



Fidelity to the Event? Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and the Russian Revolution

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Abstract

The underlying assumption of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* is that “history” can be understood as a unified and meaningful meta-narrative, which can be read along the lines of a realist novel. Although the future is not guaranteed, the present contains “objective possibilities” which can be identified and realized through activist intervention in the world by those who are destined to “make” history, the proletariat. In the intervening century since the Russian Revolution, it has become impossible to read “history” as a singular, triumphalist story leading to human emancipation or identify any one group as its subjective agent. To salvage the revolutionary potential of Lukács' work, it has been read instead in terms of “fidelity to the Event” by such latter-day Leninists as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. But their recourse to a meta-historical notion of pre-figuration and future realization is itself no less beholden to a literary or rhetorical device, that of *figura*, which was traced by Erich Auerbach in originally religious terms.

Keywords Lukács · History · Event · Objective possibility · Realist novel · Figura · Badiou · Žižek

Georg Lukács' magnum opus *History and Class Consciousness* is, alas, unbearable to read a century after the revolution, the still ramifying implications of which it sought to explain and whose goals it hoped to foster. This was not always the case. When I first wrote about it in *Marxism and Totality* in 1984, I could describe it with admiration as “the charter document of Hegelian Marxism,” “a milestone in Marxist theory,” and “one of those rare synthetic visions that launch a new paradigm or problematic in thought, in this case Western Marxism” (Jay 1984, 84 and 103). Praise no less hyperbolic continues to infuse later accounts by commentators such as Slavoj Žižek, who wrote the postface to the translation in 2000 of Lukács' newly discovered defense of the book, titled “Tailism and the Dialectic.” “*History*

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and *Class Consciousness* (1923),” Žižek could still gush, “is one of the few authentic events in the history of Marxism” (Žižek 2000, 151).¹

Such enthusiasm reflected not only appreciation for the ingenuity and rigor of the book’s arguments, but also admiration for the evident passion of its author, whose abrupt and unexpected conversion to Marxism in early December, 1918, was taken by virtually all who knew him as akin to a Kierkegaardian leap of faith.² Determined to move from contemplation to action, realizing as best he could the unity of theory and praxis extolled by Marx, Lukács wrote the eight essays that comprised the book—in fact, heavily rewrote the first two—while involved in the thick of revolutionary politics in Central Europe. The highpoint of his activism—and actual political power—came when he served as Deputy People’s Commissar for Education and Culture in the turbulent 133 days of the Hungarian Soviet Republic led by Bela Kun from 21 March to 1 August, 1919. In addition to fostering radical cultural reforms, he also acted as political commissar attached to one of the army battalions of the Communists, and did not shy away from enacting violent revolutionary justice when he thought it warranted. When the Hungarian Revolution faltered, Lukács went underground for 2 months before fleeing into exile in Vienna, where he finished the final essays in *History and Class Consciousness*.

As is often the case with recent converts, the intensity of Lukács’ belief produced a maximalist zealotry—he later called it the “idealism and utopianism of my revolutionary messianism”³—that soon earned him Lenin’s chastisement for ultra-leftist infantilism.⁴ He accepted the rebuke as valid, unlike his response to many others that were to rain down on him in the years to come, despite his invariable willingness to acquiesce in public. *History and Class Consciousness* is in part a record of his struggle to square the impatience and intensity of his revolutionary commitment with the pragmatic realism displayed by Lenin during the Russian Revolution, which had avoided the dire fate of its hapless Hungarian clone. What made the book seem such a breathtaking achievement was its intricate interweaving of theoretical issues with practical ones, its heady mixture of German Idealism, historical materialism, and advanced sociological theory with factional disputes in the socialist movement, culminating in a full-throated defense of the organizational virtues of the vanguard party. There can, in fact, be few if any comparable exercises in on-going theoretical clarification written by someone deeply engaged in life-or-death political activity, involving not only factional battles in the Hungarian Communist Party but also in the political drama unfolding in Moscow and the Comintern. Rather than a unified,

¹ The odd epithet “tailism” came from a Russian word, *khvostism* (*khvostismus* in German) which Lenin had used to attack passive, economic Marxists who linger indecisively in the rear of any revolutionary movement.

² The comparison is not idle, as Lukács was himself fascinated by Kierkegaard and the difficult choices he made in his life. See Kadarkay (1991), 80.

³ Lukács (1971), xv.

⁴ Lenin (1966), 165. Lenin’s epithet “an infantile disorder” appeared in the pamphlet he wrote shortly thereafter called “*Left-wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*,” which Lukács read soon after it appeared in June, 1920 and took to heart.

post-facto account of a past event, the book itself records the changing responses of a participant-observer as the event itself was occurring.

Accordingly, *History and Class Consciousness* was immediately recognized as a book with explosive implications, providing ammunition both for critics and defenders of the Communist movement supported so fervently by its author. It earned added luster with the recovery a few years later of Marx's early manuscripts with their focus on the question of alienation, which seemed to confirm the remarkable analysis of reification developed in the book's longest and most original essay. When Lenin's wartime *Philosophical Notebooks* were discovered and then published in 1929–1930, still further credit accrued to Lukács for having intuited the importance of Hegel for Lenin's understanding of dialectics. And yet, the book was soon under severe attack by the guardians of Dialectical Materialist orthodoxy, then being established as the ideological counterpart to the Stalinization of the Party in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. The story of how *History and Class Consciousness* drew swift condemnation from official Soviet ideologues, while inadvertently inspiring the heterodox tradition that later came to be called Western Marxism despite its author's desire to hold fast to Marxist orthodoxy, has often been told.⁵ Lukács's own defenses and self-criticisms—most notably the text called “Tailism and the Dialectic” unpublished in his lifetime and his preface to the new edition that was allowed to appear in 1967—complicate the story still further by raising questions about the extent to which he remained faithful, and for how long, to its central arguments.

The debate over precisely what those arguments were also continues today, reignited by new readers hopeful that *History and Class Consciousness* can still inspire radical politics in the twenty-first century, and paradoxically stoked by the fears of the authoritarian government now ruling Hungary that they might be right.⁶ Many interpretative issues remain unresolved. Were there still traces of Lukács' earlier “romantic anti-capitalism,” “abstract utopianism,” and “infantile leftism” in some of the essays? Or had he already embraced the neo-Hegelian “realism” that emerged full-blown in his 1926 essay on Moses Hess and the so-called “Blum Theses” 2 years later, which some have seen as preparing his reluctant capitulation to the Stalinization of the Communist movement? Did he successfully expunge the Fichtean subjectivism infusing his post-conversion activism or were there still residues of it in his characterization of the interventionist role of the vanguard party? Did he really find a successful way to overcome the antinomies of bourgeois thought epitomized by Kantian dualism by identifying with the totalizing gaze and practical activism he attributed to the proletariat? Did his bold critique of the dialectics of nature in Engels and Second International Orthodox Marxism mean an excessively Idealist distinction between spirit and matter? Did he instead provide a still materialist way to characterize the relationship between history and nature, while avoiding

⁵ A still excellent account can be found in Arato and Breines (1979).

⁶ See, for example, Thompson (2011) and Bewes and Hall (2011). For an account of the Hungarian government's threat to close the Lukács archive, which is kept in his old apartment in Budapest, see Kerekes (2017). It has since been carried out, along with the removal of a statue of Lukács from St. Stephen's Park.

the domination of the latter that some critics saw in his excessive elevation of the subject? Did his critique of scientistic “vulgar Marxism” and the hypertrophy of technological rationality emerge from a romantic disdain for science and technology *tout court*, or just his understanding of their complicity with capitalist rationality? Did he satisfactorily explain the radical transformation of the working class from the worst victims of capitalist reification and commodity fetishism into their most self-consciously intransigent opponents, or in Hegelian terms, from a subject-in-itself to a subject-for-itself? Did his stress on the vital role of political organization in that transformation lead him, despite all his protestations to the contrary, to validate a party that was no longer really organically embedded in the class it sought to lead, a conclusion enabled by the waning importance of the mediating link of workers councils—also known as soviets—in his analysis?

These and a host of other questions have been chewed over incessantly in the very substantial commentary devoted to *History and Class Consciousness*, and they are obviously not going to be resolved in the compass of one short essay. What I would like to do instead is focus on just three issues, which I hope will explain why, as I suggested at the outset, returning to the book now is such a painful experience. The first involves the assumptions it makes about the historical process and the specific conjuncture in which it was written. The second examines the crucial category of “objective possibility,” which Lukács borrowed from one of his teachers, Max Weber, and used to distinguish his position from the passive spontaneism of his “tailist” opponents, on the one hand, and the putchist adventurism of his erstwhile “infantile leftist” comrades, on the other. The final issue concerns the implications of the category of “fidelity to the Event,” an attitude towards the Bolshevik Revolution that latter-day Leninists like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek have ascribed to Lukács and claimed is a template for uncompromising radicalism today.

Lukács’ wager on history

It is no accident that the title of *History and Class Consciousness* gives pride of place to the importance of history, as Lukács’ investment in it, both as a methodological imperative and an actual process, was profound. The former meant he was opposed to any attempt to confuse Marx’s “historical materialism” with an ontologically dubious dialectics of nature, a charge he leveled with great audacity against no less a socialist icon than Friedrich Engels.⁷ Nor, he argued, should historical materialism be understood as a conventional social science, like sociology, with its search for objective regularities comparable to those observed in nature, which he soon criticized in Nicolai Bukharin and Karl August Wittfogel.⁸ It was reminiscent instead, as the literary critic Fredric Jameson later emphasized, of the meaningful narratives fashioned by the great realist novelists of the nineteenth century, whom

⁷ Lukács (1971) 24. He later modified his critique in “Tailism and the Dialectic.”

⁸ See Lukács (1972), 134–147.

Lukács always celebrated in opposition to their naturalist and modernist competitors.⁹ These narratives were, to be sure, aesthetically contrived carpets with figures hidden in them, stories, that is, with protagonists, turning points, and meaningful conclusions, all of which may well be absent in the flow of non-fictional historical occurrences, where contingency and over-determination so often defeat attempts to discern intelligibility. But Lukács was confident that the carpet of real history did indeed have a figure that was not merely imposed by aesthetic fiat.

Understanding historical method as more like a narrative art rather than a social science was not only necessary for theoretical purposes, but also for Lukács had practical implications. Hegel and Marx had been right to argue that philosophical contradictions, such as the antinomies Kant had mistakenly thought were eternal, could not be resolved by purely intellectual means, but only by their future overcoming in the social relations of real human beings. Historical consciousness in methodological terms thus meant more than the contemplative stance of an observer of the past, no longer with a personal stake in the outcome of struggles long since concluded. Instead, it meant realizing that the observer was also a participant, embedded in a still unfolding historical story, and that the present, with all its uncertainties and possibilities, was part of an on-going narrative that would extend into the future. The Marxist demand to unify theory and practice meant that historically self-conscious theory informed and was in turn informed by history-creating action. “The historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with knowledge of the present, with the self-knowledge of its own social situation and with the elucidation of its necessity (i.e., its genesis).”¹⁰

But as active participants in the historical process, Lukács insisted that we—or at least the potential universal class that was the proletariat and its spokesmen—are able to act in such a way that future history can be fashioned differently from the past. In fact, as Vico had understood when he famously argued that *verum et factum convertuntur* (truth and making are convertible), even the past is accessible to us because humans have made it, albeit inadvertently, and can fathom its meaning from within, whereas our knowledge of the natural world, a world of already existing laws and processes, can only be of objects from the outside. Thinking historically is thus a necessary antidote to the reification that naturalizes bourgeois social relations and the antinomies of bourgeois thought, which appear to be expressions of an unchangeable “second nature.” Recalling the origins of present pseudo-natural relations is crucial, for, as Horkheimer and Adorno would later put it, “all reification is forgetting.”¹¹ But although necessary, recollection alone is not sufficient, because only action to destroy the existing institutions and practices of bourgeois society will

⁹ Jameson (1971), chapter 3, and (1981), 34. For a more sustained development of this argument, see Jameson (1988).

¹⁰ Lukács (1971), 159.

¹¹ Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), 191. The crucial issue, of course, is what exactly has been forgotten and must now be remembered: the origin of commodities in human labor? The domination of nature? The dialectic of recognition?

make possible meaningful de-reification, understood as the consciously intended, collectively subjective determination of the social world.¹²

Lukács' belief in the methodological-*cum*-practical importance of thinking historically was so strong that he opened his book by provocatively asserting that even if all of Marx's conclusions about actual occurrences were proved wrong, the approach itself would still survive. Orthodox Marxism, he insisted, "does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*."¹³ Ultimately, however, the proof of the method's validity would be practical; indeed, it was a method that was never contemplative or disengaged. If it could inspire and guide the struggle of the proletariat to assume the role Marx had assigned it, which Lukács called, in a phrase he soon came to abjure as overly Idealist, as "the subject and object" of history, it would then show itself to have been correct. Significantly this appeal to future historical validation would continue to inform his 1967 preface to the new edition of *History and Class Consciousness*, which ended by pleading ignorance about the "fruitful results" produced by the book, whose merits Lukács refrained from assessing because it would "raise a whole complex of questions whose resolution I may be allowed to leave to the judgment of history."¹⁴

It has been 50 years since Lukács invoked that judgment, and so it might be tempting now to venture a verdict. But even if some might claim it is still premature, we should, I want to argue, question the underlying premise that allowed Lukács to invoke something called "history" in the first place to judge the validity of a method or the practices it fostered. Its origins go back at least to Friedrich Schiller's famous claim in his poem "Resignation" of 1786 that "*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*" (world history is the world court), which was repeated and given wider currency by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*.¹⁵ A secularized version of the Christian idea of the "Last Judgment," this celebrated aphorism transferred the awesome power of God's final justice to either a fantasized posterity possessing the wisdom of hindsight or the raw survival of the fittest in a contest where success is the only criterion of value. It denies the transcendental, ahistorical power of ethical norms in favor of posthumous validation at some uncertain time in a future yet to be fashioned.

As all students of Lukács' sudden conversion to Marxism know, it was over this very alternative that he himself agonized in the period when he made his leap of faith, moving dramatically from one to the other. Just before he jumped, he wrote

¹² Some critics of *History and Class Consciousness* read Lukács as arguing for the sufficiency of the proletariat's knowledge alone to bring about dereification. And indeed, certain passages in the book support this conclusion, e.g. "When the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practical. *That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge*" (Lukács [1971], 169). But elsewhere he acknowledges that without the organizational leadership of the Party, such knowledge alone would not suffice.

¹³ Lukács (1971), 1.

¹⁴ Lukács (1971), xxxviii.

¹⁵ For a discussion of its history and implications, see Rosen (2014).

an essay entitled “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem,” which sided with transcendental moral norms. Rejecting the assumption that ultimate good can come from the employment of evil means, he warned that there was “an insoluble moral dilemma in the foundations of the Bolshevik position.”¹⁶ But then shortly after his conversion, he reversed himself in an essay titled “Tactics and Ethics,” which argued instead that “the decisive criterion of socialist tactics” is “the philosophy of history,” and that “all means by which this historico-philosophical process is raised to the conscious and real level are to be considered valid.”¹⁷ The logic of historical validation was directed not only against abstract moral imperatives, but also against the political norm of democratic will-formation and the legal norm of abstract formalism. The willingness to violate them in the name of ultimate historical vindication—reminiscent, some might argue, of the Jewish Sabbatian idea of “redemption through sin” famously elaborated by Gershom Scholem¹⁸—was to become a mainstay of revolutionary apologetics. It was, for example, still operative in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s 1947 *Humanism and Terror*, which justified the Soviet Purge Trials of the 1930s by arguing that “bourgeois justice adopts the past as its precedent; revolutionary justice adopts the future. It judges in the name of Truth that the Revolution is about to make true; its proceedings are part of a *praxis* which may well be motivated but transcends any particular motive....The Moscow Trials only make sense between revolutionaries; that is to say between men who are convinced they are *making history*.”¹⁹ Because no one can have absolutely “clean hands,” Merleau-Ponty contended, the ultimate test of even the most violent actions will be their efficacy in enabling an improved future to supersede the current debased order.

Setting aside the question of how one is to compare superior and inferior orders without implicitly ahistorical criteria, the crucial point for our consideration of the role of history in *History and Class Consciousness* (and texts like *Humanism and Terror*, which owe so much to its example) is the more basic assumption that history can be written in the manner of a realist novel told by an omniscient narrator, as an intelligible narrative concluding with an act of judgment by an imputed posterity that can share a unified perspective on what preceded it. In addition to his stress on the historical nature of Marx’s method, Lukács embraced with no hesitation the meta-narrative of *Weltgeschichte* it had adopted. That is, he understood history as a collective story of humankind’s progress through various stages of development, culminating for the moment in capitalism, whose terminal crisis was imminent. The critical category of “totality,” which rather than the primacy of the economy Lukács saw as the hallmark of Marx’s method, was thus applicable not only to the social whole existing at the time, but also to history as a meaningful story, or in the terms I adopted in *Marxism and Totality* as a “longitudinal” as well as “latitudinal” reality.²⁰

¹⁶ Lukács (1990), 41.

¹⁷ Lukács (2002), 5–6.

¹⁸ Scholem (1995), In “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem,” Lukács had himself referred disparagingly to Dostoyevsky’s character Razuhimin from *Crime and Punishment* for believing that it was possible that we can “lie ourselves through into truth.” Lukács (1990), 41.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1969), 28–29.

²⁰ Jay (1984), chapter 1.

It was, moreover, a story with an emerging protagonist, a nascent “subject,” understood in collective rather than individual terms, who was in the process of awakening from the slumber engendered by capitalist reification and assuming its prophesized role as the self-conscious maker of the history of the future. Whether or not that subject somehow was latent in history from the beginning or emerged only as the concrete negation of Capital, which had become the abstract, pseudo-subject of bourgeois society, has been a frequent bone of contention among readers of *History and Class Consciousness*.²¹ What is, however, indisputable is that Lukács assigned to history, understood as a longitudinal totality, a crucial capacity of its own, which he described in these terms:

The totality of history is itself a real historical power—even though one that has not hitherto become conscious and has therefore gone unrecognized—a power which is not to be separated from the reality (and hence the knowledge) of the individual facts without at the same time annulling their reality and their factual existence. It is the real, ultimate ground of their reality and their factual existence and hence also of their knowability even as individual facts.²²

Lukács, to be sure, vigorously disputed the erroneous conclusion often drawn from the Marxist meta-narrative of history as “a real historical power” that the transition from one stage to another was inevitable, as the crisis of capitalism played itself out and the workers movement came into its inheritance. His admiration for Lenin’s vanguard party was rooted in its disdain for the dominant Second International strategy of patient passivity, in which conditions were left to ripen by themselves into a terminal crisis that would somehow open the door for socialism. Rather than an economic reliance on the contradictions of capitalism automatically leading to collapse and the birth of a new order, Marxists should recognize that although capitalism was characterized by the primacy of the economy and thus would run aground when the contradictions between the mode of production and relations of production reached the point of no return, its socialist successor could only be achieved by practical activity on the political and cultural levels as well. Even Rosa Luxemburg, who had been so critical of the overly cautious Orthodox leadership of the Second International, had succumbed in her critique of the Bolsheviks to a dubious faith in the spontaneous revolutionary fervor of the working class based on what Lukács damned as an “overestimation of *the organic character* of the course of history.”²³ Because history was characterized by uneven and irregular development, Lukács argued there was a need to seize opportunities and act boldly when they were presented rather than wait patiently for all stars to be aligned.

²¹ See, for example, Feenberg (2011).

²² Lukács (1971), 152. Jameson (1981), 54–55, argues that “in some paradoxical or dialectical fashion, Lukács’ conception of totality may here be said to rejoin the Althusserian notion of History or the Real as an ‘absent cause’.”

²³ Lukács (1971), 277.

Lukács' ontologization of Weber's "objective possibility"

Seeking to overcome the undialectical either/or of passive, economic determinism and putschist, utopian adventurism, Lukács drew on a theoretical category developed by his mentor Max Weber, that of "objective possibility."²⁴ For the neo-Kantian Weber it was a counterfactual concept allowing the historical sociologist to recover possible alternative outcomes for past events and speculate retrospectively about their probability of success. In contrast, Lukács, indebted to Hegel rather than Kant, gave "objective possibility" ontological weight as more than just a heuristic device employed in disinterested social scientific inquiry. Instead, it achieved what realist novels did by employing what literary critics have called "side-shadowing," the technique of avoiding the fatalistic implications of unilinear fore-shadowing by presenting a field of still possible outcomes as the narrative plays out.²⁵

Not only did sensitivity to "objective possibilities" mean realistically assessing structural possibilities at any one historical conjuncture, but it also suggested that class consciousness could be understood in more than merely subjective terms. In a sentence written entirely in italics, Lukács insisted in *History and Class Consciousness* that "*the objective theory of class consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility.*"²⁶ Lucien Goldmann, one of Lukács' most insightful followers, glossed "objective possibility" as "the external situation of a class which limits its field of possibility with regard to thought and action. The mental structures of a class also circumscribe its theoretico-practical field of possibility. The objective possibility of a class determines its possible consciousness and inversely, according to Lukács. The two are inseparable."²⁷ Fredric Jameson concurred: "the epistemological 'priority' of 'proletarian consciousness,' as a class or collective phenomenon, has to do with the *conditions of possibility* of new thinking inherent in this particular class position."²⁸

It was faith in the ontological validity of objective possibility that underlay what is perhaps the most audacious argument in *History and Class Consciousness*, which provided a sophisticated theoretical warrant for the Leninist party, the theory of "imputed" or "ascribed" class consciousness. Of a piece with his suspicion of surface appearances and empirical "facts" in favor of the deeper trends coursing through the concrete, complexly mediated totality revealed by the historical materialist method, Lukács' imputation of latent revolutionary consciousness to a class that was still only inchoately aware of it allowed him to answer the charge that the

²⁴ For an account of its different uses in Weber, see Swedberg (2005), 17–179. For a more extensive consideration of its relationship to probability theory and the distinction between its applicability in individual cases and large-scale populations, see Turner and Factor (1981). They argue that it shows the importance of *Verstehen* in Weber's conception of causal explanation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty understood the importance of Lukács' debt to Weber in the origins Western Marxism so much that he called it "Weberian Marxism." See Merleau-Ponty (1973), 29.

²⁵ Morson (1994) and Bernstein (1994).

²⁶ Lukács (1971), 79.

²⁷ Goldmann (1977), xv.

²⁸ Jameson (1988), 66.

Leninist Party was importing it to the proletariat entirely from the outside. It also gave him warrant for hope that what was objectively latent would soon become subjectively manifest through the praxis of a class already “in-itself” that was on the threshold of achieving its potential as a class “for-itself.”

Crucial to this hope was the confidence that the narrative of history was legible, at least from the standpoint of its makers, and that the proper method would give the theorist aligned with the potentially universal class access to its probable—albeit never guaranteed—future course. Failing to understand this premise misled commentators like John Rees in his Introduction to the English translation of “Tailism and the Dialectic” to argue that Lukács was merely doing what people normally do when they disdain someone’s false consciousness about their true needs or interests. “We ‘impute’ a consciousness to them,” Rees writes, “based on an appreciation of what we think they would see their interests to be if they were to look at the situation in a wider framework.”²⁹ Rather, however, than this subjective interpretation of one person allegedly knowing the “true interests” of someone better than he or she does, Lukács’ argument was that objective social processes unleashed by the crisis of capitalism were the real source of the theorist’s imputation or ascription.

Although never explicitly drawing on it, the opposition between empirical and ascribed class consciousness, it might be argued, relied on some of the same assumptions that had informed the medieval notion of the King’s two bodies, famously elaborated a generation later by the historian Ernst Kantorowicz.³⁰ Drawing on the religious distinction between the mystical and natural body of Christ, one eternal, the other mortal, medieval notions of monarchy contrasted the sacred institution of kingship with the human, sometimes all-too-human embodiment of it. For Lukács, there was an ideal proletariat, whose revolutionary consciousness and role as subject-object of history were objectively possible, and an empirical proletariat, whose actual consciousness and political engagement were not—or at least not yet—up to the level of their ideal counterpart. The crucial standpoint from which knowledge of history might be said to flow was thus the ideal rather than empirical working class. Although the hope remained that empirical and ideal levels would ultimately converge, the task of bridging them in the still imperfect world of the present necessitated the mediating role of the Party, which somehow had the ability to attain a higher consciousness without, however, losing its connection with the still immature masses. Wrestling with precisely what such a mediation might mean in the last essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, by which time his earlier faith in the workers councils had collapsed, Lukács once again resorted to the historical meta-narrative underlying his entire argument:

The growth of proletarian class consciousness (i.e. the growth of the proletarian revolution) and that of the Communist Party are indeed one and the same process—seen from a world-historical perspective. Therefore, in everyday praxis they condition each other in the most intimate way. *But despite this their*

²⁹ Rees in Lukács (2000), 22.

³⁰ Kantorowicz (1997).

*concrete growth does not appear as one and the same process. Indeed there is not even a consistent parallel....The Communist Party is an autonomous form of proletarian class consciousness serving the interests of the revolution.*³¹

The premise that there was such a thing as “world history,” whose “perspective” could somehow be shared with the workers by the Party and its theoreticians, allowed Lukács, as we have noted, to believe that the antinomies of bourgeois thought, including the tension between ethical norms and practical imperatives, were in the process of being overcome historically. It was the same assumption that gave him the warrant to believe that “objective possibilities” were ontological truths in the real world rather than merely heuristic devices to make sense of the completed past. It was the same conviction that allowed him to dismiss the recalcitrant “facts” of the world of mere appearances as insufficient evidence to falsify the historical materialist method that defines “orthodox Marxism.” And it was the same unquestioned belief that allowed Lukács to envision the ultimate integration of the autonomous form of proletarian class consciousness that was the vanguard party with the actual class consciousness of a fully militant mass movement able to de-reify the world and fashion it anew in socialist terms.

If we pause for a moment to reflect on the foundational role of something called “history” as Lukács saw it played in his narrative of revolutionary struggle, it is not difficult to see why reading *History and Class Consciousness* almost a century later is so unbearable. “The totality of history is itself a real historical power,” he tells us. Viewed from a “world-historical perspective,” he argues, the party and the masses are one. “The historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with knowledge of the present,” knowledge, he claims, which can uncover “objective possibilities” able to guide revolutionary praxis. Whether or not the arguments of *History and Class Consciousness* will be validated, he concludes, must be left to “the judgment of history.”

Although it may well have been plausible in the years immediately after the Russian Revolution to imbue an unfolding narrative called “history” with all of these characteristics and wager on its moving in the right direction, however unevenly with backward steps as well as forward, and even still possible to wager on it against longer odds in the era of the New Left, a century later it is increasingly difficult.³² Remembering Zhou Enlai’s famous response to Richard Nixon’s question about the impact of the French Revolution—“it’s too early to say”—we might want to cut Lukács some slack and postpone any final reckoning. But instead, we should abandon the idea that such a conclusive final judgment is even possible. For the real issue is the plausibility of turning lived history, however we choose to emplot it, into a unified story, whose outcome can ever be confidently weighed by an imagined posterity able to render a singular judgment. How legitimate is it, we should ask, to impose the ruling assumptions of realist fiction on the interpretation of actual history, which may well lack heroic protagonists, meaningful plots, and cadential

³¹ Lukács (1971), 329–330. Italics in original. As Michel Löwy has noted, by the time of “Tailism and the Dialectic,” Lukács had reverted to the claim that the Leninist Party, led by intellectuals, brought class consciousness to the proletariat “from the outside.” See Löwy (2011), 67.

³² There are, to be sure, still some holdouts. See, for example, Kavoulakos (2011).

conclusions? Already in 1979, Jean-François Lyotard famously defined post-modernity as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”³³ Although the category of the post-modern has itself lost its allure, Lyotard’s point is ironically hammered home by that very fact. That is, we now know there is no straightforward succession story from modernity to what allegedly comes after it. Nor can we easily go back to the universalist modernization theory that served for a while as the anti-Marxist version of “world historical” development.³⁴ And the fatuous claims about the “end of history” made by triumphalist liberals after the fall of Communism have also proven false.

What has, in fact, survived Lyotard’s overblown proclamation of the arrival of a post-modern epoch is his insight into the increasing implausibility of treating world history as a coherent, meaningful narrative, let alone one that has a potential subject in the process of emerging into its own as the conscious maker of an emancipated future. Instead of the Russian Revolution serving as a model for those that would follow, which still seemed likely to Lukács even as he reflected on the failure of the Hungarian experiment, the regime it created survived for only 74 years, having lost its emancipatory potential far earlier. Nor can it be said that, despite whatever else it might have served as a vanguard, the Leninist Party hastened the de-reification of social relations and the birth of a universal subject and object of history.

In addition, even if capitalism has certainly not overcome its many flaws, it is no longer plausible to affix the temporal modifier “late” to it and claim to be on the threshold of its terminal crisis. Instead, it keeps on showing its resiliency as a system that is never quite late enough. Nor have its victims, such as they are, been able to keep up the momentum of their outrage and maintain confidence in being the harbingers of a new order. Instead of starry-eyed young people around the world willing to risk all in the cause of socialist ideals, as they did, say, during the Spanish Civil War, their twenty-first century avatars seem more likely to join a jihadist movement designed to restore a religious theocracy that would have seemed repugnant, for all their messianic yearnings, to Lukács and his generation. On a more proximate time-scale, the age of Obama, which began with the audacity of hope, was succeeded by the Age of Trump, in which America will be made “great” again by undermining all the progressive achievements of the past century. There may seem, in short, lots of “objective possibilities” that one might impute to the present, but none of them looks remotely like the ones discerned in 1923 by the recent Marxist convert and recovering infantile leftist Georg Lukács.

In 1988, Fredric Jameson may have still been able to call *History and Class Consciousness* an “unfinished project” and stubbornly endorse Lukács’ belief that the mark of reified bourgeois consciousness was precisely its helpless embrace of contingency and chance, in which “events that are meaningful socially or historically turn incomprehensible, absurd or meaningless faces to individuals who can henceforth only ratify their bewilderment with the names of accident or of well-nigh natural convulsion and upheaval.”³⁵ But today, the putative standpoint of the collective

³³ Lyotard (1984), xxiv.

³⁴ See Gilman (2004).

³⁵ Jameson (1988), 57.

class whose shared experience somehow allows it to discern beneath the chaos and fragmentation a deeper meaning seems more tenuous than ever.

Lukács and “fidelity to the Event”

It is thus not difficult to see why some of Lukács’ current celebrants have employed Badiou’s category of “fidelity to the Event” to defend his—and in some cases, their—stubborn faith in the promise of 1917, despite all that has happened in the interim. Unwavering faith is, of course, often seen as a sign of a religious mentality, and there has been no shortage of attempts, ranging from René Fülöp-Miller’s *Mind and Face of Bolshevism* in 1926 to Yuri Slezkine’s *The House of Government* 91 years later, to characterize the Bolshevik appeal in these terms.³⁶ In Lukács’ case, the comparison is almost too easy. He explicitly understood his “leap of faith” to be an embrace of a Kierkegaardian absolute in defiance of conventional ethical norms, and he characterized it in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution as a frankly “messianic” gamble. To quote his biographer Arpad Kadarky,

Lukács rationalized his conversion [to Bolshevism] by quoting Kierkegaard’s saying that sacrificing one’s life for a cause is always an irrational act. ‘To believe,’ said Lukács, ‘means that man consciously assumes an irrational attitude toward his own self.’.... As if to symbolize his new life, Lukács moved out of the family villa and joined his sect of ‘Franciscan’ communists in the Soviet House.... In the Soviet House, Lukács and his sect discoursed on Jesus, St. Francis, and the Old Testament prophets as if they were their close friends.³⁷

A number of commentators, among them Michel Löwy and Anson Rabinbach, have convincingly situated him in the larger context of apocalyptic and redemptive enthusiasm engendered by the War and its aftermath, which included other Marxist theoreticians such as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Leo Lowenthal.³⁸ Although Lukács sought to distance himself from the still smoldering messianism acknowledged in their work, in particular that of Bloch, it is not clear he was fully successful.³⁹

In most cases, of course, the claim that revolutionary fervor is a poorly disguised semblance of religious fanaticism is aimed at diminishing its originality and robbing it of any legitimacy. This is a tedious game I would prefer not to play. The complex defense of the “legitimacy of the modern age” by Hans Blumenberg against debunking secularization theorists such as Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt is, I would argue,

³⁶ Fülöp-Miller (1927) and Slezkine (2017).

³⁷ Kadarky (1991), 203–204.

³⁸ Löwy (1992) and Rabinbach (2001).

³⁹ For one account of his struggle to free himself from his religious concerns and his fraught relationship to Bloch, see Liebersohn (1988), chapter 6.

applicable in this case as well.⁴⁰ That is, rather than a simplistic reduction of later secular forms of belief to watered-down versions of earlier religious ones, in which the noun “theology” always trumps the adjective “political,” it would be more fruitful to treat both religious and secular modes of thought as imperfect attempts in different idioms to address perennially exigent, but unanswered questions. So rather than focus on the issue of fidelity with its implication of displaced religious piety, I want to conclude this essay by looking instead at the category of the Event and see if it accords with Lukács’ interpretation of the Russian Revolution as expressed in *History and Class Consciousness*.

In his postface to “Tailism and the Dialectic,” Žižek celebrates what he calls Lukács’ “art of *Augenblick*,” which he defines as “the moment when, briefly, there is an opening for an *act* to intervene in a situation” and argues that it “is unexpectedly close to what, today, Alain Badiou endeavors to formulate as the Event: an intervention that cannot be accounted for in the terms of its pre-existing ‘objective conditions.’”⁴¹ The category of “Event” has in fact enjoyed a remarkable upsurge of interest in recent years, especially among French theorists who still live off the experience of the 1968 *événements* and their unexpected disruption of conventional republican politics.⁴² Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze joined Badiou in celebrating the “Event” as an ineffable break in the normal flow of occurrences, a singular explosion that resists contextual explanation, upsets the equilibrium of the system and escapes the constraints of historical determination. A caesura in the continuum of empty time, it signals what the Greeks called a *Kairos* in the flow of *Chronos* or the Christian descent of the sacred into the profane world exemplified by the Incarnation and evident in miracles that suspend the laws of nature. More than just a punctual break, the Event occurs in a complex pluri-temporality that disrupts the flow of forward-moving time by reviving earlier moments of thwarted desire and anticipating later realizations of utopian hopes.

The Event is thus, as Claude Romano has made clear, also an “advent” of something new, the beginning of an adventure that may spawn something radically different from the present order.⁴³ Whether or not it is the product of a willed decision—Badiou and Žižek speak grandiloquently of it resulting from “the act”—or just comes unbeckoned like a lightning flash, it is a tear in the fabric of coherently plotted, narratively meaningful history. Although, of course, conventional historical narratives, just like realist novels, routinely include surprises and unanticipated interruptions in the evolutionary development of plots, Events in this maximalist sense are more radical, ungrounded ruptures that call into question the larger stories that try to contain them.⁴⁴ As such, they often are experienced as traumatic or emancipatory, but never as business as usual.

⁴⁰ Blumenberg (1983).

⁴¹ Žižek (2000), 164.

⁴² See Jay (2014). For an insightful treatment of the “political semiotics” of the event, see Wagner-Pacifi (2017).

⁴³ Romano (2009); For a discussion of the implications of his argument, see Jay (2011).

⁴⁴ As in the case of most binaries, the absolute opposition of Event and historical context cannot be upheld for long, as each entails the other. See Wagner-Pacifi (2017), chapter 3.

Inevitably, however, Events show themselves to be ephemeral, fragile, and susceptible to recuperation, as the tear repairs itself and the bracket closes.⁴⁵ And so it was in the case of the Revolution whose emancipatory energy was already being blunted while Lukács was fashioning the essays that comprise *History and Class Consciousness*. As George Lichtheim once sardonically commented, with the French experience in mind, “if it has been said of the early Christians that they awaited the coming of the Savior and instead got the Church, it may be said of the French proletariat that it expected the Revolution and instead got the Communist party.”⁴⁶ “Fidelity to the Event” for those keeping the flame burning resists this outcome by refusing to capitulate opportunistically to the Thermidorian restoration that marked both the establishment of the official Church and the Stalinization of the Party.

Ironically, rather than insisting on the utter singularity of the Event, such “fidelity” holds out hope for its repetition at a later date, as a Second Coming in which the suffering of the first will be redeemed.⁴⁷ In so doing, it reveals itself to be as much in the thrall of a rhetorical precondition as any reading of the meta-narrative of history modeled on a realist novel. As Erich Auerbach famously showed, the abiding power of “figura” as a way to make sense of Christianity and its Jewish and Pagan predecessors meant that both rupture and supersession could be explained by a typological faith that the future was foreshadowed by the past.⁴⁸ Thus, the Hebrew Bible could be turned into “The Old Testament,” and many of its stories, protagonists and prophecies seen as prefiguring “The New Testament.” Their ultimate “fulfilment” would come when the rupturing “Event” returned one more time. Such events happen in history, but they are ultimately timeless because they involve a truth that transcends ephemerality and contingency. Belief that “Events” in the past prefigure ones in the future does indeed entail a religious “fidelity,” which allows Žižek to characterize forthrightly Badiou as “the last great author in the French tradition of Catholic dogmatists.”⁴⁹

Did this mantle of “Fidelity to the Event” fit on the shoulders of Lukács when he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*? Perhaps, but when he underwent his self-critical reconciliation with the Party in the mid-1920s, signaled by his decision to leave unpublished his last-ditch attempt to defend that book against his “Tailist” critics, it had clearly waned. Indeed, by the mid-1930s, he was explicitly endorsing the Thermidorian character of Stalin’s regime against Trotsky’s denunciation of it.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Reversing the normal identification of appearances with ephemeral flux and essences (or in Badiou’s terminology, Being) with enduring substances, Žižek claims that for Lukács, reified surface appearances, the realm of seemingly intractable “facts,” are really much more rigid than the elusive fragility of Events, which surge up from the realm of fragile fluctuation beneath. See Žižek (2000), 181.

⁴⁶ Lichtheim (1966), 68.

⁴⁷ Where the Event is experienced as entirely traumatic rather than emancipatory, however, Fidelity involves precisely the opposite, as demonstrated by the injunction “never again” in response to the Holocaust.

⁴⁸ Auerbach (2016); the essay has generated considerable commentary over the years. For an insightful recent reading, see Porter (2017).

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek cited in Bensaïd (2004), 102.

⁵⁰ See Lukács (1968). For an account of it as an answer to Trotsky’s critique of Stalinist Thermidorian counter-revolution, see Žižek (2017), lxxv.

But in the fast-moving years when *History and Class Consciousness* was written he steadfastly scorned those who fell back fatalistically on a belief in the ripening of conditions that would inexorably produce system change without decisive action. Although he sought to distance himself from the taint of Fichte's subjective idealism, there was a palpable residue of the latter's impatience with facts in the name of the deed underlying his belief that the normative totality of the future was in the process of being made by the proletariat as the meta-subject of history.⁵¹ As he could still put it in the concluding paragraph of his little 1924 book on Lenin, "Leninism represents a hitherto unprecedented degree of concrete, unschematic, unmechanistic, purely praxis-oriented thought. To preserve *this* is the task of the Leninist."⁵²

And yet, as we have seen, Lukács also struggled to exorcise the remnants of his infantile ultra-leftism, by rejecting imprudent actions oblivious to the "objective possibilities" that had to exist before those actions had a chance to succeed. Getting the balance right was, alas, not easy, and the differing formulae he adopted over the years, both while writing *History and Class Consciousness* and in his subsequent career, testify to the frustration of his on-going efforts to do so. But what has to be acknowledged is that all throughout that career, he maintained that confidence in the ultimate justification of those efforts in something called "history," indeed "world history," that we have identified in so many places in *History and Class Consciousness*. "The totality of history," he tells us, "is a real historical power." There is a "judgment of history" that will decide if the ruthless acts of the revolutionary can be absolved of their immoral taint. The superior knowledge of the proletariat and their spokesmen is grounded in their awareness that they are the makers of history and will come to know what they have made. There is a "world-historical perspective" that can be shared with those who can somehow understand the "objective possibilities" that lie before them. Tellingly, the same recourse to the coherence of a meta-historical narrative is still apparent in a remark he made in *Lenin* about the meaning of an isolated event, which cannot be called "either a victory or a defeat; only in relation to the totality of socio-historic development can it be termed either one or the other of these in a world-historical sense."⁵³

In other words, not having had the opportunity to read Badiou, Žižek, or other recent celebrants of prefigural Events as the antithesis of "socio-historic development," Lukács did not understand them as Kairotic interruptions in the flow of historical Chronos. Straining to reconcile antinomies through a dialectical reading of history in which theory and practice were mutually reinforcing, he believed that vanguard parties were only one step ahead of the masses they led, and that objective possibilities really did exist for both the terminal crisis of capitalism and the emergence of revolutionary self-consciousness in a proletariat ready to assume its historical role. Although he sought to avoid a smooth, "organic" notion of historical progress, which we have seen him fault in Luxemburg, he still believed that despite

⁵¹ For my understanding of Fichte's abiding role in Lukács' argument in *History and Class Consciousness*, see Jay (1984), 104–109; for an alternative reading, see Feenberg (2011).

⁵² Lukács (1970), 88.

⁵³ Lukács (1970), 39.

all its dialectical reversals and uneven lurches forward, history as a whole could be understood as an intelligible story, indeed one with normative implications. In short, heavily invested in an historical meta-narrative that soon began losing its plausibility, Lukács bet on an outcome that a century later is farther away from realization than ever. Rather than analogous to a realist novel with heroic protagonists and a narrative arc, history as we now experience it seems more and more like a random congeries of contingent happenings that refuse to congeal into a meaningful plot, let alone one with emancipatory implications.

It is, I would argue in conclusion, a mark of just how far we have come that *History and Class Consciousness* can now be defended only in terms of a dogged—and dogmatic—fidelity to an Event, whose nature is precisely the antithesis of that faith in History that underlay Lukács' wager on the intelligibility of the story that led to 1917, as well as its redemptive denouement in the future. What makes reading *History and Class Consciousness* so unbearable today is the sober realization that when faith in History, in particular its future trajectory, wanes, we are left with little but pious recitations of quasi-theological formulae that can sustain only the most devout of believers. Witness the recent attempt to defend the continuing relevance of Leninism by Žižek, who defends the Chinese Cultural Revolution in these terms:

If we read it as a part of historical reality (Being), we can easily submit it to a 'dialectical' analysis which perceives the final outcome of a historical process as its 'truth'....If, however, we analyze it as an Event, an enactment of the eternal Idea of egalitarian Justice, then the ultimate factual result of the Cultural Revolution, its catastrophic failure and then reversal into the capitalist dynamic, does not exhaust the real of the Cultural Revolution: the eternal Idea of the Cultural Revolution survives its defeat in sociohistorical reality; it continues to lead a spectral life as the ghost of a failed utopia which returns to haunt future generations, patiently awaiting its future resurrection.⁵⁴

For those of us unable to believe in ghosts or their ultimate resurrection and incapable of mustering much faith in figural fulfillment, sociohistorical reality is, alas, all there is, and no amount of patience for an apocalyptic revenant will help us deal with its daunting challenges. Although we too are denied the vantage point of an ultimate judgment and must therefore concede that future redemptive Events, despite everything, may still be possible, the sorry history of the past century—told from virtually any perspective—makes it necessary for us to look far more carefully than Lukács did after 1917 before we leap into the unknown.

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⁵⁴ Žižek (2017), lii–liiii.

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