György Lukács (1885–1971), who started and ended his career as a literary theorist and critic, is best known for his influential contributions to discussions of German idealism and Marxist philosophy. Along with Karl Korsch, Lukács was one of the originators of so-called Western Marxism through his key contributions to political thought: *Theory of the Novel* (1916), *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), *The Young Hegel* (1975), and *The Process of Democratization* (1969).

Lukács was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Budapest and studied at the universities of Budapest and Berlin. He personally knew and was influenced by figures such as Ervin Szabó, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Stefan George, and Ernst Bloch. For much of his life, Lukács was involved as a political figure and public intellectual as cultural commissar of the short-lived revolutionary Hungarian government of Béla Kun in 1918–19, and the reformist government of Imre Nagy that was crushed by the invasion by the USSR in 1956.

After his first book, titled *Soul and Form* (1911), Lukács published *Theory of the Novel*, a key pathway via what he referred to as "Romantic anti-capitalism," from the detached, ironic aestheticism of his first book to Marxist-Leninist commitment. Anticipating the revolution brewing in the east, Lukács suggests that a return to the epic unity of individual and world could be glimpsed in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Lukács's conversion to Marxism occurred in the course of the Bolshevik Revolution, and such a conversion was reflected in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). The most important aspect of this book from the standpoint of political thought is the 65-page essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." This essay is a *tour de force* of social theory and philosophy, one that synthesizes Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism in the first chapter of Vol. I of *Capital* with phenomenology and sociology, to extend and deepen Marx's argument regarding the fetishization of the commodity in capitalist society. Lukács extended this analysis beyond the narrow ambit of the realm of exchange to an account of how society in its totality becomes "reified" (literally "thingified"). This means that even the most rarefied, autonomous products of bourgeois civilization, for example, art or idealist philosophy, become marked by reification or the "contemplative attitude." This kind of analysis of cultural forms was far more sophisticated than the crude base/superstructure model that lay at the heart of the Marxism of the Second International, for example. The conception of reification enabled Lukács to engage in a "meta-critique" of philosophy through which he sought to demonstrate that bourgeois philosophy, insofar as it is constituted by insoluble tensions or antinomies that it is unable to solve—for example, the Kantian oppositions between the noumenal/phenomenal, reason/understanding, subject/object—had reached its own immanent limit. The seemingly insoluble oppositions of bourgeois thinking could only truly be overcome in the praxis of the proletariat that, in understanding the world as the product of its practical activity or labor, would attain self-knowledge as the identical subject-object of history.

Lukács's defense of the Party as the locus of revolutionary consciousness and therefore as substitute for Hegel's "absolute knowledge" led to charges of Stalinism. Yet, this is not entirely fair, especially if one looks at Lukács's last work, written in the aftermath of the Prague Spring of 1968 and Alexander Dubček's attempt to forge a "socialism with a human face," translated as the *Process of*
Democratization. In it, Lukács takes up a position based on Lenin's new economic policy (NEP) of 1921–28, the termination of which signaled the onset of Stalinization. He also draws on Lenin's idea of habituation or a new kind of praxis through which a new socialist man would be constituted. In keeping with History and Class Consciousness, Lukács repeatedly emphasizes the need for attention to constituting the subjective preconditions for an authentic socialist democracy. However, Lukács troublingly insisted, though, that these subjective preconditions would have to be introduced into the working class from the outside.

Lukács was criticized by Theodor W. Adorno, an important representative of critical theory, for an all too apologetic “reconciliation with reality”—that is, for far too sanguine an assessment of the capacity of “realist” representations of late capitalist societies to yield genuine knowledge about the historical process and hence the possibilities of transforming it. Perhaps the most influential and important criticism of Lukács, however, was made in the 1960s by Louis Althusser, who used Lukács’s Marxism as a foil for his own structuralist reading of the supposedly scientific, “mature” Marx. More recently, Lukács’s influence has returned in the guise of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s notion of the proletariat that turns, however, not on consciousness but on the production of affect, which gives rise to the unified political subject they call, following Baruch Spinoza, “the multitude.”

See also Alienation; Althusser, Louis; Bureaucracy; Capitalism; Class; Communism, Varieties of; Critical Theory; Dialectic(s); Frankfurt School; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; Heidegger, Martin; Marx, Karl; Negri, Antonio; Romanticism; Weber, Max

Further Readings


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