

Editorial Note

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There is no doubt that without Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* the history of what has been called since Merleau-Ponty "Western Marxism" would not have taken place. In particular, figures associated with the *Frankfurt Institute for Social Research*, such as Marcuse, Adorno, and Benjamin, used Lukács' book as an inspiration for their own thinking. As we know, it was not the entire text from which they developed their own ideas and positions; rather, they focused on the concept of reification that Lukács presents in the main (and philosophical) essay of the book. This is still true today. A decade ago, Axel Honneth presented a well-received and widely discussed "update" of the concept of reification, and Todd Hedrick used it for establishing a long trajectory from Hegel to Rawls.¹ Neither author makes reference to the historical context in which Lukács' text was written or to the essays that deal with political issues. But, with the increasing interest in Lukács, the overall picture of his work has changed in recent years.² For example, the claim that subsequent to his 1923 collection of essays, and his 1924 book on Lenin, Lukács became a committed Stalinist who betrayed his own principles and whose work could be of no further interest, is fortunately no longer convincing.³

The most influential part of the book is Lukács' claim that the commodity form should not be considered "in isolation," but, instead, bears on the structure of capitalist social organization; i.e., the claim that the concept of the commodity form can be applied to all aspects of capitalist

1. For this, see Honneth, *Reification*, Hedrick, *Reconciliation*; for less abstract and reductive approaches to Lukács, see recent editions, such as Thompson, *Georg Lukács Reconsidered*, Thompson, *Georg Lukács and the Possibility*, and Smulewicz-Zucker, *Confronting Reification*.
2. For a different approach to Lukács, for example see Kavoulakos, Westerman, *Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism*, Miller, *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory*, Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*.
3. For this, see the contributions in Dannemann, *Staat und Revolution*.

society, including what was formerly conceived of as “superstructure,” such as literature and law. Lukács emphasizes that reification refers to “the commodity structure of all things” and that reification should be conceived of as the “character of things as things.”⁴ This is important because readers of this text often overlook the neo-Kantian and Laskian theory of object constitution from which Lukács draws.⁵ In addition, the book is famous for its insistence that only the proletariat can achieve a practical consciousness of the social totality. Thus, class consciousness is central for the revolutionary process, while the bourgeois standpoint remains trapped in its contemplative attitude towards society. Class consciousness can resolve the reified social objectivity into a process that can be challenged by a revolutionary perspective that can practically overcome the “frozen” character of society. From a contemporary perspective, the speculations and often misunderstood claims about the subject-object identity achieved by the proletariat are less central. Nonetheless as the concept of class has reemerged in contemporary debates, there is an increased interest in this aspect of the book.⁶ In addition, with his idea of the standpoint of the proletariat, Lukács has been understood as a forerunner of feminist standpoint theory.⁷

The Frankfurt School would have been impossible without the expansion of the concept of commodity fetishism so that it can be used to analyze the entire range of social practices. All of this is based on Lukács’ ingenious reading of Marx (which is truly astonishing, given the historical context). Lukács claims that the commodity form not only constitutes objective forms of society, but also corresponding subjective forms, a point that proved decisive for Adorno. In addition, Lukács makes the argument that commodity fetishism is a historically specific problem and applies only to capitalist society—a position that he abandons in his later writings.

As Marx had already argued in the *Grundrisse*, as the worker becomes an appendix of the machine (i.e., of existing capital), she becomes an observer; the “eye” of the entire machinic process. Subject and consciousness become as fragmented as the labor process itself. We become “split,” even “plural” personalities; today we can further observe how this leads to fragmented psyches, market personalities, etc. Moreover, time and money

4. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 92.

5. For this, see Lotz, “Categorical Forms as Intelligibility of Social Objects,” and Lotz, “Marxismus als Methode?”

6. See, for example, López, *Lukács. Praxis and the Absolute*.

7. For example, see Hartsock, Nancy. “The Feminist Standpoint”; Teixeira, “The Revolutionary Subject in Lukács and Feminist Standpoint Theory,” Stahl, “Social Structure and Epistemic Privilege.”

lead to the *quantification* and *equalization* of all creative and productive activities of humans. "Quantity alone decides everything," as Lukács puts it.⁸ As a consequence, time "freezes" because it loses all qualitative properties and makes every moment of time *the same*.

Lukács is aware that desires and needs become reified too, as these can only be satisfied through purchases; i.e., money. Calculability moves into the core of the psyche. Personal relationships become "abstract" because they [1] are mediated through the commodity form and [2] no longer constitute society as such. The circulation of commodity transactions takes place independent from individuals, although all individuals are integrated in the circulation. In a capitalist economy, products of social labor appear as things objectively possessing value in themselves (and not as expressions of socially recognized individuals). Society no longer appears as matter of relations among individuals but appears now as nature-like necessity to which individuals are subjected. The isolation and fragmentation, then, leads to a de-politicization of individuals and an increasingly contemplative attitude towards social reality. This is almost self-evident today: in the light of the media and increasing digitization, politics and society appear as spectacles to consumers. The chapter on reification in *History and Class Consciousness* presents Marx' claim that we are "dominated by abstractions" in a twentieth Century version, in particular because Lukács incorporates insights from modern social theory in his text, such as those from Simmel and Weber.

Hand in hand with this process of de-politicization goes the formalization of law that Lukács criticizes, and which has an uncanny contemporary ring. He argues that through its disconnection from the political sphere, the entire legal system appears as a frozen "thing" with fixed, natural rules and laws that no one seems to be able to change again. The calculability, planning, and accounting in businesses is stabilized through the constancy and predictability of formal law that, in turn, is controlled by the bourgeois class (lawyers, highly educated individuals, etc.). The legal system obscures the underlying class struggle through its reified "rigid, static and fixed" status;⁹ i.e., it obscures the political and emancipatory dimension.

In sum, the fragmentation of society leads to a "destruction of every image of the whole."¹⁰ We no longer understand social reality; it is obfuscated and dominates us. Marxist theory is supposed to change this in theory and practice.

8. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 90

9. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 97.

10. *Ibid.*, 103.

Though one year belated, the *Radical Philosophy Review* contributes to the 100-year anniversary of *History and Class Consciousness* with three articles from international contributors that discuss important aspects of the book. The style of these contributions differ, as they range from textually based historical considerations (Dannemann), to conceptual issues (Teixera), to broad reflections on what is missing in Lukács (Peterson). In their different approaches to Lukács, these contributions demonstrate the range of how we can deal with Lukács from a contemporary perspective. Let me briefly introduce the contributors:

Rüdiger Dannemann was one of the first scholars who—in 1987—reminded its German audience, for which Lukács at that point was a “dead dog,” of the importance of Lukács’s concept of reification. His contribution deals with Lukács’ reflections on historical materialism in connection with his vision for an institute for Marxist research. Most recently Dannemann has, together with Axel Honneth, published a German edition with the most important texts by Lukács. He is also the long-term director of the *International Lukács Society*.

Richard Peterson should be known to the readers of this journal, as he was the long-term book review editor for the journal and the secretary of the *RPA* and the author of works on violence, racism, and the social theory of knowledge. I am therefore especially delighted to see his paper in this journal. His article consists of a critique and extension of Lukács’ position in *History and Class Consciousness*, through the lens of violence, social learning, and symbolic interaction.

Mariana Teixeira is well known in the Lukács community for her wide-ranging contributions to contemporary critical theory. In her contribution, she disentangles the complexity of the concept of reification, thereby defending the concept, against their despisers, as relevant for contemporary discussions. She also clarifies Lukács’ odd self-criticism of his text, such as his claim that his early concept of “reification” conflates the phenomena of *alienation* and *objectification* and therefore leads to his idealist position in *History and Class Consciousness*.

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