, even if they are not always sufficient.

Not only is this empiricist idea intuitively plausible, since it offers a readily intelligible explanation of how social context can affect our epistemic position, but it can also make sense of both the inversion thesis and the achievement thesis. Being socially disadvantaged typically comes with a range of specific experiences that more privileged people lack. However, such experiences do not automatically lead to knowledge in every case. Often, one also needs theories, concepts and frameworks to make sense of one's experiences, and the development of such theories is often impeded by dominant concepts and ideologies (Toole 2020: 10-11, 2019: 607). Therefore, the conditions that are sufficient for acquiring knowledge often only emerge from people coming together collectively in political struggles.

These advantages explain why a broadly empiricist version of standpoint theory is widely endorsed in contemporary feminist epistemology, perhaps constituting the dominant form of such theories. In her overview of feminist standpoint theory, Kirsten Intemann even argues that "standpoint feminism can be seen as an empiricist philosophy of science" (Intemann 2010: 785).

Marx and Lukács have also been interpreted as subscribing to this view. In his overview of Marxist models in epistemology, Charles Mills argues, for example, that the only plausible defense of a group-specific standpoint in the broadly Marxist tradition is one that refers to "differential group experiences" (Mills 1988: 245), and Jameson identifies as the core of Lukács's argument the idea that "each group lives in the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see [...] features of the world" (Jameson [1988] 2009: 215-6). This interpretation also has a basis in Lukács's text. For example, Lukács states at one point that the working class is the (only) "class which was able to discover within itself on the basis of its life-experience the identical subject-object" (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 148-49).

There is no doubt that Lukács attributes *some* role to experiences in his argument. However, to attribute an empiricist view to Lukács would be to ignore several central aspects of his argument. First, Lukács openly and heavily criticizes empiricism as a general view in the philosophy of science (Lukács [1923] 1971b: 5, [1923] 1971a: 160; López 2019: 55). This is because the core tenets of empiricism reproduce the division between a subject and subject-independent objectivity that is taken as immediately available – which is precisely what Lukács identifies as an effect of ideological reification. In particular, he argues – as already noted – that the defining feature of the Marxist method is its commitment to going beyond the "immediately given" and understanding it as mediated by a social totality,

i.e. a form of holism (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 160). More specifically, Lukács also clearly rejects the idea that the proletarian standpoint consists in insights which are directly justified by experience. In particular, he criticizes the idea that there is an “immediate form of existence [of] class consciousness [that] is then made even more incomprehensible by a mechanistic and naturalistic psychology” (Ibid. 173).

The main reason why Lukács rejects “immediate” class consciousness is that the particular knowledge that the standpoint yields, on his view, is not first-order knowledge about social or natural facts but second-order knowledge about how objective social structures and our knowledge of them are mediated by a historical social process. This insight into the mediation of our own relationship with reality, however, is clearly not an insight that can be justified by ordinary forms of empirical experience. As I will later argue, there is room for a form of “conceptual” or “intellectual” experience. However, this is not the form of experience to which empiricist theories refer.

There are therefore good reasons to reject the empiricist interpretation of standpoint theory as an interpretation of Lukács. In addition, there are also systematic problems with empiricist versions of standpoint theory that provide further reasons to look for another interpretation if one aims to read Lukács in the most plausible way. As Dror (2023: 624) argues, it is also unclear whether the empiricist approach yields any form of principled epistemic privilege. Certainly, members of oppressed groups are often more likely to have specific experiences that disclose features of social reality to them. Furthermore, it is true that they will often be more motivated to develop concepts that capture their experiences. But these advantages are only relative – after all, members of dominant groups will also have specific experiences which make certain aspects of social reality accessible to them, and in virtue of their better access to education and leisure time, at least some of them will also likely be capable of conceptual innovations, particularly if they take the testimony of the oppressed about their experiences seriously.

Not only does the empiricist interpretation reduce the idea of a standpoint to a merely empirical claim about relative probabilities that are always contingent on a multitude of factors, but standpoint theorists have also struggled with the idea that all members of a given group (and only members) have access to a unique set of experiences. This idea has been met with the objection that it assumes too much similarity between members of oppressed groups (Fricker 1999: 199) and that it seems to justify an ultimately reifying practice of deference to group members (Táiwò 2020). Both on interpretive and systematic grounds, the empiricist interpretation therefore seems unattractive.

5. THE INTEREST INTERPRETATION

A second interpretation of Lukács focuses not on the specific experience of the working class but on its specific *interests*. The working class is epistemically privileged, on this interpretation, because it has specific interests that can only be satisfied by acquiring certain kinds of knowledge – in particular, knowledge about the working class's role in the social totality – whereas the bourgeoisie not only does not benefit from such knowledge but in fact has an interest in not acquiring it. As a result, while members of the working class can be rationally motivated to acquire such knowledge whenever they can, members of the bourgeoisie face a motivational and rational obstacle.

This interpretation has the advantage that it provides a better story about the link between group membership and epistemic privilege than the empiricist interpretation. In addition, it can help make sense of the achievement thesis, since it is clear that an interest in acquiring knowledge is not sufficient for actually acquiring it.

There is also some textual evidence in Lukács that supports this interpretation. In a key passage, Lukács argues that,

[f]or the bourgeoisie, method arises directly from its social existence and this means that mere immediacy adheres to its thought, constituting its outermost barrier, one that cannot be crossed. In contrast to this, the proletariat is confronted by the need to break through this barrier, to overcome it inwardly from the very start by adopting its own point of view. (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 164)

and, even more explicitly,

The same reality employs the motor of class interests to keep the bourgeoisie imprisoned within its immediacy while forcing the proletariat to go beyond it. (Ibid.: 164)

In its most simple form, the idea is one that connects “noncognitive” (Schwartz 1993: 546) interests, rational desire, and knowledge. While some authors attribute this idea to Marx, it has also been popular among non-Marxist scholars, especially when explaining cases where members of a dominant group display a surprising lack of knowledge regarding their social situation (Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2012). In this simple model, there is a direct connection between group interests and the motivation to accept or reject particular beliefs, concepts, or explanations (see also Jaggar 1983: 370).

In the Frankfurt School tradition, both Horkheimer ([1937] 1975) and Habermas (1972) have developed a more complex theory of the relation between knowledge and interest. They do not assume that people's interests explain their acquiring (or not acquiring) particular true beliefs. Instead, they argue that such interests are constitutive of different fundamental *forms of knowledge*. For example, both Horkheimer and Habermas hold that the form of knowledge supplied by the natural sciences (knowledge about invariant regularities that can be used to predict outcomes of interventions) is best explained by a fundamental human interest in exercising control over our natural environment. By contrast, the emancipatory knowledge sought by critical theories is in its very form determined by an interest in liberation.

However, Horkheimer and Habermas do not draw standpoint-theoretical consequences from this model, since they assume that these forms of knowledge structure the epistemic activities of all members of society and are not specific to any social group. In the "Reification" essay, by contrast, what is at issue is a specific form of knowledge that is only accessible from the standpoint of a specific group. This knowledge is of a different type than the one sought by bourgeois social science, as Lukács makes abundantly clear, since it rejects the idea of a subject-independent reality and does not seek universal, fixed laws. One could speculate that this knowledge is perhaps, in its very form, dependent on an interest in universal liberation that only the working class as a "universal class" possesses (Feinberg 2020: 196; for a critique, see Mills 1988).

However, both of these interpretations are ultimately unconvincing. In the first instance, they do not address the sense in which members of the working class are epistemically privileged in their initial situation. That certain kinds of knowledge would be beneficial to them clearly does not in itself imply that they are epistemically well-positioned. Of course, having an interest in knowing something means that one does not have to act against one's inclinations if one pursues such knowledge. However, this does not entail that one has a better ability to acquire such knowledge than others. For example, it would be in my interest to know the numbers of next week's lottery draw, although I clearly enjoy no epistemic privilege in regard to that knowledge. Or, more relevantly, it may be true that members of oppressed groups have an interest in knowing the causes of their oppression, but they may lack access to the education and scientific training needed to acquire such knowledge. By contrast, even though it is generally in the interest of dominant groups to remain ignorant about these causes, there have been various individual members of dominant groups throughout history

who, out of idle curiosity or a spirit of rebellion, inquired into the causes of their privilege and, in virtue of their intellectual training and available resources, made considerable contributions to their study (Engels comes to mind as a paradigmatic example). While interests may be a relevant causal factor, they are one among many other such factors that make up one's circumstances. It is therefore hard to see how the mere reference to interests could serve as a sufficient basis for a standpoint theory.

Many of these considerations also hold true for the more complex model that builds on the idea of knowledge-constitutive interests. Ultimately, the interesting claim at the heart of this model is that we cannot understand the form of knowledge that we assume critical theories are ultimately after without knowing which emancipatory interests that knowledge serves. But while this will serve as a methodological warning not to unreflectively take for granted dominant conceptions of knowledge, it does not explain why certain groups are better positioned to acquire such knowledge if they do not yet have a clear picture of their own interests. In other words, this model does not tell us much about why the working class might be in a better position to acquire such knowledge.

In the "Reification" essay, there is also a more specific argument that would appear to be similar to an argument about interests. Lukács argues that there is something about the situation of the working class that is unique and that it does not share with other exploited groups in human history, such as enslaved people. This is the fact that the working class sells its own labor power as a commodity. Labor power appears to be structurally equivalent to all other commodities, but it has the unique property – this is Lukács's rather conventional reading of Marx – that its use value is rooted in the fact that it can be exploited to generate a greater quantity of exchange value than corresponds to its own value (Arato and Breines 1979: 169).

Lukács can be read as making the following argument: Because of the particular way in which the working class is exploited, it has an interest in understanding the particular way in which proletarian labor power is constituted as a commodity. But one cannot understand this without understanding how all commodities are socially constituted as commodities, that is, without understanding capitalist society as a totality (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 174; Feenberg 2014: 237; Kluge and Negt [1972] 2016: 255).

Lukács also argues that proletarian class consciousness – as the consciousness of oneself as a commodity that plays this particular role in the reproduction of capital – is a form of knowledge that is immediately practically effective because it "brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge" (Lukács

[1923] 1971a: 169). However, this presumes that the subject already knows about the specific property attributed to labor power in the Marxist explanation of the origin of surplus value; i.e., Lukács assumes that this dynamic will unfold when workers realize the truth of Marx's theory. This would seem to be a somewhat circular form of reasoning, however, since its explanation of the standpoint presupposes the very knowledge that the alleged epistemic privilege is meant to make accessible (Feinberg 2020: 193).

6, THE AGENCY INTERPRETATION

Both as readings of Lukács and in systematic terms, the empiricist and the interest interpretations have turned out to be at least somewhat implausible. I will now turn to two more plausible interpretations: the agency interpretation and the immanent critique interpretation.

The agency interpretation assumes that the situation of workers in capitalism involves a fundamental contradiction that makes it impossible for them to unreservedly accept an ideologically distorted description of their situation (in a way that is not true for other groups) and therefore provides them with rational warrant for rejecting that description and seeking out alternatives. The contradiction in question arises from the fact that conceiving of their situation in the dominant conceptual and interpretive framework forces them to conceive of themselves as non-agents. At the same time, it is impossible for them to think of themselves otherwise than as agents. In the initial situation, members of the working class are therefore characterized as having a “split” or “dilacerated” consciousness (for this interpretation see, above all, Teixeira 2020; Feinberg 2020).

Lukács argues that,

in his social existence, the worker is immediately placed wholly on the side of the object: he appears to himself immediately as an object and not as the active part of the social process of labour. (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 167)

Further,

because of the split between subjectivity and objectivity induced in man by the compulsion to objectify himself as a commodity, the situation becomes one that can be made conscious. (Ibid. 168)

Similarly to the labor commodity version of the interest interpretation, Lukács seems to assume that the “split between objectivity and subjectivity” is not only unbearable for workers but can only be overcome when workers begin

to understand that the objective character of their labor power – its character as a mere object – is socially imposed. They will then necessarily realize that the same is true for all commodities, and ultimately for all socially imposed forms of objectivity. They will therefore begin to realize that society forms a totality.

Of course, it would be implausible to claim that workers literally believe that they are mere objects, and this is not what Lukács wants to argue. Rather, we might say that under capitalism, workers can only rationally pursue their own interests if they think of their situation as one that is entirely determined by objective, unalterable social laws and if they think of their own labor power as a resource that they can use to pursue their interests, making it entirely irrelevant that this resource is actually the capacity to exercise agency.

We can perhaps reconstruct the resulting argument as follows.

- (1) Participation in (reified) labor makes it objectively appropriate for workers not only to conceptualize themselves as mere objects or commodities but also to view the appropriateness of this conceptualization as an objective, “immediate” feature of their existence.
- (2) At the same time, the act of labor (or perhaps their exercise of agency in general) forces them to conceptualize themselves as acting subjects.
- (3) The contradiction between (1) and (2) rationally compels workers to see the apparent objective necessity or “immediacy” of the conceptualization in (1) as misleading and as an effect of social domination.
- (4) This enables workers to acquire knowledge about the mediated character of social categories.

As becomes apparent in this reconstruction, what Lukács thinks of the other side of the contradiction at issue – that is, of the need for workers to think of themselves as *subjects with a certain kind of agency* (premise 2) – remains somewhat of an open question. There are two ways to make sense of the idea that workers cannot but think of themselves as subjects in a way that generates a contradiction. A first, “Kantian,” interpretation starts from the idea that understanding ourselves as subjects with a certain kind of agency is something that we generally cannot avoid. In particular, whenever we face the question of how to best understand ourselves as agents, we have to ascribe to ourselves the capacity to make different choices in response to this question. But to do so is to ascribe to ourselves at least a minimal form of agency (Korsgaard 2009).

Lukács seems to hint at a contradiction between the commodification of labor power and an ineliminable form of subjective agency when he writes that

while the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity dehumanises him and cripples and atrophies his ‘soul’— as long as he does not consciously rebel against it – it remains true that precisely his humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities. (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 172)

As a result of the emerging contradiction between the demand for complete self-objectification and its impossibility, workers may be forced to understand that the seeming rationality of understanding themselves as pure objects is dependent on historically contingent social forms, and thus to draw the inevitable conclusion that this is the case not only for their own labor power but for all forms of social objectivity.

While this Kantian interpretation may seem to be the most obvious way to make sense of Lukács’s claim about the contradiction between objectivity and subjectivity, it is neither systematically convincing nor something that can easily be made compatible with Lukács’s views. First, it is clear that Lukács should not be read as claiming that workers literally become objects in capitalism and enjoy no agency at all. Clearly, he is aware that workers, even if they take up a “contemplative” attitude (Ibid. 89), still exercise their agency in adapting themselves to their economic circumstances, e.g. by choosing between different employment options. Therefore, workers continue to exercise a minimal form of agency. To make the Kantian argument work, Lukács would need to claim that it is impossible for humans to understand themselves as lacking not just a minimal type of agency but a more demanding form – one that perhaps involves the capacity to change the circumstances of one’s choices. However, not only does this seem to create a standpoint by fiat, by building an interest in a certain self-understanding into human subjectivity as such, but there are powerful objections against the way in which similar attempts to derive requirements of autonomy from the concept of agency have been made in the Kantian tradition (Enoch 2006).

In terms of Lukács’s argument, the Kantian interpretation has another flaw. It cannot make sense of one of the central steps in Lukács’s argument for the unique standpoint of the working class. This is his claim that other forms of economic exploitation, such as slavery, do not generate the relevant contradiction (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 169). On the Kantian interpretation, however, there does not seem to be anything in the condition of enslaved people that would make the contradiction between their self-consciousness as agents and their social situation as commodities less sharp than the contradiction affecting workers – if anything, the opposite might be the case. This suggests that Lukács does not pursue a Kantian line of thought.

A second interpretation, by contrast, locates the necessity of workers' conceiving of themselves as agents not in the general structure of human subjectivity but in the particular way in which they must understand their subjectivity as involved in labor. We might argue, for example, that capitalism imposes a social function on labor power, treating it as (and partly transforming it into) a mere resource that can be directed, by others, towards specific ends. Workers' subjective interests and desires are largely treated as obstacles to this use and are to be eliminated by surveillance and rational control. In fact, the rationalization of production that Lukács describes as the source of reification and of the split in the subject can be understood precisely as an attempt to remove workers' subjectivity, as a potential source of resistance, from the actual exercise of their labor power. At the same time, however, actual labor, no matter how much it is rationalized, always involves an element of coping with the unpredictable resistance of the material (Bueno 2022: 166; for an overview of how this argument is more generally developed in the work of Christophe Dejours, see Dashtipour and Vidaillet 2017), which necessarily involves responding spontaneously – and, at least to a minimal extent, autonomously – to emerging problems. Therefore, the attempt to completely objectify labor always encounters an internal barrier.

The version of the agency interpretation is both more compatible with Lukács's actual analysis of reification – in particular his claim that rationalization can never eliminate the unpredictable qualitative features of material reality (see Lukács [1923] 1971a: 126) – and avoids the need to make questionable assertions about transcendental elements of human subjectivity. It is therefore not only more attractive than the Kantian version, but also more attractive than the empiricist and the interest interpretations.

It can also make sense of the way in which the working class enjoys a distinctive epistemic advantage, i.e. the inversion thesis. It enjoys this advantage over the bourgeoisie – which does not experience objectification to the same degree and, at least on the second interpretation, does not experience a contradiction between the involvement of subjectivity in their labor and the objectification of that labor (Teixeira 2020: 240) – because unlike the working class, the bourgeoisie lacks direct access to a reason to reject the dominant self-understanding. The working class also enjoys an advantage over other groups whose oppression is less tightly connected to the structural imposition of a form of objectivity and is instead based on personal relations of domination. This is because it is only in the case of the working class that insight into the mechanism behind the “mediated” (i.e., social) nature of objectification immediately generalizes to other social phenomena.

Furthermore, this reading can also make sense of the achievement thesis, as the epistemic situation of the working class is mostly characterized in negative terms. While the working class is privileged in that it is driven to reject the dominant (but false) understanding of social reality, it does not have automatic access to an alternative understanding.

Despite these virtues, there are still two systematic problems with the agency model. First, Lukács either needs to implausibly invest the very notion of human subjectivity with an intrinsic commitment to a self-understanding that contradicts the objectification of labor power under capitalism (as in the Kantian interpretation), or he must place the burden on the concept of labor itself, such that the experience of labor as such contains an ineliminable potential for resistance against its rationalization. In both cases, either subjectivity or the labor process are invested with a potential that ultimately places them outside of history. In the history of the Frankfurt School, these premises were largely rejected as implausible (Habermas 1972a; Axel Honneth 1995), albeit for different reasons. This also seems to lead to a new version of the essentialism worry – if the standpoint is specific to any social group, this seems to imply that either all members of that group share a unique form of subjectivity or that their (and only their) situation is essentially characterized by a distinct, unique form of labor.

Second, and relatedly, it is still not clear why the relevant contradiction is only a feature of the situation of the working class. After all, the bourgeoisie exhibits a “contemplative stance” as well. Even though capitalist investors can presumably conceive of themselves more easily as autonomous decision-makers than those forced to perform alienated labor, they are also compelled to understand their economic environment as one that systematically evades planning and control. In their role, they are subject to socially imposed constraints on their agency that severely limit the way in which they can see themselves as autonomously choosing the purposes they can pursue. Therefore, it is not entirely obvious why they should not experience some version of a contradiction between that objectified social role and their agency.

If we put more emphasis on the labor process itself, it remains similarly unclear why the contradiction between the need to exercise subjective agency in labor, and the social imposed imperative to eliminate subjective agency, will not be similarly clear to those who try to manage labor. Even if it is clearly not in their immediate interest to advertise that the whole enterprise may involve a necessary tension, there would seem to be no systematic barrier to acquiring knowledge about it.

For these reasons, I will consider a final possible interpretation that tries to avoid relying on foundationalist premises about subjectivity or labor and that locates the contradiction at the heart of the working class's alleged epistemic advantage purely in terms of its historically specific situation in the social order.

7. THE IMMANENT CRITIQUE INTERPRETATION

In this section, I will present what I refer to as the “immanent critique interpretation” of Lukács's standpoint theory. I am not suggesting that this interpretation perfectly aligns with Lukács's explicit statements in the “Reification” essay, nor will I assert that it precisely reflects Lukács's intentions. Because the remarks of Lukács do not come together to uniquely support any particular interpretation, this reading instead offers an understanding of his standpoint theory that is, at the very least, not in conflict with the text, even though it introduces claims that go beyond it, and that is independently attractive.

The immanent critique interpretation does not assume a contradiction between a socially imposed form of objectivity on the one hand and an underlying reality that resists such an imposition on the other. Rather, it proceeds from the idea that both sides of the contradiction are to be located in the contingent social forms or practical norms of capitalist society (Stahl 2011).

In simple terms, this interpretation assumes that workers are subject to social norms that affect them in two ways. One set of social norms mandates that they must understand themselves as autonomous agents, in particular in relation to the wage contract, which is presumed to be an expression of their own will. On the other hand, they are subject to social norms that have the effect of undermining their own agency, such that the self-understanding that most rationally corresponds to their own situation is one in which they see themselves as lacking agency.

This amounts to what I have described in earlier work as a “practically mediated contradiction” (Stahl 2022: 251-52). A practically mediated contradiction is not a contradiction between two beliefs that cannot be true at the same time, nor is it a contradiction between two norms that prescribe incompatible forms of behavior. Rather, a practice is subject to a practically mediated contradiction if and only if the governing norms of that practice have two effects: First, if these norms are generally followed, the practice generates a social structure which positions people in a particular way and which makes it rational for them to understand themselves in terms of these social positions. Second, these norms simultaneously mandate a self-understanding that stands in contradiction to that realistic view of one's own role in society.

I argue that this is true of labor under capitalism as Lukács describes it. My reconstruction involves four claims:

- (1) The normative self-conception of all members of capitalist society treats the value of autonomous, individual choice as a main criterion for the legitimacy of social arrangements. This self-conception is not only deeply embedded in the institutional structures of capitalist societies, and part of the narrative of their legitimacy vis-à-vis earlier forms of society, but also the best way to make sense of the immediate reality of many of its institutions.
- (2) If workers treat the social categories that determine their situation under conditions of industrial capitalism as subject-independent features of reality, then the best way to pursue their interests within those constraints is to treat their own agential capacities as a resource they can sell to others and subordinate to their purposes (or subordinate to the requirements of capital circulation).
- (3) If workers treat their own agency as a resource they can sell to others and subordinate to their purposes, their resulting choices will systematically lead them into situations where they are subject to forms of domination under which they cannot understand themselves as having any substantive capacity for individual, autonomous choice.
- (4) Because workers *can* realize that any rational attempt to exercise their agency will undermine their freedom *as long as they treat the social categories that determine their situation under conditions of industrial capitalism as subject-independent features of reality*, they are well positioned to be able to rationally reject this “immediate” perspective on social reality.

Let us discuss these steps in more detail. Claim (2) reflects Lukács’s starting point. All members of society tend to treat the social categories that structure their interactions – in particular the social category of abstract labor and the “value form” – as subject-independent features of that reality. This is not only because social reality immediately appears to them as structured by subject-independent forms, but also because they in fact have no individual or collective influence over the dominant social forms (as long as there is not an organized working class that has already achieved class consciousness). In other words, for their practical purposes, treating these features of reality as subject-independent constraints is the most rational strategy.

However, this “immediate” outlook will make different choices rational for different groups. For the capital owner, this means that they will view the

opportunity to accumulate capital through the buying of labor and its employment for the generation of profit as an unproblematic part of social reality, and this will make it rational to pursue their interests by comparing different investment opportunities.

For members of the working class, treating social categories as subject-independent constraints means viewing the option of selling their labor power to others (who then extract “abstract labor” from it) as a feature of their choice situation, but not as something they have any choice about. Given this presupposition, workers then face a range of choices regarding how to pursue their interests effectively. In that situation, the most rational way to pursue their interests will likely be to agree to the wage labor contract, which means treating their own labor power as a resource they can sell to others and subordinate to their purposes. As claim (3) states, this entails that workers adopting an understanding of themselves “as commodities” (Lukács [1923] 1971a: 168-69).

Lukács argues that once this has become a generalized social practice, it will necessarily lead to a situation in which labor is employed *en masse* in an industrialized, rationalized setting through which it is completely subsumed to the requirement of surplus profit generation, which entails the elimination of workers' autonomy in their laboring activity. In other words, an aggregate consequence of all the individual instances of wage labor is that the site of the exercise of autonomous agency by workers contracts to the single point of having the opportunity to agree to the wage labor contract but is eliminated in all other areas of their working existence.

While this development does not involve the *complete* negation of agency, it involves the negation of any substantive capacity to autonomously pursue one's interests (that is, claim 4). This is because workers' choices are restricted to choices between different employment opportunities that are determined by the overall development of the economy, over which they have no control. Workers' choices in these conditions depend largely on which opportunities arise in the labor market, but they do not have any power to influence these opportunities. They also do not have any autonomy whatsoever in the productive sphere. In other words, in such a situation, workers become unable to continue to understand themselves as having any meaningful capacity to pursue their own interests by exercising their autonomy in a way that shapes their situation.

It is important to note that this argument does not depend on the idea that a commitment to a more substantive form of autonomy is a transcendental requirement of agency as such or that an interest in having such autonomy is

rooted in human nature or the particular nature of work. Rather, it assumes that there is an immanent contradiction between a socially embedded commitment to individual freedom and its negation. Claim (1) involves the idea that understanding oneself as an autonomous chooser is not only definitive of interaction in a market that constitutively depends on the idea of contracts as expressing voluntary agreement but also functionally necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. This is because the particular way in which labor power flows between different economic sectors in capitalism is constitutively organized around the right to freely choose one's own profession. That all members of society (including workers) understand themselves as rational, autonomous choosers is thus a non-contingent feature of capitalist societies, and this self-understanding is one that is so deeply embedded in institutions to be effectively compulsory for anyone who wants to pursue their interests within those institutions.

Lukács makes it abundantly clear that this self-understanding of subjects as individually free choosers within a law-like environment leads to all kinds of philosophical dilemmas as long as it is tied to the perspective of “immediacy” in the context in which it emerges (Ibid. 124, 134). Therefore, Lukács clearly does not take the ideal of individual freedom of choice to be part of that self-understanding that – according to him – will survive the emergence of a scientifically superior standpoint that replaces the “immediate” perspective. However, Lukács's commitment to one particular idea of a fully developed standpoint is not an essential part of his argument regarding the initial standpoint. Therefore, his model of the initial standpoint can also be drawn on by standpoint theories that do not reject such a liberal understanding of freedom.

This way of reading Lukács's argument helps to clarify why he denies that the bourgeoisie and enslaved people share the standpoint of the working class. Members of the bourgeoisie are also committed to their own freedom, and although the dominant conceptual schemes may lead them to accept social categories such as abstract labor as unproblematically given, this reified perspective does not undermine their understanding of themselves as autonomous choosers. This is because they are not subject to the rationalization of labor that results from the structuring of social reality through those categories.

It is reasonable to believe that Lukács also thought that enslaved people are not hindered in the pursuit of their interests by a perspective of “immediacy” since they can understand their enslavement adequately based on the (correct) belief that their situation is defined by violent coercion exercised *by concrete others*. Although they will obviously understand their situation as one that is unfree, that

unfreedom is not caused (Lukács seems to argue) by the domination of abstract categories. Therefore, their subordination is also not explained by their acceptance of these categories from a perspective of “immediacy”. As a result, they do not have any reason to reject their present understanding of the world – which will most often be largely correct in any case. Lukács’s argument would seem to suggest that even in cases where enslaved people are initially deceived by, say, a racist conceptual scheme that naturalizes the hierarchy to which they are subject, they can overcome this epistemic distortion without thereby changing their epistemic situation (Ibid. 169). In the case of the working class, by contrast, their own acceptance of “immediacy” is part of what explains the stability of their situation. In other words, the emergence of class consciousness among enslaved people does not immediately constitute a political change, since slavery is not constituted by the exercise of their free agency; therefore, uncovering a contradiction in their commitment to freedom (if there were any such contradiction, which Lukács denies) would not by itself be practically effective.

Obviously, Lukács’s remarks do not constitute even a superficial attempt to provide a plausible analysis of historical cases of slavery. For the purposes of my argument here, the case of slavery only matters insofar as Lukács’s treatment of it sheds light on his analysis of the contrasting case of the working class.

The intended contrast, I take it, is the following: Once members of the working class realize (as a result of experiencing the contradiction described above, and when discovering or being provided with an appropriate conceptual alternative) that they have reason to reject the idea that the social categories that dominate them are subject-independent features of reality, this enables them to see that they are subject to social constraints that are partly the result of their *own choices*. As they are already committed to seeing these choices as an exercise of their own freedom, this will immediately be practically effective, since the resulting inconsistency in their self-understanding will tend to undermine their acceptance of the conceptual framework on which that self-understanding is based.

This creates an immanent conflict with their self-understanding as free agents because (unlike the bourgeoisie) members of the working class cannot rationally exercise their freedom other than by entering into social relations that make them unable to see themselves as exercising any meaningful agency *as long as they remain committed to the perspective of immediacy*. While this does not entail that there is any other perspective available to them, this at least means that, once such a perspective arises, they can rationally adopt it, since doing so is the only way to resolve a systematic inconsistency in their self-understanding.

How does this interpretation compare to the competing models? While it remains close to the agency view by assuming that there is a contradiction between the interest in seeing oneself as a self-determined agent and a social situation that makes it impossible to see oneself in this way, it does not treat that interest in a specific kind of agency as an unexplained precondition or as a transhistorical, transcendent, or anthropological given. Rather, that interest itself is a feature of the historically contingent social position of workers in capitalism. It is, however, supported by an underlying, more universal kind of interest: a rational interest in achieving a consistent self-understanding that will at the same time enable one to pursue one's material interests.

In addition to assuming the existence of this interest in achieving a consistent self-understanding, the immanent critique interpretation also has room for the idea that it is in the practical interest of the workers to achieve a standpoint from which the imposition of social categories on social life is seen not as a subject-independent feature of reality but as the unintended result of unconscious collective agency. This is in their interest because it opens up new pathways of collective agency, which is desirable even from the point of view of their initial self-conception as autonomous choosers.

However, this interpretation does more than merely claim that workers have these interests. It also makes sense of the idea that they are already epistemically privileged in their initial situation because they have sufficient justification to reject the perspective of "immediacy". Of course, this does not entail that they will reject that perspective, or that they have any other perspective available, but it makes it plausible to suppose that they (and only they) can do so based on reasons that are already available to them in their present situation should the opportunity arise.

There is also a role for experience in this model of the initial standpoint. Lukács argues that workers are systematically (although certainly not inevitably) brought to realize that they are unable to pursue their rational interests through meaningful choices once they take up the "immediate" perspective, from which they must rationally accept

their subordination to abstract mental categories [... and to] a process of abstraction of which he is the victim [...] a process that [the worker] discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanised and rationalised tool. (Ibid. 165-66)

It is this *experience of complete subordination* that tends to make it possible for workers to reject the perspective of "immediacy" because it conflicts with their

simultaneous, non-optional commitment to individual freedom. Their immediate experience therefore does not empirically justify any particular belief about the world, as an empiricist theory would claim. Rather, the experience of this conflict rationally undermines the conceptual scheme in which their beliefs are formulated, and therefore at least makes it more likely that they will adopt a competing conceptual scheme.

This reading therefore also integrates some insights that drive the empiricist interpretations: Clearly, members of the working class have a distinctive experience of the contradiction between subjectivity and imposed objectivity. This is not an ordinary experience of the world, however, but an *intellectual* experience of the unsatisfactory nature of one's self-understanding.

Finally, there are also interesting parallels between both the agency interpretation and the immanent critique interpretation of Lukács and non-empiricist models of the feminist standpoint. As Teixeira (2020: 244-45) points out, Dorothy Smith (1974) endorses the idea that a split in women scientists' consciousness could be the source of a certain epistemic privilege in her critique of male-dominated sociology. While dominant models in sociology reproduce, through their objectivism, the objectification of social reality, women as the primary object of that objectification experience a distinctive tension between the self-understanding arising from that model and their own subjective agency (Ibid. 9-10). Similarly, Catherine MacKinnon (1989: 102) locates the source of women's unique standpoint in the contradiction between the experience of actually, socially enforced objectification and women's struggle against it. This interpretation allows for an interesting conversation between Lukács's standpoint theory and certain feminist accounts.

8. CONCLUSION

Even though Lukács never explicitly endorsed the negativist, immanent interpretation of standpoint theory, it is the version that is most compatible with his overall theoretical commitments. As I hope to have shown, it is also independently plausible and politically attractive.

The general claims of standpoint theory (as introduced in section 2) can therefore be filled in as follows: If there is a social group G whose members are all subject to social norms and constraints that make it mandatory and rational for them to adopt a certain understanding of their freedom; and if they must exercise that freedom through choices that undermine it, given their acceptance of certain

social categories as objective, unchangeable features of their situation (this is the shared feature *F*); then, given the availability of a competing understanding of those social categories as “mediated” – i.e. as socially imposed – members of *G* will gain the capacity to rationally reject their present acceptance of these social categories as objective and unchangeable. If they do so, they will be in an improved position to develop an adequate theory of their social situation. Members of other groups that are not subject to the same contradictory social constraints will lack at least the rational motive to reject the objectivity of social categories, which is grounded in an experience – of a contradiction between one’s self-understanding and one’s social situation – that they do not share.

As this more formal reconstruction shows, this interpretation is also attractive insofar as it is not closely tied to the idea that such a standpoint is exclusive to the working class and does not depend on many of the substantive commitments of Lukács’s Marxism. In fact, the only condition that must be met in order for a group to enjoy the relevant kind of epistemic privilege is that their social circumstances must make a certain understanding of their freedom both rational and socially required for them and, at the same time, undermine their freedom so understood.

In addition, this interpretation leaves room for the question whether a standpoint in a similar sense is also available within other social systems that lead to group-specific unfreedom. Liberal, materialist and radical feminists (see Okin 1989; Pateman 1988; MacKinnon 1989) can therefore be read as drawing on the same idea of an immanent contradiction in women’s lives in liberal patriarchal societies. Similarly, Charles Mills’s (1997) critique of the racial contract can be seen as an expression of the very same insight into how the idea of subjective freedom is “mediated” by racial categories.

The immanent critique interpretation is also politically attractive since it is inherently non-exclusionary and focuses not on any specific experiences, on any already achieved superior insight or conversion experiences, but solely on the negative experiences of contradiction afforded by specific forms of oppression.

This reading also does not lead to essentialist claims. What defines the situation of the working class is not something that is tied to any essential feature of their identity, or to any specific experience or activity, but purely to the way in which its members are subject to contradictory social constraints. For the same reason, it also does not entail any problematic norm of deference towards members of social groups. This is because it allows the relevant insight into the contradictory character of social existence to be understood as something that

can be investigated cooperatively, across social boundaries, even if the initial contradiction is one that does not arise for everyone.

Finally, this interpretation of standpoint theory does not assume that the standpoint (be it a proletarian, feminist, or other standpoint) is one that requires an “inversion” of values or the rejection of an allegedly “bourgeois” form of freedom for some higher, yet-to-be-specified kind of freedom (Cohen 1981: 7-8). Rather, as it starts from the promise of freedom embedded in liberal society, it allows standpoint theorists to appreciate the fruitful ways in which social movements might draw on this promise, not as a symptom of ideological delusion but as a normative commitment on which an emancipatory politics can be built.

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