

# Historical Epistemology: An Interpretation based on Lukács' History and Class Consciousness

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## Abstract

Lukács pioneered the Western Marxist intellectual movement, holding significant research value. This study employs a totality approach. To analyze the historical context from three aspects: the Theoretical Dilemma of the Second International, the German Sociological Tradition and the Debates within the Communist International. Analyze the Totality, Class Consciousness and Practice-Oriented of the theory to clarify the fundamental tenets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, and examine the contemporary relevance of Lukács' Historical Epistemology from the perspectives of criticism of mechanical materialism, communist debate and its influence on contemporary international socialist movement.. This research and analysis method is helpful for us to deepen our understanding of Lukács' Historical Epistemology and Western Marxism. It argues that Lukács' theory represents an innovative response to the crisis of Marxism during the proletarian revolutionary era, while also offering impetus for the global socialist movement in the 21st century.

## Keywords

Lukács; Historical Epistemology; Totality; Dialectics; Class Consciousness.

## 1. Introduction

As a pioneer of Western Marxism, Lukács has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Theoretically, research on Lukács' Historical Epistemology can provide insights for deepening Marxist epistemology and offer references for the study of Marxism adapted to Chinese conditions. Practically, it holds certain implications for the global socialist movement in the 21st century and for building ideological leadership in contemporary China.

This study aims to analyze existing interpretations of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, employ a holistic approach to deepen understanding of his theory, advance research on Lukács and Western Marxism, and discuss its contemporary relevance. Specifically, it can be summarized in three points:

- (1) Analyze the historical context in which Lukács' Historical Epistemology emerged;
- (2) Clarify the fundamental tenets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology;
- (3) Examine the contemporary relevance of Lukács' historical epistemology.

## 2. Literature Review

Current domestic and international research on Lukács' Historical Epistemology focuses on aspects such as "totality," "reification," "class consciousness," and "dialectics." A substantial body of research has been produced, objectively and dialectically affirming Lukács' contributions to the development of Marxism while acknowledging the rational elements within his theory. Simultaneously, these studies point out the neo-Kantian-Hegelian tendencies within his theoretical framework.

Overall, most scholars employ textual analysis to examine Lukács' Historical Epistemology from a philosophical perspective, which will serve as the primary methodology for this study. However, this approach has to some extent downplayed the historical context in which Lukács' Historical Epistemology emerged, failing to situate it within the broader historical process.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. The Historical Context of Lukács' Historical Epistemology**

This section primarily employs contextual restoration methods, combined with Lukács' holistic approach to epistemology, to situate his theory within its historical genesis. It elucidates the broader context and origins of Lukács' historical epistemology, thereby achieving a comprehensive grasp of its historical background and facilitating a deeper understanding of its fundamental tenets.

##### **3.1.1. The Theoretical Dilemma of the Second International**

This section primarily narrates the severe disagreements among theorists of the Second International concerning Marxist theory and practical struggle strategies before and after World War I, along with the debates among various factions.

By examining these debates, it reveals the historical context of the time and demonstrates the crises and contradictions Marxist theory faced during this historical phase. Therefore, this section analyzes the broader context of Lukács' Historical Epistemology by elucidating the theoretical dilemmas confronting the Second International.

##### **3.1.2. The German Sociological Tradition**

This section primarily explores the innovative theoretical tools and critical perspectives developed by German sociologists during the golden age of German sociology to analyze modern capitalist society. It highlights how these theories bear distinct traces of speculative and idealistic elements from German classical philosophy. By describing the new theories within the German sociological tradition, this section analyzes the crucial instrumental origins of Lukács' Historical Epistemology.

##### **3.1.3. Debates within the Communist International**

This section primarily examines the reflections and critiques emerging among theorists of Western European communist parties and left-wing intellectuals following the failure of the European revolutionary wave. It explores their criticisms of the Second International and the Communist International at the time, along with their perspectives on social structure and the strategies for the struggle between Marxist theory and practice. This section analyzes the concrete real-world origins of Lukács' Historical Epistemology by examining internal divisions within the Comintern, particularly the rift between Moscow and Western Europe.

#### **3.2. The Fundamental Tenets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology**

This section employs textual analysis to examine Lukács' exposition of historical epistemology in *History and Class Consciousness*. Building upon domestic and international scholarly research on Lukács' theory, it further clarifies and summarizes its core principles. It is particularly noteworthy that this chapter adopts the same logical structure as Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*: first, it discusses the fundamental principles and methods for a holistic understanding of history; second, it examines the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie and the holistic class consciousness of the proletariat, as well as the proletariat's ability to grasp this holistic method of understanding and thereby grasp history as a totality; Finally, it demonstrates how this approach creates the theoretical pathway for the proletariat to achieve the unity of class consciousness and class struggle, thereby transcending capitalism[1,2]. Consequently, this chapter unfolds its argument across three interconnected sections: totality,

class consciousness, and practice. These three aspects are mutually interrelated and form a complete logical chain.

### **3.2.1. Epistemology Characterized by Totality**

This section primarily analyzes the question: "What is totality?" Through examining this question, we can gain deeper insights into the fundamental essence of Lukács' Historical Epistemology. Through textual analysis of History and Class Consciousness, including "Tailism and Dialectics," combined with extensive scholarly research from both domestic and international sources, we further examine the concept of totality under the proposition "What is totality?" This includes exploring the relationship between totality and dialectics, the fundamental principles of the dialectic of totality, and how it permeates the entire theory, becoming its core methodology.

Specifically, this is addressed from two angles. First, it explains why Lukács discusses the genesis of history from a totality perspective, analyzing his method for grasping the history of totality. Simultaneously, it examines Lukács' discussion of human subjectivity and the historical subject of totality, using this foundation to investigate the proletariat's unique position in history and analyze why Lukács regards the proletariat as the unified subject-object of history. Second, this study elucidates Lukács' so-called "revolutionary dialectic," the fundamental principle of totality dialectics. It focuses on exploring the reasons for its "revolutionary" nature and analyzes how Lukács restored dialectics to its central position within Marxism, integrating it throughout his entire theoretical framework[3]. Through these two aspects, this study aims to better clarify the totality of Lukács' Historical Epistemology.

### **3.2.2. Epistemology Centered on Class Consciousness**

In this section, building upon the preceding discussion of totality and following Lukács' logic, we trace the development from historical genesis to the historical subject. We integrate the dialectic of totality with epistemology and class consciousness to elucidate the fundamental essence and pivotal role of proletarian class consciousness. Given Lukács' strong emphasis on class consciousness, this section primarily addresses the significance of proletarian class consciousness—specifically, how the proletariat, as the historical subject, masters the dialectic of totality to achieve a comprehensive understanding of itself and history, thereby forming class consciousness[4].

This section chiefly underscores the importance of the proletariat mastering the dialectic of totality to complete class consciousness, particularly highlighting its crucial prerequisite: only the proletariat can attain this totality of understanding. This connects logically with preceding arguments, forming a coherent theoretical thread[5]. Simultaneously, it reinforces the principle of totality dialectics emphasized throughout Lukács' work, culminating in a final emphasis on how the fundamental principles of totality dialectics, as discussed earlier, determine the unity of theory and practice. This achieves a unity of form and content in his theory, laying the groundwork for subsequent sections and forming a complete theoretical path to realization.

### **3.2.3. Practice-Oriented Epistemology**

Through the principle of dialectics of totality in Lukács' Historical Epistemology, his discourse ultimately aims to achieve the unity of theory and practice. Therefore, this section primarily discusses the practice-oriented nature of Lukács' Historical Epistemology and analyzes the pathways for realizing his theory.

Building upon the groundwork laid in the preceding section and synthesizing the earlier discussions on totality and class consciousness, this part examines how Lukács, through his elaboration of totality and dialectics, reification and class consciousness, ultimately returns to concrete practice[6]. It particularly emphasizes that this practice-oriented approach consistently permeates Lukács' Historical Epistemology, serving as an indispensable

component within his theoretical discourse and a crucial element enabling his theory to exert tangible influence in reality.

### **3.3. The Contemporary Significance of Lukács' Historical Epistemology**

This chapter primarily employs comparative analysis and contextual restoration methods. Integrating Lukács' totalizing approach to historical epistemology, it positions this theory as a historical product within the broader historical development process. It particularly emphasizes that, as totalizing history encompasses all temporal formations-encompassing the past, present, and future of historical existence-this section fundamentally embodies the basic principles of this totalizing methodology[7]. Thus, it examines three aspects: the critical targets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, critiques directed at his theory, and its role in advancing the global socialist movement in the 21st century. By elucidating Lukács' distinctions from the Second International and the Communist International, it demonstrates the totality of history, the historicity of theory, and the processual nature of development. This deepens our understanding of the core tenets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, thereby highlighting its contemporary relevance.

#### **3.3.1. Critique of the Second International's Mechanical Materialism**

This section primarily addresses Lukács' critique of the Second International's mechanical materialism. While extensively researched by scholars globally with abundant findings, most studies focus his criticism on economic determinism. This study, however, approaches the subject from the perspective of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, arguing that his primary critique of the Second International should actually center on its positivist attitude toward Marxism-particularly the abandonment of dialectics within the Marxist method. This interpretation aligns with the fundamental tenets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology and resonates with the preceding analysis, thereby deepening our understanding of his historical epistemology.

#### **3.3.2. Lukács in the Communist Debates**

This section primarily examines the Communist International's critiques of Lukács and his responses to them. Given this study's fundamental aim to clarify and deepen understanding of the core tenets of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, it does not elaborate extensively on his specific responses. Instead, it draws upon numerous scholarly studies to affirm Lukács' significant historical value in Marxist theoretical research.

#### **3.3.3. Advancing the Development of the World Socialist Movement in the 21st Century**

This section primarily addresses the numerous challenges confronting the world socialist movement under advanced capitalism in the 21st century. It explores the relevance of Lukács' Historical Epistemology and associated perspectives to resolving these issues, thereby demonstrating the enduring value of his historical epistemology for the 21st-century world socialist movement and the international proletarian revolutionary struggle.

## **4. Conclusion**

In response to the specific content of this study, by analyzing the historical context, fundamental essence, and contemporary relevance of Lukács' Historical Epistemology, this research employs a holistic approach to elucidate the historical genesis of his theory. It situates the theory within the developmental trajectory of history for discussion, ultimately concluding that Lukács' Historical Epistemology represents an innovative theoretical response to the crisis of Marxism in the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution. It is a practice-oriented theory characterized by a holistic epistemology that enables the proletariat to grasp history as a whole, penetrate bourgeois reification and reified consciousness, develop class consciousness, and thereby advance the unity of revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary struggle,

ultimately transcending capitalism. and characterized by totality. It enables the proletariat to grasp history as a whole, penetrate bourgeois reification and reified consciousness, develop class consciousness, and thereby advance the unity of revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary struggle, ultimately serving as a practical theory for transcending capitalism. This holds significant value for the development of Marxist theory and the practice of the world socialist movement.

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