

# On the Problem of Subjectivity in Marxism: Karl Marx and György Lukács

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**Abstract.** There was a long-standing engagement with the problem of subjectivity by different scholars over time. The problem of subjectivity is not only the key to the understanding of the Marxism but also the core of György Lukács's philosophical studies in his lifetime. While it is well-recognized of the transformational influence of Marxism on the modern traditional philosophy, the comparison between Karl Marx and György Lukács regarding their discussion of the problem of subjectivity can shed light upon what and how Marxists carried on and expanded this contested philosophical problem.

## 1 Overview and problem statement

In more recently, the question of subjectivity returns to the fore in the Chinese academia. The problem of subjectivity is associated with some Marxist concepts such as agency and practice; it is also concerned about other concepts like labor and freedom, especially the theory of practical materialism with subjectivity as its core concept. Until now, many scholars have managed to understand how Karl Marx carried on the studies by Hegel and engaged in a transformational and innovative development of the problem of subjectivity. However, little attention has been paid on György Lukács, the founding father of Western Marxism. György Lukács had his intensive, insightful interpretation on the problem of subjectivity, a fundamental starting point in his philosophical system, which also endows his philosophical system with additional value and vitality. This paper mainly analyzes and compares Marx's and Lukács's interpretations on the problem of subjectivity.

According to Marx, the old materialism and idealism tended to fall into the dichotomy of subject and object or the either/or fallacy. This was because the metaphysical way of thinking adopted by either old materialism and idealism tended to set existence against thought, subject against object, and subjectivity against objectivity; all of these were made independent or separate from each other. To solve the problem of unity due to the use of the metaphysical way of thinking, the philosophers practicing either old materialism or idealism resorted to the method either the subject dominating the object or the object dominating the subject. The use of God was an additional way by these philosophers, which fell into the trap of idealism. Face with the dilemma of the old materialism and idealism, Marx took a different approach by endowing the subject with species-essence that reflected the social, historical, and developmental

nature of human. Since the dawn of modern philosophy, anthropocentrism has been the order of the day taking a dominant position governing people's way of thinking and behaviors. However, anthropocentrism has long been criticized because it tended to endorse the rational way of thinking and the agency of the atomized subject that opened the door for the introduction and development of capitalism. Given this, Marx managed to restore man to be the species-essence and endow human with practical meanings; man was represented as the species-essence in development that was composed of multiple facets; man was considered by Marx as a significant element in the evolution and development of the society and history. Marx thus solved the problem of modern philosophy that tended to fall into the dichotomy of subject and object and the either/or fallacy.

In the same vein, Lukács also paid attention to this trick of rationalism and capitalism. It was generally considered that the idea of subjectivity of Lukács was embodied in *History and Class Consciousness* when relating to his idea of the objectification of man in the modern society. In fact, Lukács has been improving and consolidating his idea of subjectivity in his philosophical career from *Young Hegel* and *Ontology of Social Being*. Lukács argued that rationalism that was relied on by man in the capitalist society with science and technology tended to pull man apart from the independent and complete entity and quantify and objectify everything including man. He clearly indicated that capitalism "refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product." [1] Given this, Lukács was more inclined toward accepting that belief that rather than purely an object, the socio-historical development of the human society and history was an inevitable product of human life. Lukács was influenced by the German

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Romanticism in his early years, and in his later thoughts, he always carried on the reflection of the rationalism. Similar to Marx, Lukács thought that rationalism, a philosophical way of thinking endorsed by the bourgeois, was problematic and contradictory; while rationalism highlighted the important role of the subject, it failed to find and reach the authentic subject. The root of this dilemma, according to Lukács, resided in the preference of the capitalist society to objectify and objectify everything based on science and technology; this way of thinking swept through the human society in the modern period and was widely recognized or accepted by lots of people. When man thought that they have triumphed in mastering and controlling the “second nature” that was been objectified and quantified, it “weed(ed) out ruthlessly from its own outlook every subjective and irrational element and every anthropomorphic tendency.” [1] The rationalist philosophers were then pull into the conundrum between freedom and necessity and between idealism and fatalism. Throughout his life, Lukács has been devoting to the revolutionary enterprise, thus allowed him to have an insightful understanding of capitalism and proletariat. Based on this, proletariat concluded through the lens of the Marxist dialectics that only through the empowerment and full integration of the proletariat class into the society that the subject and object would be unified.

## 2 Marx on the problem of subjectivity

Karl Marx involved the problem of subjectivity in his earlier philosophical works. His ideas on this problem are mainly embodied in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. During the period from the emergence of modern philosophy to Immanuel Kant, subject has been framed as an epistemological concept. From Descartes's ‘cogito’ to Immanuel Kant's ‘a priori’, it was not until Hegel who started to frame the problem of subjectivity as an existential problem rather than an epistemological one. According to Hegel, subjectivity is a state of ambiguity. Mediated with human labor, Geist plays an absolutely important role in the representation of world history. Man can be embodied as the subject of self-realization, on the one hand; man can also be represented as an object taken as a means or a tool in Geist or absolute spirit, on the one hand. It is therefore reasonable for Althusser to argue that Hegel's spiritual development was a process without subject. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states that the concept of subjectivity has become subject-object [2], the unity between subject and object. Accordingly, Hegel spell the end to and shattered the foundation of the traditionally binary understanding of subject and object since the modern time on, although the subject eventually becomes a myth of pure spiritual concepts that transcend the historical process. Lukács also pointed out that Hegel's argument “I that is *We*, *We* that is I” [1] pointed to a conceptual myth that ultimately boiled down to the spirit of history. Even so, Hegel paved the way for Marx's subsequent practice to completely subvert and

dissolve the traditional concept of subjectivity. In what follows are several important characteristics about how Marx interpreted the problem of subjectivity.

### 2.1 The subversion of the problem of subjectivity

Above all, Marx's refocus on “person” when it comes to the problem of subjectivity is the precondition of the existence of person as a species-essence. Marx made it clear that “the outstanding achievement of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of *labor* and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man's *own labor*.” [3] On the one hand, Marx managed to capture how Hegel transcended the traditional understanding of the problem of subjectivity with labor (and its process). On the other hand, Marx, under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophical ideas, perceived man as real, living, and corporeal being with natural vigor. Marx's discussion tends to combine and transcended the discussions by these philosophers on the problem of subjectivity. Marx associated the nature of man as real, living, and corporeal being with the status of man as laborer; he united the existence of the natural attributes of man's corporeal being with the existence of the social attributes of the laborer. Marx elevated the status of man from the abstract, pale, and cold concept to the authentically, living body with flesh and blood. Marx also transformed the problem of subjectivity from the rational epistemology and ontology to the problem of practice. Thus, Marx's subject can be identified as the subject of man, who are required to clarify the individual relationship in the context of the modern anthropocentrism and the growing atomization of the individuals under capitalism. Under this circumstance, the subject with a certain extent of agency in a variety of practical activities are also faced with the challenge of the division between subject and object.

### 2.2 The discussion on alienated labor related to the problem of subjectivity

Man as a subject lies in the nature of species-essence. Marx tended to have a prudent use of the term “subject” or “subjectivity” in his earlier work *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. In this work, Marx considers labor as an important medium through which man become the subject. In the “Third manuscript” of *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx considers private property as a spontaneous activity with labor as the subjective essence of man. [4] Labor elevates the concept of “person” from no more than a mode of existence to an agency with transcendent production activities. In this work, Marx also formulated and discussed four forms of alienated labor, including

the product of labor, the act of production, the species-essence, and other workers. The alienations of the product of labor and the act of production have been well-understood. The third form of alienation, alienation of the species-essence, is closely related to the fourth form of alienation, alienation of other workers, in that the alienation of the species-essence must manifest itself in alienation from other workers. The alienation of the species-essence, therefore, tends to have the most serious blow to human's subjective existence. In fact, the subjectivity of person is embodied in the process negating one's own needs as an individual and the sublation of one's own as a species; through this process, man is endowed with the status of the subject, whose mind is continuously strengthened and practiced before developing self-consciousness and spontaneous activities that manifests subject as the existence of man as the species-essence.

### **2.3 Man as species-essence in socio-historical development**

The concept, species-essence, manifests the socio-historical development. From a historical materialism point of view, Marxism tended to observe and think in the light of historical development. In his famous article "Theses on Feuerbach", Marx explains his idea of subjectivity that, "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such." [5] The sensuous activity mentioned in this quote is not the human activity in the biological sense. Instead, it refers to the historical activities and practices of people as species-essence with social attributes. The sensuous activity is undertaken not by isolated people in solitude but by people in development who are real and empirically observable. History is the history of the life processes of agency of the subject rather than a chain of cold, unabridged facts in the mind of the abstract empiricists or a bunch of imaginary activities proposed by the idealists. [6] Accordingly, the subjectivity of man can only be manifested in the history of the social and historical development. The initiative of the subject is also the history of the society and development in the sense of the theory of practice.

## **3 LUKÁCS on the problem of subjectivity**

In Lukács's view, the sophistication and weaknesses of the bourgeois philosophy of rationalism were exposed in the problem of subjectivity. György Lukács was interested in the discussion of the problem of subjectivity by different philosophers from Immanuel Kant to Fichte and to Haig. Rationalists tended to endorse the unity of subject and object. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*,

Immanuel Kant argues that the problem of the subject-object unity can be solved in the realm of practice. Similarly, practice is a core concept in the philosophical system of Fichte. Hegel proposed labor as an opportunity to solve the problem between the unity of subject and object. However, these three philosophers had different interpretations of practice and labor while dissociating between people of flesh and blood with different social attributes, thus making the problem of subject and object more abstract and contradictory. Lukács explained that the root of this contradiction lied in the materialistic forces of capitalist society, which makes the subject a product of the object; the object becomes an external force against the subject. Lukács tried to justify this claim with a quote from Marx who says, "to them, their own social action...take the form of the action of objects which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them." [7] Lukács pointed out that the bourgeoisie tried to create the subject, but its vision of development limited their understanding of development incompatible with the inherent logic of the authentic historical development. The bourgeoisie, which was highly respected by modern rationalism, could not in any way give a satisfactory answer to the problem of subjectivity or the problem of unity between subject and object. On the contrary, the bourgeoisie tended to produce some contradictory and discouraging answers to these questions.

### **3.1 The philosophical system of Lukács**

In *Young Hegel*, Lukács further elaborates on the significance to the unity of subject and object. Like Marx, Lukács also saw the value of Hegel's study and discussion of the problem of subjectivity. Through his close examination of Hegel's earliest works, György Lukács argued that Hegel has realized that labor meant a man's dissociation with his natural, instinctive life, "it is Hegel's thesis to make a man become a fully human through labour." [8] In *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel regards labour as the starting point for the practice of man, and defines it as "the annihilation of the object, or the annihilation of the intuitive thing, which, as a phase (i.e., not the ultimate absolute annihilation), is to be replaced by another object or intuitive thing... not only to destroy the object as a general object, but to replace it in the same way with another object, ..... In short, this extermination is labor." [9] Through labor Hegel maintains that labor creates the second nature while destroying the natural object, and, in the process, achieves the unity between subject and object. All this is further demonstrated in Hegel's philosophy of reality, in which man gradually separates himself from the natural state of instinct through labor, and creates a new level of objects while at the same time forming in his consciousness, gradually becoming the rudiments of civilization and culture. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel uses the master-slave dialectic to discuss more specifically the relationship between labor and the subject. According to him, the slaves did not work for themselves, but had no choice but to restrain their desire

to work for the slaveowners. In their labor, the slaves “gave up his dependence on their own existence” and “cancelled their natural existence through labor.” In this sense, labor allowed the slaves to disassociate the subject with the object and achieve the unity between subject and object. Obviously, the interpretation of the problem of subjectivity by Hegel was largely influenced by the rational philosophy of the bourgeois, which was a point seen by Marx as problematic. When discussing the problem of subjectivity, Lukács, inspired by Hegel's concept of “labor”, delved in further and argued that the factor of labor was the key the subject associating with the reality.

### 3.2 The discussion of *Ontology of Social Being*

In *Ontology of Social Being*, a work completed in his later years, Lukács placed his focus on the discussion of human freedom and the ways to achieve it. This allowed Lukács to look deeper than Hegel in the problem of labor and subject by connecting this problem with that of freedom. From the historical materialist point of view, the way through which man conforms to the inevitability of the economic law and achieve relative freedom is precisely labor. According to Lukács, “labor, as a category of social existence, can only attain its true and corresponding existence in the society focusing on process and social reproduction.” [10] In the meantime, Lukács draws on Marx's discussion of labor in *Capital* about the production of labor. Human not only changes the form in the materials of nature, but also “realizes his own purpose in those materials.” Based on this, Lukács proposed that human freedom is achieved in the mutually dependence between the process of subject transcending object as well as the process of subject exercising self-control. The process of the subject to understand the nature and obtain freedom is one in which the subject transcends the object. It is a process where purpose is designed by man, who engage in explorative investigation with this purpose. During this process, man need to continuously overcome their instinctive desires and emotions, such as rejection, fear, and so on. The joint efforts of these two processes for the subject allow the subject to achieve freedom. And, all of these are carried out on the premise that people recognize and follow economic factors and economic laws in a macroscopic manner. Lukács's discussion on Labor and freedom is centered on the problem of subjectivity. He emphasized, but also agreed with, Marx's social-historical argument on the problem of subjectivity, and further argued that only in the context of social existence as a general relationship, that the subject can obtain freedom with labor as the key.

### 4. Summary

It can be found after comparing the discussions of the problem of subjectivity by Marx and Lukács that Marx has long tried to clarified the problem of subjectivity in his earlier works. Negatively influenced by the modern philosophy especially the rationalist philosophy of the

bourgeois, the term “subject” or “subjectively” rarely appeared in the works of Marx. However, the discussion of this problem can be still traced in some of his works such as *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. While Marx frequently used the terms such as the working class and the laborer, he was more prudent and careful when discussing the problem of subjectivity connected with the social-historical process. For Lukács, however, his discussion of the problem of subjectivity tended to start earlier and ran through his philosophical career in his lifetime. Some of the core philosophical concepts for the philosophical system of Lukács include subject, labor, and man's freedom. Lukács's writings are closely linked with his revolutionary beliefs and political practice. Throughout his life, Lukács firmly adhered to his Marxist belief and was dedicated to practicing his belief. He did not evade the discussion of the problem of subjectivity while trying to integrate theory with his political life. Lukács had a turbulent life of ups and downs. He was harshly criticized by his political party for four times, expelled from the party, driven out of his country, and exiled to the Soviet Union. Despite all of these, he still clung to Marxism and his own consistent theoretical beliefs or his original intention that were greatly indebted to Marxism. Commendably, he insisted on his Marxist belief in his lifetime that was the “truth” Lukács tried to pursue and carry on.

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