

# Lukács is Dead. Long live Lukács

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***Under Discussion:***

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Richard Westerman. *Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism: Reification Revalued*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2019. ISBN 978-3319932866 (quoted as W)

Konstantinos Kavoulakos. *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. ISBN 978-1474267410 (quoted as K).

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For some time now, the philosophy of Georg Lukács, has seemed to be of interest only to those who are concerned with the emergence of what has been termed “Western Marxism”: Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* was a crucial text in the development of the Frankfurt School-oriented critical theory of society in the twentieth century. Most readers (unfortunately) focus only on the chapter on reification of the 1923 text in which Lukács unified his new understanding of Marx’s concept of the commodity form with insights from Simmel’s and Weber’s sociologies of modern rationality and culture. In so doing, Lukács pushed Marxism away not only from a narrow economic understanding of capitalism, but also from determinist theories of historical development which lay at the base of “official” party doctrines. Instead of conceiving Marx as offering an analysis of the capitalist mode of production, Lukács opened up a broader understanding of Marx’s thinking as an approach to society and culture that was pursued later by Frankfurt School philosophers and social psychologists.

However, with the emergence of communicative, recognitional, feminist, and post-colonial versions of critical theory alongside the defeat of left political projects and state socialism in the twentieth century, Lukács's star declined to the philosophical horizon. In addition, with the turn towards systems theory and a pluralized conception of society as a mix of social "spheres," roles, struggles, and the lifeworld/system dualism, Lukács's attempt to grasp an implicit unitary social logic of capitalist societies that is open to reflection that unites epistemological, political, and ontological aspects in a comprehensive theory seemed to be a failed project. Both French Post-Marxism with its emphasis on power, difference, and the political, and recent "official" critical theorists in academia, such as Habermas, Honneth, and Fraser, tend to reject the idea of an overarching logic of the capitalist social world.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in the last decade we have seen a reemergence of interest in Lukács. This is not only because thinkers have turned to pre-Habermasian critical theory and to the critique of political economy<sup>2</sup>, but also because our current political and social crises force us to think again about alternatives to liberal approaches in political philosophy.

Recent evidence of this "turn" in critical theory are new books on Lukács by Richard Westerman (University of Alberta, Canada) and Konstantinos Kavoulakos (University of Crete, Greece). Both authors portray the rich philosophical and historical contexts that prevailed at the time of the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*. Let me be clear from the start: both books are superb analyses of Lukács's philosophy and both open up new paths for rethinking the origins, motives, and possibilities of critical theory. Both authors explore the philosophical underpinnings of Lukács's philosophy in relation to the philosophical discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century, including Neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, and theories of art and culture. Both authors reduce the longstanding emphasis on Lukács as a Hegelian Marxist. The main problem for Lukács, they suggest, is how to be a Marxist philosopher without becoming either a Hegelian or a Kantian. As Kavoulakos succinctly puts it, Lukács had to take "a road between the abstract universal concepts of the Kantian transcendental logic and the dialectical concept of the Hegelian holism" (K

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1. The rejection of a commodity logic and the concept of reification "all the way down" is visible in Jaeggi and Fraser's recent publication *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*; for this, see my review in *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*.
  2. This "new" critical theory and return to political economy and figures who have been marginalized in the "official" discourse is most visible in the ninety-six chapters of the new *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*.

27). For Lukács, social theory can find a way between Scylla and Charybdis by developing a phenomenological and Neo-Kantian understanding of Marx. Husserlian phenomenology (which is the focus of Westerman) and Laskian Neo-Kantianism (which is the focus of Kavoulakos) offer ways out of the pitfalls of Kant's dualism, without turning to speculative identity philosophy. Both authors reconstruct the route that Lukács takes from his early ethically inspired reflections on culture towards Marxism and party politics. Against the mainstream literature, Westerman and Kavoulakos argue that there is no mythical break around 1918 when Lukács suddenly emerges as a newborn Marxist. Instead, they trace his ideas back to the philosophical discourse out of which they emerged.

Richard Westerman's eye-opening study unfolds an entirely new way of thinking about Lukács, insofar as he successfully argues that Lukács's critical theory can be re-married with Husserlian phenomenology (W 24), a thesis that was explored briefly in the 70s. In the light of Westerman's claim that Lukács is a phenomenologist rather than a classical epistemologist, we might reconsider Habermas's depiction in the *Theory of Communicative Action* of Lukács as trapped in subject/object philosophy. Contra Habermas, Lukács sought to overcome the subject/object distinction, not to adopt it. According to Westerman, Lukács "moves from describing consciousness as knowledge reflecting or representing a world that stands outside it, towards treating consciousness as the mode in which that (social) world exists" (W 95). Westerman's reconstruction of Lukács as a social phenomenologist is guided by the tacit assumption that we should read *History and Class Consciousness* as an attempt to re-appropriate Marx within the newly emerged philosophical concept of *meaning*. This concept of meaning, as it entered philosophical discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century through Husserl and Frege, is important since it allows us to avoid reducing objects to objective properties or to subjective constructions (W 17, 50). Social objects—for Lukács, commodities "as a phenomenological meaning-structure" (W 126)—present themselves in a specific way to subjects understood as practical agents. According to Westerman, this emergence of the concepts of meaning and sense in Husserl (and then also in Lask) as "inextricable from the being of objects" (W 59) in connection with a new concept of intentionality, makes it possible to interpret capitalism as something beyond its being a "mode of production." On the contrary, capitalism is a *world* (though Westerman does not discuss this central phenomenological notion) that is constituted by meaning, which, conceived in practical terms, equals culture: "When Lukács refers to 'consciousness,'" Westerman suggests, "he is in fact referring to something similar to the anthropological notion of *culture*, which refers to 'the

unifying pattern of an entire society” (W 14). The concept of intentionality can thus function as a *social* concept. As Westerman writes, “social practices constitute meaningful objects as meaningful by the ways in which they direct subjects towards objects. Subjectivity, then, is defined by these practices” (W 4). In a move that may surprise many readers, Westerman elegantly ties all of the foregoing together with Husserl’s theory of whole and parts as this is elucidated in his *Logical Investigations*. This Westerman argues leads back to Lukács’s concept of totality, insofar as “the significance of social objects comes from the relations they stand in, not from their material properties” (W 119). As a consequence, the turn towards intentionality as a an “act”<sup>3</sup> in which subject and object are embedded, undercuts any subjectivist interpretation of Lukács. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that Westerman rejects Fichtean readings of Lukács (W 163). He also shows how Lukács’s move towards a phenomenological Marxism cannot be grasped without taking into account his philosophy of art and its relation to the work of such prominent art historians and theorists as Konrad Fiedler and Alois Riegl. Westerman claims that totality emerges in Lukács’s thinking first as a term that is applied to works of art as unities in which parts of the work “are defined in relation to the whole” (W 63). Even the concept of “standpoint,” which later re-appears in relation to the proletariat, is derived from his philosophy of art (65).

Though Westerman deals with the Neo-Kantian background of Lukács’s thinking, Kavoulakos brilliantly goes deeper into systematic connections with that tradition as echoed by Lukács concept of reification. Whereas Westerman understands reification as the horizon of meaningfulness that makes social actions possible, Kavoulakos argues that the central motive in Lukács is his critique of formalist and a-historical philosophies. The greatest achievement of Kavoulakos’s book lies in its reconstruction of Lukács’s neo-Kantian philosophical framework and of his conception of what constitutes society. Apart from Andrew Feenberg’s discussions this remains largely misunderstood in Anglo-American critical theory.<sup>4</sup> Central to this approach is Emil Lask’s concept of categories and of objectivity. As both Westerman and Kavoulakos emphasize, the concept of reification depends on Lukács’s reception of Lask’s theory of categories as something that can be reduced neither to subjective structures of reason nor to properties of metaphysically conceived beings.

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3. We should note that Husserl did not conceive of “acts” and “intentionality” as activities of a subject; practical acts, such as willing or desiring acts, are a subclass of acts.
  4. For this, especially, see chapter 4 in Andrew Feenberg’s *The Philosophy of Praxis*.

Instead, categories are constituted in social practices as something that appears to the social agents as already informing the framework of meaning in which they act (W 57).

In contrast to Westerman, who only discusses Lask's influence, Kavoulakos masterfully presents both the entire Neo-Kantian background of Lukács's social philosophy, and demonstrates how Lask's concept of objectivity (i.e., the "form of objectivity" (K 22)) leads to the concept of reification in Lukács. Kavoulakos also reconstructs in more detail how Lukács criticizes the formalism of existing materialism and epistemology on the basis of a more substantial concept of history and how knowledge can only be defined in relation to the historical moment in which it is constituted *as* social knowledge (K 73–82). With the influence of Lask in mind, reification can now be understood as the form of social objects that establishes the relation "between objects and persons that leans upon abstraction and objective calculation of qualitative properties" (K 119). It is in this sense that "the historical character of social relations" (K 131) vanishes behind the veil of reified, that is, abstract, social properties. Kavoulakos's reconstruction of the concept of reification is more helpful than Westerman's, since he places the concept within Lukács's Marxism, while Westerman's reference point is phenomenology. As a side note, one may wonder whether these two perspectives could not be tied together by referring to Husserl's *Crisis* (1936). Husserl's genealogy of the modern mathematization of nature might be joined to the analysis of the abstractions that the commodity form introduces into social life.<sup>5</sup>

As to the political and practical aspects of Lukács's theory and to the often criticized idea that the concept of the proletariat is based on a speculative philosophy, both Westerman and Kavoulakos defend Lukács. As Kavoulakos stresses, for Lukács the social revolution does not happen in an instant; instead, it requires a long process of social struggle, which can be thought neither as a top-down party process nor as unorganized movement politics. In addition, class consciousness is not a given: "for a dialectical theory of historical reality, class consciousness must be understood as a dynamic process unfolding through contradictions, inequalities, conflicts and regressions" (K 169). Consequently, Kavoulakos tries to downplay the meta-aspect of proletarian revolution in Lukács and speaks instead of a "transformative praxis" (K 172). "Praxis," as Kavoulakos has it, "anticipates social change, referring to a coming future. Transformative praxis recognizes and utilizes those tendencies that allow it to create

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5. Besides Andrew Feenberg, who demonstrated the connections between Marcuse and Husserl, more recently Ian Angus has moved Marx closer to Husserl; for this, see his "Critique of Reason and the Theory of Value."

the future" (K 173). Overall, this is a refreshing view, insofar as it defies the many simplistic readings of Lukács as someone who, whether from a Hegelian or from a Fichtean perspective idealizes, even mystifies, the historical process. As Kavoulakos makes clear, Lukács's approach to social struggle is dialectical: social change depends upon conditions in which it emerges as a historical *process*. In this light Kavoulakos cautions that we must carefully separate our historical situation from that of Lukács. In this regard these authors seem to disagree: for Westerman, Lukács's philosophy of praxis remains ultimately unsuccessful because he cannot show that the contradictions in social experience (which Westerman takes as a phenomenological concept) "*necessarily* lead to a revolutionary consciousness" (W 218). According to Kavoulakos, Lukács never assumed that such a necessity is in play; in fact he remains closer to Luxemburg than is often assumed.

In fact, both authors fail to indicate how we might operate with Lukács's theory within our own experiential horizon. One wonders how Lukács could help us politically to understand our own situation, which is characterized by environmental crisis, the reemergence of anti-democratic nationalist and authoritarian movements, the internationalization of communication, and an unprecedented level of inequality. How should we think about a contemporary transformative praxis in light of the pluralization of social struggles? And how should we solve the contradiction between global social problems and the democratic practices organized locally, as with workers' councils? What would this mean today?

One of the most problematic features of Lukács's thought is the unquestioned place of universal history. Despite contradictions in global capitalism, the ongoing presence of uneven development, and the persistence Eurocentric positions in regard to history, it is unfortunate that the authors never discuss Lukács's assumption that there is such a thing as "the" history.<sup>6</sup> Both authors are insufficiently critical of their subject. Though Kavoulakos's book is immensely rich and informative about Lukács, it fails to develop a true systematic horizon. The author does not locate Lukács's claims within the larger contemporary philosophical landscape of post-Marxist thought or French social philosophy, nor does he show how Lukács can be of use in contemporary debates within critical theory, though he does refer critically to a few contemporary philosophers,

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6. In addition, at least as far as I can see, both do not deal with the charge that Lukács's concept of reification fails on normative grounds, insofar as he is unable to differentiate between justifiable and unjustifiable rationalization. For this and Lukács's position within the Hegelian tradition in critical theory, see Todd Hedrick's masterful *Reconciliation and Reification*, 84–86.

such as Slavoj Žižek, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. Nonetheless, Kavoulakos's study is well researched, as and be seen in his use of the considerable literature (in English and German) on Lukács of the last fifty years. Though Kavoulakos's reconstruction is systematically and conceptually more forceful, Westerman's has its own strength as it depicts the wider historical context of Lukács's philosophy.

Without a doubt, these two books are the most important recent contributions to Lukács's scholarship in the English speaking world and should be studied by anyone who is interested in rethinking Frankfurt School critical theory from its roots in order to develop new philosophical basis for a critical theory to come.

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