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Translation

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Introduction to 'The Lukács Question'

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Abstract

Not for the first time, certain stakes came to the boil again in the 1950s surrounding what became referred to as the 'Lukács question', namely the position of Georg Lukács under the shadow of Stalinism. What follows is an interview by Patrick Tort with Henri Lefebvre on the 'Lukács question', arising from an earlier lecture delivered by the latter in Hungary in 1955. The interview is important for the light it sheds on the power of truth in relation to the Party, issues of proletarian science, class consciousness, and literary and aesthetic politics. Most crucially, the interview touches on the concept of the 'socialisation of society', or dialectical totality, in which elements are incorporated as internally related to the structure of a whole. In contesting Stalinism as a discursive

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complex and for its defence of Lukács, the interview is a crucial material contribution to Marxist theory.

Keywords

Lefebvre – Lukács – Marxism – totality

On 8 June 1955, Henri Lefebvre delivered a long lecture on Georg Lukács. Although the text was planned for publication, the French Communist Party (PCF) prevented this. Thirty years later, it was published in a book by Éditions Aubier, along with a text by the much younger philosopher and historian of science Patrick Tort (1952–). The two individual texts were prefaced by a discussion between Lefebvre and Tort, which we present here in English translation.

The lecture itself is perhaps more remarkable for the history of censorship and retrieval alongside its content. It is in most respects an account of Lukács's importance, given in honour of his seventieth birthday and the award of the Kossuth Prize in 1955. As well as a biographical sketch towards the end of the lecture, it situates him within wider Marxist and intellectual trends. Lefebvre outlines Lukács's key works, particularly *History and Class Consciousness*, and especially its impact on thinkers in France including Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His reading of Lukács is generous and wide-ranging, with the claim that he finds his most important work in his study of aesthetics. Some other aspects of the lecture are mentioned by Tort in his discussion with Lefebvre.

As the interview makes clear, Lukács was a controversial figure at the time of Lefebvre's lecture, and so speaking about his work was seen as a political act. 1955 was two years after the death of Stalin, and as Lefebvre indicates, a few months before Nikita Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in early 1956, which denounced the crimes of that era. The crumbling of the Soviet bloc that was initiated at this time was also impacted by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its suppression by the Soviet army. That history is well known.

Perhaps less well-known in this period is a resurrection of criticisms against Lukács that unfolded into the 1950s. These attacks against Lukács can be regarded as an extension of those against his earlier Blum Theses (1928), which focused on building worker-peasant coalitions within the Hungarian Communist Party. As part of a set of wider Hungarian purge-trials affecting numerous figures, the Communist ideologue László Rudas targeted Lukács and

even drew support from the latter's former friend, Józef Révai, to denounce him. Originally completed in 1923, *History and Class Consciousness* carries an important commentary on the topic in the 1967 Preface (as published in 1971). Likewise, the issue of Stalinist ire is deliberated upon in Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiography* (published in 1983). The volume *Literature and Democracy* (1947) by Lukács, recently published in *The Culture of People's Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art and Democratic Transition, 1945–1948* (2013), also includes further contextual background on these party conflicts. In this volume, in the essay 'Poetry of the Party', Lukács dialectically plays with the notions of 'poetry' and 'party' to deliver subtle anti-Stalinist criticisms. All these elements can be seen to combine in the build-up to the period preceding Lefebvre's lecture. The import of the interview translated here is demonstrated by Lefebvre's awareness of these issues and how he draws attention to the renewed attacks against Lukács. The latter's 1949 essay of 'self-criticism' – still untranslated into English – is referred to explicitly by Lefebvre in the interview. The interview also deals with a number of significant wider issues, namely Stalinism as a form of state ideology and the *stakes* of Lukács as a target, the role of consciousness as a criterion of truth and action linked to the Party, the fusion of power and knowledge, the domain of literary aesthetics and everyday life, and the need to self-critically question the notion of 'proletarian science' and its saturation by Stalinist dialectical materialism.

At this time, then, all these themes resonated with the status of Lefebvre within the PCF. Lefebvre had been a member of the party for decades, though had often found himself in a complicated position with respect to its hierarchy. While he was sometimes used to attack other intellectuals in France on behalf of the party, notably his stinging critique of existentialism in 1946, his own work was also subject to censorship. He published *Logique formelle, logique dialectique* in 1947, but while this was intended to be the first volume of a series, the next volume on *Méthodologie des sciences* had its publication stopped. His 1953 book *Contribution à l'esthétique* was only passed by the censors because he fabricated a quotation from Marx which seemed to support his approach. In the years between the war and this Lukács lecture, Lefebvre worked largely on literature and rural sociology, seen as less politically charged topics.[1] His 1958 book *Problèmes actuels du marxisme* led to a party tribunal at which he was suspended, and he quickly turned the suspension into an expulsion. He discusses this and other themes in his substantial and still-untranslated *La somme*

1 A useful collection of these writings on rural sociology is now available in English, see Lefebvre 2022, and for a detailed overview of Lefebvre's path from rural sociology to the production of urban space, see Elden and Morton 2022.

et le reste in 1959, an ambitious and somewhat-rambling intellectual and biographical account.

The intellectual affinities and differences between Lefebvre and Lukács are deserving of a much fuller treatment than can be provided here.[2] But we might point to the interest both showed in the question of everyday life.[3] There is something of a priority debate here, in terms of whether Lefebvre and his colleague Norbert Guterman knew Lukács's work when they wrote early studies including *La Conscience mystifiée* and journal articles which preceded it; or whether they discovered his work only later. For Lefebvre and Guterman though, their key inspiration was the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, a source unavailable to Lukács when he developed themes in *History and Class Consciousness*. In the 1967 Preface to that work, he discusses reading the manuscripts in Moscow in 1930, around the same time Lefebvre and Guterman were able to access them. Equally, it is interesting that both Lefebvre and Lukács turned to analysis of literary work when faced with party strictures – Lukács's work on, for example, Balzac, Flaubert and Goethe, and Lefebvre's on Diderot, Pascal, and Rabelais. They differ, though, notably on their attitude towards Nietzsche, with Lefebvre seeing him as a figure who contributed things that Marx did not, and who, read critically, could be used for progressive purposes. Lefebvre discussed Nietzsche in his 1939 book, intended to rescue him from the fascist appropriation, and returned to him notably in the 1975 book *Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche*. For Lukács, in contrast, Nietzsche was a fundamental figure criticised in *The Destruction of Reason*.

The personal connections between Lefebvre and Lukács are more difficult to trace, and a key source is this interview.[4] They met in Budapest in 1950 and, also, in Paris on at least two occasions. It is possible that they exchanged correspondence, though since Lefebvre's papers are not yet accessible to researchers, and the Lukács archive has been closed since 2016, this remains to be examined. There are certainly further questions to be explored in terms of their relation. But as Lefebvre says in this interview: 'If I have come to defend Lukács, it was for tactical and strategic reasons, and perhaps I have avoided certain aspects concerning our divergences precisely because of the urgency of defending him'.

2 For more on Lefebvre's situation within wider European thought, see Elden 2004; for a renewed focus on the relational method of totality in Lukács's work, see Altun, Caiconte, Moore, Morton, Ryan, Scanlan and Smidt 2023.

3 See also Scanlan 2023.

4 Lefebvre's fullest discussion of Lukács, beyond this interview and the lecture, comes in *La Somme et le reste*; see Lefebvre 1989, Part IV, Chapter XVIII.

By the late 1970s, Lefebvre became closer to the PCF again, partly through his relationship with Catherine Régulier, who became his last wife. The interview translated here evinces some of that reconciliation and, in common with other texts from this period, shows a more reflective Lefebvre taking account of his long life. Lukács died in 1971, in the same year that *History and Class Consciousness* was published in English translation. Just a few years previously, though, Lukács did witness the publication of his major exposition on the ontology of social being in German as *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins* (1968), although it remains only partially translated into English.

Lefebvre died in June 1991, just as two of his most significant works, *Critique of Everyday Life* and *The Production of Space*, were translated into English. Over thirty years on from Lefebvre's death and over fifty years on from Lukács's, anglophone readers have available to them a good sample of their work, though there remain many books untranslated. Of course, *History and Class Consciousness* celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2023. We hope that this translated text indicates an important relationality between Lukács and Lefebvre as major Marxist figures of the twentieth century and their tensions with party orthodoxy, in order to continue work of rediscovery and contextualisation.

The Lukács Question

Henri Lefebvre and Patrick Tort

Edited by Stuart Elden and Adam David Morton
Translated by Federico Testa

This text first appeared as 'Entretien Liminaire' (preliminary interview) in Henri Lefebvre, *Lukács 1955: Être marxiste aujourd'hui*, with Patrick Tort (Paris: Aubier, 1986). The new title and all notes are by the editors. We would like to acknowledge the advice and guidance of Rüdiger Danneman, András Kardos, Tamás Karusz, Daniel López, Riki Scanlan and Federico Testa.

Patrick Tort: Our common decision to publish this book of two voices – different yet friendly – is marked by two connected aims.

It was you who proposed the first aim, namely to understand what the conditions of Marxist philosophical engagement were in the 1950s, but you are also at the heart of the second, which is that of examining the very contemporary question of the relations between Marxism and political practice.

Let us begin by talking about the first aim – which, since it is linked to the second, is 'historical', even if not *exclusively* so.

We have decided to publish a unique document on Lukács and yourself, and thus to *lift a ban*.

Indeed, your lecture on Lukács, delivered on 8 June 1955 at the Hungarian Institute of Paris, had already been formatted and typeset for publication as a short, 121-page volume with Éditions de L'Arche when an order from the Central Committee of the French Communist Party halted its publication. The Hungarian Institute would close its doors shortly afterwards.

It is important to know that in certain *milieux* of the French left in 1950, one used to speak of a 'Lukács affair', which essentially referred to the fact that the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and aesthetician stated in a lecture on realism at the University of Budapest that socialist realism had not had its 'Balzac or its Leonardo da Vinci'. Certain 'intellectual' leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party then began a war against Lukács, accusing him of making judgements that went against the *duties* of revolutionary speech, which could easily be appropriated by the adversaries of socialism. A mere aesthetic judgement – which did not have anything final or conclusive about it, and which also happened to be *true* – had at the time, in the context of the European Communist parties, the power to arouse the indignation of militants, as well as suspicion, ostracism, accusations, censorship and speech prohibitions. This leads one to

ask what the real 'stakes' of this sort of polemic were. What was then *at stake* when you delivered your lecture on Lukács, and for what reasons did you make this intervention in his favour? What do you think the motivations were, *in extremis*, behind the interdiction of its publication?

Henri Lefebvre: Your question surprises me a bit, for at the time I never asked if there were real, concrete and practical issues 'at stake' in all these complicated situations. It was one of those trials they invented then, which served to *affirm power*, to affirm the power that the political authority had to decide on *all matters*, including aesthetic and philosophical questions.

The misunderstandings regarding Lukács had a long history. First, during the whole pre-war period, there was complete silence about his work. Back then, I had only heard of him from my friend Norbert Guterman, who knew him because he lived in New York, where people knew who Lukács was. In France, however, we did not know him, and outside of his country – with perhaps the exception of Germany and the USSR – he was very little known. There was a sort of silence surrounding him. I still have a German book from that period, a philosophy book by the Party Executive, in which Lukács is mentioned as an enemy of Leninism and Marxism.

This misunderstanding, if one can call it that, comes from Lukács's book *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).[5] Why? Because in this book Lukács attempts to show that there is a class consciousness of the proletariat that has access to the true totality of history – past, present and future; and that class struggle comes to promote within this class a consciousness that is true, general and total. This thesis very soon appeared to be a non-Leninist one, because Lenin claimed that one brought consciousness to the working class from *outside*, and that this was the role of the *Party*. Thus, it was said that Lukács *denied the role of the Party*, and this was extremely serious. Perhaps this is what you would say was 'at stake'. I was baffled, because I already knew that this thesis, of the truth brought to the working class 'from outside', came from Kautsky. Lenin, who attacked and insulted Kautsky, nevertheless picked up some of his theses, for instance regarding agrarian issues, and on questions regarding knowledge and the working class.

5 Lukács 1971. The French translation was important in bringing this text into Western Marxist discussions and was co-translated by Lefebvre's friend Kostas Axelos. It was used in the preparation of the English edition; see Lukács 1960.

However, around 1950 this discussion seemed to have been buried. Lukács had written his *Autocritique*,[6] in which he managed to defend his book without seeming to defend it – but defending it all the same – and this contributed to generating an atmosphere of suspicion around him in Hungary and the Soviet Union. This is something I noticed during my stay in Budapest at the time. As I relate in the text published in this book, I was literally summoned by the political and ideological authorities of the Hungarian Party to be told to look at Lukács with suspicion, that his situation wasn't clear, that they resented him a lot, and that even if he wasn't necessarily considered a declared enemy, he was nevertheless potentially one. They gathered, then, the elements of an accusation against him, pieces for a real trial – a trial that, in spite of this, never took place.

As I see it, if there was anything 'at stake' then, it was *political power* and its relation to *truth* in general, to scientific knowledge and philosophy. In the Stalinist period, one claimed that political authority not only had the right to scrutiny and critique, but also the right to *adjudicate* on all issues that were not directly political (philosophical and otherwise). This is what Stalin and the Stalinists used to do shamelessly. It is a fact that, in Hungary, Lukács did not follow this line. He claimed, *like I did in France*, that a mere individual member of the Party had the right to address theoretical questions, as well as to join ongoing discussions, put forward theses and hypotheses, which is part of our work as philosophers, sociologists, economists, etc. But this is not at all the point of view of the Stalinists, nor of the leadership of the parties. On the contrary, not only does dogmatism consist in affirming that there are acquired and enduring

6 See Lukács 1949. This article in the August edition of the journal *Social View* was a response to an earlier attack in the same publication in July by the Communist ideologue László Rudas; see Rudas 1949. What ensued was a further chapter in the continual trials that surrounded Lukács as a target, with the attacks resurrecting criticisms of his earlier Blum Theses (1928) on building worker–peasant coalitions within the Hungarian Communist Party; see Lukács 1972, pp. 227–53. The wider Hungarian purge-trials that followed affected numerous figures, including Lukács, and led his former friend József Révai also to denounce him. The 'Lukács Debate' occasioned international notoriety (see Hobsbawm 1949, pp. 291–2). There is an important commentary on the topic by its target in the 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* as well as in his autobiography; see Lukács 1971, pp. xxx–xxxi, and Lukács 1983, pp. 113–16. Crucial contextual background may also be found in Lukács 2014, pp. 105–28, where Lukács is dialectically playing with the notions of 'poetry' and 'party' to state: 'for the poet of the party who relies on the party and who – like Antaeus – finds his footing in it, the possibilities for development are completely different from those of the first pioneers of this type, who were forced to do without a party' (p. 127). Returning to his 1949 'self-criticism' essay, Lukács also delivers the famous barbed comment against Rudas: 'Marxism-Leninism is indeed the Himalayas of world-views. But that does not make the little rabbit hopping on its summit larger than the elephant of the plains'; see Lukács 1984, p. 94, and Lukács 1983, p. 113.

truths, but also, and fundamentally, in maintaining that political instances of authority have the right to adjudicate decisively on these issues. As I have often claimed, this has produced a *fusion of power and knowledge* in Stalinism, often not sufficiently stressed, which is one of its most seriously problematic characteristics, whose impact one can only begin to measure today. For example, modern genetic theories, the theory of relativity and quantum theory have been judged to be 'bourgeois ideology'. This puts the countries [that have laid down such judgements] in a very difficult position. Indeed, that which one now refers to as the 'scientific and technical revolution' *should and could have taken place in the socialist countries, since they had the means for achieving it.* They had physicists and mathematicians *who proposed these theories*: they discarded them, and sometimes sent their authors to Siberia. Similarly, in the French Communist Party, any minor secretary believed himself able to decide definitively on philosophical matters in the name of the Party's authority. I remember, for example, having had senseless discussions with the Party's Secretariat in Toulouse, in which he would adjudicate on matters such as *logic*, among others. It was said then that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie did not have the same logic. I replied: 'So, $(a + b)^2$ is not the same thing in New York and Moscow?' He would then reply: 'You don't understand anything.' As for myself, I thought it was *they* who did not understand anything. As a matter of fact, we didn't understand the word 'logic' in the same way. They took it to be the discourse, the 'discursive complex' – that which *you* call 'discursive complex' – this is what they understood by logic, a 'class logic'; what I called *logic* was something rigorous and precise, which is at work in mathematics…

P.T.: I would like to briefly interrupt you to clarify a concept that I would rigorously like to take responsibility for having created. A 'discursive complex', in the conceptual framework of the *Analyse des Complexes Discursifs* (ACD) I am currently developing, is *not a class logic.*[7] It is rather *a network of discourses* that are ordered in a *heterogeneous and tensional* manner around a *dominant stake*. One must not conflate *discursive complex* and homogeneity or ideological convergence. Stalinism is not a discursive complex, but rather a homogeneous ideology and, what is more, an ideology *of* convergence and homogeneity. What is pertinent to say in this context is that the issue of *the relations of power and knowledge* is, under Stalinism, the dominant *stake* of a discursive complex in which you, Henri Lefebvre, have an anti-Stalinist discourse.

7 Although Tort was developing these ideas in the 1980s, his most complete statement appeared many years later; see Tort 2016.

H.L.: Anyway, here in France there was a misunderstanding with regard to myself, and in Hungary there was the same kind of misunderstanding. What was at *stake* was the scope of political power.

P.T.: The award of the Kossuth Prize in 1955 to Lukács clearly constituted a sort of public rehabilitation of the philosopher.[8] By that time, it was becoming less 'delicate' to side with him, and to explain Lukács's turn to Marxism, from the publication of *History and Class Consciousness* up to the 1949 *Autocritique*, on the one hand, and to explain what was *true* about the statements that had been condemned [, on the other].

In your 1955 text, one finds some of these *rare* sentences (simultaneously beautiful, courageous and *fair* statements) that we would like to oppose today to the false efficacy of dogmatic constraints. Allow me to cite one of them:

> I know perfectly well how delicate the problems are that I pose. And [I also know] for what one will reproach me personally. Some will say that I am wrong in raising these problems, that it is not appropriate to do so. I would reply by saying that for them it is rarely appropriate to tell the truth, and that they suppress discussion, even and especially when they loudly proclaim freedom of discussion. An old habit of false democracy! Others, the adversaries, will seize [the occasion and take up the problems raised], and will make a loud noise: they will be awkwardly mistaken, for the truth has nothing in common with their mystifications and lies. Philosophy, when worthy of its name, has been right, in the long run, against its detractors.[9]

These statements and these positions result from your reflections in the 1950s, especially your conversations with some of Lukács's main (Communist) adversaries, for whom your esteem was inferior to the one you dedicated to him. Why, then, wait for 1955 – and the award of the Kossuth Prize – to make your reflections on this problem public?

H.L.: The 'Lukács question' was by then roughly solved in Hungary. However, it was not resolved in the *theoretical domain*. As far as I know, the fundamental problems hadn't been posed. Moreover, the intervention you just quoted

8 The Kossuth Prize is a state award for Hungarian culture, given by the President and named after the Hungarian politician and revolutionary Lajos Kossuth.

9 Lefebvre 1986, p. 41.

was aimed at what was happening with regard to Lukács *in France*. The 'stakes' were displaced, and the truth is that in France one maintained Stalinist positions when they had faded in other countries. The lines you just quoted had, therefore, a much more direct relation to the French position. But I would like to remind you that these lines precede – by some months – the Khrushchev Report – the famous report then called "secret". In France, Stalinism was in full swing, and one still referred to Lukács as an adversary. One did not understand – one did not want to understand – what was happening in Hungary. The 'Lukács Debate' still existed in France, and some of my Hungarian friends asked me to intervene and make it known in France that the issue had been solved in favour of Lukács in Hungary. [They even asked me] to pursue the theoretical reaffirmation of Lukács's thinking *in Hungary*. Perhaps it is all this *ensemble* that constituted the tensional 'complex' of which you were speaking before. As for me, I was submersed in this battle without knowing exactly what was at stake. One must not forget that *what was really at stake was Stalinism*, and that would only be revealed in 1956, and yet…

P.T.: But would you have delivered this lecture five years before, when you came back from Budapest?

H.L.: Yes, absolutely! If someone had asked me to, I would have done it, in roughly the same terms. And with roughly the same illusions with regard to some important French figures. The same illusions: I believed that the leadership of the French Communist Party would be intelligent enough to grasp the new course of events, to grasp that something was being attempted in Hungary, which was later clarified.

P.T.: During your stay in Hungary you had a few conversations with Lukács – and not for the first time, since you had already met in Paris (at the *Union des Écrivains*)…

H.L.: When I met Lukács in Budapest, and then in Paris – for he came to Paris twice – he spoke about many things.

There is a curious issue: when did Lukács introduce the notion of *everyday life* into his thinking? I don't really know, but I know that this notion has played a certain role in his later work, particularly in his aesthetics. But it is also possible that there had been a convergence and not exactly an influence…

In my own work, this notion dates back to 1933, and is found in the journal *Avant-poste,* where Norbert Guterman and I had put forward a series of *theses*

concerning everyday life.[10] This journal was available for consultation at the Bibliothèque Nationale. I spoke with Lukács about *everyday life*, and it is possible that this influenced his thinking in some way.

What struck me more in my conversations with Lukács was the way he employed a concept that was remarkable to me then, that of the 'socialisation of society'.[11] What did he understand by that? It was not socialism. It referred to something that one pursued under capitalism and that could lead to socialism. It characterised a situation in which all the units, once isolated, became more and more linked to one another, both in the national context and beyond. The isolation of individuals, enterprises and localities diminished, and multiple 'networks' (as one would call them today) encompassed them and linked them. Socialism would have as its starting point the *socialisation of society*, adding to it something whose contours have remained indeterminate in those conversations. I was struck by this concept of the 'socialisation of society', and I stress this because I don't know if it received enough attention in France.

P.T.: One of the key points of interest in your text, and also one of the most contemporary – we tackle here [the issue of] what I call 'second intention' – is that it articulates the problem of *truth in politics* in historical and practical terms, particularly of the sort of truth whose expression is part of the domain of competence and responsibility of the Marxist thinker, the philosopher or, more generally, the [Marxist] intellectual. Addressing one of your main 'political' interlocutors from Budapest (Révai)[12] regarding Lukács, you wrote:

> All critique, to the extent it touches a sensible point, and so long as it is serious, appears to you as an obstacle, a threat, a danger. But is that the question? Or is that the only question? It seems to me that you conflate opportunity and truth, which leads you to a very sectarian position!... Isn't the profound question the one about the truth contained in Lukács's

10 Lefebvre and Guterman 1933, pp. 91–107, and Lefebvre and Guterman 2003, pp. 71–83. Of course, Lefebvre's three volumes of the *Critique of Everyday Life* were published in French in, respectively, 1947, 1961, and 1981. For a complete English edition, see Lefebvre 2014.

11 Lukács discusses the notion of the socialisation of society to refer to the challenging process of becoming, for capitalism *and* revolutionary action, as moments that emerge within the totality of a process so that, 'in the dialectical totality the individual elements incorporate the structure of the whole'; see Lukács 1971, p. 198, and, for the relationality of this method on totality, see Altun, Caiconte, Moore, Morton, Ryan, Scanlan and Smidt 2023.

12 József Révai (1898–1959) was a Hungarian Communist politician and theorist, ally, and then opponent of Lukács.

> words? Is it true or not? Do you really think that socialist realism has had its own Balzac or its Leonardo da Vinci? If you don't think so, why condemn Lukács? I want to believe – I am quite sure – that his adversaries use his words. It doesn't matter if it is *true*![13]

You then say you had, 'shortly before, a conversation in France with Maurice Thorez on the subject of "proletarian science"'. Thorez told you then: 'Let the comrades become aware of their own mistakes…'.[14] Don't you think that in Thorez's injunction there is a deep and serious *illusion*, which explains all the 'delays' recently acknowledged and which condemns to solitude and to a tragic inefficacy he who, while being the bearer of a true idea, cannot transform it into a *useful* truth, given the lack of communication and facilities?

H.L.: I think I would be more sceptical today about the power of truth, and about truth itself. I believe that throughout that discussion [with Thorez] I had reinforced the idea of a revolutionary truth a bit myself, as if it were in itself necessary and sufficient. Revolutionary truth is perhaps necessary, but I no longer believe that it is sufficient at all. In any case, this is not how ideological battles were brought to an end. The question was then posed only in terms of *power*. Those in power imposed their truth, even when one demonstrated it to be mistaken and inefficacious.

Now, what has happened with the issue of 'socialist realism'? Lukács proposed, with regard to Balzac and many other authors, the thesis of *critical* realism, and he was reproached for having given too broad a scope to this thesis, which he extended up to the present. However, this was not at all the case with Lukács, who thought, as you know, that creative power in the capitalist and bourgeois context was worn out with Balzac and Tolstoy. He didn't even believe in the literary grandeur of a Flaubert, for example. Everything seemed to him to bring 'decadence' with itself, and this is a thesis that one could discuss. I have, in fact, argued with him because I wasn't of the same position. I then thought that there were *critical* works, on our side, that had a certain reach. In our conversations, we often spoke about Proust and, even if I wasn't fully positive about it, I nevertheless had the impression that there was on the other side a certain *critical* view, which was not a mere symptom of 'decadence'. The question of 'critical realism', which surrounded Lukács's name, was at the centre of one of the great discussions of those years.

13 Lefebvre 1986, pp. 37–8.

14 Lefebvre 1986, p. 38. Maurice Thorez (1900–64) was leader of the French Communist Party and, briefly, Deputy Prime Minister of France.

P.T.: There were, then, certain possibilities of discussion regarding the literary and aesthetic domain. The same was undoubtedly not true of the domain you discussed with Thorez, namely that of 'proletarian science', which was one of the 'truths' of Stalinist power.

H.L.: …which spoke *on behalf of the proletariat*, equating itself to the proletariat. Its operation consisted not only in decreeing the truth of a certain proposition, but rather in claiming the full identification of political power with the working class.

P.T.: The Lysenko case showed us that one could condemn and fight against a truth linked to modern genetics, key in the development of the agricultural and food sectors, a truth which brings objective progress, and all this against the true interests of a socialist society.[15] Shouldn't we become aware that, behind Thorez's patient, *wait-and-see* attitude that advises us to 'let our comrades recognise their mistakes by themselves' is at the same time a great mystification and one of the explanations one could give for the 'delays' which today are the object of more or less official *self-criticisms*?

H.L.: There is something of that. The thesis of a 'proletarian science' has never been the object of self-criticism or any critical examination whatsoever.[16] One has simply to let it decay, decompose. This is what Thorez's sentence *really* means: 'Let our comrades realise', which means to say that one abandons the question and never challenges one's dear comrades. One would never need to acknowledge that what one has said was mistaken. *This* is what the sentence really means. The 'delay' [you mentioned] can have many causes, and this is one of them. There are many others. There is also the 'historicism' that already threatened the Party back then. The taste for commemorations – such as always remembering the *Résistance*, etc. There was also a certain aversion to admitting that there could be something new, especially when the novelty came from the side of bourgeois capitalism. One did not recognise in it any capacity for invention and creation. I must say that I have a lively recollection of my trips to America, and that at the forefront of my mind was my correspondence with

15 Trofim Denisovich Lysenko (1898–1976) was a Soviet agronomist and biologist who promoted specific theories of genetics based on environmentally acquired inheritance, as director of the Institute of Genetics within the USSR's Academy of Sciences, and backed by Stalinist state power.

16 This seems unfair, even at the time of this discussion. See, in particular, Lecourt 1976; and Lecourt 1977. The book had an introduction by Louis Althusser, which may perhaps explain Lefebvre overlooking it.

my friend Norbert Guterman, which was never interrupted – except of course during the war, but only to be resumed soon after. I was well aware that there was a capacity for initiative and invention there. In the United States, people were well-informed about what was going on in Europe. There, the notions of 'bourgeois' and 'proletarian science' provoked laughter, and the polemic around Lukács seemed meaningless. That is why your question on what was at stake surprised me at first. It is true that there was *something at stake*. I see it a bit better now. But at the time, this seemed absurd to me. And, if I intervened, it was to fight – even if a bit clumsily – against this absurdity into which I felt we were sinking.

P.T.: I think that you also understood the stakes in 1955, since your approach to Lukács perfectly links purely aesthetic questions to more general or fundamental issues in Marxist theory and the political or militant uses of Marxism.

H.L.: The question was: who has a say and who has the right to speak in matters of theory? Our position – mine and Lukács's – was to say that simple members of the Party, and even mere individuals and citizens, have the right to speak on the most serious issues without having to be immediately considered guilty because of that. [Our position was that individuals had the right to] propose ideas for discussion – a *real* discussion, and not the mere appearance, the mere illusion of discussion. The problem was that of *Marxism* and its relation to politics, and this problem had been around for a long time. I remember a quarrel [I had] with Georges Politzer shortly before the war, in which he would die heroically.[17] When discussing a book that is today considered the only theory book of that time, *Le nationalisme contre les nations*,[18] Politzer told me: 'You occupy yourself with questions that regard only the Party's leadership'.

P.T.: Since the central question of one of Lukács's first and most important books is that of *class consciousness*, and since you invoked earlier the doctrinal conflict that opposed his theory to official theory – Lukács, as I see it, was not right about the heart of the matter, while his adversaries were also mistaken in their way of dealing with it – what do you have to say today about *class consciousness*?

17 Georges Politzer (1903–42) was a French philosopher and Marxist theoretician. A lecture course of his was published posthumously as Politzer 1976.

18 Lefebvre 1937.

H.L.: When I wrote *La conscience mystifiée* with Norbert Guterman, we made a stand, without saying it, *against* Lukács.[19] Ours is a non-Lukácsian book. If I have come to defend Lukács, it was for tactical and strategic reasons, and perhaps I have avoided certain aspects concerning our divergences precisely because of the urgency of defending him.

Guterman and I positioned ourselves against the idea of consciousness as a *criterion*. As a criterion of *truth*. As a criterion for *action*. The idea of the book was that *all consciousness can be deceived and mystified, especially the class consciousness of the workers*. This idea was formulated after two trips to Germany, where I observed that Hitlerian racist ideology had infiltrated parts of the working class, which did not remain unaffected by it. It resisted such an ideology, of course, more so than the middle class. Nevertheless, this ideology ended up penetrating it just the same. After that, we also observed, in the United States, that class consciousness had been softened, that it had been more alive and much stronger at the beginning of the century with the great workers' movements, the great struggles, and that in contrast, in those years, especially after the war, there was only something that couldn't reach the level of a true consciousness, of a self-affirmative consciousness – and above all, of a *self-transformative* consciousness, the Marxist thesis being that the working class becomes conscious of itself by transforming itself in such a way as to abolish class society.

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