

YEHUDI LINDEMAN

A CONVERSATION WITH GEORG LUKÁCS

Georg Lukács (1885-1971) was born in Budapest, Austria-Hungary. He earned a doctorate in political science from the Royal Hungarian University of Kolozsvár in 1906 and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Budapest in 1909. He published the books *Soul and Form* (1910) and *The Theory of the Novel* (1916) before joining the Communist Party and serving as deputy commissar of culture in Béla Kun's government. After this government was overthrown, he moved to Vienna and edited the journal *Kommunismus*. He also published the book *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), which had a tremendous influence on European intellectuals. He briefly lived in Berlin, but when Hitler came to power he moved to Moscow, where he edited the German journal *Internationale Literatur* and the Hungarian journal *Uj Hang*. After the war he returned to Hungary and became a professor at the University of Budapest. He also joined Imré Nagy's government and was deported to Romania following the Soviet invasion in 1956. He was eventually allowed to return but was forced to remain in seclusion until 1965, when he was publicly honoured. The following interview was conducted in Budapest in September 1970 and published in the spring 1984 issue. In his introduction, Lindeman explained that his goal was "to meet the most influential Marxist critic of our time and to question him especially about his life as a communist and private citizen, his public loyalties, and his personal feelings and idiosyncrasies."

Yehudi Lindeman: My first question concerns the languages that you use. Do you have a preference? You started out with short contributions to *Nyugat*, a Hungarian periodical, and your first book was published in Hungarian (1910) and in German (1911). Which language do you prefer?

Georg Lukács: My mother was an Austrian, and we were brought up bi-



Georg Lukács photographed by Horst Sturm (1952)

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lingually, in Hungarian and German simultaneously. I can't remember any time when I didn't speak fluent German. I remain bilingual until today; though, when it comes to philosophical problems, I prefer to express myself in German.

Lindeman: Do you like to write?

Lukács: Do I like it? That is irrelevant: whether one likes it or not is of secondary importance. Anyone with a thought that he considers essential has to write, in order to give it accurate expression, so that others can have access to it. Writing is a necessity, like speaking.

Lindeman: Do you write every single day? Do you keep a diary? Do you feel an inner compulsion to write? How do you feel during periods when you aren't writing?

Lukács: Sometimes there are months, even years, during which something is being mentally prepared. Then one and a half years of thought and reflection can sometimes be written down in the period of a month. I don't keep a diary because, even though I have dealt in the past with the widest possible range of problems, I have never been preoccupied with myself. I believe, along with Kipling, that there is too much ego in the cosmos. I like to find the truth, but I am not interested in my own individual personality. It is an instrument: I have never looked at my own personality in any other way. To lie by oneself on a couch, thinking about oneself—that is unimportant. The human personality expresses itself in the manner in which it introduces specific things into society, and in that way the generic development of mankind, its evolution, is affected and promoted. About that development we would know much less if Beethoven hadn't written his compositions. You can tell why I wasn't interested, for a very long time, in the writings of Sigmund Freud, although today I find some of his theories quite interesting. Freud's theories are sometimes quite hypothetical, as for instance in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*: it isn't true, for instance, that one fails to remember something because of one's inhibitions. It is much more plausible that one has forgotten it! I like to read the Mexico-based author Erich Fromm, who has made an effort to explain some of Freud's phenomena from a social angle. From a biological viewpoint a purely psychological

explanation is one-sided. There is, after all, a social or sociological aspect to the way in which a child grows up, and those two can't be separated: we are dealing with dual determination.

Besides Fromm, Marcuse is not without significance. He is an honest thinker who tries to find a way out of the present crisis of our society, which is a very real and serious one. But Marcuse is a bit of a utopian: at present there is no realistic way to get out of the impasse. The situation today is very different from the time when *The Communist Manifesto* showed the way. This applies as much to Eastern Europe as to the West: in fact, it applies to the entire world. Today we must deal with capitalism as it exists right now. Things have changed a lot in my lifetime, and I don't always find it easy to remember that. When all is said and done, in my childhood one could rent a horse-drawn carriage and that was about it. To my generation the automobile came a very long time later. I was twenty years old in 1905: I belong to the era of gas light.

Lindeman: Since we are talking about your childhood, I wonder if you would care to talk about your early years, your reaction to your parents, and your relation to Judaism and Zionism.

Lukács: My mother was a superficial bourgeois type, whom I couldn't stand at all ever since my earliest childhood. My father I respected, I idolized him from a distance, although, even at a young age, I must have been eight or nine, I remember looking at him with a good deal of irony and compassion, because he was so short-sighted. I am talking about his inability to see what was so glaringly obvious to me—namely, that my mother was a cipher, a nothing. As for my feeling towards my mother, later on it turned very quickly into indifference. With my father I had a good relationship. He belonged to what you might call the Hungarian nobility, as he was the director of a large bank. There was a group of Jews who were of a high rank, socially, and my father was one of them. The emancipation of those Jews had succeeded very well, but they remained Jewish in their identity all the same. About the Zionist movement, I remember how my father used to say, yes, there may very well be a Jewish state in Jerusalem one day, and then I will be the Jewish consul general in Budapest! As far as religion is concerned, one might call the atmosphere at home one of religious indifference. Judaism as such has not played a role in my life. My position towards anti-Semitism? That

has been the same as my position against fascism.

Lindeman: What about your extended stay in the Soviet Union from about 1933 to 1945? What was it like to live there?

Lukács: Do you mean to ask me how free I was in Moscow?

Lindeman: Yes.

Lukács: Though certain positions were clearly taboo, one could usually avoid those by changing the formulation of it around: that way, polemical exchanges were quite possible. One taboo concerned my book about Hegel: according to Andrei Zhdanov, Georg Hegel was one of the principal traitors among the bourgeoisie during the period following the French Revolution. For that reason it was impossible to get the book published. I wrote a lot during my stay in Moscow, and the company there was excellent. I was fortunate enough to escape the big wave of arrests, even though I had generally opposed the Komintern position since the 1920s. I was arrested only once, in 1941, and spent a couple of months in jail.

Lindeman: Are there any special influences on your thinking and writing, such as Max Weber, who was in Heidelberg while you were a student there in 1912-1913, or literary authors, such as Thomas Mann or Arnold Zweig?

Lukács: I knew Friedrich Gundolf well. My own development also owes a great deal to Thomas Mann. I read *Buddenbrooks* while I was still at the *gymnasium* and also *Tonio Kröger*. Any personal ties? Hardly: I met Thomas Mann in 1920 and we used to write letters to each other, that is all. Arnold Zweig I knew much more intimately. Whenever I was in Berlin, I visited him, and when he came to Budapest he would visit me. But actual influence? It is hard to tell. I think Georg Simmel was very important to me, as were some of the philosophers, but that was all in my bourgeois period, prior to 1918. Ernst Bloch made a tremendous impression on me. I felt that he and I shared something very important: both of us were opposed to the kind of philosophy that was taught in the universities. From what I saw of Bloch, it became evident to me that it is also possible to philosophize outside the walls of the university, just as was the case in the time of Hegel and Fichte.

The people whom I respected the most I didn't know in person. Some of the work of the Hungarian lyric poet Endre Ady that was published in 1906 made an unforgettable impression on me and has had a lasting influence. Béla Bartók I barely knew in person, but what a great influence he had on me! Why? As you may remember, according to Lenin the development taken by capitalism led to a split in two separate directions: the Prussian road, in which the feudal element was retained, and the American road, in which all feudalism has disappeared. In literature there is a line that runs from Alexander Pushkin to Anton Chekhov (and in close proximity to Maxim Gorky), which goes entirely counter to the Prussian way of thinking. The poet Ady and the composer Bartók are the Hungarian representatives of this opposition to the Prussian road, hence their influence on me. Though the subject matter of music may be undetermined, this shouldn't distract us from realizing the important part played by music: a composer is able to give clearer and more accurate expression to a period than can be done in literature. Beethoven's position vis-à-vis Napoleon, as expressed in his *Eroica* symphony, is much clearer than that of either Goethe or Hegel.

Lindeman: Could you be more precise? You aren't talking about programmatic music, are you?

Lukács: Programmatic? That is only a phrase. Monteverdi, for instance, defines his position vis-à-vis the crisis of Renaissance society with enormous clarity. Among all the Renaissance painters only Tintoretto comes close to matching his clarity of position. In the Renaissance we witness the ideological search for a solution to the problems of its society: this search is both ideological and utopian—it is the search for a “New World.” What follows is the development of modern capitalism. Music is especially capable of expressing this development: when we are looking for the presence of an ideology in a certain society, surely we cannot concentrate exclusively on that which is capable of being expressed verbally only.

Lindeman: Would you care to comment on “utopian” solutions to the problems of individuals (if not of society as a whole) and what significance this might have, in your opinion, for the future of our world? Would you say that any new developments of lasting value can be worked out in that way? I'm thinking, for example, of the many young people who have chosen

to live on the land instead of the city—a “return” to the land (by living on a farm in, say, Vermont or New Hampshire) that may have been influenced by the ideas of Thoreau, the nineteenth-century American author.

Lukács: Utopia—that stems from a period when it was thought that the human mind was incapable of any further development. Basically, the idea comes to us from the Renaissance, which treated the human mind as a homogeneous substance that is not capable of being reduced any further. And the development of something irreducible is, that goes without saying, very limited.

Lindeman: Do you yourself have any utopian vision that would clarify what you mean and at the same time show what your utopia looks like?

Lukács: Utopia is that particular product of the human mind that, as the Marxists have pointed out, cannot be realized. Remember, a man who believes in utopia does not accept society as it is. Such a man can afford the luxury of feeling very peaceful: each time he looks at himself he sees a superior human being. Some of the schemes following the French Revolution, such as those envisioned by Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, are good examples of utopian thinking. They clearly belong to the capitalist era in history. Marxism, on the other hand, holds that any thought-out utopian vision cannot possibly be realized. Marxism takes its cue from that which can be realistically accomplished within a given society.

Utopian thinking is a peculiar mode of thinking, as it is an attempt to find a solution for a specific crisis in human relationships. Symptomatic for the utopian mode of thought are the concepts and actions found today among certain groups of students in France: according to their position, work will again become some sort of play, which doesn't make sense at all. The same goes for your young Americans on a farm or commune near Boston: we are dealing here with escapes from society on the part of very small groups of people. You may, if you like, compare this to a good marriage, which is also—in a small way—a kind of commune. It is a nice idea, but it amounts to an escape from society. As an idea it isn't effective at all within any given society, with its enormous ships and industries.

Lindeman: Do you think that the utopian idea is a dangerous thing?

Lukács: No, not at all. Let me say a few perhaps rather obvious things about the reality of society as I perceive it. Our present-day society is not only a consumer society, but also one that is prestige-oriented and competitive. Individuals seem to have a manifest need to feel superior to the next person. You may take as an example an ordinary advertisement for Gaulloise cigarettes: it seems to suggest that you can prove your wisdom by smoking Gaulloise! You can prove, that way, that you are a superior person! Such an advertisement is like a drawing by Honoré Daumier in that it allows one to see the truth of an era through a caricature. Many people are willing to sacrifice their own feelings and give up their own personal interests in order to prove that they are better than their neighbours. This urge to feel superior is so pervasive, apparently, that young children while still in school are already full of dreams about doing better than their peers. If the young start out spending much of their time dreaming about competition and superiority, they will end up inventing all kinds of qualities for themselves that they cannot possibly possess in reality. The result of all this is frustration on a massive scale—something that can be seen all around us and that must be viewed as a peculiarly contemporary social phenomenon.

Lindeman: What is your standpoint about this so-called division between East and West, and to what degree do you consider yourself a representative of Middle European culture: one eye to the East, one eye to the West, at home in both. Some critics obviously considered Mann a “Westerner,” citing for instance *Tonio Kröger* as an example in support of this position, while others held that Mann was among those who tried to create a synthesis between East and West. Do you think of yourself as one of those who attempted to create such a synthesis?

Lukács: East and West? That is such nonsense! Gogol and Dostoevsky, for instance, they are Easterners, yes? Very beautiful. But how can one make separations in this way? Just think of the great influence that Dostoevsky has had, and still has, in the West. In that way . . . (triumphantly) the West becomes . . . Eastern. No, these are all myths. There are no East and West. All that we can talk of is the bourgeoisie, which is everywhere, and certain differences that exist or existed within those bourgeois societies.

Look at France and England: there feudalism was stamped out and its place is taken today by capitalism. As I said before, according to Lenin

there existed, within the bourgeois world, a Prussian and an American way, a Prussian and an American road, both economically and politically. Two roads, but not “East” and “West.” The Prussian road was distinctly different because of the historical fact that Bismarck never got rid of the nobility.

Lindeman: Could you be more explicit about the “Prussian road”? What was the Prussian ideology all about?

Lukács: Thomas Mann expressed it well when he spoke about German culture as an inner nature propped up by external force (*machtgeschützte Innerlichkeit*). Russian authors such as Pushkin and Chekhov, but also Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, were forever battling against this Prussian tendency. Even without being socialists themselves, they were opposed to and took action against this capitalistic and undemocratic culture. In no way can you call those authors “Eastern” or “Western.” What you find in them is a position that asserts the equality of all man versus one that believes in the basic inequality of man. In Arnold Zweig’s work we may seem to find the East set against the West, but “Eastern” here means Prussian and “Western” refers to an idealized situation—namely, that in France at the time of the Dreyfus affair. Even so, it is true enough that there are real differences between Germany and the “West.” The Germans of the bourgeois class have always equated virtue with keeping their mouths tightly shut. Their motto was, keeping quiet is the supreme civic duty. As a result it is impossible to imagine that anything like the Dreyfus affair could happen in Germany. For the Germans to take a position in favour of the equality of all man is something unthinkable: no, that couldn’t have possibly happened in Germany.

Lindeman: Could you illustrate the difference between Germany and other Western nations with some other concrete examples?

Lukács: Germany never followed the road of democracy to its end. It is true to say that the inequality of the Negro was accepted as a foregone fact in pre-WWII America. But while in the United States the question was one of equality versus inequality, in Germany it was a question of nobility versus non-nobility: it mattered if one had the right blood or not. Consequently, democracy was never able to send down firm roots there. An example? The University of Düsseldorf turned down the chance to change its name to

Heinrich Heine University. The reason for this ought to be clearly understood: until this day Heine, though born in Düsseldorf, is not considered a true German: being a Jew, he remains a foreign element (*Fremdkörper*) among “real” Germans. Conversely, Heinrich Heine, of all the German poets, has exercised by far the greatest influence upon the writers of France. In order to understand the course of German history, it is essential to realize that Hitler was not an unexpected, sudden event. On the contrary, the foundations that made Hitler’s rule possible were laid at the time of the defeat of the revolution way back in 1848. In Germany we have no ordinary inequality, but an undemocratic inequality. When the great Emil Lask was killed in battle, he died as a common soldier. He could not obtain any rank, let alone that of officer, because he was a Jew. And that while almost anyone from a “German” family could become a lieutenant. Among the bourgeois democracies, France is much more democratic than Germany. After he lost the referendum, De Gaulle withdrew from the presidency. Taking such a cue from the people would be something unthinkable in Germany. Germany’s basic inequality has very deep roots. Its culminating point came with Hitler, but it is hard to eradicate it completely: it exists until today. Certainly everyday life is much better in Italy than in Germany. When a German discovers that a shirt is missing from the laundry, he shouts and raises hell. Compare to that a scene from everyday life in Florence, in which a shop owner is talking to a woman and highly praising her son’s shrewd intelligence. “You should be proud of that little boy of yours,” he says. “He is truly a genius: every day I try to give him a little Greek or French coin as part of his change, and everyday he politely returns the coin to me.” That story says something about the quality of everyday life in Italy; in Germany such a scene would be almost impossible to imagine.

Lindeman: What about the everyday life of the writer-critic in a communist country? Aren’t they overly isolated from the rest of the world? They hardly see any foreign movies, for instance, and they don’t read the foreign press while foreign books are hard to come by. Doesn’t that limitation in looking out result in even more limited insights?

Lukács: As a generalization this may be true for a lot of critics and writers, but on the other hand many works are available to us in translation. Many people here are quite familiar with Western literature and also, for that mat-

ter, with Western music. In other words, it is possible (though not easy, maybe) to obtain as good an insight here as it is in the West. Certain books are hard to obtain here, but not impossibly hard. The works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for instance, are well known here. And many critics are able to tell you precisely in what way Solzhenitsyn's novels are indebted to the works of James Joyce, even as they admit that the Russian author is a great original novelist himself.

Lindeman: But what about the expression of their insights. Aren't your possibilities for free expression cramped by the fact that you live in a communist state? Has this limitation affected your own ability to express yourself freely, and does this bother you? And is there any solution for this?

Lukács: Let me tell you a story about free critical expression from pre-revolutionary times. As a twenty-year old young man in bourgeois Hungary I used to write essays. So it was natural that I be hired to write theatre reviews, and this is what happened when I wrote my first review for a Hungarian newspaper. In the evening I went to see the play; and since I was both young and radical, I didn't mince my words and wrote that it was a very bad play indeed. At 10:00 a.m. the next morning I handed in my review, and at 11:00 a.m. I was fired. So much for your bourgeois freedom of speech! No, I can't see that the limitations that exist in bourgeois society are any less severe than they are here. They are probably equally strong. I have certainly been able to criticize the official communist line sufficiently, as is clear, for instance, from my strong opposition to the views of Zhdanov. It is a fact that every society considers certain matters taboo; there are, for instance, a lot of things that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* won't print, period. Do you seriously think that that newspaper would ever print an article in praise of my activities? Certainly not: each article that they print is carefully "adjusted." Then that is called freedom of press. On the other hand, it is also true that I have had trouble in getting some of my works printed. Sometimes the publication of a work has taken a very long time. Thus I finished my book about Hegel in 1937, but I had to wait for its publication until 1947. At that time it appeared in Switzerland, but not in the Soviet Union.

Lindeman: Could you comment on the role of Marxism and the Marxist ideology in the world today, particularly in relation to Western, American-

style capitalism, its economics, and its politics?

Lukács: Let me speak plainly. The reason that I am being read in the West is that people today are vastly more interested in communism than they used to be. Twenty or twenty-five years ago, for instance, it was still possible to ignore communism altogether. Then came the Vietnam war. After Vietnam, it was thought, it would be abundantly clear that the American way of life would be triumphant in our world: cybernetics would win, the war would soon be over, and the enemy would be defeated. But what turns out to happen? The partisans are winning in Vietnam. This is one of the reasons why there is a new kind of interest in the nineteenth century. It used to be normal to think that the nineteenth century presented us with an image that was totally passé—an image that had become obsolete, along with its theory of knowledge. Now it has begun to occur to people that it is not without interest after all.

Lindeman: Does that amount to saying that Marxism is a respectable ideology today?

Lukács: In the old days, people who could be trusted in other matters, and generally expressed themselves in a precise manner, suddenly changed when it came to Marx and Marxism. Take Max Weber, for instance, who is able to announce, without further explanation, that Lasalle's right of the labourer to the proceeds of his own labour simply doesn't work in practise, period. It was only with regards to Marx and Marxism that people felt free to say whatever they wanted. Another example: according to Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, in *The Destruction of Reason*, called Freud a fascist. There is no ground whatever for this accusation, for Freud isn't even discussed in *The Destruction of Reason*. Normally decent scholars could only indulge in such nonchalance in relation to Marxism, for Marxism didn't count—it was *hors de loi*. Now this has begun to change, as people must behave just as decently in matters concerning Marx as in all other matters. The fact is that the nineteenth century and its issues have a great deal of actual significance. Far from being obsolete, the problems of the nineteenth century are very relevant. Insight into those problems is of much aid in solving the problems that face us today. It is in this sense that the past twenty years have been a great step forward.