

GEORG LUKÁCS OVERVIEW

Georg Lukács, like Antonio Gramsci, is often called a *Western Marxist*, a term designed to differentiate the Marxism which evolved in Western Europe from that which predominated in the USSR (Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, etc.). He is often also termed a *Hegelian Marxist* partly because his work represents an attempt to rethink traditional Marxism by making use of some of Hegel's most important concepts (e.g. Hegel's notion of the dialectic) while continuing to reject others, above all Hegel's idealism. Lukacs states in The Historical Novel that his desire is, like Marx's, to translate the "whole mysticism of the 'spirit' into materialist historical reality" (119). It was not until about 10 or 15 years later that the existence was revealed in Moscow of Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, where Marx's debts to Hegel are particularly profound, validating Lukacs' attempt to fuse Hegelian and Marxist thought. From this time, Marx's career has most often been divided into two broad phases, the Hegelian and post-Hegelian, differentiating earlier works where Hegel's influence is more marked from later works such as Capital (1867). Lukacs' work has most often been seen since then as corresponding to the Hegelian phase of Marx's thought. There are at least three concepts, adapted from Hegel, with which Lukacs' brand of Hegelian Marxism is synonymous: the notion of the 'expressive totality,' the dialectical development of history, and 'class consciousness.' There is a fourth, 'alienation,' with which we will not be dealing.

The Expressive Totality:

One of the most important Hegelian concepts adopted / adapted by Lukacs in an effort to replace the Base / Superstructure model favoured by the later Marx (see, for example, his Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy [1859]) is what Hegel called the 'expressive totality.' According to the dominant Base / superstructure model (nothing more than a trope or a metaphor, that is, a way of conceptualising any society by comparing it to an architectural structure comprised of two levels), every institution (e.g. the political and legal systems) and ideology (e.g. the corresponding ideas about how we should rule ourselves or what is lawful) that comprise the superstructure is the effect of or determined by economic determinants found in the so-called base, not least the class structure. Accordingly, to understand any element of a given society involves viewing it as part of the base (e.g. a given class) or superstructure (e.g. a religious ideology), that is, as either determining or determined. From this perspective, for example, a work of art (which, as part of the superstructure, is a species of ideology, a way of viewing the world) is ultimately reducible to its economic determinants (i.e. those elements found in the economic base). It should be noted that the framework of thinking involved in the Base / superstructure model is that of cause and effect (the base determines or is the cause of the superstructure) or, to put this another way, mimetic in nature (the superstructure is said to reflect the base).

Lukács substitutes for this another, what he considers to be more appropriate, metaphor which he gets from Hegel but adapts to different ends: an organic conception of the social whole. He claims that it is the "category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts" (27) which is the "essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel" (27) in particular and nineteenth century thought in general. It was this which Marx "brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a whole new science" (27). From this point of view, a society is less like a two-tier building than something akin to a bodily organ in which all the parts, while important in themselves, are subordinate to the whole of which they are part. The hand, for example would not exist apart from the fingers of which it consists but fingers by themselves perform only limited functions and acquire their true purpose as part

of the hand. By extension, the hand's true importance is realised only in relation to the other body parts which, together with the hand, comprise the body as a whole (in that a hand by itself is pretty useless). In the case of a society, accordingly, it is the relationship between the various elements that comprise it (such as the means or the forces of production) which is more important than the elements per se. From this perspective, the meaning of a hand, a body or a society arises not from something external to it (e.g. a soul or spirit different in kind from the body's matter through which it expresses itself or some aspect of God or Spirit manifesting itself through a particular community) but from the nature of the constituent elements of the entity in question. To put this another way, the essence expressed by a material thing (e.g. a body or a society) is not something spiritual in nature (e.g. a soul), something ultimately external to or distinct from that thing, but rather inherent in and derived from constituent properties of the thing itself. A thing is the ensemble of the properties of that thing.

In the Hegelian Marxist scheme of things, therefore, the essence expressed by all the elements which comprise the social 'totality' is not spiritual but material in nature. To be precise, it is the totality of that society, the relation between its constituent elements (rather than Spirit or Reason), which is expressed by each of those parts in relation to each other. Any society, from the Marxist perspective, consists of the means, forces and social relations of production as well as particular institutions and their concomitant ideologies. These various elements do not belong to distinct, qualitatively different levels of society (the *economic* base as opposed to the *ideological* superstructure) as a result of which one set is primary and the other secondary, one determining, one determined, one cause, one effect. Rather, each element in that totality is a function of its relation to all the other elements with which it is caught up in a symbiotic union and upon which it is entirely dependent. Given the etymological roots of the word 'economy' (the Greek word 'economeia' suggests the whole, the totality, the inter-relationships formed by the agglomeration of the various parts), it may be said that the various elements of a society all express the *economic* essence of that society in the sense that each part is inextricably linked to the whole and vice versa.

The question arises: what is the precise nature of these relationships? For Lukacs, influenced as he is by Hegel, the relationships linking the various constituent elements of a social totality are inherently dialectical in nature. In other words, any two elements are caught up in an antithetical or antagonistic relationship with each other, one of *thesis* versus *antithesis*. This is particularly evident in the case of the class structure or what Marx terms the social relations of production. Each class is incomprehensible apart from the others and from its relationship to the *social totality* which they together form. From this point of view, in any society at any stage of history, a human being is determined by the fact that he or she is inevitably caught up in the network of relationships between the constituent elements which constitute the social totality. In other words, each individual is a member of a particular class and thus involved in relationships not only with other members of that class but with members of other classes and of which s/he is a function. The relationship both within and between classes is inherently conflictual (or dialectical) in nature in that they are defined and differentiated in terms of power, some individuals and groups with greater economic power being dominant and the others subordinate. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie is the ruling class in that it owns the means of production while the proletariat is powerless because all that labourers possess is their labour which they sell to those who own the means of production. As a result, "[i]deologically, no less than economically, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are mutually interdependent" (68). That is, the two classes are caught up in a mutually dependent relationship, the one struggling to preserve power, the other to gain it or at the very least ameliorate the status quo.

Dialectical Development of History:

However, according to the Hegelian Marxist viewpoint, this conflict of opposites is not destined to continue forever as out of this opposition emerges a synthesis, an overcoming (*aufhebung*) of conflict, that combines the best features inherent in each pole and thus resolves the contradiction. Because of the dialectic of its constituent elements, the social totality is always in the flux of change, always in process rather than a *fait accompli*. The social system is characterised by conflicts and contradictions that consequently give rise to its transformation. The social totality is, thus, a dynamic rather than static affair in which change is inevitable, propelled not by Spirit's quest to become conscious of itself but by material factors. To be precise, it is the contradictions within the social relations of production, that is, the dialectical conflict between the classes, which is the crucial engine of social change. He argues that it is the inevitable conflict between these classes which constitutes the *essential* (though not the only) contradiction at the centre of any social totality and which is responsible for change. The driving force of this process of change, according to Tony Bennett in Formalism and Marxism, is nothing less than the

clash between the dynamic momentum of new forces of economic production and the restraining hand of old social relations of production. This essential clash is then said to be present in, and therefore capable of being deduced or read off from, each of the constituent parts which, taken together, comprise the social totality. (40)

In other words, the motor driving this change is the process by which improvements in the means of production (e.g. improved industrial technologies) and accompanying alterations in the forces of production (e.g. the consequent need for a smaller workforce) come into conflict with the prevailing social relations of production necessitated by obsolete modes of production (e.g. the existence of large masses of labourers) that prevail at that stage of history. What this usually translates into is a conflict between the ruling class fighting, on the one hand, to maintain its economic, social, and political dominance by keeping control over the ever-changing means and forces of production and, on the other hand, the ruled classes who sometimes struggle merely to exist in an environment in which they are subjected to the whims of market forces entirely beyond their control or at least to change an unfair status quo in which they are marginalised and exploited, or sometimes even to attain social ascendancy. It is from this point of view that every element within a given social totality 'expresses' what Lukács terms the 'world-historical forces' pertinent to that time and place.

In short, out of this essential contradiction or conflict at the heart of and expressed by all parts of the social totality arises historical change. The question arises: what form does this change take? Is there a discernible pattern of development to be found in history? The answer, yet again, is that history takes a dialectical form. Each stage of history (e.g. in the Middle Ages), which is characterised by a distinct mode of economic production (e.g. feudalism) and, thus, a particular configuration of the social relations of production (e.g. the conflict between the serfs and the feudal landlords), gives way to its antithesis (e.g. the capitalism which emerged during the early modern period and which pits proletariat against bourgeoisie), which in turn will ultimately give way to a third stage (communism in which, because private property has been abolished, there is no class division). This is the synthesis, as it were, in which the proletariat will assume its destiny and realise that it is the endpoint or telos of history. This consciousness on the part of the proletariat, this awareness of itself and of its historical role, rather than the self-consciousness of Spirit, is the ultimate goal of human history.

Class Consciousness:

One of Marx's most important contributions to social and political thought is his theory that the individual's perspective upon or ideas about the natural and social worlds is necessarily determined by or a reflection of the class structure. The consciousness of each individual is determined by his / her class-position within the social relations of production, that is, shaped by the experience of living in a confrontational world historically divided into dialectically opposed classes. Given that one of the most important connotations of the term ideology is that of error, one's knowledge of things is more often than not mistaken, irrespective of one's class (this is true even of poor people who are almost always subject to the dominant ideology of the ruling class). To put this another way, most people are victims of a *false consciousness* that will only be done away with through the inauguration of a communist utopia in which classes and, thus, class-conflict, would be eliminated.

The question arises: how is it possible that people like Marx and Lukacs can see through the charade, as it were? How exactly are they able to transcend false consciousness? Is this possible for all members of society, all classes? According to Lukacs, the opposite of false consciousness is class consciousness, a term that implies not only that such awareness is the possession of a particular class at a particular stage of history (whereas members of the bourgeoisie under capitalism are prone to false consciousness, the proletariat can and will overcome it) but also an objective awareness of itself, that is, of its location within the class structure and the essential role of the class structure within the social totality as a whole, that is, within "*society as a concrete totality, the system of production at a given point in history and the resulting division of society into classes*" (50). Class consciousness is, in other words, the "*sense, become conscious, of the historical role of the class*" (73). By contrast, the bourgeoisie as a class is unable to do this, he argues, because, given its social dominance, it is unable to look beyond its own narrow self-interest. It is, as such, almost always the primary victim of false consciousness. The "superiority of the proletariat" (69), he writes, resides in its "ability to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole" (69), that is, to "lay bare the nature of society" (70), an ability that results precisely from its disenfranchised location.

Lukács stresses that class consciousness is not an empirical "description of what men *in fact* thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history and from any given point in the class structure" (51). It is not, in other words, the possession of the members of simply any class and does not denote merely the outlook of that class, its characteristic ways of thinking. It is not, moreover, a given, something innate within an individual merely by virtue of being a member of that class. Rather, precisely because of the dominance of the ruling class and the pervasiveness of its outlook, the class consciousness of the proletariat is something which must be arduously striven for. Class consciousness, which many members of the proletariat do not possess class consciousness, is an *acquired* objective awareness of the proletariat's position within the class structure and, by extension, the social totality. Importantly, he thought, such an awareness inevitably breeds a concomitant sense of the indispensability of transforming an unjust system. The proletariat, he writes, "has been entrusted by history with the task of *transforming society consciously*" (71). The development of such a class consciousness on the part of the proletariat, enabling it to "act in such a way as to change reality" (69), is the indispensable prerequisite for the ushering in of a classless society. This self-awareness on the part of the proletariat, rather than the self-realisation of Spirit, is the telos of history. This will usher in a classless society, a worker's paradise, so to speak. This is where history is inevitably heading, Lukacs thought, faithful Marxist that he was, whether anyone likes it or not.