

Love, Mourning, and the Speculative Philosophy of Praxis

Iaan Reynolds

This is a preprint. Please see the full text in: *Radical Philosophy Review* 26, no. 1 (2023): 169-173. <https://doi.org/10.5840/radphilrev202326113>

Under review:

Daniel Andrés López. *Lukács: Praxis and the Absolute*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2020. Pp. 620. \$50.00, ISBN: 978-1-6425-9342-6.

Philosophical attention to Georg Lukács has increased in recent years, with several studies focused specifically on the unique approach to Marxist theory he developed between the October revolution and the end of the 1920s. While *Lukács: Praxis and the Absolute* is an addition to this general trend, it also aims to move past what author Daniel Andrés López sees as a detrimental elision of the speculative character of Lukács' project in these treatments. If Lukács can be helpful to us a century after the composition of his most well-known works, we cannot merely separate the insightful or problematic parts of his method from their total context, but must rather bring every element of this system into a comprehensive interpretation. Reading Lukács' philosophy of praxis thus requires an immanent reconstruction of the way in which his project struggled to unite the conceptual and logical dimensions of critique with the possibility of genuine historical novelty.

The central thread guiding López's work is the idea that, "praxis occupies the same position in Lukács' philosophy as the absolute does in Hegel's" (419). This means that Lukács' work is starkly different from its portrayal by many of its critics, and even some sympathetic readers. It also means, however, that it is plagued by difficulties that these commentators have only scarcely noticed – most notably the tendency to take refuge in conceptual mythologies, or irrational gaps between apparently irreducible moments with no apparent possibility of genuine mediation (439; 474). The immanent self-contradiction that López locates in Lukács' philosophy of praxis means that the philosopher of praxis inevitably inclines towards such a conceptual mythology, which seems to reconcile the gap between this philosopher's abstract standpoint and the historical situation from which this standpoint could become concrete (44). As López tells it, Lukács attempts to resolve this through an appeal to the "actuality of revolution" in his book on Lenin and elsewhere (270-300). But by placing the weight of Hegel's absolute on the interplay between finite moments of political and social reality (in this case: the class and the party), such an attempt necessarily fails. Although the outlines of this failure could already be seen in the 1920s, it becomes especially apparent, according to López, in the period immediately following Lukács' philosophy of praxis, in the withdrawal of the revolutionary moment, and the ossification of the institutions into which the working class had cast their hopes into new instruments of oppression (574).

Through a "literary-historical method of reading, which unites logic and genesis" (35), López develops a "phenomenology of praxis" (in the Hegelian, not Husserlian, sense (40 n. 16)), tracing the inner movement through which the concepts in Lukács' system appear. The work thus reconstructs Lukács' project through the hierarchically organized categories of mediation, totality,

genesis, and finally praxis, in order to fully develop the inner contradiction of Lukács' philosophy. In the work's first part, López frames the initial moment of Lukács' philosophy of praxis as the overcoming of immediacy. In the three chapters describing this first moment, López explicates Lukács' view of theoretical consciousness in capitalist society, developed through discussions of his appropriation of Marx's development of the commodity fetish, his critique of reification and its relation to totality, and the standpoint of the proletariat as the position capable of reconciling the antinomies of bourgeois society. For López's speculative reading, these chapters represent praxis in itself, as the development of a critical theory of praxis. The chapters on "Reification and Totality" (ch. 2) and "The Standpoint of the Proletariat" (ch. 3) stand out as excellent treatments of reification and the imputation of class consciousness in English-language Lukács commentary, offering thorough critical assessments of the major trends in Lukács scholarship over the past several decades.

In Part 2, theory recognizes itself as abstract and begins the process of self-critique that will culminate in its concrete realization. We move here from the critique of immediacy to the recognition that even this critique can ossify into its own form of immediacy if it does not take account of its own position. That is to say, this Part describes the transition from praxis in itself to praxis for itself, completing the theory of praxis begun in the last part through an unfolding of its subjective moment. This part's chapters on "The Critique of Ideology" (ch. 5) and "The Party" (ch. 6) bring impressive insight to these discussions, as well as continuing to engage critically with prominent Lukács commentators.

Part 3 turns from López's comprehensive interpretation of Lukács' theory of praxis towards the immanent critique promised at the outset. López argues that Lukács' project's subjective and objective moments can be united only in "a *philosophy* of praxis" (389), through the development of a standpoint which remains "unconscious" or "latent" in Lukács' work (390; 395). Although Lukács hoped that "only the unity of meditation, totality, and genesis under the sign of praxis could sustain a philosophical standpoint that escapes the eternal return of the self-same" (393), the concretization of this philosophical reflection in the actions of the proletariat forces the theorist into a position of immediate identification. By making praxis the absolute endpoint of his theory, Lukács thus re-inscribes his thought in the antinomies of reified thought. López's way to cope with this failure is to develop "a theory of praxis *in and for itself*; that is to say, a theory that has fully comprehended itself and become a philosophy" (396). The final chapter of this part and of the work, "Praxis, the Absolute and Philosophy" (ch. 9), is an outstandingly rich meditation on Lukács' philosophy and an audacious contribution to the philosophy of praxis.

The thorough interpretation of Lukács developed in these pages is an exemplary effort in Lukács scholarship but is also an original philosophical work in its own right. Amidst his meticulous readings of Lukács, López also offers thought-provoking reflections on textual interpretation, philosophy's role in history, and the affective dimensions of philosophical research. The most intriguing aspects of this book are its underground currents – for example, its sustained reflection on the theme of love, and its self-characterization as a work of mourning – in which López brings Lukács' biographical, theoretical, and practical thinking together into vivid moments of insight. At various points, López discusses the "subterranean" conceptual role played by love in Lukács' philosophy of praxis (214; see also, *e.g.*, 12-13, 182, 300, 396, 551). This account blends Lukács' own discussion of love as a "relationship to the other which is neither transactory,

solipsistic, nihilistic or egotistical,” and which thus “underpins and becomes solidarity” (330), with biographical attention to Lukács’ own love relationships – for example his ill-fated love affair with Irma Seidler, who would commit suicide in 1911. In these reflections, López provides an interpretation of the failures of Lukács’ philosophy of praxis that relates its problematic aspects in his own life history. In a significant moment of the final chapter, the author writes: “Despite [Irma Seidler’s] aching affirmations of love, Lukács found himself incapable of the ethical, creative and loving act she implored of him. Did he leap into communism as penance and solatium for her lost love? Perhaps Lukács was unaffected by his incorporeal light because his mourning for Irma Seidler was incomplete” (564). While López might helpfully have done more to help us think through the relationship between theoretical work and biographical detail implied in such a reflection, the consistent presence of love as a conceptual category in Lukács’ work merits attention, as does its implied role in Marxist philosophy.

The discussion of love also brings up another intriguing dimension of the book, which is its identification as a work of mourning. Specifically, the work seeks to mourn the withdrawal of praxis, and Lukács’ inability to move past it (594). While this level of analysis finds López at his most thought-provoking – see, for example, the truly exceptional reflections on praxis and mourning at ch. 9.2 – it also raises interesting issues for further reflection. For example: who, exactly, should mourn the death of praxis? After the period of revolutionary ferment in the Western European democracies, and the cooling of the October Revolution, who is to say that we live “in an era both after and prior to praxis” (541)? This seems especially problematic given the wave of socialist political activity in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, and anti-colonial struggle in Africa, Asia, and Latin America from 1950s to the 1970s. Were the possibilities for communism really extinguished, as López seems to imply, so much as obscured from the view of those focused centrally on Europe? While López draws a clear distinction between the possibility of praxis in Lukács’ time and in our own, it also seems that his solution to Lukács’ inability to mourn – to philosophically reflect on the failure of praxis – risks reproducing another conceptual mythology, through which the historical present is connected to political possibility only by the thread of philosophy. Is not the praxis that has been “lost” potentially just another unexamined form of immediacy? Can’t such a mourning process thus become disingenuous? Is it not possible to mourn things that *we* haven’t lost, merely to relieve ourselves of the slow and difficult work of realizing the possibility of something truly different?

Any discussion of these questions would find ample resources in López’s excellent book. It promises to become a central reference in Lukács scholarship for years to come, not only owing to its careful and comprehensive exegetical work, but also due to the questions it brings into focus. López’s thorough and bold reading of such a central thinker in the Marxist tradition would be appreciated by all those interested in the philosophy of praxis, the philosophical dimensions of Marxist theory, and the relationship between philosophy and history.

Iaan Reynolds is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Utah Valley University. His research is concerned with the role of educational formation in critical social and political philosophy, and he has recently begun to expand this project through an engagement with phenomenology and

psychoanalysis. His book, *Education for Political Life: Critique, Theory, and Practice in Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge*, is forthcoming with Rowman & Littlefield.