

MARXIST

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ANIL BHATTI

Remembering Georg Lukács

Commemoration is an indispensable way of retaining the memory of the Marxist tradition in the context of the anniversary of the October Revolution.¹ The destruction of memory is part of the irrational assault on the palimpsest of history. This assault on memory is characteristic of fascist movements. Because it is not just a question of distortion which could be rectified but rather repeatedly creating a *tabula rasa*, a blank surface which can be arbitrarily filled by the fascist view of the world.

This is the context in which the review of the life and work of the great Marxist thinkers in the period between the two World Wars and the “resistible rise” (Brecht) of fascism becomes uncannily immediately relevant since the similarities with the situation in India today is so disturbingly immediate.

Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács in their separate though connected ways gave to Marxism in the 20th century that decisive theoretical momentum which made Marxist theory and praxis a real alternative to the ascendancy of barbarism. Of these Lukács and Gramsci had the closest direct links with the Communist parties of their times.

Lukács’ thought and the positions he took with all its fascination, ambivalences, questions raised still retain an extreme

¹ I have drawn on my earlier review of Lukács’ autobiography: *Gelebtes Denken. Eine Autobiographie im Dialog* by Georg Lukács and Istvan Eörsi, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 10. No. 10 (Oct, 1982), pp. 69-73; and ‘Marx, Sue Realism’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Marx Centenary Number (Mar, 1983), pp. 83-89.

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relevance in a period in which we are discussing the history of the entire communist movement and Marxism, criticising, revising, defending because it is not a part of an antiquarian past but a living presence, exiting, troubling, despairing, exhilarating.

This is why we continue to look upon Lukács in the way in which Walter Benjamin advised us to look upon Brecht. As a model. A model does not have to be copied, one does not have to agree with it completely, one can examine it critically, but with sympathy.

But the context of our commemoration of Lukács is also particularly significant. Most of Lukács' papers and documents and library are kept in the Lukács archives housed in his flat in Budapest. Overlooking the Danube this archive is a working space from which many publications have emerged and many more are forthcoming. There is a real threat that this unique repository which is the memory of the communist movement in Central Europe and the legacy of one of its greatest thinkers may be disbanded and dispersed by the present Right wing government in Hungary.

Though Lukács never wrote out a full autobiography the series of interviews he gave towards the end of his life as well as his sketch *Record of a Life* (1933) together with the self assessment of his early works make up the material we can deal with:

Letters and documents keep being published by the Archive, and at last the interrupted edition of Lukács's complete works has been resumed by the small and committed publisher *Aisthesis Verlag*.

The publication history of Lukács' works is in itself a fascinating story which reflects Central European and Hungarian political and cultural developments.

In one of his early diary entries Lukács quotes the German Dramatist Friedrich Hebbel: "*Esist das Zeichenbedeutender Menschen, dass sie zum gewöhnlichen auf ungewöhnlichen Wege gelangen*" which we can render inadequately

as: “It is the sign of important persons that they reach the usual (conventional, normal) in an unusual (unconventional, abnormal) way”.

Perhaps this is inevitable in our age, which Lukács, quoting Fichte called the “Zeitalter der absoluten Sündhaftigkeit” – Age of absolute sinfulness or degradation.

I

In 1971, in virtually the last months of his life, the 86-year-old Lukács drafted the outlines of an autobiographical sketch. Rapidly deteriorating health which prevented him from working with the required energy on the revision of his last theoretical effort, the *Ontology of Social Being*, also made it impossible for him to develop the sketch into a full-length autobiography. The editor tells us that the scrupulous scholar Lukács no longer had the strength to consult archives or libraries for material to confirm his memory. Following the advice of his students he recorded in May 1971 a series of conversations in which aspects of the sketch were amplified. Istvan Eörsi who has edited the volume, reports the extraordinary act of will and strength Lukács summoned in order to complete the interviews. Since all aspects could not be covered, Eörsi has collated earlier interviews he conducted with Lukács in order to provide chronological coherence and readability. This is of course philologically a problematical procedure which moreover strengthens the already large editorial presence and imposes an interpretative filter onto the sketch.

An editorial preface, the edited conversations and the sketch constitute the volume. The 40-page sketch with its telegram-style compression oscillates between discursive clarity, crypticopacity and tantalising hints. Reading it one turns to the conversational amplifications, editorial interpretations and returns to the sketch, fascinated by the scope and complexity of the material provided. It is the same fascination that emanates from Lukács’ books – a

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fascination that persists in the reader in spite of numerous and necessary differences of opinion.

Excerpts from the sketch were included earlier in an attractive pictorial biography (Budapest 1980, Stuttgart 1981), and more material from the Lukács Archive in Budapest has been published. (See the recent editions of the Yearbook of the International Lukács Society).

In particular the complete letters will tell us more about some aspects of his life, specially the great life-crises after his friend Irma Seidler committed suicide in 1911. The sketch and conversations contain forthright opinions on his contemporaries, and one of the coherent sections is a tribute to the role his wife Gertrud Bortstieber-Lukács played in his life, notably in the decision to join the Hungarian Communist Party.

The title “Gelebtes Denken” does not quite ‘click’ in English. Literally ‘Lived Thought’, it connotes the nexus between life and thought Lukács was trying to capture. The fact that the autobiography was never written out is a great loss, because Lukács was aware of the methodological problems of writing autobiographies to an extent often lacking in other writers of memoirs. The subjective nature of the autobiography lies for Lukács in its attempt to show “how in the context of a given development a person comes to himself (in the Hegelian sense of ‘*zusichkommen*’) or misses himself”. This has to be based on the objective corrective of temporal exactness. The chronology must be correct. The effort lies in capturing the specific essential lines of development. “*Not my life in its immediate sense. Only how (humanly how) from life this direction of thought, this mode of thought (this behaviour) towards life arose.*”, he says. The significance of past acts emerges from the heightened awareness of the point of view of the biographer. Lukács does not read meaning into past situations—that is how a positivist would look at it. Rather, the dialectics of reconstruction of the past allows the essential significance of past actions to emerge in their coherence. The actor is unable to oversee

the totality available to the autobiographical view. Individuality is neither the origin nor the goal. It is the complicated and difficult perspective of capturing how “individual qualities, inclinations, tendencies developing according to circumstances have tried to merge into the generic, species specific (*Gattungsmassigkeit*)”. The shade of Hegel lies unmistakably over these notes of a Marxist.

In the conversations Lukács insisted on the strong connection between everything in his life, on his organic development. The ‘author’ of the Autobiography capturing this organic development was both poet and philosopher. The philosopher’s abstraction and the danger of generalisation from spontaneous action much too early are counter-posed by the poet’s memory of concrete (!) feelings.

Lukács was born in 1885 in an affluent “pure Jewish family”settled in Budapest. The father was a rich and successful banker. Interestingly, he remarks that the Jewish background is precisely the reason why Jewish or Zionist ideologies had no influence on him. In common with the life styles of many other assimilated Central European Jewish families, Lukács’ family looked upon religion as ceremonial necessity, as a matter of home protocol. He relates his father’s ironic remark at the beginning of the Zionist movement that if a Jewish state were to be constituted he would like to be its counsel in Budapest. But protocol, whether resulting from religious conventions or social etiquette, with its attendant hypocrisy, was a matter Lukács revolted against spontaneously. He relates an amusing but extremely characteristic anecdote. As a small boy he waged a ‘partisan war’ against his strict mother who punished the children for their mistakes by shutting them in a dark room till they apologised.

His brother and sister immediately apologised, but Lukács differed sharply. If he was shut up in the morning he apologised quickly. But if he was punished after 1 pm he refused to apologise. The reason was simple. His mother wished to avoid tensions after his father got home at 1.30. The result was that he was let out

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without an apology before 1.30. He set protocol against protocol. One recognises the tactician Lukács.

The counter-world to domestic protocol was provided by the world of literature. At the age of nine he discovered the Iliad and Fennimore Cooper's novels. He sided instinctively with the losers, with Hector and the Mohicans against their conquerors. For Lukács this is important, because his father (whom Lukács otherwise liked and respected), as a successful banker, considered success as the criterion for right action. But from literature Lukács learned that there is no necessary relation between the two.

The road from a child's rejection of protocol and convention which are not rationally justifiable to a critique of society was a protracted process in the development of self-awareness. An important role in this was played again by modern literature. The discovery at the age of 15 of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Zola, Swinburne, Ibsen exerted a strong influence on him and helped him to grasp the connection between a critique of convention and a critique of social order within which it is situated.

A realistic assessment of his abilities seems to have characterised Lukács right from the beginning. He was obviously extremely precocious playing a public literary role even before he was 18. But he soon realised that he was not a creative writer and destroyed all his works at 18 and retained what he calls a secret criterion for literature: anything he could write himself was bad literature. Good literature started after that. Literary criticism and philosophy started absorbing his interest.

The sketch and conversations are full of interesting insights and assessments of his contemporaries, of political events and developments. But it is not possible for a reviewer to match the autobiographer in commenting on every portion and problem of the chronology. Instead we shall restrict ourselves to focussing on one important aspect: Lenin and the Road to Marx, which emerges with great clarity from the book. It is well known that the variation

of left wing philosophy called 'Western Marxism' has practically canonised Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). The sketch and conversations once again emphasise a position Lukács developed in numerous other writings. It was only after overcoming the limitations of *History and Class Consciousness* by studying Lenin that Lukács was able to take the road to Marx.

After his doctorate in Budapest (1906) Lukács studied and lived mainly in Berlin and Heidelberg, where, among others, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Paul Ernst, Emil Lask, Ernst Bloch were important friends and influences. Lukács characterised the theoretical position he had reached in the period before the First World War as a synthesis of "conservative epistemology and left wing ethics". His opposition to the war was total and led to a break in the friendship with many German colleagues who became victims of the nationalist fever. Lukács saw the war as a product of all the social forces he had hated since his earliest youth. For him the pseudo-consolidation in Europe till 1914 was, in Fichte's terms, "the age of complete (vollendet) sinfulness". His well known position was: "The German and the Austrian armies will probably defeat the Russians and the Romanovs will collapse. That is good. It is possible that the German and Austrian armies will be defeated by the English and French armies, and that the Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns will collapse. That is good. But who will then protect us from Western democracy?" It was a historical-philosophical position which led Lukács to, as he says "remain outside. Since more than the 'Theory of the Novel' as protest impossible for me. Sympathy for Jaures and Liebknecht without the slightest possibility of going their way."

Looking back, Lukács emphasises that what was missing was the Leninist perspective. The answer to his problem was provided by the October Revolution. He mentions in this context that the "honour of the International was saved almost exclusively by Lenin who announced that the task of the working class lay in

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overthrowing capitalism precisely in connection with the war. We were able to approach this insight exclusively via Lenin”.

After a period of hesitancy Lukács joined the Hungarian Communist Party and played an important role in the Hungarian Commune (1918/1919). But he emphasises that there was no real knowledge about Lenin in the Hungarian movement. It was only after the counter-revolution forced him to emigrate to Vienna for ten years that he started studying Lenin and realising his “real theoretical importance” and the importance of his “intellectual, practical, moral physiognomy”. “With the exception in a specific sense of Lenin”, Lukács notes, “no one has realised that the social emergence of the new man is a factual synthesis of all individual attempts at coming to terms in honest revolutionary manner with the new reality.”

Lukács’ Marx-Lenin studies in Vienna were conducted however in the context of the Hungarian Communist Party in exile trying to come to terms with the collapse of the commune. He caustically remarks that like the others he was a “messianic sectarian”, convinced that the world revolution would come the next day. This attitude influenced *History and Class Consciousness* towards ultra-left radicalism. Lukács notes: “Hope kept alive by actions.” Lenin’s rejection of his position made a profound impression on Lukács. Lukács repeats the criticism he made elsewhere too, that the basic mistake of the book was ontological. Since only social being is recognised and the dialectics of nature rejected, it missed precisely the universality of Marxism “which derives organic nature from the inorganic and through labour derives society from organic nature.” This, Lukács adds, is perhaps the reason why the bourgeoisie was so receptive to the book particularly during the student movement days (after 1968). From then on, helped by Lenin’s criticism, the establishment of the philosophical basis of the universality of Marxism became Lukács’ main concern which he was able to develop during his long stay at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow.

II

Among the various controversies Lukács was involved in, questions centred round the role of literature and art in the period of growing fascism still fascinate. Lukács's polemics with writers in Germany's union of proletarian revolutionary writers around 1931 played an important role in clarifying the Marxian understanding of realism and the writers' attitude to tradition. A large number of writers were involved in these polemics but the most illuminating counter-position to Lukács was perhaps documented by Brecht. It is extremely important to underline the fact that neither Brecht nor Lukács were "pure" theoreticians, or arm-chair academicians developing an aesthetics in the abstract. On the contrary, their theoretical and aesthetic ideas were deep-rooted in the political reality of their time and in the struggle of the revolutionary working class to permit concern with only "pure" aesthetic questions. Brecht and Lukács had to proceed from completely divergent conceptions in coming to terms with reality, but this divergence resulted from the fact that they represented two Marxian alternatives on the question of the role of art and literature in the era of the anti-fascist struggle.

In his Blum theses published in 1928, Lukács developed his conception of a "democratic dictatorship" of the peasantry and the proletariat as a revolutionary form of transition from the bourgeois revolution to the proletarian revolution. The theses developed the strategy and tactics required by the working class in a situation which is not immediately revolutionary. Lukács himself emphasized that the perspective embodied in the Blum theses characterized his theoretical efforts till the very end of his life. The Blum theses mark Lukács' break with his early left radicalism. Writing in 1928 to define the role of the communist party in Hungary after the collapse of the Commune, Lukács, unlike some other Hungarian communists (Bela Kun), came to be convinced that an immediate revolutionary situation did not exist in Europe and that the

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proletariat still had a long way to go before revolution could be on the agenda. Under such circumstances, Lukács concluded, bourgeois democracy was still a useful arena of struggle for the communists. Indifference to this arena was responsible for their lack of development. Lukács was already conscious of the question of alliances in class struggle nearly seven years before the seventh Comintern Congress accepted the people's front policy for fighting against fascism. The theses were criticized as right revisionist since the question of the hegemony of the working class and the role of the party in the period of transition were not spelt out (a careful reading of the theses permits the interpretation that Lukács simply presupposed this aspect). It is obvious how such a perspective made Lukács sensitive to the problem of alliances posed in the Sickingen debate and the related problems in aesthetics.

Brecht too had undergone considerable development by their thirties, from an anti-bourgeois playwright to a conscious Marxist (the didactic *play The Measures Taken* marks the transformation). Though he originally took the theoretically correct position that the proletariat could negate fascism, by 1935-1937 he realized that the people's front policy was the adequate tactical expression of the struggle against fascism in the epoch. But Brecht arrived at an equally strong commitment to the politics of the people's front from an aesthetic direction different from Lukács. Revolutionary writers and critics in the period immediately after the October Revolution were with a change in the function of art. This was a category which was theoretically the most concentrated expression of the striving for the new in the unity of political and artistic efforts. Hanns Eisler, the composer, for instance, spoke of the function of music as a social institution. Walter Benjamin demanded that "instead of asking how a work related to the relations of production of the epoch (conformity, reactionary, revolutionary) we should ask what is its position within them. The question concerns the function of a work within the literary production-relations of its time. In other words it is directly concerned with literary technique. This category

articulated the radical rupture with the past and a perspective for artistic activity which would pre-empt a slide back into the past.

In these interviews Lukács significantly discusses the role of Stalin. Lukács is of course fully aware of the necessity of a full critique of the Stalin era and the Moscow trials. In his 1957 postscript to *Road to Marx* (1933) he had emphasised the historical necessity of the trials and had reminded us that the central question then was the defeat of fascism and this was Lukács declared position. In the fragment he mentions that Ernst Bloch too in exile in America refused to side with Marxists who wanted to take up an anti-Stalin position. To weaken the Soviet Union by critique meant strengthening Fascism. In the conversations Lukács sees the real problems of the trials in the fact that they continued a tactical line beyond the period in which it was necessary. After the Bukharin trial the opposition was defeated, notes Lukács. “With Marx and Lenin, the basic line of social development in a specific direction was given. Within this basic line certain strategic problems result in every period. Within this basic line the tactical problems arise. Stalin reversed this order. He considered the tactical problem as primary and derived the theoretical generalisations from it”. But a full critique cannot ignore Stalin’s historical contribution. For Lukács it was extremely relevant that, in the philosophical debate initiated by Stalin against Deborin and his school, “Stalin represented an extraordinarily important position which played a positive role in my development.” Stalin attacked the Plekhanovian orthodoxy and rejected its claim to interpret Marx. He emphasised the Leninist position. Lukács extended the critique to Mehring’s incorporation of Kantian aesthetics into Marxism, and Plekhanov’s positivist aesthetics. The central point made by Stalin was directed against eclecticism, according to which Marx’s theory is relevant for socio-economic questions and requires “additions” for other areas. Lukács states: “I interpreted Stalin’s struggle against the Plekhanov orthodoxy to mean that Marxism is a universal Weltanschauung which therefore has its own aesthetics and which

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Marxism need not adopt from Kant or elsewhere". The Aesthetics and Ontology of Marxism were from then on Lukács' central theoretical concerns.

In one of his apocryhical sayings Lukács famously is supposed to have asserted that in all questions of theory and praxis it the the correctness of method that has primary importance. To put it drastically, a theory must be valid in terms of method first before other criteria are used. Revisionism is precisely the opposite. Here the outward 'results' are given primary importance and the method is relegated to a secondary place and it is a kind of addendum. Wrong decisions result from wrong methods. Lukács' insight into left wing radicalism as a combination of right wing epistemology and left wing ethics was an example of looking for the right method. So also his life long adherence to the distinction between surface appearances and essential truth. It was this which made it possible to work out the basic movement of history. In commemorating the memory of Lukács it is this which becomes important. His mistakes were many. But his insight into the importance was unique and this is something we can learn from.