Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrmx20

Lukács and Sexual Humanism
Kevin Floyd

To cite this article: Kevin Floyd (2006): Lukács and Sexual Humanism, Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society, 18:3, 397-403

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935690600748108

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Lukács and Sexual Humanism

Kevin Floyd

Georg Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness and Karl Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts are founding documents of the discourse of Marxist humanism. This essay scrutinizes Lukács’s definition of the human from a queer perspective which, I argue, is consistent with the Manuscripts in terms of its definition of the human. While for queer politics a contextualized emphasis on the social and political legitimacy of the body’s sexual objectification is basic, Lukács uncritically recapitulates Kantian morality, which represents sexual objectification as inherently dehumanizing. Property ownership, moreover, is a basic aspect of Kantian morality: because humans are supposed to own objects, they cannot also be objects. What a queer perspective is then especially well equipped to reveal, I argue, is that Lukács, while developing a powerful epistemological critique of Kant, ultimately allows Kant’s moral naturalization of property ownership to stand.

Key Words: Marxism, Humanism, Alienation, Objectification, Queer Theory, The Body

History and Class Consciousness is both a founding document of the discourse of Marxist humanism and a critical development of Kant’s, Hegel’s, and Marx’s respective engagements with the relation between subject and object; it influentially articulates a dialectical, Marxist notion of the human in terms of this relation. Kant is both the exemplar of what Lukács calls the “antinomies of bourgeois thought” (1994, 110–49) and a key participant in what Eric Clarke has characterized as a discourse of “sexual humanism” (2000, 101–25): a discourse with both heteronormative and bourgeois presuppositions, a discourse in which, I will argue, Lukács implicates himself. Specifically, I will suggest that a queer reading of Lukács that draws on Clarke’s analysis of Kant not only throws into relief the heteronormativity of Lukács’s analysis, but also suggests, somewhat more surprisingly, the extent to which History and Class Consciousness serves to reproduce a moral, Kantian naturalization of property ownership in spite of its own most apparent and fundamental intentions.

According to Kantian morality, as Clarke points out, any form of sexual practice in which sexual pleasure is an end in itself is immoral, because this particular end turns people into mere means to that end. Sexual pleasure as an end in itself reduces the...
persons involved into objects and therefore dehumanizes them. Kant’s reasoning, moreover, about why humans are supposed to be ends in themselves, about why it is immoral for humans to be objects in any sense, is characteristically rigorous: within the terms of Kantian morality, humans are not supposed to be objects because humans are supposed to own objects. As Kant puts it, insofar as a human being “is a person he is a Subject who can own property and other things... But a person cannot be a property and so cannot be a thing which can be owned, for it is impossible to be a person and a thing, the proprietor and the property” (quoted in Clarke 2000, 114). For Kant, Clarke adds, “to become (sexual) property would be to become less than human” (114).

Queer studies scholars, meanwhile, have developed compelling arguments about the political importance of sustaining public, queer practices that legitimate the use of the body as a pleasurable means (practices located in spaces like bathhouses and sex clubs, for instance). In particular, these practices constitute a site of resistance to contemporary enforcements of heteronormativity—resistance, for example, to the contemporary limitation of the very horizon of queer politics to the right to marry, a limitation which serves to assimilate homosexual practices not only to a heteronormative model of monogamy and “commitment” but to a related, uncritical acceptance of the bourgeois articulation of privacy with property (see Muñoz 1996; Berlant and Warner 1998; Warner 1999; Clarke 2000).

In this context, an antiheteronormative interrogation of Marxist humanism can and arguably should begin with History and Class Consciousness in that this text helped reestablish a certain Marxist discourse of the human. A key aspect of the book’s influence is indeed its emphasis on subjectivity, its success in critiquing the scientism and economism of a contemporaneous, hegemonic European Marxism. The discourse surrounding the book also represents it as anticipating the arguments made in Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, which were published in Germany in 1932—nine years after publication of Lukács’s text, but which Lukács himself read in 1930 in Marx’s own handwritten manuscript (see Arato and Breines 1979, 163–209; Rees 2000). Lukács’s response to his own text became, after reading the 1844 Manuscripts, significantly more critical. In the 1967 preface to History and Class Consciousness, he says that “in the process of reading the Marx manuscript all the idealist prejudices of History and Class Consciousness were swept to one side.” He acknowledges in particular that reading Marx’s text made him understand that in his own landmark book he had conflated alienation with objectification, helped him see that “objectification is a natural means by which man masters the world and as such it can be either a positive or negative fact. By contrast, alienation is a special variant of that activity that becomes operative in definite social conditions” (Lukács 1994, xxxvi). The 1844 Manuscripts argue that the collective social labor of human beings objectifies the human itself in the world, making the world over in the image of the human and, in a subsequent, inevitable dialectical turn, redefining the human. Alienation, by contrast, characterizes those situations in which humans fail to apprehend these objectifications of the human as objectifications of the
human—in failing, for example, to apprehend commodities as the products of their own collective labor, or in failing to apprehend congealed social labor (i.e., capital) as congealed social labor.

In contrast with the 1844 Manuscripts, *History and Class Consciousness* consistently takes the position that objectification—not certain specific forms of objectification but objectification as such—has its social basis in, and is inseparable from, the commodification of labor power. Lukács conflates the productive capacity of collective social labor to objectify itself with the exploitation and commodification of that capacity within capitalist social relations. But one of the Hegelian claims with which Marx most emphatically takes issue in the 1844 Manuscripts is that objectification is always a condition to be overcome, superseded, and that the human being is ultimately “a non-objective, spiritual being” (Marx 1975, 387). The same critique can be made of Lukács. The proletarian object of knowledge—knowledge, that is, of its own objective existence (the proletariat in itself)—becomes the basis for subjective, revolutionary praxis (the proletariat for itself); the objectification of the proletariat becomes, in Hegelian fashion, the provocation for the overcoming of this same moment of objectification. But this knowledge of the proletariat by the proletariat is also, for Lukács, knowledge of the social totality itself; the “standpoint of the proletariat” is the only standpoint from which this knowledge is possible. It is not only proletarian objectification at the hands of capital that is overthrown, but social objectification in general. Lukács extrapolates from the objectification of the worker within processes of capital accumulation an insistence that the objectification of persons is, by definition, dehumanizing. These claims carry a moralizing tone in *History and Class Consciousness*. Indeed, while Lukács explicitly makes an epistemological argument about knowledge, he also makes, more implicitly and, for my purposes, crucially, a moral argument with sexual implications.

The book has precious little to say, at least explicitly, about sexual objectification per se or even about the sensory capacities of persons as materially existing bodies, as objective biological beings—an issue that the 1844 Manuscripts, by contrast, emphasize at length. In an understandable attempt to avoid implicating himself in Engels’s attribution of an inherently dialectical quality to nature, Lukács makes an absolute, decidedly undialectical distinction between the social world of human practice and the world of nature, claiming that the former operates according to a historical dialectic while the latter does not, and excluding the world of nature from his analysis. But this exclusion produces serious if presumably inadvertent problems: not only does the natural world not operate, for Lukács, according to a subject/object dialectic; Lukács also excludes, fairly consistently, any acknowledgment even that the natural world is impacted by that dialectic, by human practice as such. And here he distances himself not only from Engels but also from Hegel, and ultimately (if apparently unintentionally), from Marx as well. This absolute distinction between the history of human consciousness (or, perhaps more accurately, the history of humanizing consciousness—that is, proletarian
consciousness) and the natural world implicitly but unmistakably situates the materially existing *human body* within the latter.¹

This is perhaps most strikingly the case in Lukács’s extended critique of Kant’s epistemology. For Kant, the world of things-in-themselves, the world of objects, is by definition the world external to consciousness. But in his critique of the epistemological and unbridgeable dualism Kant posits between the cognitive, rational subject and the external world, the world of things-in-themselves, Lukács apprehends the Kantian thing-in-itself as the misrecognized product of human labor. Here again—and this is the crux of his critique of Kant—Lukács makes no meaningful distinction between objects and commodities. In categorically identifying all Kantian things-in-themselves with alienated products of the subject’s activity, Lukács essentially represents the social world as if it were created out of nothing. He offers no acknowledgment—which you get unmistakably and every step of the way in Hegel—even that the subject works on some kind of objective, material substance that preexists it and that serves as the necessary obstacle to the subject’s self-realization. Lukács recognizes no objectively existing, material substratum that the subject manipulates, upon which the subject acts. The irony of this exclusion becomes yet more striking when he argues that Kant implicates himself in the reification of social life, specifically, by draining all things-in-themselves of any particular content, by abstracting the thing-in-itself, by reducing it to mere form. But in failing to apprehend the multiplicity of specific ways in which the human body is objectified, in obscuring the specificity of particular kinds of objectification, Lukács is himself ultimately guilty of a similar analytic reduction.

Human bodies do make occasional appearances through the cracks, as it were, of this insistent methodological exclusion, infrequently but I think tellingly. Again, this realm of material, biological beings can be understood, in deconstructive fashion, as a constitutive outside to Lukács’s argument that inevitably makes itself legible in the very course of that argument. Lukács uses marriage, for instance, as Kant characterizes it, as an example of reification. For Kant, as Lukács points out (and

1. Lukács speaks to this issue without claiming that this criticism of the book—a criticism that was indeed made in some of its earliest reviews—was a misreading of it.

Self-evidently society arose from nature. Self-evidently nature and its laws existed before society (that is to say before humans). Self-evidently the dialectic could not possibly be effective as an *objective principle of development* of society, if it were not already effective as a principle of development of nature before society, if it did not already *objectively exist*. From that, however, follows neither that social development could produce no new, equally objective forms of development, dialectical moments, nor that the dialectical moments in the development of nature would be *knowable* without the mediation of these new social dialectical forms. (Lukács 2000, 102; emphasis in original)

He responds in a way that seems to move his position from a dismissal of any attribution of a dialectical character to nature to a qualified acceptance of this position. In any case, the second sentence of this passage, especially given what it places in parentheses, certainly does not encourage, and arguably serves to preempt, any sustained consideration of the human being as an embodied, sensory, “natural” entity.
here I quote Lukács quoting Kant), “sexual community ... is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another ... marriage ... is the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possession of each other’s sexual attributes for the duration of their lives” (Lukács 1994, 100). Now Kant argues that only within the marriage contract is this kind of sexual objectification acceptable—and in this sense Kantian morality is, as Clarke argues, unmistakably heteronormative—whereas for Lukács, even this form of sexual objectification is immoral and dehumanizing. This distinction is significant: to the extent that one wants to develop an antiheteronormative critique of Lukács’s analysis, it is important to point out that that analysis is not so much heteronormative on its own terms—this would presumably require a more sustained consideration of sexuality, or at least of the body as a sensory entity, than Lukács offers—but heteronormative from the vantage of a contemporary queer politics that insists on the legitimacy, within antiheteronormative spaces, of the sexual objectification of bodies.

Lukács also contrasts proletarian objectification with narcissism, which he uses as an example of the sexual objectification of the human body as articulated by what he identifies as the modern, reifying science of “psychology.” He then goes on to compare this objectification of the body with the objectification of the slave’s body, the body of what he calls “an instrumentum vocale” (168; emphasis in original), and here we encounter a breathtaking inability or refusal to make any moral distinction whatsoever between narcissism and enslavement. For Lukács, all three forms of objectification—of the proletarian’s, narcissist’s, and slave’s respective bodies—are equivalently dehumanizing, immoral. The distinction he emphasizes is epistemological: knowledge of the social totality is, again, only possible from the standpoint of the proletariat. In the cases of both the narcissist and the slave, “the rigid epistemological doubling of subject and object remains unaffected and hence the perceiving subject fails to impinge upon the structure of the object despite his adequate understanding of it” (169). In the examples of narcissism and marriage, then, Lukács identifies sexual objectification with an immorality and inhumanity that has its basis in commodification and its supersession in revolutionary proletarian praxis.

For Marx, by contrast, the defining of the human is always dynamic, ongoing, and socially mediated. The first volume of Capital asserts that the human being “sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature” (Marx 1976, 283). To the extent that History and Class Consciousness and the 1844 Manuscripts both represent key moments in the development of a Marxist humanism, it is worthwhile to at least briefly highlight the ways in which these texts diverge. Marx’s central concept of “species-being,” for example, implies not only that biological existence is in no way subordinate or secondary to consciousness, but that biological existence is in no way excluded, as in Lukács, from history as such. Indeed any insistence upon the supersession of the objectification of the human body is, according to the 1844 Manuscripts, idealist. “A non-objective being,” says Marx, “is a non-being” (1975, 390; emphasis in original). For Marx, bodies are material, biological, sensory objects
impacted, developed, remade within the ongoing social and historical production of human beings by human beings. Marx’s emphasis on the ongoing objectification, through collective labor, of human desires and capacities in the materially existing world, and the resulting historical dynamism of this world, together necessarily imply (as his historicization of the senses, for example, indicates) the manipulation, the recreation of bodies themselves, the dialectical objectification of bodies themselves by the collective social body, whether or not that objectification operates within alienated social relations. Within this historical movement one would, I think, have to include that ongoing epistemological production of sexual desire Foucault elaborates in materialist (if not historical materialist) terms. I am suggesting that the collective development of human faculties, capacities, needs, and desires, the realization of human powers Marx emphasizes, would include an expansion of sexual practice, including the development of discourses (e.g., Foucauldian “reverse-discourses”) organized around the legitimacy of sexual pleasure as an end in itself—and therefore around the sexual objectification of human bodies as means to that end.

In taking issue with Lukács’s moral presuppositions, I don’t mean to suggest that Marxism is not or should not be a discourse with an explicit moral component. The claim, for example, that capitalism is socially and historically contradictory, and that these contradictions produce human misery on a far vaster scale and in a more systematic way than any mode of production could ever justify, is not only a social, historical, theoretical, and political claim, but a moral one as well. But one also has to distinguish between different kinds of morality, and the sexual morality of Marx’s and Lukács’s arguments diverge significantly. Lukács would appear to be making an argument quite consistent with the 1844 Manuscripts when he devotes an entire section of History and Class Consciousness to the explicit rejection of any ahistorical definition of the human (Lukács 1994, 185–97). But the explicit epistemological and implicit moral components of his analysis fail to align, and this misalignment gives the lie to this explicit rejection. In the course of his tenacious critique of Kantian epistemology, Lukács simultaneously fails to extricate (much less distance) himself from Kantian morality.

But I want to push the implications of this claim a bit further. On the one hand, Lukács’s explicit argument that Kant misrecognizes mediated products of collective human labor as natural, immediate things-in-themselves at least implicitly constitutes a critique of Kant’s epistemological naturalization of private property. On the other hand, Lukács’s uncritical inheritance of Kantian morality allows Kant’s moral naturalization of private property to stand. It is precisely the inconsistency of his epistemological analysis and his moral presuppositions that allows Lukács to reproduce, in spite of himself, this moral naturalization. My central suggestion, then, is that an antiheteronormative reading of Lukács, facilitated by recent queer work like Clarke’s, indicates that Lukács does nothing to denaturalize and indeed participates in a moral discourse of the human that, from a distance of eighty years, can not only be seen as heteronormative but that also, and inseparably, posits property ownership as fundamental to the very definition of the human. It is hardly necessary to add that this uncritical participation takes place in one of the most influential texts in the history of Marxist humanism. History and Class Consciousness is significantly less able than the 1844 Manuscripts to apprehend, much less
comprehend, the material, objectively existing body. To the extent that a Marxist humanism is reestablished with the publication, within a decade of each other, of these two texts, this reestablishing is not only historically pivotal but also, from a contemporary queer perspective, more than a little ambiguous.

References


