

Lukacs: An Orthodox Marxist

by

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To understand Lukacs you need to know a little bit about Hungary-- a proud little country of ten million souls in the middle of Europe. The Hungarians have a language and culture of their own. Their national heroes are intellectuals and poets. They have had one important philosopher -- Georg Lukacs -- and he wrote many of his most important works in German. Lukacs lived much of his life outside of Hungary -- but never by his own choosing. He returned again and again to Budapest and participated actively, when he could, in the political life of his nation. His political activities, without exception, came to an unfortunate ending.

In 1968 I had the privilege of meeting regularly with Lukacs over a period of several months. In the middle of an abstract philosophical discussion with Lukacs, he reminded me that “Whether or not we solve this philosophical problem will not determine whether there will be a revolution, but it might help determine the kind of revolution it will be.” That attitude infused his philosophical work.

A Complete Philosophy

Lukacs, among Marxist philosophers, stands out in his drive to develop a “complete” philosophy within the Marxist tradition. The scope of his work is truly breathtaking. He completed a major systematic work on Aesthetics – a topic ignored by most other Marxist philosophers. His works on literary criticism are among the finest in that field. His historical works, such as the brilliant analysis of the Young Hegel, show his deep philosophical grounding in continental European philosophy.

As a philosopher, he showed us a way to do philosophy – with the courage to take on all issues – large and small.

Even though he lived more than eighty years, he was not able to complete his work. We should look at the works of Lukacs, then, by looking at his method and his project and not just what he wrote.

If you look at the legacy of Lukacs, you will find that he has had profound influence in at least five very different spheres – and many of those who recognize his importance in a particular area are unaware that all of his work was done as part of developing a complete philosophical theory using Marx’s methodology. In each of these areas he is recognized as an important historical thinker who made contributions to human knowledge.

These five areas are:

I. Literary Criticism. Some of his most important contributions to intellectual life lie in his works in literary criticism. He was an acquaintance – and often a friend – of the giants of German literature. Among the most famous of these works is The Theory of the Novel, first published in 1916, before Lukacs became a Marxist.

II. Social and Political Theory. In 1923 he published a collection of essays with the title of History and Class Consciousness. This work remains one of the seminal pieces in the history of Marxism. Each of his essays in this volume are worthy of study and reflection. Lukacs also wrote a spirited defense of Lenin's view of the party and remained committed to participation in the party, even if he was not always welcomed.

III. Aesthetics. His monumental two volume systematic aesthetics stands alone in Marxist thought and shows the full depth of his thinking and work.

IV. Historical Analysis. All of Lukacs' works are imbued with references to the classical tradition of Continental European philosophy. Perhaps the outstanding complete work is The Young Hegel which he wrote while he was in the Soviet Union but was not published until after World War II.

V. Ontology. At the end of his life Lukacs completed an Ontology of Social Being, which he decided not to publish after critical discussions with his colleagues in the Budapest School. This work was meant to prepare the way for a Marxist ethics.

Lukacs' contributions in each of these five areas are enough to make him a philosopher of note and there is a plenitude of studies on his contributions. He will continue to be important as an historical figure in each of these areas. But to understand him as a Marxist we need to see his work within the context of his whole life and works.

Lukacs' Marxism

For my discussion today I chose the title “Lukacs – an orthodox Marxist.” I say “an” rather than “the” for I believe that Lukacs is just one orthodox Marxist. Marxism is a rich and robust tradition worthy of study and emulation. We should not limit our studies to just a few correct individuals – if for no other reason than that no one person is always correct

Lukacs' Marxism is a humane and moral Marxism which sees the development of a humane and democratic society as a moral imperative. It is more than just a philosophy and more than just a scientific theory.

Lukacs can teach us that:

1. **Marxism is a method, not a doctrine.** It is a way to think about and understand the world, not a set of prescriptions to be followed or predictions we can expect to come true.

2. **Marxism seeks to understand the whole range of personal, social and political experiences.** It is not just about understanding economics. Marx focused on economic issues, but his methods of analysis can be applied to other aspects of human life.

3. **Marxism sees productive labor¹ as a fundamental human activity.** Focusing on labor, (rather than on reason, experience or faith) we can come to an understanding of what humanity is about. Freeing labor – making it productive and useful and unalienated is our theoretical and practical task.

4. **Marxism sees the liberation of labor and humanity as both a moral and political imperative.** The liberation of labor and humanity is an obligation of all those who have power. Creating democracy, where men and women control the communities where they live and work is our obligation.

These principles sum up Lukacs understanding of Marxism and are as relevant today as when he wrote and acted. Lukacs is clearly one of the giants in Western philosophy. He is also one of the giants among those who call themselves Marxist philosophers.²

A Life of Revolutionary Tolerance

Lukacs' work needs to be seen as a part of the continuum in the development of Marxism. In another paper I discuss how four of his friends and colleagues, known as the Budapest School, took his methodology and his work in various directions. They used the term "revolutionary tolerance" to describe their own thorough-going criticism of Lukacs' final works. It is a term that fits Lukacs as well.

Despite Lukacs' intellectual endowments and his deep, profound understanding of Western philosophy, he remained a modest man – a man searching to understand the whole of society. He believed in and worked for revolution – and throughout his life did what he could to foment and foster revolutions that encouraged freedom. Uniting theory and practice was not just a slogan – it was a way of life for Lukacs.

The question what/who is an Orthodox Marxist is as real today as it was in the early 1920's when Lukacs gave his answer to that question in his best known work – History and Class Consciousness that was published in 1923. Then, as now, the question of what is an orthodox Marxist is of practical, as well as theoretical importance.

¹ George Markus pointed out correctly that the more accurate term would be production, rather than labor. Labor, for Marx, was restricted to physical activities while production encompassed the whole range of activities that goes into the work process. Lukacs used the term labor in a broader sense to include both work and production.

² For an excellent bibliography up to 1982 see Lapointe, Francois H. Georg Lukacs and his Critics. An International Bibliography with Annotations (1910-1982). Westport, Ct. Greenwood Press. 1983.

A Life of Exiles

The key events of his life involved a short-lived worker's republic in Hungary and many years living in the Soviet Union. After the 1919 Hungarian Soviet was crushed, his study of Lenin as well as his continuing activity in the Communist Party consumed him. His exile in the Soviet Union and his return to Hungary where he participated as best he could to develop a democratic and humane society were all part of his political and intellectual life.³ His works and his thinking are very much a reflection of the times in which he lived – and he lived in and through many times. He started as the son of a rich banker, went on to be a developer of theater, to a career as a philosopher steeped in the tradition of German philosophy. Throughout it all he remained a revolutionary who not only spoke but acted. He lived through exiles – many kinds of exiles. He continued to search for and write about and act on the longing for human liberty and freedom. And he kept his personal integrity and honesty – hard to do if one lives more than eighty years in such turbulent times.

After joining the Communist Party in 1917, he remained faithful to the Party even if he was not always accepted by it. He served in the government of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet. After his most important and influential work, History and Class Consciousness, was formally rejected by the party in 1928, he exercised self-criticism and accepted the fact that the book could not be re-published again. However he wrote a defense of that classic book which he kept from even his closest colleagues and which was not published until long after his death.

Prior to and during World War II he lived in the Soviet Union where he continued to do philosophical work, despite the harsh and uninviting conditions. Stalin was consolidating absolute power and developed an ideology that enabled a bureaucratic party to assume total control over all phases of life.

At the end of World War II he returned to Hungary in 1945 and participated in the liberation of his country from fascism. Hungary was the subject of a brutal German occupation, where there was a thorough application of the “final solution” of the Jewish “problem” – the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Romani, homosexuals and other undesirables who were systematically deported and put to death.

By 1948, the Stalinist ideology was imposed in Hungary justifying the unchecked right of the party apparatus to be supreme over every aspect of society. Lukacs, one of the

³ “In only one country in central Europe – and indeed only one country outside Russia – did the Communists succeed in gaining power in 1919 and retaining it for more than a few days: that was Hungary....The Social democrats met and decided to seek the cooperation of the Communists, and one of them was dispatched to the prison where the Communist leaders were held. The emissary suggested that the two parties should unite, and it was decided to form a ‘completely united’ Hungarian Socialist Party....The Budapest workers’ council consented to the unification of the parties, proclaimed the dictatorship of the proletariat and entrusted the Revolutionary Directorate with executive powers. The Hungarian Soviet Republic was proclaimed amidst general jubilation.” Carsten, F.L. Revolution in Central Europe. 1918-1919. London. Wildwood House. 1972.

founding members of the Hungarian Communist Party and an internationally known philosopher and intellectual, continued to write. He kept his personal and intellectual integrity in those difficult years.

In 1956 he accepted the position of Minister of Culture in a short-lived revolution that was crushed by an invasion from the Soviet Union after which he was arrested and taken to Rumania. Although his international reputation enabled him to escape the death sentence meted out to other, more central, members of the government, he was kept in forced exile for over a year. Upon his return, he refused, despite great pressure, to do self-criticism for his actions in 1956.

In 1967 he was readmitted to the party for the last time and kept his criticism of the party to an internal letter after the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. When he died he still hoped for a renaissance of Marxism in his country – a hope that was not fulfilled.

Like other Marxists of his generation, Lukacs attempted – and often succeeded -- in connecting his theoretical work with his political practice. Lukacs was not just a philosopher who became occasionally involved in political life. Nor is he just a politician who mulled over philosophical theory. He was both a philosopher and an actor. He combined theory and practice in his life and writings.

Lukacs is the epitome of the middle European intellectual. His training and his thinking is deep, dense and thorough. But his works do not touch on many essential topics that are of crucial importance to Marxists today – topics which, I am sure, would occupy him today if he were alive. Nowhere in his work is there an understanding of the profound impact of colonialism, racism and imperialism.

George Markus, who was close to him at the end of his life, summed up his attitude toward his work as follows: “At the end of his life, looking back, Lukacs himself was less satisfied with what he had accomplished, and not completely without some reasons. His main ambition was to create a Marxist philosophy. Certainly he fulfilled it in History and Class Consciousness. But after its condemnation at the Fifth Congress of the Third International, he formally accepted this judgment, deciding not to republish the work (though for himself he wrote a marvelous defense of it - never published during his life.) This was the price he was ready to pay for remaining within the only international revolutionary movement of the time (however much critical reservations he may have had already at that time). But the actual price was greater: in self-defense and as a matter of retreat he decidedly retreated from philosophy to aesthetics and primarily to a critical theory of literature. This was, of course, the main field of his original interests, so the change was not ungrounded. But this meant that that he returned to philosophy (the Ontology) only at the very end of his life - and in all our (i.e. Budapest School members) opinion, just too late. He himself accepted this judgment - deciding not to publish the work at all (which he originally regarded as completely finished), but write instead a very short book on everyday life etc. He never had the occasion to do so - he died.”⁴

⁴ George Markus in correspondence with the author. 2011.

I believe we honor Lukacs by trying to find his “essence” -- what is it that sets him apart – and then to learn from him and try to make the societies in which we live more humane – more free – richer in every way. We need, as best we can, to combine theory and practice.

Inverted Marxism

In a 1971 conversation shortly before he died, Lukacs said this about Marx’s method:

“Marx’s method, which Stalin simply inverted, lies in the analysis of the whole of society, its style, its movements, its rhythm of development.”⁵

At the time Lukacs published History and Class Consciousness, he was just becoming acquainted with the early writings of Marx, which were not fully available until later in that decade. Lukacs anticipated what later became apparent with the appearance of the full body of writings by Marx and which are still revolutionizing the scholarly and practical interpretations of Marx.⁶ These writings, along with the various pieces of the manuscripts that were later published including, but not limited, to those published under the title of Grundrisse, gave us a much richer picture of Marx and his writings than that codified as the “official” interpretation of Marx in the text books on dialectical materialism. Instead of seeing society in all of its richness, its contradictions, its history and its style, this inverted “Marxism” presents a plodding, boring and deterministic world and a repressive ideology.

Lukacs did not yet have access to the full body of Marx’s writings when he first embraced Marxism in 1917. At that time he had not yet absorbed the works of Lenin – both the theoretical works and the practical work of creating what became the Soviet Union. And it was only after he fled Hungary to exile in 1919 that he “had his first real chance to study Lenin’s writings.”⁷

One commentator described Lukacs at this time as follows:

“To have met George Lukacs in the mid-1920’s when he wrote his defence of History and Class Consciousness would have been to meet a revolutionary exile. Lukacs had fled to

⁵ “A Conversation with Georg Lukacs,” with Franco Farragut,, Marcus and Tarr. P. 208

⁶ “On arriving in Moscow in 1930, Lukacs was ready for scholarly work....What better time to read, as Lukacs was able to do in the library of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow, the handwritten pages of Karl Marx’s “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” of 1844? There is no way of knowing the impact this may have had on him at the time. The “Manuscripts” were published first in Germany in 1932...As Karl Loewith, one of the first reviewers, noted, they provided among other things documentary confirmation of the primacy Lukacs had given to the Hegelian-dialectical core of Marx’s thought, and to the critique of reification.” Arato, Andrew and Bienes, Paul. The Young Lukacs and the Origins of Western Marxism. New York. Seabury Press. 1979. p. 209. This excellent analysis of Lukacs relies heavily on the works of the Budapest School, with whom the authors had regular contact. (see the Preface, p. xii).

⁷ John Rees, introduction to Georg Lukacs, A Defence of History and Class Consciousness. Tailism and the Dialectic. London, Verso 2000

Vienna from his native Hungary after the fall of the Workers' Republic that lasted from March until August 1919. He had been a political commissar in the republic, at first for education and then also with the Fifth Division of the Red Army. After the counterrevolution he remained in Hungary to reorganize the communist Party. Had the military regime of Admiral Horthy, which had taken power with the help of France, Britain and other Western powers, caught him, he would have been executed, as was his co-worker Otto Korvin.”⁸

When Lukacs first gave his view of what is an orthodox Marxism, the Soviet Union, under Lenin, served as the example of a successful society that sought to understand Marx not just as a philosopher but as someone who can serve as a model, a guide and a foundation to build a nation. Lukacs wrote at a time of great hope for a better world – a hope some are beginning to experience again.

As Lukacs pointed out, Marx tried to understand the “whole of society”. Lukacs' Marx sought to understand its rhythm of development. The world is a rich place for Lukacs, as it was for Marx, but not for the inverted Marxism he criticized.

Each of us could pick any one of a number of topics from Lukacs' works for our attention. I believe that the most enduring legacy of Lukacs is not just his early writings – as encapsulated in History and Class Consciousness. To understand Lukacs we need to look at the writings at the end of his life. In this way, understanding Lukacs is something like understanding Marx. We need to look at their writings as a totality and look for their way of thinking about the world.

At the close of his life, Lukacs devoted himself to creating an Ontology of Social Being. He worried about everyday life (Alltagsleben) and its transformation over time. This mammoth work was meant to prepare the way for a Marxist ethical theory. The Ontology was published after his death by Luchterhand as part of his collected works.⁹ Parts of this work appeared in pieces, but the totality was published in two volumes. Volume I appeared in 1984 and volume II in 1986 – fifteen years after his death.

He completed the two volumes of the Ontology shortly before his death and planned to send the books to be published. As was his practice, he shared his work with the members of the Budapest School for their comments. In a series of discussions, his colleagues convinced him not to publish the book because it had serious inadequacies.¹⁰ They believed, and he eventually accepted, that the manuscript as prepared was too much like the attempts of Engels to apply Marx's philosophy to all realms of life. They pointed out that the development of modern science, based on enquiry rather than conclusions deduced from general propositions, made such an analysis unfounded. After many long

⁸ John Rees. Op.cit. p. 2 .

⁹ A sympathetic analysis of the sprawling pages that make up the Ontology is given by Ernest Joos in Lukacs's Last Autocriticism: The Ontology. (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. Humanities Press, 1983). Of particular interest is the appendix which includes a paper prepared in 1968 on the Ontology.

¹⁰ Ferenc Feher, Agnes Heller, Gyorgy Markus and Mihaly Vajda in “Notes on Lukacs' Ontology” in Heller, Agnes (ed), Lukacs Revalued. Blackwell, 1983. p. 137.

hours of discussion, he adopted their criticism and decided to write a shorter discussion of what he called every-day-life which he was not able to complete before his death. Nevertheless, despite its inadequacies the ontology is an important work.

If we take into account the criticisms of those who knew him best – criticisms which he accepted – the Ontology gives us a treasure-trove of topics for philosophical work.

The Ontology of Work

One of the topics in the Ontology was the nature of Work – what it is and how it is being transformed. This is, I believe, the fundamental political, economic and philosophical question of our day. The industrial mode of production is running its course as a global economy emerges that requires new kinds of workers in order for work to be most productive. It also requires an understanding of the nature of work and how to build a society that is both humane and efficient.

What do we do today as we see the very nature of Work/Labor being transformed? That is the topic, it seems to me, where Lukacs can help us think through some very thorny problems – problems that are not just theoretical, but intensely practical.

For if we can understand the nature of knowledge work we can begin to understand the nature of the post-industrial society into which we are emerging. In another time and place – and hopefully in collaboration with some who are in this room – I hope to be able to think through and understand how we can create a society in which labor becomes unalienated – and to understand what must be done, both practically and theoretically to accomplish this task.

In a lecture prepared for an international philosophy conference in 1968, Lukacs described labor as follows:

“Labor consists of teleological positionings that activate causal series....Work is a conscious position and hence presupposes the concrete knowledge of ends and means, even if that knowledge remains incomplete....Development and improvement belong to the essential and ontological characteristic of labor; that is, how labor perfects itself or calls into being a higher order of social structure. Perhaps the most important aspect of this differentiation is witnessed in the movement towards independent status of preparatory labor, which is always connected somehow with the knowledge of the separation of ends from means within labor.”¹¹

This is a dense paragraph worthy of elucidation and exposition. It gives us hints of what men and women do when they do productive work – when they create and fashion new products through their labor.

¹¹ “The Vienna Paper” appendix 2 in Joos, Ernest. Lukacs’s Last Autocriticism: The Ontology. Highlands New Jersey. Humanities Press. 1983. p. 139.

What Lukacs, like Marx, brings to us is a way to think about – and act in the world in which we find ourselves. As Marx said, “Man makes the World, but not always as he wishes, not always in circumstances he chooses.”¹²

In his lecture, Lukacs goes on to say:

“Looking at the totality of the process of labor from the point of view of the working subject, it becomes clear that although the subject consciously carries out the teleological positionings, nonetheless he can never be in a position to weigh all the conditions of his activity, and therefore to consider all its consequences. Naturally, this does not prevent the subject from acting. Yet, there are innumerable situations in which one has to act even at the risk of perishing, though one is conscious of being able to control only a very small portion of the circumstances.”¹³

For it is in Work that Man finds his true Social Essence.

The ontology of work is only a small part of a larger enterprise – one that he thought he had completed until he shared it with his colleagues in the Budapest School. He died shortly after, but his attempt to write an Ontology -- an understanding of the nature of things has many pieces to it that are of value. The very project of writing an Ontology is odd to most philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. But it is at the heart of German philosophy and much of continental thought.

An Extension of Lukacs Theory of Work

Let me take some of his concepts and extend them – hopefully in the spirit of Lukacs, but more importantly in a way that will help us find a way to create a more humane and better way to organize work.

These are the topics that interest me today after a career focusing on transforming work processes through effective and efficient use of information. I returned to Lukacs as my colleagues in information management began to talk about “knowledge management” – a term which I resisted, but one I eventually decided I would try to make meaningful.¹⁴

In exploring the concept of work (which includes what Marx called production), I re-read the Ontology of Work and found it be a useful basis for future analysis.

Work is the process by which man interacts with nature to produce useful products. In the process, both nature and man are transformed.

¹² This is a loose translation of a quotation from Marx that I hung over my desk as I moved about from the U.S. to Germany and back to Europe . Lukacs also quoted this passage frequently.

¹³ The Vienna Paper, op. cit. p. 141.

¹⁴ See my book. Thinking for Living. The Coming Age of Knowledge Work. Munich. K.G. Saur. 2004.

The essence of the industrial mode of production is to transform work into an activity in which labor/work is alienated from the worker. Work time, not labor, is bought and sold in order to increase capital.

Automation is an important part of the industrial system and drives much of the productive process. On one hand it replaces the brute labor of workers performing manual and repetitive tasks. It also creates the necessity for knowledge workers who understand work processes and can manage the machines that make automation possible.

Marx was ambivalent when it comes to the effects of automation. On one hand he hoped that it would lead to a reduction in manual labor and the freeing of workers to pursue scientific lives. The science which he knew and the automation of the time when he lived were very different from what we have today. Science today is about experimentation – about enquiry – about making knowledge, not about achieving an understanding of all reality. The development of scientific enquiry through communities of scientific practitioners is one of the most important development since Marx and any proper application of the Marxist methodology needs to take into account and understand the nature of scientific enquiry.

Today we need to look seriously at the transformation of the working process. Marx – and Lukacs – can help us frame and understand our pursuit, but it is up to us to do the analysis and understand the empirical facts. We can learn from them how to think about the problems we face, but we do not need to adopt conclusions that are clearly not applicable in light of the development of scientific knowledge and its application to work.

For Lukacs' Marxism was not just a matter of looking back to a great thinker, but of looking forward to a new world in which forced labor becomes a thing of the past. He embraced the vision of Marx, but he also understood that what is important is the methodology used by Marx and other orthodox Marxists to understand reality – and to transform it.

The automation which Marx and Lukacs knew was, however, very crude compared with the automation and the emergence of work that fostered and drove the production in industrial settings. The thrust of industrial automation is to replace human labor with machine functions -- through the division of labor and substituting machines for people.

In the industrial mode of production, work is organized and driven from above -- with directions from the top through a bureaucratic structure that creates inherent conflicts between those whose labor time is bought and those who manage that time.

The struggle to shorten the work day was the primary struggle in industrial production -- capital seeks to cram more and more tasks into every hour and to lengthen the work day as much as possible.

Workers, sought to shorten the work day so they can have "free" time -- defined as time when they don't work.

However, as automation accelerates the efficiencies of industrial production begin to disappear. A new way of work appropriate to the production of knowledge is needed for the most efficient productive processes.

The struggles now are moving beyond a mere shortening of the working day to the creation of meaningful labor for all in society and to the elimination of great disparities between those who have and those who have not. These struggles are the struggles of our day.

Knowledge (justified true belief) is the product of much work today.¹⁵ This is particularly true in certain areas where invention and creativity are essential -- especially in sciences and applied sciences where a body of knowledge of communities of practice are the primarily products of production. But knowledge is also the basis for more and more work -- ranging from a ditch digger who operates an automated back hoe using computerized machinery to the laboratory worker discovering new truths, and even to the philosopher who wonders and worries about the nature of knowledge.

Knowledge is no longer something apart from the productive processes of society. It is part and parcel of much of the work that we do. How we create and manage knowledge becomes one of the most important practical tasks of society.

You can't make knowledge using industrial modes of production -- it just does not work and other ways of working are much more efficient for knowledge production. But post-Industrial production will not automatically bring about an end to alienated labor. That requires a democratization of society and freeing men and women to take control of their work.

I believe that instead of the division of labor, collaboration characterizes knowledge production. Collaborative work (which is beyond cooperation) is how knowledge is created and sustained. Whether this belief is true or not, I do not know. I do know, however, that there is growing evidence that a new kind of work -- the production of knowledge -- is emerging and this kind of production requires a new way of organizing work.

Until Marx, European philosophers focused on two other essential human activities. The empiricists say experience is the essential human activity and what we know comes from and through experience. The rationalists say reason is the essential human activity and what we know comes from reason.

Others have claimed that faith is the essential human activity -- but they are generally not philosophers, but theologians or the religious.

¹⁵ The definition of knowledge as "justified true belief" goes back as far as Plato. This formulation comes from Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of American pragmatism who focused on understanding the nature of scientific reasoning and enquiry.

Kant began the critique of pure reason and empiricism. Hegel synthesized reason and experience in his attempt to create a complete understanding of the nature of the Absolute.

Marx put Hegel on his feet -- and understood that Work is the essential activity.

For it is through productive work that man comes into harmony with nature -- and is transformed in the process. Work is how we come to knowledge -- we learn to know how to do things that make good stuff that is useful. This is, however, not a simple statement since work not only transforms nature but often destroys nature. We need to learn how to live with nature. We cannot conquer it.

As we learn to work in harmony with nature -- instead of destroying nature, as capital does, we honor it,

A community is a place where work is done and nature and the work is honored. Work is not alienated.

Marx understood that in these communities (Gemeinwesen) people have control of the places where they live and work.

This is what democracy means.

Controlling the places where we live and work, so that work is no longer alienated, is our task.

That is our task today -- to create such a world. Marx gives the outlines of a methodology to do that.

Lukacs uses that methodology to broaden and stretch our understanding of our world.

There are many other ways to take the thoughts and concepts of this important orthodox Marxist and use them to inform our work today.

We need to adopt a way of living, working and thinking that embodies the spirit of revolutionary tolerance -- a way of working that is at once critical and questioning and yet never loses the importance of seeking a liberated humane race.

A Tragic Ending

Shortly before his death, Lukacs believed a Marxist renaissance was in the making:

“We mark the beginning of a real Marxist renaissance. More and more people recognize that Marxism provides the only workable solution to the current world crisis. If we wish to guarantee its authority in all fields, then we have to endeavor to transform it in such a way that it may be respected by all. The method of Marxism is the right method to solve

the problems of socialism and capitalism without resorting to violence. But above all, we have to reach the proper understanding of the essence of Marxism and also of the great changes that have occurred since Marx. The precondition of this understanding is the continuation of the work of Marx in every domain of the Marxist theory, starting from the point at which Marx left off in 1883, and carefully analyzing in Marx's spirit events up to our own time....I am convinced that it is the bringing about of a 'little' democracy that solves problems of our everyday life and that in turn leads to the dismantling of bureaucracy. The study of Marxism should prepare the way for the organization of such a democracy.”¹⁶

Lukacs died in 1971. The renaissance of Marxism for which he hoped and worked did not happen – at least in his own country. In 1968, the country he loved and to which he had devoted his life was forced by the Soviet Union to participate in the attack of its neighbor, Czechoslovakia. Those closest to him lost their careers and were driven out of Hungary or isolated. The party to which he had devoted his life withered away-- and within fifteen years after his death, it lost all relevance in his beloved Hungary. Marxism became a relic in Hungary.

What Does Lukacs Means Today?

Tragic endings often give way to new beginnings. The discovery – and re-discovery – of Lukacs in China is an important event in the history of Marxism. It shows that knowledge grows and develops over time – not always in a straight line and not always in a positive direction. I look forward with anticipation to see how you take the lessons of Lukacs and apply them to an advancing industrial society.

Now Marxism is enshrined in a nation, China, that is bursting with promise and hope – a nation that is, after many centuries, universally recognized as a major world power and a successful society -- a society that adopts Marxism as its official policy. Out of the theory and practice of China we may well come to a much richer understanding of what it means to be an orthodox Marxist.

From Lukacs we can learn what one orthodox Marxist is like.

Lukacs can teaches us that:

- 1. Marxism is a method, not a doctrine.**
- 2. Marxism seeks to understand the whole range of personal, social and political experiences.**
- 3. Marxism sees productive labor as a fundamental human activity.**

¹⁶ “An Interview with George Lukacs” appendix 1 of Joos, Ernest. Lukacs's Last Autocriticism: The Ontology. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, Humanities Press.1893. pp 127-128. The interview is taken from Bela Hegyin, A dialogues sodraban (Budapest: Magveto, 1978 and is dated 1970.

4. Marxism sees the liberation of labor and humanity as both a moral and political imperative.

Creating Democracy. Dismantling bureaucracy. Freeing work so that it can be truly creative in democratic communities of practice. These are the practical – and theoretical – tasks of Marxism today.

To repeat his words:

“The method of Marxism is the right method to solve the problems of socialism and capitalism without resorting to violence. But above all, we have to reach the proper understanding of the essence of Marxism and also of the great changes that have occurred since Marx.”

That is our task today.