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The Historical Materialism of Georg Lukács

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Key words:

historical materialism, marxism, reification, class consciousness, dialectics, fetishism, alienation, genericity

Summary

The starting point of this doctoral thesis was the exhaustion of a type of discourse, that of the end of the history, whose exemplary form seemed to be F. Fukuyama's book, *The end of history and the last man*. For Fukuyama, the last chapter of history ends with the ultimate victory of western liberal democracy, anticipated by the events of 1989. But the historical events largely refuted Fukuyama's theses, and the global, universal and homogenous society, social-democratic or liberal, failed to descend, from the pages of his book, in reality. It seems now obvious that the idealist paradigm of the end of history, resulted from the resurrection of some hegelian ideas and consisting in the assertion of the universality of liberal capitalism, essentially conservative and according with the ideas of economic globalization and with the neoliberal political order, cannot be any longer defended.

Instead of the comfortable stability of post-history, we find ourselves immersed in a turbulent and unpredictable historical age. Philosophical reflection that takes its object history must be renewed. But what are the resources that we can count on? The antithesis of the end of the history paradigm would be a philosophical thought that is simultaneously critical and historical. Critical, to be able to discover the zones of antagonism, exploitation and heteronomy inside contemporary society that hinder the reach of that *nec plus ultra* of emancipation anticipated by the ideologues of the "open society". Historical, to describe the sources and explain the historical dynamics of this heteronomy, and also to be able to refute the supposedly natural character of these forms of social existence. We can focus our attention to post-structuralism, which saw itself as a critique of idealism in all its forms, of the neo-hegelianism of the end of history as well as the idealist residues in the marxian or marxist philosophy. A number of reasons prevented us to stay too long in the company of post-structuralism. Firstly, the post-structuralist discourse on history is generally vague, abstract and unconvincing, when it does not assert directly the impossibility on principle of any philosophy of history. Instead of historical analysis, we find a new set of concepts and categories, just as much trans-historical as the previous ones: event, life, power and so on. Secondly, post-structuralism refutes on principle any universalism. But the marxist critique of capitalism, in its various instances, had as its point of view one or another universal categories (human nature, the identical subject-object of history,

use-value, proletariat and so on). Post-structuralism sees this universality a-historically, as an unwanted ideological residue. But by trying to remove it removes also the possibility of critique.

Therefore, we are not satisfied neither with the balance sheet of idealist liberal philosophy that imposed the idea of the end of history, nor with that of post-structuralism. In searching for a philosophical perspective that combines historical contingency with a type of universalism, we focused on the thought of Georg Lukács. In *The historical novel*, he concisely defined a hypothetical end of the history as that moment from which “the future state of affairs could only treat, with variations, only forms and contents of the present”. For some, this end already started. Long before Fukuyama, A. Gehlen announced in 1961 the end of the history of ideas, asserting that “mankind must live within the circle of current ideas”. If we would agree with the prophets of this silent apocalypse, we would think that the years preceding the events of 1989 were the realization, the coming into being of the liberal idea. But we rather believe (as did Lukács or Derrida) that the history is not over and our ideas are far from being eternal.

We are used to associate the term “philosophy of history” with metaphysical and teleological thinking, with the fulfillment of a sense of history inscribed in it from the beginning, with a closure of history as soon as this sense is revealed or realized. But, if the closing-of-the-history paradigm does not appeal to us, how can we think the end of the end of history? We tried to prove that, in the process of his philosophical evolution, Lukács proposes a renewal of materialism, a philosophy of openness of history that has as its basis the role of human praxis in shaping social existence, therefore creating history. In analyzing the thought of Lukács we tried to reveal the strong points of a materialist theory of society, compared with the post-structuralist approach: 1. Maintaining the category of subjectivity as an instrument of critique, it offers a point of view for a critique of society; 2. Conceiving social reality in terms of a dialectical relation between subject and object, it refutes the unilateral perspectives reached by textualism, linguistic turn, the “archaeology” of the subject and so on, for whom the subject is only an effect of the signifying relation, of structures or power relations; 3. Asserting the historical character of all social formations, it is better equipped to explain their concrete dynamics, in particular the dynamic of capitalism; 4. The chosen point of view, that of generic humanity, makes possible a concept of universal history, understood as an open totality.

The 1st Chapter introduces the main concepts of the first stage of Lukács's marxist thought, in the context of the revolutionary age inaugurated by the events of 1917, whose theoretical expression it aspired to be. As the political transformation of society was the imperative of the moment, Lukács understood the ineffectiveness of the concepts of moral philosophy and the necessity of surpassing it with a historical dialectic, the only one able, in his view, to overthrow a reified social reality.

Lukács sees that neo-kantian subjectivism leads necessarily to utopia or tragedy (the unsolvable, a-historical conflict between man and society). On the other hand, the objectivist determinism of the Second International could not grasp qualitative leaps, the burning of stages, historical discontinuity. Political realism pushed him towards a hegelian solution, where the subject can act upon the object by virtue of their identity. In this theoretical framework Lukács asserts revolution as a qualitative leap, as discontinuity. The identity of subject and object can only be grasped as a revolutionary moment, as the abolition of class society. Against marxist orthodoxy, *History and class consciousness* aims to restore consciousness, the subjective moment, as an essential aspect of the revolutionary process, without cancelling its determination by the objective forms and structures of social existence. The dialectics between subject and object in philosophy starts by grasping the social existence as a totality, but its finality is the practical transformation of reality, social revolution. For Lukács the totality, man's social existence as a historical process, is only accessible to the dialectical method, as it is beyond the epistemological limits of transcendental philosophy. The fusion of subject and object in a dialectical process allows Lukács to tackle theoretically the transformation of reality in accord with the consciousness of the subject.

The 2nd Chapter shows the final formula of Lukács's early philosophy, as it crystallizes in the reply to his critics. *Talism and dialectics* reasserts the role of subjectivity in revolutionary praxis, and also the importance of class consciousness in this process. Lukács reaffirms revolution as discontinuity, as a break in the historical time, and defines insurrection as the art of seizing the instance, the privileged moment when the conscious actor can most effectively hijack the "automatic", normal flow of events. Lukács's political decisionism overshadows the objective conditions and asserts the decisive role of class consciousness in the crucial moments of the

revolutionary process. Nevertheless, on the other hand *Tailismis* a step back from the previous socio-centric position, as Lukács begins to take into consideration the conditioning of social existence by nature and to see labour as the material foundation of knowledge.

The 3rd Chapter presents a first critical assessment of Lukács's early thought, as it appears in the interpretation of Moise Postone. This distancing effect allows us to better understand the nature and significance of a critical theory of society and to see in this new light the turning point in Lukács's philosophy. In Postone's view, although Lukács was a critical of traditional marxism, he nonetheless uncritically accepted some of its presuppositions, especially a trans-historical conception of labour as creator of social wealth, separable in its content (use value) from its capitalist form (commodity). By way of this separation, Lukács stands on metaphysical grounds, because his critique has its starting point labour in its trans-historical dimension as the generating principle of social existence or, to put it differently, he idealizes proletariat as the revolutionary class, underestimating the extent to which its social consciousness is undermined by capitalist reification. For Postone, the political implications of these theoretical limits are significant to the extent that the 1917 revolution led, in his view, to a reconfiguration of capitalist relations rather than to their abolition, an aspect that seems to elude the hungarian thinker. Still, Lukács is far from being insensitive to the type of abstract domination engendered by capitalist relations, as we show in the following chapters, the immanent historical dynamic of modern society appears more poignantly in his later works.

The 4th Chapter returns to Lukács's thought, analyzing the so called "realist period", when the hungarian philosopher navigates in the troubled waters of his Moscow exile, caught by the end of the revolutionary period between Scylla and Charybdis, between the tragedy of intellectual and political isolation on the one hand, and the conformism of accommodation with Stalin's counterrevolution on the other. Trying to avoid the idealism of an ethical rigorism, Lukács chooses the realism of Hegel at the expense of Fichte's utopianism and comes dangerously close to the trap of reconciliation with reality. Still, in the context of the antifascist struggle that he embraces, reflecting on Hegel's work gives Lukács an occasion to reconsider the dialectical method, that he nowfixes in the soil of social and economic life.

For Lukács, Hegel is the culmination of German idealism as well as the highest intellectual expression of a revolutionary age when change, transformation, process, discontinuity, history become objects of philosophy. With Hegel, the philosophical surpassing of an individual consciousness dependent only on itself and captive in the narrow universe of its own subjectivity, is realized by way of understanding the role of man's economic activity in modern civil society. Hegel's point of view is therefore a transcendence of individuality towards a unity between individual and social, subjectively and objectively. This unity is implicit in the economic praxis of man, in his daily work, in the economic activity of "civil society". Therefore, for Lukács the relation between philosophy and economy is a necessary one. In his view labour, the process of social reproduction, sets in motion an objective dialectic independent of consciousness, as it asserts itself over and above the individuals, independent of their intentions. So, following Hegel, Lukács aspires to a philosophy whose contents don't flow from itself, but from reality, and the dialectical method inherited by Marx from Hegel is the philosophical expression of this objective, historical dialectic.

The 5th Chapter presents the conclusions of Lukács's later philosophy, his ontological approach and appropriation of a new point of view that emphasizes labour and "generic humanity". We traced the specifics of Lukács's ontological realism in the sphere of social existence, where independence of being from consciousness, of object from subject, can only be relative. The Hungarian philosopher establishes labour, the goal-oriented activity of man, as the foundation of social existence, the qualitative leap that separates it from nature. The ontological approach results in a conception of social existence as objectivation, in contrast to the objectual forms that one can find in nature. On the other hand, the materialist upside-down turn of Hegelian dialectic allows Lukács to operate an important distinction between alienation and objectivation, in other words between the fetishist, "phantom-like" and the non-fetishist forms of social objectivation. But the separation of alienation and objectivation, in other words the moment when human activity ceases to be alienating, is only possible at an advanced stage of social development. Actually, maintains Lukács, the history of humanity is a history of alienation, to the extent that the development of human capacities (technological and scientific progress) was not necessarily accompanied by a corresponding development of human personality (a meaningful life for man), but was achieved at the price of sacrificing whole generations of men. The overcoming of alienation requires, in Lukács's view, an active involvement of subjectivity, a

conscious effort of dis-alienation, the mobilization of all the species' resources for a human existence worthy of its name, in accord with the objective possibilities reached by society. Thus, subjectivity cannot be equated with particularity, but requires a generic consciousness, sociality, the relation between individual and species.

As with Marx, for Lukács this relation between individual and species is different for humans. Man is not only biologically determined by his species, but also socially. This social conditioning of man appears in Lukács' late thought as *genericity*. History is not only reification and alienation but also progress, and negativity can be an agent of progress. Genericity encapsulates precisely this dimension, the totality of material, cultural, scientific achievements of the human species. The "generic humanity" is the new point of view of Lukács's critical theory, superseding the proletariat from *History and class consciousness*. The concept of genericity opens a new perspective, from which history becomes intelligible a universal history, as history of mankind.

Finally, the 6th Chapter tests the conclusions of the previous ones in confrontation with the poststructuralist critique of marxism and tries to further clarify the matters at stake in the historical materialism of Georg Lukács, considered here, alongside post-structuralism, as a philosophical alternative to the thesis of the end of history made famous by Fukuyama in 1989. We found that, for post-structuralism, marxism is a philosophy of metaphysical oppositions, but also a teleology of history that preaches the final reconciliation of a subject of history with itself. Rejecting any reference to necessity in history and exalting the role of contingency, post-structuralism comes close to a position that Lukács would label as irrationalist, to the extent that not only that it neglects the laws of history that started the dynamic of capitalism, but it negates even the possibility of comprehending history as a totality.

But the cognoscibility of the world as totality is a key tenet of marxism, just as is ontological realism. We tried to prove that Lukács's ontology does not force itself upon reality, trying to submit its amorphous contents to a logicist categorial structure, but tries to identify the categorial relations which arise in reality and which philosophy can only reflect. Lukács emphasizes the historical character of categories and conceives history as the process of their becoming and transformation, of the forms of objectivity that structure social existence. He does not absolutize historical necessity as teleology, but remarks the conditional character (if... then)

of necessity. Moreover, Lukács rejects any conception of a mechanical necessity inscribed *a priori* in the historical process, and thus the idea of history as the unfolding of a predetermined algorithm. And the relativization of historical necessity brings about a relativization of the idea of progress: for Lukács history is not a linear, continuous progress, it comprises leaps, heterogeneities, discontinuities and regressions. This is the reason why acknowledging the existence of certain “laws” of history is not synonymous with an apology for the present moment, and Lukács finally rejects the hegelian argument according to which all the stages of history must be considered as “just”. Therefore, the question of reconciliation with reality is solved by admitting the ambiguity of progress.

To conclude, the recent historical evolutions prove that the great political and ideological dilemmas which animated the 20th century and seemed to have been solved by the events of 1989 and the supposed end of history, are back on the contemporary agenda. The interval of stability assured by the economic, political and ideological hegemony of liberal democracy, seems to be affected by uncertainty, and there are some indications that point to the possibility of new emerging historical arrangements and configurations. Although philosophy cannot anticipate historical events, it finds itself compelled to break out of “the circle of current ideas” in order to devise a theoretical framework for these new developments. The objective of this present work was to familiarize the readers with such a conceptual framework that does not abandon universality and the perspective of the totality of social existence, but also does not abandon *itself* to the conceptual mythology of the end of history. The social formations as well as “the circle of our ideas” have a historical character. Guided and animated by these ideas, more or less consciously, human beings are always setting in motion causal chains of events, and out of the social synthesis of these chains there will come about the events and historical upheavals of tomorrow, that will probably exceed their intentions, expectations, and their capacity of understanding them. Maybe this is the essence of the historical materialism of Georg Lukács.

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