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One Step Back, Two Steps Forward: Neo-Kantianism and Lukács's Transformative Praxis

Review essay

Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism* (Bloomsbury, 2018)

Reviewed by: Robert Jackson, Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

In his recommendation on the reverse of Konstantinos Kavoulakos's *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis*, Jay Bernstein refers to Lukács's vision of transformative praxis as being 'too far ahead of its time'. This echoes a point made by Fredric Jameson in *Valences of the Dialectic*, in which he refers to *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) as a text that is 'yet to be written', which 'lies ahead of us in historical time' (Jameson, 2009: 222). Both of these comments express the notion that Georg Lukács's essays of the early 1920s are not merely historical artefacts, even if that in itself would be sufficient cause to absorb our interest. They indicate that Lukács's revolutionary writings, far from a 'finished case', are part of an ongoing project pertinent to the present and the future.

With this rigorous piece of scholarship, Kavoulakos suggests just such a fresh start for Lukács's 'dialectical-practical theory of modernity' (p.2), enabling its political-theoretical and philosophical resources to find renewed resonance in a different historical moment. The book's aim is

> to show that a more charitable approach to Lukács's philosophy of praxis is much more interesting, coherent, and fruitful than the more or less unfounded and theoretically unproductive prejudice that prevails in a great part of the critical intelligentsia today (p.9).

One of the challenges to accomplishing such a reassessment of Lukács's 'early Marxist thought' is the daunting number of intellectual figures and traditions that must be brought into focus in order to provide an adequate context for this act of interpretation. Indeed, the conceptual fertility of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* emerges from his ambitious efforts to synthesise a dizzying array of intellectual crosscurrents, from aesthetic formalism, neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, to sociological thought, Marxism and more.

Kavoulakos duly acknowledges several precedents for his own work. These include Andrew Feenberg's methodical clarifications of many of the misreadings and misunderstandings of Lukács's work, and Michael Löwy's account of the shifting phases of Lukács's development in the early decades of the twentieth century. Kavoulakos also makes an impressive and detailed appraisal of a wide range of international scholarship on Lukács. Particularly significant for an Anglophone audience is the guide that this book provides to the German-language studies on Lukács and his sources, including Hartmut Rosshof's *Emil Lask als Lehrer von Georg Lukács* (1975), and the works of Rüdiger Dannemann and Kurt Beiersdörfer among others.

In his account of the origins of Lukács's framework in *History and Class Consciousness*, Kavoulakos moves beyond the primary texts commonly referenced and analysed by scholars. Providing a careful reconstruction of the early stages of Lukács's thought, Kavoulakos delivers instructive exegeses of various writings, from Lukács's *Evolutionary History of the Modern Drama* (1911) and *Heidelberg Philosophy of Art* (1912-14), to his *Theory of the Novel* (1916). Kavoulakos also employs evidence from Lukács's correspondence, such as his exchange of letters with Paul Ernst. Kavoulakos expounds Lukács's ideas in parallel with those of the thinkers that influenced the development of his studies in various fields. These fields include the critique of culture, the sociology of literature, and, later, neo-Kantian philosophy, and dialectical and Marxist theory.

One of the most innovative elements of the book's interpretation of Lukács's thought is its foregrounding of previously overlooked neo-Kantian themes and concepts established by Lukács's peers and mentors. Without dismissing the influence of Hegelian dialectics on Lukács's development, Kavoulakos's mission is to redress this imbalance in the illumination of Lukács's conceptual toolbox and its ongoing dialogue with the problems of modern philosophy. Working closely with the original German-language text, Kavoulakos is able to draw our attention to the continuing importance in *History and Class Consciousness* of conceptual resources derived from the field of neo-Kantian experimentation.

Kavoulakos overcomes a number of issues of translation that have hampered prior interpretations of *History and Class Consciousness* based on the widely available English translation by Rodney Livingstone. While the clarity of the prose of Livingstone's translation aids the reader in parsing some of the more involved argumentation in the essays, it also has some unforeseen consequences. Thus, Kavoulakos indicates that certain formulations have obscured or distorted the active dialogue between Lukács's writings and those of other, particularly neo-Kantian, thinkers.

Building on the work of Feenberg, Kavoulakos's rendering of *Gegenständlichkeitsformen* as 'forms of objectivity', rather than Livingstone's 'objective forms' or related expressions, enables Kavoulakos to reveal the term's origin in neo-Kantian debates regarding the relationship between these forms and their content. While this may appear at first sight as an exercise in technical precision, distinguishing between 'forms of objectivity' and the 'phenomenon of reification' plays a crucial role in Kavoulakos's correction of less careful readings of the text. By demonstrating that reification is not simply a theory of epistemic distortion, this distinction allows Kavoulakos to disentangle the concepts of objectification and reification in Lukács's essays (p.115). This supposed elision is one of the recurring complaints levelled against Lukács's theoretical framework, as we will see below.

Kavoulakos divides the book into three sections that deal, respectively, with the philosophical underpinnings of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, a new reading of his theory of 'rationality and modern society', and, finally, his conception of social and political transformation. In the first section, Kavoulakos carefully explores the influence on Lukács of the philosophies of Heinrich Rickert, a renowned scholar, in his own time, from the neo-Kantian school of southwest Germany, and Emil Lask, one of Rickert's disciples and a friend of Lukács. Their writings, such as Rickert's *The Object of Knowledge* (1904) and Lask's *The*

Logic of Philosophy and the Doctrine of Categories (1911) and *The Doctrine of Judgment* (1912), had a significant impact on Lukács's thought after his move to Heidelberg in 1912.

Beginning with a conventional Kantian framework in which there is a 'subjective constitution of the objects of knowledge' (p.14), Rickert fashions a critical theory of knowledge. He defends neo-Kantianism against a slide into relativism by adopting a 'standpoint of immanence' (p.15), and by constructing philosophy as a 'science of values' (p.18). However, the essential problem confronted by this project is the irreducibility of the content of knowledge to its rational forms. Kavoulakos delineates Rickert's efforts to solve this problem, which lead him, perhaps unwittingly, very close to a Fichtean emphasis on practical reason.

Finding his teacher's defences against relativism and psychologism insufficient to the task, Lask moves away from Rickert's subjectivist approach to the problem of knowledge, focusing instead on developing an 'objective foundation of philosophy' by stressing its logical grounding in general (p.18). This involves, what Kavoulakos refers to as, 'an ontological shift in transcendental philosophy, to "locate" the logical in the object itself' (p.19). Lask conceives of a 'theory of two elements', which spell out an interpenetrating primordial relation between form and material that is simultaneously unified and distinct (p.21). Kavoulakos points out that Lask's reaction to Rickert tends to 'downplay the constitutive role of the subject', transforming it into a 'correlate' of objective meaning (p.23).

In his account, Kavoulakos demonstrates the enduring influence of both of these thinkers on Lukács's thought, his vacillations between them, and at the same time Lukács's critical distancing from each. Kavoulakos makes the case that, even after Lukács departs from a neo-Kantian framework to advocate a dialectical approach to philosophical questions, his perspective on these questions remains inscribed with the concerns of neo-Kantianism. Thus, Kavoulakos contends that Lukács's later adoption of the dialectical method is armoured against many of the commonplace complaints, of panlogist or emanatist tendencies that subsume the material content to the form, which blight more conventional Hegelian or neo-Hegelian versions of dialectical theory.

Indeed, according to Kavoulakos, 'Lask's influence was much more intense than Lukács was ready to admit and it would continue even after his conversion to Marxism at the end of 1918' (p.26). It is not possible here to do justice to the detailed exposition of the philosophical problems (of the irrational, the thing-in-itself), and the 'flawed alternatives' (of mathematics, ethical praxis, aesthetic education, history, etc.) examined by Kavoulakos, and which were analysed by the later Lukács under the rubric of the 'antinomies' of modern philosophy. Kavoulakos concludes this section by restating his case that Lukács adopts and transforms the neo-Kantian concept of the 'form of objectivity', as 'the most general category of a dialectically constituted ontology of the social-historical' (p.90).

The second section extends the archaeology of Lukács's thought even earlier to his sociological studies of culture. Kavoulakos demonstrates the influence of Georg Simmel and of the key themes of *Lebensphilosophie* (form, experience, and the tragic expression of life) on the initial formulation of Lukács's criticisms of positivist methodology and the problem of

alienation. For Kavoulakos, Simmel's efforts to go beyond historical materialism, to locate a sub-level beneath the economy for explaining social phenomena, help to explain Lukács's later opposition to interpretations of Marxism as a form of economic reductionism. However, Lukács initiates a move away from the models of Simmel, and similarly those of Henri Bergson and Wilhelm Dilthey, long before his turn to Marxism in 1918.

Kavoulakos's book describes Lukács's refraction of his earlier discussion of social rationalisation, absorbed from Simmel and Max Weber, through his neo-Kantian education. In a fascinating section, Kavoulakos illuminates the unique combination of elements from the philosophies of Lask and Rickert that enable Lukács to develop a theory of 'experienced reality' in his Heidelberg aesthetics (p.107). Kavoulakos argues that Lukács's theory here displays 'structural homologies' with his later framework of reification (p.108). In turn, Lukács seeks to historicise this account in his *Theory of the Novel* (1916). In exhibiting these sources of Lukács's thought, as they are worked and reworked, Kavoulakos prepares the ground for a contextualised presentation of the conception of reification that Lukács develops in the essays of *History and Class Consciousness*.

The distinctive feature of Kavoulakos's reading of Lukács's dialectical-historical theory of reification derives from the concept of the 'form of objectivity', to which Lukács 'imputes a socio-ontological as well as an epistemological meaning' (p.115). By distinguishing between the 'modern form of objectivity' and the phenomenon of reification to which it gives rise, Lukács is able to describe a 'dual, objective-socio-ontological and subjective-mental phenomenon' (p.129). Thus, Kavoulakos explains how the modern form of objectivity, which Lukács associates with the commodity-form, gives rise to 'the phenomenon of beclouding the socio-historical character of the relation between subject and object that it organises and delimits' (p.129). For the individual, this also corresponds to a 'contemplative' stance towards the world, which is a key element in Lukács's consideration of the obstacles to the 'possibility of an active intervention of the subject to change the social-historical objectivity' (p.138).

In the final section, Kavoulakos provides a detailed reading of Lukács's account of transformative praxis and the de-reification of capitalism. For Kavoulakos, it is with this element of Lukács's thought that commentators most often allow their attention to lapse, failing to deliver a textually evidenced analysis of his position. Kavoulakos's explanation of the process of de-reification and its limits catalogues some of the most widespread misreadings of Lukács. The dominant interpretation asserts that Lukács explains de-reification by 'deifying' the proletariat. These readings, such as that of Jürgen Habermas, tend to see Lukács's apparent endorsement of a mythical proletarian super-subject providing the theoretical underpinning of a 'dogmatic, authoritarian, anti-democratic political practice' (p.201).

Many critics, such as Gareth Stedman Jones, also find Lukács's employment of the notion of an 'ascribed' or 'imputed' class-consciousness to be deeply suspect. Kavoulakos warns against commentators that 'one-sidedly stress the "chasm" between the self-consciousness of the commodity and the developed class consciousness of the proletariat' (p.187). This, Kavoulakos suggest, leads them to ignore the 'procedural nature' of the transition between these, and intermediate, states in Lukács's thought.

Kavoulakos gives a precise and even-handed treatment of Lukács's account of praxis. Tracing Lukács's journey from a 'mystical ethics' to a theory of conscious political practice, Kavoulakos demonstrates how Lukács's ethical concerns metamorphose into a search for a 'mediation between revolutionary action and reality' (p.158). For Kavoulakos, we can comprehend the apparently dramatic shift in Lukács's position to the paradigm of class consciousness more readily as a coalescence of various elements in his intellectual journey hitherto. Kavoulakos proceeds to frame the issue of de-reifying capitalism in terms of a specific philosophical problem treated by Lukács:

> how we can think of a *non-mechanical emergence of a radically (i.e., qualitatively) new form of consciousness and the corresponding social practice* as an immediate realization of human freedom in given objective conditions (p.187).

Kavoulakos explains the interaction in Lukács's account of de-reification and the 'historically concrete possibilities of subjectification' (p.177). For Kavoulakos, this involves the dialectical-procedural nexus of class-consciousness and transformative praxis.

Kavoulakos suggests that the flipside of downplaying the procedural nature of Lukács's conception of social transformation and the development of class-consciousness is the neglect of its ruptural aspect. Thus, there is a fundamental link between crisis and the emergence of subjectivity in Lukács's work. Finding an explanation for the crisis of modern culture plays a key role in Lukács's thought for a long time prior to his turn to Marxism in 1918. It remains at the heart of *History and Class Consciousness*, because crisis represents the limit of the 'modern form of objectivity'. As Kavoulakos argues,

> the double—methodological and socio-ontological—meaning of the concept of the form of objectivity points to the connection between the crisis of the dominant forms of knowledge and the objective economic, social and political crisis of bourgeois society. Both dimensions of the social crisis are due to the inadequacy of the fundamental form of objectivity of modern society, the deeper lack of unity and the conflict between rational forms and the contents of life that cannot be reduced to these forms without being violated. (p.125)

The recurrent phenomenon of crisis thus reveals, what Lukács refers to as, the 'irrationality of the total process' (Lukács, 1971: 102). Locating a path away out of this catastrophe stimulates Lukács to formulate a transformative praxis that is novel in its dual characteristic of both rupture and process.

On this point, Lukács's thought provides a distinctive contribution in relation to contemporary debates on subjectivity. Thus, Kavoulakos compares Lukács's transformative praxis with the ruptural conceptions of transformation elaborated by Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and others. Kavoulakos contends that Lukács's 'view on praxis as a break with determinism can be analogized to the contemporary concept of the "event" in theories such as Slavoj Zizek's and/or Alain Badiou's' (p.174). At the same time, Kavoulakos argues that Lukács's theory of a radical break with the given world does not lead to the same 'paradoxical consequences' as these theories. Thus, for Kavoulakos, Lukács gives

> equally great emphasis to considering transformation action as a *dialectical moment of an open process*. As such, it does not realize a mythical final "situation" of reconciliation. It realizes an *immediate unity* of the opposites that provides the material for a new chain of mediations, that is, for the further development of the dialectical process. (p.175)

Far from an 'irreconcilable opposition' between rupture and process, we find in *History and Class Consciousness* an uninterrupted process of moments, which takes into account, as Lukács says, 'an uninterrupted process of moments becoming independent and the uninterrupted abolition of this independence' (Lukács, 2000: 56).

There are many other features of Kavoulakos's book that deserve to be mentioned, but for reasons of space can only be signalled telegraphically. Kavoulakos's account of the 'constant tendency towards the restoration of reification' is particularly insightful (p.196). His discussion of the question of violence and 'popular antiviolence' is equally apposite in our increasingly febrile times (p.193). Finally, Kavoulakos also presents a new approach to the vexed relation between society and nature in *History and Class Consciousness* by framing the question as the external limit of Lukács's theory of de-reification (p.200).

This close reconstruction of Lukács's ideas in their development from his early writings through to the essays of *History and Class Consciousness* allows Kavoulakos to reveal a number of the well-known characterisations of Lukács's thought to be misrepresentations of his actual positions. Thus, Kavoulakos places diverse readings of *History and Class Consciousness* under critical scrutiny. He surveys the immediate denunciation of the text by 'orthodox' figures in Communist circles, such as László Rudas and Abram Deborin. Kavoulakos also relates the analyses of more widely read reviewers, such as Gareth Stedman Jones. Drawing on Althusser's critique of humanist historicism, Stedman Jones finds in Lukács's work an 'irruption of the romantic anti-scientific tradition' into Marxist thought (Stedman Jones, 1971: 44).

Kavoulakos notes a surprising symmetry in the arguments advanced against Lukács's theory of reification, despite emerging from radically different philosophical perspectives. Thus, Theodor Adorno, one of the founding figures of the Frankfurt School, prefigures Stedman Jones's conclusion that Lukács holds an idealist position. While deriving significant inspiration from Lukács's theory of reification, Adorno detects in his thought an 'excessive Hegelianism' (p.4). Adorno's influential interpretation shaped the reception of Lukács's work by later generations of critical theorists. Thus, in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas judges that Lukács grounds his theory of reification in a 'metaphysical philosophy of history' (p.7).

Similar criticisms are embraced, in turn, by Axel Honneth. In his *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (2008), Honneth revived international discussion of Lukács's theory, but, Kavoulakos argues, at the cost of distorting the concept 'by transforming it into a kind of constant anthropological factor' (p.141). Kavoulakos uses his own reading of Lukács to advance a 'substantial critique' of Honneth's reformulation of the theory of reification. From a Lukácsian standpoint, Honneth separates the concept of reification 'from its dialectical

theoretical framework' (p.146). Honneth characterises Lukács's theory as a form of 'economic reductionism' (p.147), and repeats the common misattribution to Lukács of a confusion between the concepts of objectification and reification. For Kavoulakos, Honneth's reading amounts to 'an ontologization—or in Lukács's words—a *reification* of reification' (p.149).

Finally, Kavoulakos also questions the standard treatment of Lukács's early Marxist thought as a form of voluntaristic and utopian messianism, in which Lukács 'deifies' the proletariat as a replacement for the demiurge of the Hegelian world spirit. However, these are not examples belonging to a compendium of heresy hunting. While demonstrating these arrayed criticisms as misreadings, Kavoulakos's approach does not raise Lukács to a lofty pedestal. Rather, it provides a more accurate version of Lukács's dialectical-practical theory of modernity relevant to the challenges faced by critical theory today. Thus, Kavoulakos's exposition of the neo-Kantian sources of Lukács's thought both deepens our understanding of the origins of Lukács's formulations as well as of their actuality, their power to speak as if for the first time.

As one of the major contemporary inheritors of Lukácsian thought, Fredric Jameson's reading of *History and Class Consciousness* perhaps warrants a substantive confrontation with the interpretation developed here. Like Kavoulakos, Jameson seeks to displace any ascription to Lukács, or indeed Hegel, of a mechanical synthesis of subject and object. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson aims to restore the unpredictability of Lukács's dialectic, and, what he calls, the 'unsuspected dimensions of the problem—"interrelationship" and "process"' (Jameson, 2009: 205). Certainly, this revaluation of Lukács's thought requires us to question, again like Kavoulakos, the easy identification of Lukács's 'aspiration towards totality' with a necessary slide into totalitarianism (Lukács, 1971: 198). It may be that Kavoulakos's reading is compatible with Jameson's version of Lukács's project to destabilise 'the multiple systemic webs of reification' (Jameson, 2009: 204). At the least, their readings seem to share a number of commonalities.

In this regard, Jameson observes in *Late Marxism* that *History and Class Consciousness* is a fundamental engagement with Marx's 'remarks on the relationship between ideologues and class-fractions in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*' (Jameson, 1990: 46). I wonder whether Kavoulakos could expand the philological evidence that he provides of Lukács's Marxian inheritance, mainly citing Marx's critique of political economy, by analysing the influence on Lukács of Marx's historical works. This might aid Kavoulakos to negotiate the problematic nature of Lukács's concept of ascribed consciousness, which finds its most plausible treatment at the level of concrete historical analysis.

Kavoulakos's reconstruction of Lukács's thought seeks to show 'another way of reading Lukács's philosophy of praxis' (p.2). While providing a catalogue of the misreadings of Lukács's thought that accompany various ailing 'critical theories', Kavoulakos's text aims to provide a means to comprehend the necessity of these misreadings within the social totality, and therefore a path towards a 'concrete criticism' (p.163). This, for Kavoulakos, is the hallmark of historical materialism itself, and, following Löwy, we might say, of 'a Lukácsian analysis of Lukács' (Löwy, 1979: 10).

This reading articulates the complex dialectical balance of the diverse influences (sociological, neo-Kantian, Hegelian, Marxian, and beyond) that are synthesised by Lukács within his writings. Kavoulakos's book is therefore a vital contribution both for those interested in Lukács studies and those operating with frameworks influenced by his thought. It forms part of a recent revival in Lukács studies that includes texts such as Richard Westerman's *Lukács's Phenomenology of Capitalism*, of which there is also a review in this special issue. These stimulating texts are an intervention in a broader re-evaluation of critical theory, which is to some extent already underway. They enrich a discussion about the reasons why and the extent to which the many 'critical' theories of the past have lost their effectivity.

Kavoulakos provides a powerful argument for revisiting 'dialectical-practical theory' as a means to overcome the weaknesses (or perhaps antinomies) of the contemporary theories of Habermas, Honneth, Mouffe, Rancière, Badiou and more. Further concrete elaborations of these critical engagements would be very welcome in future, and would develop this reading in the direction of the more 'comprehensive theory of contemporary society' towards which the author aspires. Kavoulakos makes a persuasive case that a serious re-engagement with Lukács, re-actualising the untapped resources of his early writings, is an essential part of addressing the question of what it means to be 'critical' in our present juncture.

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