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## Research Article

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# “Objective Possibility” in Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*

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**Abstract:** This study explores the pivotal concept of “objective possibility” within Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, a concept that has received less attention compared to more prominent ideas such as reification or totality. Lukács frequently refers to “objective possibility” and related terms in essays like “What Is Orthodox Marxism?” and “Class Consciousness,” emphasizing its importance in understanding class consciousness theoretically. The term’s roots for Lukács derive from Max Weber’s methodological writings, which drew from John Stuart Mill and Johannes von Kries and applied to historical and social causation. However, Lukács diverges from Weber’s use, focusing not on counterfactual historical events but on latent historical tensions in the present that can be actualized through collective action. The study argues that Lukács integrates Weberian objective possibility with Marxist and Hegelian language, utilizing it within a modal social ontology. This approach allows Lukács to theorize key questions of class consciousness, historical action, and revolution. By drawing on Hegel’s dialectics of possibility, actuality, and necessity, as well as Marxian contradictions in material conditions, Lukács reconfigures objective possibility from a heuristic tool for the writing of history to an ontologically significant element in the field of historical action.

**Keywords:** objective possibility, Max Weber, Hegel, Marxism, class consciousness, Lukács, imputed class consciousness, reification, modality, social ontology

Recent readings of *History and Class Consciousness* – among others, those of Konstantinos Kavoulakos, Richard Westerman, and Andrew Feenberg – have delved into its philosophical roots and its conceptual underpinnings in ways that have extended and in a number of ways revised our view of the work.<sup>1</sup> I take up this work in a more modest way, to inquire into what I will argue is a pivotal concept in *History and Class Consciousness*, “objective possibility” (along with related terms involving possibility, the possible, and the impossible), which has nevertheless been somewhat less discussed than Lukácsian concepts such as “reification” or “totality.” Especially in his essays “What Is Orthodox Marxism?” and “Class Consciousness,” Lukács refers in a variety of contexts to “objective possibility,” as well as related nouns, verbs, and modifiers indicating possibility or its modal opposite, impossibility. For example, toward the end of “Class Consciousness,” he lays particular emphasis on the connection of class consciousness and its theoretical elucidation with the problem of understanding class consciousness’s “objective possibility” as such. “The objective theory of class consciousness,” he writes, “is the theory of its objective possibility.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács’ Philosophy of Praxis*; Westerman, *Lukács’ Phenomenology of Capitalism*; Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*.

<sup>2</sup> Lukács, “Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein,” 255. I quote from the German edition, because in many cases the English edition obscures Lukács’s more precise terminology, echoing neo-Kantian and Hegelian modal concepts. I have, hence, modified or translated from the German as needed to maintain the original’s conceptual sense. Henceforth, quoted parenthetically as *GKB*.

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It has been noted that the term “objective possibility” derives from the methodological writings of Max Weber, who adopted it from writings on probability by John Stuart Mill and the physiologist Johannes von Kries and from its application in legal reasoning, and applied it specifically to questions of establishing *causation* in historical and other social research. It is also connected in Weber to other social scientific methodological issues such as questions of “adequate” causation – which among the indefinite number of causal conditions can be said to be decisive in, for example, bringing about a particular historical outcome? – and to the formation of sociological “class-concepts,” the use of “ideal-type” arguments, and the “imputation” of mentalities to groups on the basis of abstractions from particular cases.<sup>3</sup> There is an evident link from Weber’s conceptual world to Lukács’s, for example, in the much-debated notion of the “imputed class consciousness” of the proletariat, in *History and Class Consciousness*, and his use of such terms and concepts bears witness to his early formation in the neo-Kantian milieu of the previous generation of philosophers and social theorists.

For readers attuned to the Weberian background of Lukács’s early thought, these motifs thus find echoes in *History and Class Consciousness*. For example, in this passage from the “Class Consciousness” essay, we can hear the methodological concerns of Weber behind Lukács’s formulation, when he writes:

The relation with concrete totality and the dialectical determinants arising from it transcends pure description and yields the category of objective possibility. By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say, it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation. The number of such situations is not unlimited in any society. However much detailed researches are able to refine social typologies there will always be a number of clearly distinguished basic types whose characteristics are determined by the types of position available in the process of production. Now, class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions “imputed” to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness... and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness. (GKB 223-224)

Such “typical positions” have for Lukács not only a descriptive, but also a normative valence, and can thus function diagnostically as well, insofar as empirically given cases of class consciousness diverge from the forms of consciousness that can be imputed to these positional types. Lukács, in fact, footnotes the above-quoted passage with references to both Marx’s “economic character-masks” and Weber’s “ideal types,” noting he cannot venture into these connections further.

Yet despite his terminological appropriation and his occasional echoes of Weber, Lukács’s use of “objective possibility” overall in *History and Class Consciousness* diverges significantly from Weber’s. As noted, for Weber, objective possibility is employed methodologically to establish historical and social causation on the basis of ensembles of “conditions.” It involves putting forward counterfactual arguments – such as, what would have been the subsequent effects on the development of Greek democracy had Persia won the Peloponnesian War? – to try to identify, through the lens of the historian’s interests, the complex causal factors that most decisively affected the actual historical outcome. In Lukács, in contrast, objective possibility does not refer to counterfactual propositions about historical events but rather to ontologically effective, if latent historical tensions in the present, possibilities that may be actualized in collective action. Rather than oriented to explanation of the past, it is applied as a diagnostic of the present as it holds future possibilities latent for theoretical explication and practical realization.

As Iain McDonald notes in his recent study of Adorno and possibility, *What Would be Different*, “Lukács takes Weberian objective possibility in a new direction, inflecting it not merely with Marxist but also with Hegelian language, such that one might legitimately wonder: What is the status of objective possibility in

<sup>3</sup> For the concept of “objective possibility” in Weber, refer to Weber, “A Critique of Eduard Meyer’s Methodological Views;” and “Objective Possibility and Adequate Causation in Historical Explanation,” in Weber, *Methodology of Social Sciences*, 113–63 and 164–87; Turner and Factor, “Objective Possibility and Adequate Causation in Weber’s Methodological Writings,” 5–28; Wagner and Zipprian, “The Problem of Reference in Max Weber’s Theory of Causal Explanation,” 21–42; Ringer, *Max Weber’s Methodology*, 63ff.

relation to real and formal possibilities on Hegel’s use of these terms?”<sup>4</sup> Lukács’s objective possibility thus partakes both of the dialectics of possibility, actuality, and necessity that Hegel developed in his *Science of Logic* and encyclopedic *Logic* and the Marxian notion of contradictory material conditions as conditions of historical possibility. In other words, Weber uses objective possibility primarily as a modal heuristic for historical interpretation; Lukács, following Hegel and Marx, uses it within a modal social ontology, within which key questions of class consciousness, historical action, and revolution can be theorized. I will note in passing that even in his late work *The Ontology of Social Life*, Lukács makes explicit reference to Hegel’s treatment of modality, noting that he broke decisively with the epistemological orientation of Kant’s theory of modality, which focuses on the mode of necessity, in order to ground modal difference immanently in reality, within which the modes of possibility and actuality, contingency and necessity, are dynamically interrelated.<sup>5</sup> Not accidentally, Rüdiger Dannemann and Werner Jung highlighted this persistence of the concept of objective possibility in the late Lukács by utilizing it as the title of their volume of essays on Lukács’ *Ontology of Social Being*.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I will present some of the passages in *History and Class Consciousness* in which Lukács formulates and explores the concept of “objective possibility,” teasing out the dimensions of the dialectic he explores through it and also its reference to modality in Hegel’s logic. Interestingly, I will suggest, Lukács considers not only the question of class consciousness within the dialectical interplay of the modalities of possibility and actuality, but also, through the theories of standpoint and interest and of reification, the reciprocal constitution of objective possibility and impossibility. As Lukács claims, for example, it is objectively impossible for the bourgeoisie to come to consciousness of capitalist society as a totality, an impossibility that indicates and indicts the structural limits of bourgeois social thought and philosophy. Also related to the problem of reification is the epistemological distinction between *formal* possibility and *real* possibility, which expresses the more general structure of the antinomies of bourgeois thought that Lukács diagnoses in classical German philosophy and contemporary social thought. Lastly, Lukács turns to questions of modality to interpret Marx’s and Lenin’s theorization of action as a grasping of possibilities of the present within the interplay of necessity and contingency – a political modality which has its longer genealogy in the civic Republican thought of Machiavelli, in his dialectic of *occasione*, *fortuna*, and *virtù* and which, through the historical experience of the French Revolution, clearly also impacted the thinking of Hegel and Marx.<sup>7</sup>

I will begin with a passage from the essay “What is Orthodox Marxism?” that appears in the original version of this essay published in Hungarian in *Tactics and Ethics* in May 1919, thus in the first months of the Hungarian Council Republic and not many months after Lukács’ sudden conversion to communism. The essay, in both this early version and in its longer, revised version in *History and Class Consciousness*, emphasizes the importance of Marx’s dialectical *method* and the unity of theory and practice, bringing about essential change “in the object” toward which thought is directed, as Lukács puts it (GKB 61-62). Reflecting on the actual context of the collapse of the First Hungarian Republic and the institution of the Council Republic in March 1919, Lukács highlights the moment of revolutionary turn in a set of conditions, which depends on overcoming the individual “moments” (moments in the Hegelian sense) of the situation, while at the same time, as he writes, also on recognizing the revolutionary essence *in potentia* of these individual moments and making them consciously revolutionary. It is here, then, that Lukács explicitly introduces the modal concept of “possibility”:

For the possibility of revolution, the “ripeness” of the relations, is for the revolution nothing other than the instant of this dialectical transformation. This moment is indeed contained in every instant as possibility, but one cannot determine it in advance with the same certainty as one can in astronomy reckon upon the appearance of a comet. *This instant in its dialectical condition can only swing over from possibility to reality if the workers’ movement is conscious that for it theory and praxis and likewise movement and end-goal are a unity.* (GKB 64)

<sup>4</sup> McDonald, *What Would Be Different*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Dannemann and Jung, *Objektive Möglichkeit*.

<sup>7</sup> For this Machiavellian tradition, refer to Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*.

And he concludes that rather than seeing revolution – such as the sudden turn in March 1919 in Hungary – as an unexpected catastrophe, as in the case of the Second International socialists, revolution can appear as the “longed-for fulfillment... for which it had been inwardly and outwardly prepared as the dialectical transformation as possibility within each individual moment of activity” (GKB 64-65).

In this early essay, Lukács suggests that revolution is present within each “instant” in the modality of possibility – for “instant” Lukács here uses the Hungarian word “*pillanat*,”<sup>8</sup> the equivalent of the German term “*Augenblick*,” which he had also in his early work taken over from Kierkegaard. This is typical of Lukács’s messianic view of revolution in the heady days of the Council Republic, in which he sees the proletariat’s calling as that of bringing to actuality the possibility of revolution that exists potentially in each instant. Two things are notable with respect to the trajectory from this first version of the essay to its reappearance in significantly revised and expanded form in *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, which was published in the context of counter-revolution in Hungary and exile and the broader ebbing of the revolutionary wave that Lukács had experienced in Hungary. First is that Lukács uses only the word “possibility” in this earlier version, not “*objective possibility*.” Although he gestures toward the Marxist notion of a ripening of objective conditions for revolution, the emphasis is on subjective consciousness, decision, and action, as the keys to turning the instantaneity of revolutionary possibility into the actuality of revolution. And accordingly, the temporality of revolution is, for Lukács at this time, akin to a Kierkegaardian instant in which sudden conversion, discontinuous with a prior state of being, can occur. Kierkegaard called the instant an “atom of eternity,” and Lukács here connotes something of this theologically tinged, instantaneous break with the extensive time of possibility in his conception of possibility’s revolutionary actualization.

In the *History and Class Consciousness* version of “What is Orthodox Marxism?” Lukács takes up the problem of possibility in connection with formulations from the young Marx’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy of law and from his correspondence. He quotes Marx as saying “It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought” and “It will be realized that the world has long since possessed something in the form of a dream which it need only take possession of consciously, in order to possess it in reality” (Marx, quoted in GKB 172). This “something,” for Marx, is of course the possibility of the overcoming of alienation and of human emancipation from class society. Lukács goes on to argue that this emergence of consciousness accordingly is the decisive step “which the historical process must take towards its proper end,” and that “The historical function of theory is to make this step a practical possibility” (GKB 172). Marxist theory, for Lukács, thus plays a crucial role in making this possibility, at first merely implicit in what we might call, following Hegel, the proletariat’s immediate existence, also practically – or we might say, *objectively* – possible in historical actuality. Here, the more messianic tones of an instantaneous, conversion-like leap from possibility to revolutionary actuality have retreated, in favor of a more continuous process of mediating theory and practice, along with a reciprocal process in which possibility and actuality transition into one another, as previously actualized possibilities become the objective conditions for further, previously unmanifested possibilities.

In the same, later version of the essay, Lukács develops the category of “possibility” at greater length, in connection with the “possibility of the Marxist method,” in particular, historical materialism as method. Using a distinction employed by Hegel (and by Kant as well) between “formal” possibility and “real” possibility, Lukács distinguishes between the “formal possibility” of historical materialist knowledge, which he attributes to “the economic development that created the proletariat” and its “real possibility” which, in the course of the proletariat’s development, sublated historical materialism’s formal possibility, becoming a theory helping the proletariat to become aware of its own historical potential. Rather than being only a logical possibility, however, an operation of thought by a subject, “formal possibility” is for Lukács one of the material, historical “forms of objectivity” in the development of capitalist society, just as “real possibility” is a differently modalized material form of objectivity that expresses a higher degree of class consciousness.

As referred to the historical development of the proletariat, both the “formal possibility” and the “real possibility” of historical materialism are moments of objective possibility. Lukács writes, “Every substantial

<sup>8</sup> See Lukács, “Taktika és Etika,” 131.

change that is of concern to knowledge manifests itself as a change in relation to the whole and through this as a change in the form of objectivity itself” (GKB 185). He thus understands the development of historical materialism itself as the developing form of objectivity of the possibility of understanding history as a totality. It moves from understanding the historical process as an object in which the proletariat is involved to the self-comprehension of the historical process as a whole from the standpoint of a proletariat ready to take historical action in its own name and interest. Lukács thus writes:

The possibility to grasp the meaning of the historical process as itself immanently inherent to the process and no longer to relate a transcendent, mythologizing or ethical ascription of meaning to an intrinsically meaningless material presupposes a highly developed consciousness of the proletariat about its situation, a—relatively—highly developed proletariat, thus a long previous development. It is the path from utopia to knowledge of reality; the way from the transcendental establishment of goals by the first great thinkers of the workers’ movement to the clarity of the Commune of 1871; ...the way from the class standing “against Capital” to the class “for itself.” (GKB 195-196)<sup>9</sup>

I now turn to Lukács’s “Class Consciousness” essay, where his most elaborated discussion of “objective possibility” can be found. In this essay, Lukács takes up the question of “false consciousness,” which he formulates as the distance between “class consciousness,” which is imputed as an objective possibility on the basis of an understanding of the position of the class within the social totality, and the “psychologically describable and explicable ideas which men form about their situation in life” (GKB 224). Here Lukács considers “objective possibility” as at once a function of the structural position of a class in the social whole and the epistemological possibility that this position affords, to know and understand the social whole.

Anticipating his epistemological analysis in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács argues that, at least in the first instance, class standpoint is a limitation or even a structural blockage of knowledge of the social whole. As it puts it, “Regarded abstractly and formally... class consciousness implies a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one’s own socio-historical and economic condition” (GKB 225). Or as he suggests at length in the “Reification” essay, due to the effects of reification, one mode of objective possibility in capitalist society is the *impossibility* of knowledge of the social totality, from the perspective of its reified immediacy, to which, he further argues, the class standpoint of the bourgeoisie is necessarily bound. Given this structural possibility of the impossibility of a class grasping its true position in the social totality, its actual class consciousness being in fact a class *unconsciousness*, a key task of historical analysis is, Lukács argues, “to use the category of objective possibility so as to isolate the conditions in which this illusion can be exposed and a real connection with the totality established” (GKB 225). As an example, Lukács takes up Marx’s discussion of class struggle in Greek antiquity as being primarily a conflict between debtors and creditors, yet also a reflection of antagonistic relations in the economic conditions of ancient society more generally. Lukács comments:

Historical materialism showed that this reflection was no more than a reflection, but we must go on to ask: did the classes of this society at all have the—objective—possibility to bring to consciousness the economic basis of these struggles, the economic problems of society from which they suffered? Did these struggles and problems not have to take on—according to their conditions of life—either natural-religious or juridical-state forms? (GKB, 230)

Did they, in other words, historically possess the “objective possibility” to represent their own experience of social life to themselves in ways that did not render impossible any knowledge of the economic underpinnings of their struggles?

As we have seen, Lukács makes a general postulate of historical materialism that class consciousness also has, as a form of its objective possibility, class *unconsciousness*, systematic limitations of its knowledge of the social whole, and the historical process that unfolds from it. The concept of reification, I would argue, allows Lukács to make a detailed analysis of the objective possibilities of bourgeois class consciousness as *false* consciousness: “false” not as simply erroneous, but rather systematically distorted and constrained

<sup>9</sup> The standard English translation obscures Lukács’s connection of this historical trajectory of the “possibility” of grasping the sense of history to the formal and real possibility of historical materialism discussed earlier in the paragraph.

consciousness, that is, as a richly variegated field of different types of class *unconsciousness*. But what of proletarian class consciousness? Is it not as well essentially “false consciousness,” like, Lukács claims, abstractly and formally, *any and all* class consciousness?

Lukács, in fact, admits that this is the case, but then suggests that whereas the form of the objective possibility of bourgeois class consciousness leads to its becoming stranded in reified knowledge, the form of the objective possibility of proletarian class consciousness points beyond such limits as a tension within it between its immediate possibility and its longer-term possibility of abolishing class society as a whole. That is, class *unconsciousness* is an essential moment of proletarian class consciousness, but contingently, not necessarily, as in the case of the bourgeoisie.

The form of its objective possibility unfolds from this immanent contradiction. Lukács characterizes this as “an *intention* towards the correct,” “hidden within the ‘false’ consciousness of the proletariat, even in its substantive errors” (GKB 247). Lukács defines this “intention” in explicitly non-psychological terms, as an “objective intention” (*objektive Intention*). He writes:

The objective intention towards the correct that is immanent even in the ‘false’ consciousness of the proletariat, in no way means that it can now come to light without the active intervention of the proletariat. On the contrary. Only when this raw intention strips off its false husks through the heightening of consciousness, through conscious activity and conscious self-criticism will truly correct, historically significant, and socially transformative knowledge emerge. This would of course be impossible if it were not grounded in this objective intention... But only the *possibility* is *given* here. The *solution itself* can only be the fruit of the *conscious* act of the proletariat. (GKB 248)

We can see “objective possibility” and “objective intention” as corollaries here. They represent the possibility of the proletariat’s coming to consciousness of its place in the social totality and grasping the necessity of its revolutionary act to actualize the possibility of its self-overcoming.

Lukács concludes his essay on class consciousness with a discussion of the persistence of utopianism in the workers’ movement, which in his view represents a dialectical expression of the tension between objective possibility and actuality in the uneven and intermittent development of proletarian class consciousness historically and because of the inhibiting effects of reification. He writes:

It would be foolish to believe that... the recognition that a post-utopian attitude to history has become *objectively possible* means that utopianism can be dismissed as a factor in the proletariat’s struggle for freedom. This is true only for those stages of class consciousness that have really achieved the unity of theory and practice described by Marx, the real and practical intervention of class consciousness in the course of history and hence the practical understanding of reification. (GKB 254)

He notes, in turn, that more mediated areas of the social totality, more distant from direct understanding of the economically and politically structured whole of capitalist society, are even more prone to utopian thinking, for example, in the domain of culture. He suggests that, in connection with culture, “What is positive here in theory and practice is almost entirely utopian” (GKB 255).

Lukács concluding summary is highly nuanced and worth quoting in detail, as it points to a differentiated field of class consciousness related to a stratified and diverse set of relations of the actual working class to its objective possibility to overcome capitalist society. First, Lukács maps the gradations of consciousness in a two-fold way: as different moments (in the Hegelian sense) of the historical development of objective possibility; and differences between the empirical, “psychological” class consciousness that exists and an imputed, but not yet realized “adequate understanding of the total situation” (GKB 255). It is here that Lukács puts forward one of his most striking claims, arguing that “*These gradations*,” – meaning these latter differences of distance between the empirically immediate, psychological ideas in the working class and their imputed class consciousness – “can no longer be referred back to socio-economic causes” (HCC 79) and, in a formulation I have already quoted, “The objective theory of class consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility” (GKB 255).

It is not easy to understand what Lukács means when he says that these latter gradations are not referable to socio-economic causes. However, the explanation that follows suggests that he means that Marxism needs additional theoretical tools to understand how the realization of objective possibility may be facilitated or impeded by the formation of class consciousness in capitalist society – and I believe he is referring to the theory of reification here, as a theory of inhibited objective possibility. While reification is of course “in the last

instance” socio-economically occasioned, as a tool of analysis of mediated domains such as culture and philosophy, or even individual works of literature, philosophy, or cultural thought, it offers a more finely-grained theory of epistemological and experiential blockages of class consciousness than a more blunt-instrument “vulgar Marxist” or sociologizing theory of social causation could. It also, I would suggest, expresses Lukács’s argument for the primary necessity of tarrying with ideological questions as such, rather than reducing them hastily to economic factors or viewing them solely as instruments of tactical politics.

In a passage I quote in full in conclusion, Lukács evokes this problem of understanding objective possibility in a more nuanced theoretical way as an urgent task related to solving the current ideological crisis of the working class movement that was becoming increasingly evident with the ebbing of the revolutionary wave, the isolation of communists within the workers’ movement, and the manifest contradictions of actual socialism in its consolidating form in the Soviet Union. Lukács writes:

The stratification of the problems and economic interests *within* the proletariat is, unfortunately, almost wholly unexplored, but research would undoubtedly lead to discoveries of the very first importance. But however useful it would be to produce a typology of the various strata, we would still be confronted at every turn with the problem of whether it is actually possible to make the objective possibility of class consciousness into a reality.... Today it has become a real and relevant question for a whole class: the question of the inner transformation of the proletariat, of its development to the stage of its own objective historical mission [*Sendung*]. It is an ideological crisis which must be solved before a practical solution to the world’s economic crisis can be found. (*GKB* 255)

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