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Reading Hegel after Marx: Lukács and the Question of Teleology

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a rethinking of the concept of teleology in Marxist theory. In particular, I propose some reflections on György Lukács's teleology of labour, addressed in *The Young Hegel* and subsequently reworked in *The Ontology of Social Being*. Lukács challenged an idealist notion of teleology understood as realisation of a transcendental principle posited *a priori*. He redefined the concept by showing how Hegel and Marx reintroduced the question of purpose as an essential quality of human labour. Against idealist conceptions, Lukács reimagined teleology as a secular purpose inherent to human praxis and the key to thinking agency within a materialist concept of history. Accordingly, a Marxist concept of teleology should highlight what Ernst Bloch described as the “anticipatory” character of consciousness, whereby teleology means the positing of an end that does not yet exist in reality and that exceeds the temporal horizon of the present. However, in his critique of Hegel, Lukács illustrates the ambivalent and contradictory dimension of teleology, a perspective that constantly relapses into temporal closure and determinism. While proposing a radical reading of Hegel, Lukács oscillates between the two extremes of a dialectical notion of teleology that he nonetheless helped to formulate.

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The idea of teleology is charged with many negative connotations. A teleological vision of history may presuppose stagism, determinism, linearity, and a blind faith into a foreseeable course of historical development. In the tradition of historical materialism, Marx's ability to critique the onset of capitalism as a historical process has been described as a decidedly anti-teleological vision (Wood 1995, 177). Furthermore, in the history of modernity, a teleological vision has been used as a pretext for imperialist ideologies of colonial expansion and Eurocentrism, positing “the West” as the one and only outcome of a global history of domination and exploitation. In this sense, the idea of teleology is deeply ideological as it conceals the plurality of historical bifurcations and the possibility for imagining an alternative to global capitalism. However, at the same time, some kind for teleological thinking is an unmissable element in the tradition of Marxism and, potentially, it may indicate collective agency and a force for social liberation.

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This paper aims to reimagine the notion of teleology by focusing on a short essay by György Lukács, a chapter of his 1938 book *The Young Hegel* (1975) titled “Labour and the Question of Teleology.” This chapter suggests that teleology does not equal a simple and linear ideal of progress towards a pre-established end. Indeed, Lukács’s philosophy should be seen, as István Mészáros has observed, “as a defence of the universal methodological validity of the dialectical approach” (Mészáros 1972, 13) against the “prevalence of ‘vulgar Marxism’ in the organized working-class movement,” and “dogmatic attacks on dialectics and glorifications of pedestrian, mechanistic materialism” (Mészáros 1972, 12–13). Accordingly, Lukács’s recourse to Hegel enabled him to oppose a faith in history as an automatic process that unavoidably leads to an already known outcome, because of its inherent laws. In contrast to a fatalist concept of history, Lukács developed a dialectical and historical materialist idea of teleology, which means the ability to prefigure and to anticipate a future beyond the dominant forces of the present. If teleology is human purpose and labour, it means that socialism can only be realised through class struggle, the role of the Party and political praxis; it is not guaranteed by the course of history. In this, Lukács drew on Marx, Hegel and Lenin in order to redefine teleology as purposeful labour and a key concept in Marxism. However, this essay will also show that, in Lukács, a dialectical and materialist notion coexists with the older, idealist and undialectical concept of teleology. The entanglements and contradictions between these two versions raise some important questions about the current relevance of teleology as a productive and ambivalent concept, which will be explored in this essay.

The short chapter of *The Young Hegel* opens many questions that Lukács also considered in other writings. Particularly, it resonates with some insights he proposed, many decades later, in volume one of his *The Ontology of Social Being* (Lukács 1978a). As Paul Browne and André Tosel have observed, it was only in a late, post-1956 phase when Lukács could formulate a “new theoretical basis for a democratic revival of real socialism” (Tosel 2008, 163) as he was finally able to develop a historical materialist ontology and “Marxism as a self-mediating, self-critical vision of the world, rooted in a dialectical ontology of social being” (Browne 1990, 193). This makes the significance of Lukács’s earlier writing more complex and problematic, even though Lukács offered a substantial reflection on the complexities of teleology already in his earlier work on the young Hegel.

Lukács’s early reflections on teleology cannot be detached from their historical context, as Michalis Skomvoulis thoughtfully remarks in a recent essay on the topic. Skomvoulis points out that the “treatment of the relation between teleology and labor indicates the dependence of his thought on certain motives of dogmatic Marxism,” with the result that “the ‘objective’ priority of productive forces is presented as an automatic justification for the rationality or the non-rationality of a theoretical position” (Skomvoulis 2019, 162). Indeed, this is an important limitation and an important difference between his earlier essay and *The Ontology of Social Being*. Some outlines of Lukács’s argument, however, seem to be retained across the two moments, and Lukács even goes back to the same passage from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1969) in both texts, even though Skomvoulis (2019, 153) notes that in *The Ontology of Social Being* we do not see the marked reduction of Hegel to its “idealist limits” that was more prominent in *The Young Hegel*. In his 1962 *Subject-Object*, Ernst Bloch had already noted that Lukács’s portrayal of Hegel as a precursor of Marx in *The Young Hegel* raises the important question of what to do with

aspects of Hegelian philosophy that could not feed directly into Marx. Most interestingly, Bloch suggested that it is precisely in these non-subsumed aspects of Hegelian philosophy that lies the possibility of yet unthought possibilities for Marxism (Bloch 1962, 50). In this essay, I will draw from both writings by Lukács, while mainly focusing on *The Young Hegel* as the text that offered the seeds of a fascinating and still relevant and productive proposition on teleology.

My main argument is that Lukács was able to reveal an essentially contradictory and dialectical quality of teleology understood as a Marxist, historical materialist concept. From this point of view, teleology implies prefiguring a possible end-result and objective that does not yet exist in reality. As Marx noted, it involves a work of the imagination that anticipates, precedes and exceeds the immediate reality around us. Teleology has to do with the “active side” that Marx recuperated as an important legacy of idealism in his “Theses on Feuerbach” (Marx 1998). However, the striving to realise the end envisaged in the imagination can entail a shift. Teleology moves from the order of becoming to the order of being: from essential quality of human labour, as well as the struggle against the oppressive forces of the present, the telos of teleology becomes an abstract result, automatically bound to take place and imposing itself on the present. Through this reversal, the dimension of the future originally present is obliterated, teleology hence becomes oppressive and deterministic. The most fascinating aspect of Lukács’s reflections on the topic is that they illuminate this ambivalent, contradictory dimension of the concept, characterising Lukács’s own engagement with Hegel and Marx.

This ambivalence can be used as a tool for making sense of a vexed problem in intellectual history, that is, the relationship between authors and their times, or cultural production and economic structure. Indeed, the ambivalence is at work across centuries and generations: it impacts the way Marx read Hegel, Lukács read Marx and Hegel, but also how we read the way Lukács read the former. Reading teleologically hence would mean situating each author as “precursor” of a future generation, finding the seeds of a future that earlier writers somehow prefigured. Simultaneously, however, teleological reading can imply the reduction of this vanguard and forerunner aspect to a mere accident or anomaly. The two senses of teleology cannot be disentangled: reading Hegel as a precursor of Marx means pointing to aspects of Hegelian philosophy that paved the way for what Hegel anticipated but did not fully realise. But it also means to reduce Hegel to a step in a predetermined sequence in which Hegel occupies a static position necessarily guided and delimited by the subsequent course of history.

This ambivalence complicates what Victoria Fareld and Hannes Kuch describe as Lukács’s “progressivist” reading of Marx and Hegel, whereby in Lukács’s reading, “Marx’s rejection of Hegel’s idealist metaphysics was thus neither a rupture with, nor a rejection of, Hegel’s philosophy, but a critical realization and transformative completion of it” (Fareld and Kuch 2020, 4). Reading Marx as “transformative completion” of Hegel, indeed, has a double, dialectical valence: retrospectively, it means marking a path leading from Hegel to Marx. Prospectively, however, it means reopening the dimension of the future in the past, anticipating something that does not yet exist in the present time and historical moment of each author. Accordingly (and more in keeping with Fareld and Kuch’s suggestive “helical” paradigm for interpreting the relationship between Marx and Hegel), rethinking the concept of teleology can ultimately lead to reimagine the

idea of progress as a dialectical form of continuity, albeit a continuity without guarantees rather than realisation of a pre-given and static end.

Key problems at the heart of historical materialism are at work in such teleological reading, as historical materialism should not be limited to a linear and unproblematic reduction of philosophy to a reflection of the historical situation. The uneven development of culture and society can explain this anticipatory aspect of teleological positing as active and concrete changing of given historical circumstances. Lukács was able to stress a radical contradiction at the heart of this concept, and most importantly, he suggests a still unexplored possibility for thinking an open-ended and potentially revolutionary teleology that would not fall prey to determinism.

An open and critical teleology stresses the dimension of novelty, the future, and what Bloch defined as “anticipatory consciousness” (Bloch 1986, 208), an aspect of Marx’s comments on purpose as he expressed them in the first volume of *Capital* ([1867] 1990). Lukács’s writings constantly move between such an open-ended, dialectical and historical materialist concept of teleology, and another sense of teleology as a kind of stasism whereby it is impossible to overcome the historical circumstances that one inhabits. These two aspects of teleology—open and critical on the one hand, deterministic and ideological on the other—are deeply interwoven and connected; they are the two sides of the same coin as they inspire a reflection on historical time and agency in a materialist concept of history.

1. Marx: Teleology as Anticipation

In *The Young Hegel*, Lukács engaged with teleology for many reasons. Firstly, he addressed teleology as a way of introducing Hegel’s perspectives on economics and on history, in order to challenge fascist and mystifying revisionisms of Hegel’s philosophy. Secondly, following Lenin, Lukács aimed to rethink the relationship between Marx and Hegel and, most significantly, the way in which Hegel can be considered precursor of Marxism. Thirdly, the question of teleology is indissolubly related to the role of human labour in defining the relationship between humans and nature in Marx, a topic he further expanded on in the third volume of his *The Ontology of Social Being* (Lukács 1980).

Lukács’s reflections on teleology open with a very famous and influential passage from Marx’s first volume of *Capital*, a passage in which he theorised the labour-process as a metabolic interaction between humans and nature and a productive activity that defines human society as a whole. Marx wrote:

We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. (Marx [1867] 1990, 284)

This passage helps Lukács show how Marx was able to reintroduce the notion of “purpose” that earlier materialist philosophies had repudiated. Indeed, in this famous extract,

Marx noted that human labour is radically different from non-human labour because human beings put a sense of purpose and an idea of the ends of labour in the process of making. Humans have to construct an image of the finished product and its purpose before they embark on the labour process, unlike bees or spiders. The key problem that Lukács unearths through this quote by Marx concerns the meaning of this “purpose” and telos of human labour.

The idea that human labour, and hence human life, has a telos and a purpose, indeed, can lead to positing a transcendental principle and ultimately to defending religion and the idea of God as the primary intelligence that created such “purpose” for human existence. Teleology seems to assume a “final cause” and the existence of some kind of force in nature that gives humans reason to exist. In contrast to this, materialist philosophers such as Hobbes and Spinoza had rejected teleology as a whole, restricting life to a material field of immanence and causality. In this regard, Lukács’s main thesis is that Marx was able to reimagine the question of teleology in a secular, critical and materialist way. Without positing the existence of a transcendental agency, Marx however did not simply dismiss the problem altogether; rather, he rethought the possibility of teleology as a key dimension of the labour-process. This question could also be connected to Marx’s introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where Marx challenged the separation of production and consumption and the prejudice that

consumption, as the concluding act, which is regarded not only as the final aim but as the ultimate purpose, falls properly outside the sphere of economy, except in so far as it in turn exerts a reciprocal action on the point of departure thus once again initiating the whole process. (Marx 1859)

Against this teleology of consumption, Marx redefined a materialist, immanent concept of telos whereby the economic processes need to be seen in their unity, interdependence and totality.

Lukács redefines the question by offering a dialectical theory of teleology in which Marx and Hegel are affiliated as part of the same movement that goes beyond the dualism of causality and teleology that had informed previous philosophies including Kant’s major intervention on the concept in his *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 2007). In this regard, Lukács notes:

The specific nature of final causes as both Hegel and Marx correctly saw is just that the idea of the objective to be attained comes into being before the work process is set in motion and that the work process exists for the purpose of achieving this objective by means of an ever greater penetration of the causal relationships existing in reality. . . . [T]he breadth and depth of man’s knowledge of cause and effect in nature is a function of the purposes man sets himself in the work process. (Lukács 1975, 345)

The radical novelty of Hegel and Marx concerns their ability to place the teleological principle into the immanence of the real world and the reinsertion of purpose into causality. Teleology, from this point of view, does not mean an ultimate end predetermined by a transcendental intelligence, but rather the achievement of an imagined purpose fully within the bound of the real and concrete world of labour and history.

However, human life cannot be fully reduced to nature or causality because humans, through their labour, add a surplus to the chain of causal relationships. Unlike spiders or bees, human beings are able to imagine what they are going to produce before creating

the product in reality through the labour-process. This means a teleology of labour that does not posit a transcendent principle beyond the material reality in which it takes place. The immanent ontological leap enabled by Marx's theory of labour involves, from this point of view, a radical shift whereby the concept of teleology is restricted to human life. Thus, in a passage of the third volume of his *The Ontology of Social Being*, Lukács notes that while in nature there are only actualities, and an uninterrupted change "in their existing concrete forms . . . the Marxian theory of labour as the sole existing form of a teleologically produced existence . . . founds for the first time the specificity of social being" (Lukács 1980, 20). Teleology cannot exist in nature or in an ultramundane and timeless spiritual realm divided from material reality. As Christian Fuchs remarks, "the human teleology that Lukács considers as being characteristic for work and therefore for society is not opposed to causality and is not an external, esoteric force that drives society to a higher goal . . . but is immanent in society itself" (Fuchs 2016). The key insight of Marx lies in his restriction of teleology to *human* labour as a qualitative leap through which human beings transform their environment.

Human labour is the one and only "ongoing realisation of teleological positings" (Lukács 1980, 9). In this, Marx was able to go beyond his predecessors by removing the need to reintroduce God or spirit as the "solution" to the predicament of purpose. As Lukács observes,

Marx's understanding of labour teleology goes beyond the attempted solutions of even such great predecessors as Aristotle and Hegel, since for Marx labour is not one of the many phenomenal forms of teleology in general, but rather the only point at which a teleological positing can be ontologically established. (Lukács 1980, 8)

Human labour is the only possible teleological form, and the one that enables social being to emerge out of organic life. Marx's metabolism of labour and nature, hence, involves the rise of human consciousness as the ability to prefigure, desire and plan the end result of the metabolic process. However, the kind of consciousness "glimpsed (but only glimpsed) in this untimely recovery of teleology," C. D. Blanton notes in a recent essay on Lukács, cannot be assimilated to the form of consciousness proper to "orthodox critical theory," which "presumes self-consciousness, excavating—in the heuristic and merely reflective, never determining, Kantian structures of aesthetic and teleological judgment—oneself in place of the world" (Blanton 2020, 734). Rather, Lukács's teleological positing offers the promise of a different type of determination, what may be described, following Lukács's reflections in the third volume of *The Ontology of Social Being*, as a different "ontological kernel of freedom" (Lukács 1980, 39) irreducible to the ideological strictures of a capitalist modernity and grounded into the possibility of envisaging a non-reified social *poiesis*.

By refocusing teleology on the labour-process, Marx enabled a materialist reversal of idealism through which "the antinomy of causality and teleology is, in reality, a dialectical contradiction in which the laws governing a complex pattern of objective reality become manifest in motion, in the process of its own constant reproduction" (Lukács 1975, 346). A materialist teleology not only does away with transcendence but also with the dualism between necessity and freedom that had informed the tradition of German idealism. From this standpoint, rethinking teleology is an important precondition for defining a materialist concept of history in which human praxis can change given circumstances but only within the frame given by these same circumstances, a concept of history

Marx had sketched most vividly in works such as *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx 1992) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 1852).

In the volume on Marx of his later *The Ontology of Social Being* (1978b), Lukács goes back to the passage about the architect and the bee from *Capital*, but also to another influential passage from Marx's *Grundrisse*, in which Marx wrote about how the comprehension of the structure of capitalism also allows insight into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements "it built itself up. . . . [H]uman anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known" (Marx 1993, 105). While there may be some kind of teleological assumption at work in this influential passage, it is a sort of inverted teleology, whereby it is only through the prism of the "later" stage that earlier forms can be understood, and only insofar as they anticipated more "developed" forms. As Sayers observes, such passage from Marx is by no means unequivocally teleological, even though the language used by Marx creates some ambiguity (Sayers 2019, 44). Lukács stresses the need to separate the ontological from the epistemological and how this passage enabled Marx to go beyond Hegel's "idealist illusion" (Lukács 1978b, 8). Marx's critical allusions to Darwinism, however, reveal the ambivalence of the concept of teleology within the Marxist tradition: while Lukács emphasises how the teleological positing of labour entails the creation of something qualitatively new, unprecedented and irreducible to nature, this new creation of human labour projects its light onto the past as well as the future, reframing even organic life in a completely new way. What Lukács describes as the "ontological leap," indeed, "is in no way negated by the fact that it involves in reality a very lengthy process, with innumerable transitional forms" (Lukács 1978b, 7). Thus, while "genetically" the teleology of labour can be explained by innumerable transitional forms, ontologically labour produces a qualitative difference. Yet, the transition from quantity to quality can only be grasped if "labour in the true sense of the word, is correctly understood in its ontological significance, and if the attempt is made to understand its genetic process, which in itself is in no way teleological, in terms of its result" (Lukács 1978b, 7–8). Lukács "solves" the problem of teleology by positing teleology as a transformative activity opposed to any evolutionistic idea of historical or natural development: teleology is not genetic but ontological, it is not a category that merely explains how things have come to be, but a form of activity that radically transforms the world. But in this way, teleology retains its full ambivalence: if human labour is the end result of a series of transitions, how can it not be teleological then? Otherwise, how can labour be teleological, if the historical process out of which it emerges "in itself is in no way teleological" (Lukács 1978b, 7–8)? Either labour is reduced to causality, or it cannot help but operate as the underlying telos of history.

The origins of this contradiction can be found in Lukács's reading of Hegel, and the way he turned Hegel into an anticipation of Marx. Most importantly, Lukács devotes his analysis to showing that Hegel's *Logic* and lectures in Jena had prepared and anticipated Marx's insight about teleology as an aspect of human labour rather than divine spirit. Thus, in *The Young Hegel* Lukács summarises the main contribution of Hegel to conceptualising a Marxist concept of teleology by stressing how Hegel's "great philosophical achievement had been to take the concept of purpose down from Heaven, where the

theologians had placed it, and bring it back to earth, to the reality of actual human action” (Lukács 1975, 363). While still impeded by the “miasmas of idealism” (363), Hegel had introduced the key insight that Marx could develop in his theory of the labour-process: teleology does not equal transcendence or final cause, but purposiveness in the historical process. By taking teleology down from Heaven and reframing it as a completely worldly, earthly, and historical dimension, Hegel managed to anticipate a radical, revolutionary concept of teleology that could later inspire a materialist concept of history. As Lukács remarks:

The main thrust of Hegel’s view of history, then, culminates in the concrete realm of human praxis; it aims at achieving a philosophical understanding of the real historical process that necessarily led to the establishment of modern civil society. This necessity arises from the actions of men, from passions and aspirations which, through the dialectics of freedom and necessity, produce other, higher and more universal effects than were originally intended or even contemplated. The concrete dialectic of freedom and necessity means, then, that these individual passions . . . are just as essential to the realisation of history as their results are different and more than was originally intended and implicit in the immediate impulses of action. (Lukács 1975, 361)

This summary of Hegel’s contribution to reimagining the notion of teleology in history is arresting, as it seems to go beyond any other insights put forward by Lukács in *The Young Hegel*. Teleology is reinserted into the “dialectics of freedom and necessity” that most productively characterise historical materialism. These remarks about Hegel need to be compared to Marx’s initial quote about the ability of humans to raise material structures in the imagination and to establish a purpose before the actual onset of the labour-process. Indeed, an unnoticed but radically important question can become visible, as a sort of unthought subtext running through Lukács’s oeuvre.

The key insight proposed by Lukács in his comment on Hegel’s view of history concerns the fact that the results of action “are different and more than was originally intended and implicit in the immediate impulses of action” (Lukács 1975, 361). This insight operates a further reversal and torsion on the idea of teleology: teleology is the projected anticipation of the future in the labour-process, but an anticipation that *does not necessarily realise itself in the actual production*. Teleology, from this point of view, is more a category of a future-in-the-present rather than an ultramundane intelligence. It can indicate the way in which human beings project, imagine and anticipate the results of their action—historical praxis as well as labour—in the moment of starting it, but with no guarantee that it will be actually realised. As Mário Duayer and João Leonardo Medeiros note in their analysis of Lukács’s *The Ontology of Social Being*, “taking for granted that the decisive act of the subject is the teleological positing and its actualisation, . . . whenever intention intervenes, the envisaged future governs the present in the form of an ‘ought’ that simultaneously impels and constrains action” (Duayer and Medeiros 2013, 118). Teleological action is “governed by the future,” which produces “a new category of social being—the ‘ought’—which is the determining factor of the subjective praxis” (Duayer and Medeiros 2013, 118). Human consciousness and labour are hence guided by a projected future that becomes the source of the action itself.

In this sense, teleology can be reframed as a historical materialist, Marxist concept: teleology indicates human purpose, what Ernst Bloch characterised as “anticipatory

consciousness” and the opening of aspirations of an as yet non-existent future. Bloch defined the idea of anticipatory consciousness in the first volume of *The Principle of Hope*:

Man spins out wishes, is in a position to do so, finds a wealth of material for them, even if it is not always of the best, most durable quality, in himself. This fermenting and effervescing above the consciousness that has become is the first correlate of the imagination. . . . The animal knows nothing of this kind; only man, although he is much more awake, wells up utopianly. His existence is less solid as it were, although, compared with plants and animals, he is much more intensely present. (Bloch 1986, 195–196)

Bloch’s distinction between human and non-human animal seems to resonate with Marx’s insight about the teleology of labour. The capacity to imagine something that does not exist, however, is by no means reduced by Bloch to a merely subjective and inward quality. On the contrary, Bloch’s notion of “real possibility” stems from a reading of Marx’s (1998) “Theses on Feuerbach” as Bloch maintains that “the concrete imagination and the imagery of its mediated anticipations are fermenting in the process of the real itself and are depicted in the concrete forward dream; anticipating elements are a component of reality itself” (Bloch 1986, 197). The key to a Marxist, non-deterministic concept of teleology lies in such force of anticipation, the ability to project something future by stretching the present. The telos of teleology, in other words, should not be understood as a “rigid final goal” but rather as a “goal-determination of the human will” (Bloch 1986, 202).

As Wayne Hudson notes in his study on Bloch’s Marxist philosophy, there are similarities between Bloch’s and Lukács’s reflections on the teleological character of labour.

Bloch, however, rejects Lukács’s reliance on Nicolai Hartmann’s staticist concept of teleology, and attempts to posit emergentist finality of a subject-object sort. Granted that there are no pre-ordained purposes, as in the old teleology, Bloch argues that there is emergentist finality in the sense of the emergence of goals and ends. (Hudson 1982, 158)

From this point of view, teleology can be thought of as an emergent and transformative praxis that stretches the present into an imagined future that may or may not happen, while human beings strive and work to make it happen: the element of freedom-in-necessity rests on this possibility and this opening, which never becomes a fully realised transcendence and keeps in itself the fundamental novelty of an unexpected outcome. In this way, teleology seems to involve a type of praxis, as Michael Thompson thought-provokingly argues, more akin to the Greek concept of *poiesis*, the creative act of making and transforming nature (Thompson 2011). Bringing teleology down to earth means to rethink it as purposeful anticipation rather than an external overview of a linear historical process. Such a concept of anticipation would be radically opposed to the idea of anticipation Lukács addressed in his *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, a posthumous text from the mid-1920s. Writing against Laszlo Rudas, Lukács challenged a “most undialectical conception of a fluidity flowing of its own accord, without any *conscious assistance* on the part of the Communist Party” (Lukács 2000, 68). Anticipation does not mean the acceleration of an objective process that is bound to happen anyway. On the contrary, the telos of anticipation is uncertain and needs ceaseless struggle to be attained, which is the dialectic of subject and object. More radically, it means to think teleology as a category of the future rather than the past. In his later *The Ontology of*

Social Being, the possibility of such concept of open-ended teleology emerges where Lukács discusses a limit case of the teleological positing of labour, as he writes, before re-introducing the same passages from Hegel he had analysed in *The Young Hegel*:

The positing of the goal arises from a human social need; yet in order to be a genuine positing of a goal, investigation of the means, i.e. knowledge of nature, must have reached a certain appropriate level; if it has not, then the positing of this goal remains merely a utopian project, a kind of dream, as did flying, for example, from Icarus through to Leonardo and far beyond him. (Lukács 1978a, 15)

Such passage reveals a profound ambivalence in Lukács's reworkings of the notion of teleology: while, on the one hand, teleology means the ability to imagine and to anticipate something that does not yet exist—as in Marx's influential reflection on the bee and the architect—on the other hand, this imagination should not go too far ahead in time, it should match the level of the historical development of science, technology and the economy. Teleology is both fully contained by and exceeding a linear, developmental concept of history in which culture and the economy, base and superstructure would follow the same tempo. The power of Lukács's concept of teleology lies in its oscillation between these two extremes, suggesting the possibility of a telos that would go beyond developmental sequence and yet reinserting it into an evolutionist narrative. In *The Young Hegel*, Lukács did not seem to fully develop the more radical undertones of his concept of teleology. Rather, he seemed constantly to relapse into a different, more theological and less open-ended perspective, much closer to that “self-annulment of history” which he reproached to Hegel, a vision upholding that history “is transformed into the mere realisation of a goal inherent in its subject, its spirit from the very outset” (Lukács 1975, 546). This might express, as Michael Löwy notes in his great book on the early Lukács, the fact that Lukács himself had adopted, under Stalinism, a more “realist” position by rejecting the utopian fervour of his early years and embracing instead a “reconciliation” with reality drawn directly from Hegel, as Löwy writes: “Lukács, . . . like Hegel, accepts the end of the revolutionary period and builds his philosophy on an understanding of the new turn in world history” (Löwy 1979, 190). Lukács's thoughts on teleology seem to be marked by this ambivalent and forced reconciliation, though radical subtexts and counter-currents are still at work in his philosophy.

2. Hegel: Teleology as Closure

Lukács's rethinking of teleology stems from his interpretation of Hegel and his framing of Hegel as a precursor of Marx. In Lukács's view, Hegel made a radical discovery that allowed him to go beyond Kant and Fichte. Hegel was able to reimagine the problem of teleology from the point of view of human beings' intervention into the material world through labour and the use of instruments. Lukács main discoveries revolve around a passage of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, the third chapter of the second section of the second volume, “Subjective Logic or the Doctrine of the Notion,” where Hegel discusses the problem of teleology by offering a cogent critique of Kant, and especially Kant's treatment of teleology in *Critique of Judgement*. Hegel is highly critical of the Kantian “solution” to the antinomy of causality and teleology, as he is dissatisfied with the Kantian conclusion that shifts the problem of the existence of final causes from

objectivity to subjective maxim. In his chapter on teleology in *Science of Logic*, Hegel refers to Kant's antinomy between causality and freedom, that is, to the question whether phenomena of the world occur "solely according to natural laws" or "a causality through freedom must be assumed as well" (Hegel 1969, 737). Kant could not prove natural causality because such a concept would still entail "an absolute spontaneity within itself," while postulating freedom as ultimate cause of phenomena "presupposes a state that has *no causal connexion* whatever with its predecessor, it contradicts the law of causality which alone makes unity of experience, and experience at all, possible" (738). In the end, writes Hegel, the

Kantian solution of this antinomy is the same as the general solution of the others; namely that reason can prove neither the one proposition nor the other, because we cannot have *a priori* any determining principle of the possibility of things according to merely empirical laws; that further, therefore, both must be regarded not as *objective propositions* but as *subjective maxims*. (738; italics in the original)

Kant did not properly solve the antinomy but transposed it to a subjective plane, concluding that the world is governed by natural laws, but the individual subject can decide, on some occasions, to switch to "*investigating* certain natural forms in accordance with *another maxim*, namely, on the principle of final causes" (738; italics in the original). Kant escaped the conflict between determinism and freedom and reframed it as a question of subjective judgement, while Hegel attempted to go beyond this predicament.

Accordingly, Hegel's mention of labour as a possible site to rethink the question of teleology, in anticipation of Marx, takes place as Hegel moves beyond Kant in overcoming a rigid and un-dialectical dualism of natural mechanism and final causes. The passage analysed in-depth by Lukács, both in *The Young Hegel* and in *The Ontology of Social Being*, goes as follows:

But the means is the external middle term of the syllogism which is the realisation of the end; in the means, therefore, the rationality in it manifests itself as such by maintaining itself in this external other, and precisely through this externality. To this extent the means is superior to the finite ends of external purposiveness: the plough more honourable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends. The tool lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. (Hegel 1969, 747)

In his reading of this passage, Lukács follows Lenin by stressing how Hegel posits the seeds of historical materialism. In his *Philosophical Notebooks* (Lenin [1895] 1916), Lenin had noted how this passage signalled the way in which Hegel placed labour, hence economic activity, as the "prototype of human praxis" (Lukács 1975, 350), and how "the economic process of production is the moment thanks to which teleology becomes the truth of mechanism and chemism" (Lukács 1975, 349). Hegel emphasises the instrument of labour and its persistence as a manifestation of a teleological end, which is the activity of human labour itself. This allowed Hegel to overcome the separation of theory and praxis and to ground consciousness into material and economic activity. Thus, Hegel places teleology fully within the world-historical process, linking means and end, human praxis and human purpose, into a unified and meaningful whole. As Lukács observes:

Man naturally wishes to satisfy his needs immediately and all work, every tool, etc., only appears to his immediate consciousness as a means to this end. But Hegel also shows the

concrete objective dialectics of the labour-process which necessarily leads beyond the standpoint of immediate consciousness. And it is here that progress lies. (Lukács 1975, 347)

The ambivalences of Lukács's re-reading of Hegel appear through his reference to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, both in *The Young Hegel* and in *The Ontology of Social Being*. Indeed, one of the most interesting suggestions presented in the passage from Hegel's *Science of Logic* concerns the different temporality that tools of labour seem to incorporate and to manifest. Hegel writes that "the tool lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten" (Hegel 1969, 747). The potential significance of this remark is noted by Lukács in both texts. While in *The Young Hegel*, it concerns a move beyond immediate consciousness, in *The Ontology of Social Being*, Lukács notes:

Hegel stresses, and by and large rightly so, the longer duration of the means vis-à-vis the immediate ends and fulfilments. To be sure, this antithesis is far from being sharp in reality as Hegel presents it. For although individual "immediate enjoyments" certainly do "pass away" and are forgotten, the satisfaction of needs also has a persistence and continuity when society as a whole is considered. (Lukács 1978a, 16)

Lukács quickly dismisses here a point which, however, did not seem to be so insignificant in his earlier writing, probably due to the earlier influence of Lenin's notes on Hegel: the teleology of labour can only be posited if a certain activity involves an end (consumption and production), which however is not immediately realised. The temporal gap between the activity and its goal is the most essential aspect of teleology, and what characterises its anticipatory dimension. The permanence and longer duration of the means is important because it shows that labour is a concretely teleological activity; the long-lasting time of the instrument is the concrete embodiment of this longer temporality proper to teleological positing. This is the reason why, in Lukács's earlier study, Hegel's reframing of teleology involves going beyond "immediate consciousness" and moving to the universal by inserting a dimension of potentiality and the future into the process of historical becoming. This perspective leads, according to Lukács, to the "abolition of the mechanical separation between theory and praxis," incorporating "man's 'active side' in its conception of reality" (Lukács 1978a, 16). The emphasis on this "active side" of idealism, which Marx also famously recuperated in his "Theses on Feuerbach," allowed Hegel to give a revolutionary solution to the problem of freedom and necessity, reconnecting purpose and praxis. While humans live in a world of necessity and causality, the possibility of freedom rests on what Hegel described as the "cunning" of reason, whereby men make their own history themselves and the actual driving force "behind the events of history is to be found in the passions of men, . . . but the totality of these individual passions nevertheless ends by producing *something other* than what the men involved had wanted and striven to attain" (354; italics in the original). The gap between purpose and realisation does not at all mean total randomness or voluntarism. On the contrary, it means that the concrete, objective side of history emerges precisely out of these unexpected results and this constant dialectical interlocking of human praxis and material reality. This vision prefigures Marx's own concept of history in many ways, especially in the way Hegel linked human action to an objective course of history, embedding freedom into the realm of necessity rather than reproducing a static dualism of subject and object.

The radical potential of teleology as an open and anticipatory consciousness derives from the ability to overcome—even if only in the imagination—the limitations of the

present. It means stretching the present into a projection of desired results, aspirations and aims, a purposive leap towards a not-yet-existing moment in time. The political value of teleology would be the ability to engage with the active construction of socialism rather than simply projecting an expected outcome as a future state of things and the abstract utopia of the end of history. As Lukács wrote in his study on Lenin,

The utopian conceives socialism not as a process of “becoming” but as a state of “being.” In so far as problems of socialism are raised at all, they are studied only as future economic, cultural or other questions. . . . How this in the first place becomes socially possible, how it is achieved, or constituted, or what class relations and economic forms the proletariat must confront at the historical moment when it assumes the task of realising socialism, is not asked. (Lukács 1970, 70)

Teleology is, from this point of view, an overcoming of the present in the present. In contrast to this, an older, pre-Marxist, idealist and theological concept of teleology entailed reinscribing the *telos* of teleology into a metaphysical and transcendental realm. In Lukács’s essay, Hegel’s vision ultimately relapses into such an idealist concept of teleology, while simultaneously anticipating Marx. As Lukács concludes, in the final pages of the chapter on teleology:

For objective idealism, i.e. for both Hegel and Schelling, nature and history are the products of a “spirit,” and since this is so it follows that the old conception of teleology must inevitably recur, even though Hegel had eliminated it from his detailed discussions of society and history. For if history is an object which is guaranteed by a unified subject, if it is indeed the product of that subject’s activity, then, for an objective idealist like Hegel, history itself must realise the purpose which the “spirit” had posited as a goal from the outset. (Lukács 1975, 362)

According to Lukács, the limits of Hegel’s view on teleology derive from his objective idealism, which ultimately frames “spirit” as the ultimate mover of history and the unifying subject which gives the totality of history meaning, purpose and direction. In this way, “the whole process is thereby transformed into a pseudo-movement: it returns to its starting point, it is the realisation of something that had always existed *a priori*” (Lukács 1975, 362). Thus, Hegel had somehow introduced the possibility of thinking teleology in a historical materialist way, while in the end, he returns this possibility to the idealist system whereby teleology goes back to simple repetition and realisation of something that had already been fixed beforehand.

Interestingly, Lukács’s own concept of teleology is marked by similar ambivalences. While his reading of Hegel as a precursor of Marx opens up most productive questions for historical materialism, in the end, his reading of Hegel reinstates a concept of teleology as historical closure and negation of becoming. While a Marxist concept of teleology indicated purpose, historical transformation, and anticipation of possible futures in the making of the present, Lukács’s historical positioning of Hegel reveals an underlying persistence of old teleology. Thus, his radical positing of Hegel as anticipation of Marx relapses into a pigeon-holing of Hegel into a “thinker of his times.” As he had already commented in his 1926 pivotal study on Moses Hess and idealist dialectic, Hegel simply stopped at the present refusing to go any further:

The result of Hegelian philosophy is to put an end to the process as process. Historically and logically, every form of abstract petrification and thing-ness has been dissolved into a

concrete becoming, a process, only for the product of the process, the present, to petrify once again into a mere product, a thing. (Lukács 2014, 192)

In the earlier essay on Hess, Lukács could hence conclude that Hegel's philosophy, looked at "in relation to earlier philosophy, . . . is the resolution of Kant's antinomies; turned forward; however, it represents their reproduction on a higher level" (Lukács 2014, 192). In a true dialectic, beyond Hegel's reconciliation with the historical reality of his times, "the present points in real and dialectical fashion beyond itself and into the future" (Lukács 2014, 192). Lukács's concept of teleology, however, remains trapped in such ambivalences too, and, indeed, in essays written in the early 1930s, Lukács praised Hegel's realism as he came to terms with his post-Thermidorian epoch, in contrast to Hölderlin's tragic and anachronistic faith in past revolutionary ideals (Lukács 1968).

Thus, on the one hand, Lukács reinterprets Hegel as a genealogy of Marxist thought, noting that Hegel was able to

anticipate some of the later ideas of historical materialism. Of course, Marx and Engels went far beyond Hegel in their materialist concretisation of the problem of necessity and contingency, and it was only when they developed their really scientific language that Hegel's mystified constructs could finally be overcome. (Lukács 1975, 357).

On the other hand, however, Lukács reinstates the sense of finality of Hegel's thought, the linear "overcoming" of Hegel's mystification, and the fact that Hegel could not go beyond the limits and frontier of his historical situation, thereby contradicting the historical materialist postulate about teleology as precisely this ability to go beyond one's own times and to anticipate a future. Lukács further develops his critique of Hegel:

However, the boundary of Hegel's view of history now becomes visible, since, on the one hand, he did not see anything beyond that point, and on the other hand, he himself remained enmeshed in the real contradictions surrounding the problem of German national unity. (Lukács 1975, 360)

While Lukács aims to defend Hegel against later mystifications of his thought, he still locates Hegel, as world-historical figure, utterly and completely within the bounds and the borders of his own historical situation, forgetting the "active side" of teleological positing. Hegel is described, quite vividly, as a thinker who is unable to see anything beyond the point of his historical condition and, most importantly, cannot foresee the most important motive force in history, class struggle, which Marx later illuminated. Lukács writes:

The decisive factor which prevented Hegel from making a concrete and accurate application of his philosophically correct view of freedom and necessity, contingency and necessity to the actual course of history is to be found in his ignorance of the class struggle as a motive force in society. . . . [H]is general view of history and society prevented him from grasping the importance of class antagonisms as a motive force, to say nothing of making any general inferences from their observed laws of motion. (Lukács 1975, 358)

While this reflection might be ascribed to Lukács's much-discussed "reconciliation" with orthodox Marxism at the time, it should be stressed that such criticism also reveals an important aspect of the idea of teleology. In Lukács's argument, Hegel *could not have realised the significance of class antagonism*, as this is a discovery made possible by Marx's subsequent development of Hegel's ideas and method, and by the changed historical

circumstances of Marx's times. The question about whether Hegel did or did not, as a matter of fact, anticipate Marx on this point is totally inconsequential in this regard. Some of the limits apparent in *The Young Hegel* did not seem to disappear from the later *The Ontology of Social Being*, where Lukács also engages with the question of teleology as a way of showing Hegel's historical limitations, as he writes:

Since labour provides the original pattern for social practice, a fundamental determination for the ontology of social being is to be found in Hegel's conception of labour teleology, when this is interpreted in this way. This analysis cannot be taken any further, however, for Hegel's social philosophy, as he presents it, contains besides the distorting rule of his purposive ontology, distortions of the real facts in the light of the historical prejudices of his time. (Lukács 1978a, 110)

By framing Hegel as a mere expression of the historical prejudice of his time and Marx as the telos of Hegel's concept of labour, Lukács betrays a relapse into a theological concept of teleology. Hegel is doomed to be limited by his historical circumstances, Marx can only emerge later; there is a linear sequence leading from Hegel to Marx, even if Hegel had done so much to anticipate, prefigure, and inspire key insights of Marx's philosophy. The underlying assumption of this critique contradicts the main insight about teleology proposed in Lukács's analysis, and most importantly, his framing of Hegel as a thinker who was indeed fully capable of going beyond his own times and of transforming given circumstances, and not simply limited by the supposed stage of historical development in which he happened to live. The notion of teleology cannot be disentangled from these contradictions, which constantly present themselves in a materialist concept of history.

3. Conclusion: The Dialectic of Teleology

In *The Young Hegel*, György Lukács radically reimagined the question of teleology. Lukács challenged any simple reduction of teleology to transcendence, repetition of a telos given a priori, or denial of historicity. On the contrary, he illustrated a secret side, or what following Marx could have been called the "bad side" of history (Balibar 1995, 97), which indicates the purposiveness and anticipation expressed by human action and human labour. In his *The Ontology of Social Being*, he revindicated a vital role for "teleological positing" as a possible way to create an alternative to capitalist modernity. Indeed, as Michael Thompson notes, teleological positing is the way by which human beings can "unfold new forms of social reality—language, conceptual thought, cooperation, etc." (Thompson 2019, 430). Teleology is hence the core of collective action, not merely individual enterprise, as Thompson continues:

Lukács is therefore saying that for us to act together, we possess a shared form of teleological positing. . . . The critical potency of this social ontology now begins to be glimpsed. Once we place the ends or purposes of our activities at center stage, we begin to open up the way that social values can be assessed as either promoting social ends or private ends. (Thompson 2019, 431)

This concept of teleology captures a fundamental dimension of collective agency and social transformation, and it opens up the question of which ends are being pursued through praxis and labour. Teleology would involve, from this point of view, the appearance of

radical novelty and possible futures in the present, because it signals the openness of the historical process and the fact that the outcomes of human action are not always predictable.

Lukács derives this dual concept of teleology from Hegel, showing how the idealist philosopher anticipated Marx but also how Hegel relapsed into a pre-dialectical teleological vision because of the limitations of his philosophy and his historical times. In this way, Lukács reiterates the ambivalence of teleology in his analysis, showing that, perhaps, this contradiction and ambivalence is unavoidable. Hegel illustrated the fact that labour expresses a universal principle that goes beyond immediate consciousness and brings the possibility of the future in the present, but this insight was ultimately obscured by his recourse to his objective idealist presupposition and the denial of the historicity of his recourse to “spirit.” These contradictions affect the way Lukács reimagined Hegel’s influence on Marxism. As Lukács notes,

The proximity of Hegel’s ideas to historical materialism was not a coincidence, not the expression of a mysterious intuition of a genius, but the results of his study of the same objective problems which were solved so brilliantly by the founders of historical materialism. (Lukács 1975, 348)

If the concrete historical problems tackled by Hegel were “the same objective problems” solved by Marxist thinkers, why is it that Hegel could not have possibly overcome the boundary of his thought and of his historical situation, as Lukács writes in other passages of the essay? Both Hegel and Marx radically reimagined teleology, and the key insight we can draw from them concerns, precisely, a concept of teleology understood as the ability to discover things ahead of one’s own times, to stretch the boundaries of historical circumstances rather than falling back on them. As Lukács noted at the end of his autobiographical sketch, *Gelebtes Denken*, commenting on what he described as the truth of Marxism: “each individual—regardless of whether he is conscious of this or not—is an active factor in the overall process whose product he also is” (Lukács 1983, 169). Teleology is human labour and purpose, the incessant attempt to change the world, even if the outcomes are always changing and never guaranteed. But the telos of cultural production does not follow the same tempo of economic determination, their uneven development shows instead the anticipatory and non-synchronous quality of labour as teleological positing. Without this kind of teleology, there would be no history at all. However, history also shows a series of closures and limitations, instances in which the present cannot be overcome, returns of teleology as the fixation and repetition of a principle given beforehand. As István Mészáros writes, there is an apparent contradiction running throughout Lukács’s philosophy between, on the one hand, the idea “that the outcome of the objective economic forces that dialectically clash with one another is open-ended” (Mészáros 1972, 14), and, on the other, the profound conviction that the struggle for socialism will succeed. Maybe this is the reason why, after all, teleology is not simply open-ended purposiveness and anticipation, but also a deeper, un-renounceable conviction that global history will ultimately lead to socialism, as the ultimate outcome and realisation of the historical process. From this point of view, while Marx certainly developed the seeds of Hegel’s philosophy, a Hegelian residue remains, in many ways, the telos of Marx’s philosophy, coming after him as the recurring end of his insights on labour and history. In this sense, anachronistically and non-chronologically, Marx comes before

Hegel in the infinite torsions of teleology as an objective, material process in which human beings continue to make history out of material conditions, not of their choosing.

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