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CHAPTER 1:
Georg Lukács (1885-1971) and the Critique of Reification: On the Dialectical Genesis of the Great Acceleration*

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1. Marxism in Crisis: Social Democracy on the Eve of the Great Acceleration

Georg Lukács' (1923) *History and Class Consciousness* (*HCC* hereafter) comes on the heels of an important split within the political currents of Marxism at the beginning of the twentieth century. This split, which had been brewing within Europe's social democratic parties in the years leading up to WWI, marked the end of the project to unify the political interests of the working class under the aegis of the socialist parties of the Second International beginning in 1889 (Joll, 1974). This movement into mass political parties marked a distinctive transition not only in the form that working class ferment took but also in terms of the relation of these discontents with respect to the national state framework. If the activity of the working class at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution was notably antagonistic to the state—from its first identifiable amorphous form in the 1830s with the Chartist movement in England (Hobsbawn, 1962), to its central role in the pan-European revolutions of 1848 and through to the Paris Commune of 1871—its articulation within social democracy appeared to have a somewhat more ambivalent relationship.[1]

This transition into the period of the Second International bears significance on the question of the Anthropocene, particularly in considering the historical origins of the Great Acceleration from the crucible of the Industrial Revolution. While the emergence of liberal capitalism was remarkable to the extent that it appeared to occur at a distance and in opposition to the Absolutist states of the eighteenth century, with labor markets and the investment of capital being organized by no single authority—the so-called "invisible hand" in Adam Smith's moment—by the late nineteenth century both labor markets and capital were being integrated into a distinctive state form that Karl Marx characterized as "Bonapartist."[2] For Marx, the Bonapartist state was inextricably connected with the historical development of the Industrial Revolution since Smith's time and the manner in which the working class's political demands for a solution to the problem of unemployment triggered a social crisis: "The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air" (Marx and Engels, 1978 [1848]: 482). Bonpartism presented itself in the wake of the pan-European uprisings of 1848, in which the general demand for

[1] The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) of the Second International is an important case in point (Nettl, 1965). In principle, the SPD aimed to hasten revolution and the collapse of the existing form of society. But its steady growth after the repeal of the Anti-Socialist Law in 1890 did not lead to increasing revolutionary pressure, but rather a significant softening of its position. The softening first became notable following the Russian Revolution of 1905, after which the SPD appeared to let a corresponding wave of labor unrest in Germany draw down. By 1912, after the SPD's electoral victory of 110 seats made it the largest party in the *Reichstag*, the party began taking steps to actively support the government. Finally, on 4 August 1914, as German troops entered Belgium, SPD deputies supported a motion to advance war credits to the Imperial German state that enabled it to effectively declare war. As Max Horkheimer (1978 [1940]: 101) remarks: "The murky relationship between Lassalle, the founder of the German socialist mass party, and Bismark, the father of German state capitalism, was symbolic. Both aimed at state control. Government and opposition party bureaucrats from the left and right were pushed towards some form of authoritarian state."

[2] As Marx would point out of Bonapartism: "The empire, with the *coup d'etat* for its birth certificate, universal suffrage for its sanction and the sword for its sceptre, professed to rest upon the peasantry, the large mass of producers not directly involved in the struggle of capital and labour. It professed to save the working class by breaking down parliamentarism, and, with it, the undisguised subservience of government to the propertied classes. It professed to save the propertied classes by upholding their economic supremacy over the working class; and, finally, it professed to unite all classes by reviving for all the chimera of national glory. In reality, it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling." (Marx, 1993 [1871]: 53)

democratic reform was drawn into sharp crisis when combined with the demands of the proletariat. The authoritarian Bonapartist state was a means of mediating the growing social instability generated by the emerging proletarian politics.[3] For Marx, the severity of Bonapartism had deeper implications, which the authoritarian state merely reflected; namely, the changed character of society as a whole. The Industrial Revolution, as evinced by Bonpartism, suggests something more profound than a mere technological shift as Anthropocene periodization presupposes (e.g., the use of coal for steam power): it marks a profound transformation within the very fabric of society.

As mentioned previously, the great mystery of the Anthropocene is how human beings, which emerged approximately 200,000 years ago, only become recognizable as a planetary force in the last 250 years. While the political expression of the proletariat may appear to represent only a narrow sectional interest within society, Marx grasps it as the key historical development through which we might recognize the deep, seemingly indiscernible social structure that took form in Industrial Revolution. For Marx, proletarian politics—if developed in the direction of consciously provoking and sustaining a crisis—would render social structure comprehensible and therefore enable individual actors to exercise agency in actively transforming history for the first time. The task of freedom in the nineteenth century—that of consciously recognizing and actively transforming social structure—was inextricably linked to the question of the political activity of the proletariat. Yet, the expression of these politics through Bonapartism revealed a second insight: the most symptomatic expression of the crisis of society—the proletariat—lacked the type of critical consciousness necessary to recognize how its activity was connected to social structure. Bonapartism, then, is an index of the inadequacy of proletarian consciousness: "it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling" (Marx, 1993 [1871]: 53).

Marx sought to specify the *possibility* that consciousness of the deeper, crisis-laden structure of society could be developed from the most acute consciousness available to the proletariat at the time; the description of the objective laws structuring their lives outlined in the classical political economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo (discussed in Chapter 3). To this end, Marx marshaled the insights from his critique of political economy to inform the subsequent political orientation of the proletarian movement towards the possibility that it might consciously direct a revolutionary crisis through which society could apprehend its deep contradictory structure.[4] Yet, the proletarian politics of the Second International, which focused on the social democratic party, fell well below Marx's horizon. Rather than increasing consciousness of the

[3] In France, a broadly constituted democratic uprising led to the formation of the Second Republic in February and the creation of universal suffrage but also a National Workshop program designed to absorb the unemployed in government-run businesses paid out tax revenues. Following the elections in April, however, the Workshops were closed. The closure led to a working class uprising in June that was violently suppressed. The resulting political instability lasted two years and resulted in *coup d'état* by the Republic's President, Louis Napoleon (nephew of Napoleon I), and the eventual dissolution of the Republic in 1852 and the severe curtailment in political liberty throughout French society. Paradoxically, the victory of liberal democrats in February 1848 ends with an appeal to the most illiberal dimensions of society as the only means to reestablish social order. As Marx famously wrote of the June suppression: "Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers, their domestic sanctuaries profaned, their houses bombarded for amusement – in the name of property, of family, of religion and of order" (Marx and Engels, 1978 [1852]: 603).

[4] A founder of the International Workingmen's Association (First International) in 1864, Marx wrote a scathing critique of one of the founding documents of the social democratic party in Germany at the end of his life (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875) and many of the key figures of the Second International (1889-1916) regarded themselves as direct followers of Marx (Korsch 1970 [1922]: 129-156).

total character of society among the proletariat, these politics were far narrower, taking aim at the numerous, discreet features of social reality (Korsch, 1970 [1923]: 57). While such an approach drew significant reforms from the state,[5] it dulled any insight of the deeper and contradictory character of society and it certainly did not necessitate revolution. In fact, the exact opposite occurred as the Second International justified a narrowing political strategy that was readily integrated into the state. Consequently, by the beginning of the twentieth century the practical problem of the revolution languished within Marxist theory,[6] giving way instead to a tacit evolutionary view of politics in which workers would gradually assume control of the state by expanding the scope of reforms (i.e., within the existing social structure). While the deeper social crisis continued unabated—and on a much larger scale (e.g., WWI)—it no longer appeared as a logical product of a contradictory social totality, but as a "bolt from the blue"[7] (Marx, 2008 [1852]: 9); that is, as episodic, inexplicable and irrational events that lay beyond the concerns of political program.

Photo 1.1: Rosa Luxemburg and the Second International

[5] These reforms included the key elements of the modern welfare state—for example, its national framework of old age pension and unemployment insurance. Significantly, the first of such reforms were advanced in Imperial Germany in the 1880s in parallel with the Anti-Socialist Laws that was not only banned from the *Reichstag*, but severely restricted the rights of socialist to assemble and outright banned the ability of workers to form trade unions. These reforms were intended by the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck to undercut the influence of social democrats by responding to their criticisms of society (Joll, 1974: 44).

[6] As Nettl (1965: 73) observes of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD): "in all the years from 1882 to 1914 there was only one article in *Neue Zeit*, the theoretical organ of Social Democracy, on the subject of post-revolutionary society, and this treated the problem merely in a historical context—as a discussion of past millenarian societies. Even the revolution itself was little discussed; the technique of it not at all. The all-important topic of war was treated as an abstract evil, simply to be denounced. Interest was focused largely on contemporary questions of the day and their importance in the context of present Socialist attitudes, while broader questions affecting the SPD's future tended to be ignored."

[7] According to Marx (2008 [1852]: 9-10), neither the liberal author Victor Hugo nor the socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (who each represented two significant responses to the unexpected collapse of the Second French Republic into the Bonapart Empire) are able to grasp the deeper issue at work and, as a result, are forced to interpret historical transformation as exogenous to society—that is, as a "bolt from the blue" (Hugo), or as wholly identical to society ("the result of an antecedent historical development" (Proudhon)). Along this vein, Lukács (1970 [1923]: 158) writes: "As a result of its incapacity to understand history, the contemplative attitude of the bourgeoisie became polarised into two extremes: on the one hand, there were the 'great individuals' viewed as the autocratic makers of history, on the other hand, there were the 'natural laws' of the historical environment. They both turn out to be equally impotent-whether they are separated or working together-when challenged to produce an interpretation of the present in all its radical novelty."

Rosa Luxemburg during a speech at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, August 1907. Significantly, the stage is not only accompanied by a portrait of Karl Marx (on the right), but the other founder of the German Socialist movement, Ferdinand Lassalle (on left). Photo: AKG-Images

Lukács' *HCC* is an attempt to regain Marx's point of departure in and through the debates and subsequent political divisions that erupted among Marxists in the decade before WWI over the question of whether revolution remained the pivotal feature of Marxian theory and political practice (see Photo 1.1). The content of these debates is expansive, but for the purposes of contextualizing *HCC*, Lukács is particularly concerned with the question of whether the necessity of revolution had been superseded by the success in exacting reforms from the state (the debate over revisionism in Germany, *ca.*, 1897-1902,[8] or whether trade union militancy, or "trade union consciousness," would simply reproduce capitalist forms if allowed to unfold on its own volition (the debates in Russia over economism, *ca.*, 1894-1902).[9] In both of these debates,

[8] The struggle over revisionism within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was exemplified in the debates between the revisionist Marxist theoretician Eduard Bernstein and the orthodox Marxist Rosa Luxemburg that took place between 1889 and 1903. Although the debate was largely among Party theorists, it touched on deep practical concerns as the supporters of revisionism were broadly constituted in the party and were also most in touch with currents in German society. As Nettl (1965: 68) describes: "Bernstein's main supporters were the practical men of the party, the Trade Union leaders, practicing members of various professions who happened also to be Socialists." Although the SPD Executive and its supporters came down firmly against revisionism, such that it appeared defeated by 1903, few, such as Luxemburg and Lenin, recognized the debate as pointing to a deeper and unresolved problem within the proletarian movement. Lukács' contemporary Karl Korsch (1970 [1923]: 58) would explain revisionism "as the attempt to express in the form of a coherent theory the reformist character acquired by the economic struggles of the working class parties, under the influence of altered conditions." In a manner that strongly foreshadows *HCC*, Luxemburg's (1970 [1899]: 62) critique of revisionism was that it constituted "the theoretical generalization made from the angle of the isolated capitalist" in which "each organic part of the whole economy is seen as an independent entity."

[9] Vladimir Il'ich Lenin was quick to generalize the debates in Russia over the need to work beyond "trade union consciousness" to a broader problem within working class politics internationally that threatened to reproduce the "the political reaction that has long reigned" if socialists avoided working through such problems. This is apparent

Lukács, following the Second International political figures Lenin and Luxemburg, recognized the consciousness of the worker's movement was constitutive not only of the conscious self-transformation of society—through the revolutionary overcoming of wage labor—but could also reconstitute wage labor in new social forms of domination that would become increasingly naturalized, or "reified." Reified consciousness, not only among the bourgeoisie but within the workers movement, meant any revolutionary politics would need to understand the "gradations within the class consciousness of workers" (1971 [1923]: 78) as it relates to the "ideological problems of capitalism and its downfall" (1971 [1923]: 84).

Lukács' critique of reification, which focuses on the intrinsic interrelations of the subject-object dimensions of the commodity form, highlights the mediation between what Marx referred to as the "inner logic" of the capitalist mode of production and the pattern of political and cultural life at a later stage of capitalist development (see Dahms, 2011: 3-44). Since this distinctive phase of capitalist development appears to anticipate the pattern of state capitalism that gave the Great Acceleration its form, Lukács' critique of reification is particularly relevant to the last century of the Anthropocene. Significantly, Lukács' critique does more than describe the course of history in a negative sense (i.e., to anticipate the subsequent pattern of state capitalism, or more generally, the helplessness that eventually comes to define the Anthropocene), it specifies the conditions under which society's relationship to history could be freed from its "rigid, reified structure" (1971 [1923]: 202). Perhaps Lukács' most profound point is to discern the possibility that social actors could make history rather than be dominated by it. In this sense, Lukács places reification at the center of the practical tasks for freedom in the Anthropocene.

This chapter develops Lukács critique of reification through the issue of the increasing rationalization of industrial and administrative work in the early twentieth century. We show how Lukács is able to relocate the continued relevance of Marx's insights with respect to the central importance to any understanding of the deeper structure of capitalist society in his consideration of the differential manner in which proletariat and bourgeois class consciousness approach the problem of social contradictions. We end the section by discussing how, for Lukács, the overcoming of reification in and through increasingly class conscious proletarian praxis (or the failure to do so) has profound implications not only for how society comes to regard history, but also—more central to the issue of the helplessness that characterized the Anthropocene—the significance of such praxis for qualitatively changing history such that humans, for the first time, could develop freely. The chapter concludes with some brief remarks on the significance of Lukács' critique for our understanding of the Great Acceleration.

2. Critique of Reification

The concept of reification derived from Lukács refers to a form of social life under modern capitalism in which human subjectivity is increasingly shaped in accordance with the objective commodity form. Lukács' critique of reification is not, however, simply a critique of detached, contemplative individual forms of bourgeois subjectivity. Rather, Lukács seeks to grasp

in the very first footnote of his critique of economism in Russia, titled *What is to be Done?*: "At the present time (as is now plain for all to see), the English Fabians, the French Ministerialists, the German Bernsteinians, and the Russian Critics – all belong to the same family, all extol each other, learn from each other, and together take up arms against 'dogmatic' Marxism. In this first really international battle with socialist opportunism, will international revolutionary social-democracy perhaps gather sufficient strength to put an end to the political reaction that has long reigned in Europe?" (Lenin, 1975 [1902]: 74-75).

reification as a process of social mediation between consciousness and social structure, particularly, as he asserts: "reification is (…) the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society" (1971 [1923]: 197).

Combining Marx's critique of commodity fetishism[10] in ways similar to, yet quite distinct from Max Weber's theory of rationalization, Lukács emphasized how reification fragments social life, and he analyzed reification in relation to processes of increased rationalization, which emerged alongside the consolidation of large-scale industry and investment banks at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lukács viewed the concomitant rise of bureaucracy within the economy, the so-called "managerial revolution," which gave rise to increasingly complex corporate and state hierarchies of organization and control, as a new form of domination in capitalist society. The managerial revolution had direct ecological implications as well, as it marked an increasing technocratic dimension to the management of ecosystems, not only in terms of preventing soil erosion on agricultural land (as discussed in the Introduction), but also in terms of sustainable harvesting of forests and fisheries (Olver et al., 1995; Straka, 2009).

Lukács redirects Weber's analysis of rationalization, identifying it as a force working in concert with the abstraction embodied in the commodity form. Keeping with his categorial appropriation of Marx's mature theory, Lukács is concerned not only with the objective aspects of rationalization but also with the mediation between objective processes of rationalization and its subjective effects as structured by the commodity form of social relations.[11] On this basis, Lukács identifies two key (subjective and objective) changes resulting from the rationalization of work: (1) the severance of the "organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product" (Lukács: 1971 [1923]: 88), which in turn effects an (2) equally abstract fragmentation of the subject whereby the worker's activity "becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 89). In an attempt to discern capital's immanent crisis in his moment, Lukács (1971 [1923]: 92) analyzes the effects of economic rationalization in terms of the dissimulating role played by the commodity form: "This rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things. When use-values appear universally as commodities they acquire a new objectivity, a new substantiality which they did not possess in an age of episodic exchange and which destroys their original and authentic substantiality."

Lukács explains the reconfiguration of consciousness in connection to the effects of large-scale industry and related processes of increased rationalization from the perspective of the worker:

> [T]he period of time necessary for work to be accomplished (which forms the basis of rational calculation) is converted, as mechanization and rationalization are intensified, from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint that confronts the worker as a fixed established reality. With the modern 'psychological' analysis of the work-process (in

[10] In the short introduction to the *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* in *HCC* Lukács (1971 [1923]: 83) indicates that he takes Marx's critique of political economy for granted, particularly the insight that "commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects."

[11] According to Postone (quoted in Blumberg and Nogales C., 2008), "Lukács takes the commodity form and he shows that it is not simply an economic category but that it is the category that can best explain phenomena like those that Weber tried to grapple with through his notion of rationalization, i.e., the increasing bureaucratization and rationalization of all spheres of life. Lukács takes that notion and provides a historical explanation of the nature of that process by grounding it in the commodity."

> Taylorism) this rational mechanization extends right into the worker's 'soul': even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialized rational systems and their reduction to statistically visible concepts. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 88)

In this passage it is clear that, for Lukács, economic rationalization is not solely economic. Although capitalism appears to advance human ends, the abstract universal dimension of the commodity form of social relations is analogous with an increasingly dominating force expressed through the defining features of modern social life, such as bureaucracy, instrumental rationality, and atomization. Unlike manufacturing capital, the production of wealth under large-scale industry becomes cut-off from direct human labor time expenditure. This deepening process of reification is most acute in the bureaucratic work that expanded in Lukács' historical moment, where "even his [the worker's] thoughts become reified" as well as the very "faculties that might enable him [the worker] to rebel against reification" (1971 [1923]: 172). Thus, Lukács recasts the apparent necessity between state planning, large-scale industry and capital, as well as industrial labor and high levels of productivity, in light of the social mediations between the subject-object dimensions of the commodity form, thereby elucidating the historical specificity (and social character) of these forms.

Although it appears to be total, the process of rationalization, according to Lukács, is nonetheless inherently incoherent. This incoherence is inherent to industrial capital because isolated phenomena, such as the increased specialization of the division of labor and the associated fragmentation of social reality, are governed by a strict rationality. The rigidity of rationality both structures and is structured by the fact that these processes are severed from the social totality from which they were produced and continuously interact. More specifically, the commodity form of labor under industrial capital becomes alienated from itself as a "reified," immediate and isolated "surface-level" appearance misapprehended as being directly indicative of the social totality itself. Lukács argues,

> It is evident that the whole structure of capitalist production rests on the interaction between a necessity subject to strict laws in all isolated phenomena and the relative irrationality of the total process (…) This irrationality, this—highly problematic—'systematisation' of the whole which diverges *qualitatively and in principle* from the laws regulating the parts, is more than just a postulate, a presupposition essential to the workings of a capitalist economy. (Lukcás, 1971 [1923]: 102-103 [original emphases])

For Lukács, (1971 [1923]: 103) the increased specialization and fragmentation of labor "has the effect of making these partial functions autonomous [so that] they tend to develop through their own momentum and in accordance with their own special laws independently of the other partial functions of society." At the same time, the process of increased fragmentation leads to "the destruction of every image of the whole" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 103). Lukács uses bourgeois economic analyses of crises as an example of the fundamental misrecognition and ossification of this inversion of social reality. "[T]he structure of a crisis," he explains, is "no more than a heightening of the degree and intensity of the daily life of bourgeois society" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 101). "Crises" are experienced as such because "the bonds uniting [bourgeois society's] various elements and partial systems are a chance affair even at their most normal" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 101). In other words, what appears to be objectively given, or "natural" (i.e., non-social), is in fact social.

For Lukács, such contradictions exemplify the crisis of capitalism and as such, "are not concealed 'behind' consciousness but are present *in* consciousness itself (albeit unconsciously or repressed)" (1971 [1923]: 59 [original emphasis]). Although "the proletariat shares with the bourgeoisie the reification of every aspect of life" (1971 [1923]: 149), these contradictions appear differently in the consciousness of the bourgeoisie than they do in the consciousness of the proletariat. The activity of the bourgeoisie historically brings capitalism into being—first, in establishing formal equality in labor ("free" wage labor) and then in universalizing the commodity form[12]—but this activity is what ultimately binds the workers as a class; what makes "the fate of the worker" become "the fate of society as a whole" (1971 [1923]: 91). Yet, from the perspective of the bourgeois, this deeper social structure is inaccessible since society appears to them as a series of objective economic laws; society is something they approach as individual capitalists, hence "the social principle and the social function implicit in capital can only prevail unbeknown to them and, as it were, behind their backs" (1971 [1923]: 63). As capitalists seek to expand their domain, capital too threatens to generate the independent political organization of the proletariat, bringing to the surface "all the hidden forces that lie concealed behind the façade of economic life" (1971 [1923]: 65). The attending social crisis renders bourgeois consciousness increasingly contradictory. The most paradigmatic example of such a crisis is the 1848 French Revolution (previously discussed) where bourgeoisie "freedom" was transformed into its opposite by adding a new element—the activity of the proletariat:

> Politically, it became evident when at the moment of victory, the 'freedom' in whose name the bourgeoisie had joined battle with feudalism, was transformed into a new repressiveness. Sociologically, the bourgeoisie did everything in its power to eradicate the fact of class conflict from the consciousness of society, even though class conflict had only emerged in its purity and became established as an historical fact with the advent of capitalism. Ideologically, we see the same contradiction in the fact that the bourgeoisie endowed the individual with an unprecedented importance, but at the same time that same individuality was annihilated by the economic conditions to which it was subjected, by the reification created by commodity production. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 61-62)

Hence, in spite of the reifying character of bourgeoisie consciousness, the contradictory social totality becomes discernable *to society* by the political activity of the proletariat. Reification is, thus, not an inevitable feature of capitalism, but one that can be overcome. As Lukács explains, the fragmented immediacy of reified thought can then be revealed as being "the consequence of a multiplicity of mediations" enabling "the fetishistic forms of the commodity system… to dissolve", such that "in the commodity the worker recognizes himself and his relations with capital" (1971 [1923]: 168).[13] But since the "fate of the proletariat" becomes "the fate of society as a whole" under capitalism, "the self-understanding of the proletariat is

[12] "The first system of production able to achieve a total economic penetration of society" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 62).

[13] The process of overcoming reification for Lukács, however, is not an immediate process. As it was for Marx, as well as for Lenin and Luxemburg, it involves working through stages in which, as Lukács explains, "the plenitude of the totality does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action" (1971 [1923]: 198). In fact, even the seizure of state power by the proletariat and the reorganization of the economy on socialist grounds would only constitute a step in the direction of being able to clearly discern the contradictory social totality of bourgeois society (1971 [1923]: 208). Rather the process is continuous and involves the: *"constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development"* (1971 [1923]: 197 [original emphases])

therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society" (1971 [1923]: 149), which is inherently contradictory. Hence, proletarian politics become the vehicle through which society can achieve mastery of itself.

If proletarian consciousness has the *potential* to move through contradictions in the direction of social totality, bourgeois consciousness is *restricted* to a fragmented view and is unable to recognize contradictions as such. Consequently, rather than recognize crises as a product of society, bourgeois consciousness, as exemplified by the natural sciences, tends to isolate social phenomenon, considering them discrete and unconnected:

> The more highly developed it [modern science] becomes and the more scientific, the more it will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which is its task to understand, *its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp.* (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 104 [original emphases])[14]

Lukács here criticizes the Second International Marxist economist Tugan-Baranovsky[15] and his attempt to explain production in purely quantitative terms.[16] The formalism of bourgeois thought, according to Lukács, has political implications:

> The reified world appears henceforth quite definitively—and in philosophy, under the spotlight of 'criticism' it is potentiated still further—as the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world vouchsafed for us humans (…) By confining itself to the study of the 'possible conditions' of the validity of the forms in which its underlying existence is manifested, modern bourgeois thought bars its own way to a clear view of the problems bearing on the birth and death of these forms, and on their real essence and substratum. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 110)

Reification is embodied in the political, economic and cultural institutions of capitalist society and it is enacted by the individuals who inhabit this society. Indeed, the 'birth and death of these forms' underlies a very profound historical context. According to Lukács, the failure to situate the fundamental problems of society within the historical context within which they emerged is itself explained with reference to the intrinsic relationship between social structure and subjectivity. Lukács explains that bourgeois thought exhibits a "double tendency," which is also characteristic of bourgeois society, and that it expresses this in an opposition between an objective material world and subjective consciousness:

> On the one hand, it [bourgeois thought] acquires increasing control over the details of its social existence, subjecting them to its needs. On the other hand it loses—likewise progressively—the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society as a whole and with that it loses its own qualification for leadership. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 121)

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[14] It is not our intention here to deal with the complex issue of reification and the natural sciences. In this particular passage we take Lukács to be providing an analogy from "outside, i.e., a vantage point other than that of reified consciousness" to the question of social totality (i.e., the natural sciences) (1971 [1923]: 104). On the issue of reification and the natural sciences, see Vogel (1996) and Feenberg (1999).

[15] Tugan-Baranovsky's student, Nikolai Kondratiev, would later become well known for his theory of long-term cycles of economic expansion and contraction.

[16] It is notable that Karl Korsch (1970[1923]: 56-57) also identifies a similar pattern in the work of another prominent Second International theorist Rudolf Hilferding. Also see Moishe Postone's (2009: 97-101) critique of Giovanni Arrighi.

Lukács (1971 [1923]: 122) believes this problem is ultimately rooted in the division between theory and practice. Lukács's theory of praxis seeks to move beyond traditional subject-object epistemology. He indicates that both subject and object develop simultaneously through practice—and that this process is thoroughly dialectical. In other words, through praxis the subject both constitutes and is constituted by social structure. This practical activity, according to Lukács, is historically determinate.

It is on this basis that Lukács is able ground his explanation of the antinomies of bourgeois thought, particularly the opposition between objective matter and subjective consciousness, in the relationship between social structure and subjectivity, a relationship reflective of the contradictory nature of modern capitalist society:

> [M]an in capitalist society confronts a reality 'made' by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its 'laws', his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while 'acting' he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events. The field of his activity thus becomes wholly internalized: it consists on the one hand of the awareness of the laws which he uses and, on the other, of his awareness of his inner reactions to the course taken by events. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 135)

In capitalist society, "'nature' becomes highly ambiguous" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 136) since, with the progression of modern capitalist society, "nature" becomes increasingly socialized while "society" becomes increasingly naturalized. It is here that the significance of praxis in Lukács's critique of reification is perhaps most obvious. Regarding the contradiction between subject and object, Lukács explains,

> [T]he contradiction does not lie in the inability of the philosophers to give a definitive analysis of the available facts. It is rather the intellectual expression of the objective situation itself which it is their task to comprehend. That is to say, the contradiction that appears here between subjectivity and objectivity (…) is nothing but the logical and systematic formulation of the modern state of society. For, on the one hand, men are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them the 'natural', irrational and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and 'made', a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form). (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 128)

Lukács claims Marx's method allows us to grasp the mediation of the historical totality in and through the immediate, fragmented aspects of reified reality. As he explains,

> [T]he essence of history lies precisely in the changes undergone by those *structural forms* which are the focal points of man's interaction with environment at any given moment and which determine the objective nature of both his inner and his outer life. But this only becomes objectively possible (and hence can only be adequately comprehended) when the individuality, the uniqueness of an epoch or an historical figure, etc., is grounded in the character of these structural forms, when it is discovered and exhibited in them and through them. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 153 [original emphases])

As we discussed above, critical recognition of reification implies the possibility of undoing reification through revolutionary proletarian praxis. Following Marx, Lukács contends that such a revolution would need to be led by the proletariat. But the extent to which bourgeois ideology predominated these politics it would serve to undermine the revolution and deepen

reification. Yet, the question of the ideological maturity of the proletariat loomed large in 1923 after recent and decisive defeat of communist uprisings in Germany, Italy and Hungary (of which Lukács was a key political figure). It is important to note, for example, that many of the figures in *HCC* who are exemplars of bourgeois consciousness (e.g., Tugan-Baranovsky, Strauve, Mach, Sombart, Bernstein) were, in fact associated with the primarily Marxist Second International; i.e, the organized proletarian politics before WWI. As Lukács warns:

> The danger to which the proletariat has been exposed since its appearance on the historical stage was that it might remain imprisoned in its immediacy together with the bourgeoisie. With the growth of social democracy this threat acquired a real political organisation which artificially cancels out the mediations so laboriously won and forces the proletariat back into its immediate existence where it is merely a component of capitalist society and not *at the same time* the motor that drives it to its doom and destruction. (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 196 [original emphases])

Yet, against the reified consciousness of these figures, Lukács is explicitly drawing on the example of the Second International "Orthodox Marxist" radicals, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, and their attempt to address long-since languished questions of revolutionary organization and theory. However, this revolutionary tide has passed. Its critical insights, as captured in *HCC*, failed to register into a renewed praxis as the working class became "imprisoned in its immediacy" and integrated into the new command economies that stoked the fires of the Great Acceleration. As alienation became second nature, the obstacles preventing such critical consciousness from being realized in practice became insurmountable (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 70). "The most striking division in proletarian class consciousness," according to Lukács (1971 [1923]: 70-71), "is the separation of the economic struggle from the political one." Lukács (1971 [1923]: 71) argues that this division is rooted in "the dialectical separation of immediate objectives and ultimate goal and, hence, in the proletarian revolution itself." The dialectical relationship between immediate objectives and ultimate goal is tricky because, as Lukács (1971 [1923]: 71 [original emphases]) explains, the latter necessitates that the proletariat transcend itself: "the revolutionary victory of the proletariat does not imply, as with former classes, *the immediate realization of the socially given existence of the class*, but, as the young Marx clearly saw and defined, *its self annihilation.*"[17]

Yet, it is precisely this feature of proletarian politics and its capacity to overcome the most general feature of capitalist society—the proletariat itself—that causes Lukács to attach epochal significance to it. The question he takes up from Marx at the beginning of his essay, "Class Consciousness," in *HCC*—"*what is the proletariat* and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature" (1971 [1923]: 46 [original emphases])—has implications for the history of humanity, and by extension (in the Anthropocene), the planet.

> The 'realm of freedom', the end of the 'pre-history of mankind' means precisely that the power of the objectified, reified relations between men begins to revert to *man*… In other words, when the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, *the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of*

[17] In a different formulation of this same point, Lukács (1971 [1923]: 80 [original emphases]) states, "*The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle.* The struggle for this society (…) is not just a battle wages against the enemy, the bourgeoisie. It is equally the struggle of the proletariat *against itself*: against the devastating and degrading effects of the capitalist system upon its class consciousness."

> *mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness.* (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 69-70 [original emphases])

The implication is that the scope of the historical transformation, which attends the confrontation with the contradictory totality of bourgeois society, would mark a transition without parallel in the Anthropocene. In fact, it anticipates a transition that would draw to an end "pre-history"; all history extending back to the beginning of the Holocene. This stunning conclusion comes at the very end of Lukács' painstakingly critique of reification. In bourgeois society, "historical thought perceives the correspondence of thought and existence in their – immediate, but no more than immediate – rigid, reified structure" (1971 [1923]: 202). In this way, reification conditions history because the *potential* trapped *within* history can never be regarded *as potential*, but rather as fixed. What reification means is that historical reality can only appear as empirical facts assembled rigidly in a structure that is deemed invariable (e.g., Tugan-Baranovsky). But from the perspective of totality "reality is by no means identical with empirical existence"; rather, "reality is not, it becomes" (1971 [1923]: 203). We contend that the question of becoming, which is synonymous with the question of freedom, has itself become even more inaccessible in the almost one hundred years since *HCC* was published. The deepening of reification has considerable implications for how we understand the historical reality that is represented in the Anthropocene.

3. Reification and the Dialectical Genesis of the Great Acceleration

Grappling with the problem of history and freedom in his moment, we approach Lukács' critique of reification as an attempt to name a key mediating process between the objective dimension (i.e., concrete human-ecological transformation) and the subjective dimension (i.e., the social conception of 'nature') of the environment-society problematic. Here we emphasize Lukács' understanding of mediation as a theory of praxis. In this sense, "reification" attempts to name a key mediating process, constituted by the capitalist mode of production, through which people create structures that in turn dominate them (cf. Postone, 1993: 30-33). At the same time, reification *rewrites social reality* so as to inhibit these very same humans from consciously recognizing that this is indeed the case (Stoner, 2014: 632).

Although not concerned with the Anthropocene per se, Lukács grappled with the meaning of history and freedom in and through the emergence and development of the commodity form of social relations. His critique of reification is an attempt to specify the question of the possible supersession of the capitalist mode of production. In doing so, Lukács sought to discern the prospects for regaining revolutionary practice from existing reified consciousness within the proletarian movement; that is, by understanding the historical significance of the emergence and development of the commodity form of social relations and how this transition necessitates overcoming the commodity form as the primary task of freedom.

Lukács' focus on the subjective dimension of the commodity form elucidates the commodity not only as a form of constraint, but also, importantly, as a form of agency. This understanding of freedom during the genesis of the Great Acceleration contrasts sharply with that of Crutzen and his colleagues. Cut-off from its historical and dialectical genesis, the concept of the Anthropocene advanced by Crutzen et al. is unable to effectively grasp how a society that emerges from the Industrial Revolution can be both conscious of the degradation of planetary systems *and* seemingly powerless to do anything about it. Conceiving of the Anthropocene as an objective historical reality necessitates a subjectivity made possible only at the close of the twentieth century, one which uncritically reflects the apparent incapacity of society to self-

consciously transform itself towards less ecologically destructive ends. Unable to account for its own integration and active involvement in this development, the objective possibility of the Anthropocene indicates the degree of distance between a less ecologically destructive form of social organization and "the adequate understanding of the total situation" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]: 79). Following Lukács, the Anthropocene cannot be adequately understood in terms of its effects; rather, the Anthropocene can only be understood in terms of its objective possibility. Although significant, the proposed Anthropocene periodization misapprehends the genesis of the Great Acceleration, mistaking reified forms of appearance as directly indicative of an underlying historical dynamic. As a consequence, Crutzen and his colleagues effectively naturalize, or "reify" a historically specific form of appearance which coincides with the beginning of the Anthropocene.

Following Marx, Lukács grasps the social totality through the continuation of the social crisis generated by proletarian politics—a dynamic, which not coincidentally, is synchronous with the proposed Holocene/Anthropocene transition. Moreover, the problem of self-conscious social transformation in the context of capitalism took on a practical dimension for Lukács, which is something that becomes less and less clear with the failure of Marxist politics and the unfolding of the twentieth century. Many of the same forms survive this moment—social democracy, labor unions, communism—but their capacity to work through the subjective dimension of the commodity form ("working class consciousness") does not—their practical connection to the problem of freedom become dimmer. According to Lukács (1971 [1923]: 76), "As the product of capitalism the proletariat must necessarily be subject to the modes of existence of its creator. This mode of existence is inhumanity and reification." Hence, the importance of self-criticism on behalf of the political Left, which we aim to advance in the chapters that follow.