

History and Class Consciousness as an “Unfinished Project”

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... *History and Class Consciousness* [by Georg Lukács] was, . . . one of the earliest explicit proposals (in what was to become the so-called Western Marxist tradition) for a new and more complexly mediated theory of ideology.¹ . . .

What is argued in this text is essentially an *epistemological* priority of a particular social group or class in advanced society. Whatever the group or class identified and “privileged” by such an argument, therefore, the form of the argument is itself unusual and demands attention in its own right, since in its very structure it seeks to relate a truth claim to the social structure and phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity. Epistemology thus passes over into social phenomenology in a way that cannot but be felt as scandalous, and as a kind of “category mistake,” by those for whom these levels correspond to distinct academic disciplines and their strictly differentiated methodologies. Since such differentiation—epistemology, economics, sociology as three autonomous fields of study—corresponds to Lukács’s previous diagnosis of the reification of bourgeois thought, his very argument here—and the polemic against such specialization, in the form of the conceptual adversary or hostile reader—is itself a kind of “unity of theory and practice” and dramatized in the text the conceptual content of his position.

But the inverse form of formulating the issue of “priority” is no less misleading. It is, for example, tempting to suppose that if the matter of the practical balance of forces in alliance politics is not here immediately at stake, then the argument must somehow be a “metaphysical” one, that is, an argument about ultimate grounds or foundations, or about what the Marxist tradition notoriously calls “ultimately determining instances.” The shape of a metaphysical argument of this kind comes immediately into view when one replaces Lukács’s designation of the working class by a classification of its abstract concept, namely, *social class*. At that point, one concludes that Lukács is arguing the explanatory priority of the concept of *class* over competing concepts or “ultimately determining instances”—mostly, in the contemporary situation, sorted out according to race or gender or some related social concept on the one hand, or according

to language or some related “dimensional” concept on the other. The polemic, thus conceived, becomes a two-front struggle. On one hand, “Marxism” (in the person of Lukács) wages a battle against feminism and race- or ethnic-based ideologies (or even against the more general prioritization of the “new social movements” or of “marginality”). On the other hand, it responds to the philosophical threat of various language-based “structuralisms” in the largest sense (Umberto Eco’s defense of the sign,² for example, or Habermas’s communicational model). This is, however, to recast Lukács’s arguments in terms of what each side replies by reiterating its own “absolute presupposition,” after the fashion of the older disputes (also still with us, however) over whether human nature is essentially good or essentially bad.

What is more significant is that this way of restaging the fundamental issue at stake in this moment of “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” omits not only what was its most original feature but also the very “move” or “step” on which the whole argument turned: namely the insistence, not on abstract concepts such as “class” or “production,” but rather on group experience. The omission characterizes Lukács’s defenders fully as much as his various adversaries to the point where, today, one has the feeling that the most authentic descendency of Lukács’s thinking is to be found, not among the Marxists, but within a certain feminism, where the unique conceptual move of *History and Class Consciousness* has been appropriated for a whole program, now renamed (after Lukács’s own usage) *standpoint theory*.³

These path-breaking texts now allow us to return to Lukács’s argument in a new way, which opens a space of a different kind for polemics about the epistemological priority of the experience of various groups or collectivities (most immediately, in this case, the experience of women as opposed to the experience of the industrial working class). For the argument of standpoint theory now enables a principled relativism, in which the epistemological claims of the various groups can be inspected (and respected) for their “truth content” (Adorno’s *Wahrheitsgehalt*) or their respective “moments of truth” (to use another convenient contemporary German expression). The presupposition is that, owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups.

This way of describing the argument has, incidentally, the additional merit of cutting across that most notorious of all Lukács’s secondary qualifications, namely the seemingly last-minute distinction between the actual experience and thinking of working-class people and their “imputed consciousness” (*zugerechnetes Bewusstsein*).⁴ This distinction opens the wedge through which Lukács’s various adversaries (on the extreme left as well as on the right) glimpse the

wolf-in-sheep's-clothing of the Party or the Intellectual, who now conveniently get substituted for a sociological working class that needs them to find out what it "really" thinks. But it should also be juxtaposed against the other crucial qualification of Lukács (shared, one would think, by all forms of Marxism), that the "subject" in question here is not, as in the bourgeois epistemologies, an *individual* one, but is the result of "the abolition of the isolated individual."⁵

The bourgeoisie always perceives the subject and object of the historical process and of social reality in a double form: in terms of his consciousness the single individual is a perceiving subject confronting the overwhelming objective necessities imposed by society of which only minute fragments can be comprehended. But in reality it is precisely the conscious activity of the individual that is to be found on the object-side of the process, while the subject (the class) cannot be awakened into consciousness and this activity must always remain beyond the consciousness of the (apparent) subject, the individual.⁶

The temptations of the centered subject, therefore—including the optical illusion that scientific truth could somehow be the experience and spiritual property of an individual consciousness (of Lacan's "sujet supposé savoir," for example)—are a socially generated (but "objective") mirage projected by a properly bourgeois experience of social fragmentation and monadization.

The opposite of this monadic conception of individual consciousness is not, however, some doubtful, mystical or mystified, notion of *collective* consciousness. In my view, indeed, the stirring slogan so often taken to be the climax of *History and Class Consciousness*—the proletariat as "the identical subject-object of history"⁷—is rather the local thematic climax of Lukács's intermittent engagement throughout this text with the central motifs of German idealism from Fichte to Hegel. The passing phrase marks the "solution" to those specific traditional contradictions, in their own specific language or code, which is no longer our own. It is preferable, in our own linguistic and intellectual climate, to retranslate the perspectival and subject-oriented figure of the "standpoint" into the structural notion of the positioning of a given class or class fraction in the social totality.

At that point, it becomes clear that the epistemological "priority" of "proletarian consciousness," as a class or collective phenomenon, has to do with the *conditions of possibility* of new thinking inherent in this particular class position. It is not a matter of the scientific aptitude of individual workers (although Sartre quite properly underscores the qualitative difference in thought mode of people who work with machines as opposed, for example, to peasants or shopkeepers), still less of the mystical properties of some collective proletarian "world view." The conception of "conditions of possibility" then has the advantage of stressing, not the content of scientific thought, but its prerequisites, its preparatory requirements, that without which it cannot properly develop. It is a conception

that includes the diagnosis of blocks and limits to knowledge (reification as what suppresses the ability to grasp totalities) as well as the enumeration of positive new features (the capacity to think in terms of process).⁸

Contemporary feminist standpoint theory was able to restore and to make again visible this fundamental line of Lukács's argument (often effaced or distorted by generations of "faithful" as well as hostile commentators), because of the central importance, it gives to the problem of Western science itself and of scientific knowledge. Lukács's work had rarely been seen in this context for two reasons: first, because of his own anti-scientific and Viconian bias, inherited by so-called Western Marxism as a whole,⁹ and second, because developments in the history and philosophy of science were in the past never so propitious for the posing of such questions as they are in the effervescence of the post-Kuhnian moment of this sub-discipline, when stereotypes of Lysenko have been displaced by a new speculative willingness to grasp scientific facts and scientific knowledge as a human construct and as praxis.¹⁰ But it is precisely only within that radically different framework—science as construction and invention, rather than science as discovery and as the passive contemplation of external law—that such Lukácsian issues as the class preconditions of the possible forms of scientific praxis become meaningful and even urgent.

Meanwhile, the feminist appropriation of Lukács also allows for a productive and comparative inquiry into the epistemological potentialities of the various social groups which is very different in spirit from that sterile metaphysical quarrel about "ultimately determining instances" to which reference has already been made. And this is also the moment in which the conception of a "moment of truth" in the various competing types of group experience becomes crucial, since it is not some abstract evaluation applied from the outside and after the fact to this new kind of epistemological and sociological description, but is rather immanent and inherent in this last. Lukács himself, for example, first characterized the phenomenological experience of the industrial working class in terms of a new capacity to see the world historically and in terms of process, which that class very specifically owed to its concrete situation as the ultimate, but very unique, commodity in the system of capitalist production. Its structural destiny, therefore, on this formulation, lay in its experience of itself as wage labor, or in other words as the commodification of labor power, a form of *negative* constraint and violence which now dialectically produces the unexpectedly *positive*, new content of its experience as "the self-consciousness of the commodity."¹¹ In his 1967 Preface to the book—a mature autocritique which can no longer be supposed to be motivated by any of the Galilean ambiguities of his earlier recantation—Lukács proposes a reformulation of this epistemological "exceptionality" of the industrial working class in terms of labor and praxis¹² (whether the transformation in contemporary production and machinery, the new dynamics of the cybernetic in late capitalism, modifies or enriches this descriptonal option remains to be seen). Meanwhile, other forms of Marxism

have thematized the uniqueness of working-class experience in further, distinct categories, such as that of a specific experience of cooperative or collective action.

If one wants to be consequent about Lukács's model, however, it seems clear that *History and Class Consciousness* must also be read, or must be rewritten, as including a description of the specific epistemological capacities of the bourgeoisie itself, the very originator of "Western science" in its current form. At that point, it will be very precisely the dynamics of reification as a social and phenomenological experience that constitute the "moment of truth" of the extraordinary disciplinary and specializing developments of "positivist" research. Those developments comprise a long and incomparably productive period which now seems to have touched its structural limits, if the unparalleled intensity of contemporary critiques of Western "rationality," of the dynamics of the physical sciences, and of the historical and structural closure of the various disciplines, is to be believed.

Feminist "standpoint theory," which has generated some of the most acute of those critiques, now stages the specific phenomenological experience of women in the patriarchal social order as an equally "exceptional" but very different structural submission to negative constraint from that of the working class. That experience generates new and positive epistemological possibilities which are thematically distinct from those enumerated by the Marxist tradition. The emphases here—whose relationship varies according to the description, in this theory currently in full elaboration—include an experience of the body radically distinct from that of men, or even of male workers (even though what is presupposed is that this is an experience of the deeper truth of all bodily experience, generally masked from men's consciousness). They also include a capacity for non-reified consciousness, generally negatively characterized in the caricatured attributes of feeling or of "intuition," but which itself "leaps over" a certain historical stage of the psychic division of labor to which men have historically had to submit. Finally, feminist "standpoint theory" emphasizes an experience of the collective which is different from the active collective praxis of workers and already constitutively experienced as that community and cooperation, which for the working-class movement still lies in the future.¹³

The Black experience has its "priority" in something like a combination of both of these distinct "moments of truth" (that attributed to workers and that attributed to women), but a combination which is qualitatively distinct from both, including not merely an experience of reification deeper than the commodity form, but also the historic link, by way of imperialism and the plunder of what was to become the Third World, with the older stage of capitalist accumulation. These kinds of unique epistemological priorities are surely presupposed in all Black theory as it emerged from the 1960s and the Black Power movement; but their fundamental theorization goes back, famously, to the immense figure of DuBois and his notion of a "double-consciousness": "this sense of always

looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹⁴

Meanwhile, despite the development of a Jewish-Studies industry since the first printing of this essay, it seems appropriate to add a word about this specific social and epistemological situation as well, so intimately related to the development of Marxism and of dialectical thought. We are in fact often tempted, as intellectuals, to stress the obvious formal analogies between the Talmudic tradition and its exegetical relationship to sacred texts and the intricacies of modern dialectical reading and writing. But these analogies pre-suppose a cultural transmission which remains obscure, and which may well be very problematical indeed in the case of assimilated urban Jews whose interest in the tradition (one thinks of Walter Benjamin) was purely intellectual and a development in later adult life. The "moment of truth" of the Central European Jewish situation seems to me very different from this, and cannot go unnoticed by any reader of the work of Adorno, and in particular of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is not first and foremost the formal and aesthetic stress on pain and suffering, on dissonance and the negative, everywhere present in Adorno, but rather a more primary experience, namely that of *fear* and of vulnerability—the primal fact, for Adorno and Horkheimer, of human history itself and of that "dialectic of Enlightenment," that scientific domination of nature and the self, which constitutes the internal machine of Western civilization. But this experience of fear, in all its radicality, which cuts across class and gender to the point of touching the bourgeois in the very isolation of his town houses of sumptuous Berlin apartments, is surely the very "moment of truth" of ghetto life itself, as the Jews and so many other ethnic groups have had to live it: the helplessness of the village community before the perpetual and unpredictable imminence of the lynching or the pogrom, the race riot. Other groups' experience of fear is occasional, rather than constitutive: standpoint analysis specifically demands a differentiation between the various negative experiences of constraint, between the *exploitation* suffered by workers and the *oppression* suffered by women and continuing on through the distinct structural forms of exclusion and alienation characteristic of other kinds of group experience.

Those clearly include the heterosexist life-worlds that inspire queer theory; as well as a variety of other ethnic or even national situations; but it is important that such comparison of the "wounds" should not degenerate into a pluralist or multi-cultural aesthetic delectation on the order of the older historicism, even though history is a better way to approach the singular structure of the collective experience in question than the much abused pseudoconcept of "culture" as such. Deleuze offers a productive version of standpoint theory when he recommends that we think of it in terms of the absence of a "people"—"le peuple; c'est ce qui manque, c'est ce qui n'est pas là";¹⁵ rather than in terms of a power to achieve or which is already achieved. Such analysis is finally not complete until the identification of the "moment of truth" of group experience—*itself* **negative and positive all at once, an oppressive restriction which turns into a**

capacity for new kinds of experience and for seeing features and dimensions of the world and of history masked to other social actors—is prolonged by an epistemological articulation that translates such experience into new possibilities of thought and knowledge. That such new possibilities can also be thought of in aesthetic and formal ways, alongside these scientific and epistemological ones, must now be recalled and emphatically stressed, since it was in terms of this very interrelationship between the formal possibilities of "realism" and of standpoint knowledge that we argued for the deeper continuity between the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* and the later theoretician of the realist novel.

What emerges from the feminist project, and from the speculations it inspires, is an "unfinished project": namely the differentiation of all those situations of what I have tried neutrally to characterize as "constraint," which are often monolithically subsumed under single-shot political concepts such as "domination" or "power"; economic concepts such as "exploitation"; social concepts such as "oppression"; or philosophical concepts such as "alienation." These reified concepts and terms, taken on their own as meaningful starting points, encourage the revival of what I have characterized above as an essentially metaphysical polemic about the ultimate priority of the political, say (the defense of the primacy of "domination"), versus that of the economic (the counter-primacy of the notion of "exploitation").

What seems more productive is to dissolve this conceptuality once again back into the concrete situations from which it emerged: to make an inventory of the variable structures of "constraint" lived by the various marginal, oppressed, or dominated groups—the so-called "new social movements" fully as much as the working classes—with this difference, that each form of privation is acknowledged as producing its own specific "epistemology," its own specific view from below, and its own specific and distinctive truth claim. It is a project that will sound like "relativism" or "pluralism" only if the identity of the absent common object of such "theorization" from multiple "standpoints" is overlooked—what one therefore does not exactly have the right to call (but let it stand as contradictory short-hand) "late capitalism."

As for the "workerism" of *History and Class Consciousness*, I have tried to suggest that it is also not an end point, not a "solution" or a final position on matters of group consciousness and praxis, but rather the beginning of work yet to be done, and of a task or project which is not that of ancient history, but of our present. Toward the end of his life, in an interview conducted in the late 1960s, Lukács had this to say about the utopian romanticism of that now bygone era:

Today, in arousing the subjective factor, we cannot recreate and continue the 1920s, we have instead to proceed on the basis of a new beginning, with all the experience that we have from the earlier workers' movement and from Marxism. We must be clear about this, however, that the problem is to begin anew; to use an analogy, we are not now in the twenties of the twentieth century, but in a certain

sense at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the workers' movement slowly began to take shape in the wake of the French revolution. I believe that this idea is very important for theorists, for despair can very rapidly set in if the assertion of certain truths only finds a very weak resonance. Don't forget that certain things that Saint-Simon and Fourier spoke about had at the time an extraordinarily weak resonance, and it was only in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century that a revival of the workers' movement got underway.¹⁶

The Communist Manifesto, in other words, let alone Lenin and the Soviet revolution, are not behind us somewhere in time; they have yet to come into being. In some new way we are called on to achieve them through the slow and intricate resistances of historical time. Something like this is also what I would have liked to say about Lukács himself. *History and Class Consciousness* is a work whose prodigious intellectual deductions had an incomparable effect on several generations of revolutionary intellectuals. In that sense, to be sure, it is alive in the past and a perpetually fascinating object of historical mediation, among those very special dead which it is the mission of the historian, à la Michelet or Benjamin, to summon back to life. I think that it would be better, however, to consider that, like the *Manifesto*, it has yet to be written, it lies ahead of us in historical time. Our task, as political intellectuals, is to lay the groundwork for that situation in which it can again appear, with all the explosive freshness of the *Novum*, as though for the first time in which it can, once again, become both real and true.

Notes

1. *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1977), 387–393; *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 199–204. Hereafter page references will designate both editions, the German preceding the English. Re-edited, with additions, by the author.
2. As for example in *The Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).
3. See Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power* (New York: Longman, 1983); Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).
4. The term is not used in the major essay on which we have drawn here, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," but rather in the essay entitled "Class Consciousness" (*History and Class Consciousness*, op. cit., 223–224/51). The fateful sentence reads as follows: "Class consciousness consists in the fact of the appropriate and rational actions 'imputed' to a particular typical position in the process of production." That the word "rational" specifically mobilizes Weber's theory of rationalization may not be particularly evident in the English-language context, but obviously moves Lukács's thinking much closer to Weber's theory of "ideal types."
5. *History and Class Consciousness*, op. cit., 356/171.
6. *Ibid.*, 350/165.
7. *Ibid.*, 385/197.
8. These are of course the central features of Lukács's socio-economic description of reification in the first section of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" and of his philosophical description in the second section.
9. See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), 56; on the orientation to epistemology, 52–53. *Vico's verum factum in effect sunders history from nature as an object of possible human knowledge.*

10. See, for example, the pathbreaking work of Bruno Latour: (with Steve Woolgar) *Laboratory Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) and *Science in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
11. *History and Class Consciousness*, op. cit., 352/168. The form of the theory (often schematically designated as the theory of "radical chains") obviously originates in Marx himself: see "Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Introduction," in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1975), esp. 256.
12. See, in the English-language editions of *History and Class Consciousness*, xvii–xviii.
13. See in particular Hartsock, op. cit., 231–261; Harding, op. cit., 141–162; and Jaggar, op. cit., 369–385. The privileged test-case for the relationship between women's "stand-point" and scientific discovery has become the achievement of the molecular biologist Barbara McClintock; see Evelyn Fox Keller's biography, *A Feeling for the Organism* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1983), as well as her collection *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale, 1984), particularly Part III, Sections 8 and 9, 150–177.
14. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* in *Writings W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 364. See also Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, 1984). The omission of this reference in the first version of the present essay is more than surprising and can only be explained: 1) by my anti-Americanism (according to Cornel West); 2) my racist blind spots; 3) sheer intellectual ignorance; and/or 4) by the protean and unclassifiable nature of DuBois's work and of his own status as an intellectual and a writer.
15. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'Image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 281: the entire section that follows contains a political lesson whose consequences we have yet to draw.
16. Hans Heinz Holz, Leo Kofler, and Wolfgang Abendroth, *Conversations with Lukács* (Cambridge: MIT, 1975), 62.