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## Hungary - Save the Lukács Archive

Tuesday 22 March 2016, by [SABATINI Joe](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2016).

**The Hungarian government is threatening to close the Georg Lukács Archive. Anyone with an interest in the role that intellectuals have played in left-wing politics should be appalled at such a possibility, write Joe Sabatini.**

Lukács was a writer and intellectual whose work spanned the period from around 1910 to his death in 1971. Few thinkers were marked so deeply by the changing nature of the periods in which they wrote. To possess an archive of such a career is of immense value to all who seek to understand the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During the period before the First World War and the Russian Revolution, his main work reflected the general movement of late romanticism at the time. He produced a collection of essays titled *Soul and Form* and a short book, *The Theory of the Novel*, which explored the tension between the forms of modern life that fragment our experience of the world, and our longing to overcome such fragmentation.

Although not overtly political, his friendship with Ernst Bloch and opposition to the First World War opened a path towards Hegel and German Idealism, and away from the nationalism that affected people like Max Weber and the novelist Thomas Mann.

The Russian Revolution provided the spark that generated his greatest writings during the 1920s. The circumstances in which he joined the Hungarian Communist Party are difficult to trace; however, once committed he remained a life-long member. Within a year of joining, he experienced revolution first hand, and was commissar for education in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919.

He spent much of the 1920s in exile in Vienna following the crushing of the Soviet Republic, and it was only a petition by prominent German intellectuals that saved him from a long prison sentence or even execution.

Between 1919 and 1923, he explored the theoretical foundations of Marxism in a way that no one had done since Marx himself. He traced Marx's roots in the German Idealist tradition of Fichte and Hegel, and developed a perspective on capitalism derived from chapter 1 of *Das Kapital* that focuses on the way commodities shape our experiences across all spheres of life. He also explored the question of consciousness and how forms of collective consciousness emerge.

The essay collection *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923, developed these themes. He opened the work by claiming that Marxism was a method that sought to understand capitalism as a totality. In so doing, he was developing ideas from his pre-Marxist period and reworking them. He argued that the distinction between the condition of workers selling their labour power and their awareness of such a condition as exploitative is critical to opening a path to understanding capitalism as a totality. This can only occur through *praxis* – the actual engagement in struggles that have no predetermined outcome.

At the time, this was a barely explored issue. The dominant theories of Marxism focused on laws of history, and consciousness was considered as something that automatically reflected economic conditions, rather than as one of the conditions themselves. Yet Lukács was driven to view consciousness in this way through his active participation in movements where workers were taking revolutionary action. It was this involvement as both an activist and an intellectual immersed in a century of German philosophy that gave the edge to his work.

However, *History and Class Consciousness* was too innovative for the Communist International at a time when Lenin was dying and the Stalinist period was beginning. Lukács was condemned as an idealist, and was eventually forced to recant or be expelled. His public response took the form of a short work on *Lenin*, in which he tried to demonstrate the role that the party plays in developing class consciousness, and then in book reviews, where he tried to clarify his theoretical position (as well as a posthumously published defence of his ideas). Finally, in 1928 he developed *Blum Theses*, a political programme which attempted to orient the Hungarian Communist Party towards a policy of building a coalition between workers and peasants. Although a sophisticated work, with some similarities to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, it was criticised for Rightist tendencies and made it clear that he lacked the skills for a full-scale political fight.

The failure of the *Blum Thesis* showed that his talents lay less in political leadership than in intellectual activity. With the rise of fascism and the closing off of central Europe, Lukács went east and ended up in the Soviet Union during the darkest period of Stalinist reaction.

From the early 1930s to 1956, his work changed again. Aside from a book on the young Hegel, he stuck to literary studies. His key interest during this period was to preserve what he saw as the most dynamic tendencies of the early bourgeois period. He argued that during the period when capitalism was developing, it was possible for individuals to reflect social struggles. He saw in the realist novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a critical model that could grasp contradictions and reflect them through social types.

During this period, he also wrote a number of condemnations of modernism. Of largely mediocre standard, at worst these reduced great works like those of Kafka and Joyce to the predicament of the bourgeois individual who lacks a consciousness of the whole of society. Such condemnation led him to claim that modernism was irrational and ultimately part of the same process that led to fascism. Adorno rightly accused him of reducing literary criticism to diktats or a sports commentary – with favoured authors giving peak performances or somehow in the lead, as if literature was a race.

In 1956, we see the final period of his work emerge, as the workers in Hungary revolted against the Soviet authorities and declared an independent republic along with forms of workers' councils. Lukács joined this movement and was again imprisoned when it was put down by Soviet tanks.

After this experience, he revived his interest in philosophy, producing a massive work on ontology. This final stage of his career is perhaps least known, though it marks an attempt to settle accounts with Marxism and its relationship to the whole of Western Philosophy. In this, Lukács attempted a project similar to Hegel in his lectures on philosophy, art, history and religion, and large sections of this work have never been translated.

By this time he had become a major figure in the world of ideas and his early works were being translated and starting to influence the New Left. For a brief time, he was treated by the New Left as one of the leading exponents of the Humanist Marxism that Althusser attacked. While it is possible to agree with Althusser that there is no subject called 'Mankind' who has been alienated by capitalism, it is less clear whether Lukács had such a figure in mind in the 1920s. It can be argued that there are major differences between the theory of reification that was developed in *History and*

*Class Consciousness* and Marx's theory of alienation, which remained in an unpublished manuscript until the 1930s. Lukács commented on the need to clarify this relationship in 1967, yet this remains to be done.

Nonetheless, all theories of totality had become suspect by the 1980s. With the end of the Cold War and the liberals' talk of the "End of History", his themes about class consciousness, historical tendencies and totality looked as out of place as a Lada in a Ferrari showroom. To many he was an embarrassment. Yet in the period of failing banks and political polarisation, perhaps 1923 is more timely than 1989. History has a habit of intruding – which is a very Lukácsian thing to say.

Certainly today people want to understand how capitalism works as a whole, how it is linked to all aspects of life. With the integration of the economic and the ecological crises, the search for totality is taking on even wider dimensions than during previous periods in the history of capitalism. The career of Georg Lukács is well worth preserving under such conditions.

The Archive is invaluable in this respect. Lukács wrote in German and Hungarian, and much of his work is unpublished or untranslated – either into English or German. There is nowhere apart from the archive where scholars and political activists can access this work.

Moreover, Hungary is in the grip of a right-wing regime that wants to rewrite its past. The closure of the Lukács Archive would be significant cultural attack that should be read alongside the razor wires that are going up around Hungary's borders – to use the categories of *History and Class Consciousness*, these phenomena are mediated. The proposed closure should be seen as a step towards book burnings and forcing dissidents into exile – a fate Lukács suffered at the hands of conservatives and fascists. It was also the same fate that led him to subordinate himself to Stalinism.

There is something tragic about Lukács and his choice to remain loyal to a Communist project that had betrayed the class that made it. He could have taken the path trodden by Trotsky and Victor Serge. He did not, and there will always be mystery about the moves and compromises he made. Maybe some of the answers lie in the archives.

Saving the Lukács Archive should be of huge importance not only to all Marxists, but anyone with an interest in and respect for historical memory and intellectual freedom.

**Joe Sabatini**

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\* <http://rs21.org.uk/2016/03/14/save-the-lukacs-archive/>