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Adorno and Lukács

The riddle of *History and class consciousness* in Adorno's philosophy

Abstract

This article reconstructs Adorno's early concept of the philosophical riddle by situating it in a sustained, though ambivalent, engagement with Lukács' work. Adorno adopts Lukács' analysis of bourgeois antinomies and the commodity-form as the experiential core of modern philosophy, while decisively rejecting Lukács' ontological and totalizing resolutions. Against solutions grounded in the standpoint of totality, Adorno radicalizes the antinomic character of bourgeois thought by insisting on the liquidation of its fundamental questions. Through an immanent deciphering of philosophy itself, social-historical reality emerges within conceptual structures without being reduced to sociological or historicist explanations. The article shows that Adorno remains faithful to the critical impulse of Lukács' early work precisely by refusing its later ontological turn, thereby transforming the riddle of the commodity into a negative, non-ontological model of critique grounded in non-identity.

Keywords

Adorno, Lukács, Commodity-form

Received: 04/02/2025

Approved: 30/07/2025

Editing by: Mario Farina

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Value, then, doesn't come with its name written on its forehead. Instead it transforms every labor product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, people try to decipher the meaning of this hieroglyphic, to solve the mystery of their own social product; for a useful object's characteristic of being a value is a social product every bit as much as language is.

(Marx 2024: 50)

Introduction: the riddle

Adorno's first philosophical program, his 1931 inaugural lecture in Frankfurt, *The actuality of philosophy*, revolves around the idea of something he calls – enigmatic enough – *riddle* (*Rätsel*). After discussing the philosophical developments of recent decades (such as neo-Kantianism and phenomenology), a young Adorno outlines what he believes philosophy can and should still do at that historical moment. For him, the only way for philosophy to demonstrate its non-obsolescence is to identify and solve certain riddles that are beyond the realm of problems that empirical science or pure logical analysis can resolve. A few decades earlier, Bertrand Russell (1905) had also characterized philosophy's task as solving puzzles – another possible correspondent for what Adorno called *Rätsel*. Russell demonstrated clearly and distinctly that some longstanding philosophical problems were merely the result of linguistic confusion. Wittgenstein (1971: 71, § 133) also later asserted that philosophy's sole purpose was to therapeutically untangle its own problems, showing that our confused thoughts had conjured the illusion of problems where none actually existed. That was, however, not exactly what Adorno had in mind. Maybe we can really dissolve philosophical questions about the baldness of the present King of France. Still, Adorno maintained, there are a couple of questions that cannot be resolved merely by using a logical quantifier. They have their *fundamentum in re*. Behind them lies not the nothingness of a verbal confusion, but something very tangible, actually a kind of “demonic force” (Adorno 1977: 126; AGS 1: 334) – or, to draw on a related concept he would later use frequently (e.g., AGS 8: 19), a kind of “spell”.

Adorno's concern with the “residual character” of philosophical problems also made its way into his mature thinking. Historically, other disciplines tend to encroach on philosophical problems, leaving philosophy

with increasingly abstract objects to such an extent that only almost unintelligible questions, such as the “question of being”, are left as its recognized legitimate domain (Adorno 2019: 28 ff.). But the question of being, enigmatic as it may also be, is not the type of riddle that Adorno had in mind. It neither has nor can have an answer. For Adorno, it is a pseudo-question, at best the object of an empty meditation. There is no praise in Adorno’s philosophical program for being satisfied with mere philosophical interrogation, as he would later accuse Heidegger of doing. The “riddle” Adorno is thinking of, says he, must be construed into varying constellations “until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears” (Adorno 1977: 127; AGS 1: 335). Those questions that, on the one hand, resist logical analysis and empirical investigation, and, on the other hand, are not merely mystical pseudo-questions, and which therefore remain the actual object of philosophy, should be already answered when they are correctly posed: “The answer stands in strict antithesis to the riddle, needs to be constructed out of the riddle’s elements, and destroys the riddle, which is not meaningful, but meaningless, as soon as the answer is decisively given to it” (Adorno 1977: 129; AGS 1: 338).

We could speculate that Adorno had in mind the famous demonic figure of the Sphinx, who devoured the citizens of Thebes who failed to answer her riddles correctly. Oedipus becomes king of Thebes after ridding the city of this magical monster. The question, carefully constructed to hide its answer – what animal walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening? – is answered “decisively” by Oedipus: “It’s man”. Its clarity is antithetical to the threatening obscurity of the question, which now loses the meaning it appeared to have (the legs were not exactly legs, the hours of the day were not in fact hours), exposing the absurdity and inadequacy of meaning that had existentially doomed the city¹. But how can a philosophical question resemble such a riddle? And on what basis could philosophy first construct such riddles?

We know what Adorno’s riddle is not. It is not a question to be answered by empirical research or dissolved by demonstrating the syntactic inaccuracy of its formulation. But then, what does it concern? Fortunately, Adorno provides an example. Indeed, one single example – which leads us to suspect that it may have ultimately shaped his very concept of a riddle. Or, more accurately, his reconceptualization of it, since he

¹ On the games of meaning in Sophocles’ play, see Vernant 1986.

adopted the term itself along with the problem it refers to in an exemplary manner.

1. *The riddle of the commodity*

The image of the riddle is not especially relevant for György Lukács, but it happens to appear on the first page of his *Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat*, published eight years before Adorno's lecture. There, Lukács states: "At this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of *commodity-structure*" (Lukács 1971: 83; 1977: 257). Lukács presents a bold and ambitious thesis that also deals with the actuality of philosophy ("at this stage in the history of mankind"). Now, not only must every question – whether practical or theoretical – be traced back to the structure of the commodity as depicted by Marx, but the commodity itself simultaneously provides the answer to every such question. It is both the key to deciphering the real meaning of our questions and the means of answering them – much like Adorno later believed his riddles to be. Of course, *Rätsel* is a word that Marx himself used frequently to refer to categories in the universe of the commodity², and Lukács is also not introducing it for the first time. Still, we do not need to speculate whether it was really Lukács' rhetorical statement that Adorno had in mind when he assigned philosophy the task of constructing and, thereby, solving riddles. It is Adorno himself who mentions him when introducing his only example of a riddle:

Suppose, however – I give an example as a thought experiment, without suggesting its actual feasibility – suppose it were possible to group the elements of a social analysis in such a manner that the way they came together made a figure which certainly does not lie before us organically, but which must first be produced: the commodity-form. This would hardly solve the thing-in-itself problem, not even in the sense that somehow the social conditions might be revealed under which the thing-in-itself problem came into existence, as Lukács even thought the solution to be; for the truth content of a problem is in principle different from the historical and psychological conditions out of which it grows. But it might be possible that, from a sufficient construction of the commodity structure, the

² Exemplarily, in the first section of *Capital I*, Marx 2024: 25, 34, 48, 67, 68 (translated by Paul Reitter as "enigma").

thing-in-itself problem absolutely disappeared. Like a source of light, the historical figure of commodity and of exchange value may free the form of a reality, the hidden meaning of which remained closed to investigation of the thing-in-itself problem, because there is no hidden meaning which could be redeemable from its one-time and first-time historical appearance. (Adorno 1977: 128; AGS 1: 337, transl. mod.)

In these brief remarks, we find, in a nutshell, some of the philosophical ideas that Adorno would spend his whole life grappling with. The idea of the constellation as an essayistic form of philosophical exposition; the way reality, or better, the experiential content, enters into philosophy, in some sense, through the backdoor; the idea that philosophy must criticize itself in view of its own liquidation, becoming an *ultima philosophia*; and that the “hidden meaning” of at least one philosophical question would be found in an appropriate conceptual constellation of the central aspect of our experience: the commodity-form. All these themes appear here in tension with Lukács, blending agreement and critique in ways that are initially hard to separate³. Adorno’s encrypted positive reference to Lukács, conveyed through the idea that philosophy must deal with riddles, outweighs his explicit rejection of the solution Lukács proposed. To glimpse the full extent of the influence, we must turn to Lukács’ treatment of the problem of how modern bourgeois philosophy is shaped by

³ Many years later, in 1963, Adorno would refer to *History and class consciousness* in a lecture as “the most important Marxist book on Hegel”, adding: “The book is [...] an attempt, one might say, at a Hegelianization taken to the extreme of Marxist dialectics, and it is very curious that in this book, precisely the strictest connection of apparently idealistic theses has been associated with an extreme communist position, according to its own official statement. And consequently, this book was very early on condemned by the communists, and its fate probably explains, to a large extent, what happened later to Lukács. Let me say right away that the universality that is extracted in this book precisely from the concept of reification, and the transposition of the problematic of the concepts of reification and alienation to the whole theory of knowledge, is something eminently fruitful, and that hardly anyone can seriously reflect on questions of dialectics without having taken note of what happens to the concept of reification in this book by Lukács. But, on the other hand, let me say that it was precisely the exaggerated Hegelianism, that is, how can I put it?, the extreme idealism of this book that led to the highly peculiar construction of the Communist Party, which in it, as also in many of Lukács’ later writings, is identified, in a certain way, with the world spirit, with all the disastrous political consequences that you already know. Therefore, this book must be used with great caution and one must not fall into the doctrinal suggestion it presents; but, on the other hand, there are really many original and essential ideas in this book” (Adorno 2021: 19 ff.).

its social and historical framework, as discussed in the second section of the *Reification* essay, *The antinomies of bourgeois thought*.

2. The antinomies of bourgeois mind and world

Even though it became a widespread and characteristic approach of Western Marxism after him, when Lukács proposed sketching “the connection between the fundamental problems of [modern] philosophy and the basis in existence [*Seinsgrund*] from which these problems spring and to which they strive to return by the road of the understanding” (HCC: 112; GuK: 289), he was introducing an entirely new perspective to philosophy. It was not just some kind of sociological assessment of the history of philosophy. Philosophical ideas were not simply relativized as corresponding to the interests of a social group, for example. Philosophy – particularly, and not by chance, here German classical philosophy – was seen as a kind of screen onto which the fundamental structures of society were projected, with its practical problems examined in a privileged yet powerless and ineffective way, as problems of pure thought. We are presented with a positive reading of the young Marx’s problem of German ideology, and this even before the publication of the excerpts by Marx and Engels that received that name. German political, social, and economic backwardness relative to its Western neighbors paradoxically made German classical philosophy highly advanced. It emerged at a historical moment when the problems of European capitalism had matured enough to be brought to consciousness. However, on the underdeveloped side of the Rhine, these issues had no social effectiveness and could only be addressed intellectually and philosophically. What we see is not exactly a cognitive advantage of historical backwardness, as its truly more advanced character was precisely cognitively inaccessible to its agents. They understood their object but could not recognize it for what it was – indeed, the “complete intellectual copy and the a priori deduction of bourgeois society” (HCC: 148; GuK: 331). In a transposed and transfigured manner, in pure thought, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel were “able [...] to complete the evolution of class [...] and [...] to take all the paradoxes of [their] position to the point where the necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind’s development can at least be seen as a problem” (HCC: 121; GuK: 299).

Within the framework of pure thought, the real contradictions of a society structured by the commodity are cast as antinomies. When Lukács stated on the first page of his *Reification* essay that the commodity was both the riddle of the problems of our times and their solution, he meant that “the structure of commodity-relations [...] yield[s] a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them” (HCC: 83; GuK: 257). Now, the commodity-form is a structure that integrates the opposing elements of value and use-value, which unfold into many contradictory processes and relations. The thought characteristic of the epoch of the commodity will thus be fundamentally antinomic. Paradoxically, capitalist society’s antinomies will manifest most prominently and consciously where thought is most detached from reality, preoccupied solely with itself. The antinomies that pervaded German classical philosophy, constantly shifting whenever a solution seemed to be found, represented for Lukács “the most profound and the most magnificent intellectual expression of those antinomies which lie at the roots of bourgeois society and which are unceasingly produced and reproduced by it” (HCC: 148; GuK: 331).

Adorno’s favored riddle was the one that addressed the historically emergent problem of the thing-in-itself, as originally formulated by Kant. Now, the thing-in-itself is exactly the vanishing point of Lukács’ central antinomies, “the antinomies of totality and of content” (HCC: 132; GuK: 312). The thing-in-itself condenses two distinct problems that ultimately prove to be two facets of a single issue. Content and totality are the two names for what, in Kant, remains beyond experience – ‘below’ experience, in the case of the former, and ‘above’, in the case of the latter. The two may seem like very different problems, but as Lukács demonstrates, they are essentially the same. Kant calls experience our touch with the object when it arises simultaneously and collaboratively from our sensory and conceptual capacities. A purely sensory ‘experience’ lacking the categorical framework of the understanding cannot be considered genuine experience. Similarly, an ‘experience’ derived solely from reason, devoid of sensory content – such as the intellectual ‘experience’ of the idea of totality to which thought is compelled – also falls short of experience properly speaking. Thus, in Kant’s philosophy, there are two ways of being beyond experience – the “blind intuitions” and the “empty concepts” –, both of which fall under the problem designated as the “thing-in-itself”. They will give rise to different versions of logical antinomy.

Lukács praises Kant for taking the problem of experience seriously in a manner that remains strictly consistent with his starting point, the Copernican Turn. Although it gained a name from Kant, it is an idea that has shaped modern philosophy since its beginning with Descartes and Vico. Its fundamental meaning is that we can only know things because we have created them – either by being the ground of their existence, through our activity, or by being the ground of their being understood as they are, through our cognitive structures and conceptual schemes. Given this assumption, it is an epistemic imperative that all knowledge (and knowledge as a whole), to be considered as something produced by us, must originate from a subjective source. Kant tried to make justice to this imperative but also recognized “the inevitability” of “a frontier or barrier of irrationality” (HCC: 114; GuK: 291). We must know our knowledge as something entirely produced by us, yet we cannot derive its ultimate sensible content from ourselves; we must always encounter it contingently as something given. This is the antinomy of the content. In the precise formulation of Giovanni Zanotti: “On one hand, no irreducibly given ‘fact’ may be allowed to resist formal reduction, for otherwise the whole purpose of ‘generation’ would be missed and the system would collapse upon itself; on the other hand, a merely formal rationality cannot by definition penetrate a content that is opposed to it at the outset” (Zanotti 2023: 11).

While Kant does not acknowledge the antinomy of content as such, he recognizes the antinomy of totality as antinomic. Lukács goes so far as to claim that not only the cosmological antinomies, but the entire *Transcendental dialectic* revolves around this antinomic problem, as the ideas of the world, soul, and God all relate to the issue of totality. For Kant, totality – or, more precisely, the transcendental idea of the world, which necessarily arises from our hypothetical synthesis of a causal chain – is not a constitutive concept of anything that can be experienced. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid presupposing totality when experiencing states of affairs that are causally linked to one another. Kant’s acknowledgment of antinomies when addressing totality is therefore not unexpected, given the antinomy of content that was left repressed. Since content remains indelibly outside what is produced by the subject, our knowledge is never total. The result is that modern science is limited to partial knowledge, or knowledge of partial domains of objects, which not only have no connection to other domains but can even contradict each other.

According to Lukács, the *Seinsgrund* of these thought antinomies lies in the contradictory development of bourgeois society during Kant's time, which, unlike the rationalist philosophy that preceded it, was already marked by the recognition of a doctrine of irrationality and the challenge it imposes to the concept of a unified philosophical system. "On the one hand", says Lukács, the society structured by the commodity "acquires increasing control over the details of its social existence, subjecting them to its needs. On the other hand it loses – likewise progressively – the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society as a whole and with that it loses its own qualifications for leadership" (HCC: 121; GuK: 299). This logical problem of capitalist society is then refracted into pure thought, oblivious to its original referent, and acquires the form of the antinomy.

It seems that the epistemological antinomies could be resolved if we consider the production of the object of knowledge not only as a conceptual process but also as a real, practical one. This was, in fact, the path pursued by Kant himself and later, more emphatically, by Fichte. The subject must now be conceived as the producer of the entirety of the content, ensuring that content and form do not come into conflict, nor does any contradiction arise regarding the whole. However, the exteriority of content relative to the subjectively produced form, acknowledged in theoretical philosophy, reemerges with more significant consequences in practical philosophy. Through individual ethical action, the subject is envisioned as the cause of existence of rational states of affairs in the world. Still, only the rational form of the ethical act, not its previously determined irrational content, is voluntarily accessible and can be settled by the subject. With the idea of *Tathandlung*, Fichte still seeks to discover, in practical activity, an original unity between objectivity and subjectivity. These efforts, however, can only shift the plane of the antinomy – whether in the Kantian recognition that moral action is structurally incapable of leading to happiness in this world or in the antinomy between freedom and necessity, which renders freedom not an actual state of affairs, but rather a noumenal perspective from which our mental facts must be judged. Fichte can, at best, deduce the indeducibility of the content that fills the activity. Thus, acting becomes merely an adaptation, through the formally rational anticipation of possibilities, to what would occur regardless of the specifically individual action. The realm of action becomes a second nature, as rigid as the first, and we remain contemplative even in action.

These examples show negatively that the antinomies of thought could only be effectively overcome if form and content were understood as an organic rather than external connection. However, it would be philosophically and logically inconsistent to consider them organic in a world where they are not so. Art offers a model of how such an organic mediation could be: by the principle of art as described by Kant in the third *Critique*, Lukács understands “the creation of a concrete totality that springs from a conception of form orientated towards the concrete content of its material substratum. In this view form is therefore able to demolish the ‘contingent’ relation of the parts to the whole and to resolve the merely apparent opposition between chance and necessity” (HCC: 137; GuK: 317 ff.). Yet, art remains separate from life. It provides a logical model but not an actual solution. Its contribution is to anticipate the need to discover a unified subject capable of effectively shaping reality. This subject must be both the producer of its disintegration and the one who can reverse it, reconstituting itself as an agent and producer, now consciously engaged in creating the world. It can only do so if it already was the actual producer, the identical subject-object that produces itself and its world through its activity, i.e., labor. The point of view of the proletariat – not of the empirically found proletariat, but its presupposed ontological point of view still to be empirically posited through self-production – is the point of view of totality, reconciling form and content and suppressing every antinomy. But when Hegel came to something resembling this idea, he “turned back and lost itself in the endless labyrinth of conceptual mythology” (HCC: 145; GuK: 328). Only Marx and Marxism could carry it to its ultimate consequences and transform it into a reality through political praxis.

3. *Leaving the Lehrjahre behind*

Lukács gradually revised many of his assumptions from his early work, which he described as tentative or experimental, reflective of what he termed, alluding to his esteemed *Wilhelm Meister*, his *Lehrjahre* in Marxism (HCC: ix; GuK: 11). One of the most decisive changes concerns his early idea that nature is nothing but a “theoretical reflection and projection” of our “social milieu” (HCC: 38; GuK: 211). Nature was nothing extra-social but already “spirit” in a Hegelian sense. To invoke a Husserlian terminology not employed by Lukács, nature was the regional ontology of

the natural sciences, the domain of meaning they projected, as reified as their contemplative stance toward its object. Since the development of modern science “interacted fruitfully with a technology that was becoming increasingly more rationalised, and with the experience of work in the production” (HCC: 113; GuK: 289, transl. mod.), it is expected that “nature” is the name we give for the domain of reference of a science functionally interwoven with capitalist production. Consequently, Lukács claimed, against Engels, that “the crucial determinants of dialectics – the interaction of subject and object, the unity of theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc. – are absent from our knowledge of nature” (HCC: 24; GuK: 177). While many perceive a certain “ontological dualism” in his position, wherein the historical world of spirit is dialectically dynamic and the domain of nature remains eternal and static (see Saito 2022: 75 ff.), it seems rather that Lukács is asserting that there is no access to another ‘nature’ apart from the mediation of empirical sciences embedded in capitalist production. From within the monist mediation of capitalist provisional ontology, nature appears so.

Leaving behind his *Lehrjahre*, Lukács moved on to dismiss the tendency he had then once embraced “to view Marxism exclusively as a theory of society, as social philosophy, and hence to ignore or repudiate its stance on nature” (HCC: xvi; GuK: 18, transl. mod.). The main problem was that by disregarding the (now understood as) “ontological objectivity of nature” as irrelevant to dialectical thinking, we would also risk losing sight of the “most important real pillars of the Marxist view of the world”, namely “labour as the mediator of the metabolic interaction between society and nature” (HCC: xvii; GuK: 19).

We cannot explore the further development of Lukács’ thought here. Since the resolution of the identical subject-object in the proletariat, which claims access to a totalizing perspective and thereby overcomes bourgeois antinomies, was also correctly rejected by Lukács as an idealist solution (HCC: xxiii; GuK: 25), he then sought in the supposed ontological nature of labor and its teleological structure the Archimedean point that could guide theoretical judgment and political praxis.

4. *Genesis and validity of the antinomies*

But let us return to Adorno's riddle. It becomes now not less but more enigmatic. A constellatory construction of the commodity-form should, according to Adorno, make the philosophical problem of the thing-in-itself disappear at all. Lukács merely revealed the social conditions in which the problem arose, but that would not be enough, "for", as the young Adorno claimed, "the truth content of a problem is in principle different from the historical and psychological conditions out of which it grows" (Adorno 1977: 128; AGS 1: 337). In a letter to Kracauer the year before the *Antrittsvorlesung*, Adorno reports having returned to *History and class consciousness*, with the impression that the book "diffuses a kind of Heidelberg local colour in an unbearable fashion; it is only a step to Mannheim, most of all in the wholly abstract conception of the concept of ideology which cannot be handled in this schematic way of deducing it in idealistic terms" (Adorno, Kracauer 2020: 140)⁴. Adorno consistently opposed such historicist, sociological, or psychological reductions of philosophical ideas, famously articulating this stance with the formula that "it is not, as relativism would have it, truth in history, but rather history in truth" (Adorno 2013: 135; AGS 5: 141). In 1939, during a recorded discussion with Horkheimer about their plans for the future coauthored book, the claim reemerges, but now with its full Lukácsian resonance:

We don't have to answer the questions of bourgeois philosophy, because they are an expression of bourgeois antinomies and are therefore aporetic concepts. We can only abolish them, i.e. show the roots from which these questions are posed. A theoretical world in which these questions have disappeared will look very different. [...] Insofar as the questions we liquidate are socially necessary questions, the only genuine and not illusory questions are those that do not allow themselves to be answered. But that's why, in a certain sense, their dissolution is also their answer, and not their mere elimination. They really are "suppressed" (*aufgehoben*). (Adorno, Horkheimer 1985: 492)

⁴ In the 1960's lecture *Philosophie und Soziologie*, Adorno, even if now more generously, insists on the comparison of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and *History and class consciousness*, "where the author attempted to show in a fairly rigorous way how the form assumed by some of the most important modern philosophies, and especially those of Kant and Hegel, could be derived from and explained in terms of social factors, and specifically in terms of the economic relations of production that prevailed at the time" (Adorno 2022: 94).

The core of the program outlined in Adorno's *Antrittsvorlesung* is summarized here eight years later. Adorno's critique of the alleged sociology in *History and class consciousness* becomes even more puzzling, as he appears to be precisely reaffirming its approach. The liquidation of the great questions of bourgeois philosophy, as advocated by Adorno, coincides with the path Lukács charted in the section on the antinomies. Is the disapproval merely a manifestation of a fundamental antipathy, a surrogate for other disagreements that remained in the background? The fact is that the young Adorno's *Aufhebung* of the antinomic questions of bourgeois philosophy does not correspond with the version proposed by Lukács – that is, the actual proletarian revolution led by the vanguard party. For Adorno, the liquidation of philosophical questions does not entail a move to praxis and, above all, is not grounded in any totalizing point of view. As appears in his discussions with Alfred Sohn-Rethel on very similar themes and by the same time (see de Caux 2021), Adorno believes that the liquidation of philosophical questions occurs when, through a rigorous immanent analysis of their arguments, social-historical reality emerges, so to speak, spontaneously within the text, rather than being preemptively introduced by the theorist from the outside. Adorno's program, first attempted in his analysis of Husserl in the 1930s, seeks to draw practical reality from within philosophical problems, emphasizing, on the one hand, their strict autonomy and closure, and on the other, their antinomic character. In other words, while these problems are correlated with real historical conditions, doing justice to this correlation requires bracketing them as autonomous issues, independent of their genetic origins. It is the genesis that must emerge within the validity, not the other way around. If this occurs, the real antinomies of society appear 'inside' theory as philosophical antinomies, like the phenomenological antinomies he identified in Husserl. Yet, it remains unclear whether Lukács actually did otherwise. On the contrary, the capitalist antinomic world seems to resurface from within bourgeois philosophy in Lukács' analysis, just as Adorno demanded.

5. *A misencounter*

Beneath the guise of criticism, Adorno appears to remain deeply faithful to the author of *History and class consciousness* – though not entirely un-

til Lukács' final conclusions, perhaps precisely until its coherent conclusion. While Lukács renounced the theses of his *Lehrjahre*, it was Adorno who remained, so to speak, more Catholic than his Marxist Pope György. To understand Adorno's slightly unsympathetic attitude towards Lukács in the inaugural lecture – an attitude that would later grow into a real antagonism, with mutual *ad hominem* accusations –, we may recall Adorno's impressions of his only personal meeting with Lukács, which took place in Vienna in 1925, two years after the publication of *History and class consciousness*, six years before the lecture on *The actuality of philosophy*. After the meeting, Adorno ambiguously reports to Kracauer in a letter, describing both the atmosphere of fascination surrounding Lukács and the fundamental philosophical disagreements they discussed⁵. He portrays a thinker's obsession with the objectivity of rationality as manifested in history, bringing together the Hegelian thesis on the rationality of reality and blind trust in the party. For what interests us here, it is enough to quote one theme.

[Lukács] roundly disavowed the theory of the novel, saying that it was “idealistic and mythological”. He contrasted it with the “conversion into content” (*Verinhaltlichung*) of history by means of Marxist dialectics. To my objection that this too was idealism (a criticism which he did not understand properly), he retorted that 1) it was precisely by means of dialectics that the object was “taken up and produced in its being in and for itself” (something which I shall never comprehend); 2) true nature would only be perceptible in a “classless society”. (Adorno, Kracauer 2020: 50, transl. mod.)

Of Lukács' two replies, it is striking that Adorno only ‘fails to understand’ the first, while he raises no objections to the second. This dissociation is illustrative because the thinking of both will develop in opposite ways regarding the two theses and their relationship, like a mirror image where right becomes left and vice versa. To preserve the first thesis – on the dialectical production of the object in and for itself – Lukács, as we have seen, now rejects the second one. For the late Lukács, the two theses are not in solidarity but in opposition. Without actual access to true nature,

⁵ To Alban Berg, Adorno reports about the same encounter: “In Vienna I immediately got into a discussion with the Marxist thinker Lukács [...], whom, as you know, I greatly revere; he made a strong impression upon me on a personal level, but in intellectual terms communication proved impossible, which of course pained me particularly in the case of Lukács, who has had a more profound intellectual influence on me than almost anyone else” (Adorno, Berg 2005: 9).

particularly our ontological nature as laborers, it becomes impossible to understand the historical production of the object as something rational and conducive to a human telos, for it is labor that mediates natural causality and spiritual finality. If, for the author of *History and class consciousness*, nature was ‘inside’ the antinomic connection, trapped in the opposition of thing-in-itself and phenomenon, then Lukács must now step into it firmly, ontologically, in order to suppress the antinomies, even if, once again, only in a theoretical (Adorno would say: reified) manner.

For Adorno, it is quite the opposite. Since the second thesis, which Lukács abandoned, is taken for correct – Adorno will remain the most faithful heir to this Lukácsian thesis until the end⁶ –, the first one must be wrong. Not only is nature a set of ‘thingly’, reified states of affairs known only through a science entangled with capitalist forces of production, but history and society are also considered as reified as nature – indeed, an idea Adorno also borrowed from Lukács. If there is a *Verinhaltlichung* of history, an objective content that is “taken up and produced in its being in and for itself” precisely through dialectic, this content has nothing to do with the development towards an emancipated society. Our social world is now, as Adorno also learned with Lukács, a “second nature” that “like nature (first nature), [...] is determinable only as the embodiment of

⁶ This is best illustrated by the interaction between Lukács and Adorno’s student Alfred Schmidt at the time of the publication of the latter’s 1962 book on *The concept of nature in Marx*. Nicolas Tertulian explains the episode: “The book was preceded by a laudatory preface by Adorno and Horkheimer, who praised the author’s anti-ontological interpretation of Marx’s concept of nature. Alfred Schmidt sent the book to Lukács, who acknowledged receipt in a letter dated August 24, 1963. After a few positive remarks, he subjected the book’s main thesis to a thorough critique. He rejects Schmidt’s opposition between Engels, author of a *Dialectic of nature*, and Marx, who would not have spoken of a nature-in-itself, i.e., a dialectic of nature, but only of nature mediated by society, and vigorously defends the ontological autonomy of nature (*die ontologische Objektivität der Natur an sich*). He also reminds Schmidt that we cannot understand the original phenomenon of social life, labor, without taking into account the objective properties of nature (or, as he would later put it in his *Ontology*, without taking into account the dialectical tension between the teleology of the subject’s acts and the objective causal nexus of nature). Not without specific intent, he pointed out to Schmidt that his error had its origins in *History and class consciousness*, with which his position in certain places had ‘a fatal resemblance’ (*eine fatale Ähnlichkeit*). Lukács was referring to his critique of the thesis on the dialectics of nature, a position he was later to revise. Adorno, on the other hand, defended to the end the young Lukács’ position on the non-existence of a dialectic of nature. By criticizing Schmidt’s book, Lukács implicitly disavowed Adorno’s thinking” (Tertulian 2005: 211 ff.).

recognised but senseless necessities and therefore it is incomprehensible, unknowable in its real substance” (Lukács 1971b: 62). The younger Lukács describes this second nature in *The theory of the novel* – the book he called idealist during his conversation with Adorno – as

not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses – meanings – which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities; this second nature could only be brought to life – if this were possible – by the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved it; it can never be animated by another interiority. It is too akin to the soul’s aspirations to be treated by the soul as mere raw material for moods, yet too alien to those aspirations ever to become their appropriate and adequate expression. (Lukács 1971b: 64)

Since the concept of second nature is preserved and refined in the idea of reification in 1923, it makes no sense to speak of an ontological dualism: both nature and society are, in this sense, ‘nature’, i.e., domains of thingly states of affairs. Precisely for this reason, both are historical, for they are not ontologically but only transitorily ‘natural’. Tyrus Miller explains that with the reception of the concept of second nature, “the young Lukács’ self-conscious diagnosis of the tensions within subjectivity against a world that appears to allow no practical way forward or out [...] is adopted by Adorno as axiomatic for his work from the 1930s on” (Miller 2022: 11).

6. *The riddle of anti-spirit*

This representation of our socio-historical world arises (*pace* Lukács’ personally expressed disavowal) in another of Adorno’s works, a year after the *Actuality*. It is once again, but now more explicitly, at the heart of his evolving philosophical ideas, and it is Lukács again who helps us identify the enigmatic content behind the riddle in Adorno’s youth program. In 1932, Adorno delivered a conference on *The idea of natural history* at the Kant-Gesellschaft of Frankfurt. After exposing Lukács’ ideas on second nature, he claims: “From the perspective of the philosophy of history the problem of natural history presents itself in the first place as the question of how it is possible to know and interpret this alienated, reified, dead

world. Lukács already perceived this problem in its strangeness and its character of riddle” (Adorno 1984: 118; AGS 1: 356, transl. mod.).

We can now connect the dots. The socio-historical world, reified as it also is, shows the traits of first nature: in every supposed novelty in history, it is the mythical repetition of the same archaic that Adorno sees. Being the world of the commodity, the spiritual world is as meaningless as nature, leaning more towards an “anti-spirit”, as he would phrase it in *Negative dialectics* (Adorno 1973: 356; AGS 6: 349). Marx himself spoke of the “laws of nature of the modern mode of production” or “of capitalist production” (Marx 2024: 6, 252, 688), and Lukács referred his “pre-Marxist” concept of second nature now to the phenomenon of reification in *History and class consciousness* (HCC: 128; GuK: 307). As our natural and socio-historical reality appears in general as meaningless, it presents itself as a riddle, and the task of philosophy is to decipher it. But the commodity is the key to it. From Benjamin, Adorno derives the concept that such a reality must be “read” similarly to how we read allegories: “So, for example, in the language of the Baroque, the fall of a tyrant is equivalent to the setting of the sun. This allegorical relationship already encompasses the presentiment of a procedure that could succeed in interpreting concrete history as nature and to make nature dialectical under the aspect of history” (Adorno 1984: 121; AGS 1: 360). This also applies to philosophy itself: it must be read allegorically as an arbitrary representation that can be deciphered through its formal analogies, reflecting the essential reality that shapes our second nature, i.e., the structuring reality of the commodity-form. But was not this what Lukács accomplished in the chapter on the antinomies?

7. The meaning of meaninglessness

Let us jump three decades and find Adorno occupied with the positivist dispute in German sociology. By paradigmatically analyzing the sociological methodologies of Durkheim and Weber, who view society either as a raw social fact devoid of meaning or as shaped by the subjective meanings that make it appear rational, Adorno identifies an antithesis in the comprehensibility and incomprehensibility of society – if you will, an antinomy in which the contemplative position of bourgeois knowledge is trapped. The role of a critical-reflexive theory, for Adorno, is not either to

explain or to comprehend alone, but “to comprehend non-comprehensibility, to deduce from the relations between people the autonomized relations that have become untransparent” (AGS 8: 12), because “society, the autonomized, is no longer comprehensible, but comprehensible is only the law of its autonomization” (AGS 8: 296). The essence of this society is the law of its tendential autonomization from the individuals who compose and produce it, which is why “the contradiction in the concept of society as comprehensible and incomprehensible is the driving force of rational critique” (AGS 8: 296). “A dialectical concept of meaning would not be a correlate of Weberian comprehension, but rather the social essence that shapes the phenomenon, which appears in it and hides in it [...] its model would be the Marxian law of collapse” (AGS 8: 320).

Adorno speaks of neither riddle nor allegory, yet we are not far from the program he outlined in his youth under the considerable influence of Lukács. A critical theory of society whose main objective is to comprehend its incomprehensibility: this is what the philosophical program of the riddle has turned into. In the meantime, Lukács practically abandoned the hard side of Marxian critique of political economy and its explanatory potential for deciphering every form of false consciousness (philosophy included) and dedicated more and more to the work of grounding an ontological human nature in order to claim that we are alienated from it. In other words, while Lukács accepted back and unproblematically the horizon of bourgeois philosophy, it is Adorno who carried forth his idea that its questions are not to be answered, as they are antinomic, but rather to be liquidated through an *ultima philosophia*.

8. *Totality as experiential content of a philosophy*

It is not unreasonable to speculate that Adorno had Lukács in mind when he claims, in a 1958 conference later included in the *Three studies on Hegel*, that understanding – or deciphering the riddle of, one might say – the “experiential content of Hegel’s philosophy” is philosophically more interesting than merely addressing “the experiential content in Hegel’s philosophy” (Adorno 1993: 54; AGS 5: 295 ff., my emphasis). Ten years earlier, Lukács published his extensive study on the development of Hegel’s thought, which Adorno mentions in a 1950 letter to Thomas Mann: “I am afraid I must regard Lukács’ big book on Hegel, which I have worked

through from beginning to end, as among my most depressing recent experiences. One can hardly credit such reification of consciousness in the very man who coined this concept in the first place" (Adorno, Mann 2006: 47). Such a strong judgment is surely not easy to understand. Highlighting the attention that the young Hegel paid to economic theory and phenomena in the years leading up to the writing of the *Phenomenology*, Lukács partially anticipated his own later ontological elaborations on the teleology of human labor and its alienated character in capitalism. When Adorno writes in 1958 that "the concept of experience" he is discussing does not "refer to isolated empirical observations that would be processed synthetically in Hegel's philosophy", but instead to "the compelling force of the objective phenomena that have been reflected in his philosophy and are sedimented in it" (Adorno 1993: 54; AGS 5: 296), he may be opposing the procedure Lukács used in his new book on Hegel precisely in the name of the method employed by the author of *History and class consciousness* – and it is no coincidence that Adorno's essay ends with a reproach of the Hegelian idea, as rehashed by Lukács' concept of literary realism, concerning the rationality of reality. If the accusation of historicism or sociologism seemed unjustified regarding the 1923 book, it now strikes at the heart of the 1948 book. Tertulian reveals that a two-page summary of Lukács' book, authored by Adorno, is found in Horkheimer's papers in the archive of the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt. Interestingly enough, Adorno's main objection there is that Lukács "dared not seek the materialist motifs in Hegel's Logic and Metaphysics, but limited himself to finding relations between Hegel's economic thought, based on classical political economy and that of Marx and Engels" (Tertulian 1985: 89 ff.). Adorno thinks that the experience of backward capitalist modernization lived by Hegel should be found, as its experiential content, more pronouncedly where his thought is more abstract and removed from a direct description of its domain of reference. For Adorno, Hegel does not view the contradictions he discovered in the economy as a model for comprehending the entire realm of experience. Instead, he sees experience as the domain of contradiction because his experience, shaped by the profound influences of an incipient capitalist modernization, is – whether he is aware of it or not – a manifestation of the contradictions of the commodity beginning to permeate every aspect of life. In this experience of ongoing subsumption of what was external, a certain totality can be felt and even anticipated conceptually.

In the early Idealist period, when bourgeois society had not yet really taken shape as a totality in underdeveloped Germany, the critique of the particular had a different kind of dignity. In the theoretical sphere, idealism represented the insight that the sum total of specific knowledge was not a whole, that the best of both knowledge and human potential slipped through the meshes of the division of labor. [...] In a total society, totality becomes radical evil. What resonates in Hegel along with the need for a progressive integration is the need for a reconciliation – a reconciliation the totality has prevented ever since it achieved the reality Hegel enthusiastically anticipated for it in the concept. (Adorno 1993: 62; AGS 5: 302 ff.)

The totality anticipated by Hegel is, for Adorno, the logico-metaphysical account of a real social totality, the tendential integral subsumption of life through the mediation of the commodity. It is not free of contradictions or antinomies; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It is a totality exactly because it encompasses both poles of the antinomies in their instantiations: “*Deciphered*, the logical-metaphysical theory of totality as the epitome of contradictions means that society is not merely riven and disturbed by contradictions and disproportionalities; rather, society becomes a totality only by virtue of its contradictions” (Adorno 1993: 79; AGS 5: 317, my emphasis).

9. *The antinomies of the wrong life*

Lastly, whereas the problem of the antinomies appears to vanish from Lukács’ later thought, Adorno not only embraces it but takes it to a more radical level. Totality and antinomy were antithetical for Lukács. Antinomy was conceived as a lack of mediation, a stark, rationally undecidable opposition between two terms unable to find what makes them one. For Adorno, antinomy is the logical form of what is subsumed by a totality – not due to a lack of mediation but because of its excess. We only need to remember the pair of most notable theses from *Minima moralia*: that “the whole is the false” and that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (Adorno 2005: 50, 39; AGS 4: 55, 43). In a social world now totally touched by the mediation of the commodity, nothing escapes its logic, not even running in the opposite direction, which is posited by the commodity as well. A real totality is one in which you also affirm when you negate, one where the negation of what is inside does not fall outside, as Hegel knew.

In such a bad totality, every normativity stands intertwined with its anti-nomic counterpart, rendering both sides wrong in an emphatic sense. There is no right life in the bad totality because even negating the wrong remains wrong (as I intend to have shown in de Caux 2024). The *nomos* of the antinomy is, by Adorno, no longer only a rule of how objects should be thought of. It is real social normativity that becomes antinomic when the tendential total mediation of commodity takes over. This totality, however, is a false one, and not in the sense that it does not correspond to a “real” or “good” totality – for example, that of the point of view of the proletariat. The totality of the mediation of the commodity is the only totality we can claim to know, yet it is a false one, because it does not coincide with *itself* and, therefore, is not really total. “Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself – of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept”, says Adorno in *Negative dialectics* (Adorno 1973: 147; AGS 6: 150). This totality is more of a ‘magical’ circle of immanence – a spell that can be broken. Although it tends to behave in a totalizing manner, subsuming its exterior into its dynamics of a self-moving abstraction, it never truly corresponds to totality in an ontological sense, the very one sought by Lukács⁷.

Conclusion: against ontology

To conclude, why then does Adorno, in 1931, reject Lukács’ philosophical procedure in the section on the antinomies, even though it aligns with a methodological approach he would, from then on, consistently endorse and develop – namely, the deciphering of philosophy itself as a riddle, i.e., a specific relation between meaning and meaninglessness, to be unrav-

⁷ In a way of reading Marx that was opened by Adorno, Postone summarized this critique of Lukács’ 1923 concept of totality: “In Capital, then, Marx explicitly characterizes capital as the self-moving substance that is Subject. In so doing, he implicitly suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism. Note, however, that he does not identify that Subject with any social grouping, such as the proletariat, or with humanity. Instead, Marx grasps it with reference to the social relations constituted by the forms of objectifying practice expressed by the category of capital. [...] The idea that capital, and not the proletariat or the species, is the total Subject clearly implies that, for Marx, the historical negation of capitalism would not involve the realization, but the abolition, of the totality” (Postone 2009: 210 ff.).

eled through the lens of the commodity-form? Out of sheer political antipathy? Nothing would attend less to the requirement of immanent critique.

So far, I have concluded that Adorno steadfastly upholds at least two aspects of *History and class consciousness* that Lukács himself ultimately abandoned. The first is its method – not the so-called dialectical method of “orthodox Marxism”, but the one actually employed in the section on the antinomies. The second is its concept of nature as ‘phenomenon’ in a Kantian sense, i.e., as something we only access and determine through the mediation of a specific conceptual scheme that is functional to capitalist accumulation. Lukács’ withdrawal from this thesis is pivotal to his abandonment of the method he used in 1923 for the critique of philosophy. With a firm, ontological point from which reality can supposedly be accessed, he can now blame everything that diverts from good nature as ‘decadence’, ‘disease’, ‘alienation’, from Kafka and Joyce to Nietzsche and Freud (see Adorno’s review of Lukács’ proposal of literary realism in AGS 11: 251 ff.). One no longer needs to search for the contradictory reality within philosophy when one has the yardstick at hand to judge it in advance. Good philosophy is now separated from the bad one, as if they were not all born out of the same bad reality. We can understand that Adorno refuses the development of Lukács’ thought after his abandonment of *History and class consciousness*. But it is already this book that Adorno criticized in 1931, which remained, for us, until the end as a *riddle*.

Adorno’s allergy to ontology is well known. In a manuscript written just before his death, titled *On the specification of critical theory*, Adorno states emphatically: “Critical theory is not an ontology” (Adorno 2003b: 292). He means that critical theory and ontology are incompatible. We cannot be sure that what we know – say, labor in its present form – corresponds to its eternal essence, let alone if there is such an essence. Not only can we not know it ontologically, but we have compelling reasons to believe it is only transitory. So, we would be fixating it normatively in its flawed current structure if we ontologize it. Adorno did not live to see the publication of Lukács’ *Ontology of social being*, but he could see it coming. When Lukács published an ambiguous review of the first book Heidegger published after the fall of the Nazi regime, Adorno took the following notes:

To ascribe a dialectic to a being that is not reflected, not passed through by consciousness and thereby determined in its neediness would be as dogmatic as any

of the statements about being as such that Heidegger's philosophy comes up with. Marx's doctrine of the priority of being over consciousness is not meant to be understood ontologically, but as an expression of something negative, namely the prevalence of reification, of the relations of production into which people 'involuntarily enter'. (AGS 20.1: 252 ff.)

Can we also view Adorno's critical veto against every ontology as a key to his rejection of a so-called historicist or sociological approach to bourgeois philosophy as early as 1931? In fact, it may not be right to characterize Lukács' approach to the antinomies of bourgeois philosophy as utterly consistent with Adorno's demand of immanent critique. The antinomies of bourgeois philosophy only appear to Lukács as projections of the socio-historical world's real antinomies because he already has a conceptual anticipation of its reconciliation. Only in light of this ontological deep structure of reality, the identical subject-object generating the split actuality derivatively, can Lukács judge the antinomies of the bourgeois mind and world as a shortcoming. In *History and class consciousness*, Lukács already has an 'ontology' in the sense he later assigns to that term, and this is what Adorno cannot tolerate. So it would be quite imprecise to designate Lukács' 1923 book as suffering from an 'ontological dualism'. Strictly speaking, there is, for him, only one true ontology – and another false one, the phenomenal world of nature and society, both reified. It is not one ontology for nature and another for society, but rather nature and society belong together in the false, reified, antithetical, and non-ontological experience under capitalism. *History and class consciousness'* true ontology lies somewhere else. It is a kind of ontology without actual being, a Being without being (*Sein ohne Seiendes*), and its place is the speculative idea of a reconciliated totality. The first sentence of Adorno's lecture of 1931 already discloses the problem:

Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real. No justifying reason could rediscover itself in a reality whose order and form suppresses every claim to reason; only polemically does reason present itself to the knower as total reality, while only in traces and ruins is it prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality. Philosophy which presents reality as such today only veils reality and eternalizes its present condition. (Adorno 1977: 120; AGS 1: 325)

Without this kind of feigned intellectual grasp of a concrete transcendence, that Lukács continuously sought in different formulations, Adorno is left to grapple only with the actuality of philosophy and its real antinomies⁸.

Abbreviations

AGS = Adorno 2003a

HCC = Lukács 1971a

GuK = Lukács 1977

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⁸ This study is supported by Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ); Process number 200.139/2023.

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