

Research Article

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The Marxist Method as the Foundation of Social Criticism – Lukács' Perspective

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Abstract: The investigation into the foundations of social critique has increasingly gained importance in the tradition known as Critical Theory. In this context, I will analyze Lukács' work, particularly *History and Class Consciousness*, to comprehend the foundation he provides for social critique, rooted in the adoption of Marxism as a method. I posit that the escalating disjunction between the critique of the object and the critique of theory is attributable to the deepening social fragmentation engendered by capitalist structures. This inherent characteristic underscores the imperative for a cohesive amalgamation of epistemic and socio-ontological critique. To elucidate Lukács' model of critique, I will give particular attention to the chapter "What Is Orthodox Marxism?". By doing this, I aim to elucidate Lukács' assertion that the Marxist method facilitates a harmonious integration between the epistemic and socio-ontological dimensions of life, once it incorporates crucial categories such as historicity, totality, reciprocal action, and mediation. Furthermore, his method underscores the symbiotic relationship between some elements of the political economy and the German philosophical tradition, which shapes Lukács' conceptualization of critique.

Keywords: Lukács, Marxism, method, critical theory, Kant, Hegel

As the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century unfolded, the tradition of "Critical Theory" found itself compelled to interrogate the very foundations of its conceptualization of social critique. In other words, this tradition started an introspective inquiry, asking, "What is critical about critical theory?"¹ This question emerged against the backdrop of a growing tendency of specialization within the realm of scientific investigation.² One noteworthy consequence of this process is elucidated by Brazilian philosopher Amaro Fleck, who identifies an "epistemic turn" as articulated by Habermas: "critical theory, instead of dealing directly with its objects, starts to deal with the conditions of possibility of itself, especially with the problem of how to find a sufficiently solid anchorage to normatively ground its social criticism."³

An exemplary manifestation of this phenomenon can be found in Rahel Jaeggi's 2013 article, "What (if anything) is wrong with capitalism? Three ways to critique capitalism" (2015).⁴ Despite its title, Jaeggi's work diverges from a direct analysis of capitalism itself and instead delves into the historical methodologies of

¹ The expression is borrowed and adapted from Fraser and her article "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender."

² Lukács already denounces the process of fragmentation and continuous specialization of the sciences as an effect of the reification process caused by the universalization of the commodity form in the first part of his essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," called "The Phenomenon of Reification." In: Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*.

³ Fleck, "After All, What is Critical Theory?," 117.

⁴ Jaeggi, "What (if anything) is Wrong with Capitalism?"

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criticizing capitalism, categorizing them as functional, moral, or ethical approaches to critique. Jaeggi's contribution is emblematic of a broader trend encompassing the works of thinkers such as Robin Celikates⁵, Titus Stahl⁶, and Martin Saar⁷. This "new generation" of Critical Theory injects fresh vigor into the discussion by probing the very foundations of critique, particularly in terms of its "essence" and the "rational ground" behind its contemporary diagnosis of the times.⁸

Within the Brazilian intellectual landscape, critical theorists have similarly grappled with this dilemma. Alessandro Pinzani's text, "Critical Theory and Social Justice" (2012), serves as a pertinent case to point out. In his examination of poverty in Brazil, Pinzani⁹ first explores the essential components of critique within Critical Theory. In doing so, he establishes the foundation for subsequent arguments, or in other words, his analyses of poverty itself. It is necessary to first define what critique is before being able to effectively conduct it. Moreover, the ongoing dialogue initiated by Luiz Repa with Jaeggi and Celikates concerning the critical models they espouse, their validation, and their contrast with reconstructive and dialectical paradigms highlights the enduring significance of this epistemological challenge within the discourse of Critical Theory.¹⁰

The discussion on the foundational principles of social critique has assumed heightened importance within a context characterized by a profound division of scientific labor. The discourse becomes increasingly "philosophical" in the traditional sense of the term, evolving into a more epistemic and progressively less critical discourse. However, this significance transcends mere epistemological concerns. Rather, it reflects the exigencies imposed by a societal milieu dominated by empirical sciences. Moreover, it also underscores the intrinsic limitations of critique, as emphasized by Fraser (1996). As critical theorists delve deeper into the critical "essence" that characterizes Critical Theory, they concurrently shed light on the limits of specific approaches and diagnosis of the times, while also suggesting alternative pathways toward emancipation. Fraser's work serves as a prime example in this regard. By posing the question of what is truly critical about critical theory, she carries out her critique of the object while simultaneously exposing the limits of Habermas' Critical Theory. One of these limitations lies in its failure to account for essential social actors in its formulations, such as women and racialized populations. At this point, an interconnection emerges between the critique of the object, namely capitalist society itself, and the critique of theory, encompassing the pursuit of establishing the foundational elements essential for both theoretical and practical criticism.

Our exploration starts by delineating the foundational model underlying Lukács' critical theory: the adoption of Marxism as a method. At the core of this investigation lies an examination of the deepening social division of labor and the consequent fragmentation of spheres of life. This process engenders a noticeable disjunction between the critique of phenomena itself and the critique of theoretical constructs. This dissonance, prompting inquiries into the epistemic validity of the criticism, has remained a persistent theme throughout the history of critiques focused on capitalism. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that this dissonance is not confined to contemporary discourse but has accompanied the very act of criticizing capitalist. Consequently, I intend to briefly explore how segments of the "Critical Theory" tradition articulate new models of diagnosis of the times in response to the escalating social division of labor and the resultant fragmentation of various social spheres emerges. Within this framework, a dual approach involving both internal and external readings of Lukács' seminal article "What is Orthodox Marxism?" becomes imperative. By situating Lukács' work within the broader discourse of critical theory, we aim to shed light on the dialectical interaction between his ideas and the tradition of critical theory. This may be a fruitful way of approaching the issue. We will do this in the first part of the text.

In the subsequent section of the text, I propose that this characteristic demands an articulation of both epistemic critique and socio-ontological critique, as envisioned by theoretical efforts directed toward

⁵ Celikates, *Kritik als soziale Praxis. Gesellschaftliche Selbstverständigung und kritische Theorie*

⁶ Stahl, *Ideologiekritik als Kritik sozialer Praktiken*.

⁷ Saar, *Kritik als Genealogie*.

⁸ Bressiani, "A New Generation of Critical Theory," 235.

⁹ Pinzani, "Critical Theory and Social Justice."

¹⁰ On this subject, we recommend the following insightful articles: Repa, "Reconstruction and Immanent Critique;" and Repa, "Understandings of Reconstruction."

emancipation. To exemplify Lukácsian critical theory model, I will continue to analyze the introductory article of “History and Class Consciousness.” However, my objective here is to conduct a more thorough internal analysis to elucidate the fundamental categories identified by Lukács within Marxism. Throughout my exposition, I attempt to claim that, for Lukács, the Marxist method can facilitate this integration by utilizing specific key categories, such as historicity, totality, reciprocal action, and mediation. From this standpoint, these categories seek to overcome the disjunction between the epistemic and socio-ontological dimensions by offering a novel interpretation of the notion of method. Rather than being viewed merely as a pathway or a specific cognitive framework for engaging with the object, we claim that Lukács’ perspective positions the method as a tool for uncovering the manifestation and operation of the object. An intricate amalgamation of elements from political economy and the German philosophical tradition, as initially articulated by Marx and further elaborated by Lukács, becomes indispensable in achieving this synthesis.

1 What is Orthodox Marxism and the Question About the Possibility of Criticism

A helpful way to start our discussion is by providing some context regarding the historical background of this Lukácsian text. Notably, it exists in two versions: one published in 1919 in a brochure titled “Tactics and Ethics” and another in 1923 as part of the “History and Class Consciousness.” This brochure encompasses not only the text mentioned above but also three other shorter articles: “Tactics and Ethics,” from which the collection takes its name; “Intellectual Workers and the Problem of Intellectual Leadership” and “Party and Class.” The original version of “What is Orthodox Marxism?”, consisting of roughly ten pages, underwent substantial revisions before being republished in 1923. Lukács cautions us, in the initial preface to “History and Class Consciousness” written in 1922, that some articles were “partially revised” and that he did not intend to “radically review” the pieces initially published there.¹¹ However, it is worth noting the observation made by Michael Löwy, who points out that specific essays were essentially rewritten and that “the most modified essay being ‘What is Orthodox Marxism?’”.¹² Indeed, a comparison between the two texts allows us to discern the distinctiveness of the new text presented in “History and Class Consciousness” and Lukács’ immediately preceding writings.¹³

In his 1919 article, Lukács starts his argument by contextualizing the significance of the titular issue and highlighting its centrality within the contemporary debates of his time. He says: “This extraordinarily simple question stands at the center of a debate which has raged for decades in both bourgeois and socialist writings.”¹⁴ We can consider here the question about orthodoxy within Marxism, a question about the theoretical and epistemic foundation of criticism. Lukács seems to suggest that orthodox Marxism is the vehicle for well-founded critique, while heterodox Marxism is not. This would be easily recognized in both socialist and

¹¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, xxx.

¹² Löwy, *Georg Lukacs*, 209.

¹³ To begin with, our analysis can highlight a significant parallel in the structural organization of the two articles. “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” is widely acknowledged to be delineated into three distinct sections: “The Phenomenon of Reification,” “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought,” and “The Standpoint of the Proletariat.” Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that a proportionate perspective reveals a condensed manifestation of this same organizational framework within the 1923 edition of “What is Orthodox Marxism?”. Notably, sections 3 and 4 of the latter align closely with the arguments expounded in “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought,” while section 5 corresponds to the thematic essence encapsulated within “The Standpoint of the Proletariat.” This observation suggests that the evolution of “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” compelled Lukács to revise the 1919 text. It appears that the further elaboration of the concept of reification during the years 1920 and 1921 prompted Lukács to refine his conceptualization of the “standpoint of the proletariat,” which, in the 1919 text, was presented in a nascent form predominantly imbued with ethical dimensions. Consequently, sections 1 and 2 of the 1923 article can be interpreted as a revised rendition encompassing the entirety of the content articulated in the 1919 article.

¹⁴ Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 19.

bourgeois writings. As Fritz Haug (1984) reminds us, this issue is not new within the Second International and the debates surrounding Lukács at the time. Posed by Karl Korsch, the question about the ultimate foundation of Marxism has been treated by many before Lukács and many others after him. Names such as Rosa Luxemburg, Otto Bauer, Franz Mehring, Lenin, Bernstein, and Kautsky focused on the topic. Therefore, questions around the difference between “true” Marxism, “orthodox” Marxism, and its “adaptations” appear to be historically situated variations of the question about the basis of critique. “What is critical about critical theory” can be translated historically as “what is truly orthodox Marxism” in this context.

This same strategy continues in 1923’s text, where Lukács presents his central thesis: “Orthodox Marxism, therefore, 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*.”¹⁵ This take-it-or-leave-it presentation, however, serves only to pose the problem, not to solve it. According to Lukács, a necessary step before approaching the Marxist method itself is necessary. Before the investigation of the Marxist method understood as the fundamental basis of social criticism, we need first to investigate the reasons that allowed the emergence of social criticism in history. In other words, before criticizing the object, one must critically examine the historical possibility of a theory that aims to be radically critical. In this way, the philosopher will dedicate the first and second of the five sections of his article to indicate that “Such a situation has in fact arisen with the entry of the proletariat into history.”¹⁶ But what does this mean? Lukács tells us that Marxist theory is a revolutionary theory and indicates that it is nothing more than the conscious theorization of the practice of the proletarian class. With this, Lukács puts the question about the foundation of social criticism into perspective. Now, it is only possible to ask whether social criticism is, in fact, radical criticism, only from the moment a class becomes conscious of its place of oppression and starts to question it. This historical novelty is only possible with the emergence of capitalism and, consequently, of the proletariat. Lukács evokes Marx’s words present in *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*: “When the proletariat announces the dissolution of the existing order of things it merely declares the secret of its own existence, for it is the *de facto* dissolution of this order of things.”¹⁷ Therefore, the starting point of criticism must be the interested standpoint of the class. Notably, the conception of criticism as an interested point of view, placed by Lukács, is the same formulated by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *Capital*. Marx’s method of criticism takes the point of view of political economy to unveil phenomena and processes that seem to be hidden from the immediate dimension of life. The investigation of *Capital* or the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* shows us that beneath the given reality of a universe of fair exchanges operated by the market, there is an inherent logic of exploitation of one class by another that becomes hidden by the mechanisms of necessary illusions such as fetishism in the former and alienation in the last book.¹⁸ Here it seems to us that to justify a critical point of view, two components are necessary: critically claiming that your point of view has a political interest and revealing hidden tendencies in the functioning of capitalism. This procedure adopted by Marx and followed by Lukács developed into a certain type of critical tradition. An example of the development of this critical tradition, but not the only one, is critical theory. They are also inspired by the idea that the delineation of criticism, conceived as an inherently interested perspective, serves as a distinguishing factor between traditional theory and critical theory. It is elucidated by Horkheimer in his seminal work “Traditional and Critical Theory.” As Horkheimer has already shown us in this text, all standpoints are interested. But some, such as that of traditional theory, claim not to be. And traditional theory intended that this “neutrality” be the ultimate criterion for the epistemic validation of a theory. This principle, which shows us that all standpoints are interested points of view, also drives the

¹⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of right’*, 142.

¹⁸ It is known that Lukács had not seen Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* when he was writing the texts analyzed here. But it is also interesting to note that although he does not know such texts, Lukács reaches similar conclusions based on articulation between Marxist theory and his philosophical heritage, understood here as classical German philosophy. Brazilian philosopher Marcos Nobre explores this exciting relationship. In: Nobre, “Limits of Reification.”

concept of criticism within Lukács' analyzed text and establishes and delineates a specific tradition regarding the methodology of critique.¹⁹

Lukács suggests that the emergence of capitalism and the development of the proletariat as a class are pivotal for posing the question about the basis of criticism. He implies that the social division of labor, particularly within capitalist societies, serves as a material condition that enables the emergence of criticism. This perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness between the socioeconomic structure and the capacity for critical inquiry. The centrality of the social division of labor in this process appears to be associated with a phenomenon of fragmentation of the different spheres of life.²⁰ Especially the epistemic and socio-ontological spheres. Lukács critiques what he sees as a separation between method and reality inherent in bourgeois theory and he correlates this tradition with the Kantian project, called by him "criticism."²¹ This separation implies a disconnection between the way knowledge is constructed and the actual socioeconomic reality it claims to describe or critique. Lukács perceives this as a limitation of bourgeois theory, which he contrasts with his own dialectical approach:

For 'criticism' always starts with just this separation between method and reality, between thought and being. And it is just this separation that it holds to be an improvement deserving of every praise for its introduction of true scientific rigour into the crude, uncritical materialism of the Marxian method. Of course, no one denies the right of 'criticism' to do this. But if it does so we must insist that it will be moving counter to the essential spirit of dialectics²².

Separating method and reality seems to be one of the harmful consequences of Kant's approach to the problem of knowledge, as it mirrors another aspect of the social division of labor. As Marx reminds us in the *Communist Manifesto*, the social division of labor also impacts the intellectual division of labor. The bourgeois class would be responsible for scientific and philosophical investigation, the formulation of the way we perceive the world. It would be up to the proletariat to produce the world through the action of its work directed by the ruling classes. The division between intellectual and manual labor is recognized by Lenin²³ as a consequence of the social division of labor to be faced by the proletariat in the constitution of its class instrument, the party. And the reflection of this division is the isolation of the epistemic dimension as an autonomous and independent dimension of social life. Thus, according to bourgeois thinking, to carry out any theoretical activity, one must investigate the logical foundations, the rational laws that govern phenomena based on the principles of calculability and predictability. In other words, theory becomes an investigation of epistemic foundations disconnected from the practical dimension of life production.

However, the constant expropriation of the proletarian class ends up providing the conditions for its consciousness: "The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie."²⁴ Lukács interprets this phenomenon through a dual perspective. First, he observes that the bourgeoisie, through its dominant intellectual activities, constructs a "metaphysical" framework wherein the object is rigidly isolated as a mere "fact," with the subject's sole permissible action being passive "contemplation" or "knowledge" of the factual "legality." This process gives rise to what Lukács called the "empire of facts."

¹⁹ The notion of "standpoint" as an interested point of view of both bourgeoisie and proletariat theory is developed by Lukács in his article "The Reification and Conscience of the Proletariat" of *History and Class Consciousness*.

²⁰ The thesis of fragmentation of the social totality into different spheres of life is the core of Lukács' argument in the first part of the article "The reification and consciousness of the Proletariat" entitled "The phenomenon of reification."

²¹ Rodney Livingstone translates the term "kritischen" as criticism and not as critical nor critique precisely to allude to Kant's critical project. The original version of the quote: Denn der methodische Ausgangspunkt einer jeden »kritischen« Stellungnahme ist eben die Trennung von Methode und Wirklichkeit, von Denken und Sein. Sie betrachtet ja gerade diese Trennung als den Fortschritt, der ihr im Sinne einer echten Wissenschaftlichkeit dem groben, unkritischen Materialismus der Marx'schen Methode gegenüber als Verdienst angerechnet werden soll. Dies steht ihr selbstredend frei. Es muß aber festgestellt werden, daß sie sich nicht in der Richtung, die das innerste Wesen der dialektischen Methode ausmacht, bewegt. Lukács, "Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein, Studien über Marxistische Dialektik," 174.

²² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 4.

²³ Lenin, "Christman. Essential Works of Lenin."

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 20.

Concurrently, Lukács identifies the development of intellectual tools emerging through dialectics, which are potentially accessible to the proletarian class. These tools include concepts such as history, reciprocal action, mediation, and totality, which transcend their conventional roles as mere epistemological categories and come to be understood as fundamental aspects of social existence. For Lukács, the method is not an isolated epistemic procedure but is intrinsically linked to social life. Epistemic claims are, therefore, products of social life. Regarding this point, Lukács tells us:

The statements of Marx and Engels on this point could hardly be more explicit. “Dialectics thereby reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion – both in the external world and in the thought of man – two sets of laws which are identical *in substance*” (Engels). Marx formulated it even more precisely. “In the study of economic categories, as in the case of every historical and social science, it must be borne in mind that ... *the categories are therefore but forms of being, conditions of existence* [...]”²⁵.

The hypothesis that the social division of labor underpins the question of criticism seems to give rise to Lukács’ movement insofar as the philosopher lists revisionists and opportunists as the enemies to be fought in this article. What do the revisionists want? In some way, to “correct” Marx’s method from the methodological standpoint that separates method from reality. And what do the opportunists wish to do in a more sophisticated way? They intend to submit the Marxist method to the method of natural sciences and the so-called “pure facts.” However, they do not realize that “If such methods seem plausible at first this is because capitalism tends to produce a social structure that in great measure encourages such views.”²⁶ The evolution of capital engenders a theoretical standpoint, notwithstanding its professed neutrality, which inherently embodies a particular conception of class. This standpoint expresses a theory that divorces epistemology from social ontology.

This interpretive framework, which emphasizes the centrality of the social division of labor as a “condition of possibility” to realize a critique, can also serve to contextualize the various “generations” of critical theory. If critical theory serves as a reflection of “diagnosis of the times,” then it follows that critical theorists, in response to shifts in the organization of capitalism as a system, also perceive alterations in the social division of labor, in how it can impact the fragmentations of life, the suffering of the proletariat or other groups and formulate new “diagnosis of the times” in accordance with the exigencies of the object under scrutiny, namely capitalist society itself. For instance, Horkheimer and Adorno discerned a deepening of the social division of labor when they observed a particular intensification in the division of intellectual labor,²⁷ along with advancements in the allocation of free time for the working class.²⁸ While not the primary focus of their analyses, the recognition of different configurations of the social division of labor appears to underpin their overall “diagnosis of the times.” Consequently, observations such as the notion that the proletariat can no longer effectively articulate its interests through traditional political channels, leading to a reliance on critical theorists, or the observation that free time increasingly mirrors working time in its regimentation and structure, suggest a shifting landscape in the division and organization of labor. Similarly, Habermas’ thesis on the colonization of the lifeworld can be seen also as a repercussion of the pronounced intensification of the social division of labor. His concept addresses the encroachment of systemic imperatives, especially from the economic and administrative spheres, into the everyday lifeworld of individuals. This colonization, driven by the instrumental rationality inherent in modern capitalist systems, leads to the subjugation of normative structures, communicative action, and intersubjective understanding of the imperatives of efficiency, profit maximization, and bureaucratic control. In this context, Claus Offe’s observation that labor has ceased to function as a primary sociological category reflects a fundamental shift in the organization and significance of it. The traditional delineation of social roles and identities around labor relations, such as worker, employer, and class, has become increasingly blurred in the face of globalization, automation, and the rise of the service economy. The proliferation of labor in the service sector, the rise of informal and unregulated forms of labor

²⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ I am referring here to the diagnosis of the times in the inaugural text “Traditional and Critical Theory.” In: Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory.”

²⁸ This idea is present in: Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

associated with service provision, and the shift of redistributive policies changed the perception of how important labor can be and led us to understand that contemporary social dynamics, shaped by post-industrial forces, no longer revolve primarily around labor as a central organizing principle. Instead, new forms of social differentiation, inequality, and identity formation emerge, challenging traditional sociological frameworks centered on labor relations. This shift entails a greater prevalence of state-mediated value distribution, planning, and control, thereby diminishing the centrality of labor in the everyday life of the working class in central capitalist societies.²⁹ Nancy Fraser's analysis also provides valuable insights into the suggested link between the social division of labor and "diagnosis of the times." By emphasizing the significance of reproductive and expropriated labor, Fraser's work overcomes conventional understandings of labor relations and social stratification. Reproductive labor, encompassing activities related to caregiving, domestic work, and emotional support, has historically been undervalued and marginalized within capitalist economies. Similarly, expropriated labor refers to the exploitation of work, resources, and unpaid labor that sustains capitalist accumulation. Fraser's exploration of these forms of labor sheds light on their central role in perpetuating social inequalities and sustaining capitalist systems. As she suggests, both reproductive labor and exploited labor are conditions of possibility for capitalism itself. Moreover, her analysis underscores how these overlooked forms of labor contribute to the reproduction of societal structures and power dynamics. By foregrounding the importance of reproductive and expropriated labor, Fraser challenges traditional notions of labor and class, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary social divisions and the emergence of new social actors. In doing so, she expands the scope of critical theory, offering new avenues for analyzing and addressing the complex dynamics of contemporary capitalism.³⁰ These authors do not merely highlight occasional divisions of labor; rather, they underscore structural divisions integral to the systemic dimension of capitalism itself.

My intention here is not to oppose the sociological and economic diagnosis that were fundamental to the formulations of the critical theorists mentioned above but rather to highlight the aspect of the social division of labor within this diagnosis of the times, which, with each "generation" deepens, following new forms of organization of capitalism. Thus, we understand that the perception of Horkheimer and Adorno, informed by the diagnosis of "state capitalism" formulated by Frederick Pollock, captures the nuance of a "new" way of socially organizing work, deepening the classic social division between bourgeois and proletarians. The same observation applies to Habermas and Claus Offe's sociological diagnosis, wherein the centrality of work diminishes with the emergence of new forms of organization of the distribution of values previously mediated by the state in capitalist central societies, and then mediated by the market, thus undergoing the transition from the welfare state to neoliberalism. Or Nancy Fraser's analysis, influenced by Polanyi, highlights how capitalism devalues human labor by treating it as a mere commodity, exploits nature as an endless resource, and prioritizes property rights over social welfare through state repression. This synthesis underscores capitalism's pervasive impact on social, economic, and political structures, revealing the systemic inequalities inherent in contemporary societies. Lukács had already discerned this phenomenon in the form of tendency:

But this tendency in capitalism goes even further. The fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations, *the constant expansion and extension of the division of labor* which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers, all these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived.³¹

Fabian Freyenhagen's article "What is Orthodox Critical Theory?"³² approaches the issue similarly to ours but employs different strategies and arrives at different conclusions. When exploring the defining characteristics

²⁹ Habermas's diagnosis of colonization of the lifeworld is more systematically formulated in: Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. The diagnosis that work is no longer a central category is by Claus Offe in: Offe, "Trabalho."

³⁰ Although she already had presented a new notion of the social division of labor that included and highlighted reproductive work in previous texts, I am referring here specifically to Nancy Fraser's formulation in her conversation with Rahel Jaeggi. In: Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism*.

³¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 6.

³² Freyenhagen, "What is Orthodox Critical Theory?."

of criticism within the critical theory tradition, Freyenhagen, drawing on Lukács, argues that critical theory does not require a program of justification (*Begründungsprogramm*) or a moral correction to be the ultimate criteria of criticism. In advocating for an orthodox critical theory, the author proposes a return to the principles outlined in Horkheimer's seminal text "Traditional and Critical Theory," positioning itself as a theory expressing an interested standpoint. This perspective considers philosophy as a political practice, committed to pluralism and dedicated to incorporating the voices of historically excluded social actors to eliminate injustice and social suffering. To achieve these objectives, Freyenhagen not only outlines certain theoretical steps but also emphasizes the critical theorist's undeniable historical and political commitment to criticism. A stance he considers "ironically" fundamental to the development of critical theory. While emphasizing the significance of the theorist's subjective commitment to criticism, it is important to additionally emphasize an inherent aspect of the object (capitalism itself) that compels us to critique it: the social division of labor exacerbated by the transformative dynamics of capitalism. This goes beyond empirical experiences of injustice and lack of freedom within the system, delving into the system's intrinsic functioning that operates to produce a fragmented, oppressive, and reified reality, as per Lukács' terms. From our perspective, a historical novelty arises with the social division of labor in capitalist societies, enabling the emergence of socially conscious subjects who, cognizant of their exploitative and oppressed position, engage in a radical critique of capitalism, as articulated by Horkheimer in his text. I aim to emphasize the link between variations in the social division of labor and the diverse diagnoses of the times, in order to shed light on this fundamental aspect: this inherent characteristic of the object serves as the cornerstone for both interrogating the foundations of criticism and engaging in critical analysis, thereby nurturing the ongoing development of critical theory.

In this context, it can be suggested that the social division of labor constitutes an economic facet that fragments our perception of reality and erodes our human characteristics. However, it also prompts us to ponder: why do things unfold in this manner? Owing to our societal positioning, we are compelled to confront this phenomenon. Consequently, we can scrutinize the foundation of critical theory: namely, to unveil that a phenomenon is not as it initially appears. The critique of theory serves as a means to illuminate the social division of labor and serves as a prerequisite for conducting criticism from an engaged standpoint. This facilitates an understanding wherein a particular class or group of people becomes cognizant of its subordinate position and endeavors to articulate its own theoretical framework. However, if this scenario holds, how can this class or group engage in a critique of capitalist society that is capable of contributing to its dismantling and subsequent radical societal transformation? In essence, if it is plausible to do a critique theory based on the social division of labor in capitalism, how is it feasible to critique the object itself?

2 The Marxist Method as the Foundation of Social Criticism: Criticizing Capitalism as an Object

Expanding on the significance of the social division of labor in underlining the possibility of interrogating the foundation of criticism, our attention now turns to Lukács' proposition concerning the critique of the object, namely capitalist society. Preliminarily, we have observed Lukács' indication of the Marxist method as a central axis guiding its development. However, what precisely constitutes this method? What distinguishes Lukács' interpretation of Marx's method, rendering it the guarantor of criticism? For him, the Marxist method has the potential to reconcile the epistemic and socio-ontological dimensions of reality, divided by the process of reality fragmentation engendered by the social division of labor. To illustrate this, Lukács delineates some categories of the Marxist method while juxtaposing them with the fundamental categories of the "metaphysical" or "critical" method.³³ Through this comparative analysis, Lukács elucidates how Marxian categories

³³ In this article, Lukács uses terms such as "metaphysical," "criticism," and "scientific" as interchangeable terms to indicate theory from the point of view of the bourgeoisie.

operate to reconcile such discordances, contrasting with how categories of the metaphysical method engender such discordances.

Historicity is the first category to be highlighted as a fundamental element of the method, against the “empire of facts” posed by the “metaphysical” method:

The historical character of the ‘facts’ which science seems to have grasped with such ‘purity’ makes itself felt in an even more devastating manner. As the products of historical evolution they are involved in continuous change. But in addition they are also *precisely in their objective structure the products of a definite historical epoch, namely capitalism*. Thus when ‘science’ maintains that the manner in which data immediately present themselves is an adequate foundation of scientific conceptualisation and that the actual form of these data is the appropriate starting point for the formation of scientific concepts, it thereby takes its stand simply and dogmatically on the basis of capitalist society. It uncritically accepts the nature of the object as it is given and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of ‘science’³⁴.

Lukács seems to indicate that historicity assumes a dual function in comprehending facts within Marx’s framework: firstly, it elucidates that only through historical contextualization can we grasp how a particular phenomenon is shaped by its temporal and social background; secondly, it aims to illustrate that phenomena possess a specific temporal genesis, which arises from manifold determinations. This dual movement serves to expose the process of naturalization undergone by facts. Naturalization perpetuates the atomization of reality, its rational abstraction, and the isolation and essentialization of phenomena. Consequently, our perceptual acuity becomes compromised, leading us to perceive historical facts and phenomena as natural and timeless occurrences. The historical analysis of facts facilitates the overcoming of the dichotomy between the epistemic and socio-ontological dimensions of this specific mode of perception. According to Lukács, this characteristic was particularly striking to the initial readers of Marx’s *Capital*. This astonishment stemmed from Marx’s profound categorical critique of classical political economy concepts, alongside his demonstration of how these concepts are deeply rooted in and informed by historical events and characteristics. Marx’s method thus amalgamates a categorical, or logical, dimension of analyzing phenomena with a historical dimension. An exemplification of this approach can be observed in the third chapter of Book I of *Capital*, dedicated to money. There, Marx not only presents a logically coherent argument demonstrating money as a universal mediator derived from the value attribute of commodities, but also provides historical insight into how this process unfolded, tracing its origins from the development of markets, exchange processes, the establishment of treasuries and reserves, lending practices, and various forms of payment and receipt.

Within this context, Lukács presents dialectics as the privileged methodological approach that enables historicizing criticism of the naturalization of facts and phenomena. Consequently, through historical and dialectical analysis, we come to understand that there exists no identity between essence and appearance, or between what exists and how it is represented. This brings us to the famous quote from Book III of Marx’s *Capital*: “all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.”^{35,36} Michael J. Thompson highlights that Lukács’s resolution to the dissonance between the epistemic and socio-ontological dimensions stems from a recurrent issue inherited from classical German philosophy, often articulated as a disjunction between “what is” and “what ought to be.” Lukács grappled with this problem extensively throughout his formulations. The commentator tells us:

Throughout his work, Lukács struggled with the basic tension that ran through the course of German Idealism: the relation between an autonomous ethics which gives primacy to subjective, practical reason on the one hand, and a nonautonomous ethics which privileges the objective nature of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit* in Hegel’s formulation) or the formulation of ethical value as intrinsic in the objective structure of social life and practices.³⁷

³⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 7.

³⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 797.

³⁶ Norman Geras’ approach of this question, as articulated in his article, provides valuable insights into how Marx elaborated the connection between method and criticism in *Capital*. In: Geras, “Essence and Appearance.”

³⁷ Thompson, “Ontology and Totality,” 230.

He adds, “The outlines of this problem are not purely philosophical. It points toward a critical path back toward the real, concrete conditions of human existence and the potentials within that sphere of socio-ontological reality.”³⁸ Lukács’s use of theoretical instruments from the classical German tradition, such as historicity and dialectics, seems to be the philosopher’s way of presenting the conditions for criticizing capital based on Marx’s method. The remedy against the “empire of facts” would be historicity and dialectics. Thompson also indicates that such a critical path would allow us to move from a critique of an epistemological–moral nature to a critique of a socio-ontological nature. It is within this context that we can see that Lukács highlights the centrality of the category of totality when he states:

This dialectical conception of totality seems to have put a great distance between itself and reality; it appears to construct reality very ‘unscientifically.’ But it is the only method capable of understanding and reproducing reality. Concrete totality is, therefore, the category that governs reality.³⁹

It is interesting to note that, even in his 1967 critique of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács still maintains this position: “It is undoubtedly one of the great achievements of *History and Class Consciousness* to have reinstalled the category of totality in the central position it had occupied throughout Marx’s works and from which it had been ousted by the ‘scientism’ of the social democratic opportunists.”⁴⁰ He reinforces this understanding by saying: “The introductory comments in the first essay, for example, give a definition of orthodoxy in Marxism which I now think not only objectively correct but also capable of exerting a considerable influence even today when we are on the eve of a Marxist renaissance.”⁴¹

Thus, I would also like to suggest that totality serves a dual function within the argumentation. Epistemologically, totality functions as a situational category, positioning the various perspectives of a phenomenon within the broader context of the whole. This enables us to comprehend phenomena from an informed and situated standpoint, transcending their superficial manifestations or partial understandings. From a standpoint of knowledge, concrete totality emerges as one of the pivotal categories facilitating the synthesis of diverse phenomena and their integration into a historical perspective. This fosters a more contextualized understanding that captures the manifold determinations of reality. From this context, it is possible to integrate and understand the various isolated facts of social life as aspects of a unitary historical process. In this way, we can transform knowledge of facts into adequate knowledge of social reality. The methodology for constructing this understanding begins with the immediate observation of facts within the capitalist world and progresses dialectically toward the apprehension of concrete totality, which functions as a conceptual reproduction of reality.

It is here that the crucial importance of the dialectical view of totality reveals itself. For it is perfectly possible for someone to describe the essentials of an historical event and yet be in the dark about the real nature of that event and of its function in the historical totality, i.e. without understanding it as part of a unified historical process.⁴²

From the socio-ontological standpoint, it expresses a characteristic of the capitalist system encompassing everything it touches, gaining planetary proportions. If we compare it with previous socioeconomic systems, this would be impossible. This characteristic occurs through dynamic social relations that express something different than the sum of its parts. In this sense, Lukács points out an important question. It is not a question of ending the contradictions and multiple influences of the system, but of making such inconsistencies appear in the form of tendency. In this way, the tendency will present the emancipatory potential desired by the interested standpoint of the subordinate social class. The totality does not, therefore, reduce the diverse elements that compose it to an undifferentiated uniformity or an identity. Instead, it reveals the autonomy

³⁸ Ibid., 246.

³⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., xx.

⁴¹ Ibid., xxv.

⁴² Ibid., 12.

of the logic of capitalist production as a mere appearance insofar as it contains a dialectical and dynamic interrelationship. Lukács says:

But we maintain that in the case of social reality these contradictions are not a sign of the imperfect understanding of society; on the contrary, *they belong to the nature of reality itself and to the nature of capitalism*. When the totality is known they will not be transcended and *cease* to be contradictions. Quite the reverse, they will be seen to be necessary contradictions arising out of the antagonisms of this system of production. When theory (as the knowledge of the whole) opens up the way to resolving these contradictions it does so by revealing the *real tendencies* of social evolution. For these are destined to effect a *real* resolution of the contradictions that have emerged in the course of history.⁴³

Thompson (2011) argues that it is the category of totality that is at the center of Lukács' critical theory precisely because it guarantees a critique that integrates a transition from a "moral epistemology" to a "social ontology." The author traces the fundamental influence of three authors on this Lukacsian conception of totality: Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx. Despite their different formulations, the three were, according to the commentator, searching for a concrete and socially situated universal, which would allow understanding of the basis of human sociability.

Therefore would be an appropriation by Lukács of a particular philosophical tradition that (i) understands subjects as collective subjects and subjects of action, focused on collective and, therefore, political activity; (ii) investigates the consciousness structure of these subjects themselves; and (iii) address issues of consciousness as a praxis, a process of realization, thus realizing how external objective forces shape consciousness. When addressing questions of an ontological nature to society, such as what is real in capital, this tradition also uses logic and deductive thinking as a subjective structure of thought. The Lukacsian project can be comprehended as an endeavor to formulate a theory of social reality imbued with an inherently dialectical nature. This project entails theorizing both the objective and subjective determinants of human "social being" while simultaneously exploring how this "being" can be both influenced by and exert influence upon the overarching system – conceived here as a totality. Moreover, it aims to elucidate the theoretical framework through which such processes can be understood and analyzed.

This notion is fundamental for Lukács, as the apprehension of such an ontological foundation of human sociability embodies the totality within which human beings are continually shaped. This totality delineates the boundaries within which human self-development unfolds and constitutes one of the pillars of criticism. By comprehending the ontological structure of society, we, according to Lukács, possess the requisite conditions to envision a world more conducive to genuine human freedom. Consequently, this argument seeks to justify a normative conception of human beings. It suggests that Lukács' critical project is rooted in the construction of an ethical framework aimed at guiding our thoughts and actions toward transcending the distorted, fragmented, and dehumanizing structures engendered by capitalist society. However, these structures can only be comprehended, and subsequently evaluated, from a perspective that unveils the fundamental social ontological foundations. This perspective attempts to establish a normative logic for human knowledge, even though in a negative sense, when ethical standards, progress, and humanity are set to evaluate "how society should be."⁴⁴

To undertake this endeavor, Lukács highlights the importance of reciprocal action and mediation in addition to the category of totality. Let us initially focus on the former. Lukács employs the terms interaction, relationship, and reciprocal action interchangeably to denote the same phenomenon. In his article "What is

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ Martin Jay in his book *Marxism and Totality* (1984) points to the limits of this conception of totality formulated by Lukács insofar as it brings with it something totalitarian in its social consequence. As one of the meanings of totality attributed by Lukács is the identity between subject and object, there would be the imputation of ontological value in logical categories, thus mixing the two dimensions analyzed here by us. It does not seem to be the case to follow Jay's observations since Lukács himself observes this issue in his self-critical 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness* while at the same time not giving up the category of totality. Purified from its Hegelian notion of identical subject and object, the totality could act in the Lukacsian system in order to express the social totality as something qualitatively different than the mere sum of the parts and present us, epistemologically, with situated knowledge of the different spheres of life. In: Jay, *Marxism and Totality*.

Orthodox Marxism?” this category aims to signify a dual process: firstly, to assert that objective entities, or those with material existence, mutually influence each other, such as working time directly impacting the production of surplus value; secondly, it denotes that an idea, or subjective construct, is both influenced by and influences the objective dimension, such as the concept of value, which serves as an abstraction or subjective construct organizes the totality of social life. In both instances, this occurs through interaction, thereby perpetuating constant change:

Thus the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other. The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as a social process*. For only this conception dissolves the fetishistic forms necessarily produced by the capitalist mode of production and enables us to see them as mere illusions which are not less illusory for being seen to be necessary. These unmediated concepts, these ‘laws’ sprout just as inevitably from the soil of capitalism and veil the real relations between objects.⁴⁵

Central to this discourse is the recognition that interaction or reciprocal action stands as a crucial element not only for attaining a nuanced understanding of social reality but also for transcending the fetishistic illusion perpetuated by capitalist structures. Christian Lotz (2023) reminds us that this idea of treating categories in a relational way as central to the method has Kantian origins.⁴⁶ When commenting on the table of categories exposed in the *Analytic of concepts* of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes: “Thus allness (totality) is nothing other than plurality considered as a unity, limitation is nothing other than reality combined with negation, community is the causality of a substance in the reciprocal determination of others, finally necessity is nothing other than the existence that is given by possibility itself.”⁴⁷ Categories, in reality, express relationships, or in other words, interaction. Totality is the consideration of the multiple and the diverse taken in their unity. This allows us to represent phenomena based on a coordinated connection between all things to think of concomitant and reciprocal interactions rather than solely subordinate ones.⁴⁸ However, this Kantian origin is insufficient to indicate the complexity of reciprocal action for the notion of Marxist method in Lukács.

In Kantian philosophy, understanding and its categories are often regarded as formal constructs empty of intrinsic content, awaiting empirical experiences for fulfillment. Conversely, Lukács advances the view that categories harbor specific and historically contingent social content. Concepts such as value, labor, capital, and proletariat transcend mere representations, imbued instead with concrete social significance and engaged in reciprocal influence.⁴⁹ Consequently, categories drawn from political economy serve to underscore this dimension:

The fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society succeed in concealing reality, but more is concealed than the historical, i.e. transitory, ephemeral nature of phenomena. This concealment is made possible by the fact that in capitalist society man’s environment, and especially the categories of economics, appear to him immediately and necessarily in forms of objectivity which conceal the fact that they are the categories of the *relations of men with each other*. Instead they appear as things and the relations of things with each other. Therefore, when the dialectical method destroys the fiction of the immortality of the categories it also destroys their reified character and clears the way to a knowledge of reality. According to Engels in his discussion of Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy*, “economics does not treat of things, but of the relations between persons and, in the last analysis, between classes; however, these relations are always *bound to things* and *appear as things*.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 13.

⁴⁶ In: Lotz, “Marxismus als Methode?.”

⁴⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B-111.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ In the second section of his article “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” titled “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought” Lukács not only presents his interpretation of Kantian philosophy as emblematic of bourgeois thought but also undertakes a critique similar to that articulated in the text under examination. This observation underscores a structural affinity between the two texts, giving us reason to reinforce the suggestion that the elaboration of the concept of reification led him to revisions of the 1919 article.

⁵⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 14–5.

Lotz's analysis is indeed insightful, as it underscores that, beyond its Kantian roots, Lukács's conception of interaction also draws inspiration from the sociological writings of Simmel and Marx's contributions to the critique of political economy.⁵¹ Consequently, it becomes apparent that the category's content and its relational nature are inseparable. Building upon this analysis, we can suggest that, on the one hand, it facilitates the comprehension of reality as a dynamic process continually shaped by various influencing factors. On the other hand, it enables us to recognize that these changes manifest as tendencies, which may or may not culminate in crisis. A representation of reality as procedural and as a tendency permits the execution of ethical criticism, originating from an engaged perspective, based on an internal examination of the object, or what is used to be called immanent criticism. Throughout this process, each category unveils itself as an expression of the relationships among human beings, or the society itself:

At every stage of social evolution each economic category reveals a definite relation between men. This relation becomes conscious and is conceptualized. Because of this the inner logic of the movement of human society can be understood at once as the product of men themselves and of forces that arise from their relations with each other and which have escaped their control. Thus the economic categories become dynamic and dialectical in a double sense. As 'pure' economic categories they are involved in constant interaction with each other, and that enables us to understand any given historical cross-section through the evolution of society. But since they have arisen out of human relations and since they function in the process of the transformation of human relations, the actual process of social evolution becomes visible in their reciprocal relationship with the reality underlying their activity. That is to say, the production and reproduction of a particular *economic* totality, which science hopes to understand, is necessarily transformed into the process of production and reproduction of a particular *social* totality; in the course of this transformation, 'pure' economics are naturally transcended, though this does not mean that we must appeal to any transcendental forces.⁵²

In Lukács's methodological framework, the category of mediation functions as a bridge between the realms of political economy and classical German philosophy. This bridging endeavor is aimed at dismantling the notion of "immediacy," consequently undermining the tendencies toward "naturalization" and "essentialization" of facts. Through this synthesis, the hegemony of mere factual existence can be supplanted by a genuinely historical and dialectical analysis. In this regard, we agree with István Mészáros, who underscores this aspect: "Thus in Lukács' conception the role of economics, far from being mechanical and one-sidedly deterministic, is dialectically active: it is given the role of the structurally and methodologically ultimate frame of reference."⁵³ Indeed, Lukács perceives Marx as a theoretical resource for criticism by articulating political economy with classical German philosophy. This synthesis serves as a foundational element for rendering criticism viable. For the philosopher, the subtitle of *Capital*, a critique of political economy, is only possible because "In this sense Marx's critique of Hegel is the direct continuation and extension of the criticism that Hegel himself levelled at Kant and Fichte."⁵⁴ Marx's engagement with political economy prevented him from succumbing to "conceptual mythologies" as observed in the works of his predecessors. Moreover, it empowered him to seamlessly articulate the epistemological and socio-ontological dimensions, rooted in the social division of labor and the ensuing class struggle emanating from this division.

Mediation serves as a conduit for transcending immediate reality and uncovering emancipatory tendencies through an analysis grounded in the immanent critique of the object itself, namely capitalist society. This capability allows Lukács to invoke the methodological principle of historical materialism:

The premise of dialectical materialism is, we recall: "It is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." Only in the context sketched above can this premise point beyond mere theory and become a question of praxis. Only when the core of existence stands revealed as a social process can existence be seen as the product, albeit the hitherto unconscious product, of human activity. This activity will be seen in its turn as the element crucial for the transformation of existence. Man finds himself confronted by purely natural relations or social forms mystified into natural relations. They appear to be fixed, complete and immutable entities which can

⁵¹ In: Lotz, "Marxismus als Methode?."

⁵² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 15.

⁵³ Mészáros, *Lukács' Concept of Dialectic*, 71.

⁵⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 17.

be manipulated and even comprehended, but never overthrown. But also this situation creates the possibility of praxis in the individual consciousness.⁵⁵

Mediation is fundamental in the articulation between the political economy and the German philosophical tradition as it exercises three methodological functions: (i) it articulates social reality and subjectivation through the concept of consciousness; (ii) dissolves the immediacy imposed by the “empire of facts” and allows us to reveal development trends internal to the logic of social functioning, allowing for an immanent critique of the object; (iii) it articulates the parts with the whole, giving shape to the dialectical perspective as it interconnects reciprocal action and totality.

In the first methodological aspect, mediation facilitates the proletariat’s engaged perception by exposing the fetishized nature of society, leading the proletariat to recognize the world as a collective construct shaped by its labor practices. This engenders an alignment between the theoretical and practical endeavors of the proletariat. According to Lukács, a critical theory emerging from an engaged class standpoint essentially represents the theoretical articulation of class consciousness. It is in this perspective that a unity between praxis and theory can exist.⁵⁶ István Mészáros (1972) highlights that while the problematic aspects of the identity relationship between subject and object formulated by Lukács in the conception of consciousness, as presented in the fifth and final section of the article, are evident, there is also a philosophical core suggesting that consciousness and the interaction between theory and practice constitute a dynamic process shaped by multiple reciprocal actions. It is not a simple cause-and-effect interaction, where theory unilaterally determines practice or *vice versa*.

Concerning the second aspect, Lukács outlines a methodological trajectory of immediacy, mediation, and totality. Immanent criticism starts by scrutinizing the superficial appearance of phenomena and gradually incorporates historical considerations and the dialectical interrelations among these phenomena. The concept of totality thus emerges as a manifestation of the ultimate emancipatory goal of the proletariat.

The facts no longer appear strange when they are comprehended in their coherent reality, in the relation of all partial aspects to their inherent, but hitherto unelucidated roots in the whole: we then perceive the tendencies which strive towards the center of reality, to what we are wont to call the ultimate goal. This ultimate goal is not an abstract ideal opposed to the process, but an aspect of truth and reality. It is the concrete meaning of each stage reached and an integral part of the concrete moment. Because of this, to comprehend it is to recognize the direction taken (unconsciously) by events and tendencies towards the totality. It is to know the direction that determines concretely the correct course of action at any given moment - in terms of the interest of the total process, viz. the emancipation of the proletariat.⁵⁷

This quote directs us to the third methodological aspect of mediation within our proposed analytical framework. Beyond merely coordinating the constituent parts with the whole, mediation enables us to adopt a dialectical perspective that transcends a mechanistic conception of reality. It moves beyond the notion of one category being fundamental over others, such as politics, culture, or economics. Likewise, it rejects the notion that altering one dimension of life, like the economic sphere, automatically induces changes in all other dimensions. Instead, it fosters an understanding that the whole, achieved through mediation among the various parts, possesses a qualitative difference from their mere summation. Consequently, the comprehension of the economy is rendered through the dialectical interplay of all societal categories, undergoing multifaceted transformations across historical epochs. This intricate web of categories finds coherence within a system characterized by multiple transitions and mediations, historically and systematically qualified.

Therefore, Lukács posits that theory transcends its role as a mere reflection of social action; rather, it emerges as a potent instrument for the liberation of oppressed communities. Specifically, within the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18–9.

⁵⁶ Hence, it is possible to outline that the final objective (das Endziel) for Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* is the “Proletarian Revolution.” More than a historical contingency given by the European political situation at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lukács formulated this final objective in the form of a philosophical concept as “actuality of the revolution” in: Lukács, *Lenin*.

⁵⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 23.

proletarian context, the theory assumes the crucial role of enlightenment, unveiling the necessary illusions perpetuated by the fetishistic nature of capitalism while nurturing the development of class consciousness among the proletariat. This conceptualization underscores the transformative potential of theory in empowering marginalized groups to challenge dominant hegemonic structures and advocate for their emancipation. This conceptualization presents a paradigmatic shift from viewing the method as a rigid set of guidelines or subjective tools for acquiring knowledge to a more holistic integration of epistemic and socio-ontological dimensions. It posits theory not as a static construct but as the conscious practice of a particular class, with criticism rooted in an immanent analysis of the object. In this light, the Marxist method transcends its traditional role of merely dispelling false tendencies or safeguarding rigid theses; rather, it emerges as a dynamic and dialectical process that actively engages with the intricate complexities of social reality. This perspective underscores the fluidity and adaptability of the Marxist method, which continually evolves in response to the shifting dynamics of society or, in Lukács' words: "it is the eternally vigilant prophet proclaiming the relation between the tasks of the immediate present and the totality of the historical process."⁵⁸

Let us then return to the question posed in the article's title: What is Orthodox Marxism? This question can be approached as a historical document or as a path to understanding Marx and Lukács's Marxist formation, as Lukács himself categorizes this text in his 1967 Preface. He frames the debate as one with revisionists and opportunists, grounded in Leninist principles, making the text a historical portrait of its time.⁵⁹ However, beyond this, Lukács and the text provoke us to think critically. In this context, the question "What is critical about critical theory?" can be seen as a historical translation of "What is Orthodox Marxism?" This discussion is not about comparing Lukács and Critical Theory, for which there is extensive literature, but about suggesting that Lukács's approach remains relevant today. Lukács highlights two major movements in this text. First, he emphasizes that philosophy, when anchored in a concrete object like capitalism, remains crucial for criticism. Ironically, the fundamental categories of the Marxist method Lukács highlights are originally Hegelian. This suggests that criticism of the object (in its socio-ontological aspect) and theory (in its epistemological aspect) are interconnected. When separated, there is a risk of falling into a purely metaphysical investigation, detached from reality, where method and reality, theory and practice, are disconnected, reducing criticism to merely considering its "conditions of possibility." This implies that classical German philosophy thrived in Lukács's formulations, underscoring the importance of its legacy. Second, Lukács indicates that this movement emerges from the structure of the object itself. And, somehow, it influences our capacity to subjectivize both ourselves and the world. Different diagnoses are possible because the capitalist structure evolves over time. By returning to the object and investigating it, we can gain insights into how subjects form their subjectivities, who are the subjects that are oppressed, and what they have to say from a unique standpoint. This way, or with attention to it, we can become more critical and also indicate how these situations can be overcome. From this standpoint, these dimensions can be seen as open windows suggested by Lukács for addressing contemporary problems and we can maintain ourselves vigilant.

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⁵⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹ An important text by Lukács from the period, which helps us understand the issue in a broader way, is *Chvostimus und Dialektik*. In it, Lukács defends HCC, mainly regarding points that deal with the revolutionary subject and the dialectics of nature.

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