

## An Interview With Gyorgy Lukacs


On a bright June morning in Budapest, in 1966, I climbed five flights of stairs to the apartment of Gyorgy Lukacs. There the famous philosopher greeted me -- short, alert, his broad face slightly hawkish but mobile and open, his hair somewhat gray, his manner friendly. He looked fifty; he was over eighty. For over half a century he had been a prominent literary critic. In 1924 he had brought out his Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein (History and Class Consciousness) and since then had been a growing influence among Marxists. Now he was one of the most influential Marxist critics in Europe outside the Soviet Union. Several of his books have even been translated in the United States - though, naturally, with apologies: an introduction by Alfred Kazin for Studies in European Realism assures us that despite "the betrays<sup>al</sup> of his own intellectual standards ... committed as a Communist leader," Lukacs is actually a more 'bourgeois' and academic humanist" than many revolutionary intellectuals.

The "academic humanist" and Marxist led me into his study. It was lined with books in those many languages which a European humanist must learn. Outside the window the Danube could be seen. A post-war bridge



bore witness to a resurrected Budapest. Beyond the bridge, on a steep eminence, shone the memorial to the liberating Soviet armies. And Lukács, who lived through the Hapsburgs and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his own idealistic philosophy, World War I, the fascist Horthy regime, his stay in the Soviet Union in the 1930's, World War II, his opposition to the Rakosi government, the European mood of existentialism -- Gyorgy Lukács, who survived it all, lit a cigar and began to talk.

I know of the work of your American Institute for Marxist Studies, he said, and it seems to me very important. Few people today read Marx. But it is necessary to do so to understand our problem seriously. For example, Weber thought that the right of the worker to get back the proceeds of his labor was the theory of Marx. In fact, it was La Salle's theory, not Marx's.

2.  My book on esthetics has recently been published in the German language -- Die Eigen Art des "Ästhetiken". But many problems remain yet unresolved. The reason is that Marx felt it his duty to provide the economic foundations for his work. In consequence a great impediment in Marxist thought appeared in the Stalin period in socialism. Marxism

had not yet developed; it had reached a plateau when Lenin died -- or worse. Since 1916, the year of Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, economic changes in the theory were necessary, as Marx himself would have admitted. But they were not carried out.

Now an antinomy has arisen for us: on the one hand the dogmatists of the socialist states say that we must continue the line of Marx and Lenin; on the other hand, some westerners say that Marxism is not a real thing in history and is totally false.

But this issue can be answered: an economic, sociological study of the last eighty years would supply the answer.

In my book on esthetics I said that I was not original. (Whereas the Soviet thinkers try to make esthetics out of quotations.) I tried to write esthetics as if Marx himself were living today. Thus in its evolution Marxism might fight against both the dogmatism of the Communist parties and the lack of understanding of Marx in the capitalist countries. If we studied economic evolution, we would understand the method of Marx. No new method is necessary.

Initially I wanted to write an ethics of Marxism. In preparing it,



I saw one problem which Marx saw but which he did not work up. That was the problem of the ontology of social being. And this is the book that I am working on now.

We face this dilemma: on the one hand, the vulgar materialists hold that there is one being in nature and society; on the other hand, the existentialists and idealists hold that there is a dualism of man and non-man.

My position is that there are several principles of being:

(1) inorganic being, (2) organic being, and (3) social being. Social being could not exist without the two lower forms; it is a special form of being. In turn, as Marx said, "social being determines consciousness." Thus the topic of ontology divides into two parts: (1) general ontology, and (2) the study of social being as a special form of being. There are two extremes in this matter: (1) the use of abstract theses to cover all beings -- a view to which the Soviet thinkers are inclined; and (2) the view that social being is known by way of certain categories. But I believe that every category of social being is distinctive.

Ten years ago I wrote a brochure against existentialism. But now Sartre has changed. He now wants to accept the laws of historical materialism but not those of dialectical materialism. He finds a dualism in social being but denies it in nature. But human existence would be impossible if Sartre's rigid contrast between the inorganic-organic and the social held. Hegel said, "There is an identity of the id and the non-id." Now, Sartre accepts social being with its laws; at the same time he maintains his existential ontology as a fundamentum. But this Geworfenheit [the character of having been thrown into existence] cannot be related to Marxism and has no place in it.

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1 The period of crisis, which began in 1914 and continued through the Korean crisis and the Cuban crisis, is ending. This fact is significant for philosophers, because it means the dissolution of neo-positivism, which was most important. When neo-positivism dies down, it will be important for real Marxism to replace it, supplying insight into philosophical problems. That is why I regard your movement in the United States as very, very important.

So I believe that today there are two poles in philosophy:  
(1) existentialism, which has an ontology of the isolated personality;

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and (2) neo-positivism, which has no ontology and is antiquated. If Marxism does not replace the latter, then it could bring the domination of existentialism.

Today we have a general crisis of religious being and seeking.

It is important how philosophers take this into account, for the greatest help that religion could get came from neo-positivism. Since Galileo, religion has broken down. Neo-positivism is nothing else than Cardinal Bellarmine's version -- i. e., (1) mathematics is the manipulation of phenomena, and (2) for ontological truth, we must take the Bible.

Carnap says there is no ontology; he therefore is a great help to religion. In 300 years historians will say that Carnap was the St. Thomas of the 20th century.

It is important to show the traditions of the real materialisms, such as the great materialistic theory of Epicurus, about whom Marx wrote his dissertation. The Renaissance and Spinoza represented great traditions of materialism. Marx's theory of social being was the culminating point of all of this, the first theory to give a real analysis of social being in a material sense. All previous materialisms

had information about an authentic concept of man. But they did not give a real analysis of social being -- that was not possible.

That is why I consider the ontological question to be one of the most important questions for Marxism. The error of Marx's followers was to make a philosophical interpretation of gnoseology and logic. But we must begin with ontology.

In his Preface to the second edition of Capital, Marx says that the categories [of dialectical thought] are not the forms of the Idea but are the forms of "the existing state of things." If we reproduce things in our own thought, then things are already formed. This is one of the most important sayings of Marx.

Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and existentialism all have held that it is forms that are created, not consciousness. Marx was the first to end this mythos of the Greeks and of Genesis. The break is that the young Marx understood that existence supposes a *Gegenstandlichkeit* [that which is objective]. Marx argued that what lacks this objective character cannot exist.

It is hard for everyone to leave such religious conceptions.



"God made the world" means, secularly, that "man made the world."

I admire Epicurus for seeing this; for 1000 years none saw it so clearly.

These ontologies influence action and ethics, as I showed in my book.

One of the causes leading to the religious crisis was science, which made impossible a teleological universe. But as Sartre has pointed out, work is telic and every act of praxis is. But in science there is only a series of causalities in movement: a teleological Setzen [context] has no force at all. But a being must think teleologically.

Thus while science proclaimed there is no purpose in the universe, man has a need for the telic.

Sartre moved to a social praxis, but his existential ontology was paradoxical. Sartre's own praxis is better than his theory (it was the reverse with Schopenhauer). Personality is not neutral. In the 1920's Heidegger was more original and stronger than later. But Sartre is a better personality. One must fight Sartre but do so with respect for his personality.



With regard to religion, Marxism is the consequence of atheism. The earth is an accidental planet; then arose life; then society -- which was not necessary. Some insects have societies based on work; but it is related to biological division. With work in man a new ontological form begins. The most primitive forms of division of labor were founded by the social division of labor, not the biological. A biological being cannot change to another form of being. But in man a king can become a slave. Marxism says that there is no preformed necessity -- and others will agree. Hegel's logic of necessity is not required. Here is the great difference between us and the religious viewpoint.

Nicolai Hartmann, who is most important in his ontology (Teleologisches Denken, Philosophie der Natur) and worst in his Ethics, says: In everyday life we ask, "Why does this happen to me?" This is the source of religion. If one's wife dies, one asks, "Why does this happen to me?" Here is a "Bedürfnis, a need. If one is not strong enough to find purpose in life, then he has recourse to the transcendental. But a telic relation does not exist in answer to the question, "Why does this happen to me?" Both

Epicurus and Spinoza pointed out that human life has as much sense as I am able to give my own life. Marx added that to do this is possible only in society. There is an intimate relation between the ontological (social praxis) and the ethical.

Thus the cosmology of religion broke down; and since feudalism man could imagine a Christian form of life. But capitalism ended this. Pascal, against the Jesuits, fought for the Christian form of life, but his opponents saw that it was impossible. Religion then got its support in "religious need." The young Schleiermacher began this line of thought, and Kierkegaard continued it. All those in the ecumenical movement thus try to reconcile "religious need" with the philosophical situation. For example, they make use of Carnap and the positivists. I did not always see this. (Duhem wrote that Bellarmine saw the problem correctly.)

For a long time we shall have a fight between the new ontology and the new religion. This is an ethical problem. Can the individual support a reality neutral to personal needs? Atheism has such moral problems.

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Reformation demanded new forms of

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religion -- e. g., Calvinism. The Roman Catholics did not understand the problem, though Ignatius began to indicate an accommodation to capitalism. Now, Pope John XXIII has seen the dangers for Roman Catholicism to think of capitalism as the only possible form of society. Now the Church is trying to accommodate to the world as it did in the 17th century. But there was a conflict between the left and the right at the Vatican Council, and this will take decades to resolve.

The Stalin period compromised Marxism for many. The alternative of being a socialist was weakened. Since Stalin there has been great progress in many things. But there is a need to build up Marxism so it is a real alternative to the problems of life today. There is a need to develop the right concept of the ethical and the ontological and their relation. Kant divided the pure reason and the practical reason. But I interpret Marx as saying that practice cannot be separated from reality; we always make our answers in relation to reality. Therefore an ontology of social being is required by ethical persons.

Marx denied that in history as such there is teleology. Class wars