



# The *post festum*-rationality of history in Georg Lukács' *Ontology*

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## Abstract

During the winter of 1968–69, members of the so-called Budapest School formulated a scathing “review” of Georg Lukács’ late work, *Ontology of Social Being*. In the wake of the objections (but not in accordance with them), Lukács began to revise the text, but was unable to complete it: he died in June 1971. The disciples’ critique, published in English and German in 1976, played a major role in the reception history of *Ontology*—or rather in the fact that the 1500-page “philosophical fiasco” still has no remarkable reception history. The main criticism of the disciples is that Lukács’ work mixes two incompatible ontologies and recalls the worst traditions of Soviet Marxism. In this paper, I will argue that the disciples’ “review” is misleading (nevertheless, the historical circumstances may provide a sufficient explanation for this) because there are no “two ontologies” in Lukács’ unfinished book. I will concentrate on the source of the misunderstanding, the Lukácsian thesis of the “*post festum*-rationality” of history, and in the light of this I will analyse how Lukács describes the open determination of individual and collective action in the process of the social reproduction of life.

**Keywords** Georg Lukács · Budapest School · Marxist Renaissance · Philosophy of history · Rationality of history

During the winter of 1968–69, members of the Budapest School met several times at Georg Lukács’ flat to discuss his late work, *Ontology of Social Being* with him. Its manuscript had already been typed, but had only been shared with the closest circle of disciples. Ferenc Fehér, Ágnes Heller, György Márkus and Mihály Vajda jointly drafted a devastating “review” that was shared with Lukács before the meetings. This document, entitled “Notes on Lukács’ *Ontology*”, was the starting point for their late-night debates. In the wake of the objections, Lukács began revising the text, which he himself considered to be long-winded and unstructured. According to his plans, he

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intended to replace the first chapters with a *Prolegomena*, however, this section also outgrew the original concept. He never managed to finish his book: he died in June 1971 (Fehér et al. 1983a, pp. 126–27).<sup>1</sup>

I think the disciples' critique is "superficial" (and this is not a new claim, although, only a few scholars think so).<sup>2</sup> Of course, this "superficiality" is telling. It had a different meaning in the late 1960s when it could have still helped Lukács to articulate his *unchanged* position more clearly.<sup>3</sup> It also had a different meaning in 1976, when the English and German translations of "Notes" were published shortly before the authors' emigration, when the Budapest School could already be considered "Marxist by descent only".<sup>4</sup> Also, it meant something else again in 1978, after the disciples' emigration, when the document was finally published in the *Hungarian Philosophical Review*, together with a paper written by István Hermann, the person responsible for creating Lukács' "official" (politically acceptable) image.<sup>5</sup>

"Notes" is characterised by a conspicuous lack of hermeneutic benevolence, but the "Sitz im Leben" of the document provides ample explanation for this attitude, therefore it is not the lack of benevolence that I would like to criticise here. The problem, in my opinion, is that the majority of the disciples' remarks reveal a fundamental confusion and disorientation, and a general unwillingness to connect the links in the chain of reasoning. The "proofreaders", tired of the text and did not follow Lukács' never-ending, circular train of thought at all (which is not surprising, since they were "terribly bored"—as Vajda wrote much later [Vajda 2017, p. 134]).<sup>6</sup> They simply picked out the formulas that fit into the linguistic tradition of "institutionalised Marxism", extracted them from their original context, and patched them together according to the theses of the "official philosophy", declaring that, unfortunately, the whole stream of text carries vulgar Marxist material of insurmountable "ideological prejudices" (Eörsi 1976, p. 11).

The central objection in "Notes" is that Lukács' *opus postumum* mixes two irreconcilable ontologies. In fact, Lukács distances himself in every chapter of his book from the mechanistic-materialist historico-philosophy of "traditional Marxism" and

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Heller 1999, pp. 307–09. Although Márkus "does not consider himself a disciple of Lukács, either biographically or doctrinally" (Kis 2021, p. 77), I include him among the "disciples" here and below, for the sake of simplicity (since he belonged to Lukács' most intimate circle). I do the same with Zádor Tordai, although he was a disciple of Gábor Gaál in Cluj (cf. Tordai 1977, pp. 140–44) but later had close ties with the Budapest School (Heller 1999, pp. 299–300, p. 302, p. 388). I also include the members of the so-called "Lukács Nursery" among the disciples.

<sup>2</sup>First, Nicolas Tertulian stresses that the authors of "Notes" "do not understand the real intentions of the work": Tertulian 2011, p. 33; see also Tertulian 1995, p. 159; Tertulian 2006, pp. 31–32.

<sup>3</sup>Although, the authors of "Notes" claim that Lukács agreed with many of their objections, including the allegation of "two ontologies" (Fehér et al. 1983a, p. 128), in fact the *Prolegomena*, written after the debates, testifies to the opposite: Lukács did "not deviate one iota from his fundamental positions" (Tertulian 1995, p. 149).

<sup>4</sup>This formulation is taken from the Samizdat of György Bence and János Kis: Rakovski 1983, p. 244.

<sup>5</sup>Hermann praised *Ontology* and called it a "breakthrough" but he also distanced himself subtly from the work, while performing the "compulsory exercises" that elevated the "mature" Marx above the "young" one (Hermann 1978, p. 86, p. 84).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. with the words of Ágnes Heller: "Das erste Kapitel über die *Arbeit* enthielt noch ein paar recht interessante Gedanken, aber die Fortsetzung wurde immer verworrener" (Heller 1999, p. 308). I can only interpret this statement in the light of the "terrible boredom" mentioned by Vajda.

all its simplifying tendencies that can be traced back to Engels' "faulty interpretations" and Marx's "external concessions" as they were seeking to affect the masses.<sup>7</sup> However, the Budapest School argues that it is precisely this vulgar materialist logicisation of history that dominates the beginning of Lukács' late work. According to the disciples, the laws of social life process in the "first ontology" prevail with logical necessity and they inevitably direct history to its destination, albeit "through human mediations and, on the phenomenal level, with numerous variations" (Fehér et al. 1983a, p. 137). Indeed, "Notes" suggests that Lukács often distorts even this classical "Hegelmарxist" conception,<sup>8</sup> and his metaphysics of history is highly nonsensical because it introduces "socio-historical laws *independent* of human activities" (Fehér et al. 1983a, p. 134), nevertheless such laws were not even promulgated by the dialectical materialism of the ideological panic codified in "Stalin's master narrative", the *Short Course*.<sup>9</sup>

The "first ontology" is, to be sure, unthinkable without other theorems familiar from the era of the "brutal manipulation"<sup>10</sup>—and in fact, these are also pointed out by the "proofreaders" of the book. Their review suggests that Lukács tends to rigidly contrast social being with consciousness, reducing the latter's function to mere reflection; he uses the categories of essence/phenomenon to deny the "superstructural" complexes any kind of autonomy and self-movement; he denies human autonomy, etc.

"Notes" claims that the "second ontology" becomes dominant in the middle of the "systematic chapters". In the last five hundred pages of his work, Lukács mostly refrains from "a mechanistic and fatalist over-extension of economic necessity" (Lukács 1978, p. 149). Instead, (as expressed in a severe judgement of the "Lukács Nursery" published later) he presents "trivial generalities" with "deadly seriousness": e.g. "that the social determination of human action does not exclude the existence of alternatives, and it is indeed possible to choose between alternatives" (Rakovski 1983, pp. 190–91); or that the historical succession of social formations is not predetermined by logical-metaphysical laws because the "main tendencies" also emerge from a social synthesis of *alternative* teleological positings.

Let me say at the outset that I find the claim about the "two ontologies"—or "ontological schizophrenia" (Takács 2013, p. 246)—untenable: there is no trace in

<sup>7</sup>For a related critique of Engels by Lukács, see Lukács 1978, pp. 109–110, 150–151; on Marx's "episodic inconsistencies" see OGS I, pp. 301–302. (For those chapters of *Ontology* that have already been published in English, I refer to the English edition [Lukács 1978]. In other cases, I refer to the German edition [Lukács 1984–1986].)

<sup>8</sup>The term "Hegelmарxism" (*Hegelmарxismus*) is used mainly in the German discourse criticising the "Hegelian" Marx interpretations after the 1960s (cf. Behrens–Hafner 1993). Here, I use this phrase in a different context, referring only to the fact that, in Lukács' words, traditional Marxism also "succumbed to the fascination with Hegel's logicization of history" (Lukács 1978, p. 109).

<sup>9</sup>The phrase "Stalin's master narrative" is a reference to the title of the critical edition of the *Short Course* (Branderberger and Zelenov 2019). Stalin (citing Marx's Preface to his *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859) writes of laws of development that take place "spontaneously, unconsciously, independently of the will of man", not of laws that are even detached from human action (Branderberger and Zelenov 2019, p. 270).

<sup>10</sup>"The age of brutal manipulation" is a phrase Lukács uses as a synonym for Stalinism, see OGS II, p. 690 (and elsewhere).

Lukács' work of a dogmatic historico-philosophy that fetishises social laws. Neither can I agree with the disciples' verdict that nothing more but "empty talk" of the banal-humanist Marxism of post-Stalinist meltdown can be salvaged from this "pile of rubble".<sup>11</sup>

In my view, most of the points in "Notes" are untrue and misleading. However, I am not going to refute them systematically as that would be of little interest. I will concentrate only on the main source of the misunderstandings of the Budapest School and its "friendly entourage", namely Lukács' teaching of the *post festum*-rationality of history.

Since my essay does not intend to give a comprehensive overview of *Ontology*, a few themes, even if of central importance, will only be discussed either in passing or not at all. For instance, the concept of labour as a process of "teleological positings" and as the model of social practice will be such; or the issue of "secondary teleological positings" as the genesis of historically evolving control/regulation systems of social reproduction; or the question of the ontological primacy of the economic sphere and its relationship with the different ideological spheres, i.e. the dialectic of essence and appearance; or Lukács' theory of value; or his theory of alienation, etc. All these points could entail a detailed analysis.<sup>12</sup> Here, however, I shall merely confine myself to removing the major obstacles that, at least in that line of reception history that was influenced by the Budapest School, still stand in the way of the reappraisal of the work.

It was not difficult to misread Lukács' book if we consider when and where it had been written. It was especially easy to misread it in the era of the "Changing Evidences",<sup>13</sup> when East-Central Europe waved goodbye to its "non-European" decades, so that, after the hoped-for "rapid catch-up", history could finally end.<sup>14</sup> However, perhaps fifty years after Lukács' philosophical "failure" (Heller 1983, p. 190), it is easier to re-enter into a dialogue with the ontological theory of the evolution of social being (and, indeed, with the – also unpopular—Lukácsian notions of rationality

<sup>11</sup>For the metaphor "pile of rubble", see Heller 1999, p. 309; cf. Kis 2017, p. 446. For the claim that *Ontology* is "empty talk", see Vajda 2017, p. 134.

<sup>12</sup>The essays in a recently published volume (Thompson [ed.] 2020) provide exciting new insights into the key concepts of *Ontology*. I find the examination of Lukács' theory of value in Murillo van der Laan's outstanding study to be a particularly important initiative (Van der Laan 2020), even though it focuses only on the notion of economic value. For me, the real question is whether, on the basis of Lukács' scattered and sketchy remarks, we can reconstruct the relationship between the economic and non-economic value spheres. I think we can, indeed. In my view, it is only in the light of this reconstruction that the "systematic" chapters of *Ontology* (on labour, reproduction, ideology and alienation) could be interpreted in a truly systematic way. For this, however, it is also essential to reconsider how the old Lukács specifies and further develops the Hegelian–Marxian dialectic. The essays of Sergio Lessa and Michalis Skomvoulis are excellent starting points for answering this question (see Lessa n.d.; Skomvoulis 2020). I will try to show all this later.

<sup>13</sup>This is a reference to the title of Mihály Vajda's work (*Változó evidenciák. Útban a posztmodern felé*, i.e. *Changing Evidences: Towards Postmodernity*) published in 1992.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. with the words of Mihály Vajda: "Eine Welt, die ich in meiner Jugend als den Hort der fortgeschrittensten europäischen Tradition aufgefaßt hatte, zeigte sich für mich als etwas nicht europäisches [...]" (Vajda 1991, p. 227). For the slogan of "rapid catch-up", see also Vajda: "Meiner Wertwahl zufolge besteht der einzig entsprechende Ausweg in einem raschen Anschluß an Westeuropa" (Vajda 1991, p. 14).

and irrationality), provided that history has not yet ended, and thus there still may be some legitimacy for a “philosophy of history *after* philosophy of history”.<sup>15</sup>

It may be clear from this formulation that, in my opinion, Lukács' ontological theory of the evolution of social being is *not* a philosophy of history. For Lukács, “philosophy of history” is an umbrella term for classical historico-teleological conceptions (from Lessing to Hegel) as well as for vulgar-economic metaphysics of history (from the Second International to Stalin). In his reading, Marx did not have a philosophy of history. It is to be expected, therefore, that Lukács himself should beware of such fallacies considering that the aim of his late undertaking is merely the reconstruction of the “lost” tradition, i.e. the “Marxian ontology of social being”.

Naturally, to “reconstruct” this ontology, Lukács has to place the emphases on the different text-groups of the Marxian oeuvre in a particular way. His exciting solution would deserve a detailed analysis, but here I must limit myself to a cursory sketch of the context and the most important points.

## Reconstructing the lost tradition

The Hungarian “Marxist Renaissance”—and, as far as I can judge, its wider “family”, i.e., the family of the East-Central European schools of “Marxist humanism” in general—unanimously rejected the thesis of a “rupture” between the “young” and the “mature” Marx (because not only is it philologically unjustifiable,<sup>16</sup> but its role in the “bourgeois” versus “Stalinist” canon-building practices is also embarrassing). Instead, they argued (unsurprisingly) for a continuity linking the different periods of Marx's thought.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the banal truth of the continuity of the oeuvre itself can be defended in several ways. After all, the post-Stalinist “new orthodoxy” also took the position of continuity, as attested by the ambitious, thorough works written by Nikolai Lapin or Teodor Oiserman at the level of the “high culture” of dogmatism.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, both “humanist” and “official” Marxism refuted “the myth of the two Marxes” (Lapin 1974, p. 426), but with characteristic differences. The “humanists” discovered in the *Paris Manuscripts* the anthropological, historico-philosophical core of the whole work of Marx: the theory of the overall humanisation of “human essence”, with the prospect of becoming a “total man” corresponding to the “image

<sup>15</sup>I have borrowed this term from Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner (“Geschichtsphilosophie nach der Geschichtsphilosophie”, see Kittsteiner 2000), although he uses it in a quite different context.

<sup>16</sup>Note that a significant part of Marx's manuscripts was still inaccessible at this time, so that “there is no Marx philology”—as Zádor Tordai wrote (Tordai 1970, p. 17), and as Lukács repeatedly emphasised: “Riazanov told me in the early 1930s that the manuscripts of *Capital* would make ten volumes altogether, and that what Engels published was only a part of this mass of manuscripts” (Lukács 1978, p. 169). Cf. OGS I, pp. 109; 301–302; Pinkus 1975, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. the works of Central and Eastern European contemporaries such as Adam Schaff and Leszek Kołakowski in Poland, Karel Kosík in Czechoslovakia or Gajo Petrović and Mihailo Marković in Yugoslavia: Schaff 1965, pp. 7–66; Kołakowski 1977, p. 290 (although this study was written after Kołakowski's Marxist period); Kosík 1976, pp. 99–100; Petrović 1967, pp. 31–51; Marković 1974, p. 13; Bence et al. 1992, pp. 383–406.

<sup>18</sup>See e.g. their monographs on the “young Marx”: Lapin 1974, especially pp. 423–46; Oiserman 1980, especially pp. 8–33, and pp. 329–50.

of the developmental possibilities of the human being".<sup>19</sup> It was a theory from which Marx later distanced himself because of its "idealistic manner". Yet, since he understood human "essence" from the outset as a *historical process* of working out all human needs, capacities and pleasures in the social reproduction of life, he never had to break with this concept—on the contrary, it was precisely this thought that opened the way to the critique of political economy.<sup>20</sup>

The "new orthodoxy" took a different approach. As opposed to the "revisionist" overemphasis on continuity,<sup>21</sup> it discussed Marx's writings in Lenin's footsteps, i.e., on the basis of the organising principle of "successive milestones" in the straight line of Marx's theoretical development (Lenin 1964, pp. 43–91, especially pp. 80–91). Even though it also rejected the idea of an "epistemological break" (Althusser 2005) that would split the oeuvre, it finally had to conclude that there was no specifically Marxist element in the young Marx's work, and that the superiority of the "sober scientist-economist" of *Capital* was indisputable.<sup>22</sup>

Now, Lukács, who never knew "two Marxes",<sup>23</sup> had a more nuanced relationship with the Marxian text-groups than either of the two "camps" mentioned above. In his (re)construction of the ontological tradition, he basically relied on the 1857 Introduction of *Grundrisse*, especially on its methodological section. On the one hand, he wrote a focal chapter—the closing one—on the young Marx's main theme, viz. alienation, while explicitly objecting to the absolutisation of this category, namely to its application as a "central conflict scheme" (OGS, p. 513) encompassing all forms of oppression (i.e. Lukács used the mature Marx's "inflationary" concept of alienation).<sup>24</sup> While on the other hand, Lukács also read *Capital* with a critical eye. He regarded the passages containing "historico-philosophical slag" (above all the chapter on "the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation") as "external" and "minimal concessions" made for the sake of popularity (OGS I, p. 301), which have no constitutive significance for the critique of political economy.<sup>25</sup> In addition, he assigned

<sup>19</sup>In other words, even the early Marx was not an idealist advocate of the loss and "reappropriation" of a "definite pre-existing essence", as Althusser reads him: Althusser 2005, p. 226. Cf. Márkus 1978, pp. 82–83. For the Marxian concept of the "total man", see, for example, the study by the Polish Marxist humanist Marek Fritzhand: Fritzhand 1965.

<sup>20</sup>"In diesem Sinne eben kann man die Anthropologie des jungen Marx den Schlüssel zu seiner Ökonomie und, analog, zu seinem ganzen späteren Schaffen nennen" (Schaff 1965, p. 41). See also Tordai 1970, pp. 17–41. On the concept of essence, see above all Márkus 1978, pp. 36–59.

<sup>21</sup>"Ob nun die Marxschen Frühschriften den Werken des reifen Marxismus gegenübergestellt oder ob die qualitativen Unterschiede zwischen beiden verwischt werden—im Endeffekt läuft es auf dasselbe hinaus" (Oiserman 1980, p. 19).

<sup>22</sup>For a "praxisphilosophical" critique of the dichotomy between the "abstract philosopher-dreamer" and the "sober scientist-economist", see Petrović 1967, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup>"Rightly or wrongly, I had always treated Marx's works as having an essential unity" (Lukács 1972, p. xxvi).

<sup>24</sup>Here, I paraphrase Michael Heinrich, who writes of the mature Marx's "inflationary use of the concept of alienation" (Heinrich 2014, p. 142).

<sup>25</sup>By the phrase "historico-philosophical slag," I paraphrase the authors Christoph Lieber and Axel Otto (Lieber and Otto 1996, p. 58), who have recently argued (like Lukács) that Marx no longer had a philosophy of history when he developed his critical economic theory. This is also the view of Michael Heinrich (Heinrich 1996, 2014, pp. 148–52) or Thomas Lutz Schweier (Schweier 1996), in contrast to e.g. Helmut Reichelt (Reichelt 1996).

much more importance to the 1877 letter from Marx to the editors of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, in which Marx sharply distanced himself from the super-historical over-generalisation of *Capital* (Lukács 1978, p. 108), than to these passages.

In close connection with this, Lukács also rejected the tradition of the Marxist collapse theories that sought to prove the inevitability of the final catastrophe of capitalism on the basis of Marx's crisis theory (or rather crisis theories).<sup>26</sup> He only concentrated on a few paragraphs of *Theories of Surplus-Value*, namely on the abstract concept of crisis, which describes a destructive and productive process of restoring the unity of production "violently" when imbalances in the distribution of total social labour between different economic sectors arise that threaten the reproduction of social totality (Lukács 1978, p. 104; OGS II, pp. 143, 282, 305–06, etc.).<sup>27</sup> Lukács repeatedly stressed that the specifically capitalist form of the sociality of labour (i.e. the fact that the social interconnection of "private labours" of apparently independent commodity producers can only be realised *post festum*, in the exchange of commodities) is the form of crisis itself. Nevertheless, in the early 1920s he had already argued that there is no crisis in which capitalism could not find a "purely economic" solution (Lukács 1972, p. 306).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, he considered this to be particularly true at the time of writing *Ontology*, "in this universality of capitalism", in which "the interest of total capital is expressed more directly than before, [...] and can therefore—precisely in its contrast to the interests of the individual capitalists or capitalist groups—[more easily] be grasped and put into practice" (OGS II, p. 283).

These, therefore, are the elements of tradition that Lukács makes use of when he examines, on the one hand, the reproduction of the individual and, on the other, the reproduction of the social totality, the interrelation of these reproductive movements and the tendencies that unfold from them, in short, when he (re)constructs the Marxian ontology of social being: the ontologically revised anthropology of the young Marx; the carefully corrected critique of political economy of the mature Marx, purged of the historico-philosophical "inconsistencies"; and the methodological outline of *Grundrisse* (as well as its sections analysing the formations that precede capitalist production). Lukács strikes a delicate balance between these elements, a balance that, in my opinion, is not disturbed by any "ideological prejudices". If my analysis is correct, this in itself precludes Lukács from thinking in terms of a sequence of social

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<sup>26</sup>The crisis theory of Marx does not exist. As for his divergent crisis analyses, his interest in them has diminished over time. The theoretical status of his crisis concept based on "the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall" is also disputed (it is certainly not as substantial as it seems in the version of the text that resulted from Engels' massive editorial work on the manuscript). For all this, see Clarke 1994, pp. 246–78; Bensch 1995; Heinrich 1995, 2014, pp. 341–70. In Marx interpretations committed to philological accuracy, it is now generally argued that Marx, by deepening his critical economic insights, abandoned his early "collapse theory". A different view is taken by theorists of *Wertkritik*, see e.g. Kurz 2012.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Marx 1968/500–02, p. 509, p. 515.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. with Lenin's words (often quoted also by Lukács): "There is no such thing as an absolutely hopeless situation" (Lenin 1966, 227).

formations similar to a “train schedule”, the last station of which will be socialism due to an immanent economic necessity.<sup>29</sup>

It is worth reiterating that in this sense, the ontological theory of the development of social being is not a philosophy of history. Lukács perhaps repeats nothing more often than the notion that the irreversible process of social being itself has no goal (see also Lukács 1975). From his point of view, only the past is revealed, not the future: the past of man’s becoming man in the social reproduction of his and her life. As I will show below, Lukács does not risk any hyper-rationalist excess by drawing those ontological developmental lines that are most important to him: he does not want to “explain” history with them, but rather offers an alternative to vulgar Marxist explanations of history.

## The ontological theory of the development of the social being

I think that the authors of “Notes” may have discovered “two ontologies”—including a mechanistic-fatalistic “false doctrine”—in Lukács’ late work because they misinterpreted the reasoning about the *post festum*-rationality of history (they ignored the moment *post festum*). In fact, Lukács was convinced that only irrational thought, “breaking down in the face of reality” (Lukács 1981, p. 99), could doubt that history would prove to be rational in hindsight. In addition, as I have emphasised, we should not be surprised that after 1968, in the last phase of the “negative dialectic of Marxism” (Fehér et al. 1983b, p. 329), the members of the Budapest School rejected this thesis without further ado; that they saw in this nothing more than the apologetic metaphysics of a “comfortable orthodoxy” (Bence et al. 1992, p. 18). However, if the historical situation no longer “forces” us into the above-mentioned confusion and disorientation, we can at least ask: what does rationality mean? What does it mean that history turns out to be rational *post festum*? Also, what does history itself mean in this context? To what “depth” does Lukács rationalise “facts” and why? In what follows, I will try to explore these questions.

According to Lukács (and in line with the whole history of the concept of rationality), a process can be called rational if it is recognised as necessary or, in other words, lawful. However, this does not say much because in the different ontological spheres of being—in inorganic and organic nature, as well as in the realm of social being—there are completely heterogeneous kinds of necessity. We must, therefore, differentiate the concept of law. For there is no “physics” of social being, and as its complexity increases, the ontological falsity of natural analogies that are supposed to shed light on the social life process becomes more and more obvious.<sup>30</sup>

To take everyday examples: if a trade union calls for a strike to raise wages or if a crisis makes people sell their securities, from an “abstract-epistemological point

<sup>29</sup>For the metaphor “train schedule”, see Márkus 1978, p. 52: “In this conception history is depicted, at best, on the analogy of an unreliable train schedule in which it is fixed naturally in advance, at what stations the train will arrive, only the time of arrival cannot be altogether taken for granted.”

<sup>30</sup>Lukács returns to all this many times; here I will only refer to a few passages: Lukács 1978, p. 98; OGS I, p. 305; OGS II, pp. 224–225.



of view” these are causal relations, too. It is clear, however, that these urgent challenges did not determine anything unambiguously, they merely confronted the actors with choices and forced them to respond. Nevertheless, the decisions were certainly not taken in the abstract freedom of “absolute possibility”. *This* strike and *this* crisis could only occur in a concrete institutional and normative environment of the “social *hic et nunc*” (in Hegel’s words: in a concrete—conscious and unconscious—order of “ethical powers”), which, of course, opened up a concrete scope of possible answers. In the realm of social being, therefore, necessity—i.e. the necessity of “if-then”—cannot mean anything other than that the constellation of certain factors “here and now” shapes the field of possibilities in a certain way and in this particular field the everyday tasks of the social reproduction of life are to be solved. *Post festum*, in principle, it is possible to identify the objectively effective set of (an infinite multitude of) conditions, and it is also possible to conclude that, once these factors have become effective, the fields of possibilities must necessarily have been arranged in one way or another. Nonetheless, it goes without saying that the factors themselves did not necessarily fit into this constellation because they were not in the least predetermined to do so by their own space of action—while their space of action can also be shown *post festum* to have been necessarily arranged in this way and not otherwise because of the interplay of the conditions (and so on).

There is nothing in all this that goes beyond the methodology that has “always” been applied in historical sciences. Yet, as the authors of *The German Ideology* wrote: “a summing-up of the most general results” (Marx and Engels 1976, p. 37) is already a philosophical achievement in its own right. Lukács, therefore, maintained that the ontological theory of the development of social being must concentrate on the “most general laws” of this sphere of being. Ultimately, we can only speak of such laws because the historical process is the result of a synthesis of activities of people who have reproduced their lives under the specific conditions of a social *hic et nunc*, and “who accordingly possess definite aptitudes, skills, abilities, etc., and who can only behave and adapt accordingly” (Lukács 1978, p. 65). Hence, even if a catastrophe destroys most of the social objectifications structuring the current field of possibilities, the new spaces of action will not open up in a vacuum of total historical discontinuity, provided that (at least partially) these spaces will also be populated by a group of individuals capable of community formation and reproduction and socialised at the level of “the concrete normality” before the cataclysm.

Thus, the always open determination of human action gives a certain content and “direction” to the necessity of “if-then” and this necessity does not exclude alternatives. On the contrary, it prevails through alternatives and gives rise to some “main tendencies” (see below), which, *post festum*, once reason has grasped the unrepeatable uniqueness as well as the comprehensible regularity of the total process, can also be interpreted in a law-like relation of “if-then.”

As to our second question: history is not “rational in general”. Its “concrete rationality” “arises”, Lukács argues, in the work of knowledge itself (Lukács 1978, p. 102), and remains in the process of arising, since it must be subjected to a “permanent and constantly repeated ontological criticism” (Lukács 1978, p. 105). However, this view – namely that such investigations can in principle never be completed—has nothing to do with the defeatism of irrational thinking that shies away from analysis

and “deepens” problems into mysteries (cf. Lukács 1981, pp. 263–64). The infinitely approximate character of knowledge expresses the fact that even the most carefully elaborated narrative of “if-then” is inevitably simplistic, and its extension or “meta-physical extrapolation” is impermissible.

In the light of the above, we may no longer be surprised by even Lukács’ most provocative formulations, such as the following passage, which the disciples declared nonsensical: “While it is true that classical antiquity arose with a real necessity [*Seinsnotwendigkeit*], and was just as necessarily replaced by feudalism, etc., it cannot be said that serfdom “follows” from slavery in any rational or logical sense” (Lukács 1978, p. 112).<sup>31</sup> In fact, this claim is not an example of the ideological use of language of a philosopher who “transforms his choice [of value] into law” (Tamás 1983, p. 155). One can only think this if one overlooks the historically concrete “if-then” character of the *post festum*-necessity corresponding to the ontological specificity of social being, and confuses the different concepts of law of the different spheres of being.

Only this misunderstanding can explain why the Budapest School placed the late work in the vulgar-cryptoteological tradition of the five-stage scheme of Marxist social formation theories. However, this tradition is completely alien to *Ontology*. This could have been made obvious by the mere fact (not to mention the lengthy explanations) that Lukács, when discussing the question of the Asian mode of production, directs his readers to the “excellent” monograph by Ferenc Tőkei.<sup>32</sup> Yet, according to Tőkei’s Marx interpretation, European antiquity is “not at all natural”: “the normal childhood of humanity” (Marx and Engels 1986, 48)<sup>33</sup> is unthinkable without the contribution of “special historical factors”. Also, it is rather the “social impasse” of Asia (OGS II, p. 265),<sup>34</sup> “its development within its stagnation”, that needs no further clarification (Tőkei 1979, pp. 17, 91). As Lukács emphasises, no law could have brought about the concurrence of the ontologically progressive, heterogeneous, infinite multiplicity of historical accidents that were the preconditions of European antiquity. And at all:

whether this particular “if” is present, and if so, in what connection, with what intensity, etc., can never be deduced [...] from a constructed system of economic necessities, but only from the just-being-so [*Geradesosein*] of the totality of social being in which these particular laws are effective. (OGS II, p. 268)

<sup>31</sup>I corrected the translation. Cf. the puzzlement of the authors of “Notes”: “incidentally, we do not understand how the “real necessity” [*Seinsnotwendigkeit*] of any process is distinguished from logical necessity” (Fehér et al. 1983a, p. 137).

<sup>32</sup>The title of Tőkei’s monograph (*Essays on the Asiatic mode of production*, 1979) is in itself a break with the Stalinist tradition, since after the Leningrad “debate” of 1931, the Asian mode of production was not to be considered a separate social formation until the mid-1960s. For a “new-orthodox” re-discussion of the issue, see Varga 1967, pp. 181–204; for more on the history of the Marxist research on the Asian mode of production, see Dunn 1982. For Lukács’ reference to Tőkei, see OGS II, pp. 261–262.

<sup>33</sup>This is a paraphrase, not an exact quote.

<sup>34</sup>“Asia” is not understood here as a geographical entity but as a principle inherent also in the history of European peoples.

It may be clear from all this that when Lukács talks about the general laws or general tendencies of social being (for law is the strongest tendency),<sup>35</sup> he does not mean historical driving forces that predetermine the succession of social formations and that (in Stalin's words) can at most be utilised, "harnessed" (Stalin 1953, pp. 7, 9) but will certainly find their way to the forefront. On the contrary, Lukács is looking for other kinds of historical ordering principles: he highlights ontological developmental lines that are explicitly detached from the five-stage narrative. In fact, the ontological theory of the development of social being should be understood as a counter-concept aimed at critically overcoming the dogmatic metaphysics of social formation theory. So, let us now take a look at these developmental lines.

Lukács focuses on three "very simple and elementary" economic tendencies (Pinkus 1975, p. 120) that can be identified without further ado: there is no need to prove them (Lukács 1978, p. 142) because the ontological fact of their unfolding cannot be denied once commodity exchange had become universal. (Of course, Lukács is also aware that *ante festum*, in the world of pre-capitalist communities, these processes were constantly restrained by the "irrational" objective functions of economic activities,<sup>36</sup> hence the ontological fact mentioned above was not a social reality at all for thousands of years.)

The developmental tendencies in question (evolving unevenly, with setbacks and detours) are the following. 1) Socially necessary labour time required for the reproduction of human life is—at global level—on the decline. 2) Simultaneously, passive forms of adaptation to non-human environments are gradually being marginalised. It is becoming more and more characteristic of social reality that the conditions for the reproduction of life are no longer provided directly by nature, but are themselves objectified human activities, interconnected by increasingly complex mediating structures "striving" for more and more uncontrollable internal autonomy, which also entails the total socialisation of human "nature", and a constant differentiation and change of human capacities and needs. 3) The initially (and for a very long time) self-sufficient, isolated small communities are, in the process of humanising both external and internal nature, expanding into ever more comprehensive integrations, their economic interdependence is deepening, and the emergence of the world market already contains the seeds of a real social unity of humanity, "at least in a general economic way" (Lukács 1975, p. 32).<sup>37</sup>

There is no doubt that in one or another passage of his redundantly repetitive (but on the whole very nuanced) argumentation, Lukács fails to emphasise over and over again that he can only observe an "undeniable" progress from the historical height of the universality of capitalism; that the process from a socio-ontologically

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<sup>35</sup>In the Marxian analysis of social reproduction, law is nothing but the most powerful tendency. This was also evident for the "official" Marxists, see, for example, the study of the elderly Eugen Varga: Varga 1982, pp. 105–22. It is all the more elusive why the authors of "Notes" create an exclusive opposition between the two concepts (Fehér et al. 1983a, p. 149). In this way, at least, they step outside the Marxist conceptual framework but it remains unclear where.

<sup>36</sup>Irrational from the point of view of the logic of capital.

<sup>37</sup>Lukács listed and analysed these tendencies many times, in most detail in the Reproduction chapter of OGS II, but see also e.g. OGS I, pp. 256–265; OGS II, pp. 326–327; Lukács 1975, pp. 31–32; Pinkus 1975, pp. 120–123. Cf. also Mihály Vajda's article on the "actuality of ontology" a few months before "Notes" was written: Vajda 1968, pp. 31–32.

lower to higher level can only be proven “irresistible” *post festum*; and that even the strongest tendencies, i.e., the “laws”, cannot be exempt from the constantly repeated ontological criticism. However, there is also no doubt that he explains this just enough to make the concept itself clear.

Thus, when Lukács argues for the *post festum*-rationality of history, he has these three main tendencies mentioned above in mind. That is, he does not rationalise history in its full “depth”, “in general”. On the contrary, he points out that the more forcefully these laws exert their effects, the more they multiply the contingencies that cannot be further rationalised (Lukács 1978, pp. 97, 99).

First, it has to be stressed that Lukács focused on these lines of development precisely in order to offer his readers a non-historico-philosophical counter-narrative to the historical teleology of traditional Marxism. This narrative should have been the guiding thread for the discussion of issues that were of central importance to the author (although the narrative is not suited to this role): issues relating to the incredibly complex interrelations between the two poles delimiting the reproductive process of society, i.e., the individual and the social totality. Lukács traces the whole history of man’s becoming man but he is, of course, mainly concerned with the latest phase of history, i.e., of its “transformation [...] into world history” (Marx and Engels 1976, p. 51), in which the self-regulatory dynamics of the capital-relation dismantle the pre-modern institutional and normative systems of controlling production and consumption, and draw the individual out of personal relations of dependence into relations of domination mediated by “things”. Lukács expounds over and over again the twofold process in which, on the one hand, the economic interdependence of communities and “illusory communities” (Marx and Engels 1976, p. 78) is constantly strengthening, and, on the other hand, the relative autonomy of complexes and partial complexes is also incessantly growing (cf. Marx and Engels 2001, pp. 59–60); and is tireless in his efforts to shed light on the fact that it is precisely in this increasing tension between micro-level rationality and macro-level anarchy where the fields of individual and social action become wider, albeit unevenly and in a highly contradictory way.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Lukács does not want to “mobilise” his readers, nor does he promise anything. He only seeks to create the theoretical preconditions for regaining the lost “practical pathos” of Marxist theory (OGS I, p. 112), for this pathos has evaporated. All that remained is a false pathos of ideologies preaching “abstract revolutions” and alternatives “in general” (OGS II, p. 723).

Lukács concludes that the theoretical and practical revolution to overcome the alienation (i.e., the contradiction between the wealth of human capacities and needs at the level of the species on the one hand and the poverty of capacities and needs at the level of the individual on the other) has gone astray, and a substantive analysis of this failure is definitely hindered by the self-exculpatory narrative centred on Stalin’s personality cult (OGS II, p. 499). Instead of realising “the ontologically true counter-image”, alienation tendencies were actually duplicated, resulting in a heterogeneous

<sup>38</sup>“Je komplizierter, je weiter verzweigt dieser Spielraum ist, desto entwickelter ist die Gesellschaft; je größer dementsprechend der persönliche Anteil des Antwortenden, desto entwickelter kann seine Persönlichkeit sein” (OGS II, p. 403).

plurality of the unchanged “capitalist” and the peculiarly new “Soviet-type” forms of alienation.<sup>39</sup>

It is indisputable that the author, in this “vacuum of life” (OGS II, p. 722) produced by the “brutal manipulation” in this “shameful situation” (OGS II, p. 706), does not “dare” to go further than to echo, consciously or unconsciously, the famous words of one of Lenin’s last speeches: “we must take advantage of every moment of respite from fighting, from war, to study, and to study from scratch” (Lenin 1965, p. 431). It could be argued that this is an embarrassing testimony to Lukács’ inability to confront reality, as members of the Budapest School and its “friendly entourage” claim (see e.g. Kis 2017, p. 445). Still, let us also add that it was in the workshop of this “embarrassing document” that the disciples acquired “the ability to confront”. After all, Lukács’ “will”, his “from scratch” attitude in the second half of the 1960s evokes a much more distant past than Lenin’s in November 1922. “[W]e are [...] 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”, he told Leo Kofler back in 1967 (Pinkus 1975, p. 62).

“The sole end” of Lukács’ philosophy of history after philosophy of history “is to comprehend clearly what is and what has been, the events and deeds of the past”, in the spirit of the Hegelian tradition (Hegel 1975, p. 26). If, ultimately, the philosopher who “paints its grey in grey” (Hegel 1991, p. 23) has no other word for “what is” than this “from scratch” mentioned above, purged of all “apologetic casuistry”, this does not falsify the *post festum*-rationality of history. In the infinite approximation of knowledge, this historical “impasse” will also be integrated into the order of “if-then” relations and will prove to be rational, i.e. necessary. In fact, this is precisely what *Ontology* aims to contribute to in its fight against the irrationality of history, against the “ideology of despair” (Lukács 1981, p. 82), and against the “ideology of de-ideologisation” (OGS II, p. 719) that lock the individual into particularity. Moreover, it not only contributes to, it actually embodies the process of infinite approximation through its never-ending investigation.

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<sup>39</sup>For the concept of the “ontologically true counter-image”, see OGS II, p. 283; for the “extremely complex problem” of the duplication of alienation tendencies, see OGS II, p. 691. In the above paragraphs, I have highlighted those issues discussed in Lukács’ *Ontology* that are also at the heart of the most exciting texts written by the members of the Budapest School during their Marxist period: Márkus 1964, 1978; Heller 1969, 2016; Fehér 1972, pp. 5–76; Tordai 1970, 1974, pp. 239–325. If *Ontology* is “empty talk” (as Vajda wrote), then so are these writings—but I do not agree with that at all.

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