The Standpoint of the Proletariat After Lukács: Lucien Goldmann and Franco Fortini

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Abstract: This paper begins by showing how Georg Lukács' determination of the 'standpoint of the proletariat' resolved the theoretical and practical antinomies of bourgeois life in a too-abstract, philosophical manner. In Lukács' hands, the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat was construed as a philosophical necessity, and this made his thinking susceptible to substituting first the party, and then the party-leadership for necessary, but not yet complete proletarian self-transcendence. By the mid twentieth century this kind of wager was unacceptable for an increasing number of left thinkers. As paradigmatic, but selective inheritors of Lukács' legacy, the paper then explores the theoretical alternatives posed first, by the sociology of Lucien Goldmann, and then the negating powers of literary critic Franco Fortini. In grounding the standpoint of the proletariat in the maximum consciousness appropriate to a given time and place, Goldmann avoided Lukács' over-confidence. However, in times and places where liberal, reactionary, or a-political tendencies dominate, Goldmann's grounding strategy risks denying that there is a properly revolutionary standpoint at all. The political stance of 'doubt' offered in the poetry and literary criticism of Franco Fortini then provides a fine way to thread a path between Lukács' philosophical over-confidence and Goldmann's potentially de-radicalized sociology. By retaining the critical register of doubt, and using it to continuously test proletarian powers, Fortini insists on challenging the forms of creative, practical, and radical organization that can orient revolutionary practice. In this way, Fortini's commitment to communism offers an open-ended politics: the organized forms of refusing this world through which communism is pursued are as subject to criticism as they are in principle creatively inexhaustible.
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I was a communist
despite their certainties, despite my doubts
Franco Fortini (1966)[1]

1. Lucien Goldmann and Franco Fortini Inheriting Georg Lukács

Both Lucien Goldmann and Franco Fortini drew heavily on Georg Lukács' classical presentation of a riven social totality – a totality that is set on its historical path by the unfolding praxis of the proletariat. However, they drew their own versions of this tense social formation in ways that responded to a shared recognition of a deep problem

1 See also, Esther Leslie's reflective and recursive meditation on communist doubt, including analysis of Fortini's *Communism* (LESLIE 2018) and Thomas Peterson (1997: 35, 176).

in Lukács' work. The problem was a commitment to the "standpoint of the proletariat" derived in such a philosophical manner that, as an abstraction, so clean and clear in its philosophical derivation, it left Lukács open to the temptation of political substitutionalism. Both Goldmann and Fortini would then think the "proletariat" in more grounded ways and, in doing so, avoid Lukács' substitution of first the Bolshevik party, and then its leadership as avatars for a proletariat that they were, in fact, increasingly divorced from.

Following upon his own earlier literary analyses, Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* offers a powerful Marxist method for appreciating how modern social contradictions first develop and then dissolve. The strength of Lukács' argument stems from this distinctive method: he shows how the self-understanding of any given period is itself alive. It is moved by and thereby moves through the forces generated by its tensions. This self-understanding then has its own history, and this history of knowledge is connected to the ways society continuously makes and remakes itself first through and then beyond its constraining contradictions. For this reason, just who understands what, and how this understanding is either consciously or implicitly present as a possibility is tremendously important.

While society and its contradictions are never entirely transparent to itself, we can catch glimpses of this kind of reflective social knowledge in its unfolding. That is because this kind of social consciousness is generated, presented, and then reflected back to itself through the problems it takes up and tries to work out. Literature and philosophy, key genres of reflection and analyses, offer cultural objectifications – texts – that evince and even help clarify this self-consciousness. More than many others, these modes of writing reflect back to us the very nature of our predicaments. Indeed, each of Lukács, Fortini and Goldmann lean on both genres in developing their politically charged social analyses. Each traces the social consciousness expressed by texts, the contradictions they articulate, and, in part for that reason, they can each also read texts as signposts for radical possibilities.

Just as Lukács himself had appreciated the unfolding tensions of classical bourgeois philosophy in *History and Class Consciousness* as pointing to the radical, even revolutionary "standpoint of the proletariat", Goldmann and Fortini also insisted that texts be read in light of broader social problematics, histories, and the possibilities that

they signify. By approaching these cultural objectifications in light of the social pressures that conditioned their production, the historical possibilities appropriate to their genre, and the promises as well as limits within each social conditions, we can see them as vehicles for expressing values, hopes, and even a set of possibilities beyond their enveloping situation.

Despite this general similarity between the three, Goldmann and Fortini offer strategies for overcoming the problem they sensed in Lukács' "standpoint of the proletariat" in different ways. The specific problem lay in the fact that, in Lukács' hands, the "standpoint of the proletariat" was developed via a *philosophical* analysis of bourgeois antinomies. Though Goldmann and Fortini both inherited a tremendous gift in the way Lukacs analysed the social problems of an age through its literary and philosophical self-understanding, it is equally clear that they inherited the revolutionary confidence imbued in Lukács' "standpoint of the proletariat" in a peculiarly critical vein. Their closer attention to the social conditions of cultural production allows them to offer more nuanced and therefore, potentially more valuable determinations of the proletariat and its standpoint.

After developing first the value and then the problem in Lukács' approach, we will be able to see why, for Goldmann and Fortini, it produced an ill-conceived wager that, once staked, led the post *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács to dangerous forms of substitutionalism. We can then ask: how did these later thinkers avoid the insufficiencies in Lukács' approach such that, though in different ways, they both avoid his political neutralization of proletariat self-activity in the dead-end of Stalinism? Indeed, if Stalinism amounts to a substitution rather than an opening for proletarian praxis, as was abundantly clear to both mid-century thinkers, then through what narrower door can Goldmann and Fortini hope to pass? I'll argue, after reconstructing Lukács' position, that more than Goldmann, Fortini's approach better captures this politically important possibility.

Much hangs on just how proletarian potentials are construed. Despite Lukács' recognition of the fact that «it requires the most painstaking analysis to use the category of objective possibility so as to isolate the conditions in which the proletariat can 'strike at the heart of the totality'», Lukács himself did not spend much time analysing the

social and economic conditions of the proletariat. Both Goldmann and Fortini were therefore justified in feeling that developing the possibilities of proletarian politics not only required more careful social analysis than Lukács himself produced, but that doing so was a critical extension and grounding of Lukács own commitments. How Goldmann and especially Fortini articulated this social ground, and just how they construed proletarian possibilities, in turn determined the political upshots of their approaches.

The stakes are indeed high. If one cannot derive the necessity of the revolutionary proletariat from the bourgeois antinomies as Lukács had hoped, then just how can one construct a politically valuable notion of the proletariat? Recognizing these stakes, Goldmann and Fortini offer two responses. I first turn to Goldmann's strategy which, in its sociological ground, risks avoiding Lukács' philosophical confidence by altogether denying the proletariat's radical potentials. In honestly confronting the ebb of revolutionary politics, the logic of Goldmann's position risked annulling the revolutionary possibilities of the proletariat, instead accepting merely social democratic reforms. Goldmann thus avoided Lukács' problem, but did so at too high a cost. Fortini, however, offered a fine middle ground between these two less-than-ideal options. Fortini developed resources to hold onto revolutionary hope by, on one hand, stressing doubt against Lukács and, on the other, the open-ended possibility of testing proletarian powers against Goldmann.

2. *Georg Lukács'* History and Class Consciousness *as a False Opening, and an Unstable Inheritance*

The underlying logic by which Lukács thought of the proletariat and its revolutionary standpoint is developed in the classic essay, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* in *History and Class Consciousness*. In this essay, Lukács showed the insuperable impasses engendered by what he called the "antinomies of bourgeois thought".

Yet it is precisely here, at the level of the rigour and form of his philosophical essay, that a glaring problem emerges. Lukács' thinking was guided by the strict requirements

of logical analysis, which he then transposed in the speculative hope he both simultaneously insisted on, and problematized, in the figure of the proletariat. All the tension produced by this transposition of philosophical rigour into a theory of political practice is present in the very phrase "objective possibility". The logical necessity — the "objective" claim — brushes against the grain of what is far better thought of as a mere "possibility". The formal necessity of Lukács' logic, normally a great advantage of philosophical rigour, oversteps in its social application. This move from philosophical rigour to social application burdens Lukács' antinomy-dissolving "standpoint of the proletariat" with undue and ultimately, insupportable weight.

Lukács was right that painstaking analysis is required to work out the revolutionary standpoint of the proletariat as an "objective possibility" — but in addition to refraining from such analysis himself, he was silent on just what *kind* of analysis had to be painstakingly enjoined if one was to "isolate the conditions" for proletarian revolution. Lukács' philosophical strategy for thinking through the proletariat and the standpoint most appropriate to it was a distorted prism for integrating the social, economic, political, intellectual, and broader cultural conditions for revolutionary praxis. While modern philosophical problems, or "antinomies" as Lukács thought them, do indeed stem from the bourgeois conditions against which the proletariat ought to revolt, philosophical analysis cannot offer the fine-grained determinations of those specific conditions through which revolution approaches or recedes as a real, objective possibility. Lukács then ended up wagering on the necessity of a philosophically-derived possibility – instead of integrating the social analysis he had called for.

How did this happen? How did the great if not greatest thinker of proletarian mediation end up in such a position? Briefly following Lukács as he generated his philosophical position can help pinpoint avenues beyond it, avenues taken up by Goldmann and Fortini. But, to start with Lukács: inheriting the tradition of German Idealism, Lukács reconstructed not only insuperable antinomies at the level of ideas, as in Kant, but at the level of their bourgeois social basis. Following Fichte then, Lukács saw in immediately post-Kantian thought a tendency to dream beyond unstable grounds. The result (he feared) was romantic and irrational conceptions of the totality.

If this temptation to claim a seamless totality was resisted, the alternatives seemed to be just as bad. On one side there were uncoordinated, absolutely discrete, and independent

individualisms. On the other, mystical conceptions of individual-dissolving totalities. Individuals claiming themselves as the totality, and totalities obliterating the individual were just two sides of the same inability to thematize a coherent, integrated social ground: a basis for relating individuals and the whole in which they are, or at least could be, situated in a harmonious way.

The first step beyond this impasse was suggested in Fichte's philosophy. Fichte thought that the "I" was not to be understood as derivation or deduction, but as an *activity* of self-positing. His starting point was, therefore, a jointly conscious and practical accomplishment. Though it lacked or merely posited social integration in a productive and socially reproductive whole, picturing the "I" as an activity was a major step forward. Even if only for an individual, Fichte's central commitment to activity made it possible to consider the coincidence of subject and object. Each one of us, through our activity, is both a subject exerting our energies and the object that results. In this way, activity can work as a third and uniting term that avoids irrational commitments. Yet given its merely individualistic setting, Fichte's actively self-positing "I" claimed more than it actually earned its social horizons.

Tracing the philosophical resolution of this impasse, Lukács then read Fichte's jointly subjective and objective individual forward into the social situatedness of Hegel's *Geist*. In Hegel's strategy the whole is a set of unfolding social relations set on its path not by an individual, but by our collective self-making activity. Now not just individuals, but their coordination in and as social organisation is jointly subject and object. This social coordination, for Lukács, is the essence of praxis — a clearly Hegelian commitment with a Marxian application (LUKÁCS 1971: 126).

This step forward in the legacy of German Idealism is not, at least not primarily, the conception of an evolving social totality set on its path by the logical requirements of thought. Instead, in Lukács' materialist reading, it is an evolving social totality set on its path by the praxis of transforming social relations. Social relations evolve through the practices by which they generate and then resolve their own problems. Hegel, as many have noted, therefore forms the very crux of Lukács' reading of proletarian praxis. Yet crucially, what is meant by social relations can be pushed one step further to include *self*-relation. Indeed, for Hegel, social relations can become recursive: they have as their upper limits various ways of recognizing their own status, standing, and nature. The

path and its trajectory can be known. *Geist*, in other words, can come to know itself as a coordinating activity essentially determined by its unfolding path, including its path to just that kind of socially mediated self-knowing.

In this way, form and the content are tied together at two levels. First, the activity of the individual is not merely individual, but is shot through by social pressures. The form of social relations gives content and meaning to each and every individual by determining a horizon of options that conditions everyone's activity. And then at the level of the social whole, the form of social relations gives the whole its distinguishing flavours and substantive content. It also sets the rails for the specific ways individuals try to appreciate and then further clarify their social situation by negotiating their paths through it.

Even further, the very story Hegel, and in his own idiosyncratic way Lukács, tells about the relation between the unfolding social whole and the ways consciousness within it attempts to understand its situation requires its own historical account. In philosophy, the discipline which has tried to develop such an account, the way this story of coordination is told is determined by the standards appropriate to its genre. Philosophical praxis does not simply alight upon eternal philosophical truths, but situates claims in light of the social relations that permit truth (or at least claims to it) to take the shape that they do. Philosophical work, in other words, must itself be aware of its social history and the potentials as well as historically developed limits of its form.

In accordance with the structures of this necessarily recursive Hegelian approach, Lukács not only traced out, but criticised the evolution of bourgeois antinomies and their attempted dissolution through *merely* philosophical analyses, which is to say philosophical thinking unmoored from its social conditions and horizons. Philosophy that didn't consciously ground itself in the history of praxis - including its own - was bound to relate to bourgeois antinomies as merely thought-problems, rather than problems that stem from the form of consciousness appropriate to the given set of bourgeois social relations. Lukács was then quite right and on firm ground in claiming that such approaches were bound to, indeed necessarily, had to fail. Yet he derived the "standpoint of the proletariat" as the necessary working out of precisely these antinomies. He thus pushed the modality of logical necessity governing philosophical thought into the social history of philosophy's own problematic unfolding. In a

Hegelian way then, he insisted on the mutual determination of form and content, on praxis, and on the insufficiency of merely abstract philosophy.

Yet, in generating the standpoint of the proletariat from the legacy of German idealism, Lukács elevated the philosophical form of his tracing beyond the social content appropriate to its determination. By transposing the rigorous necessity characteristic of antinomies' production, and failed resolution, into an arena that requires a substantially different form of determination, Lukács violated his own standards of theoretical praxis. That is why he succumbed to his own version of abstract philosophising.

The problem is not so much with the notion of the proletariat, or with the idea that, through its revolutionary self-transcendence, that the contradictions of bourgeois society would be undone and its antinomies surpassed. It is rather with the undue confidence implicit in the assumption that the social antinomies to be undone by the proletariat would be worked out *necessarily* by its standpoint. As I have argued, «the very notion of an antinomy (nomos) infelicitously merges the necessity that determines the laws of thought with the possibilities characteristic of social life in a way that renders the link between the two far murkier than» ought to be the case (JAFFE 2020: 60-79). The possibilities for revolutionary praxis are shot through with contingencies, and their own species of social contradictions. They are not reducible to or mere functions of the rigorous, logical necessity appropriate to philosophical analysis, even self-reflective philosophical analysis, at one stage of its historical development.

Whether the strict mode of logical necessity is plucked from an unmoored and abstract philosophy, transferred from a retrospectively constructed account of the historically developing ground of philosophical antinomies, or imported wholesale from the tendential arrangement of laws that render an economic account of the present intelligible, the problem nonetheless remains. In each instance there is an unearned leap to a certainty in the standpoint of the proletariat. This means that as a project communism, in Lukács reconstruction, is tethered to the necessity of the proletariat's self-understanding, and its revolution. But this certainty, though philosophically defensible in his time and place, is not socially, which is to say, practically earned. Once this certainty is accepted, however, it opens the door, as others have noted, to substitutionalisms which replace actual proletarian possibilities with betrayals claiming

an undoubtable, necessary mandate (HENNING 2015: 283-290; JONES 1971: 46; MERLEAU-PONTY 1973: 47-ff; HUDIS 2001: 5; ARATO & BREINES 1979: 130).

To his immense credit, Lukács himself was aware of the way his analysis of bourgeois antinomies' resolution in the "proletariat" is itself subject to these tensions.[2] In addition to the strain on the very idea of "objective possibility", which Lukács repeatedly deployed,[3] we can read both: proletariat "consciousness is nothing but the expression of historical necessity," and then immediately after, the caveat that «dialectical necessity is far from being the same thing as mechanical, causal necessity» (LUKÁCS 1971: 177-178). Much then hangs on the modality – whether one of necessity or one of possibility - with which the dialectic guiding the proletariat is thought. The choice itself hangs on how (with which genres at which historical moments) its form is conceived and presented. If the dialectic guiding the proletariat is inherited nomologically via the history of philosophy conceived through the register of necessity, then the standpoint of the proletariat, despite the desire to avoid mechanical or causal necessity, will be formed in a way that fails even Lukács' own standard for philosophical praxis.

Fortunately, there are other paths. At this point, we can turn to Goldmann and Fortini who highlight, in exemplary ways, different alternatives. Instead of thinking through the register of necessity in an unearned faith in the communism to come, Goldmann and Fortini did better with the knowledge that socialism is far from a philosophically derived inevitability.[4] Their analyses of the form and history of antinomic knots and their possible, indeed only ever *possible,* dissolution are fine Lukácsian correctives to Lukacs' own error.

3. Lucien Goldmann, Possibility and the Significant Structure of Lukács' Commitments

In their own ways both Lucien Goldmann and Franco Fortini were deeply influenced by Lukács' praxis-based union of form and content. Both, again in their own

2 In this sense, and following Etienne Balibar, one might read Lukács'own development as an expression of the "Antinomies of 'Proletarian Politics'" rooted deep in Marx which Lukács could not resolve, except through "lapsing into metaphysics" (LUKACS 1971: 130-136, 133).
3 See "objective possibility" in Lukács (1971: 52, 205, 208-209).
4 I refer to the essay by Fortini *Il socialismo non è inevitabile* (FORTINI 1962 : 115-117) where Fortini, criticising an overly optimistic view, adopts a rather dim prognosis.

ways, showed how this valuable Lukácsian core could be developed such that theoretical praxis could better cleave to social potentials without, at the same time, falling prey to conceiving of such potentials as if they were necessities. In their hands, the fact that Lukács himself threw in his lot with the Bolsheviks despite their ever-growing drift from a party of, for, and ultimately beyond the proletariat could itself be socially analysed and criticised using the tools developed by Lukacs' own thinking. At any rate, exploring wherein and for what reasons Goldmann and Fortini departed from Lukács can help clarify their shared commitment to more precise, socially grounded determinations of the possibilities of the proletarian revolution and communism.

For his part, Lucien Goldmann sought to determine the standpoint of the proletariat not by way of its historical mission or any philosophically derived, supposedly necessary standpoint, but through its living capacities. Reflecting on Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, Goldmann wrote:

> The concept of actual consciousness must be supplemented by that of *bezogenes Bewusstsein*, which we have translated as the 'maximum possible consciousness', based on the concept of potential consciousness acting on reality and restricting its field of possible variations. This is the distinction which Marx made between a class in itself and a class for itself and without which we shall never understand anything about historical and social life. (GOLDMANN 1971: 65-84, 76)

For Goldmann, something of Lukács' tragic orientation in the latter's earlier literary essays, collected as *Soul and Form*, had survived in *History and Class Consciousness*. The tragic, all-or-nothing attempt to live an authentic, ethical life in which one tries to realise higher values within and against a vicious world was replaced by the wager Lukács staked in the "standpoint of the proletariat". What for a romantic individualism was the tragedy of higher values incommensurate with an inauthentic, meaningless world became the dialectically determined subject-object whose incommensurability with its enveloping conditions occasioned a radical reconfigure of the world itself (See: LÖWY 1979).

This shift in Lukács' thinking meant, for Goldmann, that the structure of Lukács' thought must be read in light of both Lukács' own dark personal story in the early 1910s, and the far more hopeful social conditions into which he meant to intervene in the late 10's, and early 20's. Beyond any stably determined ground, Lukács' standpoint

of the proletariat avoided the tragic pessimism of his youth. But it did so through a metaphysical resolution of antinomies that was in no way fated or truly necessary. For Goldmann, both the inauthentic world inimical to the higher values of Lukács' youth, and his idea of a capitalist totality determined and not yet transcended by proletarian praxis are better thought of as cultural objectifications beholden to their time and place.

Given this view's focus on the socio-historically specific determination of Lukács' ideas, the social whole (whether an inauthentic "world" or a capitalist "totality") is neither an existential problem to which individuals tragically succumb, nor is it something over and against which a heroic subject-object fulfils its world-historical mission. Rather, the whole is a concept that refers to a set of social relations, such that the structures conditioning this set's historically unfolding path require specific investigation, and selection amongst different possible ways of being represented. What the romantically tragic and the metaphysically heroic stances share was a vision — and thus a presentation first as a world and then as a totality — highly abstracted from any serious social analysis of their conditions. This distance separated both of them from any coherent notion of objective possibilities. And once removed from objective possibilities, the freely floating thoughts could no longer sponsor radical praxis.

Goldmann thus adopted Lukács determination of philosophical praxis, applied it to Lukács' mode of thinking and the texts themselves, and situated Lukács' revolutionary proletariat as a key part in the sociologically analyzable structure of Lukács' own work. The totality and the standpoint of the proletariat that would radically reconfigure it are then approached as representative objectifications of then existing possible consciousness. This was done in light of the then quite recent and, in the early 20's, still-hoped-for revolutionary upheavals. They are clear, even excellent examples of the possible consciousness appropriate to the social relations and conditions of Lukács' time.

Indeed, one can go so far as to maintain that in his time Lukács *might* have been right — the radical standpoint of the proletariat that he articulated was, at perhaps more than one point, very much a real possibility. His error, though clear in retrospect, was entirely justified as a practical commitment at the time. The fact that the possibility, signalled in Lukács' commitment to the revolutionary standpoint of the proletariat, failed to be actualized is not therefore proof of a philosophical error. It was rather an

error in thinking that Lukács' antinomy-resolving philosophical-historical approach to determining the proletariat could be mapped, one-to-one, onto the rapidly shifting structure of social reality. It was an error of relying on philosophy as such when a critical sociology was better suited to the task.

The necessity that organises Lukács' philosophical commitment to the "standpoint of the proletariat" is, of course, quite far from the organising structure or form of the Bolsheviks for whom he would become an apologist. This remains clear despite some of Lukács' own later attempts at rationalising away the difference. As Goldmann put it, his «return to the dialectic on the level of philosophy and fundamental sociological analysis could not lead Lukács […] to call in question the experience of the preceding years, nor above all to work out a radical critique of the structure of the Bolshevik party (the only party to have organised and led a victorious revolution) and to expose the dangers it held for both democracy and revolution» (GOLDMANN 1971: 70).

Lukács' wager was perhaps valid, and at least defensible, but the tools with which he staked his claim also engendered a persistent commitment that was far less so. Unlike Pascal's wager on God, one has a far better chance at knowing when a bet on the transcendence of bourgeois social antinomies is lost.

For Goldmann, Lukács' determination of the proletariat was not only refuted by the dominance of the Bolsheviks in the east who had long stopped pursuing communism. It was further disproven by the living conditions and relative advantages of a technocratic strata of managers and bureaucrats in the West. Though Lukács' faith in the proletariat was, perhaps, an understandable wager in the first quarter of the twentieth century, for Goldmann it was a romantic anachronism to be so committed only a few decades later.[5] Goldmann's sociological investigation into the arrangements conditioning theoretical works (like Lukács own *History and Class Consciousness*) shed light on the highest possible consciousness in a given time and place. By leaning on the structure of philosophical works in order to determine the shape of what remained social possibilities, Goldmann prevented himself from too strongly idealising bolshevism.[6] In

5 This difference in and sensitivity to historical conditions offers a fine response to Edward Said's rather negative comparison of the scholarly Goldmann to the practically committed Lukács (See: SAID 1982: 41-67; COHEN 1994: 6-7).

6 G. Markus has argued that «the 'uniqueness' of Goldmann's rediscovery of the author of *History and Class Consciousness* can be explained historically: he belonged to that undoubtedly very small group of

this way Goldmann developed the tools to read philosophical praxis as a cipher for the tensions and possibilities of its age including, in particular, Lukács' own.

Goldmann's sociological accounting of Lukács' philosophical analysis then closed the distance opened up by the latter's radical commitments and his mode of analysis. Yet in methodologically insisting on a social ground for Lukács' proletarian standpoint, Goldmann risks losing the radical commitments altogether. When this ground consists of non-revolutionary conditions and limited political horizons, Goldmann's approach loses the ability to insist on a properly revolutionary standpoint of the proletariat (MARKUS 1981: 135-136). Goldmann cannot insist on the proletariat as a potentially revolutionary agent if and when his analyses of possibilities reveal blinkered proletarian imagination, and stultifying social dynamics. In a society continually generating conservative or reactionary structures, the appropriateness of a deeply radical standpoint becomes increasingly hard to socially locate precisely when it becomes more and more necessary to do so. Given Goldmann's social-analytic strategy, when analysis of existing revolutionary possibilities reveals them as rather limited or worse, non-existent, it is indeed hard to develop the idea that the proletariat might have a revolutionary standpoint appropriate to it at all.[7]

Even though Lukács' thought did not track socio-historical developments in any fine-grained ways, for Goldmann this did not prevent it from being a great achievement. This is because, despite for a time doubling down on his problematic bet, Lukács' work revealed the tensions and values that gave shape to its age. Lukács' own fateful embrace of an idealised version of a proletariat was an objective possibility of thinking in revolutionary and nearly-revolutionary Europe at the time. Many made similar bets. Though the same was less the case in Goldmann's time, Lukács' work was produced under potentially revolutionary conditions that deeply marked it, and which quite evidently, still hold some power to condition social consciousness after the fact.

Despite Goldmann's criticisms, he credited Lukács with knowing the kind of leap he was making, grounding himself in the highest possible social stakes, and making a

Western radical intellectuals whose deep faith in an approach (with the ending of the war) of social transformation lead by the proletariat was accompanied with a critical distance toward the empirically existing forms of organisation of the proletariat as a class» (MARKUS 1981: 128).

7 Goldmann ends up arguing for certain forms of worker self-management which, in the absence of revolutionary developments to secure the broader and more liberatory social relations of production, shades into a rather limited reformism.

commitment through his work and its hoped-for effects. That his work failed to accomplish what he intended can be read, following Goldmann's more grounded version of Lukácsian thinking, as a symptom of the social antinomies of his own time. Lukács' success was limited by the rediscovery of dialectical philosophy on one hand, and a proletariat unprepared to achieve its highest possibilities on the other. Fortunately, against both Lukács' wager on the standpoint of the proletariat, and Goldmann's deracinated sociological determination, we can chart a path that preserves the advantages of both in Franco Fortini's strategy of doubt.

4. Franco Fortini or Communist Doubt between Philosophy and Sociology

Following Fortini's poetic epigram with which this essay began, the register of doubt remains a rich mine situated between what turned out to be Lukács' overly ambitious philosophical wager, and the constraints of Goldmann's sociology. Indeed, a certain amount of doubt is a valuable corrective to Lukácsian confidence in that it can preserve the revolutionary standpoint without over-extending the standpoint by way of a philosophically derived necessity. Like Goldmann, Fortini worked in the modality of possibility and grounded his investigation of revolutionary possibilities in social analysis. However, he did so without, as Goldmann's strategy risked, losing a clear commitment to the revolutionary standpoint most appropriate to the proletariat. Drawing out Fortini's selective inheritance of Lukács and departure from Goldmann will then help highlight the advantages of his own radical strategy.

To start, Fortini accepted whole cloth Lukács' method of thinking along with historically unfolding social relations. Relying on any a-historical determination of "nature" or the "natural" in social analysis is absolutely unacceptable. When what is "natural" is understood as either an authentic form preceding the corrupting influence of modern society, or when it is construed as the rigorously law-governed, bourgeois order, in both cases values attributed to the "natural" take the form of trans-historical absolutes. For Fortini there are no such absolutes, and the values that guide social practice have a social history. They are socially produced, and socially challengeable.

They evolve through socially mediated activity, and by focusing on the form and value creating power of artistic work, Fortini sought to analyse subterranean radical impulses. To make art is to give material content an intended form, and doing so relies not on fixed, ahistorical capacities or aesthetic values, but on historically determined productive powers and commitments. In giving shape to nature, artistic activity appears as an expression of freedom. As the bourgeois social order deepens its reification, increasing weight is then placed on this supposed realm of freedom and our aesthetic relation to it.[8] The more art looks like the lone remaining space of practically realisable freedom – because individuals can wilfully give content form — the deeper the social crisis.

Much then hangs on the self-consciousness of the artist and how the formative power of the artist is linked to proletarian praxis. Only through revolutionary upheaval could an artistic stance be disabused of its reification-induced response to ever-growing social burdens. Here it is worth following Fortini at some length as he focuses on poetry and aesthetic determinations of life:

> In confirmation of the correctness of the analogy proposed here: Both in poetry as value and in life as form are present simultaneously both the richness of meanings and possibilities and their radical insufficiency. The working class is coerced into the practical expenditure of its own life, into the performance principle, into immediately useful labour. In so far as it is the revolutionary class, or 'true' negation, it acts objectively to abolish the informality of its own existence and of existence in general, and thus to 'formalise' life. On the one hand this means discovering and practising the inexhaustible richness of life, the potential of restoring history: but on the other hand, it also means, in order to dominate the existent, the need to discover it as such, as illegitimacy, precariousness, insignificance, 'useless passion'. In the same way the formal nature of poetry puts forward both the potentially infinite richness of its modes and on the other hand its own futility and instability (even linguistic): the essential being of poetry is always as an ode to dust (FORTINI 1974: 63).

The conclusion that follows is straightforward: «The class which is necessity (and the movement which represents it) cannot institute the same kind of normal relations with

8 See Fortini citing Lukács' *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*: «As Lukacs had shown, from Romanticism to the present the increasing importance attributed to poetry and art has to be seen in relation to the extension of the process of reification in every other sector of human activity…If, particularly during the last century, poetry and art came to emerge as 'form'and 'structure'this is precisely because they appear as a kind of 'second nature'and as the only area of action which has apparently not yet been invaded by the sclerosis of reification» (FORTINI 1974: 61).

poetic formalisation as can its bourgeois antagonist, which is a class which claims to be and in fact is in possession of itself... poetry *seems* to have as its ideal destination the dominated and oppressed. But it only seems so» (FORTINI 1974: 63). Art gestures at a social possibility, but is radically incommensurate with its fulfilment. Proletarian lives must be inexhaustibly rich, exploding the staid bonds of bourgeois norms, but poetic writing and, more generally, living in such a way is still only a promissory note against a debt that only a deeper reorganisation of life could cancel.[9]

On this basis, Fortini does not commit to reading cultural objectifications as Goldmann would — as keys to the potentials of an age. Instead, Fortini tends to read cultural objectifications against the grain as registers of misplaced hopes and memories.[10] Analysis of the material and social conditions of artistic production can de-reify the barren promise of art, and point to the structures of domination that proletarian self-activity needs to not only remember, but signal in its present dynamics and ultimately surmount. This is why Fortini saw immense political stakes in his practice of literary criticism.

It is also why Fortini took Lukács to task for supporting the Bolshevik's imposition of socialist realism. Any state imposition of aesthetic forms reduces the infinite richness of life signalled in poetic creativity to mere propaganda. And worse than the reduction of the artist to state-ideologue, such a political project undercuts the exploratory, clarifying, self-reflective and potentially critical powers of culture. To be sure, the working class needed and still does need communist art, but more than anything such art requires the freedom to reject old forms while developing new ones. It requires an environment that encourages negating old forms, and exploring new ones in a way that represents and expands reflection on the dynamics at play in all aspects of culture.[11]

9 For the limited but formal importance and liberatory dimension of poetry in Fortini see Thomas E. Peterson's review (2014).

10 For the important role of memorial reconstruction of sedimented histories and Fortini's own autobiographical contribution to such efforts in *The Dogs of the Sinai* see, for instance, Giuliana Minghelli (2020).

11 Fortini described his own poetry as «agitated metrical and lexical experiments with topics related to persecution and conflict», as quoted in Giovanna Tomassucci (2019: 392). Tomassucci herself provides excellent and detailed analysis of Fortini's experimental creativity in his two anonymously penned wartime poems imagined as translations from the Polish. Still, this stress on experimental approaches should not be taken as a unilateral commitment to the development of avant-garde culture and criticism for its own sake. Fortini always remained staunchly committed to investigating and holding to account the conditions and institutions of all creative and intellectual production. On this score see Alberto

Here too, however, Lukács substituted the Bolsheviks and their state policy for the self-transcending, self-activity of the working class itself.

For Fortini, Lukács' error was «the political and historical error…of having believed that, from the time of the Popular Fronts (1934-5) onwards, bourgeois-critical intellectuals, allied to the Communist in the struggle against fascism, would have been able to refurbish the working-class movement (already Stalinised) with elements of Hegelian Marxism which had been present in the Soviet Union» (FORTINI 1974: 39). Lukács could make such an error because, for him «it is the *working class* that is the heir to philosophy, and it is the Soviet functionary of the First Five-Year Plan who… stands for the (lost) Russian working class and must reopen the way that leads from Lenin to Marx and from Marx to Hegel» (IBIDEM). Fortini then accepted Lukács' analysis of reification and the socio-historical analysis of cultural objectification but, like Goldmann, had deep cultural-cum-political inspired doubts about the philosophical form through which Lukács constructed the proletariat.

Of course the question then becomes how Fortini himself could avoid the Scylla of Stalinized Lukácsianism, without steering directly towards the Charybdis of Goldmann's sociology?

Like Goldmann, Fortini recognized that the mid-century potentials for revolution were significantly diminished, and though the communist goal remained the same, the paths towards it were increasingly hard to both decipher and traverse (FORTINI 2016: 106-107). One could no longer simply wager on the side of the Bolsheviks like Lukács had in the early 20s. Unlike Goldmann, however, Fortini insisted on testing radical powers here and now — in the concrete conditions in which one is immersed. It is neither, for him, a matter of «fus[ing] historical discourse, sociological discourse and aesthetic evaluation in some sort of interminable addition and synthesis» (IBIDEM), nor of gambling on an "absolute future" or "eschatological hope", but always of beginning with a committed and organised refusal.

Such refusals form the centre-piece of Fortini's strategic response to Lukács. As Fortini put it: «to say no to the Great Animal of the present, [one] does not need to 'wager' on a communist advent at the borders of history» (FORTINI 2016: 105; see also *Deus*

Toscano (2012: 12-13). More than anyone else, Toscano has been responsible for the still unfortunately limited interest in and access to Fortini in Anglophone contexts.

Absconditus FORTINI 2016: 315). Fortini's "no" is essentially a rejection of the terms, but he also acknowledged that one cannot simply stop with a refusal that leaves its conditions in place. After all, while rejection is undoubtedly necessary, it is nonetheless far from sufficient for revolutionary politics.

On this point Fortini was transparent. He knew that refusals may succeed, may be ground to dust by the gears of an overpowering machine, or may simply be forgotten and passed over in time. Fortini was never sure that the refusals and tests we are capable of would suffice. He was always sceptical that literature, criticism, philosophy, and more directly practical activity would turn out to be enough to overcome the ravaging and foreclosing power of Capital. Fortini was sure, however, that to be on even potentially viable paths their expressions had to flow from careful analysis of their constraining material conditions, and the forms of our efforts must reject the implicit norms and explicit dominance of existing modes of production. They had to be organised rather than individualistic expressions of moralism, while necessary institutionalizations ought to promote the organic ties of the militants to the working class that enable the self-reflexivity required to appropriately judge powers once tested.

Whether it is parties that stifle thought and critical engagement, prepackaged forms of easy cultural consumption, or the overbearing form of the commodity in its domination of creative and intellectual energies, the form of the refusal to be tested is part in parcel with its content and its social conditions. When refusals fail, as they are often bound to, there must be some recognition of error and an attempt to learn strategic lessons (PETERSON 1997: 26). For Fortini, this often meant joining but just as quickly leaving radical projects whose commitment to communism was unclear, became muddied through their practical engagements, or whose form of organisation precluded the honest, critical appraisal of its powers to pursue its claimed goals.

Fortini therefore always wagered on the proletariat, but unlike Lukács, what that wager amounted to was determined through each and every fight, as well as the memorial reconstructions we tell of their evolutions and revolutionary ruptures. There is not and never could be a single, clear-cut point of view, no blueprint for revolutionary practice. Yet Fortini did offer at least a version of a standpoint: nothing other than the standpoint

appropriate to the real movement that abolishes the present state of things.[12] Fortini's path is therefore best described, and indeed reflexively understood, as one of doubt. Abolition is necessary, and all stripes of attempted negations that might make it possible should be supported. But revolutionary potentials can and often do recede. Giovanna Tomassucci's description of Fortini's post-war poetry as guided by a «strong pathos that fluctuates between suspicion and hope», therefore quite accurately describes his political stance more generally (TOMASSUCCI 2019: 391).

Fortini's doubt is not an epistemological or metaphysical principle, but a political one which is necessarily situated in the struggles and social dynamics of its bearer's time and place. It is always self-reflective, open-ended, and antagonistic to traditional forms. It refuses any quietism or nihilism by demanding that lines be drawn, sides chosen, and that constraining powers be contested, fought by any means at our creative disposal (TOSCANO 2012). While recognizing the need for revolutionary institutions, organisational forms, and styles Fortini paired these needs, measure for measure, with the need for a critical relation to all such ossifications and potential dominations of struggle. For this reason, more than both Lukács' too-philosophical certitude and Goldmann's barren sociology, Fortini's doubt always pushed towards a sharpening of the skills and political models required to continuously pursue an expansive horizon of abolition. The freedom, creativity, right to dissent, not to join, to break from, and to test what is objectively possible, when fully enjoined in collective struggle, signal the future solidaristic society most appropriate to the standpoint of the proletariat in this one.[13]

5. Against a Closing Synthesis

Fortini's communism retains elements of both, but does not simply synthesise Lukács' philosophical Hegelian-Marxism with Goldmann's sociological analysis of

12 Fortini quotes this passage from Marx and Engels' *German Ideology* at the end of his late article *Marxism* (FORTINI [1983] 2015).

13 As Alberto Toscano put it, Fortini explored: «the possibility of forging literary forms capable not of mediating or representing capital but of prefiguring, without the illusions of an affirmation, the transformations of our formative capacities under communism. He thereby signaled his distance from Lukácsian critical realism, notwithstanding his attachment to the Hungarian Marxist's conception of standpoint» (TOSCANO 2016: 24).

cultural objectifications. He took from Lukács a communist commitment, and the social and historical unfolding of relations and their values. He then took from Goldmann the requirement that the maximum possible consciousness of an age be tied to existing relations and values, which are represented through cultural objectifications. Fortini's social investigations and critical analyses then surpass Goldmann's exploration of maximum possible consciousness because for Fortini this consciousness can refuse the constraints of its conditions through the works with which it engages the world. When sufficiently organised and forceful these refusals can not only clarify their actors' enveloping conditions, but reshape them.

The idea of a "maximum possible consciousness", which is to say, the tool by which Goldmann socially grounded Lukács' too-philosophical method, is transformed by Fortini into a fighting weapon. This consciousness, through the creative refusals it organises and sponsors, is a necessary part of the struggle to challenge and reshape the oppressions of the present. In Fortini's hands this necessity takes the form of a political demand, an organised need fought for and potentially won. The fight, however, is just as likely not to be won. Every struggle carries within it a doubt – one that refuses to think that its version of need is fated to be satisfied. No struggle can be thought of, let alone engaged along the lines of the modal "necessity" appropriate to Lukács' historical dissolution of antinomies. In this way, Fortini's communism assumes the "necessity" of the real movement that abolishes the present state of things while retaining the doubt that makes this necessity a distinctly political project, rather than a philosophical certitude.

Even when radical energies subside, and the communist horizon recedes, Fortini's approach can maintain a superior version of the standpoint of the proletariat to both Lukács' and Goldmann's. This is because Fortini's approach is grounded in the proletariat's ever-present needs for the social relations through which it can be fully liberated into its own creative, and free development. At any conjuncture, communism can be pursued as the abolition of the trials and constraints of capitalism, as well as any and all social formations that have calcified, and turned conservative in the face of incomplete emancipation. Fortini's communism is therefore open-ended, and the syntheses of the negating, refusing forms through which it is fought for are always precisely as doubtful as they are in-principle creatively inexhaustible.

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