



**Richard Westerman, *Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism: Reification Revalued*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; 325 pages. ISBN 978-3319932866.**

*Reviewed by Robert Jackson, Manchester Metropolitan University.*

Some thinkers' ideas have been summarized and distilled with such frequency that the prevailing image of their thought is worn smooth through repetition. The presentation of their theory acquires a familiarity that reduces its capacity to surprise us with abrasive insight. Georg Lukács is an example of such a thinker, and the notion of reification, elaborated in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923; hereafter, *HCC*), is such an idea. Building on Marx's discussion of the fetishism of commodities in his critique of political economy, Lukács's distinctive contribution was the extension of this phenomenon beyond the economic realm, reframing the commodity-form as the universal structuring principle of all aspects of capitalist society. As the archetypal philosopher of Western Marxism, the dominant image of the early Lukács is that of an intellectual shaped by a tradition of Romantic anti-capitalism, who then fashioned a Hegelian version of Marxism that emphasized the role of class consciousness in history and a mediated conception of the social totality.

While acknowledged as a seminal figure in twentieth-century intellectual life, helping to inspire the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, the standard interpretation regards Lukács's reconstruction of Marxism as outmoded and exhausted. Despite his materialist pretensions, this reading holds that Lukács's philosophy of *praxis* recreates a form of idealism by substituting the proletariat for the demiurge of the Hegelian *Weltgeist* (or the Fichtean "identical subject-object," positing the world through a moment of practice). Even Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, who acknowledge significant inheritances from Lukács's thought, level the charge that Lukács's efforts lead him towards idealism by eliding the concepts of reification and rational objectification. Indeed, Lukács himself reinforces this assessment through the self-criticism he penned in 1967 as the Preface (*HCC*, ix–xxxix) for the republication of *HCC*.

Richard Westerman would like us to rethink this standard interpretation of Lukács. In *Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism*, he argues that there has been an "excessive weight hitherto placed on Lukács's debts to classical German philosophy." (19) Reading Lukács's Heidelberg drafts of a philosophy of art and aesthetics (1912–18), Westerman foregrounds the influence on his thought of a "phenomenological quartet" of less-discussed figures: Alois Riegl, Konrad Fiedler, Emil Lask, and Edmund Husserl. Westerman argues that a contextualized reading of the later essays in *HCC*, written in Vienna in

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1922 during a moment of “enforced leisure” (HCC, xli), presents a new and unfamiliar picture of Lukács's work.

To frame this reading, Westerman reconstructs Lukács's defence of aesthetic formalism in his early efforts at a philosophy of art. In these Heidelberg drafts, Lukács aims to preserve the independence of a sphere of value against the relativizing tendencies of the dominant psychologistic accounts of art in late nineteenth-century German thought. Tracing the genealogy of neo-Kantianism through Hermann Lotze's notion of “domains of validity” (39), Westerman shows how Lukács investigated these conditions of validity in the aesthetic sphere. Inspired by Fiedler's insistence that the work of art does not simply reflect the external world, Lukács sought out a systematic concept to explain artistic style “on its own terms.” He found this in Riegl's analysis of *Kunstwollen*, “a stylistic representation of both the nature of objective reality and the relation of the individual to that reality prevailing in a given society” (47), which depersonalized the principle of form in the work of art. As Westerman explains, Lukács uses this concept to point to “the immanent structures that determine the forms of an artwork and at the same time define the position of the subject within the totality.” (48)

Drawing also on sources beyond the horizon of aesthetic philosophies, the book leads us through Lukács's engagement with Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas*, in particular the model of intentionality and the phenomenological *epoché*. Lukács's Heidelberg writings repurpose these Husserlian tools, originally developed for acts of consciousness, to relate to the meaning of artworks and wider social phenomena. In these writings, Lukács refers repeatedly to his own framework as “phenomenological,” albeit appropriating Husserl's concepts in a specifically neo-Kantian manner that is preoccupied “with the *object* rather than with mental acts.” (70) For anyone who has ever puzzled over the references to figures such as Fiedler, Riegl, and Husserl in Lukács's famous reification essay in *HCC*, Westerman's discussions illuminate the intellectual crosscurrents clashing, fusing and informing that work.

Westerman also delineates the elements of Lask's philosophy that can be seen as prefigurations of Lukács's critique of capitalist reification. In particular, Lask's unorthodox reading of Fichte and his theory of *aletheiology* (“an ontological theory of meaning grounded in the concept of truth” [57]) deal with problems familiar to readers of Lukács, such as the “irrational gap,” and with the “theoretical-contemplative” structuring of subject-object relations. (58) Crucially, we find here a conception of subjectivity that is very far from a self-positing “subject-creator” in the standard reading of Lukács, but rather one that emphasizes the “secondary, derived role” of the subject, which is “circumscribed by the objectively determined validity forms of its relation to the object.” (59)

Drawing out the key categories deployed in Lukács's early Heidelberg aesthetics, Westerman makes the case for the innovative combination of these neo-Kantian and phenomenological influences in the development of Lukács's later social theory. Westerman argues that we must be attentive to how Lukács's experiments influence the development of key terms – such as totality, standpoint, and the relation between subject and object – in his later analysis of capitalist reification. One of the formidable strengths of this book is its fluid style and clear signposting that makes the often-difficult subject material very readable. Westerman peppers the narrative with asides and anecdotes (as well as the occasional joke about Bob Dylan).

The carefully structured argument is methodically unpacked in subsequent chapters, elaborating what Westerman calls a “phenomenological reading” of Lukács's work through a substantive account of *HCC*. This reading locates three different levels in Lukács's framework, which – borrowing Heideggerian terminology – Westerman classifies as the phenomenological, the ontic, and the ontological. The first examines “the ways specific objects appear or the individual's direct relationship to the social world.” (23) The forms of this “phenomenological” level of appearance are not understood as “forms of

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#### QUOTATIONS

When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat?

— Kierkegaard, Postscript

knowledge" that convey a flawed version of "true reality," but as "what society and social objects *are*, because they govern the intentional practices that constitute objects as socially meaningful." (144)

The second "ontic" level uncovers the "overall structure of reality under capitalism," which deals with the "interaction between objects" (23), namely the logic of the commodity structure. For Westerman, Lukács takes up Georg Simmel's analysis of the "logic of social relationships" and of the role of social form in determining the ontology of social being, while also going beyond Simmel in "historical specificity" and "ontological ambitiousness." (130) Finally, the roots of this "ontic reality" are located in a deeper ontological level, "from which that reality coheres as a totality that makes sense on its own terms." (145) While a brief review cannot do justice to this detailed reconstruction, it is worth pointing towards the insightful analysis that Westerman provides of the precise role of key influences on Lukács's work. Westerman counters the common assumption that Lukács adopts a Hegelian theory of subjectivity, arguing that the decisive content that Lukács absorbs from Hegel originates in the ontological categories of the *Science of Logic*, such as essence and appearance. (217)

One of the particular merits of Westerman's phenomenological reading is that it undermines the established account of Lukács's theory of reification as restricted to distortion of consciousness conceived in merely epistemic terms. Building on the work of Andrew Feenberg, Westerman reads Lukács's use of the term "consciousness" to mean "something similar to the anthropological notion of *culture*." (14) At the same time, Westerman seeks to go beyond Feenberg's understanding by including in his analysis "the idea of mental states, the concepts of subject and object as questions inherent to it, the notion of reality, the themes of experience and memory, and the problem of the first-person perspective." (15)

Moreover, Westerman actively uses the distinction between the early essays in *HCC* and those drafted (or re-drafted) in 1922 to argue for the "jettisoning" of certain problematic and misleading concepts, such as the notion of "imputed" or "ascribed" class consciousness, from his "phenomenological" account of Lukács. (104f.) While this manoeuvre has the advantage of unambiguously distancing Lukács's conception from vulgar "false-consciousness" versions of Marxism, it also potentially defuses some of the ideological-critical capacities of his framework.

Westerman makes the case for 1922 as a decisive moment in the development of Lukács's theory of reification, contrasting the "conventional" *epistemological* treatment of consciousness in Lukács's early "naïve" and "messianic" Marxist writings (1919–21) to the *phenomenological* account found in the later essays of *HCC*. While this binary characterization of positions may play a necessary analytical function in the argument, I find the discussion of Lukács's later phenomenological conception more convincing than the philological evidence provided to show that his earlier Marxist work deployed a crudely epistemological conception. Did Lukács's early Marxist essays, as Westerman suggests, merely seek to add more "facts" to the bourgeois perception? (101) I would suggest that the moment of transformational intensity that marks Lukács's life at this point merits further scrutiny. Indeed, an expanded study of the particular character of Lukács's "messianism," and its relation to what Slavoj Žižek described in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* as the "condensed time of the Event" (PD, 135), might be a fruitful encounter for Westerman's phenomenological approach.

In the book, Westerman skilfully identifies different registers through which Lukács's thought moves during the various phases of his development. He distinguishes between the everyday experiences examined by Lukács's early sociological account of works of art, and the treatment of "peak" or "pinnacle" aesthetic experiences in his formalist Heidelberg works. (60) Additional exploration of this contraposition of the everyday experience and the rarity of "utopian" peak experience in Lukács's earlier works would perhaps find echoes in his later analysis of everyday life in bourgeois society as the

"permanent crisis of capitalism." (HCC, 40) Westerman touches on the theme of crisis in his discussion of Lukács's use of Kierkegaard to think through the possibility of finding an immanent moral imperative to revolution. Further discussion of the wider role of crisis in Lukács's project of disrupting reification might also be illuminating for Westerman's phenomenological reading.

While ultimately regarding Lukács's privileging of the proletariat in the project of overcoming reification as a failure, Westerman argues that his phenomenological version of Lukács "fails in more interesting ways than is normally understood to be the case." (4) Thus, the book identifies the overlooked contribution that Lukács makes to our understanding of the formation of collective identity, in particular providing "a non-essentializing way to speak about personal and social identity." (230) Westerman also reconstructs the often-misunderstood relationship between the social and the natural in Lukács's thought, in which Lukács proposes social relations defined by a "new form of reason" that "would no longer need to impose abstract demands on material reality." (269)

The final section of Westerman's book extends its reach beyond the scope of *HCC*. In particular, the concluding chapter offers tantalizing indications of ways to develop this reading to deliver critical engagements with subsequent theorists, such as Habermas and Fredric Jameson. This leaves the reader hoping for extended elaborations of these promises in future, as well as further development of the reflections on figures such as Moishe Postone and Axel Honneth within the preceding chapters. Above all, Westerman's conception of the development of Lukács's writings, not as a linear development between sociological, formalist, and Marxist phases, but as a more complex reconfiguration of unexpected sources conveys in a provocative and exciting way the enduring relevance of Lukács's thought today.

*Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism* is a major contribution to the recent season of Lukács studies, and it succeeds in offering both a new and a convincing perspective on Lukács's thought. It complements other publications, such as Konstantinos Kavoulakos's *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis* (2018), which also foregrounds underexplored sources of Lukács's attempt to formulate a theory of transformative *praxis*. While the recent closure of the *Lukács Archivum* in Budapest by the reactionary regime of Viktor Orbán imbues this interest in Lukács with a direct sense of urgency, these inquiries are also essential reading for a wider audience engaged in renewed questioning of the role of critical thought in our own times.

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