

Revolutionary Dialectics against “Tailism”: Lukács’ Answer to the Criticisms of History and Class Consciousness¹

Michael Löwy

¹ THOMPSON, Michael J. (ed). **Lukács Reconsidered: critical essays in politics, philosophy and aesthetics**. London: Continuum Books, 2011, pp. 65-74. Transcribed by V. S. Conttren, November 2021.

History and Class Consciousness (*HCC*) is certainly Georg Lukács' most important philosophical work, and a writing that influenced critical thinking throughout the twentieth century. Next to the dialectical method, one of the most important aspects of the book is the central place occupied by the subjective dimension of the revolutionary struggle: class consciousness. In fact both dimensions are directly linked: a dialectical understanding of history and of politics leads necessarily to a dialectical approach to the subject/object relation, superseding the one-sided vulgar materialist interpretation of Marxism, where only the "objective conditions," the level of development of the forces of production, or the capitalist economic crisis, play a decisive role in determining the issue of historical processes. No other work of those years was able to offer such a powerful and philosophically sophisticated legitimation of the Communist program. However, far from being welcome in official Communist quarters, it received an intense fire of criticism soon after its publication in 1923. No exclusions were pronounced—such practices were still impossible in the early 20s—but it was obvious that the kind of revolutionary dialectics represented by *HCC* was hardly acceptable to the dominant philosophical *doxa* of the Comintern. For many years scholars and readers wondered why Lukács never answered to these critical comments. It is true that in the 1930s he did indulge in several "self-critical" assessments of his book, rejecting it had an "idealist" piece. But there exists no evidence that he shared this viewpoint already in the early 1920s: on the contrary, one could assume, for instance from his book on Lenin, in 1924, or his critical comments on Bukharin in 1925, that he did not recant his philosophical perspective.

The recent discovery of *Chvostismus und Dialektik* in the former archives of the Lenin Institute shows that this "missing link" existed: Lukács *did reply*, in a most explicit and vigorous way, to these attacks, and defended the main ideas of his Hegelo-Marxist masterpiece from 1923. One may consider this answer as his last writing still inspired by the general philosophical approach of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, just before a major turn in his theoretical and political orientation.

The German manuscript was published by the Lukács Archives of Budapest in 1996—and translated into English by Verso (London) in 2000 under the title *Tailism and the Dialectic*. Laszlo Illés, the Hungarian editor of the original version, believes that it was written in 1925 or 1926 "at the same time as the significant reviews of the Lassalle-Edition and Moses Hess writings." I think that 1925 is a more accurate guess, because there is no reason why Lukács would wait two years to answer criticisms published in 1924—the style of the document suggests rather an immediate response. But, above all, I don't believe that it is contemporaneous with the article on Moses Hess (1926), for the good reason that this article is, as I'll try to show later on, strictly opposed, in its basic philosophic orientation, to the newly discovered essay.

Now that we know that Lukács found it necessary to defend *History and Class Consciousness* against his "orthodox" Communist critics—he never bothered to answer the Social-Democratic ones—the obvious question, curiously not raised by the editors (both of the Hungarian and the English edition) is *why did he not publish it?* I can see three possible answers to this question:

1. Lukács was afraid that his response could provoke a reaction from Soviet or Comintern bodies, thus aggravating his political isolation. I don't

think this is a plausible explanation, not only because in 1925—unlike 1935 there was still room for discussion in the Communist movement, but above all considering that in 1925 he published a severe criticism of Bukharin's "Marxist sociology," which has many points in common with *Tailism and the Dialectic*.² Of course, Bukharin was a much more important figure in the Communist movement than Rudas or Deborin, and still Lukács was not afraid of submitting him to an intense critical fire.

2. Lukács tried unsuccessfully to publish it but failed. One possible hypothesis is that he sent it to a Soviet publication—for instance *Pod Znamenem Marxisma (Under the Banner of Marxism)*, where Deborin had published an attack on him in 1924—but the essay was refused, the editors being rather on the side of Deborin. This would explain why the manuscript was found in Moscow, and also—perhaps—why Lukács used the Russian word *Chvostismus*, known only to Russian readers. It may also be that the essay was too long to be published in a review, and too short and polemical to appear as a book.

3. Some time after the essay was written—a few months, or perhaps a year—Lukács began to have doubts, and finally changed his mind and did not agree any more with its political and philosophical orientation. This hypothesis, by the way, is not necessarily contradictory with the former one.

As for Lukács' silence on this document during the following years, it can be explained by the new "realist" orientation, beginning with the Moses Hess article from 1926, which will be discussed later—not to mention his

2 Lukács' critical review of Bukharin's *Theorie des historischen Materialismus* was published in Grunberg's **Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung** in 1925.

rejection—particularly after the 1930s—of HCC as an “idealist” and even “dangerous” book.

Tailism and the Dialectic (T&D) is, as its title suggests, an essay in defense of revolutionary dialectics, a polemic answer to his main official Communist critics: Lazlo Rudas—a young Hungarian communist intellectual—and Abram Deborin—a former Menchevik and follower of Plekhanov, who had belatedly joined the Bolsheviks; both represented, inside the Communist movement, an influential and powerful semi-positivist and non-dialectical standpoint.³

In spite of its outstanding value in this respect, Lukács’ essay has, in my view, some serious shortcomings.

The most obvious is that it is a polemic against second-rate authors. In itself, this is not a significant issue: did not Marx discuss at length the writings of Bruno and Edgard Bauer? However, Lukács did, to a certain extent, adopt the agenda of his critics, and limited his answer to the problems they raised: class consciousness and the dialectics of nature. While the first is certainly an essential issue in revolutionary dialectics, the same can hardly be said of the second. It is difficult to perceive the philosophical/political significance of the many pages of T&D devoted to the epistemology of natural sciences, or to the question if experiment and industry are, in themselves—as Engels seemed to believe—a sufficient philosophical answer to the challenge of the Kantian thing-in-itself.

3 In my essay on Lukács (from 1979) I wrote: “We may note that the two best-known critiques, those by Rudas and Deborin, stood squarely on the ground of pre-dialectical materialism. Deborin used copious quotations from Plekhanov to show that Marxism stems from the very ‘naturalistic materialism’ criticized by Lukács; whereas Rudas compared the Marxist laws of society with Darwin’s law of evolution, and drew the surprising conclusion that Marxism is ‘a pure science of nature.’” (M. Löwy, **Georg Lukács From Romanticism to Bolshevism**, London: New Left Books, 1979), 169.

Another consequence of this limited agenda is that the theory of reification, which is one of the central arguments of *HCC* and Lukács' most important contribution to a radical critique of capitalist civilization— a theory which was to exert a powerful influence on Western Marxism throughout the twentieth century, from the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin to Lucien Goldmann, Henri Lefebvre, and Guy Debord—is entirely absent from *Talism and the Dialectic*, as it was from the laborious polemical exertions of Rudas and Deborin. Could it be that they agreed with the Lukácsian concept? Or, more likely, they just didn't understand it? In any case, they ignore it, and so does Lukács in his answer...

In relation to class consciousness and the Leninist theory of the party—certainly the most interesting part of the essay—there is a problem of a different sort. If one compares the discussion of these issues in *HCC* with those of *T&D*, one cannot avoid the impression that his interpretation of Leninism in the last piece gained a distinct authoritarian slant. While in the *opus* from 1923 there is an original attempt to integrate some of Rosa Luxemburg's insights in a sort of synthesis between Luxemburgism and Leninism,⁴ in the polemical essay Luxemburg appears only, in a rather simplistic way, as a negative reference and as the embodiment of pure spontaneism. While in *HCC* the relationship between the "imputed consciousness" and the empirical one is perceived as a dialectical process in which the class, assisted by its vanguard, rises to the *zugerechnetes Bewusstsein* through its own experience of struggle, in *T&D* the Kautskyan strictly un-dialectical thesis that socialism is "introduced from outside" into

4 For instance: "Rosa Luxemburg perceived very correctly that 'the organisation is a product of the struggle'. She only overestimated the organic character of this process (...)." (G. Lukács, **Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein**, Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), 494. I tried to analyse this synthesis in Georg Lukács, 185.

the class by the intellectuals—a mechanistic view taken up by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) but discarded after 1905—is presented as the quintessence of Leninism." While in *HCC* Lukács insisted that "the workers councils are the political/economical overcoming of reification,"⁵ *T&D* ignores the Soviets and refers only to the party, going as far as identifying the dictatorship of the proletariat with the "dictatorship of a real Communist Party."

In spite of these problems, *Chvostismus und Dialektik* has little in common with Stalinism: not only there is no reference to Joseph Vissarionovitch and his writings, or to his new thesis of "socialism in one country," but the whole spirit of the essay runs against the sort of metaphysical and dogmatic doctrines imposed by Stalin and his followers. In fact, it may be considered as a powerful exercise in revolutionary dialectics, opposed to the crypto-positivist brand of "Marxism" that was soon to become the official ideology of the Soviet bureaucracy. The key element in this polemical battle is Lukács' emphasis on the *decisive revolutionary importance of the subjective moment in the subject/object historical dialectics*. If one had to summarize the value and the significance of *Tailism and the Dialectic*, I would argue that it is *a powerful Hegelian/Marxist apology of revolutionary subjectivity*—to a higher degree even than in *History and Class Consciousness*. This motive runs like a red thread throughout the whole piece, particularly in its first part, but even, to some extent, in the second one too. Let us try to bring into evidence the main moments of this argument.

One could begin with the mysterious term *Chvostismus* of the book's title—Lukács never bothered to explain it, supposing that its—Russian?—

5 G. Lukács, *GuK*, 256

readers were familiar with it. This Russian word—whose origin is the German term *Schwanz*, “tail”—was used by Lenin in his polemics, for instance in *What Is To Be Done?*, against those “economistic Marxists” who “tail-end” the spontaneous labour movement. Lukács, however, uses it in a much broader historical/ philosophical sense: *Chvostismus* means passively following—“tailing”—the “objective” course of events, while ignoring the subjective/revolutionary moments of the historical process.

Lukács denounces the attempt by Rudas and Deborin to transform Marxism into a “science” in the positivist, bourgeois sense. Deborin tries, in a regressive move, to bring back historical materialism “into the fold of Comte or Herbert Spencer” (*auf Comte oder Herbert Spencer zurückrevidiert*), a sort of bourgeois sociology studying transhistorical laws that exclude all human activity. And Rudas places himself as a “scientific” observer of the objective, law-bound course of history, whereby he can “anticipate” revolutionary developments. Both regard as worthy of scientific investigation only what is free of any participation on the part of the historical subject, and both reject, in the name of this “Marxist” (in fact, positivist) science any attempt to accord “an *active and positive* role to a subjective moment in history.”⁶

The war against subjectivism, argues Lukács, is the banner under which opportunism justifies its rejection of revolutionary dialectics: it was used by Bernstein against Marx and by Kautsky against Lenin. In the name of anti-subjectivism, Rudas develops a fatalist conception of history, which includes only “the objective conditions,” but leaves no room for the decision of the historical agents. In an article—criticized by Lukács in *T&D*—

6 G. Lukács, **Tailism and the Dialectics** (London: Verso, 2000), 50, 135, 137. Cf. The German original, **Chvostismus und Dialektik** (Budapest: Aron Verlag, 1996), 9.

against Trotsky published by *Inprekor*, the official Bulletin of the Comintern Rudas claims that the defeat of the Hungarian revolution of 1919 was due only to "objective conditions" and not to any mistakes of the Communist leadership; he mentions both Trotsky and Lukács as examples of a one-sided conception of politics which overemphasizes the importance of proletarian class consciousness.⁷ Apparently Rudas suspected Lukács of Trotskyist leanings; in fact, he was not a partisan of Trotsky, but did not hesitate, until 1926, to mention him in a favourable light in his writings—quite a heresy for the official spokesmen.

While rejecting the accusation of "subjective idealism," Lukács does not retract from his "subjectivist" and voluntarist viewpoint: in the decisive moments of the struggle "everything depends on class consciousness, on the conscious will of the proletariat"—the subjective component. Of course, there is a dialectical interaction between subject and object in the historical process, but in the *Augenblick* of crisis, this component gives the direction of the events, in the form of revolutionary consciousness and praxis. By his fatalist attitude, Rudas ignores praxis and develops a theory of passive "tail-ending," *Chvostismus*, considering that history is a process that "takes place independently of human consciousness."

What is Leninism, argues Lukács, if not the permanent insistence on the "active and conscious rôle of the subjective moment"? How could one

7 As John Ree very aptly comments, Rudas and Deborin stand in direct continuity with Second International positivist/determinist Marxism: "In Rudas' mind, Trotsky and Lukács are linked because they both stress the importance of the subjective factor in the revolution. Rudas steps forth as a defender of the 'objective conditions' which guaranteed that the revolution was bound to fail. The striking similarity with Karl Kautsky's review of Korsch's **Marxism and Philosophy**, in which he attributes the failure of the German revolution to just such objective conditions, is striking testimony to the persistence of vulgar Marxism among the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy." ("Introduction" to *T&D*, 24–25).

imagine, “without this function of the subjective moment,” Lenin’s conception of insurrection as an art? Insurrection is precisely the *Augenblick*, the instant of the revolutionary process where “*the subjective moment has a decisive predominance (ein entscheidendes Übergewicht)*.” In that instant, the fate of the revolution, and therefore of humanity “depends on the subjective moment.” This does not mean that revolutionaries should “wait” for the arrival of this *Augenblick*: there is no moment in the historical process where the possibility of an active rôle of the subjective moments is completely lacking.⁸

In this context, Lukács turns his critical weapons against one of the main expressions of this positivist, “sociological,” contemplative, fatalist—*chvostistisch* in *T&D*’s terminology—and objectivist conception of history: the ideology of *progress*. Rudas and Deborin believe that the historical process is an evolution mechanistically and fatally leading to the next stage. History is conceived, according to the dogmas of evolutionism, as permanent advance, endless progress: the temporally later stage is necessarily the higher one in every respect. From a dialectical viewpoint, however, the historical process is “not an evolutionary nor an organic one,” but contradictory, jerkily unfolding in advances and retreats.⁹ Unfortunately Lukács does not develop these insights, that point toward a radical break with the ideology of inevitable progress common to Second and—after 1924—Third International Marxism.

8 G. Lukács, *T&D*, 48, 54–58, 62. Cf. **Chvostismus und Dialektik**, 16. Emphasis in the original. Of course, this argument is mainly developed in the first chapter of the first part of the essay, which has the explicit title “Subjectivism”; but one can find it also in other parts of the document.

9 *T&D*, 55, 78, 105.

Another important aspect related to this battle against the positivist degradation of Marxism is Lukács' critique, in the second part of the essay, against Rudaš' views on technology and industry as an "objective" and neutral system of "exchange between humans and nature." This would mean, objects Lukács, that there is an essential identity between the capitalist and the socialist society! In his viewpoint, revolution has to change not only the relations of production but also revolutionize to a large extent the concrete forms of technology and industry existing in capitalism, since they are intimately linked to the capitalist division of labour. In this issue too Lukács was well ahead of his time—eco-socialists began to deal with this argument in the last decade— but the suggestion remains undeveloped in his essay.¹⁰

Incidentally, there is a striking analogy between some of Lukács' formulations in T&D—the importance of the revolutionary *Augenblick*, the critique of the ideology of progress, the call for a radical transformation of the technical apparatus—and those of Walter Benjamin's last reflections. Of course, Benjamin was familiar with *HCC*, which played an important role in his evolution toward communism, but he obviously could not know Lukács' unpublished piece. It is therefore by following his own way that he came to conclusions so surprisingly similar to those of this essay.

A few months after writing *Tailism and the Dialectic*—in any case less than one year—Lukács wrote the essay "Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics" (1926) which stands for a radically different political/philosophical perspective. In this brilliant but highly problematic piece, Lukács celebrates Hegel's "reconciliation with reality" as the proof of his "grandiose realism" and his "rejection of all utopias." While this realism

¹⁰ T&D, 134-135.

permitted him to understand “the objective dialectics of the historical process,” the moralist utopianism and subjectivism of Moses Hess and the left Hegelians led to a blind alley. As I tried to show elsewhere, this essay provided the philosophical justification for Lukács’ own “reconciliation with reality,” that is with the Stalinist Soviet Union, implicitly representing “the objective dialectics of the historical process.”¹¹ The sharp and one-sided “anti-subjectivism” of this writing is sufficient proof that—unlike the hypothesis of the Hungarian publishers of *T&D*—Lukács’ answer to his critics was written *before* the Moses Hess piece— that is around 1925—and not at the same time. Soon afterwards, in 1927, Lukács, who had still favourably quoted Trotsky in an essay which appeared in June 1926, published his first “anti-Trotskyist” piece, in *Die Internationale*, the theoretical organ of the German Communist Party.¹²

How to explain such a sudden turn, between 1925 and 1926, leading Lukács from the revolutionary subjectivism of *Talism and the Dialectic* to the “reconciliation with reality” of the essay on Moses Hess? Probably the feeling that the revolutionary wave from 1917–23 had been beaten in Europe and that all that remained was the Soviet “socialism in one country.” Lukács was by no means alone in drawing this conclusion: many other communist intellectuals followed the same “realistic” reasoning. Only a minority—among which of course Leon Trotsky and his followers— remained faithful to the internationalist/revolutionary hope of October. But that is another story...

11 M. Löwy, **Georg Lukács**, 194–198. The English translation of Lukács’ essay on Hess can be found in his **Political Writings 1919–1929** (London: New Left Books, 1972), 181–223.

12 The article from 1926 is “**L’art pour lart und proletarische Dichtung**,” *Die Tat* 18.3, June 1926 which favorably quotes Trotsky’s critique of the Proletkult. The piece from 1927 is “**Eine Marxkritik im Dienste des Trotzismus, Rez. Von Max Eastman: Marx, Lenin and the Science of Revolution**,” *Die Internationale*, X. 6, 1927.

To conclude: in spite of its shortcomings, Lukács' *Tailism and the Dialectic* is a fascinating document, not only from the viewpoint of his intellectual biography, but in its theoretical and political actuality *today*, as a powerful antidote to the attempts to reduce Marxism or critical theory to a mere "scientific" observation of the course of events, a "positive" description of the ups and downs of the economic conjuncture. Moreover, by its emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity, by its critique of the ideology of linear progress and by its understanding for the need to revolutionize the prevailing technical/industrial apparatus, it appears surprisingly tuned to present issues being discussed in the international radical movement against capitalist globalization.