

## Philosophy in Review



# Konstantinos Kavoulakos, "Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism."

Bryan Smyth

Volume 40, Number 1, February 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068153ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068153ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Smyth, B. (2020). Review of [Konstantinos Kavoulakos, "Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40 (1), 22–24. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068153ar>

Copyright, 2020 Bryan Smyth



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Konstantinos Kavoulakos.** *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism.* Bloomsbury 2018. 264 pp. \$114.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474267410); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350155282).

The last decade has seen a definite uptick of philosophical interest in the thought of Georg Lukács. This interest has largely taken the form of reconsidering the main claims made in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), a series of essays Lukács wrote after his seemingly abrupt 'turn' to Marxism in 1918, the best-known (and longest) of which presented a rich and provocative analysis of reification. Although severely censured (and effectively censored) by Comintern officials at the time as a work of counter-revolutionary idealism, *History and Class Consciousness* (HCC) nonetheless exerted a profound underground influence on twentieth-century Marxist philosophy, especially on what has come to be referred to—following a somewhat misleading characterization originally coined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty—as 'Western Marxism.' For many of these thinkers, HCC seemed to hold open the prospect of a Marxist alternative to the dogmatism and reductionism of Stalinist orthodoxy, even though Lukács himself came to repudiate the work and acquiesce in that very orthodoxy. But as it was typically approached within philosophical frameworks that differed from that in which it was written, this hopeful expectation tended to fall flat, and by the end of the century a disparaging view of HCC as indeed a work of idealism had established itself as more or less standard consensus. This consensus is fragile, however, in that it brings together those who see this idealism in either subjective or objective terms. In this and other ways, the contemporary philosophical dismissal of HCC echoes the political condemnation the book received in the 1920s, and much of the recent renewal of interest in Lukács is aimed at shaking up this consensus on the basis of more rigorous textual and contextual research, especially with regard to how HCC relates to Lukács' earlier work from the 1910s. This new book from Konstantinos Kavoulakos is an exemplary contribution to this aim.

The main idea is that the belated reception of Lukács occurred in contexts where HCC was misperceived as a work of *Hegelian* Marxism. To be sure, there are Hegelian aspects in it, and the work is commonly referred to in those terms. Yet, as far as the philosophical origins of HCC are concerned, Lukács was no Hegelian. It is well known that, in addition to the influence of neo-Kantian figures in sociology such as Georg Simmel and Max Weber, Lukács was deeply immersed in the metaphysical and epistemological debates that preoccupied Southwest German neo-Kantian philosophers such as Heinrich Rickert and, especially, Emil Lask. This immersion is usually discounted by those interested in Lukács' Marxism on the assumption that his 'turn' took him far away from all that. Andrew Feenberg notes the folly of this assumption in pointing out, in the Preface he wrote for Kavoulakos' book, that many of the key claims in HCC are expressed in the unmistakable idiom of neo-Kantianism itself—most notably, the notion of *Gegenständlichkeitsform*, 'form of objectivity.' Closer attention thus needs to be paid to that context, and this is precisely what Kavoulakos—who signals his intellectual debt to Feenberg on several occasions—undertakes to do in considerable detail in this book. The goal is to push back against the mistaken assumption concerning the Hegelian character of HCC, to show that standard rejections of the work hinge on misinterpretations stemming from that assumption, and hence to show that a theoretically viable and politically timely text awaits those who approach it through the prism of Lukács' prior engagement with neo-Kantianism.

Between an introductory chapter and a concluding epilogue, the discussion is developed across nine main chapters, equally divided between three parts. Part 1, which is by far the weightiest, is where Kavoulakos deals most directly with Lukács' engagement with neo-Kantianism in order to

reconstruct ‘the philosophical presuppositions of Lukács’ early Marxism.’ Building on that, in Part 2 Kavoulakos offers ‘a radical reconsideration of Lukács’ theory of rationality and modern society,’ which leads him, in Part 3, to a corresponding reconsideration of the ‘theory of social and political change’ implied by HCC (10).

Part 1 is anchored on an analysis of what Kavoulakos calls ‘the central problem of modern philosophy’ (14), namely, the problem of content, that is, the material content of knowledge as opposed to its rational or conceptual form, and the different ways in which Rickert and Lask respectively addressed it. Genuinely to solve this problem would mean ‘capitulating’ to neither the dogmatic claim that content necessarily follows form, nor the skeptical resignation that content is ultimately irrational. These antinomial perspectives comingle in Kant’s own conception of transcendental idealism, and they shaped the neo-Kantian context as well. Whereas Rickert addressed the problem of content by construing cognition in effectively ethical terms based on the primacy of practical reason—a subjectivist position that ultimately capitulates to skepticism—Lask developed a more objectivist interpretation of the Copernican revolution in which rational form ultimately follows content understood in ontologically categorical terms. Lask thus severely reduced the active role of the subject, but he was also wary of speculative tendencies such as Hegelian emanatism. In Kavoulakos’ reading, however, in its one-sidedness this view still amounted, for Lukács, to another hopeless formalism, such that he considered Lask, no less than Rickert, to have capitulated before the problem of content (58). In neither case was there any real reconciliation with form—the antinomy of subject and object remained, and Lukács turned his attention to post-Kantian philosophy for a solution.

What Kavoulakos’ discussion very instructively shows is that in doing so Lukács did not cut ties with neo-Kantianism. On the contrary, he remained indelibly influenced by it such that his encounters with Fichte and Hegel were critically mediated by commitments he shared with Lask especially. Lukács appreciated the latter’s objective emphasis on content. While Lask could only see a hypostatized conceptuality in Hegel, Lukács found the primacy of content (62) reflected in Hegel’s view of history when this is de-systematized, so to speak, on the basis of a Laskian reformulation of Fichtean ethical action (48), as well as ideas concerning historical knowledge drawn from Rickert (74-6). The primacy of content thus becomes the primacy of historical praxis understood in terms of an ongoing process of mediation of subject and object (88), and hence as the site of the dialectical emergence of the ‘radically new’ (82). Kavoulakos shows that, for Lukács, the key to this holistic perspective lay in Lask’s ‘form of objectivity’ concept. Corresponding ontologically to ‘the historically unique form of the mediation of man and world in a specific epoch,’ and epistemologically to ‘the logical structure of the theory of historical and/or natural reality’ (90-2), it was his dialectical take on this notion that enabled Lukács to prioritize materiality while also retaining an essential role for subjective praxis, and thus to sketch, beyond the impasse of subjectivism and objectivism, a *practical* solution to the problem of content that profoundly prefigured the Marxist view of HCC.

In Part 2, Kavoulakos relates this background to the account of reification laid out in HCC. In addition to discussing how this account represents a synthesis of ideas drawn from Marx, Weber, and Simmel, Kavoulakos argues that it crucially, if only implicitly, distinguishes between the phenomenon of reification itself, and the modern (capitalist) form of objectivity, understood as a specific kind of abstract ‘calculative rationality’ based on the commodity form, that generates this phenomenon. For Lukács, reification has to do with the ‘second nature’ that the form of objectivity establishes as a veil of dehistoricizing mystification over relations between subject and object. While it is commonly claimed that Lukács conflates reification with objectification—a charge that is closely

linked to accusations of impracticable idealism—Kavoulakos' reading suggests a profound philosophical coherence that deftly situates the possibility of dereification within the scope of human transformative praxis.

In Part 3 Kavoulakos discusses such praxis as aiming at a radically new form of subjective consciousness through the revolutionary establishment of a post-capitalist form of objectivity. Far from any sort of idealist messianism, Lukács' view of praxis should thus be seen as 'a practically oriented diagnosis of historically concrete possibilities of subjectification opened up in specific social conditions' (177). These possibilities are real, although there are also real limits to dereification, both internal organizational limits, and external limits pertaining to nature. To his credit, Kavoulakos devotes a chapter to these limits, but it is unclear whether further work, especially concerning any sort of dialecticity in nature, will affirm the open historical process of dialectical mediation that he has discerned in HCC.

Kavoulakos' intention to rehabilitate Lukács as a genuinely revolutionary thinker is admittedly polemical, and while the argument is pursued with meticulous rigor, it is greased at certain points with generous doses of exegetical charity (e.g., 140, 178). Nevertheless, the book provides a fresh and fascinating reading of Lukács. Part of the original excitement over HCC was that it took up Marxism with an unprecedented level of philosophical sophistication. In painstakingly recovering some of that, Kavoulakos provides essential material for a sorely needed re-radicalization of contemporary Critical Theory.

**Bryan Smyth**, University of Mississippi