

Introduction: *Aesthetic and Social Form after Lukács*

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Lukács is back. Marginalized during the era of postmodernism and postmetaphysical critical theory, Georg Lukács (1885–1971) has made a strong comeback since the world economic crisis of 2008. Over the last fifteen years the Hungarian philosopher and literary theorist has returned to academic and public debate worldwide. The German *Werkausgabe* (the German-language edition of his collected works) will finally be completed, a vast majority of Lukács's books are available again in English, and new large-scale translation projects in Chinese and Brazilian Portuguese are underway. This special section of essays for *New German Critique* celebrates the centennial of his most influential work, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), and reflects on his legacy today.

Lukács's recent comeback—not the first, as we will see—is worth reflecting on. Perhaps he can keep coming back because at several points during his lifetime he already declared himself dead, only to reinvent himself. Lukács's early writings, inspired by both neo-Kantianism and the German vitalist movement known as *Lebensphilosophie*, appeared even to himself of merely faint historical interest after his conversion to Marxism in 1918. In a later foreword

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to a reissue of his *Theory of the Novel* from 1962, Lukács famously addresses his former self only in the third person as “the author of the *Theory of the Novel*.”¹ *History and Class Consciousness*, celebrated by friends and foes alike as one of the true events in twentieth-century intellectual history, was dismissed by Lukács only months after its publication as a work of a mere “transitional period,” still more an “attempt to out-Hegel Hegel” (ein Überhegeln Hegels) than to “stand [him] on his materialist feet.”² The fact that the Communist International (Comintern) heavily attacked the book was a tipping point for his self-criticism, albeit not its utmost motivation; Lukács never renounced his revocation, even as the party line had already changed again. His essays on realism from the 1930s, widely circulated again today within the contexts of world literature and the reemergence of Marxist literary studies,³ were later characterized by Lukács as part of a “partisan fight” in the Communist Party against its Stalinist deformation. For the late Lukács, only his systematic philosophical work of the 1950s and 1960s, excluding his work from other time periods, remains important.

It was, of course, not only Lukács who repeatedly declared himself dead but also his many enemies on the right and—even more often and vehemently so—his enemies on the left. Lukács was sentenced to death after the victory of the “white” counterrevolution, named in response to the “red” first Hungarian Council Republic in 1919, during which Lukács played the role of People’s Commissar for Culture and Education. Lukács narrowly escaped to Vienna, where he lived as a *sans-papier* for several years. When the Austrian government planned to deport the seemingly “unpleasant” refugee back to Budapest in 1920, where he most likely would have been executed, an open letter, “To Save Georg Lukács” (“Zur Rettung von Georg Lukács”), was published in different German newspapers and signed by numerous renowned authors, among them Richard Beer-Hofmann, Paul Ernst, and Thomas Mann. Again in 1929 Mann intervened by writing an open letter to the Austrian chancellor, Ignaz Seipel, to arrange a permanent status of political asylum for Lukács.⁴ This status was denied by Austrian officials, so Lukács moved to Moscow in 1930 to stay safe. More than twenty-five years later, in 1956, Lukács became involved in the second Hungarian Council Republic. After that republic was crushed by

1. See Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 14.

2. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, xvi, xxiii.

3. See Bewes and Hall, *Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*; Cleary, Esty, and Lye, “Peripheral Realisms”; Goodlad, “Worlding Realisms”; Smith-Brecheisen, “Realism Reevaluated”; and Kornbluh, “Lukács 2016.”

4. See Raddatz, *Georg Lukács in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, 61–65; and Kadarkay, *Life, Thought, and Politics*, 246–48. See also Mann, *Tagebücher*, 701–2.

another, now “red” counterrevolution, Lukács’s name appeared on the death lists once again. This time he was saved by the intervention of his old friends and comrades Anna Seghers, Johannes R. Becher, and Ludwig Janka.⁵

Lukács was repeatedly declared dead not merely by politicians but also by theoreticians: by Vladimir Lenin, who condemned him as a left-wing dissenter for his antiparliamentarism; by the Comintern philosopher László Rudas, who censored the author of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1925 as a right-wing dissenter for dismissing Friedrich Engels’s “dialectics of nature”; and—perhaps most famously, thoroughly, and unfairly—by Theodor W. Adorno, who opposed Lukács’s views on aesthetics and philosophy. For Adorno, Lukács’s theory of literary realism and his opposition to modernism and the avant-garde amounted to a legitimization of the socialist dictatorship in the *Ostbereich* (the East), designed to advocate for an aesthetic “reconciliation under duress” in a political situation that could hardly be reconciled at all.⁶ In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno also attacks Lukács’s category of reification as a remnant of the idealist metaphysics of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), which neglects the dialectical constitution of the very opposition of the reified and the proper.⁷

These accusations against Lukács have always had distorting effects. A self-declared Bolshevik and Leninist, Lukács nevertheless kept a reputation as a leftist nonconformer. His refutation of Engels’s “dialectical materialism” made him one of the initial proponents of Western Marxism and a founding figure of Critical Theory. While most of Adorno’s followers among the rebellious students in the 1960s shared Adorno’s aversion to “actually existing socialism” in the Eastern bloc, they still admired Lukács’s uncompromising anticapitalist stance and his partisan defense of a “standpoint of the proletariat.” Hans-Jürgen Krahl, a leading figure of the Frankfurt branch of the Socialist German Students’ Union (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund; SDS) and one of Adorno’s most talented students, cites Lukács repeatedly in his fragments titled “Constitution and Class Conflict.”⁸ And Rudi Dutschke, the most prominent proponent of the Berlin branch of the SDS, even traveled to Budapest to visit the elderly Lukács in his apartment on Belgrade Kai. While Dutschke gave an ambivalent but overall positive account of their encounter,⁹

5. See Kardakay, *Life, Thought, and Politics*, 431.

6. See Adorno, “Reconciliation under Duress.”

7. See the section “Objectivity and Reification” in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

8. See Krahl, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, esp. “Zu Lukács, Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein” (168–85) and “Aus einer Diskussion über Lukács” (203–5). Lukács is also one of the main references in Krahl’s seminal essay in the same book, “Zur Wesenslogik der Marxschen Warenanalyse” (31–83).

9. See Prien, “Das Was und das Wie.”

it is not clear whether Lukács himself appreciated his new long-haired admirers from the capitalist West. In direct opposition to Adorno, another faction of the student movement attempted to revive Lukács's realist aesthetic theory. In the late 1960s the journal *Alternative* started a far-reaching archaeological enterprise to excavate the forgotten and muted strands of a radical left aesthetic discourse in Germany. Alongside Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Karl Korsch, *Alternative* centered Lukács in a series of volumes dedicated to the quest for a materialist aesthetics.¹⁰ This special section of *New German Critique*—itself part of the journal's long-standing engagement with Lukács—likewise participates in this mission to rediscover and actualize Lukács's thought today.

The politics and aesthetics of the New Left, at least in Germany, were strongly inspired by Lukács, and some of the conflicts within the New Left were fought over Lukács's legacy. The 1987 special section of *New German Critique* on Lukács (no. 42) explores “the legacy of Georg Lukács” (to quote Peter Uwe Hohendahl's essay title) in a moment when the New Left undoubtedly started to grow old—and thereby, perhaps, began to outlive itself. None of the three essays in the 1987 journal issue presents Lukács as a model for one particular direction within the New Left's debates.¹¹ Instead, they present an “unpleasant Lukács,” as Istvan Eörsi puts it in his essay, that is, a Lukács who resists appropriation by any one faction.¹² Even when he tried to adapt to the official line of the Communist Party, as he did several times during his life, Lukács always upset the camp he had chosen. Today we can see Lukács's enduring ability to stay “unpleasant,” his very “unpleasantness,” as a condition for his ability to come back, to return in moments when such a return is least expected.

So, what is Lukács's legacy today? This special section devoted to him reopens the multidirectional, multifaceted exploration of Lukács inaugurated by *New German Critique* in 1987—albeit, this time, connecting the different strands of Lukács's reception to his own notion of form. Today Lukács is mostly perceived as a theoretician of form. Less recognized is the fact that, for Lukács, form is always both aesthetic and social. From the early conflict between life and form in Lukács's pre-Marxist writings; to the groundbreaking theory of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, according to which all social relations are mediated by the commodity-form; to his numerous publications on literary realism; his later reconsiderations of an aesthetics of reflec-

10. See Neuffer, *Die journalistische Form der Theorie*.

11. Hohendahl, “Artwork and Modernity.”

12. Eörsi, “Unpleasant Lukács.”

tion in *Specificity of the Aesthetic* (1963); and his account of a historically progressing complexity of social form in his three-volume *Ontology of Social Being* (1971)—for Lukács, it is always through the dynamics of form that otherwise elusive historical processes and contradictions become tangible and meaningful. Hohendahl's essay from 1987 already spells out some of the preconditions for Lukács's revival today. When Hohendahl ponders the (non) debate between Adorno and Lukács—as well as the “usefulness of revisions,” as he puts it—Hohendahl highlights the category of totality as the “common ground” between Adorno and Lukács.¹³ One way to translate the term *totality* into more generalizable terminology is to conceive of it as form. In literature, but also in society, totality shows itself in and as form—a kind of form, however, that transcends the conventional opposition between form and content. We can find such a notion of form as totality already in Lukács's first book, *The Developmental History of Modern Drama* (1909),¹⁴ and it is famously summed up in a sentence from its introduction: “But the truly social in literature is: its form” (Das wirklich Soziale aber in der Literatur ist: die Form). Form in this sense is the “mediation of art and society,” which, according to Hohendahl, constitutes the center of literary practice for both Adorno and Lukács.¹⁵

Four essays in this special section of *New German Critique* investigate Lukács's notion of form. Eva Geulen and Kirk Wetters each focus on Lukács as a theorist of literary genre. Within literary theory, the German word *Form* also means genre (*Gattung*), and it is not by chance that Lukács's early literary theory of form is always also genre theory, or *Gattungstheorie*, which is evident in titles such as *The Developmental History of Modern Drama* and *Theory of the Novel* (1914–15). Geulen and Wetters each demonstrate that, for Lukács, literary genres always imply acts of social classification. Thus the “truly social in literature” manifests in its genres.

Rüdiger Campe shows that, for Lukács, form is no mere outcome but the very process of “becoming form”—in other words, form is always “werdende Form.” Recent philosophical research on Lukács has revealed the theoretical continuities in his thought before and after his turn to Marxism in 1918.¹⁶ Campe's essay reveals a conceptual basis for these claims in a notion of form

13. Hohendahl, “Artwork and Modernity,” 47, 37.

14. The translation “Developmental History” for *Entwicklungsgeschichte* stems from Kirk Wetters's essay in this issue; Konstantinos Kavoulakos translates *Entwicklungsgeschichte* as “Evolutionary History” (“The Drama in an Age of Fragmentation,” 23).

15. Hohendahl, “Artwork and Modernity,” 36.

16. See Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis*; and Westerman, *Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism*.

that structures the philosophical framework of both *Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness*.

Jette Gindner returns to form in the sense of totality to actualize *History and Class Consciousness* at one hundred years. Totality has been displaced by class and reification in Lukács's political and academic reception. Gindner's essay recovers the central role of totality in *History and Class Consciousness* as Lukács's most important contribution to contemporary Marxian theory.

The other two essays in this special section present versions of an "unpleasant" Lukács that could not have been foreseen thirty-five years ago. For a long time *History and Class Consciousness* was regarded as the origin of Western Marxism, including the Frankfurt School, for its dismissal of Engels's "dialectics of nature." Drawing on Lukács's "Defense of *History and Class Consciousness*," written in 1925 or 1926 but published only in 1996 (and translated into English in 2000), Kohei Saito develops a Lukácsian theory of a "metabolic interaction between society and nature" as the foundation of an ecosocialist theory of the anthropocene.¹⁷ This theory allows us to embrace and sublimate recent attempts to formulate a critical theory of nature from "dualism" via "hybridism" to "monism." Saito's essay is a chapter from his recent book, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, published in 2020, which has sold half a million copies in Japan and thus constitutes a prime example of a philosophy that is, as Hegel put it, "its own time comprehended in thoughts."¹⁸

Finally, György Túry confronts us with a situation in which Lukács has once again become "unpleasant," this time in the eyes of Far Right politicians. Over the last ten years Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary has fought an ideological war against Lukács, driven by what Túry describes as a desire to eradicate Lukács's legacy. The Lukács Archive in Budapest was closed in 2018,¹⁹ his statue was removed, and the press loyal to the ruling Fidesz party launched a campaign against him. Túry defends Lukács against these assaults by affirming the fears of Lukács's opponents: Orbán is indeed right to fear Lukács, because Lukács's political theory still offers us a conceptual framework to analyze and dismantle Far Right politics.²⁰ In an era of global political,

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

18. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 21.

19. For details, see the Lukács Archive International Foundation's website, <https://www.lana.info.hu/en/front-page/> (accessed March 24, 2023).

20. Especially relevant in this context are Lukács's political essays written in times of turmoil and unrest—for example, "The Old Culture and the New Culture" of 1919 or *Literature and Democracy*, written shortly after World War II.

economic, and ecological crisis, to return to Lukács also means to confront the most pressing concerns of our time.

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