

Research Article

Paolo Tripodi*

“It Would be Helpful to Know Which Textbook Teaches the ‘Dialectic’ he Advocates.” Inserting Lukács into the Neurath–Horkheimer Debate

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2024-0014>

received March 31, 2024; accepted May 27, 2024

Abstract: The present article aims at providing some clarification on the Horkheimer-Neurath 1937 debate, so as to make three main claims: (a) around 1937 (even though perhaps neither in the early 1930s, at the time of his review of Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*, nor after the Second World War, at the time of Adorno’s disenchanted statement, “the whole is the false”), Horkheimer belonged to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition stemming from Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1923); (b) notwithstanding Neurath’s semantic and epistemological holism, his fallibilism, his rejection of *Wertfreiheit* in the social sciences, his commitment to socialism, there is still a gulf between his position and Horkheimer’s, for Neurath did not accept the main methodological claim made by the latter, namely, the Lukács-inspired view that what “constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought” is the Hegelian “point of view of totality”; (c) highlighting the main differences between Neurath’s and Lukács’s versions of Marxism – one concerning the very idea of dialectic, and the other concerning the epistemic privilege of the proletariat – can throw some light on and help understand better the distinctive features of Lukács’s Hegelianization of Marxism.

Keywords: György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, Otto Neurath, Max Horkheimer, totality, Hegelian Marxism, logical empiricism, dialectic, proletariat, *Geistesgeschichte*

1 Introduction

A somewhat polysemic label such as “the dismissal of Hegel” can be used to identify several different – perhaps recurring? – tendencies in the history of philosophy and more in general in the history of culture. One of these tendencies – which, of course, is not incompatible but, in fact, can occur simultaneously with several attempts to study or use Hegel’s ideas – goes back approximately to the three decades before the First World War. Expressions of it are evident in the spread of positivist ideas; in the predominance of Neo-Kantianism in German academies; in the emphasis, put by such authors as Max Weber and Benedetto Croce, on the (relative) autonomy of the spheres of human understanding; in the hegemonic role played, within the Second International, by Karl Kautsky’s allegedly scientific – i.e., determinist and “economicist” – form of Marxism, and in the subsequent controversies generated by Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism and the Austro-Marxists’ search for an additional, non-Marxist, principle of practical philosophy.

Less evidently, but significantly, even a work such as *The Theory of the Novel* by the young György Lukács – written between 1914 and 1915 – belongs, to some extent, to this story. As Lukács put it in a preface added in

* **Corresponding author: Paolo Tripodi**, Department of Philosophy and Education, University of Turin, Turin, Italy, e-mail: paolo.tripodi@unito.it

1962, although Hegel was already, at that time, “its general methodological guide,” there is a “contradiction between *The Theory of the Novel* and Hegel,” which “is primarily social rather than aesthetic or philosophical in nature.” This contradiction is visible in “the author’s attitude towards the war” (expressed by his emotionally motivated “The better the worse!,” as he replied to Marianne Weber during a conversation in the late autumn of 1914), as well as in his “conception of social reality, ... at that time strongly influenced by Sorel. That is why,” Lukács made clear in the 1962 preface,

the present in *The Theory of the Novel* is not defined in Hegelian terms but rather by Fichte’s formulation, as ‘the age of absolute sinfulness.’ This ethically-tinged pessimism vis-à-vis the present does not, however, signify a general turning back from Hegel to Fichte, but, rather, a ‘Kierkegaardisation’ of the Hegelian dialectic of history.¹

As is well known, a drastic shift in Lukács’s philosophical and political development – and a sea change in this anti-Hegelian story – occurred in 1917, with the revolution in Russia, making possible for him to find “an answer to the problems which, until then, had seemed to ... [him] insoluble.”² This transformation led to the publication, in 1923, of *History and Class Consciousness*, a turning point in the overall history of twentieth-century Marxism. In the incipit to the second essay of the book, written in 1921 and devoted to Rosa Luxemburg, Lukács famously wrote:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science.³

This full-fledged Hegelianization of Marxism allowed Lukács to take a stand on the main issues related to the anti-Hegelian tendencies of the pre-war period: he criticized – on the basis of his semantic and epistemological holism – the positivist attitude towards isolated facts; he replaced the Neo-Kantian concern with (transcendental) epistemology with a focus on ontology; he “saved” historical materialism from its economicist drift, whose monocausal and one-sided explanations in the field of the historical–social sciences had been criticized by his teacher Weber; he presented a form of Marxism – associated in part with Lenin and in part with Luxemburg – that was anti-determinist (*contra* Kautsky and his Engelsian orthodoxy), revolutionary (*contra* Bernstein and his reformist “opportunism”), and fully philosophical (*contra* the Austro-Marxist purpose of integrating the science of Marx with Kantian and/or Machian elements).

Lukács’s 1923 book contained, among many other things, an explicit exercise of *Geistesgeschichte*, a perspective characterized by Richard Rorty, in his famous attempt to classify the literary genres in philosophical historiography, as a history of philosophy directed at “canon-formation,” “the sort of intellectual history which has a moral,” the grand narrative – “the genre of which Hegel is paradigmatic” – that “wants to justify the historian and his friends in having the sort of philosophical concerns they have”⁴: in the second part of his 1923 essay on “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” devoted to “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought,” Lukács focused on the crucial contrast between bourgeois thought and the point of view of totality by presenting a brief and *sui generis* history of Western philosophy from Descartes to Kant and beyond. Anticipating – methodologically – his later historical–philosophical work in *The Young Hegel* (1948) and *The Destruction of Reason* (1954), Lukács focused on the “connection” between the “fundamental problems of philosophy” and their historical *Seingrund*, with the aim of showing that “modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness,”⁵ since it is based, ultimately, on the “refusal to understand reality as a whole and as existence.”⁶ Then Hegel entered the scene, highlighting that “the totality of life at its most

¹ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 18.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 62.

⁴ Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy,” 56–7.

⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

intense is only possible as a new synthesis out of the most absolute separation,”⁷ so that, in the words of Lukács, “the dissolution of the irrationality of the thing-in-itself, the resurrection of man from his grave, all these issues become concentrated henceforth on the question of dialectical method.”⁸ As Lukács pointed out, the last step was taken by Marx:

The revolutionary nature of Hegelian dialectics had often been recognised as such before Marx, notwithstanding Hegel’s own conservative applications of the method. But no one had converted this knowledge into a science of revolution. It was Marx who transformed the Hegelian method into what Herzen described as the ‘algebra of revolution’.⁹

This “big sweeping *geistesgeschichtlich* stor[y]”¹⁰ – in short, this teleological history of the antinomies of bourgeois thought from Descartes and Leibniz to Kant and Fichte, up to the dialectical resolution of such antinomies in the hands of Hegel and Marx – allowed Lukács, in 1923, to justify his own Hegelian Marxism.

Then time passed and philosophy (or perhaps, more in general, culture) distanced itself from Hegel again: “Influential elements within postwar intellectual culture – has been remarked recently – staged a sort of insurgency against Hegel.”¹¹ Once again, arguably, this “misunderstanding of Hegel” was “a social fact,” rather than a mere “misinterpretation that ... [could] be ‘resolved’ with seminar arguments.”¹² Illustrations of this contemporary tendency to dismiss Hegel – which in itself is compatible with an array of specialized attempts to study Hegel, or some aspects of his legacy, or even to bring philosophy “back to Hegel”¹³ – are the post-modernist incredulity towards the grand narratives that had characterized modernity; the widespread propensity, in the contemporary human sciences, towards methodological individualism; the global, hegemonic, spread of analytic philosophy; the rise of non-Hegelian forms of Marxism, from Theodor W. Adorno’s disenchanting statement that the “the whole is the false”¹⁴ to the scientifically oriented and non-dialectical views of such different thinkers as Louis Althusser, Galvano Della Volpe, Lucio Colletti, and G. A. Cohen, to mention but a few.

Arguably, the marginalization of Lukács in the last four decades – though perhaps motivated mainly by political reasons (given that Lukács had “always thought that the worst form of socialism was better to live in than the best form of capitalism”¹⁵) – is itself part of this same anti-Hegelian story. Not a marginalization of Lukács the literary critic and theorist, let alone the still authoritative young author of *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*, but rather a repudiation of Lukács the Hegelian-Marxist philosopher: the one who criticized his own 1923 views, in part for purely external reasons, under the pressure of the condemnation by the Third International, and in part for more internal reasons, related among other things to his additional reflections on the issue of reification after the publication, in the 1930s, of Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts*; but, after all, the same one who never abandoned – from *History and Class Consciousness* to *The Ontology of Social Being*, published posthumously from 1976 to 1981 – the ambition to adopt the Hegelian point of view of totality.

A sophisticated and indirect expression of this more recent anti-Hegelian tendency took the form of a competition between alternative *Geistesgeschichten*. For not only was *History and Class Consciousness*, as suggested earlier, the *expression* of a self-conscious and, hopefully, self-justifying *Geistesgeschichte* (from Descartes and Leibniz to Hegel and Marx), but it became itself the *object* of an exercise of *Geistesgeschichte*. This happened in 1955 when, in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty interpreted Lukács’s rediscovery of the Hegelian point of view of totality as the origin of “Western Marxism.”¹⁶ This historiographical concept – Western Marxism in the sense of a Lukács-inspired form of Hegelian Marxism – was neither

⁷ Hegel, *Werke I*, 173–4, cited in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 273–4.

⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰ Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy,” 56.

¹¹ Bourke, *Hegel’s World Revolutions*, 1.

¹² Preve, *Una nuova storia alternativa della filosofia*, 271.

¹³ Pippin, “Back to Hegel?”

¹⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 30.

¹⁵ Lukács, “Interview,” 58.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, ch. 2.

monolithic nor fixed once and for all.¹⁷ Yet, under many respects, it contributed to establish a historiographical canon. Recently, however, this very *Geistesgeschichte* – paradigmatically expressed by Merleau-Ponty’s reference to Lukács as the forefather of Western Marxism – has been put into question in a rather implicit and indirect way, in a somewhat unusual place, namely, in the context of the current Vienna Circle historiography. In the last four decades, this kind of historiography – thanks to the work of scholars such as Rudolf Haller, Alberto Coffa, Michael Friedman, Alan Richardson, Friedrich Stadler, Thomas Uebel, and many others – has led to the “rediscovery of the ‘real existing’ Vienna Circle – its deliverance from the myths, simplifications and plain falsehoods in circulation about it since it broke onto the philosophical scene in the 1930s.”¹⁸ Among the recent achievements of this historiography is the retrieval and evaluation of the first, long-forgotten stage of the “positivism dispute,” namely, the 1937 debate between Max Horkheimer and Otto Neurath.¹⁹ If the Horkheimer–Neurath debate, it is claimed, started in the form of a collaboration but ended as a failure, the entire responsibility is on Horkheimer who, with the aim of making the Frankfurters “the sole representatives of critical German-language philosophy in the 1930s,”²⁰ systematically misrepresented Neurath’s logical empiricism, which on the contrary did share a lot of ideas with critical theory on many matters. The Horkheimer–Neurath “disrupted debate,”²¹ the argument goes, represented a missed opportunity of *epochal* proportions, since Horkheimer’s unfair behaviour killed at its birth the development of a possible third way, constituted by Neurath, between two different traditions in the history of twentieth-century philosophy: Western Marxism and one of its main offspring, critical theory, on the one hand, and logical empiricism and its main offspring, analytic philosophy in the United States, on the other hand.

Therefore, raising the counterfactual question, “What if the Horkheimer–Neurath debate ended differently?”, has two main effects. A first, direct effect is the highlighting of a “parting of the ways.”²² This case is similar to that in which Friedman presented Cassirer’s Neo-Kantianism as a superior, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, alternative both to Heidegger and his legacy on one side and to Carnap and his followers on the other side. A second, indirect effect of such an argument is, however, that of obscuring and therefore questioning the peculiar traits of the twentieth-century Hegelian Marxism, to which the views held by Horkheimer in the second half of the 1930s essentially belonged. This runs the risk of watering down and ultimately forgetting what was distinctive in Lukács’s 1923 re-Hegelianization of Marxism.

The present article aims at providing some clarification on the Horkheimer–Neurath episode, so as to avoid the second, implicit effect described earlier. In Section 2, the 1937 debate between Neurath and Horkheimer will be described and analysed from the point of view of the recent studies in the history of the “real existing” logical empiricism. In Section 3, Lukács will be inserted in the Neurath–Horkheimer debate, to show that there are no compelling reasons to revise our old and still legitimate historical–philosophical canon and *Geistesgeschichte*, paradigmatically represented by Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the Lukács-inspired form of Hegelian Marxism. In this section, the reasons will also be briefly provided to assert that, at least in the second half of the 1930s, Horkheimer’s critical views were largely comparable to the dialectical point of view of totality presented by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. A by-product of this attempt of clarification will be that of reflecting further on – and perhaps, hopefully, understanding better – two distinctive features of Lukács’s 1923 Hegelianization of Marxism: namely, his view of the Hegelian dialectic (presented here, for the sake of a comparison with Neurath, in terms of a pragmatic-contextualist theory of historical–social reality), and his proletarian standpoint theory. Neurath’s negative and, in fact, dismissive attitude towards these two pivotal points of Lukács’s Hegelian Marxism – the dialectical method and the thesis of the epistemic privilege of the proletariat – will be presented and discussed in Section 4.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*.

¹⁸ Uebel, “The Positivism Dispute Revisited,” 323–4.

¹⁹ Dahms, *Positivismusstreit*, ch. 1.

²⁰ Uebel, “The Positivism Dispute Revisited,” 327.

²¹ O’Neill and Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath.”

²² Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*.

2 The Neurath–Horkheimer Debate: Rational Reconstruction, Historical Reconstruction, *Geistesgeschichte*

After serving time in prison for his involvement in the short-lived revolutionary experience of the Bavarian Soviet Republic (tasked with directing the Central Office for Planning), Neurath returned to Vienna in 1919. Over fifteen years of social–democratic rule, he actively participated in the city’s political and cultural life, engaging in urban planning and cooperation as the secretary of the Research Institute for Social Economy, as well as in public education, through projects like the ISOTYPE visual system and the Museum of Society and Economy. In addition, he delved into epistemology, playing a central role in the development of the Vienna Circle, after the arrival of Moritz Schlick in Vienna in 1922. In 1929, Neurath drafted the programmatic manifesto for the Vienna Circle, co-presented by Hans Hahn and Rudolf Carnap. In 1934, with the establishment of Engelbert Dollfuß’s Austrofascist regime, Neurath emigrated to The Hague.²³

The year before, in Frankfurt, the police had closed the Institute for Social Research, and its director, Max Horkheimer, had been expelled from the university. Taking refuge first in Geneva and then, from 1934, in New York, Horkheimer explored the possibility for the Institute in exile to collaborate with other politically and culturally aligned European research groups, including the Vienna Circle. In 1936, the collaboration project seemed promising: Horkheimer and Neurath met in The Hague; Horkheimer provided financial support for Neurath’s research on the working class’s living standards; Neurath supplied Horkheimer with publications from the Vienna Circle and visited him twice in New York; they attended a seminar together and agreed that Neurath would contribute an article to a special issue of the *Review of Social Research* directed by Horkheimer; they also exchanged letters, in which Horkheimer expressed his “desire to continue dealing with logical empiricism.”²⁴

However, in 1937, while Neurath, perhaps overly optimistic, had not given up on the possibility of including Horkheimer among the authors of his *International Encyclopedia of the Unified Science*, Horkheimer published in his journal not only Neurath’s expected contribution on the analysis and measurement of living standards but also, at the beginning of the issue, his own essay titled “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics.” This essay would have passed into the annals of history as a foundational document of critical theory, representing a frontal and irreconcilable opposition with logical empiricism, often labelled as “neo-positivism” or simply “positivism,” in Horkheimer’s broad categorization.

From an epistemological point of view, Horkheimer accused Neurath and other logical positivists to blindly believe in the methods and results of science, and to adopt “an unhistorical and uncritical conception of knowledge,” based on “the hypostatis of the particular methods of procedure employed by natural science” and, more generally, on the “the abstract concept of the given.”²⁵ From a social point of view, he criticized them for preventing critical reasoning, embracing conformism, and fetishizing facts. According to him, they were like the animals in a university laboratory:

Although the animals were by no means asleep, the visitors would not hear a single sound. A simple transection of their vocal cords had deprived the animals of the ability to give voice to their suffering!²⁶

From a political point of view, he went as far as to assert that these “latter-day apologists for freedom from value judgments (*Wertfreiheit*),” with their “indifference” and “relativism ... towards values and ends,” not only displayed the “ideological capitulation of liberalism to the new autocratic systems” but also constituted “the transition to an authoritarian philosophy,”²⁷ as they ultimately understood the situation less than Benito Mussolini, who had grasped that “from the circumstance that one ideology is as good as the next, that is, that all are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create his own ideology and to

²³ See Sandner, *Otto Neurath*, 122–42 and 156–233.

²⁴ O’Neill and Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath,” 77.

²⁵ Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics,” 178.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

get the most out of it with all the energy at his disposal.”²⁸ In the eyes of Horkheimer, the world of logical empiricists would

resemble both an insane asylum and a prison, and its smoothly working scientific research would not be aware of it. Their science could improve physical theories, play a prominent part in food and war chemistry as well as in astronomy, and reach unheard of heights in the creation of means for the derangement and self-annihilation of the human race. It would, however, entirely miss the decisive point. It would not notice that it had long become its own opposite. Although some of its departments might have reached the highest eminence, science itself would have turned into barbarous ignorance and shallowness.²⁹

Horkheimer’s about-turn was a bolt out of the blue for Neurath, but the latter did not abandon constructive engagement, stating that “only to those with whom one seeks no contact it is best not respond.”³⁰ He prepared a non-excessively polemic response, sending it to Horkheimer and requesting the right to reply. Horkheimer repeatedly refused to publish Neurath’s text, explaining that his journal did not aim to provide a platform for the comparison of contrasting views. Only at that point did Neurath, who had initially been, as he acknowledged in a letter to Horkheimer, shocked and speechless, sever diplomatic ties with the Institute for Social Research in exile. Notably, from a political standpoint, he decided not to publish his response elsewhere.³¹

The rediscovery of this long-forgotten episode is credited to the work carried out in 1994 by Hans-Joachim Dahms in *Positivismusstreit*. This work is meticulous, focusing on both the rational reconstruction of content and the historical reconstruction of context – to employ the categories discussed by Rorty in his article on the literary genres in philosophical historiography referred to above. In the subsequent years, various scholars belonging to the new paradigm of historical studies on logical empiricism – from Thomas Uebel to Andreas Vrahimis, Carl Sachs, and others – have further developed Dahms’s investigation under both conceptual and contextual aspects.³²

The rational reconstruction has primarily aimed to defend Neurath against Horkheimer’s attacks. It has been emphasized that Horkheimer’s portrayal of logical empiricism, besides being excessively broad and short-sighted (including even figures like Bertrand Russell), was somewhat stereotyped and monolithic, failing to consider the heterogeneous nature of the historical entity that we call “Vienna Circle.”³³ The epistemological accusation from Horkheimer to Neurath of blindly believing in the methods and results of science has been deemed inconclusive and misleading, since Neurath’s and the logical positivists’ faith in science was sophisticated and conscious, not naive. Furthermore, as is well known, Neurath never committed to, but rather often denounced, the so-called myth of the given, defending – for instance, in the protocol sentences debate – a holistic, fallibilist, and anti-foundationalist conception of scientific knowledge based on the conviction that every observational data is always theory laden.³⁴ Horkheimer’s social critique, on the other hand, was considered ill-placed, not only because Neurath had dedicated his entire life to various economic and social causes, always siding with the working class (before, during, and after the “Red Vienna” experience), but also because he had never advocated a conception of scientific objectivity grounded in the alleged neutrality or *Wertfreiheit* of the social sciences.³⁵ The political criticism, finally, was regarded not just as an unsustainable thesis, but in fact as an unacceptable “infamy” as it led, from the caricatural claim that the Vienna Circle would be indifferent and apolitical, to the insulting declaration of proximity to fascism, a regime many Viennese empiricists had to escape.³⁶

²⁸ Ibid., 165.

²⁹ Ibid., 160.

³⁰ O’Neill and Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath,” 77.

³¹ See Uebel, “The Positivism Dispute Revisited,” 325.

³² See Dahms, *Positivismusstreit*; O’Neill and Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath;” Vrahimis, “Scientism, Social Praxis, and Overcoming Metaphysics;” Sachs, “Why Did the Frankfurt School Misunderstand Logical Positivism?”

³³ O’Neill and Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath,” 77.

³⁴ See Neurath, “Protokollsätze.”

³⁵ Vrahimis, “Scientism, Social Praxis, and Overcoming Metaphysics,” 21.

³⁶ See Sachs, “Why Did the Frankfurt School Misunderstand Logical Positivism?”

The historical–contextual reconstruction has focused mainly on the correspondence between Horkheimer and Adorno – referred to as “Max” and “Teddie” in their letters – in the years immediately preceding 1937, with a twofold purpose.³⁷ On the one hand, it aimed to reveal Horkheimer’s playing both sides in his exchanges with Neurath. While communicating with Neurath, Horkheimer appeared open to collaboration and driven by curiosity to get a closer look at logical empiricism. However, he confessed to Adorno (and other interlocutors like Henryk Grossman and Karl Wittfogel) his true intention, namely, the attempt to quickly discover the flaws of logical empiricism so as not to “waste too much time” with it, criticize it, and even dismiss it once and for all. On the other hand, the analysis of the correspondence sought to highlight the strong influence exerted on Horkheimer – particularly in crafting his 1937 text on the “Latest Attack on Metaphysics” – by Adorno himself.³⁸

However, rational reconstruction and contextual reconstruction are not the only literary genres tackled by the historians of logical empiricism who, in the last twenty years, have kept on discussing the episode of the failed collaboration between Horkheimer and Neurath. Just when the evidence of Horkheimer’s turnaround seemed blatant – so much so that Sachs, for instance, could write that “There is no need for protracted discussion as to whether or not the Frankfurt School theorists ... misunderstood logical positivism in general and the Vienna Circle in particular”³⁹ – it became evident that a third literary genre is implicitly at play in these studies, alongside contextual and rational reconstructions: the so-called *Geistesgeschichte*, in the sense described by Rorty, i.e., as the sort of historiography directed at canon-formation. This was not the first time that Neurath’s name has been employed to construct a Viennese canon (or a privileged Austrian lineage) in the history of logical empiricism or, more broadly, analytical philosophy, and to justify a philosophical option still considered alive and valid.⁴⁰ For example, the assertion of a holistic and anti-foundationalist Duhem–Neurath–Quine thesis was also meant to be a *geistesgeschichtlich* move of that kind. And the thesis – apparently shared by different authors like Uebel, Sachs, and Vrahimis – that the missed encounter between the Frankfurt Marxists and the Vienna empiricists, caused by Horkheimer’s treachery, represented a missed opportunity of *epochal* significance (as it quashed the possibility of reconciling and hybridizing two seemingly alternative philosophical traditions, fundamentally transforming the landscape of twentieth-century philosophy), this thesis is even more markedly directed at constructing a philosophical canon, declaring a moral to the story, and justifying a theoretical option. The rational and contextual reconstructions that attribute the entire responsibility for the event to Horkheimer’s rupture – ultimately motivated by his hegemonic ambition to make the Institute for Social Research in exile the primary or unique critical subject in those challenging European years – may be seen as part of the general operation of writing a counterfactual history of twentieth-century philosophy. It is a history redesigned by breaking down or shifting traditional barriers, attempting to validate a new canon, considered in many ways superior to both current Marxism and mainstream analytical philosophy. And once again, Neurath has been placed at the centre of such an operation. An empiricist epistemologist and, *at the same time*, a politically involved and pro-Marxist man of action: the kind of intellectual who, when logical empiricism migrated to the United States and the era of the Cold War and McCarthyism arrived, quickly became a taboo, and was eliminated from the realm of the concrete possibilities for an analytically oriented academic philosopher.⁴¹

3 Horkheimer, Lukács, and the Point of View of Totality

However, *Geistesgeschichte* (in Rorty’s partly idiosyncratic but fruitful sense) must be approached with its own tools. Beyond observing individual points of convergence between Neurath and Horkheimer – anti-

³⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel*.

³⁸ Vrahimis, “Scientism, Social Praxis, and Overcoming Metaphysics,” 6, where it is shown that Adorno’s *political* criticism of neo-positivism during the years when, after a brief escape to Vienna, he had moved to Merton College in Oxford and pursued a second doctorate under the (purely formal) supervision of Gilbert Ryle, played a crucial role in this story.

³⁹ Sachs, “Why Did the Frankfurt School Misunderstand Logical Positivism?”

⁴⁰ See Haller, *Studien zur Österreichischen Philosophie*.

⁴¹ See McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*; Reisch, *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science*.

foundationalism, the idea of theory-ladenness of observational data, epistemological holism, the rejection of value-neutrality in the economic and social sciences, the political positioning in the socialist camp – and beyond noting and emphasising some specific features of Horkheimer’s individual psychology or political-cultural tactics, if one plays the game of *Geistesgeschichte*, it is about finding the heart or essence – the *fundamental* motivation – of Horkheimer’s position against logical positivism.

Upon re-reading the 1937 text, it becomes apparent that Horkheimer systematically contrasted the use of the “understanding” (*Verstand*), which exists only within individual and specialised disciplines, with the use of “reason” (*Vernunft*), the “critical, dialectical element” that maintains “conscious connection between that process and historical life,” thus employing

categories, such as the distinction between essence and appearance, identity in change, and rationality of ends, indeed, the concept of man, of personality, even of society and class taken in the sense that presupposes specific viewpoints and directions of interest.⁴²

Regarding this conceptual framework underlying critical or dialectical thought, Horkheimer’s judgement was succinct: all this “do[es] not exist for empiricism.”⁴³ The presence of *the elephant in the room* immediately stands out: “Hegel’s formulation – explicitly invoked by Horkheimer – that the true is the whole.”⁴⁴

Indeed, the essential point of Horkheimer’s argument is that, against logical positivism, critical theory adopts the dialectical perspective of totality, rediscovered by Lukács in 1923 with the aim of renewing Marxism through Hegel after the tragedy of the First World War, the failure of the Second International, and the surprising success of the Russian Revolution.

Lukács had illustrated the matter by recalling a passage from a famous lecture delivered by Marx in 1849 on wage, labour, and capital:

A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. Only in certain circumstances does it become *capital*. Torn from those circumstances it is no more capital than gold is *money* or sugar the *price* of sugar.⁴⁵

A pragmatic-contextualist reading of these words can help better understand what Lukács had in mind and the general functioning of his Hegelianization of Marxism.⁴⁶ For bourgeois thought (Hegel would say: for the understanding or *Verstand*), a spinning jenny is *nothing more* than a machine for spinning cotton. Through an operation of abstraction, bourgeois thought isolates a fact and, simultaneously, a meaning of the term “spinning jenny,” excluding other facts and meanings. It places the spinning jenny in a context that is not the broad one of real history but the narrower and simplified one of technology – or, say, of classical political economy – and specifies: a spinning jenny is only *this* – a set of mechanical gears, a machine. This semantic operation confines the space of possible discourses. Using the bourgeois concept of a spinning jenny, one can talk, for example, about engineering (what is the mechanics of those gears?) or labour productivity (how much more cotton can be spun, thanks to the use of machines?). Other discourses – related, for example, to the exploitation of textile workers – are banned. The reasons for this operation of isolation and abstraction are manifold – lack of awareness, ideology, opportunism, (reverse) class struggle – and Lukács understands and analyses them under the categories of “false consciousness” and “reification.”

The inevitable negative moment of Hegelian dialectics brings us back to reality: the actual historical context is different from what bourgeois thinkers take for granted. Even if bourgeois thought does not recognize it (it does not realize it, it does not want to know it, etc.), a spinning jenny is *not* only and exclusively a machine for spinning cotton, but it is *also* many other things (that are not simply machines). What these are depends on the context in which we place the spinning jenny to describe it. For this reason, strictly speaking,

⁴² Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics,” 145.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁵ Marx, *Wage, Labour, and Capital*; cited in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 38.

⁴⁶ For a semantic analysis of Hegel’s dialectic, see Marconi, *Contradiction and the Language of Hegel’s Dialectic*; and Berto, “Hegel’s Dialectics as a Semantic Theory.”

the assertion of bourgeois thought that a spinning machine is only a machine leads in a certain sense to a contradiction, as it implicitly amounts to stating that something that is not only a machine – but is also other things – is nothing but a machine.

One of the contexts we can select to describe the spinning machine is linked to the point of view of totality (the dialectical viewpoint of reason, *Vernunft*, for Hegel). From this perspective (or: in “certain circumstances,” which translates the Hegelian term “bestimmten Verhältnissen” employed by Marx), a spinning jenny is *capital*. The discourses that can be conducted by adopting this viewpoint now concern capitalist production, the exploitation of textile workers, the process of reification, and so on. With two significant consequences. First, by placing the spinning machine in the real historical context, we can establish what it *essentially* is, namely, its fundamental function in the social totality to which it belongs. Furthermore, we can become aware that the dialectical contradiction – generated by bourgeois thought and its ideological claim that the spinning jenny is nothing more than a machine for spinning cotton – is surmountable, since the bourgeois standpoint is a product of historical contingency, which can be altered through the praxis of class struggle.

The invocation of class struggle points to the last fundamental step in Lukács’s reasoning: the identification of the proletariat as an epistemically privileged subject, capable of adopting the perspective of totality, grasping the essence of historical–social phenomena, such as the use of spinning machines. Here, the proletariat is not an empirical subject but, with due differences (philosophically robust but operationally subtle) between the method of Lukács and that of his teacher Max Weber, an ideal type.⁴⁷ Not because this subject is God or an omniscient individual: the goal is not to know the whole of everything, understood in terms of Hegel’s “bad infinite” (for Lukács’s *Totalität* is something different from, say, Wittgenstein’s *Gesamtheit der Tatsachen*),⁴⁸ but to identify the main contradiction of a certain historical–social context and, on the basis on that, understand the function of the phenomenon we are interested in – such as, for example, the use of spinning machines – in that wide context. The epistemic privilege of the proletariat, its ability to perform this operation, has an ontological explanation: by knowing itself – answering the question “who (or what) am I?”, by recognizing itself as the product of capitalist reification, acquiring, in labour and in struggle, “class consciousness” – it simultaneously attains “the objective understanding of the nature of society.”⁴⁹

Now, there is little doubt among interpreters that *History and Class Consciousness* (as well as *The Theory of the Novel*) was “intensively discussed in the circles of what would later become the first generation of the Frankfurt School,”⁵⁰ even though “Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse ... possessed an apparently both politically and personally conditioned tendency to underplay or even to ignore the powerful experience that *History and Class Consciousness* must have represented for them all.”⁵¹ The eventful history of the Frankfurt School’s relationship with the point of view of totality can be divided into three main phases. Starting from the conventionally foundational meeting in May 1922 in Ilmenau, attended by Lukács and Karl Korsch, there is an initial exploratory phase lasting until the mid-1930s, when critical theory had not yet emerged.⁵² This is followed by an intermediate phase – during the second half of the 1930s – defined by Horkheimer’s attack on positivism and some applications of dialectical reasoning by Herbert Marcuse; in this phase, the debt to Lukács was really strong. Finally, there is a reversal in Adorno’s famous aphorism quoted earlier, “the whole is the false,” when, in a radically changed historical context, many illusions had been lost, and some Frankfurt School intellectuals wrote, disillusioned, from the Grand Hotel “Abyss,” as Lukács would have put it.

Let us briefly consider more closely the evolution of Horkheimer’s thought in the first and second phases of this story. During the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, Horkheimer was not (yet) a Hegelian Marxist in the sense of Lukács: not only because “they belonged to different camps” (since the former was a “bourgeois

⁴⁷ In short, ideal types are internally consistent, whereas dialectical notions allow for contradiction; the construction of different ideal types, conceived of as methodological tools, promotes a plurality of possible explanations, whereas for dialectics, there is ultimately, at the ontological level, a single correct explanation.

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1.1.

⁴⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 295.

⁵⁰ Stahl, “Lukács and the Frankfurt School,” 240. See also Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 97.

⁵¹ Honneth, “Auf Augenhöhe mit Heidegger,” 262. See also Miller, *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory*.

⁵² Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 211.

professor” and a “fellow traveller,” while the latter was an “active communist”),⁵³ but also – and especially – for strictly philosophical reasons.

First, both in his dissertation, written in 1919 under the supervision of Hans Cornelius, and in his *Habilitationsschrift*, completed in 1925, Horkheimer drew – implicitly *contra* Lukács and his 1923 project – the concept of totality from Gestalt psychology.⁵⁴ At the same time, during these years, he openly distanced himself from the Hegelian viewpoint of totality promoted by Lukács, both morally and epistemologically. Morally, in “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research” (1931), he stated that the Hegelian emphasis on the priority of the whole over the parts risks overlooking the reality of human suffering – the suffering of individual persons.⁵⁵ Epistemologically, not only in his unpublished “Theses über den Begriff der Totalität”⁵⁶ but also in several published essays written in the first half of the 1930s, he claimed that the notion of “knowledge of the totality is a self-contradictory concept”⁵⁷ belonging to “dogmatic metaphysics,”⁵⁸ since a reasonably reliable knowledge of reality can only proceed by trial and error.⁵⁹

Looking at this first phase, there are several elements of agreement between Horkheimer’s position and that of Neurath. The most striking case probably concerns the reviews that both wrote in 1930 of Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*, a book published one year before, in which a – partially Lukácsian – notion of totality had been used. In his review, Neurath concluded:

Mannheim seeks the all-encompassing vision, a point of view on the ‘world’ as a whole; in other words, metaphysics! Marxism, on the contrary, seeks to make precise statements about social processes! It wants to predict the future fate of the proletariat and other classes! Metaphysics against science! Ultimately, despite all his goodwill, Mannheim against Marxism: bourgeois front against proletarian front! Always the same old story!⁶⁰

With fewer exclamation points but no less critical, Horkheimer had also criticized Mannheim, stating that Marx’s science “did not aim to know a ‘totality’ or an absolute truth but to transform a specific social situation.”⁶¹

Although the analysis of this first phase shows that the expectations of collaboration, which were later disappointed, were not simply the result of Neurath’s unrealistic optimism of the will, without reconstructing the second phase, which includes the 1937 “Latest Attack to Metaphysics,” it is not possible to provide a balanced evaluation of Horkheimer’s relationship with Lukács’s perspective of totality and, *a fortiori*, his conflict with Neurath.

The second period is when critical theory, in its proper sense, was born under Horkheimer’s direction. Regarding this phase and this version of the Frankfurt School’s social philosophy, it is significant that many scholars have interpreted Horkheimer’s programmatic vision of interdisciplinary materialism as an elaboration of Lukács’s concept of totality.⁶² Even more significant is the judgement of one of the interpreters who has most emphatically highlighted the *distance* between the early Horkheimer and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*: concerning the non-Lukácsian or even anti-Lukácsian views of the early Horkheimer in the epistemological, socio-ontological, and moral domains, in a 1985 article titled “Die kritische Gesellschaftstheorie des frühen Horkheimer. Mißverständnisse über das Verhältnis von Horkheimer, Lukács und dem Positivismus,” Michiel Korthals wrote that these views “are valid only until about 1936. In the essays

⁵³ Dmitriev, “Interview.”

⁵⁴ Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*, 82.

⁵⁵ Horkheimer, “The Present Situation.”

⁵⁶ Korthals, “Die kritische Gesellschaftstheorie des frühen Horkheimer,” 319.

⁵⁷ Horkheimer, “The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy,” 244.

⁵⁸ Horkheimer, “On the Problem of Truth,” 189.

⁵⁹ See Horkheimer, *Gesellschaft im Übergang*; and Horkheimer, “Materialismus und Metaphysik.”

⁶⁰ Neurath, “Bürgerlicher Marxismus,” 232.

⁶¹ Horkheimer, “Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?”

⁶² Arato and Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, 218; Dubiel, *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung*, 165; Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, 22, 201; Howard, *The Marxian Legacy*, 99; Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 21; Skuhra, *Horkheimer*, 38; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, ch. 6.

from 1936 onwards, the outlines of critical theory in the classical sense are delineated, as presented in the two essays from 1937,⁶³ namely, “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics” and “Traditional and Critical Theory.”

After 1936, Horkheimer began to use the term “totality” – in a sense no longer akin to Gestalt psychology but to Hegelian philosophy and its dialectical method – as a label for critical theory, formulating “a notion of the ‘critical theory of society’ as a quasi-successor to the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács.”⁶⁴ For example, he stated that “the critical theory of society is, in its totality, a single existential judgment,” made about “the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests [and which] contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era.”⁶⁵ Moreover, describing this concept of totality in historical–social terms, he started to draw, following Lukács and Weber, a deep distinction between the procedures and methods of the natural sciences and those of the human and social sciences.⁶⁶ And in opposition to the logical positivists’ invocation of the ultimate authority of science, he reaffirmed, with Hegel and Lukács, the autonomy of philosophy, understood as critical authority.⁶⁷

Two clarifications are required. The first clarification: Faced with such a sudden change on Horkheimer’s part, it is natural to wonder *why* it occurred. On this matter, two or three different but reconcilable answers can be found in the literature. According to Martin Jay, in the early 1930s Horkheimer had begun to study Hegel seriously,⁶⁸ coming to consider him as “the philosopher to whom we are most indebted in many respects.”⁶⁹ According to Korthals’s hypothesis, the contacts with Marcuse – the “Hegelian” of the group – significantly contributed to Horkheimer “acquiring a less critical understanding of ‘totality,’ ‘independence,’ and other Hegelian-Marxist concepts.”⁷⁰ A third answer is suggested by the analysis of the very episode discussed in this article: Horkheimer’s need to demarcate the peculiar identity of the nascent critical theory in opposition to Neurath’s logical positivism led him to adopt the dialectical perspective of totality; in this sense, the critique of positivism represented a *constitutive* moment of critical theory in the classical sense.

The second clarification: This reconstruction should not be understood as claiming that, in the intermediate phase and particularly in the 1937 essay written against Neurath, Horkheimer’s position coincided perfectly with that presented by Lukács in 1923. Some differences – subtle but not irrelevant – remain. Perhaps the most significant difference concerns the dialectical relationship between the whole and empirical facts. In “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics,” that relationship is presented in more nuanced and less rigid terms than the motto repeated by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* quoting Fichte – “so much the worse for the facts” – could perhaps suggest:

Dialectics, too, notes empirical material with the greatest care. The accumulation of solitary facts can be most incisive if dialectic thought manipulates them. Within dialectical theory, such individual facts always appear in a definite connection which enters into every concept and which seeks to reflect reality in its totality.⁷¹

The details of what, even in the intermediate phase, still separates Horkheimer and Lukács go well beyond the scope and possibilities of this article. For the present purposes, it is sufficient to note that, from a *geistes-geschichtlich* perspective – as adopted by Merleau-Ponty in his *Adventures of the Dialectic* – Horkheimer’s social philosophy in the intermediate phase, and his critique of Neurath’s positivism, is part of Western Marxism, with its Hegelian framework, inaugurated by Lukács in 1923.

⁶³ Korthals, “Die kritische Gesellschaftstheorie des frühen Horkheimer,” 326.

⁶⁴ Dahbour, “Totality, Reason, Dialectics,” 208.

⁶⁵ Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 227.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 210–1, 227.

⁶⁷ See Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics.”

⁶⁸ See Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 211.

⁶⁹ Horkheimer, “The Social Function of Philosophy,” 270.

⁷⁰ Korthals, “Die kritische Gesellschaftstheorie des frühen Horkheimer,” 326.

⁷¹ Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics,” 61.

4 Neurath on Science, Dialectic, and the Proletarian Standpoint

Since Neurath's perplexity was caused by the reading of the constitutive document of that central phase of history – the essay by Horkheimer in 1937 – and since Merleau-Ponty's canon seems to be one of the implicit polemical targets of the operation that, through the historical reconstruction of the “real existing” logical empiricism, aims to rewrite – although counterfactually – the historiographical canons of twentieth-century philosophy, for these two reasons, it becomes crucial to understand Neurath's position regarding the Hegelian–Marxist point of view of totality.

All indications seem to suggest that Neurath had not read Lukács and had never met him, even though both lived in Vienna in the 1920s under different circumstances: one at the centre of the political and cultural activities of social democracy, and the other living secluded, almost as a refugee, after being “saved” from extradition by the appeal signed by Thomas Mann and other intellectuals.⁷² It is, therefore, natural to seek an answer to this question – what position did Neurath take regarding the Hegelian–Marxist perspective of totality? – in the reply, now no longer unpublished, that he had vainly asked Horkheimer to publish in 1937.

In his response, Neurath was primarily concerned with asserting that the Unity of Science project, with its ambition to find a common linguistic ground for different scientists and disciplines, did not preclude the possibility of disagreement and discussion and, on the contrary, had a strong critical potential:

The Unity of Science Movement rests on the assumption that one can find within unitary science ... a form of expression that enables scientists to express their views in a common language, however contrary their views may be. Certainly, a critical, non-dogmatic empiricist cannot exclude the possibility that the urge to express oneself in ways that hinder universal communication will remain alive, to the effect that the Unity of Science Movement can only capture part of the total scientific activity.

Moreover, he suggested why a logical empiricist like himself had hoped to be able to collaborate profitably with the “early” Horkheimer:

When Horkheimer publishes scientific papers in his specialty, he employs a language the sentences of which are empirically testable. The extensive introduction to the research report “Authority and Family” employs a language which proponents of logical empiricism may well find intelligible.

Nevertheless, he himself seemed to realize the deep chasm that now separated him from Horkheimer, when he provided his assessment of the two key theoretical points of their dispute: the nature and role of the dialectical method and the attitude towards the alleged epistemic privilege of the proletariat.

As for the former issue, Neurath summarized Horkheimer's “main thesis” as the idea that

“there is an extra-scientific method capable of criticizing the sciences mainly by way of exhibiting their historical position in a way alien to the sciences themselves, although based on everything scientifically determinable”. This point of view, Horkheimer calls it “dialectical” or “critical”, allegedly goes beyond both the metaphysical and the scientific one. ... He himself thinks he is defending reason against empiricism, where he follows traditional German philosophy in distinguishing between “understanding” [Verstand] – which he does not deny to empiricism – and “reason” [Vernunft].⁷³

Abandoning the somewhat dialogical tone of his reply, Neurath resorted to sarcasm and wrote:

Horkheimer exaggerates when he thinks the Unity of Science Movement requires every philosopher to study logic. ... Horkheimer, on the other hand, seems to require that one should study “dialectics”; it would be helpful to know which textbook teaches the “dialectic” he advocates (the term is very ambiguous), as one can learn modern logic from Carnap's well-known “Grundriss [der Logistik]” [sic].⁷⁴

And he concluded:

⁷² Bourdet, *Figures de Lukács*.

⁷³ Neurath, “Unity of Science and Logical Empiricism,” 17.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20. Neurath intended to refer to Carnap, *Abriss der Logistik*.

A historico-sociological account of the history of scientific empiricism remains a scientific desideratum; if it existed one could find out easier whether one or another of Horkheimer's metaphysical formulated theses point to certain connections, which so far have escaped many empiricists. Yet, even if such an examination were to confirm this, that would not prove that Horkheimer's method is useful and his metaphysical style of writing necessary, no more than the astrologists' onetime advantage over the astronomers in accounting for high and low tides proves that their method is superior to the astronomical method. To this end a comprehensive scientific study would be necessary.

Consequently, as for the latter issue, the proletariat's ability to grasp the essence of reality by acquiring self-consciousness, Neurath firmly stated that logical empiricists “do not recognize a tribunal beyond science, with sits in judgment of science and investigates its foundations.”⁷⁵ His position was still the expression of a technocratic tendency, as he had taken in the review of Mannheim: the social sciences are not neutral, but the proletarian cause *assumes*, rather than *constitutes*, the correct standpoint, which is the scientific one (indeed, that of the Unity of Science program), a viewpoint established independently through the methods of science itself. Moreover, the sort of Marxism that interested him was a materialistic and scientific conception that “seeks to make precise statements about social processes” and “wants to predict the future fate of the proletariat and other classes.”⁷⁶

Therefore, Neurath caustically rejected the dialectical method and took a position incompatible with the proletarian standpoint theory. So, it seems that, regardless of the evaluation that Horkheimer's tactics and insincerity may elicit, it is better to resist the implicit attempt of the revisionist historiography of logical empiricism to rewrite the canon of twentieth-century philosophy based on the historical reconstruction of that fateful episode in 1937.

To recap the main argument of the present article. The current historiography of logical empiricism has provided a rather convincing rational reconstruction of several aspects of the Horkheimer–Neurath debate and an accurate historical description of the context in which the debate took place (as well as, perhaps more controversially but equally interestingly, an argument for the claim that logical empiricism has a “potential for radical social critique”⁷⁷). The present article acknowledges all this but, inserting Lukács in the Neurath–Horkheimer debate, it does not reach the conclusion that Horkheimer's 1937 sudden attack on Neurath was *nothing but* the expression of a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation.

To claim this would not only be equivalent to defend an alternative, counterfactual *Geistesgeschichte* that is (legitimately) in competition with the grand narrative of Western Marxism, paradigmatically told by Merleau-Ponty in 1955, but would also run the risk of casting a shadow over the distinctive traits of Lukács's Hegelianization of Marx, which represents the original and constitutive core of that tradition (*a fortiori*, of that canonical *Geistesgeschichte*). Quite the opposite, the present article claims that (a) at least around 1937 (even though neither in the early 1930s, e.g. in his review of Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, nor after the Second World War, after the publication of his and Adorno's 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), Horkheimer essentially belonged to the Hegelian–Marxist tradition stemming from Lukács; (b) notwithstanding Neurath's semantic and epistemological holism, his fallibilism, his rejection of *Wertfreiheit* in the social sciences, his commitment to socialism, and so forth, there is still a gulf between his position and Horkheimer's, for Neurath did not accept the main methodological claim made by the latter, namely, the Hegelian, Lukács-inspired view that what “constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought” is “the point of view of totality”;⁷⁸ (c) highlighting the main differences between Neurath's and Lukács's versions of Marxism – one concerning the very idea of dialectic, and the other concerning the epistemic privilege of the proletariat – can throw some light on and help understand better the distinctive features of Lukács's Hegelianization of Marxism.

Two brief comments on point (c). Consider first the view according to which the proletariat has a privileged standpoint. In his *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976), Leszek Kolakowski famously wrote that “the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Neurath, “Bürgerlicher Marxismus,” 232.

⁷⁷ O'Neill and Uebel, “Logical Empiricism as Critical Theory?,” 379.

⁷⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 62.

main principles of ‘critical theory’ are those of Lukács’s Marxism, but without the proletariat.”⁷⁹ Given that Neurath defended holism, avoided the myth of the given, rejected neutrality in the social sciences, was committed to socialism, and so forth, one may wonder whether a somewhat similar formula – “Lukács’s Marxism, but without the proletariat” – could be applied to him as well. The present article suggests that the answer is no, or not exactly. Why? Not much, or not only, because critical theory eventually ended up rejecting the proletarian standpoint theory above all in the 1940s and beyond, after time had passed, many different things had happened, and much disillusionment had occurred, whereas Neurath *never* accepted it (arguably, not even at the very beginning, in 1919, when he was directing the Central Office for Planning for the Bavarian Soviet Republic). But also, and above all, for another reason, having to do with the basic fact that Neurath sarcastically rejected dialectic as ambiguous and obscure (meaningless?), when he remarked: “It would be helpful to know which textbook teaches the ‘dialectic’ he [Horkheimer] advocates.” One might think that a reply referring to Hegel’s *Science of Logic* would be adequate, yet – in a sense – equally sarcastic. The present article aims at suggesting that a more balanced reply could be the following: “It would be helpful if you read *History and Class Consciousness*, especially the pages in which Lukács discusses Marx’s 1849 passage on the spinning jenny.” Now, would Neurath have been satisfied with such a reply? Perhaps not. But be this as it may, looking at things from this angle – for the sake of a comparison with Neurath – motivated us to provide, especially in Section 3 of the present article, a pragmatic-contextualist interpretation of those Marxian passages, interpreted by Lukács in Hegelian terms, with the aim and the hope of reflecting further on, and understanding better, some of the distinctive features of Lukács’s 1923 Hegelianization of Marxism.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

Funding information: The research and publication have been financially supported by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (PRIN 2022 project “Towards the History of a Heterodox Tradition in Analytic Philosophy: Transformative, Humanistic, Conversational”, n. 2022XS25NZ).

Author contribution: The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

References

- Abromeit, John. *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life* [1951], translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London-New York: Verso, 2005.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund and Max Horkheimer. *Briefwechsel, Band I 1927-1937*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994.
- Anderson, Perry. *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: NLR, 1976.
- Arato, Andrew and Paul Breines. *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1979.
- Berto, Francesco. “Hegel’s Dialectics as a Semantic Theory.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 15:1 (2007), 19–39.
- Bourdet, Yvon. *Figures de Lukács*. Paris: Anthropos, 1972.
- Bourke, Richard. *Hegel’s World Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1977.
- Carnap, Rudolf. *Abriss der Logistik*. Wien: J. Springer, 1929.
- Dahbour, Omar. “Totality, Reason, Dialectics: The Importance of Hegel for Critical Theory from Lukács to Honneth.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, edited by M. J. Thompson, 198–242. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁷⁹ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1071.

- Dahms, Hans-Joachim. *Positivismusstreit. Die Auseinandersetzungen der Frankfurter Schule mit dem logischen Positivismus, dem amerikanischen Pragmatismus und dem kritischen Rationalismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994.
- Dmitriev, Alexander. “Interview.” In V. Mickisch, *Lukács and the Early Frankfurt Institute: An Interview with Alexander Dmitriev*, blog of the Journal of the History of Ideas, 13 April 2022, <https://www.jhiblog.org/2022/04/13/lukacs-and-the-early-frankfurt-institute-an-interview-with-alexander-dmitriev/>.
- Dubiel, Helmut. *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978.
- Friedman, Michael. *A Parting of the Ways. Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger*, Chicago and La Salle. Illinois: Open Court, 2000.
- Haller, Rudolf. *Studien zur Österreichischen Philosophie. Variationen über ein Thema*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Werke I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009.
- Held, David. *Introduction to Critical Theory. Horkheimer to Habermas*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1980.
- Honneth, Axel. “Interview with Rüdiger Dannemann, ‘Auf Augenhe mit Heidegger’”. In *Georg Lukács und 1968: Ein Spurensuche*, edited by R. Dannemann. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2009.
- Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory. Selected Essays* [1968], translated by Matthew J. O’Connell and Others. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Horkheimer, Max. “Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?”. In *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 15. Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1930.
- Horkheimer, Max. *Gesellschaft im Übergang*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1972.
- Horkheimer, Max. “Materialismus und Metaphysik.” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2 (1933), 1–45.
- Horkheimer, Max. “On the Problem of Truth [1935].” In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, 177–215. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1993.
- Horkheimer, Max. “The Latest Attack to Metaphysics [1937].” In *Critical Theory. Selected Essays* [1968], translated by Matthew J. O’Connell and Others, 132–87. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Horkheimer, Max. “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Task of an Institute for Social Research [1931].” In *Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Early Writings*, translated by J. Torpey, 1–14. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1993.
- Horkheimer, Max. “The Social Function of Philosophy.” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8:3 (1940), 322–337.
- Horkheimer, Max. “The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy [1934].” In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, translated by J. Torpey, 217–64. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1993.
- Howard, Dick. *The Marxian Legacy*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2019.
- Jay, Martin. *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism. The Founders. The Golden Age. The Breakdown* [1976]. New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.
- Korthals, Michiel. “Die kritische Gesellschaftstheorie des frühen Horkheimer. Mißverständnisse über das Verhältnis von Horkheimer, Lukács und dem Positivismus.” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 14:4 (1985), 315–29.
- Lukács, György. *The Theory of the Novel. A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* [1920], translated by Anna Bostock. London: The Merlin Press, 1988.
- Lukács, György. “Interview: Lukács on His Life and Work.” *New Left Review* (July/August 1971), 49–58.
- Lukács, György. *History and Class Consciousness* [1923], translated by Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin Press, 1963.
- Marconi, Diego. *Contradiction and the Language of Hegel’s Dialectic: a Study of the Science of Logic* (PhD dissertation). Pittsburgh: University Microfilms International, 1980.
- Marx, Karl. *Wage, Labour, and Capital* [1849], translated by Harriet E. Lothrop. New York: New York Labor News Company, 1902.
- McCumber, John. *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Adventures of the Dialectic*, translated by Joseph Bien. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Miller, Tyrus. *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory. Aesthetics, History. Utopia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.
- Neurath, Otto. “Protokollsätze” [1932/1933] in Rudolf Haller.” In *Gesammelte philosophische und methodologische Schriften*, edited by Heiner Rutte, 577–86. Wien: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1981.
- Neurath, Otto. “Bürgerlicher Marxismus. Rezensionssatz zu: Karl Mannheim *Ideologie und Utopie*.” *Der Kampf* 23:5 (1930), 227–232.
- Neurath, Otto. “Unity of Science and Logical Empiricism: A Reply.” In *Otto Neurath and the Unity of Science. Logic, Epistemology, and the Unity of Science*, edited by John Symons et al., translated by Thomas Bonk, vol. 18. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011.
- O’Neill, John and Thomas Uebel. “Logical Empiricism as Critical Theory? The Debate Continues.” *Analyse & Kritik* 30 (2008), 379–398.
- O’Neill, John and Thomas Uebel. “Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12:1 (2004), 75–105.
- Pippin, Robert. “Back to Hegel?.” *Mediations* 26, 1–2, Fall 2012-Spring 2013, 7–28.
- Preve, Costanzo. *Una nuova storia alternativa della filosofia. Il cammino ontologico-sociale della filosofia*. Pistoia: Petite Plaisance, 2013.
- Reisch, George A. *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Rorty, Richard. “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres.” In *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, edited by Richard Rorty et al., 49–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Sachs, Carl. “Why Did the Frankfurt School Misunderstand Logical Positivism?”, blog of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 5.10.2020, www.jhiblog.org/2020/08/05/why-did-the-frankfurt-school-misunderstand-logical-positivism/.
- Sandner, Günther. *Otto Neurath. Eine politische Biographie*. Wien: Zsolnay, 2014.
- Skuhra, Anselm. *Max Horkheimer. Eine Einführung in sein Denken*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1974.

- Stahl, Titus. "Lukács and the Frankfurt School." In *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, edited by P. E. Gordon et al., 237–50. New York and London: Routledge, 2018.
- Uebel, Thomas. "The Positivism Dispute Revisited." In *Norms, Values, and Society, Vienna Circle Institute Yearbook*, edited by H. Pauer-Studer, vol. 2, 323–9. Dordrecht: Springer, 1994.
- Vrahimis, Andreas. "Scientism, Social Praxis, and Overcoming Metaphysics. A Debate between Logical Empiricism and the Frankfurt School." *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 10:2 (2020), 562–597.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922.