

## GEORG LUKÁCS IN THE LABYRINTH OF COEXISTENCE

CRISTIAN NICHITEAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** This text attempts to trace the evolution of the political and philosophical thought of Georg Lukács, after his magnum opus *History and class consciousness*, as well as the influence that historical events had on this evolution. Against the dominant consensus that dismisses Lukács's late work as an effect of his alleged "reconciliation with reality", I argue that the line of continuity in his thought was the idea of peaceful coexistence, derived from the objective conditions – the isolation of the Soviet Union and the stabilization of Western capitalism. So, rather than explaining his choice to defend coexistence, or "socialism in one country" as a consequence of his reconciliation with, or surrender to Stalinism, one should see his compromise with Stalinism as a consequence of this choice. His commitment to the coexistence thesis shaped his final version of Marxism in a number of ways. From a political perspective, a readjustment of the temporal scale of the transition to socialism in post-revolutionary society constrained him to advocate a more realist strategy that combined revolutionary movements with evolutionary processes – this was reflected in his option for the Popular Front strategy and later in his support for the Western pacifist movements. His late philosophical work also bears the marks of this enduring political choice.

**Keywords:** *Coexistence, Marxism, irrationalism, Stalinism, democratization, socialism*

The publication of *History and class consciousness* earned Georg Lukács a solid reputation, as one of the founders of Western Marxism. In contrast, his subsequent work lies in obscurity, because of his compromises with Stalinism. Although Lukács withdrew from active politics after the party line he supported in the *Blum Theses* was defeated, although in 1949-50 he was targeted again by the Hungarian party leadership (the so called "Lukács debate" concerning the realism of literature in socialist society), although his last political intervention was to accept a position in the government of Imre Nagy, the cloud of mistrust that hovered over Lukács prevented a

---

\* Independent researcher, crissis76@yahoo.com

fair reception of his ideas. This is hardly a surprise, since even authors with Marxist credentials issued irrevocable verdicts. The most famous is Adorno's 1961 attack on Lukács's "official optimism", denouncing his alignment with the official ideology of Soviet communism (Adorno 1980: 167). In Adorno's pamphlet, Lukács's "reconciliation" with the regime appeared as the abdication of thought under ideological pressure and its substitution with a dogmatic simulacrum. H. Marcuse also saw in *The Destruction of Reason* an example of the deterioration of Marxist critique. For J. Gabel, Lukács's later philosophy was a never-ending ritual of penitence for his former "heresy", a "long and humiliating Canossa" (Gabel 1966). If we agree with these statements, we may think that the Hungarian thinker ended up in a deadlock, unwittingly repeating Hegel's failed intellectual journey: from tragedy to utopia, then to reconciliation.

Could perhaps Lukács's attitude towards Soviet-type socialism rather be seen as a sign of resignation? That at least seems to believe G.M. Tamás, who reads *The Young Hegel* as "Lukács's own intellectual autobiography in disguise: between its lines, he concedes defeat" (Tamás 2017). Others saw in his work neither reconciliation nor defeat, but an expression of intellectual resistance. Ostracized from politics, where his insights were ignored or even suppressed, Lukács had to content himself with aesthetic and philosophical matters – here, at least, he had some autonomous space. For instance, N. Tertulian asserted that, far from offering philosophical legitimation to the communist parties in power, Lukács's late work was an example of "critical ontology" called to question the complex relations between economy, law, politics and ethics, the status of ideology, the dialectic between alienation and disalienation (Tertulian 2016: 48). But the dominant framework of interpretation became that of reconciliation, understood as alignment, submission or even capitulation. Matteo Gargani astutely summarized Lukács's late contribution to philosophy as a " 'testament' without heirs" (Gargani 2016): although his late political, cultural and philosophical practice was radically extraneous to Stalinism, the suspicions raised by his compromises in the 1930s virtually condemned his later ideas to oblivion.

This paper attempts to advance a different framework of interpretation, by examining the impact that one of the main tenets of the Soviet international policy – the idea of peaceful coexistence – had on Lukács's thought. It argues that his position and actions can be better understood as a result of his agreement with and internalization of the peaceful coexistence thesis, rather than as a consequence of his alleged reconciliation with Stalinism. Lukács's late thought cannot be exclusively derived from its indebtedness to the idea of coexistence. There were other factors at play that influenced his final version of Marxism, some internal (his ethical perspective, his particular brand of Hegelianism, his rather conservative aesthetics), some attributable to historical circumstances. But features like the projection of his

universal revolutionary aspirations into a distant future, or the formulation of the main ideological conflicts of his era as a *Kulturkampf* between reason and irrationalism were surely consequences of his internalization of the coexistence principle. The empirical reality of coexistence compelled Lukács to emphasize more and more the role of evolutionary processes and secondary contradictions – these were new categories that he introduced in order to investigate the new socio-political landscape, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.

By the end of the Civil War, Lenin had to abandon the assertive doctrine of world revolution and switch to a more defensive strategy of “peaceful coexistence” with the West. It was a retreat determined by facts: as Russia lay in ruins, the motor of world revolution ran out of steam. It was argued that this new orientation aimed only for a temporary and limited cooperation in order to gain a necessary “breathing space” for the proletarian state to consolidate, a respite in the struggle with capitalism. Anyway, the coexistence doctrine was a response to a set of international circumstances dominated by the defeat of the German revolution, the stabilization of capitalism, the relative weakness of the Soviet State and the relative decline of class struggle and working-class militancy in the West. Inevitably, it prioritized the interests of the Soviet Union, at the expense of those of the international communist movement. It had to postpone world-revolutionary ambitions and design alliances with bourgeois forces in the capitalist world. Later in the 1930s it had to choose between an anti-fascist and an anti-capitalist strategy, and finally settled for the former, lending its support to the “Popular Fronts”.

Coexistence imposed a readjustment of hopes and expectations. Conceptually, for Lukács the new reality meant that the era dominated by the “actuality of the revolution” was coming to an end. What remained was the war torn, economically destitute Soviet state in need of peace for its consolidation. In the 1967 *Preface to HCC*, he briefly summarized his thoughts around that turning moment in history: “Lenin died in 1924. The party struggles that followed his death were concentrated increasingly on the debate about whether socialism could survive in one country. That it was possible in theory Lenin had affirmed long before. But the seemingly near prospect of world revolution made it appear particularly theoretical and abstract. The fact that it was now taken seriously proved that a world revolution could not be held to be imminent in these years... Moreover, after 1924 the Third International correctly defined the position of the capitalist world as one of ‘relative stability’. These facts meant that I had to re-think my theoretical position. In the debates of the Russian Party, I agreed with Stalin about the necessity for socialism in one country and this shows very clearly the start of a new epoch in my thought” (Lukács 1971: xvii–xviii). There is always a risk with this type of autobiographical

statements, *a posteriori* reconstructions that may be intended to project an organic development, an artificial continuity in one's views. But it can be proved that, by and large, Lukács's trajectory was consistent with his own assessment of it. Good or bad, the coexistence idea was his "existential choice" (to use Agnes Heller's words), and he stood by it until the end.

**"So I rejected the Hegelian thesis that all the stages of historical development must be considered right, which led to his reconciliation with reality"**

The tendency to read Lukács allegorically was popular among his critics. They seek to uncover a deeper meaning, hidden in his work but still accessible to a select few, revealing Lukács's true attitude towards the social and political events of his day. As mentioned above, G.M. Tamás reads *The Young Hegel* as a confession of defeat. For Ferenc Fehér the reconciliation theme was a new dialectic in historical disguise. This is what he has to say about Lukács's situation: "It was a very contradictory position. He always tried to reveal the system's 'ideal type' as opposed to its empirical reality ... it also meant an acceptance of the regime's basic principles, i.e., a reconciliation with reality" (Fehér 1979). A strange way to define reconciliation as allegiance to the "regime's basic principles", although it acknowledges that Lukács generally preserved a critical distance to its empirical reality. (Rather he resigned himself with this gap between ideal and empirical reality, as long as he thought that it was only temporary). But in the end, this autonomous space, this distance from Stalinism was for Fehér just an illusion. Lukács sided with Weimar (the moderate but – by and large – progressive ideas of Goethe or Hegel) against Potsdam (the *Ancien Régime*), while remaining sceptical towards more utopian radicals (Hölderlin, Georg Forster) who, for all their heroism, failed to understand that in the backward Germany there were no objective conditions, no material and social base for their ideals. In Fehér's translation: Lukács enacted an impotent cultural opposition against Stalinism, while also opposing both capitalism and a more radical, "utopian" communism.

As for Agnes Heller, she saw in Lukács's own repudiation of *HCC* not so much reconciliation, but an expression of his supposed paradoxical relationship with the "absolute" (i.e., the "existential choice that bound him to the then existing communist parties, and – in consequence – to the Soviet Union and the Third International"), a relationship characterized by Heller, in a predictable Kierkegaardian fashion, simultaneously as faith and despair (Heller 1979). Of course, to pose the

problem in theological terms absolves one of the effort of examining more closely Lukács's ideas. In this way, concrete circumstances can be abstracted out, everything can be grasped in terms of ideological blindness, faith, illusion or mythology. These allegorical readings are simplifications that don't take into account the social, political and historical context: the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s was different from Germany at the turn of the XIX century. The "faith in the absolute" expressed itself differently in different individuals. Lukács's thought was not unilaterally determined. He did not follow blindly the party, but based his decisions on his own independent, early assessment of the events. Also, in 1926-1928 there was not yet the need for faith to be opposed to empirical reality, and no duress that could have determined his defense of "socialism in one country".

In *Lukács and Stalinism*, Michael Löwy wrote that "a decisive re-orientation in the life and work of Lukács began in 1926; a profound theoretical and political break with all his former revolutionary ideas, and in particular with *History and Class Consciousness*", and adds that "after 1926 his writings are characterized by an identification with Stalinism, albeit with many reservations and qualifications" (Löwy 1975). This identification was actually a process that took Lukács from "revolutionary realism" to "realism pure and simple" and, "politically, closer to the non-revolutionary *Realpolitik* of Stalin". Löwy states that from 1926 to 1968, the idea of reconciliation "had formed – implicitly or explicitly – the 'philosophical' basis of his unstable and difficult compromise with Stalinism". In Löwy's account, this reconciliation was a two-stage process. The first step was mainly theoretical but with "far-reaching political implications", and it began with the 1926 article *Moses Hess and the problems of idealist dialectics*, that set the "methodological basis for his support for the Soviet 'Thermidor'". By siding with Hegel's "dialectical realism", against the "abstract utopianism" of his contemporaries, Lukács allegedly alluded to his own tendencies towards reconciliation. The fact that in the same piece the Hungarian thinker stated explicitly that "the question of 'reconciliation' reveals in fact the most problematical aspect of Hegelian philosophy" (Lukács 2014: 189) is not mentioned. Having contended that by 1926 Lukács's methodological roots of his reconciliation with Stalinism were in already in place, Löwy tried then to prove that subsequently Lukács followed blindly the official line (so blindly that he even failed to notice when the line has changed). So, the *Blum Theses* were just "an application to Hungary of the right turn of the Comintern; Lukács was only following the 'general line' of 1924–7". This interpretation denies to Lukács any independent position, and conveniently depicts this instance of inconformity as an accident caused by a lack of synch with the party.

It is important to grasp the context as much as the contents of the *Blum Theses*. Drafted in 1928, these theses reflected the position of the Landler faction, opposed to the Moscow-backed party leader Béla Kun. An example of political realism, the *Theses* advocated for a broad coalition of democratic forces and warned against maximalist actions, considering that in Hungary there were no immediate conditions for a new revolutionary insurgency. What could be accomplished at the time was a mass movement “beyond the confines of the proletariat”, which would lead to the overthrow of the Bethlen regime and the establishment of a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, in view of a “transition to the revolution of the proletariat”. That for Lukács was in line with the “Marxist view – that bourgeois democracy is the best battlefield for the proletariat” (Lukács 2014: 241). It would be more logical to ascribe Lukács’s position in the *Blum Thesis* to a genuine reorientation in his thought, rather than to him inadvertently following the obsolete party line. With their projected alliance between the proletariat and the progressive faction of the bourgeoisie, against a reactionary and oppressive dictatorship, the *Theses* can be seen as an application of the coexistence principle, an anticipation of the Popular Front strategy. There is one strong reason to ascribe Lukács’s position to an autonomous development in his thought, rather than to a spontaneous alignment behind the party line: the coexistence theme accompanied him constantly from then on. On the contrary, at times Lukács found himself outside of the “correct” party line, for which he was severely reprimanded. (To say that Lukács reserved for himself the right to think freely, i.e., that he had an independent position, is not to deny his tactical compromise with Stalinism, in order to survive, or to keep himself relevant).

In 1926, when he was praising Hegel’s realism and allegedly was setting the stage for his reconciliation, Lukács was very much active in the clandestine Hungarian party. So, if he used “Hegel” as a code-word for himself, what was the reality that he was preparing to reconcile to, since Stalinism as such had not yet been developed? By then, the only reality that Lukács could have been reconciled to (or, rather, resigned to) was that of the peaceful coexistence, or socialism in one country. And *this* was indeed the reality reflected in the *Blum Theses*. As Isaac Deutscher explained, after Lenin died in 1924 – just as the European revolutionary wave was receding – the Bolshevik leaders (but also rank and file communist militants) inherited a dilemma.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Deutscher 1953: ‘The dilemma to which this gave rise was in the centre of the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky... Bolshevism had to decide whether it should go on staking its future on the ‘liberation’, that is on the self-emancipation, of foreign working classes or whether it ought to aim at ‘containing’ capitalism at the frontiers of the Soviet Union. The policy of ‘liberation’ appeared to have exhausted its possibilities: the working classes in foreign countries were neither ready nor willing to overthrow capitalism. Soviet policy moved slowly but irresistibly towards ‘containment’, which involved a radical revision of Leninist assumptions and attitudes.’

And the trend in the Party that contradicted the Leninist internationalist principles and pushed for a retreat of the revolution within national boundaries had already emerged victorious by 1928.

Löwy tries to frame Lukács as a “rightist Stalinist”, stating that “What Lukács could not accept was Stalinist policy in the so-called ‘left’ periods, which considered bourgeois democracy (or social-democracy) to be the prime enemy rather than fascism”, and that “Lukács was in opposition whenever Stalinism was in sharp conflict with Western (bourgeois) democracy and culture”. Even the anti-Stalinism of the late Lukács was allegedly “rightist”, because he “inclined towards defining Stalinism as essentially a ‘leftist’ deviation, a ‘sectarian subjectivism’”. (Actually, in the *Ontology* Lukács defined Stalinism as a type of dualism, a heterogeneous mixture of voluntarism and mechanical necessity, of subjectivism and objectivism). For Löwy, “the Stalinist period which he criticizes most vigorously is 1928–33. The orientation of the USSR between 1948 and 1953 seemed to him, in the last analysis, to be a relapse into the same basic errors”. However, it could be argued that what bothered Lukács was not so much the alleged “left” content of the Stalinist policies during the incriminated intervals, but the inflammatory “sectarian” rhetoric that threatened peaceful cohabitation with the West, especially after the Second World War. Also, the fact that “Lukács totally supported ‘Khrushchevism’, both in its internal aspects (partial criticism of Stalinism) and its external ones (peaceful co-existence as the international strategy of the Communist movement)”, only shows the continuity in his beliefs and confirms that it was the underlying idea of coexistence, rather than his alleged reconciliation with Stalinism, that fundamentally shaped Lukács’s position.

Contradicting his own interpretation of the *Blum Theses*, Löwy has to concede that “Lukács did not automatically follow the ‘general line’ dictated by Moscow. He had his own line, which sometimes coincided with and sometimes clashed with the ‘Centre’”. The cornerstone of this independent position was a political realism that went against his former utopianism. Löwy writes, correctly, that “while he accepted the fundamental premises of Stalinist politics (socialism in one country, the abandonment of revolutionary internationalism), Lukács was not a blind follower: whatever the circumstances, he refused to give up his own special popular-frontist ideology”. But he does not attach much importance to this conclusion, and does not interpret Lukács’s popular-frontism as a tactical application of the coexistence principle. Instead, he sees Lukács’s realignment as a consequence of his affinity for the bourgeois culture. He goes as far as concluding that “Lukács’s political and intellectual career from 1928 onwards was coherent: it was a consistent attempt to ‘reconcile’ Stalinism with bourgeois-democratic culture”. In fact, Lukács was very selective in his embrace of “bourgeois culture”, reserving his praise for the small fraction that he saw as progressive.

Of course, his later criticism of Stalinism was incomplete. As Löwy shows, “he never grasped the roots of the Stalinist phenomenon or sought to develop a Marxist analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy, but confined himself to denouncing its ‘superstructural’ aspects: brutal manipulation, predominance of tactics over theory, etc.” It is true that Lukács “refused to question some of the basic elements of Stalinist policy, such as socialism in one country”. But as I stated above, it makes little sense to explain his defense of “socialism in one country”, i.e., his “existential choice”, as a consequence of his reconciliation with, or surrender to Stalinism. Rather the other way around, one should see his compromise with Stalinism as a consequence of this choice, which incidentally was also Stalin’s basic political guideline. In the final analysis, Lukács perceived his situation as a dilemma: either he accepted Stalinism (even if internally he disagreed with it), or he broke up with it and abandoned the organized labour movement. He did not envisage other options, so he chose to stay in. As Perry Anderson wrote, to Western Marxists in general, “the official Communist movement represented the sole real embodiment of the international working class with meaning for them – whether they joined it, allied with it or rejected it” (Anderson 1979: 92). In other words, for these intellectuals Stalinism may have been accepted or opposed, but it was the only significant partner of conversation. It is a too broad definition of the term “Stalinism” that allows Löwy to say that Lukács identified with Stalinism. (As I tried to show, actually he was committed to the principles of a communist society and identified with peaceful coexistence and socialism in one country). Not everyone that agreed with one principle or another of Stalin’s policies was doing so out of abject submission. As Costanzo Preve put it, we can label Lukács as a “Stalinist” only if we include in this category all the twentieth-century communists which did not explicitly break with Stalin’s “official” Communism (Preve 2013: 485). But for Preve this criterion has no significance, as it does not take into account the concrete alternatives available for Lukács at the time.

As with everything he wrote in the 1930s, one can only guess to what extent his ideas were influenced by an instinct of self-preservation. Those were years when Lukács, working at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, preferred not to take too many ideological risks. He found refuge in his literary studies, and yet the spirit of *Blum Theses* was reflected in his aesthetic conception, in his affinity with bourgeois ‘critical’ realism and perhaps in a somewhat less than enthusiastic attitude towards socialist realism. And his beliefs were not abandoned after 1945 when, back in Hungary, he received an academic position and assumed the leadership of the *Forum* journal. As he recalled the events in the “autobiographical sketch”, he explicitly based his editorial strategy on the idea of the Popular Front, in the hope that it would lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat (Lukács 1983: 117).

In retrospect, Lukács considered that, with the *Blum theses*, his Marxism had reached maturity. He disowned his early pre-Marxist work and tried to project his late views as the result of an organic development, of a continuous theoretical evolution. His detractors saw in this an attempt to cover up inconsistencies and, perhaps, sins. However, as it emerges from the above analysis, there was an element of continuity in his late philosophy, one that, having altered Lukács's perspective in the 1920s, shaped the main lines of his thought for the rest of his life. But it was not his alleged surrender to Stalinism – it was the idea of coexistence, derived from the “objective conditions”, from the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the defeat of the other European revolutionary movements, an attempt to deal with the new “geopolitical” reality of the stabilization of the capitalist world and the two rival social systems existing side by side. The coexistence theme – quite ubiquitous in Lukács's writings after 1945 – was an adaptation of the direction inaugurated by the *Blum Theses* to the new circumstances. The Popular Fronts were designed mainly as an antifascist strategy. After the war, the USA replaced fascism as USSR's main antagonist. Lukács disliked the bellicose factions on both sides and sided with the moderates who were hoping for a *détente*. He regarded the “progressive” forces in the West, communist and non-communist, including religious currents opposed to war, as presumptive allies. This new type of Popular Front had, in Lukács's opinion, an even more important mission than the interwar one: to secure the peaceful coexistence in the atomic era.

To prove his point, Lukács resorted to a somewhat Maoist-like conception of contradiction. More specifically, he saw a dialectical relationship between the main historical contradiction of an era and the “secondary” contradictions that determine the concrete flow of events in the shorter term. In his view, one cannot always approach the main contradiction directly, as it is sometimes mediated by secondary ones. Reaffirming – in the spirit of Marxist Orthodoxy – that “the fundamental historical opposition of our age is that between capitalism and socialism”, he immediately pointed out that however, “since Lenin's death there have been two periods when the strategy of struggle for progress has not been directly conditioned by this problem” (Lukács 1968b: 91). The first such secondary contradiction was that between fascism and anti-fascism. For Lukács, the main strategic error of the Communist parties was precisely their inability to deal adequately with this new situation. In 1917 the main historical contradiction manifested itself directly in the immediate struggle for power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But then the theoretical and practical solutions that resulted in the victory of the Soviets were generalized and applied inappropriately “at a time when the fundamental strategic problem was not the immediate struggle for socialism, but a test of strength between fascism

and antifascism” (Lukács 1968b: 91). Written in 1956, this article – *The fight between progress and reaction in today’s culture* – incriminated Stalin’s theoretical ignorance of the nature of historical contradictions, which led to the ill-fated political actions of the Comintern in the third period, delaying the organization of the Popular Fronts and thus unintentionally enabling the rise of Nazism.

So, if the contradiction between fascism and anti-fascism was “the true dialectical contradiction, the expression of the real historical movement” (Lukács 1968b: 93) of the previous decade, after the war Lukács identified a new “great historical opposition” – between the cold warriors and those who struggled for peaceful coexistence. He believed that finding a solution to this new secondary contradiction was of vital importance, and advocated for the creation of a broad alliance of the social and political forces that opposed the conflict. Accordingly, he thought that the decisive confrontation had to be avoided, as the conditions were still unfavourable to socialism (Lukács 1968b: 92–3). Although in *The Destruction of Reason* he pointed out that the Soviet policy of that time had a defensive character, he believed, however, that this struggle had not been adequately managed during Stalin’s life, since “the main axiom that determined Stalinist politics, namely the inevitability of a continuous upsurge in contrasts, dominated not only Soviet internal politics, but necessarily involved the prospect of a third world war” (Ibid.). But what did Lukács mean by the term “coexistence”? “The peaceful coexistence of both social systems must be understood literally, in the sense that both worlds can exist within their own laws of internal development” (Lukács 1968b: 94). It was a mutual recognition as the basis upon which contacts could be established at political, economic and cultural level. Thus, by the mid-1950s, he provided a clear theoretical formulation of coexistence, and implicitly stated its continuity with the Popular Front strategy of the *Blum Theses*.

### **“An innocent reactionary ideology cannot exist”**

It’s easy to see this conceptual constellation reflected in Lukács’s more theoretical works of the period – *The Destruction of Reason*, for instance, drafted in Moscow in the fourth decade, but completed and published in the early 1950s. As the title suggests, in this work Lukács approached the history of modern philosophy from the angle of a secondary contradiction, between reason and irrationalism, abandoning for the moment the “canonical” duel, materialism vs. idealism. Hence the hostile reception of the book, even in the Eastern Bloc, as he remarked in the *Note to the Italian edition*: “From this dogmatic-sectarian point of view, the conclusion

of my book, the peace movement as the insurrection of millions of people for the defence of reason in the historical reality, must necessarily appear as ‘idealism’” (Lukács 2011: x). Lukács viewed even this philosophical contradiction in terms of the imperative of coexistence, stating that “this movement for the restoration of reason and the safeguarding of peace... are inseparable” and asserting that the protection of reason is “taking the form of a mass movement” (Lukács 1980: 851). In short, he advocated for a united front for peace under the banner of reason.

In Lukács’s account, originally this contradiction between reason and irrationalism took place within idealism: both Hegel and his irrationalist opponents were idealists. But the reasons for this conflict were to be found outside philosophy. Rejecting the possibility of an immanent history of philosophy, Lukács emphasized the importance of productive forces, social evolution, and class struggles as primary driving forces that determine the fundamental lines of philosophical thought (Lukács 1980: 3–4). Therefore, the nature of the arguments is determined first of all by their genesis and social function (Lukács 1980: 5). (Later, in the *Ontology*, Lukács wrote, in a similar manner, about the “social command” made by certain social classes for a certain theoretical content.) If the history of philosophy is not immanent, but is essentially determined by social factors, as he argued, one could move away from the subjective intentions of the various authors, and pursue the line of continuity at the level of the social command met by the philosophical content. Lukács spotted such a continuous line in philosophy, that served the social command of the reactionary bourgeoisie, and identified it as *irrationalism* – a line that included thinkers of various orientations who shared however a certain type of attitude towards reality and history: denial of progress, of objective truth and of the possibility to grasp the world as a whole. Under-estimation of intellect and reason, exaltation of intuition, aristocratic gnoseology, repudiation of historical-social progress, creation of myths etc. were, according to Lukács, the elements that defined irrationalist thought, the antithesis of materialism and the dialectical method. Behind the surface of philosophical polemics, Lukács always detected the class struggle: if the proletariat was the heir of the classical German philosophy, during the nineteenth century the reactionary bourgeoisie acquired its own ideological arsenal. Over several hundred pages Lukács investigated from this perspective the ideas of Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Max Weber or Heidegger, in order to reveal a functional continuity of irrationalism that, independent of the intentions of the above-mentioned authors, culminated in the national-socialist ideology. He considered irrationalism as an objective connection in the development of German ideology towards fascism (Lukács 1980: 632) and tried to show that all these authors provided that type of more or less ‘respectable’ arguments that were taken over in

time, albeit in a vulgarized form, by the reaction, culminating with Hitler, while also leaving society ideologically disarmed against the assault of the extreme right. Unfortunately, the post-war era did not bring about the desired *détente*, but a new escalation of tensions, the cold war and the atomic threat. Therefore, Lukács's polemic against irrationalism as the "ideology of the militant reaction" did not end with Hitler. He saw in the preservation of reason an essential philosophical project for the Socialist Bloc in its intent to appeal to the Western masses: if irrationalism was the ideology of reaction, reason was a theoretical weapon for the camp that struggled for progress, peace and coexistence.

We saw that the end of the "Messianic" period by the mid-1920s determined Lukács to revise his ultra-leftist position. Twenty years later, he concluded that the stabilization of the post-WW2 situation, dominated by the two superpowers, had postponed the prospects of a socialist revolution in the West into an indefinite future (although at some point he became once again optimistic about the future of socialism, as evidenced by his writings after Stalin's death, and especially after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party). Nevertheless, the factual reality of coexistence with its political and ideological manoeuvres of attrition required a rethinking of the temporal horizon. Thus, Lukács's thought acquired a dimension of *longue durée*, particularly visible in the *Ontology*, the work that was intended to develop a categorical structure as a basis for his projected *Ethics*.

A key concept that Lukács employed in his polemics against what he saw as the latest avatar of irrationalism – neopositivism – was *manipulation*. The term was derived from the immediate economic existence: according to Lukács, universal manipulation of the market had become an economic necessity in advanced, consume driven capitalism. The reason why Lukács thought of neopositivism as a form of irrationalism was its attitude towards objective reality and consequently towards ontology – he believed that from the standpoint of neopositivism, the truths of natural sciences don't mirror objective reality, but only make possible its practical manipulation (Lukács 1976: 17). In his view, this aversion against ontology, dominant in the bourgeois philosophy of the time, was not at all politically neutral – philosophy became an important playground of class struggle, and ontology was intrinsically political. Therefore, although liberalism was the capitalist ideology *par excellence*, Lukács's main philosophical adversaries in the era of coexistence were those that provided a subtler defence, an "indirect apologetic" for capitalism. As "dogmatism of universal manipulation" (Lukács 1976: 53), neopositivism was the theoretical support for a degraded practice. But he also reserved a stark criticism for what he saw as the other pillar of mid-century bourgeois philosophy, existentialism, especially for Heidegger's ontology. He thought that existentialism was in fact just

an organic complement of neopositivism. Both were ways of reflecting the subjective attitude towards the destinal character of manipulation: the counterpart of neopositivist conformism was existentialist rebellion. Again, for Lukács the attitude towards reality, towards the world in-itself, towards the ontological questions, did not concern only the abstract field of metaphysics, but had political implications. He intended to recover ontology as a key domain of philosophical research for Marxism. In his view, neopositivism took from beneath the feet of the individuals the firm ground of reality and delivered them to the implacable destiny of manipulation. So, even the recovery of the ontological autonomy of nature could serve to restore the sentiment of reality and thus help in the ideological struggle against the alienated capitalist society. By regaining an ontological basis for science, Lukács sought to extend the scope of Marxism, from a theory of revolution (in *HCC*) to a social ontology, with a firm basis in a general ontology. At the very least, the social universality of historical materialism was a basic premise of Lukács's late philosophy, as he wrote in the 1967 *Postscript* to his old *Lenin* study (Lukács 2009: 87).

To summarize Lukács's theoretical views at this point: philosophy is not politically neutral; it has a class content, so it is an *ideology*. Therefore, one can speak of a 'bourgeois philosophy'. In its most refined form, bourgeois philosophy formulated an indirect apologetic of capitalism. Its line of continuity was irrationalism. Its social function is to be a weapon against socialism and the labour movement. In its contemporary forms, it provides theoretical legitimacy to the manipulated society, which appears in bourgeois thought as the ultimate destiny, as the unsurpassable horizon of human experience.

### **“Coexistence is a specific form of international class struggle”**

One can accept that Lukács's ambiguous attitude towards Stalinism sprang from his acceptance of the thesis of socialism in one country. But as H. Marcuse pointed out in his 1958 book *Soviet Marxism*, the idea of peaceful coexistence between the two blocs had been a general theoretical principle of Soviet foreign policy ever since the last years of Lenin. Coexistence, as a theoretical statement, not just as a factual assessment of Soviet foreign policy-makers, meant an adjustment of communist theory and strategy to the conditions of a non-revolutionary majority in the western countries. According to Marcuse, “the weakness of the revolutionary potential in the capitalist world and the still prevailing backwardness of the Soviet orbit necessitate a new extended ‘respite’ and ‘coexistence’ of the two systems” (Marcuse 1958: 80). Hence the post-war desire of the Soviets to set up alliances

with bourgeois progressive forces in a new, pacifist version of the Popular Front: “The lumping together of the proletariat with other ‘peace-loving’ social groups indicates recognition of the underlying historical tendency” (Marcuse 1958: 71), namely the tendency toward class collaboration in the West. If, as Marcuse argued, Stalin and his successors were generally following the guidelines of foreign policy set up by Lenin, it is even less surprising that the Leninist Lukács agreed in principle with this strategic orientation of the Soviets. Not with all the tactical manoeuvres, though. He categorically opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia and even sent a letter to the high communist official György Aczél, with whom he was on friendly terms, expressing his “disagreement with the solution to the Czech problem”, and asking Aczél to inform the party leader, János Kádár, about the content of the letter (Lukács 2003: 185).

Lukács’s diagnosis of the post-war international political situation was pretty straightforward: after the war, America remained the only truly independent imperialist power in the economic sense of the term, and this allowed it a considerable margin of interference in the internal affairs of other states, politically independent but economically dependent. He believed that the former imperial powers became increasingly dependent on America. As a result, US foreign policy was increasingly driven by this new economic basis (Lukács 1980: 801). At the heights of the Cold War, the hopes for a *détente* were far-off. However, the ubiquitous threat of atomic war had paradoxical consequences, as Lukács noted in a 1968 interview. In his opinion, the atomic weapons had a dissuasive effect that prevented a third world war, in spite of the inflammatory situation in Vietnam. But, if the atomic stockpiles prevented the outbreak of the war, they did not remove the causes for war (Lukács 1968a: 87–8). Nevertheless, although the US remained an imperialist state, the balance of forces made a nuclear conflict increasingly unlikely. There were other reasons to be optimistic. As mentioned above, he hoped that the long-term policy of coexistence could count on allies within the capitalist bloc, primarily the pacifist movements. Moreover, anti-communism by itself produced resistance, bringing in the foreground another old secondary contradiction – the national question: “among every people, the safeguarding of national independence and sovereignty will also mobilize those groups that otherwise would be indifferent, indeed averse to communism” (Lukács 1980: 804). All that was required was that the Communist leaders, following the Marxist-Leninist principles, be the guards and protectors of national liberty and self-determination. And by the end of the 1960s, with the aggravation of the social tensions, Lukács saw the situation in the West as the initial stage of a revolutionary insurgency against manipulated capitalism, although this revolt was still lacking in proper self-awareness. That is why, unlike Adorno, he had great

sympathy for the new left and the student movements, even though he considered them ideologically immature (Lukács 2013: 40–1). To him, the mass movements in the West served as a democratic corrective to liberal parliamentarianism, while also being the natural allies of the socialist and anti-colonial movements around the world. He thought that there were “more than enough economic, political and social reasons for a general ideological crisis” (Lukács 1968: 61), and hoped that this crisis was signalling the collapsing of the universal validity of the American way of life and the end of the cold war. In another interview dating from May 1968, *Marxism in coexistence*, Lukács remarked that the people of the capitalist society “have completely lost the confidence to live a reasonable life in the circumstances of today” (Lukács 1968a: 93). His optimism was, however, conditional: all that was needed was the example of a reasonable socialist life.

By then the international political context had been inadvertently complicated by the disagreements between China and the USSR. For Lukács, at the root of these divergences lay precisely the question of peaceful coexistence. The 20th Congress of the CPSU had created the premises of a *détente*, which is why he stood by the Soviet side, as his 1963 text *On the Dispute between China and the Soviet Union* testifies. He believed that the Chinese had copied “the most important features of Stalinist politics and organization, subjectivist-sectarian traits”: appropriating and taking to the extreme Stalin’s position at the 19th Congress in 1952, they dogmatically raised to the level of principle the idea of the “inevitability of world wars as long as imperialism exists” – for them, only the global victory of socialism could surely prevent the world war (Lukács 1968b: 148–9). According to Lukács, the “radicalism of the revolutionary phrase” displayed by the Beijing leaders was actually hiding a rigid dogmatism: they absolutized some old theses that had proved valid in the past, but by then had become irrelevant. Such was the idea of an organic link between war and revolution, valid in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and even during the Chinese Revolution of 1949, but outdated in the 1960s. On the contrary, it was the resolutions of the 20th Congress that reflected the adaptation of revolutionary thought to the new world situation, and acknowledged the possibility (but not the certainty) of a transition to socialism without atomic war and without civil war (Lukács 1968b: 151–2). Like Stalin, the Chinese were not able to sense the concrete contradiction of the historical moment, and remained stuck within the main contradiction, the fundamental conflict between capitalism and socialism. The revolutionary rhetoric that urged the “immediate realization of socialism” concealed the trap of an abstract choice between capitalism and immediate socialism, and risked to commit the revolutionary and anticolonial movements on erroneous paths. Against this “abstract” Chinese “sectarianism”, Lukács reaffirmed the Leninist principle

– the concrete analysis of a concrete situation – in order to decide clearly, during the transition to socialism, which were the issues that had to be solved by the methods of civil war and which could be solved by means of a slow evolution (Lukács 1968b, p.154). The evolutionary perspective was becoming ever more important in Lukács's late thought.

Given his belief that in the new objective conditions (the atomic weapons, the balance of forces), the conflict between socialism and capitalism (the main contradiction) had to be approached with indirect means, it is no surprise that, by 1963, he was in agreement with the official thesis that peaceful coexistence was the new specific form of international class struggle. Making good use of the secondary, intra-capitalist contradiction between progressive and reactionary forces, coexistence as an indirect form of struggle tended in the long run to supersede the direct form of conflict between the two rival blocs – the Cold War (always in danger of heating up). Nevertheless, Lukács admitted that the Cold War continued to remain at the time “the predominant form of international relations between capitalist and socialist states” (Lukács 1968b: 150–1). He thought that the 20th Congress opened up the possibility of a return to legality in the Soviet domestic politics. At the same time, he believed that by discarding the Stalinist thesis of the sharpening of the class struggle as socialism advances, the Soviets signalled also the intention of a *détente* in international relations. In his view, this new realism of the Soviet policy took into account the specificity of the particular class struggles and was able to support a battle on two fronts, both against the opportunism of surrendering to neo-colonialism and against the fetishism of the revolutionary phraseology (Lukács 1968b: 155). So, the Soviet orientation opened up the perspective of peace, but long-term coexistence could only be relatively peaceful, as both capitalism and socialism were “universalistic economic systems whose internal logic aims to subject the whole world to their production mode” (Lukács 1968b: 150). Paradoxically, coexistence was therefore a means to provide a peaceful solution for a contradiction that was still “antagonistic”.

Having asserted the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism, Lukács tended initially to consider the economic competition as the main feature of coexistence: in the long run, the real rise of the living standards would prove more important than propagandistic slogans. Economic competition was to decide the winner, but only in the last instance. This was because, in the short term, the supremacy of the capitalist system could not be challenged only with economic arguments. Coexistence could not be reduced to its economic aspect, but also involved a struggle for the hearts and minds. Consequently, later Lukács emphasized the importance of the cultural front for increasing the attractiveness of socialism,

and advocated for the construction of a sort of Gramscian cultural and ideological hegemony. He criticized “one of Khrushchev's illusions” and stated that no matter how great were the economic reforms, the growth of production or the improvement of the living standards, they would not by themselves increase the attractiveness of socialism in the eyes of the West. By the late 1960s, what mattered more for Lukács was “the intensity of life itself in socialism” (Lukács 1968a: 63), which asked for a more comprehensive approach, a reorientation towards the cultural sphere and a revival of Marxism. Of course, this cultural front was supposed to cut across the capitalist states, as he indicated in the aforementioned interview, *Marxism in coexistence*: “from our perspective, from the point of view of the victory we want in the class struggle, it is important that in non-socialist states more and more widespread layers engage in the action, layers that feel that a dignified human existence is easier achievable in socialism than in capitalism. Essentially, it is for this victory we must fight; this is the victory that must be conquered in the coexistence” (Lukács 1968a: 71). So, the economic competition was relegated as a mere aspect of the competition between cultures.

In Lukács's analysis, another factor was to increase the importance of the cultural front: the mutations undergone by western capitalism had determined the reduction of working time and the increase of the social significance of *leisure*. This opened up even more space for culture: the front line was now crossing the everyday life of the individuals. After all, he recalled, even Marx saw in *loisir* the realm of freedom, of the development of human capacities as an end in itself. In the *Ontology*, Lukács dealt extensively with the problems of everyday life, the ontological concepts and representations that were formed at this grassroots level, the role of culture and ideology in shaping up personality and overcoming alienation. The increasing social weight of leisure, the “battlefield between a meaningful and a meaningless human life”, called once again for the revival of the “international attraction of socialism”, the recovery of the lost cultural influence, and thus for vigorous measures aimed at revitalizing Marxism and turning away from “Stalinist or Maoist sectarianism” (Lukács 1968b: 161).

### **“Socialism is ripe for a break with the past”**

After Stalin's death, Lukács argued consistently for the de-Stalinization and democratization of the East-European countries. On the one hand, he regarded democratization as an end in itself, as a precondition for the realization of socialism. Besides, he emphasized the role of democratization in the indirect struggle: to him,

internal democratization was indispensable for winning over the Western masses. Also, he believed that the escalation of international tensions only encouraged the anti-reformist factions in the Communist parties: external contradictions perpetuated internal contradictions. Despite his positive assessment of the 20th Congress, Lukács did not ignore the ambiguities of Soviet policy and the tortuous path of de-Stalinization. In his view, the general ideological crisis had not only affected capitalism, but also socialism, as a result of the deformations suffered by Marxist theory during Stalin's era. The theoretical counteroffensive, the rebirth of Marxism, had to be accompanied in the practical-political field by a return to the proletarian democracy of the early years of the revolution, to a "general democratic policy of self-determination" (Lukács 1968a: 20). Therefore, the liquidation of Stalinism was an indispensable prerequisite for victory in the "international class struggle" during the coexistence period.

Lukács restated the importance of working-class self-management and of workers' councils for the history of the socialist movement, and related them to the problem of democratization of everyday life. In his opinion, the end of the 1960s brought about the possibility of a new beginning of socialist democratization with the prospect of a democratic self-management expanding to the most basic level of everyday life and, from there, ascending back to higher levels until the people gained the power of decision-making in the most important matters of social life. In an interview with a Yugoslav journal, Lukács expressed his hope for a renewal of the "fundamental revolutionary idea of the working council" which, in the new historical circumstances, was to become again important for socialist development (Lukács 1970: 142). In *The Process of Democratization* however, he took a different approach. Here Lukács appears to have doubted the possibility of revitalizing the workers' councils strangled by Stalinism, claiming that the new forms of democratization had to emerge from the new socio-historical context (Lukács 1991: 165). By the end of the 1960s he came out in favour of the *New economic mechanism*, the major attempt at decentralization implemented by the Hungarian party, not because he was a partisan of market liberalization, but because he believed that it would give a stronger impetus to democratic reforms. Resuscitating the working councils by decree would have only been a bureaucratic reflex. On the contrary, the economic reform was in his view the opportunity to put into practice a socialist democracy that started from the base of society, giving the interested masses the right and opportunity to intervene in the issues relevant to them, and then expanded step by step to the top (Lukács 1970: 158).

In his review *György Lukács and Critical Realism*, Isaac Deutscher launched a sharp attack against Lukács, denouncing the latter's "genuine surrender" to Stalinism, "voluntary and therefore in a sense irrevocable" (Deutscher 1965). Moreover, to him

the Hungarian critic was “perhaps the only important expounder of the ‘aesthetic ideal’ of Zhdanovism.” Lukács’s conservative aesthetics was not an accident either: politically, he “identified himself wholeheartedly with the ‘moderate’ and rightist aspects of Stalinism, in particular with the Popular Fronts of the 1930s and their prolongations in the 1940s”. Therefore, Lukács’s essays on Thomas Mann were “a *pendant* to the Stalinist ‘struggle for allies’” and his “assignment” was to “establish a common ideological front with those ‘intellectual forces’ of whom [Thomas] Mann could be regarded as spokesman” – the liberal, antifascist bourgeoisie. Deutscher was probably right when he wrote that Lukács idealized the liberal bourgeoisie and its antifascist commitment, and especially when he concluded that Lukács “elevated the Popular Front from the level of tactics to that of ideology: he projected its principle into philosophy, literary history and aesthetic criticism.” However, as the *Blum theses* show, Lukács’s “rightist” position cannot be attributed to his surrender to Stalin, as it pre-dates the reorientation of the Soviet policy in support of the Popular Front. So, whether Lukács’s affinity to the “great realism” of the 19th century reflected an “original” alignment with the Zhdanovite canons – as Deutscher believed – or, on the contrary, a veiled repudiation of socialist realism, it had as a political substrate a long-lasting and independent conviction: his early embrace of coexistence and the Popular Front strategy. For this conviction Lukács came under the attack again in the late 1940s – as the party ideologues decreed that the Popular Front was only a tactical manoeuvre, a historical detour caused by the Nazi threat, acceptable before the war but not after.

However, there are important similarities between Deutscher and Lukács, regarding their diagnosis of the political situation in the final years of the Stalin era and immediately after. They both saw Stalinism as a “phenomenon of social transition” and not as “the quintessence or the final shape of the post-capitalist or socialist society” (Deutscher 1967). Both believed that Soviet foreign policy had fundamentally a defensive character. Both underestimated the possibility of the collapse of communism and of capitalist restoration. And after 1953 both counted on the possibility of de-Stalinization, of the democratization of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. Deutscher concluded that “Stalinism had exhausted its historical function” (Deutscher 1953), as it had created the conditions of its own supersession. Not very different were the ideas that Lukács developed in *The Process of Democratization*. While Stalinism proved to be economically viable in the period of reconstruction, as a propeller of rapid industrialization, it lost its effectiveness once the Soviet economy advanced to a higher level, as it failed to adapt to the new economic reality that itself had created. On the one hand, it was impossible for the economy to keep focusing exclusively on heavy industry and neglect the consumption needs of the population.

On the other hand, the education system had already produced a new scientific and technical *intelligentsia* that, without necessarily being communist in the militant sense of the term, was loyal to the Soviet regime. These new professional strata, indispensable to the system, aspired to recognition and did not accept the authoritarian administrative methods of Stalinism. Thus, Stalin's final years represented a divorce between the new socio-economic order and the obsolete political methods, between politics and society (Lukács 1991: 147–8). Antiquated authoritarian production relations came in contradiction with the productive forces developed by these authoritarian means. Last but not least, both Lukács and Deutscher believed that industrialization, in spite of the detestable means of Stalinism, had nevertheless created a material base for socialism.

Regarding the topic of Soviet prospects, Marcuse's ideas were not very different either. In *Soviet Marxism* he pointed out that, from the Soviet ideologues' perspective, the rigours of coexistence made it necessary to postpone the withering away of the state until the arrival of the world revolution and the final victory of socialism (Marcuse 1958: 181). Coexistence was to provide that breathing space and respite for the accelerated development of the productive forces, an industrial policy that could only be run by the state. So, it implied a preservation of the bureaucracy. On the other hand, as the industrialization progressed in competition with the West, terror as a means of administration became unprofitable and unproductive, for it was not a "durable substitute for the productive and rational coordination which a highly developed industrial society requires" (Marcuse 1958: 251) or, in other words, "the development of the productive forces in the Soviet system may tend to 'overflow' its repressive regimentation" (Marcuse 1958: 255). The latter was also one of Lukács's main conclusions and clearly pointed to a limitation of the power of bureaucracy, while also revealing a space for political intervention and democratic reforms.

In *Beyond Capital*, István Mészáros subjected Lukács's work to a thorough criticism. If the inconsistencies in Löwy's account are caused by his indebtedness to the reconciliation framework of interpretation, Mészáros's reading avoids these inconsistencies, only to conclude that Lukács's project was doomed right from the start. He agreed that Lukács's resignation after the reflux of the revolutionary wave and the defeat of *Blum Theses* was responsible for the change in the temporal scale of his expectations, as this projection into the distant future allowed Lukács to circumvent the momentary impasse and remain faithful to the Marxist vision of a radical socialist transformation of society: if he could detect a tendency for socialism to consolidate (however slowly), Stalin's decades were not of decisive importance.

So this world-historical perspective provided Lukács a substitute for a radical critique of post-revolutionary society (Mészáros 1995: 387). Moreover, only this perspective could validate his option of ‘coexistence’ with the regime, his oscillation between compromise and ‘guerrilla warfare’. His capacity to influence the party decisions was very limited, but the bright future offered compensation for the disappointments of the present (Mészáros 1995: 390–1).

Unlike Deutscher or Löwy, Mészáros did not assess Lukács’s complicated relationship with Stalinism as a kind of accommodation or capitulation. Not even as reconciliation. He acknowledged the importance of the *Blum Theses* as a turning point in Lukács’s evolution, but only regarding a change in the temporal horizon of the realization of socialism. The real causes and the origins of Lukács’s “tragedy” had to be found somewhere else, namely in the early years of his adhesion to the revolutionary project: he committed himself and remained stuck to the idea of operating within the narrow limits allowed by the revolution at the weakest link of the chain, and by “socialism in one country”. Thus, he could not question the negative consequences caused by these limits for the real socialist movement (Mészáros 1995: 400). The internalization of these constraints proved to be decisive for Lukács’s general conception and prevented him from producing a more radical critique of the post-revolutionary order. Accordingly, Lukács’s condemnation of the bureaucratisation and “brutal” manipulations of Stalinism remained ineffective precisely because they could not function as causal explanations for the perversion of socialist ideals (Mészáros 1995: 406). To Mészáros, these causes that Lukács could not grasp were related to the intimate structure of the immediate post-revolutionary society, to its institutional configuration. The new institutional order failed to emancipate the working class, and only offered a new version of the old capitalist contradictions with new forms of “personification of capital”, an “authoritarian mode of control of the socio-economic metabolism”, and a “politically enforced – highly antagonistic – extraction of surplus labour” (Mészáros 1995: 414). In his view, Lukács’s work lacked an analysis of the post-revolutionary state formation, and a radical critique of the forms of socio-economic and political mediations. There was no mention of the ‘material mediations’, there was no indication of the mode of social reproduction that would lead to a socialist democracy, to an egalitarian society, there was no indication of how to eliminate the hierarchical division of labour between producers and the party apparatus. Moreover, in his last years Lukács abandoned altogether the old Marxist principle of the abolition of the division of labour, which showed not only his resignation to the permanence of the party hierarchy, but also his acceptance of hierarchy in the society at large (Mészáros 1995: 415–16). In the post-Stalin context, he became a reformist within the communist regimes, pleading for the return to the democratic sources of Leninism, sources

that Mészáros considered inadequate. Moreover, Lukács's position in 1968 was even inferior to his Leninist sources: he ceased to plead for the overcoming of the division of labour, and even renounced the idea of workers' councils.

Mészáros makes some valid points. But one must always have in mind the concrete alternatives that Lukács had at the moment – the choice between capitalism and real existing socialism was not an abstract one. So, what was the alternative to his limited criticism? Was there in the 1960s a revolutionary movement able to challenge the government from the left? Should Lukács have broken with the regime and chosen to live in the West? He was invited to leave by party officials, but declined. How could he have left, if he thought that capitalism was worse? Actually Lukács, assessing the mood of the masses as one of indifference, explicitly adopted a cautious reformist position. He no longer believed in the short-term overcoming of the division of labour, and definitely did not contest the legitimacy of the party, but favoured some alternative forms of democratic organization that did not disturb the “coexistence” with the central authorities. Mészáros rejected these forms too, considering them insufficient; consistently, he rejected the idea – very important to Lukács – that the Soviet post-capitalist regime had created the material base for socialism. For Mészáros actually existing socialism was unreformable, a dead end, a doomed system. He rejected the Leninist thesis of the revolution at the weakest point of the capitalist chain: the Soviet system could not be a foundation for socialism, everything had to be started from zero elsewhere. But although keen to denounce the “illusions” of coexistence, Mészáros was not free of illusions himself: his hope that the collapse of the communist parties in 1989 and the capitulation of the Western Social-Democratic parties to liberalism would create the conditions for a revitalized radical extra-parliamentary mass movement proved to be unfounded.

For István Eörsi too, Lukács's late thought was based on an article of faith, rather than on sound political grounds. In the introductory essay to *Record of a Life*, Eörsi wrote that for Lukács faith had the role of “providing the encouraging assurance that ideological, economic and organizational reforms from above could open a route from the austere Marxist present into an authentic Marxist future” (Lukács 1983: 14). Eörsi noticed an apparent paradox: although in his last interventions, Lukács pointed out the role of discontinuity in history, he was at the same time advocating for a reform of real existing socialism, not for overthrowing it. In a kind of Engelsian manner, Eörsi revealed an alleged contradiction between the conservative ontological and aesthetic “system” and the “method” that pushed Lukács to radical conclusions – the dialectical method that favoured discontinuity had revolutionary implications and was incompatible with Lukács's “solidarity with actually existing socialism”, with his “reformist critique of existing economic and political conditions in the socialist states” (Lukács 1983: 25).

So, should Lukács have called for the abolition of the regime? From the fact that, by the late 1960s, he came to state the importance of discontinuity in history, it does not necessarily follow that he (or anyone else) should have acted to instigate a new, immediate discontinuity by supporting a rebellion against real existing socialism. Actually, as it clearly follows from an interview with the *New Left Review*, what Lukács had in mind when he highlighted the importance of discontinuity was a total break with Stalinism, not an exit from Leninism: “Should continuity with the past be emphasized within a perspective of improvements, or on the contrary should the way forward be a sharp rupture with Stalinism? I believe that a complete rupture is necessary” (Lukács 1983: 172–3). In the laconic *Notes towards an Autobiography*, he wrote that the “tendency towards democracy [is] already making itself apparent, relatively speaking. I approve of this tendency (for all the obstacles and difficulties in its path), view it as a possible foundation; hence not opposition but reform”. But he immediately added that the reform had to provide a “genuine solution to the basic problems of democracy” (Lukács 1983: 168).

It is not hard to imagine why Lukács preferred to compromise with the Kadar regime in the 1960s, rather than engage in a new revolutionary enterprise. At the time of the 1956 uprising, he situated himself in “opposition to Rákosi, to any illusions of a particular internal reform of his regime, and opposition also to bourgeois liberal reforms (which were widely advocated even in circles close to Imre Nagy)” (Ibid.). Distancing himself equally from Stalinism and liberal reforms, he thought he had a platform for a democratic regeneration of existing socialism. He drew a pessimistic lesson from the experience of 1956, as he realized the difficulty of keeping what he saw as a “spontaneous (and highly heterogeneous) movement” advancing in a socialist direction (Ibid.). So, he feared that the return to bourgeois-democratic forms of government would very probably lead to an immediate restoration of capitalism (in this he was not mistaken). That is why he proclaimed emphatically that the bourgeois democracy promoted by some Eastern European “reformers” and their sympathizers was a false alternative, and implied that western interference would bring about a right-wing dictatorship – “another Greece” (Lukács 1991: 88). Therefore, by the end of the 1960s, he reached the conclusion that the only alternatives left to contemplate for the Eastern Bloc was Stalinism or socialist democracy. At the same time, he was aware that, in the absence of a democratic opening, there was a strong possibility that the apathy and indifference of the working class would give way to protests like the Polish spontaneous strikes. Undoubtedly, he saw Kadar’s regime as a lesser evil than the restoration of capitalism, and in view of this belief one can understand his compromise with the regime, his option for a limited criticism, notwithstanding the tensions between the opposing tendencies of his thought, between system and method. After all, his

hopes of reform were not unreasonable, he was not the only one who had high expectations regarding the democratization of the socialist states. In his analysis, as in those of Deutscher or Marcuse, the hopes for democratization were grounded in social and economic tendencies, in the concrete material conditions existing at the end of the Stalin era.

**“I have always thought that the worst form of socialism was better to live in than the best form of capitalism”**

I tried to challenge the dominant “reconciliation” collection of *clichés* and suggest an alternative interpretation, one that takes into account the complexity of the historical context and views Lukács’s commitment to peaceful coexistence as a form of political realism, grounded in the concrete alternatives available for him at the time. If we accept the reconciliation framework, Lukács appears as deprived of any sort of autonomy, and his work is susceptible to being reduced, as F. Jameson warned, to “external signs of arbitrary positions, symptoms meaningless in themselves and comprehensible only in terms of shifts in the party line” (Jameson 1974: 161). More or less explicitly, some of these interpretations suggest an analogy: Stalin was to Lukács what Napoleon had been to Hegel. But, notwithstanding the occasional ritualistic praise to the leader, there are no reasons to believe that Lukács intended to make such an argument, that he supported Stalin *because* he believed that the Soviet dictator was the embodiment of the world spirit or something of that order, as is the case with Hegel’s view of Napoleon.

In the end, the “reconciliation” framework of interpretation is inconsistent, if only because sometimes Lukács allowed himself to deviate from the party line, seriously endangering his position, if not more. If we focus instead on the pivotal idea of peaceful coexistence as his existential choice, we can then analyze Lukács’s thought as a relatively autonomous space and point out the elements of continuity in his philosophy. As I stated before, one sensible reason to adjust our perspective is the fact that his allegiance to this idea remained virtually unchanged – indeed his reasons to support the party had much to do with his agreement with this basic premise of the Soviet policy. He realized quickly that in the 1930s Soviet Union there was no place for democratic socialist ideals. Still, he did not break with Stalinism, but most likely saw it as an “infantile disorder”, a transitory stage towards a more mature socialism. Adherence to the theses of “socialism in one country” and peaceful coexistence implied a renunciation (at least temporary) of international revolutionary politics, as shown in Lukács’s support for the Popular Fronts. (Actually, socialism in one country, the Popular Fronts and peaceful coexistence obey the

same political logic, emerging from an assessment of the relative weakness of the Soviet state and of the international socialist movement). He lived through the Stalin years with resignation, but somehow managed to avoid drawing the ultimate conclusion of defeat, perhaps because he never lost hope that actually existing socialism could be reformed. When he figured out that, because of the convergence of two factors (the backwardness of the Russian society and the hostility of the West), the transition to socialism was to be much longer than anticipated, all he could do was to double down on the long-time game – essentially, he saw time as an ally of socialism. So, in the post-war universe, the chances of the socialist project were for him still intimately linked to the prospects of peaceful coexistence – he believed that, given enough time, and without outside interference, the “internal laws of development” were to push the Eastern Bloc towards socialism. As the West became a consumer society, he tended to think of coexistence more as a competition between cultures rather than a simple economic contest, and believed that for this extension of the domain of struggle the regeneration of Marxism was an essential prerequisite. Victory in the coexistence had to be won by intellectual means and a renewed Eastern European Marxism had the ideological mission of supporting the Western progressive movements in their actions.

He certainly wrote from a perspective of solidarity with real existing socialism. His criticism of the democratic deficiencies of the Communist parties was aimed at reforming the East-European regimes, not at replacing them. He never left the perimeter of the Leninist proletarian democracy of the early years of the Soviets and even in 1956, as a member of the short-lived Imre Nagy government, he voted against Hungary exiting the Warsaw Treaty. He refused to emigrate to the West, out of solidarity with the socialist cause. But he was not a party ideologue, his critical stance and repeated “heresies” disprove this accusation. He internalized the strategic guideline of Soviet foreign policy – coexistence – and the projection into an indefinite future of the global victory of socialism, a peculiar kind of “historical optimism”, had in turn a major impact on the style and substance of his philosophy. He thought that Marxism could no longer be conceived simply as a particular theory of revolution, or of capitalist contradictions – it had to become a more comprehensive theory capable of providing solutions to the socio-political, aesthetic or ethical dilemmas of the age. Written in a period of relative *détente*, the *Aesthetic* and *Ontology of social being* are major expressions of “Marxism in coexistence”. He identified clearly his philosophical adversary: an irrationalist and nominalist particularism which, in his judgement, dominated both rival bourgeois currents, existentialism and neopositivism. Had he lived a few years longer, he might have pointed out poststructuralism as well, for the same reasons, as the newest and most sophisticated indirect apologetic of capitalism.

## REFERENCES

- Lukács, Georg 1968a, *Il marxismo nella coesistenza*, Roma: Editori Riuniti  
— 1968b, *Marxismo e politica culturale*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore  
— 1970, *Cultura e potere*, Roma: Editori Riuniti  
— 1971 [1923], *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press  
— 1976, *Ontologia dell'essere sociale I*, Roma: Editori Riuniti  
— 1980 [1954], *The Destruction of Reason*, London: Merlin Press  
— 1983, *Record of a Life*, London: Verso Editions  
— 1991, *The Process of Democratization*, Albany: State University of New York Press  
— 2003, *Testamento político y otros escritos sobre política y filosofía*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Herramienta  
— 2009, *Lenin. A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, London, New York: Verso  
— 2011, *La distruzione della ragione*, Milano – Udine: Mimesis Edizioni  
— 2013, *L'uomo e la rivoluzione*, Milano: Edizioni Punto Rosso  
— 2014, *Tactics and ethics, 1919-1929 The Questions of Parliamentarianism and Other Essays*, London, New York: Verso
- Adorno, Theodor 1980 [1961], 'Reconciliation under Duress' in *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso
- Anderson, Perry 1979 *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Verso
- Deutscher, Isaac 1953, *Russia after Stalin*, available at:  
<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1953/russiaafterstalin.htm>>  
— 1965, 'György Lukács and 'Critical Realism'', available at  
<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1965/Lukács-critical.htm>>  
— 1967, 'Ideological Trends in the USSR', available at  
<[https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1967/ideological\\_trends\\_USSR.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1967/ideological_trends_USSR.htm)>
- Fehér, Ferenc 1979, 'Lukács in Weimar', in *Telos* 39/1979: 113-136
- Gabel, Joseph 1966, 'Korsch, Lukács et le problème de la conscience de classe', in *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations. 21e année*, N. 3: 668-680
- Gargani, Matteo 2016, 'Un "testamento" senza eredi. Lukács e lo stalinismo', in *Critica Marxista* 3: 67–75
- Heller, Agnes 1979, 'The Philosophy of the Late Lukács', in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Volume 6, Issue 2 1979: 146-163
- Jameson, Fredric 1974, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton University Press
- Löwy, Michael 1975, 'Lukács and Stalinism', in *New Left Review* 1/91, May–June 1975: 25-41
- Marcuse, Herbert 1958, *Soviet Marxism*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Mészáros, István 1995, *Beyond Capital. Towards a Theory of Transition*, London: The Merlin Press
- Preve, Costanzo 2013, *Una nuova storia alternativa della filosofia*, Pistoia: Editrice Petite Plaisance
- Tamás, G.M. 2017, 'The Never-Ending Lukács Debate', available at  
<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-never-ending-Lukács-debate/>>
- Tertulian, Nicolas 2016, *Pourquoi Lukács?*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme