

John Lukacs: Fictio or The purposes of Historical Statements

Written by Administrator
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John Lukacs, in his own estimation, is much more than a ordinary historian. In what he considers his most important book, *Historical Consciousness*, he elaborates “not a philosophy of history but its opposite: a multifaceted statement and exposition of a historical philosophy It wishes to demonstrate the profound yet considerably unsystematic, historicity of our knowledge”. When we learn from Conor Cruise O’Brien that Lukacs possesses “one of the most powerful, as well as one of the most learned minds of our time”, we eagerly await an account of Lukacs’ philosophical discoveries.

Fortunately, this vast anthology does not disappoint us. It includes, among much else, an extensive selection from *Historical Consciousness*; indeed, *Remembered Past* tells us more about Lukacs than we need to know.

Much of the new historical philosophy consists of elementary blunders that, one might have hoped, his uniformed pupils at a Catholic girls’ college, about whom he patronizingly but engagingly writes, would have been able to avoid. He claims, e.g., that the “absoluteness of mathematical ‘truth’ was disproved by Gödel’s famous theorem in 1931”.

Not at all! The two theorems in Gödel’s great paper do not show that mathematical truth is relative. They deal with consistency within a formal system adequate for arithmetic and with statements that can be neither proved nor disproved within such a system. Lukacs makes matters even worse when he refers to “Gödel’s revolutionary theorem about the inevitability of human preconceptions in mathematics”. In point of fact, Gödel was a Platonist about mathematical truth, though this view neither entails nor is entailed by his incompleteness theorems. He thought that mathematicians directly perceive mathematical objects and condemned the exact view that our author attributes to him.

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Lukacs does not much improve when he leaves the philosophy of mathematics. After a long quotation from Werner Heisenberg that discusses proposals to abandon the Law of Excluded Middle in quantum mechanics, our author has this to say: "Knowledge means not certainly Everyday language cannot be eliminated from any meaningful human statement of truth, including propositions dealing with matter; after all is said, logic is human logic, our own creation".

Our author suffers from an intellectual obsession: he must at all costs claim that logic and truth are human inventions. Unfortunately for him, the use of logical systems without the Law of Excluded Middle has nothing at all to do with how closely statements approach certainty, the use of ordinary language in scientific statements, or whether logic is "our own creation"; the quotation from Heisenberg does not support any of Lukacs's odd inferences from it.

Lukacs displays a remarkable ability to draw philosophical "conclusion" that do not follow from the premises alleged to justify them. He states, e.g., "First: there is no scientific certitude". He appeals in support to unpredictability at the level of subatomic particles. How does this in any way show that all scientific statements are uncertain? Even more egregiously, Lukacs claims that quantum physics shows "the illusory nature of 'factual; truth'". How is this sweeping claim supposed to follow from the fact (I presume non-illusory that a physicist cannot "exactly determine both the position and speed of the atomic particle?" Amazingly, he tells us elsewhere that Heisenberg "wholly agreed with what I had wanted to know". If Heisenberg really endorsed such nonsense, I would be astonished; but for a reason that will emerge later, I am not inclined to trust our author's attributions of beliefs to others.

Perhaps I am unfair to Lukacs. Even if he is not the philosopher he imagines himself to be, can he not still be an excellent historian? Sadly, his scatterbrained theories infect his historical work, sometimes with fatal results. Lukacs, as we have seen, rejects objective truth in science: knowledge is "personal" and "participant". He applies this view, with risible results, to economics. He tells us that "the idea of Economic Laws as if they were something like the laws of Nature is even more dead [than the idea of free trade]. The notion of economical as a mental

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construction, indeed, as a fictio in every sense of the word, may be hard for many people to accept, but accept it they must if they want to think sensibly about the functioning of economic factors". Mises long ago noted that the denial of economic law was a principal tactic of the German Historical School to avoid confronting the refutations by classical-liberal economists of their plans for state control of the economy.

Suitably instructed, the historian can now understand economic history: "The principal factor in the development of such a prima facie 'economic' event as the American depression beginning in 1929 was a loss of confidence that is a change in mentality, just as the American recovery beginning in 1933 was the result of the national recovery of confidence".

It is good to know that we need no longer rack our brains trying to grasp the fine points of Austrian business-cycle theory. Economic theory is as illusory as physics: "There' nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so". No doubt Robert Higgs and other economic historians will be interested to learn of the "American recovery beginning in 1933".

Our author has more to teach us. Deficits do not matter: the national debt is "abstract"; a mere matter of bookkeeping. Accounting "after a while, becomes a closed system of its own, and consequently less and less meaningful, historically speaking. An example of this is a figure such as the 'national debt', which in the twentieth century has become not much more than an abstract term within intra-national accounting". Lukacs, whatever his faults, has read widely; but if he has the slightest acquaintance with economic theory, he has managed to keep it well concealed.

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Lukacs is by no means wholly bad. The anthology includes excellent essays on Burckhardt and Tocqueville; and, it is good to see that he esteems highly that work of Christopher Dawson, whom he rightly calls a great historian. His essay on the diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder is well worth studying. Schroeder, who by the way is among the best critics of the Iraq War, is an outstanding authority on the period after the Congress of Vienna, “when the undisputed practice of balance-of-power was superseded, for the first time, by a tacit agreement for the upholding, or at least for some preservation, of an international order in Europe”.

He has a good eye for less well-known but significant authors. He has learned much from Owen Barfield, and emulated his method of tracing the history of consciousness through changes in the meanings of words. I think he ought to have mentioned, though, that Barfield was an ardent disciple of the controversial occultist Rudolf Steiner, whose views lie not very far beneath the surface of his works. Lukacs also calls our attention to the profound essay of Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*.

When Lukacs can manage to stay away from philosophy, he sometimes makes valuable points. He is at his best with the political history that some consider old-fashioned. “One hundred years ago”, he tells us, “it was largely taken for granted what the English historian J.R. Seeley, the Regius professor of Modern History at Cambridge, wrote: ‘history is past politics and politics present history’”. Actually, it was Edward Augustus Freeman who wrote this; but with Lukacs one cannot be too exacting.

A point he makes about the Cold War especially valuable. He strongly criticizes American foreign policy in the 1950s for an overly ideological approach to Soviet Russia. Like Winston Churchill, one of his heroes, he views Russian national interest as the key to Soviet foreign policy under Stalin. Churchill, despite his “Iron Curtain” speech in 1946 inaugurating the Cold War, had by 1950 seen the potential for a peaceful resolution of the division of Europe. His suggestions had no impact on American foreign policy, dominated by a rigid ideological posture. “Eisenhower and Dulles rejected Churchill with contumely”.

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Lukac's skepticism about the Cold War is welcome, but by no means is he a supporter of the traditional American policy of nonintervention in European power politics. Quite the contrary, he smears the American opponents of entry into World War II as German sympathizers. They absurdly underrated the appeal of fascism. "When in 1941 Senator [Robert] Taft said that the danger to America was not Hitlerism but communism – 'for fascism appeals to a few, and communism to the many' – his diagnosis was entirely wrong".

Why were Taft and his fellow noninterventionist mistaken? They did not realize how close Hitler came in winning the war. Would not a Nazi-controlled Europe have placed America in mortal danger? "Hitler's victory would have meant, at the very last, his domination of all of Europe, with incalculable consequences for the United States".

The fallacy in Lukacs's argument can be seen in what he himself tells us: "After December 1941 Hitler could no longer win his war because the British and the Russians had held out against him until finally the Americans joined them in full force. But before Pearl Harbor he could have won it". But if Hitler was unable to overcome British and Russian resistance before December 1941, why was American entry into the war essential? For his argument to have merit, Lukacs would have to show that the British and Russians would have been unable to resist further after December 1941, absent American intervention. To conjure up a vision of Hitler's success before this, as Lukacs does, is not to the point.

Lukacs cannot defeat his opponents' arguments; instead, as suggested earlier, he impugns their motives. Although, with becoming generosity, he acknowledges, "There is something to be said for the arguments of isolationists before World War II", the smear follows immediately: "except that consistent isolationists were few and far between. The 'isolationism' of most of the 'conservatives' is as deeply compromised because of their selective indignation. Most of those

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who had been critical of the American intervention on the side of Britain (and of Russia) against Germany very soon became the most vocal advocates of ... intervention against Russia”.

Lukacs here ignores, whether willfully or not I shall not venture to say, that many of the prewar “isolationists” opposed the Cold War as well. National Review refused to publish an article by John T. Flynn critical of the Cold War. Herbert Hoover can hardly be described as a Cold Warrior, and Robert Taft opposed military aid to NATO. Harry Elmer Barnes, to whom Lukacs devotes considerable attention, was an ardent Cold War revisionist.

Lukacs makes some odd remarks about the post-World War I American revisionist historians. He condemns Charles Tansill’s *America Goes to War* as a ‘radical and Germanophile’ book and seems shocked that it won the praise of Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins. Tansill, whom he terms “the prototype of a zealous crusader”, was one of the foremost diplomatic historians of the twentieth century, and his book remains to this day the best and most thorough study of its subject. Lukacs disagrees: he thinks the ‘most serious’ revisionist book on American entry into World War I was Walter Millis’ *The Road to war*. Millis’s study lacks the firm documentary basis of Tansill’s, but Lukacs esteems him because he shifted to an interventionist position before World War II. This our author considers proof that “he was an honest an”.

But I have saved the worst for last. He dons the brass knuckles for an attack on Harry Elmer Barnes, who, by the way, was not a “sociologist turned historian”. Barnes taught history from the outset of his career and considered himself primarily a historian. Lukacs says that Barnes after the war “became an admirer of Hitler”. He adduces as evidence a shocking quotation. Barnes described Hitler as “a man whose only fault was that he was too soft, generous, and honorable”. He cites no source for this, but the remark comes from a privately printed pamphlet by Barnes, *Blasting the Historical Blackout*, which appeared in 1963. There is a slight difficulty

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for Lukacs,. His version of the quotation does not exactly correspond to what Barnes says, and I do not mean only that Barnes used the American rather than British spelling of "honorable". On Barnes's pamphlet, the following appears: "Defenders of Hitler, of whom I am not one, contend that he lost the War and his life by being too decent and honorable". Now we see what Lukacs has in mind by "the illusory nature of factual truth".