

Conversation with György Lukács

Franco Ferrarotti

*György Lukács was born in 1885, died in 1971. A native of Hungary, he is commonly regarded as the most important Marxist philosopher of this century. He participated in the Communist revolution in Hungary in 1918-19, spent most of his subsequent life in exile (for many years in the USSR), and only returned to settle in Hungary after World War II. Best known for his early work, *History and Class Consciousness*, first published in Germany in 1923, Lukács tried throughout his work to rescue the Marxian dialectic from what he considered to be its vulgarizations and to lay the theoretical foundations for a Marxist humanism.*

Despite his lifelong membership in the Communist Party and long years of at least outward conformity to the Stalinist line, Lukács came to be regarded as the foremost proponent of a truly Marxist alternative to Soviet-style Party dogmatism. Especially after World War II he became a leading figure in the revival of Marxism in Western Europe, particularly in France and Germany, as well as in the movement toward a less rigid Marxist thought in Eastern Europe.

*The present interview is, to our knowledge, one of the last public statements by Lukács. While the interviewer, a leading Italian sociologist, editor of *Critica Sociologica*, was interested in obtaining Lukács's ideas on sociology, the principal significance of their talk lies in Lukács's statements on the present condition and hoped-for future of Marxism.*

On November 19, 1970, seven months before his death, I talked with Professor György Lukács for three hours about sociology and contemporary Marxist theory. We talked in his Budapest apartment on the banks of the Danube overlooking the monument to Liberty on the hill across the river. On the door of his fifth-floor apartment is written simply "Lukács, György" (the telephone directory adds the identification "Akademicus"). Lukács answers the door, a small slender man with beautiful eyes and a sinuous mouth bearing the weight of an enormous cigar. From time to time he is shaken by a heavy cough. The house trembles. But the brief tempest passes, and he is again perfectly composed and resumes the argument without a break in syntax. One enters the apartment through a small, dark hallway. We talk facing the monument to Liberty on the other side of the river.

F.F.: Perhaps we can talk about sociology.

G.L.: I too was concerned about sociology for many years. As you know, I studied with Max Weber, and I have good memories of those years. But now sociology seems a bore.

F.F.: When I began working in sociology immediately after the war, sociology in Italy was dead, exhausted, suppressed. . . .

G.L.: I have often wondered about the purpose and nature of sociology as a science. Can sociology really be an autonomous science? What does autonomy mean in this connection? Today they talk about an interdisciplinary approach. But I suspect that behind the call for "an interdisciplinary approach" lies a great conceptual confusion.

F.F.: I have often thought a sociology that has both a scientific foundation and a political direction could not develop except from a combination of neo-idealism and the kind of fragmentary empiricism associated with sociology in the United States.

G.L.: We must go beyond that. We must try to define, or at least to keep alive, the question about the connection between sociology, philosophy, economics and history. When we lose sight of these relationships and limit ourselves to talking about an interdisciplinary approach in sociological research, then we cannot avoid falling into a highly technical,

specialistic fragmentation. The influence of the United States has not been positive in this regard.

F.F.: Perhaps, but it seems to me also simplistic to talk about a "Marxist sociology" as though that answers the questions. We need to establish a truly critical sociology.

G.L.: Agreed, but it is important to understand why American sociology has so restricted itself to pure technique without understanding anything of the general movement of society. The answer is that American sociology has cut itself off from the economy. One cannot understand society without taking account of its economic structure. Because you cannot study a society in little bits, sociology cannot be an independent science. Marx's method, which Stalin overthrew, analyzed the whole of society, its style, its movement, the rhythm of its development. We need to recompose that unity. The fragmentation of the social sciences can be traced precisely in the history of a bourgeois tradition that promoted specialization to the point of separation, and thus the social sciences are impotent in comprehending society as a unitary whole and become, instead, instruments of mystification.

F.F.: Nonetheless, there is a need to carefully circumscribe and limit the object of study. Certainly whatever new perspectives we may develop, we should not just throw out the many valuable results of sociological research over the last decades.

G.L.: The results of current sociology, for example academic sociology as practiced in the United States, can be saved. Some represent real achievements and contribute important information. I am interested, for instance, in certain researches reported by Galbraith. Of course, such researches are specialized and, lacking a general theory of society, never reached the heart of the problems. But they can still be put to a critical use. One must make critical use of partial contributions, even when they come from people like Galbraith. They help us understand how capitalism has changed and is changing every day, although its fundamental nature remains the same. Marx used the classical economists, especially Ricardo, and so we can learn to use, from a Marxist viewpoint, the contributions of bourgeois sociology.

F.F.: But even bourgeois sociology does not lack a comprehensive theoretical framework, even though it is an implicit one. . . .

G.L.: No, bourgeois sociology does not, in fact, possess a conceptual framework in the true sense; it does not manage to overcome the givenness of the specific datum. It cannot escape from vulgar empiricism. The fundamental reason for this is that bourgeois sociology lacks in any true sense a cognitive value.

F.F.: Is it not contradictory, then, to suggest that

we can use the results of bourgeois sociology?

G.L.: There is no contradiction. As I said, such results show, for example, the developing nature of capitalism. In the last century the market, and therefore the power of capitalism, was directed toward important but limited sectors of economic and social life. The logic of capitalism focused on the key sectors of industry, especially the steel industry, or, as we say, the *Schwere Industrie*. But today capitalism collides with, and conditions, all aspects of life. The logic of capitalism tends to coincide with the logic of the social process itself, thus spreading out and engulfing the whole life of society. We have passed from the partial capitalism of the last century to today's generalized capitalism. In this respect, Marxism, far from being exhausted, has hardly even begun. In any case, and paradoxes aside, Marxism must be developed as we study things that Marx was not able to study.

F.F.: I don't understand. How is it possible for Marxism to be the only and necessary framework for the revolutionary movement if the framework itself is not complete?

G.L.: The framework is complete. Marxism is complete as an essential approach to the global study of society in historical transformation. It is complete in its mode of analysis and its criteria for establishing the theoretical hierarchy of what constitutes society. But completeness of method doesn't mean that one can find everything in Marx. The specific ingredients are supplied only by long, patient research on the basis of the Marxist method. Here is where the Marxists themselves have gone seriously astray. They have taken the easy route, restricting themselves to repeating things they don't understand and stressing tactics above and against theory. It is clear, for example, that Marx never seriously studied the economies of Asia, Africa, or Latin America. And yet—just think of it!—in his polemic with Trotsky Stalin invented a Chinese feudalism. What is really stupefying is that such a stupid invention has been accepted by Mao.

F.F.: You are saying, in other words, that sociology must study Marx, must learn well the lessons of Marxism.

G.L.: Yes, but the trouble is that today there are no Marxists. We simply do not have a Marxist theory. Believe me, today it is necessary to do what Marx did for the capitalism of his time. We must do it both for the sake of capitalism today and for the sake of socialism.

F.F.: Socialism?

G.L.: Yes, also for socialism. Socialism also needs a continual critical and demystifying analysis, and this must be done on the world scale. No one is doing

this. No one thinks of it. What is happening is grotesque. Lacking a theory, Marxists are condemned to trail along after daily events. Collective movements erupt and are called "spontaneous"—the movements of students, the young, and so forth—and then the Marxists run to catch up with the events, to understand them after the fact. Their theory is little more than a rationalization of their surprise.

F.F.: But the movements you mention do have a meaning and do have structural roots in the struggle against the bureaucratization of social and personal life. Surely they have a significance which demands reflection.

G.L.: Of course, such protest movements have the meaning you say, but they cannot be understood in the absence of a general theory of society. Without such theory attention focuses on the picturesque and bizarre aspects and misses the whole point of the movement. Even the Marxists, who claim to have such a general theory, are forced to run after day-to-day events, after whatever makes news, in a fragmentary and wholly anti-Marxist way because they have not developed their theory.

F.F.: Do you mean that there has been a break in the development of Marxism? How? Since when?

G.L.: There has indeed been an interruption. Marxism, conceived as it should be conceived, that is, as a general theory of society and of history, no longer exists. It came to an end some time ago. In its place we have Stalinism, and will continue to have it for some time to come. Stalinism has been described in many stupid ways, but in fact the situation is simple: Whenever action is put ahead of and in opposition to history, the result is Stalinism. Stalinism is more than an erroneous interpretation or a defective application of Marxism; it is the negation of Marxism. Under Stalinism there are no theorists, only tacticians.

F.F.: How about Suslov? And the official theorists of Marxism in the Soviet Union?

G.L.: Whether in the Soviet Union or in the other socialist countries, official Marxism is very often a miserable thing. Under the banner of *Diamat* [dialectical materialism] mediocre professors explain the problems of the world by mechanically applying simplistic formulae which they repeat with catechetical monotony. This is what is illegally dispensed as Marxism. It may serve a certain didactic or propaganda purpose, but it has nothing to do with Marxism. We are still Stalinists. Stalinism is more than the evils of Stalin. It cannot be understood by reference to the categories of morality. It is quite simply the substitution of tactics for theory.

F.F.: One can understand your tactical preoccupation with Marxists who have reached power, but does your criticism apply also to Marxists in those coun-

tries where Communist parties are in the opposition, such as the capitalistic West?

G.L.: I believe so. I am astonished by some of those political situations. Look, for example, at the discrepancy between the organizational strength of the Italian Communist Party and its small theoretical weight. I am not sure about the reason for this. No doubt Togliatti was a first-class politician, even a great tactician. Perhaps his theoretical curiosity was limited. . . . They tell me he had the habits of a good bureaucrat. Again and again we are left only with the tactics. We run after the protest movements without understanding them, to say nothing of having foreseen them. For example, we call the Arab countries socialistic. We accept without hesitation such labels as the Arab Socialist Union. It is really all laughable. What is socialist about the Arab world nobody knows. At most we might say it is a movement toward nationalistic identity, but not toward socialism. Africa, Asia, Latin America are only phrases in Marx. We must study these countries and their economies with the method of Marx. Failing that, there are only abstractions, no serious analysis.

F.F.: But surely the moment of abstraction is fundamental for the construction of a general theory?

G.L.: Certainly, and I would be the last to deny the importance of the moment of abstraction in the name of a misunderstood materialism or empiricism. This is precisely what the positivists do not understand, that facts must be interpreted, and therefore they must be transcended. It is not a question of which comes first, facts or abstraction. There is no first and no later. If we forget this we end up in a hyperstasis of the terms of the problem and inevitably relapse into insoluble metaphysics. I do not understand all this bustling about over facts. Facts are a fact. That being is, is agreed. There is no reason whatever to set up hierarchies of being and consciousness. True, Marx wrote that "being creates thinking" and not vice versa. And Marxism does base its historical materialism on the priority of the social being over the social consciousness; that is a priority *sui generis* and is not to be taken literally. It is a great mistake to subordinate consciousness to being. In reality the consciousness we have of the social being enables us to act upon the social being and to transform it. Only in this way can we escape from the empirical weight of being.

F.F.: Perhaps this explains why the meaning of empirical research escapes you so completely. It seems that for you research is done merely to support what is already known on the subjective conceptual level. Basically you deny that important new discoveries may force a reopening of the theoretical scheme, and thus the creative function of research escapes you.

G.L.: Not at all. I, of course, recognize the funda-

mental importance of the documented analysis as against gratuitous and arbitrary abstractions. Marx himself considered the writings of his youth to be purely philosophical in the traditional sense. He thought his truly important work was *Das Kapital*, that is, the analysis of the capitalistic society of his time. . . . Marxism affirms scientific analysis, but that is not the same thing as a positivistic analysis, which is enslaved by facts it cannot interpret. Nor, of course, is scientific Marxism sympathetic to idealistic analysis. Marx's criticism of classical political economy, especially of Smith and Ricardo, is a great example of scientific criticism. Their theories were basically static and thus could not account for the movement of society. Marx places their static facts (the market, labor, goods, etc.) into a specific historical setting and redefines them in dialectical terms which are able to take account of history's movement without eternalizing or reifying any of its particular phases. Thus he gives back to man his history. In Marx, history no longer belongs to nature. It becomes culture, that is, human consciousness, human achievement, human responsibility. History belongs to the social consciousness, which masters, comprehends and transforms the social being. It is in this light that I reject any hierarchy between being and consciousness.

F.F.: It is the economic, or structural, plan that is decisive in the Marxist explanation of society.

G.L.: But you cannot isolate the economic plan, as you call it, from all the rest. By themselves economic motives explain nothing. One must beware of interpreting Marxism mechanically. Marxism too is subject to a positivistic interpretation, and the result, both political and philosophical, is opportunism, or, as we have seen, Stalinism.

F.F.: I wonder if you would agree that the schematism, or the bases of scientific reasoning within a given historical horizon—problem, hypothesis, verification—have a validity of their own which is independent of historical contingencies.

G.L.: That means simply that Marxism is not to be dogmatized, that there is within Marxism a critical impulse which affects specific doctrine. I have already said that Marxism must be developed, that the work of Marx must be read to its conclusion. Marcuse has tried that according to a schematism that is essentially utopian. Marcuse is not capable of scientific analysis. He has lost sight of the working class. His idealization of the subproletariat is wholly romantic and without serious basis. On the other hand, the moment of scientific analysis is fundamental; there can be no truly revolutionary politics without a prior scientific analysis that is related to the general framework of history and society. For the revolutionary movement of today this is the most urgent need. In fact, we have no policy because we have no

theory. So we are all Stalinists.

Stalin was a great tactician. In a given situation he understood instantly the best thing to do, and achieved some real coups. For example, he was certainly right against Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Similarly, the pact with Hitler and the handshake with Ribbentrop were completely justified. From a tactical point of view it was a case of simple necessity. Stalin's great historical merit is in his having understood that immediately. But unfortunately Stalin was not a Marxist. If I may be permitted a paradox, Stalin was a Trotskyite. I will tell you a story. Between Lenin and Stalin there was a disagreement about the role and responsibilities of the unions. Trotsky said that the unions should have as their primary duty the construction of the State, and accordingly they should behave in every situation as an organ of the State. Lenin, on the other hand, insisted that the unions should see themselves as mass organisms and their institutional responsibility as the defense of the immediate interests of the workers engaged in production. Thus, you see what I mean when I say Stalin was a Trotskyite.

The fact is that Stalin has not yet been superseded. Even with us here in Hungary, even in Poland, while we have learned to produce some things, the plans largely remain on paper. At the practical level agriculture is doing quite well, but industrialization in general is not working. It lacks coordination: the raw materials do not reach the factories on time, for example. We must learn to connect the great decisions of popular political power to the needs of persons, of individuals. Abstract planning creates anarchy, and the bureaucratization generated by Stalin is a terrible evil. Society is choked by it. Everything becomes unreal, nominalistic. People see no purpose, no strategic goal, and thus they don't move, and thus the problem of individual incentive becomes insoluble. It is utterly useless to refurbish the idea of individual profit along capitalistic lines or to invoke the law of the market. We still think of capitalism as it was in the last century, but the nineteenth-century market is dead! On the other hand, under Stalinism one loses the taste for consideration of great alternatives. What kind of society do we want to build? A bureaucratic socialist society? An individualistic society based on industrialized mass production and consumption? A pluralistic society, decentralized, with low economic productivity? Such questions seem boring and useless. And, in fact, they are useless because they are the strategic questions which Stalinism is not capable of asking. Not only was Stalin not a Marxist, he overthrew Marxism, and thus today we have no real policy, no policy based on a strategic plan.

F.F.: What today can be done in the Soviet Union in order to emerge from Stalinism and return to Marxism?

G.L.: Little—very little, practically nothing. Because they have subordinated theory to practice, our Soviet friends are forced to use Marxism simply to rationalize immediate political necessities. For example, the dispute between the Soviets and the Chinese has nothing to do with Marxism. It is merely a conflict over political tactics which cannot be resolved because no general Marxist theory exists.

F.F.: From what do you infer the nonexistence of a general Marxist theory applicable to our day?

G.L.: From the fact that we have been losing ground, and things seem to escape us. There are new phenomena about which we have nothing to say. We wait for the great crisis of capitalism, but capitalism has had no significant crisis since 1929 because by now capitalism has taken hold of all social life. We don't like to say this, but it is true. The mass consumption of the workers has become a means for eliminating the crises of capitalism. From the market that Marx and Engels knew—structural, objective, in many ways revolutionary with reference to the stupidity of rural life and of tradition in general—we have moved to the manipulated market of this century. While our analysis stood still, capitalism continued to evolve. We stopped with Lenin. After him there has been no Marxism.

During the nineteenth century, for example, the length of the working day was an important question. It went from fourteen hours to thirteen to twelve to ten and so on. Today it is a different question. It is not so much the length of the work week that is important but how to understand and program what the workers do during their famous "free time"; what they consume, where they go, and so forth. In the nineteenth century the capitalist could be indifferent to the workers' capacity for consumption. Capitalism then was interested above all in basic investments, in heavy industry, and important sectors of collective life were bypassed. Today capitalism is profoundly interested in all social life, from ladies' boots to automobiles, cooking utensils to means of amusement. It is a qualitative change about which we know little. We must keep an eye on the evolution of the techniques of production, and therefore on the evolution of the division of labor

and on the repercussions of productive technology for professional roles and for the way the class struggle takes shape.

F.F.: I am interested in the role of intellectuals in shaping the general theory you call for. Can one still consider intellectuals as a separate social group, or are the intellectuals salaried workers like everyone else?

G.L.: No, it does not seem to me that intellectuals are purely and simply salaried workers like all the others. The so-called proletarianization of the intellectuals does not make them authentic proletarians. Intellectuals have quite special responsibilities. Among us, for example, they can have real power and play an important role in political decision. But they continue to complain. Like an adolescent with his first girl friend, he is proud of her, wants her to be seen in society, but is at the same time ashamed. The intellectual's relationship with power is ambiguous. The official propaganda continues to talk about the "dictatorship of the proletariat," but the intellectuals who pretend to be workers become ridiculous. How can one forget that even Marx and Engels were intellectuals and bourgeois, and of course Lenin himself came from an intellectual bourgeois family. We should remember what Lenin taught us, that the socialist conscience does not rise spontaneously from within the working class, that it is brought to the working class by revolutionary intellectuals. Exactly how this happens varies from one period to another, but there is no mechanical spontaneity in it, no fatalism.

Of course, we must at all costs avoid paternalism by the intellectuals, for paternalism is always concealed authoritarianism and therefore all the more insidious. But the fear of paternalism should not make us close our eyes to the importance, under certain decisive circumstances, of the role played by great personalities in history. What would have happened in 1917 in the Soviet Union without Lenin? Can we be sure that, in his absence, we would have had the October Revolution? Socialism is what men make of it. It is up to them to see that the construction of socialism is not impeded and finally suffocated by bureaucratization.