Review

Lukács's phenomenology of capitalism: Reification revalued

Richard Westerman

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Lukács occupies an important position in the whole history of Western Marxism. The central category of reification Lukács puts forward in *History and Class Consciousness* has been criticized for its Romantic humanism. Centering on Lukács's concept of reification, Richard Westerman has done extraordinary and innovative work. Westerman's aim 'is to recontextualize Lukács within a quite different set of discourses, which are related by their attempts to explain meaning in terms of a formal structure independent of both subject and object' (p. x). In order to achieve this goal, Westerman reads the central essays of *History and Class Consciousness* in relation to the sketches of a philosophy of art Lukács produced while working in Heidelberg between 1912 and 1918. These provided key elements of the hidden philosophical scaffolding of his early Marxian theory. Westerman reinterprets Lukács's reification through the method of phenomenology, which sheds a very different light on his thought and presents us with a very different Lukács from the one we are familiar with. In this sense, the richness and heterogeneity of Lukács's 'legacy' is given its due.

The book is divided into three sections: (1) The Road to Reification, (2) The Phenomenology of Capitalism, and (3) Beyond the Proletarian Revolution. They, respectively, reinterpret Lukács's theory of social development, of social critique, and of social revolution.

The first section offers intellectual-historical justification for this reading of Lukács by examining the development of his thought in the years leading up to his embrace of Bolshevism. Westerman examines the drafting of a philosophy of art while studying at Heidelberg in the Weber circle. First, he identifies thinkers that Lukács engaged with extensively and explicitly and regards them as major sources of Lukács's thought. Lukács developed a 'phenomenological' model of analysis, using avowedly Husserlian language, to describe art, as well as the creative and receptive stances towards it. Lukács adumbrated a phenomenological ontology that treated the significance and meaning of objects as an inextricable part of what they

are so as to extend this model beyond art to social forms. Second, the Heidelberg drafts allow Lukács to begin to inch away from neo-Romantic ideas of the ‘soul’ as the basis of the subject. The Heidelberg drafts tend towards an over-coming of neo-Romanticism, because there is no theoretical subject outside totality. From the perspective of the existence of the artwork, the reality of the subject is defined by the relation in which it stands towards the object. Westerman contends that the methodological and conceptual framework Lukács developed later served as the basis of his analysis of commodity fetishism.

Next, Westerman examines the years between Heidelberg and *History and Class Consciousness* – that is, from his initial embrace of Marxism up to the publication of the book. Westerman holds that Lukács’s 1918 conversion to Bolshevism itself may well be explicable in terms of a Romantic anti-capitalism and messianic belief in revolution, but that his outlook had changed substantially by 1923. Westerman argues that the three new essays Lukács entirely rewrote for the book in 1922 show clear signs of a return to the intellectual framework of his Heidelberg years: the discourse represented by Husserl, Lask, Fiedler, and Riegl had shaped Lukács’s earlier work so thoroughly. He argues that ‘[I]t is possible, therefore, to analyze social being phenomenologically in terms of its own structure as a realm of meaningful existence, rather than simply as a reproduction or representation of a supposedly more true or “real” world beneath social forms’ (p. 103). Westerman maintains that Lukács’s intellectual development from before his conversion to Marxism until some years after *History and Class Consciousness* was not monolithic, linear, unidirectional, or clear. Lukács treats the commodity structure as the validity form of capitalist society by means of the paradigm he developed in the Heidelberg drafts so that he could enquire into social being in terms of its forms of validity as categories of existence.

The second section contains the substance of Westerman’s interpretation, in which he outlines a phenomenological version of Lukács’s thought. Westerman introduces three levels in Lukács’s theory. First, Lukács offers a directly phenomenological account, examining the ways specific objects appear or the individual’s direct relationship to the social world. Second, Lukács provides an ontic analysis – an account of the overall structure of reality under capitalism that governs the interactions of objects. Finally, Lukács explains this ontic account in terms of a deeper ontological explanation that understands the appearance of an objective reality and its determination of the subject in terms of a definite orientation towards reality. Westerman holds that Lukács identifies the commodity form as the decisive phenomenological structure of capitalism: ‘This is the core of reification – a structure of consciousness produced by a phenomenological social form, rather than by the actions of subjects’ (p. 128).

With the help of the analytical model in Heidelberg drafts, Lukács uses Husserl and Lask to deal with Hegelian and Marxian problems. Marx firmly argues that society can be examined through its structure of relations and practices. Lukács

discovers Hegelian ontological categories – he treats society as a level of being – in Marx’s social analysis, and uses this to distinguish between different modes of being in a way that allows him to treat social being as irreducible to bare material objects. But Husserl and Lask are needed to show how meanings as such – not just the very general ontological categories Hegel develops – are integral to social practices. Lukács’s commodity structure as a complete, logical system of validity shaping the being of objects draws on Lask’s model. Westerman comes to the conclusion that Lukács echoes Husserl, which renders Lukács’s account phenomenological rather than Neo-Kantian: Lukács describes social reality in terms of a structure of meaning that dictates the possibilities of subjectivity itself rather than relying on the creative powers of any subject external to objectivity.

Westerman turns, therefore, to the subject. He asserts that Anglophone commentators, such as Postone or Arato and Breines, have tended to attribute Lukács’s error to the excessive influence of German Idealism. So that Lukács’s argument rests on a subject external to social reality in essentialist or aprioristic fashion. Westerman, on the contrary, considers that we can find the great strength of Lukács’s approach by means of phenomenology: ‘The subject is not an entity with its own properties, but is instead a defined position within the overall phenomenological organization of consciousness, oriented towards objectivity in specific ways’ (p. 154). Only in this way can Lukács explain both objective social reality and the first-person perspective of the subject in ways that do not reduce either subject or object to one another, and that steer clear of a naïve overestimation of the subject. What makes the situation of the proletariat so distinct in Lukács’s eyes is not that their standpoint gives them greater knowledge of social structures assumed to exist objectively; rather, it is that the contradictory way in which they are defined fractures the coherent self-enclosure of society that makes it appear ‘real’ so that the proletariat could glimpse the falsity about society and break through reification.

In the final section, Westerman tries to apply this phenomenological reading of Lukács beyond the problems he tackles in *History and Class Consciousness*. Reinterpreting this relationship phenomenologically, Westerman suggests, most of these criticisms are avoidable. Westerman takes Lukács back to Hegel and Marx and affirms their important contribution and influence on his work. Nevertheless, Westerman insists that his phenomenological approach provides a unique way to read him, avoid many misunderstandings, and respond to many criticisms. As Westerman describes this, ‘Lukács’s phenomenology of social being is predicated on the differences between societal forms of objectivity’ (p. 287). Finally, the book offers a Lukácsian explanation of postmodernity in relation to the work of Fredric Jameson, and argues briefly that Jameson suggests a substantial concept of rationality that may be made available for critical theory. In this way, Westerman hopes not only to indicate Lukács’s renewed relevance today, but also to bridge the gap between Marxian critical theory and phenomenology more generally.

An exquisite laboratory, Westerman's book presents a complex but unique structure of thinking. Choosing the path of phenomenology, Westerman opens up a new interpretation of Lukács's reification and his theory. Where Westerman's phenomenological interpretation breaks new ground is in discovering all the nuances of consciousness that may be obscured by translating it as 'culture' as well as by returning to the existential-philosophical dimensions of Lukács's account. Meanwhile, he locates the question of the formal structure of consciousness, of social being, and of reality as a system of meaning-production at the center of the account. In this way he makes us aware of the potential richness of Lukács's thought. However, there are two points still worth noting. First, Westerman pays more attention to the similarities between Lukács's later thought and the phenomenology in the Heidelberg drafts, but more or less neglects the differences. The link between Lukács's theory and Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, as well as Lukács's misunderstanding of it, needs to be further clarified and explored. Second, it would have been interesting if he had elaborated specifically on the relationship between the phenomenological method and Marx's method: on the one hand, on the essential difference between the two methods; on the other, on the influence of the two methods on the different development stages of Lukács's corpus of work.

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