

Marxism: Lukacs on Hölderlin - There is no greatness in Stalinism

Friday 13 November 2020, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 10 November 2020).

In this article, Michael Löwy defends the original Marxist project against the pro-Stalinist criticisms of the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek.

* * *

Georg Lukács' writings in the 1930s, despite their limits, contradictions, and compromises (with Stalinism), remain of great interest. This is especially the case with his 1935 essay on Hölderlin [1], entitled "Hölderlin's Hyperion," translated by Lucien Goldmann and included in the volume *Goethe and His Time* (1949) [i].

Lukács is literally fascinated by the poet, whom he describes as "one of the purest and deepest elegiac poets of all time," whose work has "a profoundly revolutionary character." But, contrary to the general opinion of literary historians, he stubbornly refuses to recognize him as a romantic author. Why is this so?

Since the early 1930s, Lukács had understood very clearly that romanticism was not simply a literary school, but a cultural protest against capitalist civilization in the name of the values of the past - religious, ethical, cultural. At the same time, he was convinced that, because of its past references, it was an essentially reactionary phenomenon.

The term "romantic anti-capitalism" appears for the first time in an article by Lukács on Dostoyevsky in which the Russian writer is condemned as "reactionary." According to this text published in Moscow, Dostoyevsky's influence results from his ability to transform the problems of romantic opposition to capitalism into "spiritual" problems; from this "small anti-capitalist and romantic bourgeois intellectual opposition (...), a wide path to the right is opened for reaction, today for fascism, and, in exchange, a narrow and difficult path to the left, for revolution" [ii].

This "narrow path" seemed to disappear when he wrote, three years later, an essay on "Nietzsche, Precursor of the Fascist Aesthetic." Lukács presents Nietzsche as a continuator of the tradition of romantic critiques of capitalism; like these, he "opposes, at all times, the inculturation of the present, the high culture of the pre-capitalist periods, or the beginning of capitalism." For him, this critique is reactionary, and can easily lead to fascism [iii].

We find here a surprising blindness. Lukács does not seem to perceive the political heterogeneity of romanticism and, in particular, the existence, alongside reactionary romanticism, which dreams of an impossible return to the past, of a revolutionary romanticism, which aspires to a detour through the past, towards a utopian future. This refusal is all the more surprising since the work of the young Lukács, for example, his essay "The Theory of Romance" (1916) belongs to this romantic/utopian cultural universe [iv].

This revolutionary current has been present since the origins of the Romantic movement. Let us take

as an example Discourse on the origins of inequality between men of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755), which we can consider as a kind of first manifesto of political romanticism, his fierce criticism of bourgeois society, inequality, and private property is made in the name of a more or less imaginary past, the State of Nature (still inspired by the free and egalitarian customs of the indigenous "Caribs"). However, contrary to what his opponents (Voltaire!) maintain, Rousseau does not propose that modern men return to the forest, but dreams of a new form of libertarian equality, that of the "savages": democracy. We find utopian romanticism in various forms, not only in France, but also in England (Blake, Shelley) and even in Germany – was not the young Schlegel an ardent supporter of the French Revolution? This is certainly also the case with Hölderlin, a revolutionary poet who, like many post-Rousseau romantics, is possessed by "a nostalgia for the days of an original world" (*ein Sehnen nach den Tagen der Urwelt*) [v].

Lukács is forced to admit reluctantly that in Hölderlin we find "the romantic and anti-capitalist features that, at that time, did not yet have a reactionary character." For example, the author of *Hyperion* also hated, like the romantics, the capitalist division of labor and narrow bourgeois political freedom. However, "in his essence, Hölderlin (...) is not a romantic, although his criticism of nascent capitalism is not devoid of certain romantic features" [vi]. We perceive in these lines that they affirm one thing and its opposite, that is, Lukács' own shame and his difficulty in clearly demonstrating the revolutionary romantic nature of the poet. At first, Romanticism "did not yet have a reactionary character..." Does this mean that all of the Frühromantik, the first period of Romanticism at the end of the 18th century, was not reactionary? In this case, how can we proclaim that Romanticism is, by nature, a retrograde trend?

In his attempt, against all evidence, to disassociate Hölderlin from the Romantics, Lukács mentions the fact that the past they refer to is not the same: "The difference in the choice of subjects between Hölderlin and the Romantics – Greece versus the Middle Ages – is therefore not simply a difference in subjects, but a difference in worldview and political ideology" (p. 194). However, if many Romantics refer to the Middle Ages, this is not the case for all of them. For example, Rousseau, as we have seen, is inspired by the way of life of the "Caribs," these free and equal men. We also find reactionary romantics who dream of the Olympus of classical Greece. If we take into account the so-called "neo-Romanticism" of the end of the 19th century (in fact, the continuation of Romanticism in a new form), we find authentic revolutionary romantics such as the libertarian Marxist William Morris and the anarchist Gustav Landauer who are fascinated by the Middle Ages.

In fact, what distinguishes revolutionary from reactionary romanticism is not the kind of past it refers to, but the utopian dimension of the future. Lukács seems to perceive this in another passage of his essay when he evokes the concomitant presence, in Hölderlin, of a "dream of a return to the golden age" and of a "utopia beyond bourgeois society, of a true liberation of humanity" [vii]. He also sees perceives the kinship between Hölderlin and Rousseau, in both of which we find "the dream of a transformation of society" through which "it would become natural again" [viii]. Lukács is therefore very close to considering Hölderlin's revolutionary romantic ethos, but his uncompromising prejudice against romanticism, labeled "reactionary" by definition, prevents him from reaching this conclusion. In our opinion, this is one of the main limits of this brilliant essay...

The other limit refers to Lukács' historical-political judgment on Hölderlin's irreducible post-Thermidorian Jacobinism, compared with Hegel's "realism." As he notes, "Hegel accepts the post-Thermidorian epoch, the end of the evolutionary period of the French Revolution, and builds his philosophy precisely on the understanding of this new turn of evolution in world history. Hölderlin does not accept any compromise with post-termidoriana reality; he remains faithful to the old revolutionary ideal of a renaissance of ancient democracy and is crushed by a reality that had no place for his ideals, even on the poetic and ideological plane."

While Hegel understood “the revolutionary evolution of the bourgeoisie as a unitary process, whose revolutionary terror, like the Thermidor and the Empire, were only necessary phases,” Hölderlin’s intransigence “led to a tragic impasse. Unknown, crying for no one, he fell like a poetic and solitary Leonidas, from the ideals of the Jacobin period to the Thermopylae of the Thermidorian invasion”[ix].

Let us recognize that this historical, literary, and philosophical fresco does not lack greatness. It is no less problematic... And, above all, it contains, implicitly, a reference to the reality of the Soviet revolutionary process, such as it was at the time when Lukács was writing his essay.

This is, in any case, the somewhat risky hypothesis that I tried to defend in an article published in English under the title “Lukács and Stalinism,” and included in a collective book, *Western Marxism*, a critical reader (London, New Left Books, 1977). I also included it in my book on Lukács, published in French in 1976, and in English in 1980 under the title *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* [2]. Here is a passage that summarizes my hypothesis about the historical frame outlined by Lukács in his article on Hölderlin:

“The meaning of these observations in relation to the USSR in 1935 is transparent; suffice it to add that Trotsky published precisely in February 1935 an essay in which he first used the term “Thermidor” to characterize the evolution of the USSR after 1924 (“The Workers’ State and the Question of the Thermidor and Bonapartism”). With all the evidence [cited], the passages quoted are Lukács’ answer to Trotsky, this inflexible, tragic and lonely Leonidas, who rejects the Thermidor and is condemned to a dead end. Lukács, on the other hand, like Hegel, accepts the end of the revolutionary period and builds his philosophy on the understanding of the new turn of universal history. However, let us note in passing that Lukács seems to accept, implicitly, the Trotskyist characterization of Stalin’s regime as Thermidorian” [x].

However, it was with some surprise that I read, in a recent book by Slavoj Žižek, *a passage on Lukács’ essay on Hölderlin, which takes up, almost word for word, my hypothesis, but without mentioning the source:*

“It is clear that Lukács’ analysis is deeply allegorical: it was written a few months after Trotsky launched his thesis that Stalinism was the Thermidor of the October Revolution. Lukács’ text should be read as a response to Trotsky: he accepts the definition of the Stalinist regime as “Thermidorian” but gives it a positive meaning. Rather than lamenting the loss of utopian energy, we should, in heroic resignation, accept its consequences as the only real space for social progress” [xi].

I don’t think that Mr. Žižek read my book on Lukács, but he probably noted my analysis in the article published in the widely circulated collection, *Western Marxism*. Since Mr. Žižek writes a lot, and quickly, it is understandable that he does not always have time to quote his sources...

Slavoj Žižek made many criticisms of Lukács, some of which are quite paradoxical: Lukács “became, after the 1930s, the ideal Stalinist philosopher who, for this reason and unlike Brecht, set aside the true greatness of Stalinism” [xii]. This commentary can be found in a chapter of his book curiously entitled “The Inner Greatness of Stalinism” – a title inspired by Heidegger’s argument about the “inner greatness of Nazism,” from which Žižek rightly distances himself by denying all “inner greatness” to Nazism.

Why did Lukács not understand this “greatness” of Stalinism? Žižek does not explain, but he suggests that the identification of Stalinism with the Thermidor — proposed by Trotsky and implicitly accepted by Lukács — was a mistake. For instance, for Žižek, “the year 1928 was a disturbing turning point, a real second revolution – not a kind of Thermidor, but the radicalization resulting from the October Revolution...” Therefore, Lukács and, in the same way, all those who did

not understand “the unbearable tension of the Stalinist project itself” did not realize its “greatness” and did not understand “the emancipatory-utopian potential of Stalinism!” [xiii] Moral of the story: it is necessary “to stop the ridiculous game of opposing Stalinist terror to the ‘real’ Leninist heritage” – an old argument of Trotsky’s taken up by the “last Trotskyists, these true Hölderlins of present-day Marxism” [xiv].

Is it the case, then, that Slavoj Žižek is the last of the Stalinists? It is difficult to answer, all the more so as his thought manages, with considerable talent, the paradoxes and ambiguities. What can one think of his great proclamations about the “inner greatness” of Stalinism and its “utopian-emancipatory potential?” It seems to me that it would have been more just to speak of the “inner mediocrity” and the “dystopian potential” of the Stalinist system. Lukács’ reflection on the Thermidor seems more pertinent, although it is also questionable.

My commentary, in the article “Lukács and Stalinism” (in my book), on Lukács’ ambitious historical portrait of Hölderlin attempts to question the thesis of continuity between the Revolution and the Thermidor:

This text by Lukács undoubtedly constitutes one of the most intelligent and subtle attempts to justify Stalinism as a “necessary” and “prosaic,” but “progressive” phase of the revolutionary evolution of the proletariat, conceived as a unitary process. There is in this thesis – which was probably the secret reasoning of many intellectuals and militants more or less linked to Stalinism – a certain “rational core.” Yet, the events of the following years (the Moscow Trials, the German-Soviet pact, etc.) would demonstrate, even for Lukács, that this process was not so “unitary.”

I add, in a footnote, that old Lukács, in an interview with the *New Left Review* in 1969, has a more lucid view of the Soviet Union than he did in 1935 when he commented that its extraordinary power of attraction lasted “from 1917 to the time of the Great Purges” [xv].

But let us return to the point: the questions raised by Žižek’s book are not only historical, they concern the very possibility of an emancipatory communist project based on the ideas of Marx (and/or Lenin). In fact, according to the argument he proposes in one of the strangest passages of his book, Stalinism, with all its horrors (which he does not deny), was ultimately a lesser evil than the original Marxist project! In a footnote, he explains that the question of Stalinism is then out of place: “The problem is not that the original Marxist vision has been subverted by unexpected consequences. The problem is this very vision. If Lenin’s, or even Marx’s, communist project had been fully realized, according to its true core, things would have been much worse than Stalinism: we would have had a vision of what Adorno and Horkheimer called *die verwaltete Welt* (the administered society), a society totally transparent to itself, regulated by the reified general intellect, from which all vagueness of autonomy and freedom would have been banished” [xvi].

It seems to me that Slavoj is very modest, why hide in a footnote a historical-philosophical discovery whose political importance is evident? In fact, up until now, liberal, anti-communist, and reactionary opponents of Marxism have simply made Marx guilty of the crimes of Stalinism. As far as I know, Žižek is the first to argue that, if the original Marxist project had been fully realized, the result would have been worse than Stalinism.

Is it necessary to take this thesis seriously, or would it be better to attribute it to Slavoj’s unrestrained taste for provocation? I cannot answer this question, but I am inclined to the second hypothesis. In any case, I find it difficult to take this absurd statement seriously, a skepticism no doubt shared by those (especially the youth) who remain interested, to this day, in the original Marxist project.

Michael Löwy

Notes

- [i] G. Lukács, "L'Hyperion' de Hölderlin", Goethe et son époque, Paris, Nagel, 1949, p. 197.
- [ii] G. Lukács, "Über den Dostojewski-Nachlass", Moskauer Rundschau, 22/3/1931.
- [iii] G. Lukács, "Nietzsche als Vorläufer des faschistischen Aesthetik" (1934), en F. Mehring, G. Lukács, Friedrich Nietzsche, Berlin, Aufbau Verlag, 1957, pp. 41-53.
- [iv] See, M.Löwy, R.Sayre, "Le romantisme (anticapitaliste) dans La Théorie du roman de G. Lukács", in Romanesques, Revue du Centre d'études du roman, Paris, Classiques Garnier, n° 8, 2016, "Lukács 2016: cent ans de Théorie du roman".
- [v] Hölderlin, Hyperion, 1797, Frankfurt am Mein, Fischer Bücherei, 1962, p. 90. For a discussion about the concept of anti-capitalist romanticism and its diverse political expressions, see: M. Löwy, R. Sayre, Revolte et mélancolie. Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité, Paris, Payot, 1990.
- [vi] G. Lukács, Hyperion, op.cit., p. 194.
- [vii] G. Lukács, op.cit., p. 183.
- [viii] Ibid., p.182.
- [ix] G. Lukács, op.cit., pp. 179-181.
- [x] M. Löwy, Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires. L'évolution politique de Lukács 1909-1929, Paris, PUF, 1976, p. 232.
- [xi] S. Žižek, ed., La révolution aux portes, Montreuil, Le Temps des Cerises, 2020, p. 404.
- [xii] S. Žižek, op.cit, p. 257.
- [xiii] S. Žižek, op. cit., note 49, p. 419.
- [xiv] S. Žižek , op.cit., pp. 250-52.
- [xv] M. Löwy, G.Lukács, op.cit., p. 233. It's true that the massacres of forced collectivization at the beginning of the 1930s were barely known outside of the USSR.
- [xvi] S. Žižek , op. cit., note 47, p. 419.

P.S.

- No Borders on November 10, 2020:
<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/11/10/michael-lowy-there-is-no-greatness-in-stalinism-a-reply-to-slav-oj-zizek/>
- Michael Löwy is director of research at the Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique

(France). He is the author of, among other books, *The Political Evolution of Lukács 1909-1929* (Cortez) and, most recently, edited *Revolutions* (Haymarket Books, 2020). This article first appeared in *A terra é redonda* on September 20, 2020 and was later published in *Insurgência*.

- Original translation by Fernando Lima das Neves.
- Translated by Héctor A. Rivera for No Border News.
- For international news and analysis from working-class, oppressed peoples, and socialist points of view, read No Borders News (<https://nobordersnews.org/>).

Footnotes

[1] Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin was a German poet and philosopher. Described by Norbert von Hellingrath as “the most German of Germans”, Hölderlin was a key figure of German Romanticism. Wikipedia

[2] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2222-georg-lukacs>