

GYÖRGY LUKÁCS AND STALINISM: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE POLITICS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

One of the arguments that is used frequently by the critics of György Lukács is built around the label of Stalinism, a label which obviously discredits the Hungarian philosopher in the eyes of those left wing sympathizers who are less familiarized with his writings and his activity. If for the neoliberal and/or conservative public it's usually enough to use the stamp of Marxist to damage the image of an author or the ideas he releases, for those who have progressive views, only bringing into discussion Stalinism, maybe the most horrible face of the left wing totalitarianism, can really be harmful for the target of the attack. Therefore, it is easily understandable why well intended critics, but also individuals who with clumsiness are trying to hide the anti-Semitism which fuels their contempt towards Lukács, equalize him with a doctrine which provoked so many destructions in Central and Eastern Europe. But how much truth there really is in this accusations which many take for granted?

My study focuses on some aspects from Lukács' biography, but the main component of the analysis is represented by fragments from books and articles written by the philosopher, and also from the interviews that he has given. To better understand these texts, I rely on volumes dedicated to Lukács's life and activity. For the clarity and depth of my conclusions, I also consult some elements from the writings of an important philosopher of the XXth century linked to the Marxist theory, Leszek Kolakowski. The main conclusion of my research is that we cannot label Lukács as a fully committed Stalinist.

Key words: *György Lukács, Stalinism, Marxism, Leninism, Leszek Kolakowski*

INTRODUCTION

György Lukács' work has so many meaningful and intellectually provocative components, that it is difficult to delimitate a certain area of it for a profound analysis. So, one might ask, why did I chose from such a large field the subject of the author's relation with Stalinism? Obviously, my choice has to do with the recent decision of the Budapest City Council to remove the Lukacs statue from a central park of the Hungarian capital¹. This decision is, without any doubt, a political one, and it is fuelled by a certain ideological vision. During his tireless activity, Lukács had periods of political involvement, but also had long periods when, voluntarily or not, he retired exclusively on the fields of philosophy, literature and aesthetics. Now, once again, and obviously against his will, after almost 46 years from his death, he is brought back in the political arena.

Those who supported the decision that was taken by the Budapest City Council, or advocated for it, explained their stance using several arguments. One of the arguments that was used very often is that in the 21st century, in the capital city of a country that is member of the European Union (EU), you cannot have a statue of an outspoken upholder of a murderous totalitarian ideology. In their view, having here a statue of György Lukács was the equivalent of having a statue of Martin Bormann, Alfred Rosenberg, Lavrentiy Beria or Vyacheslav Molotov. But is there any shred of truth on which this comparisons can be based? Inarguably, Lukács was a Marxist philosopher. He was also, as we will point out below, a faithful adept of Leninism until the end of his life, although he distanced himself from Lenin in certain points in his final years. But is this the kind of crime that a democratic regime cannot forget and forgive? If we look at the United States of America, the answer is no: in Bronx, New York, there is an entire monument built to honour Antonio Gramsci, another important Marxist-Leninist philosopher.²

But what if one can prove that Lukács was not only a Marxist-Leninist, but he was also a representative of Stalinism, maybe the most terrible face that left-wing radicalism has ever had? Obviously, in this case, the philosophers detractors are right: his statue's place is not in a public place of a democratic country. Therefore, the goal of my research is to try to determine, at least partially, what was the nature of the relation between Lukács and Stalinism. As I pointed out in the title of the study, this relation is a complex one, and, as I will explain in a more detailed manner below, those who analysed it were not able to draw some conclusions that could be unanimously accepted in the academic environment. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that my analysis will be able to highlight some aspects that will show us if those who accuse Lukács are right or not.

Firstly, I will present the manner in which some historians and political scientists define Stalinism and Leninism, what differences and similarities they see between the two political theories, and what approach is correct from my point of view. In the following section, I will expose the way Lukács sees Stalinism after 1956. After this moment, going chronologically backwards, I will try to identify some relevant details regarding the philosopher's positioning towards Stalinism during the years

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/lukacs-debate/>, accessed on April, 2017.

² Retrieved from <http://observer.com/2013/07/thomas-hirschhorns-gramsci-monument-opens-at-forest-houses-in-the-bronx/>, accessed on April, 2017.

when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was ruled according to this doctrine. Finally, before the conclusions, I will refer to Kolakowski's opinions on Stalinism, and on the relation between Stalinism and Lukács. The only methodological tool that I will use during this steps is the qualitative method of content analysis.

1. STALINISM: A BRIEF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining Stalinism has proven to be a difficult task for many intellectuals who treated this subject. The term, which at a first sight seems as clear as the terms „Marxism” or „Leninism”, is an ambiguous one, being both obvious and elusive. It may be used to describe a movement, a type of political practice, a political, economic and social system, or a belief-system/ideology [Dallin, Patenaude 1992: 1]. Although those who use it might not have in mind always the same thing, almost all of them tried to explain the nature of the links between it and Leninism. From this point of view, we can identify three main currents: many intellectuals consider that Stalinism is the natural successor of Leninism, and even without Stalin, the political practice in the USSR would have been the same in the decades that followed Lenin's death; other authors claim that Stalinism was one of the possible outcomes of the basis built by Leninism, and it maintained some of the characteristics of the mother-doctrine, while modifying others; finally, there are many voices that declare that the essence of Stalinism was counter-revolutionary and therefore this movement betrayed Leninism [Dallin, Patenaude 1992: ix].

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski is one of the main promoters of the idea that Stalinism was inevitable from the moment the Bolshevik Revolution triumphed [Kolakowski 1990: 2], and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Zbigniew Brzezinski are between those who share his views. Speaking about the current these two represent, the Russian political writer Roy Medvedev has the following observations:

„Stalin himself constantly maintained that he was first and foremost a loyal disciple of Lenin, merely continuing the work of his teacher, and that his activities in every respect represented implementation of Leninist designs. The same was repeated by people in Stalin's immediate entourage, who additionally made the point that Stalin was the best disciple, the one most steadfast in his continuation of Lenin's work. However, many none too objective Sovietologists also find it quite tempting to identify Stalinism with Marxism and Leninism and to portray socialism only in its perverted Stalinist form. This is very much the view proclaimed far and wide by Solzhenitsyn, according to whom there never was any such thing as „Stalinism”, since Stalin always followed in Lenin's footsteps and was only a „blind, mechanical executor” of Lenin's will. An approach of this is convenient not only for those who would like to discredit every variety of socialism as a matter of principle, but also for those who favour the rehabilitation of Stalin and Stalinism. Nevertheless, it's wrong.” [Medvedev 1979: 183].

The American political scientist and historian Robert Tucker also rejects Kolakowski's arguments, underlining that his theory does not explain the process of destalinization started by Nikita Khrushchev. Tucker claims that although Leninism

contributed to the birth of Stalinism, the latter is a distinct phenomenon which does not flow directly from the former [Tucker 1977: 78].

Returning to Medvedev, he also admits that from certain points of view, Stalinism was a continuation of Leninism. But, according to him, this continuities must be studied with sober, scholarly investigation, and not with sweeping generalizations or demagogic assertion [Medvedev 1979: 184]. Turning to the differences between the two doctrines, he states that the violent acts that they fuelled are not facts that could support their equalization, because of the different historical circumstances during which these acts were made. More precisely, the crimes of Leninism were made during a counter-revolutionary war, and were aimed to save the Bolshevik state; the crimes of Stalinism were made to strengthen a one-man dictatorship [Medvedev 1979: 185-188]. If we look at the policies the two leaders implemented, the differences are much more contrasting:

„Stalin’s policies were in no way a reflection of Leninist objectives: the abolition of NEP, the hasty implementation of forced collectivization, mass terror against well to-do peasants in the countryside and „bourgeois specialists” in the cities, industrialization largely by harsh administrative rather than economic measures, the prohibition of all opposition both within the Party and outside, the revival of the tactics of „war communism” in utterly different circumstances – in all this Stalin acted in defiance of clear Leninist directives, particularly those that appeared in his last writings of 1921-22”. [Medvedev 1979: 188-189].

Thus, Medvedev defines Stalinism as a form of pseudo-socialism, fuelled by conservative tendencies and built on a highly bureaucratized structure [Medvedev 1979: 194]. Nevertheless, he also highlights that Lenin was not some kind of saint who never committed political errors or who never resorted to cruel expedients in the course of political struggle. But, unlike Stalin, Lenin was never interested in personal power, he only wanted more power for the Party and for the proletariat [Medvedev 1979: 192].

If we were to accept Kolakowski’s vision as true, then the matter of the relation between Lukács and Stalinism would be clarified from the beginning. Considering that he never repudiated Leninism, we could draw the conclusion that his ideas and beliefs were also inextricably linked with Stalinism. But Medvedev’s and Tucker’s arguments build an overview that convincingly contradict those who claim that USSR’s history would have been unchanged even if Lenin had led the country until 1953. Therefore, in my analysis I will focus on what Lukács declared and wrote about Stalinism in the last two decades of his life, and also on earlier ideas and actions of the philosopher.

2. LUKÁCS ON STALINISM AND HIS POLITICAL ACTIVITY AFTER 1953

The information presented in this section tend to indicate that Lukács was a fierce opponent and critic of Stalinism. Before even mentioning the arguments he used to condemn this political practice/doctrine, we can say that he proved with his last major political action that he opposes Soviet totalitarianism and that he is willing to contribute to a reformation of the Hungarian communist regime in a way that could

erase from this regime the residues of Stalinism. This action is made in the context of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956:

„Lukács took an active role in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and was Minister of Culture in the government of Imre Nagy. Lukács was arrested when he fled to the Yugoslav Embassy by the Soviets as they repressed the Hungarian Revolution. He was exiled to Rumania for about six months. He was a supporter of the reform movement in Eastern Europe and the ideas of 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia fill these pages³.” [Lukács 1991: 4].

Although the revolution was against the Soviet rule imposed by the Khrushchev regime, a regime that was starting the process of destalinization, it is beyond any doubt that one of its major goals was to erase definitely Stalinist practices from Hungarian politics.

As the Canadian writer Norman Levine observes, Lukács was part of the revolution, but was not a representative of its main current:

„In my interpretation, Lukács was part of the Leninist opposition to Stalinism, which was a centrist position in the 1956 revolution in Hungary. By the phrase „Leninist opposition” I mean a political reform movement which did not want political pluralism, or a market economy, or to have Hungary withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, but which saw the Leninist tradition itself as offering possibilities for the reform of Stalinism and specifically looked upon the New Economic Policy of 1921 in the Soviet Union as the basis of such a communist reformation.” [Lukács 1991: 5].

So, we can see that the fact that Lukács never abandoned Leninism makes him automatically incompatible with Stalinism, although, as we will see below, he refused to expose this incompatibility during the years of Stalin’s rule. Nevertheless, this incompatibility with Stalinism does not mean that he was compatible with liberal democracy or the process of building open societies.

As the Hungarian philosopher G. M. Tamás affirms, in 1956 Lukács was part of a genuine Socialist revolution⁴. And no one could suspect that he joined the new and ephemeral government because of political opportunism. In the years that preceded these events, he participated at meetings of the Petőfi circle, which somehow prepared the revolution, and here he stated the necessity of a renaissance of Marxism. Also, the tensions between him and the Stalinist regime led by Mátyás Rákosi were of notoriety, as we will see below, even from the final years of the 5th decade of the 20th century.

The Process of Democratization is a book that Lukács wrote in 1968, in the aftermath of the Prague Spring, and which was published only at more than 10 years after the author’s death. According to Levine, this work represents the philosophers last pleading against Stalinism:

³ My note: the pages of the book *Process of democratization*.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-never-ending-lukacs-debate/>, accessed on April 2017.

„On a more political level, Lukács’s book is his final statement that Stalinist bolshevism is a deformation of Marxism. „The process of democratisation” is an effort to distinguish a Marxist theory of politics from Stalinist bolshevism. It is a dissident work, an expression of the „Lenninist opposition”, a statement that Marxism cannot be reduced to Stalinism and that Marxism is a refutation of Stalinism”. [Lukács 1991: 4].

Indeed, he sees Stalinism as a harmful form of bureaucratic totalitarianism, that betrays the core principles of Marxism, and he argues that the return to Leninism is the best weapon that can be used against this kind of deformed socialism [Lukács 1991: 26-27].

It is obvious, therefore, as Levine points out, that Lukács’s anti-Stalinism after 1956 is irrefutable [Lukács 1991: 26-27]. In *The Process of Democratization* he explains that Stalin in the same time destroyed Leninism, and used Lenin’s heritage to consolidate his own power. Using arguments similar to those seen at Medvedev, he underlines that Stalin also destroyed the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry which fuelled the Revolution and rejected NEP [Lukács 1991: 111]. More than this, Stalin used war communism, a form that was repudiated by Lenin, both theoretically and practically. Thus, Lukács can be considered not only an opposer of Stalinism in the last years of his life, but also a theoretician of the differences between Leninism and Stalinism. Differences which also include the cult of personality, nationalism (the theory of socialism in one country) and even anti-Semitism.

Preoccupied until his last days not only with the reformation of communism through a renaissance of Marxism, but also with the best tactical approach to globalize the revolution, the philosopher sees the residues of Stalinism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as a barrier in front of the exportation of socialism in the Occidental countries:

„...I would like to stress again and again the tremendous importance that the genuine liquidation of Stalinism in the socialist countries could have for the movements in the capitalist countries (...) I always say that we are for the time being demolishing Stalinism in a Stalinist way, and a genuine demolition will only succeed when we break radically with Stalinist methods.” [Pinkus 1974: 102-103].

According to his views, there are two alternatives for the countries from the socialist bloc: Stalinism and socialist democracy, and only the latter can be appealing for those who live in capitalist countries [Lukács 1983: 21].

All the information presented above leave no place for doubts: Lukács was not a Stalinist, and this fact highlights even more the irrationality of the decision to remove his statue from Budapest. But we must take into account that the actions and declarations exposed in this section were made after Stalin’s death. The philosopher actually never rejected or condemned Stalinism before 1953. So can we say that this makes him only a post-Stalinism anti-Stalinist?

3. LUKÁCS DURING THE STALINIST ERA. KOLAKOWSKI’S ARGUMENTS

The Romanian Political Scientist Daniel Barbu explains that in Romania, in the last years of Ceaușescu’s rule, a genuine anti-communist dissidence did not existed.

Nevertheless, after the Revolution of 1989, many intellectuals who lived comfortably and even enjoyed some privileges during the Socialist years, now started a vigorous skirmish with the phantom of Marxism and with almost every left-wing political program. He called this attitude „*post-communist anti-communism*” [Barbu 2004: 107]. Can we find any similarities between what Barbu describes and the way Lukács reacted to Stalinism and its collapse?

In 1949, the philosopher was obligated to step back from public life, after he was harshly criticized by the writer and politician László Rudas, in a text requested by Mátyás Rákosi [László et al. 1993, volume 2: 434]. Even before this moment, his views regarding the building of communism in Hungary were not following entirely the Stalinist line, at least as respect to cultural issues. Thus, we can say that his activity between 1945 (the year when he comes back from the exile he spent in the USSR) and 1953 (the year when Stalin died) does not allow us to label him as a „post-Stalinism anti-Stalinist”.

The situation we analyze gets much more complex if we focus only on the years when Lukács was in the USSR (1930 and 1933-1945). As I pointed out above, during this period he never rejected or condemned Stalinism. He managed to survive during the great purge that killed many intellectuals, and also many members of the Hungarian community. Most of those who accuse him of being a Stalinist argue that otherwise he could not have been able to escape the execution squad. In my opinion, this kind of argumentation is wrong. Firstly, we must take into account that Lukács did not have a privileged position in Stalin’s USSR. On the contrary, in 1941 he was arrested by the NKVD for two months [László et al. 1993, volume 1: 232]. Secondly, it is absurd to suppose that every foreign intellectual that was not killed by Stalin voluntarily embraced Stalin’s values or his vision.

Recalling what happened in that period, Lukács exposes three reasons that, according to him, kept him alive. Firstly, he refused to meet with Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek in 1930, because he thought Radek was unscrupulous and Bukharin had bad ideas. This saved him, because prevented Stalin from seeing him as an enemy. Secondly, after publishing the Blum Theses, he was no longer a member of the Hungarian Communist movement. If he had remained a member of this movement, in the first years after 1929, he could have been killed after an order given by Bela Kun; after Kun’s fall he could have become a victim of Kun’s successors. Thirdly, he states that his apartment was in very inferior living quarters and it was less attractive to the NKVD [Lukács 1983: 18-19].

Lukács also explains that he did not oppose Stalin at the beginning of his regime because he considered that none of the alternatives were guaranteeing a faithful continuation of the steps made by Lenin:

„No one remained dedicated to Lenin’s burning desire to construct a socialist democracy through the extension and strengthening of the foundations already in place (...),” Above all it was Lenin’s successors who abandoned the priority of historic-strategic considerations.” [Lukács 1991: 108-109].

The list of this successors obviously included Stalin, but it also included names like Lev Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev or Yury Pyatakov. With some of these, Lukács had some contradictions during the 1920s. For

instance, Zinoviev accused him in 1924 of being an „*ultra-left deviationist*” [László et al. 1993, volume 1: 212]. Therefore, there is no surprise that Lukács preferred an USSR led by Stalin, and not by Zinoviev. We can also identify additional explanations for why the philosopher did not oppose Stalin in the late 1920s or the early 1930s. According to Roy Medvedev or to the American historian Stephen Cohen, Stalin distanced himself from Leninism only after 1929. According to Nikita Khrushchev or to the German journalist Rudolf Augstein, the year of the rupture is 1934 [Medvedev 1979: 195-197]. Therefore, it is easily understandable why Lukács had not criticized Stalin before these years. Much more complicated is to establish why he did not criticize him after 1934.

Some authors argue that the philosopher's opposition to Stalinism is very clear even from the first years of existence of this type of political practice. For example, Norman Levine has the following observation:

„I argue that his anti-Stalinism, at least in the area of cultural studies, becomes evident in his work of the 1930s.” [Lukács 1991: 26].

Also, the British historian Rodney Livingstone considers that Lukács's anti-Stalinism is indicated by his retirement from politics in the 1930s, when he chooses to focus on philosophy and literature. This withdrawal can be seen as a sign that „*he was the source of an alternative view of Marxism.*” [Lukács 1972: xx].

Instead, Lukács, highlighting that he was not a Stalinist, never claimed that he opposed this doctrine. He argues, and some of his arguments are pretty disturbing, that he was loyal to the regime because of tactical considerations:

„My party, right or wrong« seems a strange sentence in the mouth of a philosopher, but he used it to explain why he had never resisted Stalinism, even during the purges. Not even inwardly! And of course, he justifies this on historical grounds – for example, in the interview he gave to the «New Left Review» which did not appear until after his death. He explicitly reiterated here his convictions that »one could only fight effectively against fascism within the ranks of the Communist movement. I have not changed in this.« (...) He frequently explained his attitude by maintaining that, while the conflict between Stalin and Hitler was still unresolved, it was a moral necessity to postpone any criticism one might have of the Soviet Union. (...) »I have always thought that the worst form of socialism was better to live in than the best form of capitalism.«.” [Lukács 1983: 10-11].

A fragment from a letter written by Lukács after 1945 exposes one more possible reason for his loyalty towards Stalinism:

„In Moscow I had a good time that I could never experience before. After unending daily engagements in Vienna and Berlin, it was a novel thing to be able to pursue my research aims (...). There were major polemics over the questions of literature and literary theory. I was subjected to criticism several times. But, all in all, I can describe my life in Moscow as rather enjoyable.” [László et al. 1993, volume 2: 418].

Therefore, we can assume that the plans and the ambitions of the intellectual were a barrier in front of taking a political stance that would have brought prison in the best case scenario.

Concluding, we cannot label Lukács as a fully committed Stalinist, but nevertheless, it would be absurd to see him as an anti-Stalinist dissident. Many of his statements are entirely anti-democratic, like the one regarding the life under capitalism or socialism. Lukács is not a champion of liberal democracy or a promoter of building open societies; but still, we cannot consider him an apostle of a murderous religion without committing a major error.

Leszek Kolakowski certainly would not agree with my conclusion. He considers Lukács an actual Stalinist and eulogist of Bolshevik totalitarianism, stating that „...*he accepted despotism in principle, although he later criticised some of its extreme manifestations.*” [Kolakowski 1990: 302]. In my opinion, he accepted despotism in times of war and counter-revolution, but after that he wanted a socialist democratization, although that democratization could have taken place only between Marxist boundaries.

Also, Kolakowski argues that:

„His dogmatism was absolute, and almost sublime in its perfection. In his critique of Stalinism he did not step outside its fundamental bases. Lukács is perhaps the most striking example in the twentieth century of what may be called the betrayal of reason by those whose profession is to use and defend it.” [Kolakowski 1990: 307].

Obviously, sometimes Lukács sacrificed reason in favour of dogma, but I think that considering his entire work as a betrayal of reason can be in the best case labelled as an exaggeration. Regarding the discussion about the fundamental bases of Stalinism, for Kolakowski, to step outside these bases would have meant to abandon Leninism. In my opinion, one can be a Leninist, which obviously makes him an opponent of liberal democracy and open societies, but also stay outside of Stalinism’s fundamental bases.

4. THE RELEVANCE OF THE SUBJECT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY POLITICS. CONCLUSIONS

Tactics are a fundamental component of the subject of the relation between Lukács and Stalinism. Lukács stated that he was loyal to Stalin because of tactical considerations, but, ironically, also built his critique of the doctrine around this term. He considered that „...*the crux of Stalin’s methods rested on the principle of the priority of tactics over strategy, and even more the priority of tactics over the total evolutionary path of mankind which is the content of the ontology of social being.*” [Lukács 1991: 117]. In his vision, Stalin and his opponents definitively betrayed Leninism when they „...*allowed politics to be totally controlled by tactical considerations.*” [Lukács 1991: 128].

According to Lukács, the prioritization of tactics over strategy was a grave mistake that characterized not only Stalinism:

„The priority of tactics (...) was the dominant trend within late nineteenth and twentieth century European socialism and this hegemony was

manifested in different forms. It was the prevailing tendency in European social democracy...” [Lukács 1991: 117].

After many years, Lukács’ verdict seems to be still accurate. The „Third Way” movement, theoretically based on the work of Anthony Giddens, and brought on the field of policy making by politicians like Tony Blair, Bill Clinton or Gerhard Schroder, moved social-democracy further right on the political scene, and contributed to the transformation of some left-wing parties in catch-all parties that are upholding the current neoliberal status-quo. After this so called modernization, social-democrats became more preoccupied with winning elections than with governing, and when in power, the main goal of them was not to resolve the main issues affecting contemporary societies, but to adopt a stance that offers them the best chance to win the next round of elections. In other words, they subordinated strategy to tactics. Therefore, they partially lost their identity, and this favoured the emergence of the populist wave that today threatens liberal democracies in many countries.

Of course, social democracy did not neglect strategy always. In the decades that followed the end of WWII, this doctrine played a key role in building the welfare states in Western Europe. So not all the criticism that Lukács directed towards social democracy is valid, and not every reformist or revisionist move is harmful per se. But the philosopher’s warning, that allowing politics to be controlled by tactical considerations can be suicidal, has never lost its actuality.

As I pointed out above, Lukács was not an actual Stalinist, but in the same time, we must acknowledge that idealizing him can be almost as harmful for his legacy as demonizing him. The solutions he proposed were not always the proper ones, but this does not erase the fact that he very often offered the right diagnoses, when talking about global capitalism and the social inequalities or the lack of democracy that this system can produce.

I will conclude saying that, when I decided to write this study, I was convinced that György Lukács was not a Stalinist. Nonetheless, while reading and researching, at one point I had the feeling that I am on a road that leads towards the conclusion that actually he was a Stalinist. However, I never reached this destination.

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