

## Notes on Georg Lukács' neglected masterpiece *The Destruction of Reason*

By Chris Wright

Reading Lukács' classic *The Destruction of Reason* (1952). A brilliant history of "irrationalism" from Schelling to Hitler—which, as a Marxist work, doesn't make the mistake of arguing that earlier intellectual trends inevitably culminated in Nazism but instead only argues that no philosophy is "innocent." "Reason itself [or a rejection of reason] can never be something politically neutral, suspended above social developments." Not strictly true—I don't see how there are any social implications in a debate between Chomskian linguistics and structural linguistics—but in general it's a reasonable statement.

"Thus the subject-matter which now presents itself to us is Germany's path to Hitler in the sphere of philosophy. That is to say, we mean to show how this concrete path is reflected in philosophy, and how philosophical formulations, as an intellectual mirroring of Germany's concrete development towards Hitler, helped to speed up the process. That we are therefore confining ourselves to portraying the most abstract part of this development by no means implies an over-estimation of philosophy's importance in the turbulent totality of concrete developments. But we believe it is not superfluous to add that to underestimate the philosophical driving forces would be at least as dangerous and as little in accordance with reality." Yep, philosophies and ideologies do matter.

"...Sorel's myth was so exclusively emotional, so empty of meaning that it could pass without difficulty into the demagogically exploited myth of fascism. Mussolini wrote: 'We have created a myth for ourselves. Myth is a faith, a passion. It does not have to be a reality. It is real by virtue of the fact that it is a spur and a faith, and signifies valour.' This is pure Sorel, and in it the epistemology of Pragmatism and Bergsonian intuition has become the vehicle of fascist ideology." Perceptive. Regarding pragmatism: it's "whatever works." We all need our faiths or myths, whether religious myths or scientific myths or whatever. The will to believe. We all have our own truths, beliefs that stimulate us or inspire us. Decadent relativism.<sup>1</sup> And with Bergson you get the vitalism, intuition (a sort of irrationalist intuition), *durée*, hostility to the objective character of natural science, hostility to objective reason. All these cultural expressions, and many more of a less 'disinterestedly philosophical' character, belong to a particular zeitgeist. To understand their significance, the Marxist method is necessary.

And Lukács is a master of that method. I'll just quote some passages of his long preliminary analysis of the German social, political, and economic experience that was sublimated into an infinitely variegated ideological irrationalism.

We have located one of the most important weak points of the 1848 revolution in the lack of democratic experience and tradition, in the want of a democratic training of the masses and their ideological spokesmen through major internal class struggles. It is understandable that events after 1848, the conditions [in Prussia] of 'Bonapartist monarchy,' the creation of German unity 'from the top' through Prussian bayonets, again failed to provide any conditions favourable to the origin of revolutionary democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Later in the book (pp. 778–779) he remarks, "pragmatism is an ideology of capitalist agents consciously anchored in capitalist immediacy, a Babbit philosophy." Basically true. Like liberal capitalist apologetics, it remains on the surface of phenomena and doesn't try to penetrate to their deeper essence. Because that would contradict its relativistic spirit, its rejection of the effort to find an objective essence that differs from appearance.

traditions or a revolutionary democratic training of the masses. As a result of its impotence, the German Parliament was automatically condemned to sterility. And since every single bourgeois party had its basis in a compromise with ‘Bonapartist monarchy,’ the extra-parliamentary struggles of the masses, as far as they could spring up in the first place, were similarly doomed to sterility...

An important ideological obstacle to the origin of democratic traditions in Germany was the ever-increasing, large-scale falsification of German history. It was—to summarize very briefly—a matter of idealizing and ‘Germanizing’ the retarded sides of the German development, i.e., of a version of history which extolled precisely the retarded character of Germany’s development as particularly glorious and in accord with ‘Germany’s essence.’ It criticized and repudiated all the principles and products of Western bourgeois democratic and revolutionary developments as un-German and contrary to the character of the German ‘national spirit’...

The most important factor of all is the average German’s underdog mentality, a mentality by no means affected by the 1848 revolution, and also that of the intellectual however highly placed. We have noted that the major upheavals at the start of the modern era, which laid the foundations for democratic developments in the West, ended in Germany with the establishment, for centuries to come, of petty tyrants, and that the German Reformation founded an ideology of submission to them [in the form of Lutheranism, Pietism, etc.]. Neither the struggles for liberation from the Napoleonic yoke nor the year 1848 could alter this intrinsically. And since the German nation’s unity was created not by way of revolution but from ‘the top’ and, according to historical legend, through ‘blood and iron,’ the ‘mission’ of the Hohenzollerns and the ‘genius’ of Bismarck, this side of the Germans’ mentality and morals remained virtually unchanged. There sprang up large cities in place of often semi-medieval small towns; the big capitalist with his agents replaced the shopkeeper, artisan and small entrepreneur; world politics superseded parish-pump politics—but during this process the German people’s subservience to its ‘authorities’ underwent only the slightest of changes... [He then quotes the following passage written by a German in 1919:]

The most easily governed nation in the world is the German... meaning a lively and active nation of average proficiency and intelligence with a developed critical bent for argument; a nation, however, which in public affairs is neither accustomed nor willing to act spontaneously without or against the will of authority; a nation which thus is excellently ordered and acts under official guidance almost as though it were only performing its own common will. This readiness to be organized, along with its efficiency, does indeed provide incomparably fine material for an organization, the purest form of which is of course the military type.

Here we have the immediate, subjective source of pre-imperialist German irrationalism. Whereas the Western Democracies—by and large—considered the State, State policies and so on to be largely their own work, expected rationality from them and saw their own rationality reflected therein, the German attitude—again, by and large—was the complete opposite... [It is] ‘authority’ alone which acts, and does so on the basis of an intuitive reading of inherently irrational facts... [Think of the celebration of Bismarck’s ‘genius,’ etc.] ... Certainly there was already arising—in the [early-19<sup>th</sup>-century] Romantic

movement and its offshoots—an idealization of German backwardness which, in order to defend this position, was forced to interpret the course of events in a radically irrationalist way and to contest the idea of progress as an allegedly shallow, dim and misleading conception. Schopenhauer went farthest in this respect, and that accounts for both his total lack of influence before 1848 and his world-wide effect after the revolution was defeated.

...The German development [as opposed to France's, England's, and so on] was rated the higher one precisely because, as a result of the conservation of older (non-rational) forms of governance, it could solve various problems (ethical, cultural, etc.) for which the society and social thinking of the rationally oriented West could never find a solution. It goes without saying that here, the effective combating of socialism played a decisive role.

Irrationalism and a hostility to progress therefore go together. In this very togetherness they formed an effective ideological defence of the social and political backwardness of a Germany rapidly developing in the capitalist sphere...

Later, Lukács mentions that “Schopenhauer’s Buddhist quietism matched petty-bourgeois apathy after the 1848 revolution,” and that “the transformation requested by Nietzsche of the relationship between capitalists and workers into one between officers and soldiers corresponds to specific capitalist-militaristic wishes in the imperialist age.” Neither of these thinkers could have achieved the influence they did if their philosophies hadn’t served useful apologetic purposes. (The fact that they personally had no such intentions is irrelevant.)

On “irrationalism”:

Irrationalism is merely a form of reaction (reaction in the double sense of the secondary and the retrograde) to the dialectical development of human thought. Its history therefore hinges on that development of science and philosophy, and it reacts to the new questions they pose by designating the mere problem as an answer and declaring the allegedly fundamental insolubility of the problem to be a higher form of comprehension. This styling of the declared insolubility as an answer, along with the claim that this evasion and side-stepping of the answer, this flight from it, contains a positive solution and ‘true’ achievement of reality is irrationalism’s decisive hallmark... Now what constitutes the specific quality of modern irrationalism? It is chiefly the fact that it arose on the basis of capitalist production and its specific class struggles—first the progressive battle for power against feudalism and absolute monarchy waged by the bourgeois class, and later the bourgeoisie’s reactionary defensive struggles against the proletariat. Throughout this book we will show in concrete terms the decisive changes which the various stages of those class struggles wrought in the development of irrationalism in both form and content, determining equally the propositions and the solutions, and we will show how they altered its physiognomy.

Interesting: “Pascal in relation to Cartesianism and F. H. Jacobi in relation to the Enlightenment and classical German philosophy may be regarded as precursors of modern irrationalism. In both, we can clearly see the flinching from social and scientific progress as dictated by their period’s pace of development and against which the pair, Pascal especially, formed a kind of romantic opposition, criticizing its results from a Rightist angle.” Pascal, of course, anticipated existentialism in his emphasis on the “hopeless and irremediable isolation and loneliness experienced by the human being left to his own devices in a God-forsaken world.” He

even anticipated Schopenhauer in some respects, as in his analysis of deadly boredom as “the chronic malady of the ruling classes” (Lukács).

The discussion of Schopenhauer is very good. After 1848 a climate of reaction set in across most of Europe, which set the stage for the international reception of Schopenhauer (though he was especially popular in Germany). “It is with Schopenhauer that German philosophy starts to play its fateful role as the ideological leader of reactionary extremism,” which became more pronounced later with Nietzsche and others. Actually, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche were somewhat ahead of their time, anticipating (so Lukács says) decadent trends that later became universal.

If we have called Schopenhauer the first irrationalist standing on a purely bourgeois foundation, it is not too difficult to perceive the associated personal traits in his social being. His biography distinguishes him quite sharply from all his German predecessors and contemporaries. He was a ‘*grand bourgeois*’ in contrast to the others’ petty-bourgeois status, which in Fichte’s case was even semi-proletarian. Accordingly Schopenhauer did not experience the normal straits of petty-bourgeois German intellectuals (private tutoring, etc.) but spent a large part of his youth on journeys all over Europe. After a brief transitional period as a business trainee he lived a peaceful existence on private means, an existence in which even his university link—the teaching post in Berlin—played a merely episodic role.

Thus he was the first major instance in Germany of a writer with private means, a breed which had become important to the bourgeois literature of capitalistically advanced countries long before. (It is significant that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also enjoyed an independence stemming from a private income which much resembled Schopenhauer’s.)...

...Schopenhauer’s high-minded withdrawal from all politics was only how he behaved in normal times, when State machinery automatically safeguarded the fortunes and incomes of private investors against any possible attack. But there were times—and Schopenhauer experienced them in 1848—when this automatic protection of fortunes was thrown in question or at least—as then, in Germany—appeared to be. At such moments Schopenhauer’s aloof ‘independence’ vanished, and our philosopher made haste to hand his opera-glasses to a Prussian officer for a better view of the rioters at whom he was shooting...

Schopenhauer’s originality lies in the fact that at a time when the ordinary form of [capitalist] apologetics had not yet even developed fully, let alone become the leading trend in bourgeois thinking, he had already found the later, higher form of capitalist apologetics: *indirect apologetics*.

And so on. I could quote the whole discussion. By ‘indirect apologetics’ Lukács means that the bad sides of capitalism are acknowledged but explained as attributes of all human existence. “From this it necessarily follows that a struggle against these atrocities not only appears doomed from the start but signifies an absurdity, viz., a self-dissolution of the essentially human.” One might object here that capitalism was still hardly hegemonic when Schopenhauer was writing, and that the philosopher certainly didn’t have it in mind when penning his rhapsodies of pessimism, but this is irrelevant. The question is why his philosophy became so popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. The answer, or part of it, is that his pessimism suited the needs and the mood of bourgeois society at that time. Non-Marxists will object that this explanation is absurdly reductive, but in so doing they only betray their intellectual shallowness. No philosophy can

become accepted by the mainstream, can be internationally celebrated, unless entities with resources propagate it and find it useful. Schopenhauer's ideas were entirely acceptable, in fact useful, to bourgeois culture in the 1850s and later.

It was directly through his pessimism that Schopenhauer became the leading thinker of the second half of the nineteenth century. Through it he founded the new type of apologetics. To be sure, he did no more than lay the foundations. Later, and particularly when dealing with Nietzsche, we shall see that the Schopenhauerian form of indirect apologetics represents only the initial stage of this philosophical genre. The chief reason for this was that its conclusion—the abstention from all social activity (seen as senseless) and certainly from any effort to change society—sufficed only to answer the needs of the pre-imperialist bourgeoisie; it sufficed only during a period when, because of the universal economic boom, this rejection of political activity matched the position of the class struggles and the needs of the ruling class. The social task which reactionary philosophy was set in the imperialist period went further, although this trend was far from dying out altogether: now the task was to mobilize active support for imperialism. In this direction Nietzsche surpassed Schopenhauer, although, as an indirect apologist at a riper stage, he remained his pupil and continuation in the methodological sense.

So pessimism means primarily a philosophical rationale of the absurdity of all political activity. That was the social function of this stage in indirect apologetics. In order to reach this conclusion, the chief necessity is to devalue society and history philosophically [as Schopenhauer did]...

Going along with his pessimism was his egotistic philosophy of man, and of everything in nature. In his ethics he does condemn this egotism—but he still says it's inevitable and cosmically universal (or nearly so). (His moral condemnation of it, incidentally, served the cause of popularizing his philosophy, since it amounted to a secularizing of the dominant Christian morality—dominant only in the sense that people paid lip-service to it, not that it genuinely governed people's conduct.) Moreover, he also defends a 'higher' sort of egotism than the universal vulgar one when he praises aesthetic enjoyment, saintly asceticism, and so on. He ends up celebrating the individual's self-sufficiency, which is a decidedly bourgeois conception.

This contrast which Schopenhauer draws between two types of egotism is one of the subtlest features of his indirect apologetics. Firstly, he bestows on this attitude the sanction of aristocratic perspicacity as opposed to the plebeian's blind attachment to the world of phenomena. Secondly, this elevation above ordinary egotism entails no obligations on account of its 'sublime,' mystico-cosmic generality: it discredits social obligations and replaces them with empty emotional promptings, sentimentalities which may on occasion be reconciled with the greatest crimes against society. In the excellent Soviet film *Tchapayev*, the bestially cruel counter-revolutionary General keeps a canary, feels cosmically united with it—in the true spirit of Schopenhauer—and plays Beethoven sonatas in his leisure time, thus fulfilling all the 'sublime' commandments of Schopenhauerian morality.

Schopenhauer does himself another favor as regards the mainstream world's attitude towards him when he exempts himself, and thereby others, from following his own morality. "In general," he

says, “it is a strange thing to ask of a moralist that he should commend no virtue unless he possesses it himself.” Lukács elaborates: “This guarantees the decadent bourgeois intelligentsia the maximum of spiritual and moral ease: it has at its disposal a morality liberating it from all social duties and elevating it to a sublime height above the blind, uncomprehending riffraff, but a morality whose very founder exempts the intelligentsia from obeying it (where it becomes difficult or even just inconvenient).”

Lukács is perceptive also in his discussion of Schopenhauer’s atheism. It was quite unlike the atheism of, say, the French materialists—for Schopenhauer was the exact opposite of a materialist. Rather, it was meant to serve as a substitute for religion, “to create a new—atheistic—religion for those who had lost their old religious faith as a result of social evolution and progress in the knowledge of nature.” Schopenhauer is quite Christian in many respects, as in his defense of the dogma of original sin. (He’s also semi-Buddhist, of course.) “Again serving as a model for decadent developments later, there came into being that religious atheism which assumed, for a large section of the bourgeois intelligentsia, the function of the religion which had become intellectually untenable among this class.” Lukács goes on:

[But here again] Schopenhauer did not round something off but only paved the way. His social starting-point in the restoration period [after Napoleon] dictated the fact that his atheism—like the religion of this era—inculcated a social passivity, a mere turning aside from social action, whereas his later successors, above all Nietzsche and the subsequent fascists, expanded these points of departure morally in the direction of an active, militant underpinning of imperialist reaction, which again ran parallel to the course taken by the Churches in the imperialist world wars and civil wars. (The complex stratification of capitalist society and the harsh changes in the course of the imperialist period’s class struggles necessarily meant that religious atheism during this age could—without needing to hark back directly to Schopenhauer—have quietist variations as well, e.g., Heidegger’s existentialism.)

It hardly needs pointing out that idealism in all its forms is always a useful tool of reaction. So in a reactionary age it will be popular. (Again, this is why postmodernism has been dominant since the 1970s.) Schopenhauer’s idealism went as far as one can go in denying the reality of the world of “phenomena,” which certainly militates against social engagement. To care passionately about this illusory world and to struggle mightily to improve it is idiotic from Schopenhauer’s perspective. (Here is another point of contact between him and religion.) There is no such thing as progress or development; time and causality don’t apply to the thing-in-itself. “For Schopenhauer, history does not exist... Hence for him there exists no difference in history between important and trivial, major and minor; only the individual is real, whereas the human race is an empty abstraction.” I’ll quote the end of Lukács’ discussion:

Thus only the individual, isolated in a world without meaning, is left over as the fateful product of the individuation principle (space, time, causality). An individual, certainly, that is identical with the world-essence by virtue of the aforestated identity between microcosm and macrocosm in the world of things-in-themselves. This essence, however, located as it is beyond the validity of space, time and causality, is consequently—nothingness. Hence Schopenhauer’s *magnum opus* logically ends with the words: ‘Rather we freely acknowledge that what is left after the complete annulment of the will is, for all those who

are still full of will, assuredly nothingness. But conversely also, for those in whom will has turned round and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and Milky Ways is—nothingness.’

And at this point, with our survey of the most important problems in Schopenhauer’s philosophy completed, we ask once again: what is the social task it fulfils? Or, to put this question from another angle: what is behind its widespread and lasting influence? Here pessimism is not by itself an adequate answer, for first pessimism requires a further concretization in addition to that we provided earlier. Schopenhauer’s philosophy rejects life in every form and confronts it with nothingness as a philosophical perspective. But is it possible to live such a life?... If we consider Schopenhauer’s philosophy as a whole, the answer is undoubtedly yes. For the futility of life means above all the individual’s release from all social obligations and all responsibility towards men’s forward development, which does not even exist in Schopenhauer’s eyes. And nothingness as the pessimist outlook, as life’s horizon is quite unable, according to Schopenhauer’s ethics as already expounded, to prevent or even merely to discourage the individual from leading an enjoyable contemplative life. On the contrary: the abyss of nothingness, the gloomy background of the futility of existence only lends this enjoyment an extra piquancy. Further heightening it is the fact that the strongly accented aristocratism of Schopenhauer’s philosophy lifts its adherents (in imagination) way above the wretched mob that is shortsighted enough to fight and to suffer for a betterment of social conditions. So Schopenhauer’s system, well laid out and architecturally ingenious in form, rises up like a modern luxury hotel on the brink of the abyss, nothingness and futility. And the daily sight of the abyss, between the leisurely enjoyment of meals or works of art, can only enhance one’s pleasure in this elegant comfort.

This, then, fulfils the task of Schopenhauer’s irrationalism: the task of preventing an otherwise dissatisfied sector of the intelligentsia from concretely turning its discontent with the ‘established order,’ i.e., the existing social order, against the capitalist system in force at any given time. This irrationalism thereby reaches its central objective—no matter how far Schopenhauer himself was aware of it: that of providing an indirect apologetic of the capitalist social order.

Masterful analysis.

The analysis of Kierkegaard, on the other hand, as of Schelling earlier, is...well, rather mystifying. Whenever Lukács gets going on “dialectics” and whatnot, an impenetrable fog descends over my brain. I still don’t really know what he means by dialectics, since he never defines the term. (That’s one of the problems with “dialectics”: I’ve literally never found a clear, concrete, compelling definition of it. Every definition I’ve seen is either semi-meaningless or consists of truisms.) There’s more than a little brilliance in these dissections of Kierkegaard, but it isn’t worth it to try to digest it all.

“In Kierkegaard we encounter the mode of feeling, spontaneously expressed, of an intellectual bourgeois stratum which had become deracinated and parasitical. How little this was to do with a personal problem, or with a narrowly Danish one, is evident not only from Kierkegaard’s later international influence but also from the fact that, wholly independently of him, similar versions of religious atheism were starting to spring up and to take effect all around him.”

The chapter on Nietzsche is very good. In a sense, Lukács' task is too easy: there's an abundance of material in Nietzsche's writings that is eminently serviceable to imperialists and fascists, including plenty of passages on noble races and a race of masters, slave morality, the glory of war, the will to power, the *Übermensch*, the evils of socialism and democracy and "equal rights," slavery's desirability, and on and on. Politically, Nietzsche was obviously a reactionary. (His struggle between masters and the rabble was just a decadent-reactionary culturalist version of the class struggle.) Lukács is largely right that the appreciation both he and Schopenhauer showed for the *Enlightenment*, or at least for certain Enlightenment thinkers, was superficial and based on distortions or confusions, since the Enlightenment was nothing if not enamored of the *moral progress* (and the *struggle* for progress) for which the two Germans had contempt. Of course there are innumerable contradictions in Nietzsche, and innumerable statements of his that are totally incompatible with the fascist or Nazi way of thinking; but one consistent thread running through his work is his utter hatred of socialism. Anyway, he bears a lot of the blame for the nefarious uses to which his writings were later put. He *did* contribute to the "destruction of reason" by being so elitist, anti-democratic, anti-socialist, individualistic and frequently racist, enamored of the "will to power" (a term he should have known would be interpreted in the most vulgar way possible) and an amoral master morality, enamored of war and strength and aristocratic egotism and "barbarians" or "beasts." If there was ever a non-"innocent" philosopher, it's Nietzsche.

...It was just at the time of Nietzsche's activity that the class decline, the decadent tendencies reached such a pitch that their subjective evaluation within the bourgeois class also underwent a significant change. For a long while, only the progressive opposition critics had been exposing and condemning the symptoms of decadence, whereas the vast majority of the bourgeois intelligentsia clung to the illusion of living in the 'best of all worlds,' defending what they supposed to be the 'healthy condition' and the progressive nature of their ideology. Now, however, an insight into their own decadence was becoming more and more the hub of these intellectuals' self-knowledge. This change manifested itself above all in a complacent, narcissistic, playful relativism, pessimism, nihilism, etc... [Think, again, of postmodernism.]

...Nietzsche's philosophy performed the 'social task' of 'rescuing' and 'redeeming' this type of bourgeois mind. It offered a road which avoided the need for any break, or indeed any serious conflict, with the bourgeoisie. It was a road whereby the pleasant moral feeling of being a rebel could be sustained and even intensified, whilst a 'more thorough,' 'cosmic biological' revolution was enticingly projected in contrast to the 'superficial,' 'external' social revolution. A 'revolution,' that is, which would fully preserve the bourgeoisie's privileges, and would passionately defend the privileged existence of the parasitical and imperialist intelligentsia first and foremost. A 'revolution' directed against the masses and lending an expression compounded of pathos and aggressiveness to the veiled egotistic fears of the economically and culturally privileged...

One of the problems with Nietzsche is that he lived and thought mainly in the realm of myth. He was addicted to mythicizing, and his critiques, analyses, and ideals were not *sober* but *poetic*. Figurative, mythical, lyrical. He lived and thought at a fever pitch, and so couldn't see that if he ever had the misfortune of encountering, say, one of his beloved blond beasts—"the kind of exuberant monsters," he wrote, "that might quit a horrible scene of murder, arson, rape and torture with the high humour and equanimity appropriate to a student prank"—he would be horrified and



revolted. There was no down-to-earth *realism* in his thinking; instead, there was only *aesthetics*. There were frequent flashes of intuitive genius, but in the end even his most fascinating psychologizing (for instance about Socrates or Christians or Wagner) was merely suggestive, and more often than not aesthetical. As Lukács says, all this myth-making was extremely useful to imperialists and fascists, who as ideologists were even more addicted than Nietzsche to glorious-sounding myths. Pretty disguises of reality have always been useful to reactionaries.

More insights: “Nietzsche turned the whole problem of decadence firmly on its head when he defined as its most important sign the view that ‘we are fed up with egotism.’ For patently the predominance of individualist-egotistic propensities over social ones was among the movement’s [or the era’s] most significant features. But it was possible for Nietzsche to ‘salve’ the decadents, i.e., to induce in them absolute self-confidence and give them a clear conscience without fundamentally altering their psychological-moral structure. And he did so precisely by suggesting that they were not over-egotistic but rather lacking in egotism, and that they must—with a good conscience—become more egotistic still.”

There’s also a thoughtful analysis of Nietzsche’s atheism. His war against Christianity, of course, was totally opposed in spirit to Voltaire’s war against the Church. The Enlightenment opposed the Church as an enemy of progress, reason, freedom, science, the individual; Nietzsche opposed Christianity as supposedly having birthed the modern democratic, egalitarian, socialist nonsense. His attitude was practically the opposite of the Enlightenment’s. Voltaire hated the Church’s authoritarianism; Nietzsche hated Christianity’s egalitarianism. After quoting a passage from Nietzsche, Lukács summarizes: “The basic thinking is patent: out of Christianity came the French Revolution, out of this came democracy, and out of this came socialism. When, therefore, Nietzsche takes his stand as an atheist, the truth is that he is out to destroy socialism [and all slave moralities].” As with Schopenhauer, his atheism is completely different in spirit and motivation from that of materialists and socialists.

Next, Lukács discusses vitalism (*Lebensphilosophie*), “the dominant ideology of the whole imperialist period in Germany.” Not so much a sharply distinguished philosophy as a general trend pervading or influencing nearly all schools of thought (including the social sciences and the history of literature and art). Especially after World War I. For instance, “both neo-Hegelianism and the Husserl school in its advanced stage became entirely guided by vitalism.” That term may be unfortunate, since in English ‘vitalism’ has a technical meaning. But evidently there’s an affinity between vitalism in its technical sense and *Lebensphilosophie*—which, Lukács says, was present not only in Germany but also Bergson in France, the pragmatists in the U.S., etc. Nietzsche was very influential as regards this whole emerging tendency.

Some more lengthy quotations:

The struggle against materialism also governed the philosophical development of imperialism. Thus it was unable to detach itself from the epistemology of subjective idealism. It made no difference whether it was chiefly oriented towards Kant, as in Germany, or towards Hume and Berkeley: the unknowability, indeed the nonexistence, the unthinkable nature of an objective reality independent of consciousness was the implicit axiom of every philosophy of this age.

...The key to all these difficulties, it was thought, could be located in the concept of ‘life,’ especially if this was identified, as always in vitalism, with ‘experience.’ Experience, with intuition as its organon and the irrational as its ‘natural’ object, could conjure up all the necessary elements of *Weltanschauung* without renouncing, *de facto* and publicly, the

agnosticism of subjective idealist philosophy and without revoking that denial of a reality independent of consciousness which had become crucial to anti-materialism. Outwardly, to be sure, this struggle now acquired other forms. On the one hand, the appeal to the richness of life and experience, as opposed to the barren poverty of the understanding, permitted philosophy to counter the materialist inferences from social and scientific developments in the name of a natural science, biology... On the other hand, the appeal to experience gave rise to a pseudo-objectivism, an apparent self-elevation above the antithesis of idealism and materialism.

The tendency to be raised above the allegedly false dilemma of idealism and materialism was a universal endeavour of philosophy in the imperialist age. To the bourgeois conscience, both 'isms' seemed compromised in various ways: idealism because of the sterile academicism of its advocates (with, as its background, the collapse of the great idealist systems); and materialism chiefly because of its association with the worker movement... Thus on the eve of the imperialist period, a philosophical 'third road' came into being with Mach, Avenarius and Nietzsche almost simultaneously. In fact, however, this amounted only to a revival of idealism. For whenever the mutual inseparability of being and consciousness is posited, there necessarily arises an epistemological dependence of the first on the second—which is idealism. As long, therefore, as the philosophical 'third road' remained purely epistemological, it differed not at all or barely from the old subjective idealism (Mach-Avenarius in relation to Berkeley)...

Right. I've made that point many times with regard to logical positivism, which was far more idealist than materialist.

To continue:

In the intelligentsia, one can sense a constant growth of anti-capitalist attitudes. During the final Bismarck crisis, the time of the repeal of the anti-socialist laws, when the Naturalist ferment was taking place in German literature, the vast majority of the young and gifted intellectuals, for instance, was to be found in the social democrat camp. Therefore these tendencies had to be assimilated in the philosophical world outlook so as to combat the intelligentsia's socialist tendencies more effectively than was possible for ordinary reactionary ideology. With its contrast between the living and the dead, petrified and mechanical, vitalist philosophy took over the task of 'deepening' all concrete problems to such an extent that they created a major diversion from these imminent social consequences.

...There is the additional point that the central position of experienced life in vitalistic epistemology necessarily nurtured an aristocratic feeling. An experiential philosophy can only be intuitive—and purportedly it is only an elect, the members of an aristocracy, who possess a capacity for intuition. In later times, when the social contrasts emerged more strongly still, it was overtly stated that the categories of understanding and reason belonged to the democratic crowd, whereas the truly eminent appropriated the world only on the basis of intuition. Vitalism had in principle an aristocratic epistemology.

...We intend, in these studies, to trace in its main phases the development beginning at this point and ultimately leading, in its consequences, to 'National-Socialist philosophy.' Of course the line we are tracing does not mean that German fascism drew its ideas from this source exclusively; quite the contrary. The so-called philosophy of fascism based itself

primarily on racial theory, above all in the form developed by Houston Chamberlain, although in so doing, to be sure, it made some use of vitalism's findings. But for a 'philosophy' [the fascist] with so little foundation or coherence, so profoundly unscientific and coarsely dilettantish to become prevalent, what were needed were a specific philosophical mood, a disintegration of confidence in understanding and reason, the destruction of human faith in progress, and credulity towards irrationalism, myth and mysticism. And vitalism created just this philosophical mood.

The "founder and most important forerunner" of *Lebensphilosophie* was Dilthey. (Although Nietzsche played at least as important a role.) His philosophy ran parallel to phenomenology, "whose vitalistic advances Dilthey anticipated and influenced more than anybody," and also Bergson and pragmatism. And it promoted the rebirth of neo-Romanticism and neo-Hegelianism. I won't summarize Lukács' whole discussion of Dilthey, but here's a passage that gives the flavor of Dilthey's thinking:

Dilthey's epistemological rationale of vitalism proceeds from the thesis that experiencing the world is the ultimate basis of knowledge. "Life itself, liveliness, behind which I cannot penetrate, contains structural connections from which all experiencing and thinking is explained. *And this is the decisive factor for the whole possibility of knowing.* There is a knowledge of reality only because the full structural coherence which emerges in the forms, principles and categories of thinking is contained in life and experience, and because this coherence can be shown analytically in life and experience."

Anyway, you're probably familiar with Dilthey's "idealism" and "subjectivism," his division between explanation and understanding and his focus on the latter—intuition, hermeneutics, 'description,' etc. Closely related to phenomenology. Brought forth a psychological and historical typology of philosophical outlooks that amounted to a sort of historical relativism. *Gestalts*, mutually incommensurable. "Dilthey as a historian of philosophy could substantiate only a complete relativism—an unceasing battle of rival philosophies in which a specific selection is made, but there is no single choice: '[Philosophy's] major types stand beside one another, autonomous, unprovable and indestructible.'" A decadent relativism that leads, by way of Heidegger, to the even more decadent relativisms of twentieth-century Continental philosophy and postmodernism.

Next: Simmel. More idealistic and relativistic than Dilthey.

Simmel no longer acknowledged any actual object-world, but only various forms of the vitalistic attitude to reality (knowledge, art, religion, eroticism, etc.), each of which produced its own world of objects: 'The coming into effect of certain fundamental spiritual forces and impulses means that they create an object for themselves. The meaning of the object of this function of love, art or religious feeling is only the meaning of the functions themselves. Each of these enlists its object for its own world by thereby creating it as its own...'

The consequence of this position was a relativism still more radical than Dilthey's had been... And it is characteristic of vitalism, as the chief philosophical bias in the imperialist era, that the central content of the relativistic thought process was always a depreciation of

the scientific method, a creating of space for faith and a subjective religious feeling without a definite object, using just this relativistic scepticism as a weapon...

Lukács proceeds to quote a passage from Simmel that amply makes his case:

Despite the stress on the ever-advancing and immeasurable progress of our knowledge, it should not be overlooked that at the other end, so to speak, much that we formerly possessed as 'sure' knowledge is sinking into doubt and recognized error. How much mediaeval man 'knew', and the enlightened thinker of the eighteenth century or the materialistic scientific researcher of the nineteenth, which for us is either completely obsolete or at least completely dubious. How much of that which is now undoubted 'knowledge' will suffer the same fate sooner or later! The effect of man's whole spiritual and practical disposition is that—*cum grano salis* and speaking of the broad basis—he apprehends only that which matches his convictions and simply overlooks the counter-examples however startling: a fact totally inexplicable to later eras. Proofs no less 'factual' and 'convincing' were adduced for astrology and miracle cures, for witchcraft and the direct efficacy of prayer as are now adduced for the validity of universal laws of nature. And I by no means exclude the possibility that later centuries or millennia, perceiving as the core and essence of each individual phenomenon its indissoluble, unified individuality, not ascribable to 'universal laws', will declare such generalities to be as much of a superstition as the aforesaid articles of faith. Once we have abandoned the idea of the 'absolutely true', which is likewise only a historical construction, we might arrive at the paradoxical idea that in the continuous process of perception, the standard of the truths newly adopted differs only in degree from the standard of the errors we have abolished; that, as in a never-halting procession, just as many 'true' perceptions mount the front steps as 'illusions' are cast down the back steps.

Pretty egregious. But pretty useful for the purposes of reaction. “Modern relativistic scepticism was directly undermining objective scientific knowledge and, no matter whether its begetters intended this or not, providing scope for the wildest reactionary obscurantism, for the nihilistic mysticism of imperialistic decadence.”

A long discussion of Simmel's subjectivism and anti-Marxism follows. For example his reducing the problems of contemporary society to a “tragedy of culture in general,” which rested on the antithesis of soul and mind (*Geist*), “the antithesis of the soul and its own products and objectifications.” Such ideas were useful in diverting intellectuals' discontent and alienation from capitalism into less dangerous channels.

Vitalism developed in new ways with the outbreak of World War I. “The old basic antithesis of ‘life’ versus ‘rigidity’ and ‘the moribund’ was naturally preserved, but it acquired a new and seasonable content. The ‘German character’ (*das deutsche Wesen*) which was to ‘restore the world's health’ now constituted the ‘life’ conception, and the national character of other peoples (chiefly the Western democracies and especially England) was what was moribund and rigid. And in particular, there arose the new equations and antitheses of war as equalling life, and of peace as the rigid and moribund.” Lots of pseudo-philosophical war pamphlets were put out. In one by Max Scheler, for instance, war was affirmed in a Nietzschean vitalistic way: “The true root of all war lies in the fact that a tendency towards ascent, growth and development is inherent in all

life itself... Everything that is moribund and mechanical seeks only to 'maintain' itself...whereas life is growing or decaying." You can see glimmers of fascism here.

After the war—and after the Russian Revolution, which added a portentous new element into the cultural porridge that would produce fascism—came Spengler's *Decline of the West*, which was "a veritable, direct prelude to fascist philosophy." To quote Lukács: "Basically, vitalism's new phase [as exemplified by Spengler] was distinguished by the fact that the degrading of the scientific method, which was hitherto partly half-conscious, partly tactfully concealed and at first sought only to obtain room for vitalism's intuitive-irrationalist world-view alongside the established, materially unquestioned individual sciences, now went over to an open attack upon the scientific spirit in general, upon the competence of reason adequately to treat of important human questions." Intellectual standards sank. Spengler went farther along the path that Dilthey had pioneered, the path that elevated intuition, feeling, "perception through men of genius," a rejection of causal explanations in favor of description, analogizing, and the like. Lukács: "This shallow and arbitrary epistemology in which everything boiled down to experience, to intuition, was Spengler's way of asserting the undisputed mastery of historical relativism. Everything is historical: with Spengler that meant that everything was historically relative, purely relative." Including our knowledge of nature. And even mathematics.

...Number, for instance, was for [Spengler] a purely historical category: '*A number in itself does not and cannot exist.* There are several worlds of numbers because there are several civilizations. We find an Indian, Arabic, ancient and occidental type of number each at bottom unique, each the expression of a different course of events... Accordingly there is more than one kind of mathematics.' This ridiculously consistent denial of all objectivity Spengler took to the point where he was capable of saying of causality that it was 'an occidental and more precisely a Baroque phenomenon.'

For Spengler, history took precedence over nature as a general rule: 'Thus history is the original world-form and nature a late one which only men of a mature culture may fulfil, not the reverse as a prejudice in urban scientific understanding tends to assume.' And so the whole science of physics along with its object was a myth of the late occidental 'Faustian' culture. The atom, speed of light and gravitation were just as much the mythical categories of 'Faustian man' as poltergeists and household demons were categories of the period that believed in magic. (If we recall Simmel's statements on the historical relativity of knowledge we can see how Spengler was merely drawing all the conclusions of pre-war imperialist vitalism and popularizing them.) For those reasons, culture was for Spengler 'the primary phenomenon of all past and future world-histories.'

Hm, reminds me of postmodernism. What a surprise. Decadent minds think alike.

*Culture* was a "primary phenomenon." Each culture had its own *Gestalt*, which was the basis for all of that culture's manifestations. "The automatic result was that these self-enclosed *Gestalts* were necessarily 'monads without windows': only within its unique essence could each be intuitively grasped and described." You see the fascistic origins of later postmodernist dogmas. Even the promiscuous use of the word 'culture' by contemporary academics has an essentially reactionary significance and origin. (You also see, incidentally, that Heidegger wasn't particularly original.)

One of the benefits of extreme historical relativism is that it denies there is any progress in history, thus denying a proposition that had become an article of faith for socialists and Marxists.

It also presents science and materialism as mere provincial prejudices, thereby undermining an outlook that can serve as an immovable foundation for revolutionary politics.

Spengler regarded the various cultural *Gestalts*, such as the German and the Western democratic one, as basically ‘solipsistic,’ alien, hostile, impervious to communication with each other. (A sublimation of the solipsism of the imperialist age’s parasitical classes.) This paralleled and reinforced the racial ideology that had already emerged with Gobineau and Chamberlain, that the different races were alien and hostile to one another. Thus “we notice in Spengler the fulfilment of Nietzsche’s barbarizing tendencies, [and also] we see the deep-seated concurrent development of the various streams of reactionary imperialist philosophy, and their tendency to merge in theoretical preparation for the barbaric ideas and actions of Hitler and Rosenberg.” The reactionary nature of vitalism is evident from its culmination in Spengler.

Similarly, it is patent that the construction of this irrationalist, solipsistic myth of history had as its ultimate, crucial purpose another attempt to resist the socialist perspective on social evolution. Nietzsche, the first to take up this philosophical challenge, was still obliged to present the whole of world-history, which was unitary in his eyes, as a contest for leadership between masters and rabble. Therefore he had to lay stress on awakening the masters’ ‘will-to-power’ with all the available means in order that their struggle might end in the future defeat of socialism. Spengler entertained hopes that were far weaker than Nietzsche’s. His conception was a consoling melody rather than a battle-hymn, an opiate rather than a stimulus. The cyclical life of the cultural spheres, he thought, had repeatedly given rise to dangers similar to the contemporary one, namely the proletarian threat to capitalism. This danger, however, had been dismissed from every cycle, and each culture had died a ‘natural’ death of superannuation, of cultural paralysis. Why should a different fate befall the Faustian civilization of capitalism? There was, after all, intuitive-analogical morphology, the only sure knowledge of history, and this indicated that destiny was about to introduce the rule of the ‘Caesars’ (i.e., the monopoly capitalists). The fact that this rule signified the beginning of the end of the culture concerned did not interest any capitalist or parasitical intellectual. We shall manage to survive—*après nous le deluge*: that was Spengler’s song of consolation, and very effective it was.

But in another work, *Prussianism and Socialism*, Spengler took a different approach to the problem of socialism, an approach that would later be adopted by Hitler. Lukács describes it as follows:

Every civilization, according to Spengler, has its socialism (Zeno, Buddhism, etc.; present-day socialism is the Faustian form of these manifestations). But this generalization did not satisfy Spengler’s analogy hunt. He had, in addition, to discover the ‘real’ socialism, namely Prussianism; the types of the military officer, civil servant and worker. The adversary of this ‘socialism’ was not capitalism but England. (Here Spengler was enlarging on the ideas in Scheler’s war pamphlets and Sombart’s *Dealers [English] and Heroes [Germans]*.) Prussians and Englishmen represent two major types in the development of civilization. There are ‘two moral imperatives of a contrasting kind, slowly evolved from the Viking spirit and the code of the Knights of the Teutonic Order. The one group carried the Germanic idea within them, the others felt it over them: *personal independence and supra-personal commonalty*. Today they are called individualism and socialism.’ Karl

Marx and working-class socialism have only complicated this question and are being thrust aside by the fateful logic of world-history. The victor will be 'Prussian socialism,' the 'socialism' founded by Friedrich Wilhelm I. The true Internationale will also be built on this basis: 'A genuine Internationale is possible only through the triumph of the idea of a single race above all others... *The genuine Internationale is imperialism.*' The worker, in this 'socialism,' becomes an economic officer, and the entrepreneur a responsible administrative official. The German working class will be bound to realize that only this 'socialism' has real possibilities. No ideology is needed, only 'a brave scepticism, a class of socialistic master-natures.'

Thus you get National Socialism.

Lukács next proceeds to a subtle critique of Max Scheler, Husserl, and phenomenology, but I'll pass over that. His section on Heidegger and Jaspers is even better—much better. Brilliantly diagnoses the illness that was existential philosophy, and critiques Heidegger's ideas. With this thinker, phenomenology "turned into the ideology of the agony of individualism in the imperialist period." I have to copy some passages again, since they're too pithy to summarize.

The grim years of the First World War, which were full of abrupt changes of fortune, and the ensuing period brought a marked change of mood [in philosophy and culture]. The subjectivistic tendency remained, but its basic tenor, its atmosphere was completely altered. No longer was the world a great, multi-purpose stage upon which the I, in ever-changing costumes and continually transforming the scenery at will, could play out its own inner tragedies and comedies. It had now become a devastated area. Before the war, it had been possible to criticize that which was mechanical and rigid about capitalist culture from a lofty vitalistic angle. This was an innocuous and safe intellectual exercise, for the being of society appeared to stand undisturbed and to guarantee the safe existence of parasitical subjectivism. Since the downfall of the Wilhelmine regime the social world had started to constitute something alien to this subjectivism; the collapse of that world which subjectivism was continually criticizing, but which formed the indispensable basis of its existence, was lurking at every door. There was no longer any firm means of support. And in its abandoned condition, the solitary Ego stood in fear and anxiety.

As a rule, relatively similar social situations produce relatively similar tendencies in thought and feeling. Before the outbreak of the 1848 revolution, which was an international, European event, Romantic individualism went to pieces for good. The most important thinker during its crisis and fall, the Dane Soren Kierkegaard, formulated in the most original way the philosophy of the then current Romantic-individualistic agony. No wonder that now, when this depressed mood was already starting to make itself felt—years ahead of the actual crisis [of the 1930s]—as a foreboding of future gloomy events, a renaissance of Kierkegaard's philosophy was proclaimed by the new phase's leading minds, Husserl's pupil Heidegger and the former psychiatrist Karl Jaspers. Of course they did so with up-to-date modifications. Orthodox Protestant religiosity and Kierkegaard's strictly Lutheran faith in the Bible were of no use to present needs. But Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian philosophy, as a critique of all striving for objectivity and universal validity by reasoned thought, and of all concepts of historical progress, acquired a very strong contemporary influence. So did Kierkegaard's argumentation of an 'existential philosophy' from the deepest despair of an extreme, self-mortifying subjectivism which sought to

justify itself in the very pathos of this despair, in its professed exposure of all ideals of socio-historical life as mere vapid and vain ideas, in contrast to the subject, which alone existed. The altered historical situation did, of course, dictate far-reaching changes. Again, these lay chiefly in the fact that Kierkegaard's philosophy was aimed against the bourgeois idea of progress, against Hegel's idealist dialectics, whereas the renovators of existential philosophy were already principally at odds with Marxism, although this seldom found overt and direct expression in their writings; at times they attempted to exploit the reactionary aspects of Hegelian philosophy on behalf of this new campaign. That in Kierkegaard existential philosophy was already no more than the ideology of the saddest philistinism, of fear and trembling, of anxiety, did not stop it conquering wide intellectual circles in Germany on the eve of Hitler's seizure of power and the nihilistic period of so-called heroic realism. On the contrary: this pretentiously tragic philistinism was precisely the socio-psychological reason for the influence of Heidegger and Jaspers.

One indication of the change in mindset was that the catchword of earlier vitalism had been "life," whereas now the word was "existence." "The emphatic stress on 'life' signified the conquest of the world through subjectivity; hence the fascist activists of vitalism, who were about to succeed Heidegger and Jaspers, revived this catchword, although they gave it a new content once more. 'Existence' as a philosophical leitmotif implied the rejection of a great deal that vitalism had elsewhere approved as 'alive,' and this was now presented as inessential, non-existential." To talk about abstract *existence* instead of concrete *life* is to be more alienated from society and oneself, to be separate from or outside of life, to be acutely anxious.

As for Heidegger's philosophy itself, I'll say only that in essence it isn't much different from subjective idealism. It's dressed up in the garb of objectivity, "ontology," etc., but it's purely idealistic. How else can you describe a philosophy that claims "*Ontology is only possible as phenomenology*"? In reality, of course, ontology is only possible as natural science, since it is science that tells us (or tries to tell us) what the ultimate constituents of the world are.

More quotations:

Bourgeois man's sense of becoming inessential, indeed a nonentity, was a universal experience among the intelligentsia of this period. Hence Heidegger's complicated trains of thought, his laborious phenomenological introspections struck upon the material of experiences widespread among this class and found an answering chord. Heidegger was here preaching a retreat from all social dealings just as much as Schopenhauer, in his time, had proclaimed a withdrawal from the bourgeois idea of progress, from the democratic revolution... [But] the human emotional emphasis in the withdrawing process was totally different, indeed opposed, in Schopenhauer and Heidegger. With the latter, the feeling of despair no longer left the individual free scope for a 'beatific' aesthetic and religious contemplation as in Schopenhauer. His sense of peril already encompassed the whole realm of individual existence. And although the solipsism of the phenomenological method may have distorted the depiction of it, it was still a social fact: the inner state of the bourgeois individual (especially the intellectual) within a crumbling monopoly capitalism, facing the prospect of his downfall. Thus Heidegger's despair had two facets: on the one hand, the remorseless baring of the individual's inner nothingness in the imperialistic crisis; on the other—and because the social grounds for this nothingness were being fetishistically transformed into something timeless and anti-social—the feeling to which it gave rise



could very easily turn into a desperate revolutionary activity. It is certainly no accident that Hitler's propaganda continually appealed to despair...

There follows a long analysis of various facets of Heidegger's philosophy, including his philosophy of time and history, the upshot of which is basically that social action and so forth are "inauthentic." More authentic are the negative features of existence, such as anxiety, despair, etc. (You also see this negativity and individualism in Sartre, of course, with the emphasis on anguish, absolute freedom, bad faith, and the like.)

And then there's Jaspers. A neo-Kierkegaardian. "Every doctrine formulated of the whole," he writes, "becomes a shell devoid of the original experiencing of the ultimate situations, and it thwarts those energies which are actively seeking the meaning of future existence in self-willed experience. For this it substitutes the calm of a fully perceived and perfected, soul-appeasing world of eternally present meaning." For Kierkegaard the opponent was Hegel, for Jaspers it's Marx. "With the assertion of the one truth as universally valid for all men... *falsehood* immediately sets in." The main threat was in democratic rule by the masses. Lukács: "Only with the 'inwardly' turned, purely self-reliant individuum (in the intellectual philistine rejecting all public life) could, Jaspers believed, truth, integrity and humanity be found; and—in true German petty-bourgeois style—he represented all mass influence as falseness and barbarity." What a surprise: an intellectual who doesn't trust democracy.

As an aside, here's a paragraph from Jaspers that reminds us of how totally derivative Sartre was (but then so was Jaspers):

Existential philosophy would be *lost* at once if it *believed it knew again what man is*. It would again provide the basic outlines for an investigation of human and animal life in its types, and would revert to being anthropology, psychology, sociology. It can have meaning only if it remains without a base in its concreteness. It awakens that which it does not know; it illuminates and activates, but it does not pin down... Because it remains without a concrete object, illumination of existence does not yield any results. The clarity of awareness contains the demand without fulfilling it. As observers we must be content with that. For I am not that which I perceive, and I do not perceive what I am. Instead of observing my existence I can only set in motion the process of clarified awareness.

Lukács' final judgment of Heidegger and Jaspers is suitably harsh (although it's possible he attributes too much importance to them):

Heidegger and Jaspers carried the most extreme individualistic, petty-bourgeois-cum-aristocratic relativism and irrationalism to their farthest logical limits. They ended up with an ice age, a North Pole, a world become empty, a senseless chaos, a nought as man's environment, and a despair about oneself and one's inescapable loneliness as the inner content of their philosophy. They thus provided an accurate picture of what was widely going on within the German intelligentsia at the end of the twenties and the start of the thirties. But they did not stop at description. Their account was at the same time interpretation: an exposition of the meaninglessness of any action in this world. Their partisan attitude is manifest in the fact that they related the negative features of what they called the 'world' exclusively to democratic society. And that, on the eve of the crisis and during it, was tantamount to a decisive *parti pris*. For it deepened the general mood of

despondency among broad sections of the German bourgeoisie, above all, its intellectuals, side-tracked potential rebellious tendencies and thus afforded significant assistance, in a negative way, to aggressive reaction. If fascism could inculcate a more than benevolent neutrality in broad sections of Germany's intelligentsia, this was due in no small measure to the philosophy of Heidegger and Jaspers.

Such is the danger of all relativistic and nihilistic philosophies.

The last section in the chapter on "Vitalism in Imperialist Germany" is the one on pre-fascist and fascist vitalism, which surveys the writers Klages, Jünger, Baeumler, Boehm, Krieck, and Rosenberg (although of course there were many others—also internationally). Again, a brilliant analysis. The creation of historical myths and mythical types; the explicit repudiation of intellect and reason as dead or moribund; the elevation of intuition, which finally became the infallibility of the *Führer*; the contempt for lifeless bourgeois culture, etc. (See my old paper on fascism, and the works of Zeev Sternhell.) Near the end, Lukács reminds us of the indirect guilt of Dilthey and Simmel (however much they would have despised the fascist so-called philosophers): "...the Baeumler-Krieck-Rosenberg philosophy would not have been possible without Spengler, and Spengler's would not have been possible without Dilthey and Simmel." And here's the chapter's last paragraph:

This barbaric cul-de-sac [of "National-Socialist philosophy"] thereupon appears a necessary climax to the self-dissolution of German imperialistic ideology in vitalism (*Lebensphilosophie*), whose earliest philosophical forerunners we traced to the irrational reaction of German feudal absolutism to the French Revolution. And this climax was by no means fortuitous, but the merited fate of the immanent tendencies of vitalism itself. Hegel, who came to vitalism when it was not yet far advanced, when it was a doctrine of 'direct knowing,' prophetically wrote of it: 'From the thesis that *direct knowing* must be the criterion of truth it follows...that all superstition and idolatry are declared to be true, and that the most wrongful and indecent content of the will is justified... Natural desires and inclinations automatically deposit their interests in the consciousness, and the immoral purposes are directly located in the same.'

The next chapter, on neo-Hegelianism, is less interesting, so let's skip it. (It does, however, indicate yet again the astounding breadth of Lukács' learning.) Of far more interest is the chapter on German sociology, on how it contributed to a climate of "irrationalism." Consider Toennies, in the late nineteenth century. He did much to popularize the distinction between culture and civilization that later was very important to Spengler and others. "This antithesis arose spontaneously out of the bourgeois intelligentsia's feeling of discontent with capitalist, and especially imperialist, cultural development." Since the intelligentsia, tied in many ways to capitalism, couldn't become genuinely revolutionary, it expressed its discontent by elevating "culture" at the expense of "civilization." The latter, denoting techno-economic development, was constantly ascending, but at the expense of the former. Culture became increasingly impoverished, commercialized, vulgar, decadent. A "tragic, unbearable tension" would finally break out between the two. As Lukács comments, this conception was but the expression of an unrigorous Romantic anti-capitalism; but it had the advantage of militating against socialism. "For since socialism was developing further the material forces of production (mechanization, etc.), it too was unable to solve the conflict between culture and civilization. It was rather perpetuating the conflict—

consequently, the argument ran, the intelligentsia afflicted by this dichotomy would be wasting its time by contesting capitalism for the sake of socialism.” The odd and rather senseless distinction between culture and civilization was essentially backward-looking.

The more strongly that *Lebensphilosophie* tendencies, especially Nietzsche’s, took hold of sociology and social studies in general, the stronger the emphasis became on the contrast between culture and civilization, the more energetic the turning to the past, and the more unhistorical, antihistorical the propositions. And the internal dialectic of ideological developments after the war inevitably meant that the dismissive attitude was extended more and more to culture as well. Culture and civilization alike were rejected in the name of the ‘soul’ (Klages), of ‘authentic existence’ (Heidegger), and so on.

A more and more spiritualized-individualistic philosophy emerged, which, in rejecting the *social* sphere, collective action, economic and political progress, and so forth, necessarily aided the development of fascism and its ideologies.

With Toennies you also get a contrast between community and society, the latter equated, in effect, with capitalism. The “living” vs. the “mechanized.” What resulted, again, was an effective diversion of intellectual discontent from anti-capitalism to...anti-modern-civilization in general.

And then there’s Weber, the most sophisticated and ambitious of the German sociologists.

For German sociology, the central problem in pre-war imperialism was to find a theory for the origin and nature of capitalism and to ‘overcome’ historical materialism in this sphere through a theoretical interpretation of its own. What constituted the real bone of contention was the original accumulation, the forcible separation of the employed from the means of production. (As adherents to the marginal utility theory, the majority of German sociologists regarded the doctrine of surplus value as settled scientifically.) New hypotheses and theories were set up by the dozen as a sociological substitute for original accumulation... With regard to later developments, however, Max Weber's conception became the most influential. Weber, as we have seen, started out from the interaction between the economic ethics of religions and economic formations, whereby he asserted the effective priority of the religious motive. His problem was to explain why capitalism had come about only in Europe. In contrast to the earlier view of capitalism as any accumulation of wealth, Weber was at pains to grasp the specific character of modern capitalism and to relate its European origin to the difference between ethico-religious development in the East and West. To achieve this his principal step was to de-economize and ‘spiritualize’ the nature of capitalism. This he presented as a rationalizing of socioeconomic life, the rational calculability of all phenomena. Weber now devised a universal history of religion in order to show that all oriental and ancient religions produced economic codes constituting inhibiting factors in the rationalization of everyday life. Only Protestantism (and within Protestantism, chiefly the dissident sects) possessed an ideology agreeable to this rationalization and encouraging it. Time and again Weber declined to see in the economic codes a consequence of the economic structures. Of China, for example, he wrote: ‘But here this lack of an ethically rational religiosity is the primary factor and seems, for its own part, to have influenced the constantly striking limitation in the rationalism of her technology.’ And in consequence of his identification of technology and

economics—a vulgarizing simplification that acknowledged only mechanized capitalism as the authentic variety—Weber then arrived at the ‘decisive’ historical ‘argument’ that the Protestant economic ethos which speeded up and fostered capitalist development was already there ‘before’ the “capitalist development.” In this he saw a refutation of historical materialism.

In some respects Weber wasn’t as conservative as many of his peers. Whereas they criticized Western democracy as dysfunctional and inferior and so on—in order to argue for the superiority of German conditions—Weber favored democracy...as “the form most suited to the imperialist expansion of a major modern power,” to quote Lukács. “He saw the weakness of German imperialism as lying in its lack of internal democratic development.” Lukács then quotes Weber: “‘*Only a politically mature people is a ‘master race’... Only master races are called upon to intervene in the course of global developments... The will to [anti-democratic] powerlessness in home affairs that the writers preach is irreconcilable with the ‘will to power’ abroad which has been so noisily trumpeted.*” Weber was an imperialist like all the others, but a “democratic imperialist,” so to speak.

Lukács also criticizes the formalism of Weberian sociology, which paralleled the formalism of contemporary philosophy. “As a result of its formalism, subjectivism and agnosticism, sociology, like contemporary philosophy, did no more than to construct specified types, set up typologies and arrange historical phenomena in this typology. (Here Dilthey’s later philosophy had acquired a decisive influence on German sociology. Its real blossoming—after Spengler—we can witness in the post-war period.)” He continues:

With Max Weber this problem of types became the central methodological question. The setting up of purely constructed ‘ideal types’ Weber regarded as a question central to the tasks of sociology. According to him a sociological analysis was only possible if it proceeded from these types. But this analysis did not produce a line of development, but only a juxtaposition of ideal types selected and arranged casuistically.

A rather just criticism, I think.

Lukács finishes his discussion of Weber with a nuanced analysis of how even this rigorous thinker inadvertently accepted and contributed to the climate of irrationalism in German intellectual culture. In brief, the point is that by striving for a value-free sociology, he left the field open to irrationalism, mysticism, and faith. He had to become a relativist, since supposedly science wasn’t relevant to values or ends. (In a sense, this Humean argument is right. But Marxism shows that a sort of integration of values and “science” is nevertheless possible.) Values are arbitrary. So then it’s sort of legitimate to have a separate, non-scientific sphere of irrationalism—much as Weber on some level would have contested that (and did contest the vulgar irrationalism of his day).

Later, in the midst of a long and compelling critique of Weber’s younger brother Alfred (another sociologist of some importance), Lukács observes that the celebrated Weberian concept of “charisma” is in fact of little interest:

As is well known, Max Weber in his sociology regarded the chosen state of the democratic leader in particular as ‘charisma’, a term already expressing the conceptually unfathomable and incomprehensible irrational character of leadership. For Max Weber this was not to be

avoided. For if—following the Rickertian methodology of history, which only recognizes individual phenomena—we ask why it was that Pericles or Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell or Marat became leaders and try to find a sociological generalization covering the separate historical answers, there will arise the concept of 'charisma', which roughly pins down in a pseudo-concept our ignorant amazement, i.e., something irrational. When, on the other hand, Hegel spoke of the 'world-historical individual', he was proceeding not from the individual but from the historically allotted task of an age, a nation, and regarded as 'world-historical' that individual who could solve this task. Hegel well knew that the question of whether, among those with the potential awareness and capacity for action needed in this situation, it is the individual X or Y who does in fact become 'world-historical' conceals within it an element of irreducible chance. Max Weber posed the question precisely from the angle of this unavoidable chance element and sought an 'explanation' for it. Hence he was sure to land up with the partly abstract, partly mystical and irrational pseudo-concept of 'charisma'.

Characteristically acute insights. It's like...okay, sure, charisma is important. And one can, if one wants, elevate that concept into something more pithy than its ordinary humdrum meaning to express some sort of unrational mystical connection between the masses and a leader. But...so what? How far-reaching is the explanatory payoff of that concept? Not very. It's just more description and typologizing. More pseudo-explaining, superficial explaining.

Worse, the Weberian notion of charisma helped prepare the ground for the fascist theory of the *Führer*, and helped it gain credence among the intelligentsia. —For all these reasons and more, Weber, like the many other thinkers Lukács is discussing, has a bit of blood on his hands. In fact, any intellectual (or really any person—but the intellectuals and the elite first and foremost) who doesn't take a firm stand with the Left is complicit.

Okay; on to Karl Mannheim and his "sociology of knowledge" (which continues to find expression in postmodernist currents). Its logical conclusion, of course, is relativism, since all knowledge is supposed to be totally situation-bound, no more than an expression of a particular situation and the interests, desires, perceptions, perspectives, etc. embedded in that situation.

Like all agnostics and relativists of the imperial period, Mannheim protested against the accusation of relativism. He solved the question with a new term and called himself a relationist. The difference between relativism and relationism is about the same as that between the yellow and the green devil in Lenin's letter to Gorky. For Mannheim 'overcame' relativism by pronouncing obsolete and discarding the old epistemology, which at least put forward the demand for objective truth and termed the denial of it relativism. Modern epistemology, on the other hand, was to 'proceed from the thesis that there are areas of thought where uncommitted, unrelated cognition is quite unimaginable'. Or, more radically as regards the realm of social knowledge: 'But primarily, each of us gets to see that aspect of the social whole to which he is oriented in terms of the will.' Here Mannheim's source is obvious: it was historical materialism's theory of ideologies. But, like all the popularizers and popular opponents of this doctrine, he failed to observe that in it, the relative and absolute mesh in a dialectical reciprocal relationship, and that this gives rise to the approximative character of human knowledge, for which objective truth (the correct reflection of objective reality) is always an inherent element and criterion. Thus the theory involved a 'false consciousness' as a complementary pole to correct consciousness,

whereas Mannheim conceived his relationism as the typification and systematizing of every possible kind of false consciousness.

‘Historical materialism is itself an ideology just like all the others, and therefore a kind of false consciousness! Ha ha, I win!’ But as I was writing as long ago as my senior thesis in college, you simply *have* to acknowledge the possibility of objective truth/knowledge and that not *everything* is only an expression of a particular situation or perspective. For even in the moment of making such a relativistic claim, you’re implicitly stating that *it*, at least, is an objective truth. It’s the old “performative contradiction” of relativism: the very act of stating a thoroughgoing relativism contradicts the content of your statement.

Anyway, Lukács has some fun exposing the hollowness of Mannheimian sociology. For example: how does Mannheim get himself out of the performative contradiction? How does he get himself out of the total relativism he disavows? Well...

To the *‘floating’ intelligentsia* [Lukács writes] was imputed the chance and the role of ascertaining the truth that met the present situation from the totality of standpoints and attitudes linked to these standpoints. This intelligentsia, according to Mannheim, stood outside social class: ‘It forms a centre, *but not a centre in terms of class.*’ Now why the thinking of the ‘floating intelligentsia’ was no longer ‘situation-bound,’ and why relationism did not now apply its own tenet to itself, as it was asking historical materialism to do, is known only to the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim asserted of this social group that it possessed a social sensibility enabling it to ‘share the feelings of the dynamically conflicting forces,’ but that was a hollow claim without proof. That this group had the delusion that it was standing above social class and the class struggles is a well-known fact. Historical materialism not only repeatedly described it, but also deduced it from the social Being of this group. Here it was Mannheim’s duty to point out that the bond with social Being, with the ‘situation’ which, in his new epistemology, defined the thinking of every man living in society, was absent from this group or present in a modified way. But he did not even attempt to show this, and simply had recourse to the ‘floating intelligentsia’s’ illusions about itself...

‘We floating intellectuals, angelically hovering above society, are the exception to everything I’ve been arguing!’ Ugh. Why must bourgeois thinkers invariably be such mediocrities? Well, I guess the question answers itself.

Enough about Mannheim and all these middling ideologists. Lukács sums up: “The sociological movement emanating from Max Weber was profoundly sterile.” Intellectual and political sterility is what you get when you’re committed to a middle position in a time of social crisis. These liberals couldn’t countenance fascism but wouldn’t commit themselves to a decisive democratic program to resist it—for they feared socialism even more than fascism—so they ended up vacillating pathetically, criticizing mass democracy while (sort of) defending it, fecklessly counseling moderation, thereby enabling ultra-reaction.

I’m reminded of recent U.S. history: the feckless, vacillating liberalism of Obama & Co. prepared the way for the semi-fascism of Trump & Co. Just as the feckless, vacillating liberalism of Jimmy Carter & Co. ushered in the reactionary age of Reagan & Co. Whether among intellectuals or politicians, centrist liberalism serves but to clear the ground for reaction.

I'll pass over the section on fascist and pre-fascist sociologists like Hans Freyer and Carl Schmitt. Moving on to the chapter on "Social Darwinism, Racial Theory, and Fascism": it was in the eighteenth century that racial theory sprouted, out of (e.g.) the French nobility's struggle to maintain its dominance against an ascendant bourgeoisie. "As early as the start of the eighteenth century, Count de Boulainvilliers wrote a book (1727) in which he tried to prove that in France, the nobility represented the descendants of the old Frankish ruling class, whereas the rest of the population were heirs of the subject Gauls. Therefore two qualitatively different races were confronting one another..." At the time of the French Revolution the polemicizing advanced to a new plane, as bourgeois ideologists like Volney and Sieyès ridiculed the nobility's claim to represent a superior and pure race.

"Thus racial theory—in its first rudimentary form—was already scientifically discredited at the time of the French Revolution. But the class forces behind it did not disappear in the revolution; the struggle against democracy continued and constantly took new forms. Thus racial theory was bound to flare up again in various forms. Its further vicissitudes were determined by the class struggles—partly by the varying amount of influence which feudal or semi-feudal reaction gained in the crisis-beset development of bourgeois democracy, and partly by the ideological needs of a reactionary bourgeoisie turned anti-democratic. For the latter looked to the remnants of the feudal age for political support, and in this connection appropriated elements of its ideology..." Once the chief enemy had become the working class and not the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie was willing and eager to ally with the latter against the former, including on the ideological plane.

For a long time, though, there was no particular need for racial theory in Germany. All the way up to the second half of the nineteenth century, under Bismarck, the Prussian Junkers were secure enough in their power not to have to invoke their racial superiority as a desperate defense of their privileges. It was instead in France that racialism was first reinvigorated, by Gobineau, whose book *The Inequality of the Human Races* gradually attained influence in the era after 1848. Gobineau wrote from a feudal-aristocratic perspective, but given that in France it had become utterly hopeless to return to the age of feudal dominance, it was through the interests and agency of the bourgeoisie that his ideas spread. For instance, American slaveholders loved them, and Gobineau was initially much more popular in the U.S. than France.

Gobineau's principal animus, of course, was against democracy and the "unnatural" idea of the equality of men. Equally predictably, he thought the white race, more specifically the Aryan, was the highest, and he was cast into despair by its modern mongrelization and bastardization. It was no longer a pure race, and so was doomed to decline, ossification, and ox-like stupefaction. Lukács comments:

It is chiefly this fatalistic pessimism that distinguishes Gobineau from his important successors, Chamberlain, Hitler and Rosenberg. With these, racial theory was to a mounting degree the organ of an actively militant reactionary demagogy. And this demagogy, likewise, increasingly cast off the old feudal confines of reaction to become an obscurantist ideology of reactionary monopoly capitalism. Here, of course, we must not forget that Gobineau's successors preserved elements of his racialist pessimism in a specific sense, namely in the view that development always means deterioration (racial mixture is necessarily a corruption of the species). Thus the activism of later racial theory sprang from the same pessimistic, anti-evolutionary basis as with Gobineau. The only difference was that a desperate, ambitious activism supplanted fatalistic despair...

Later fascists considered Gobineau backward in some respects, as in his attempt to reconcile racial theory with Christianity (everyone is equal in the eyes of God), but they did draw a lot from him. “Above all, he was the first to produce a really effective pseudo-scientific pamphlet contesting democracy and equality, on a racist basis. Moreover, his book marked the first large-scale attempt to reconstruct the whole of world-history with the aid of racial theory, and to do so by tracing back to racial questions all historical crises, social conflicts and differences.”

Several decades passed before a new racial theory appropriate to the age of imperialism emerged, with Chamberlain. (But of course racial thinking was rampant everywhere in the second half of the nineteenth century, a fact that Lukács doesn't sufficiently acknowledge.) Social Darwinism played a decisive role in bridging the earlier and later stages of racism. I won't summarize Lukács' long discussion of its leading exponents, but a few points are worth making. Regarding the Social Darwinist Gumpowicz, for instance: “with his primitive biologist view of history, his mysticizing of the facts of class struggle into a racial struggle ‘ordained by nature’ and the anti-democratic attitude permeating this whole conception, he was paving the way for the fascist view of history.”

I mostly won't summarize the long discussion of H. S. Chamberlain, since racism is of less than zero intellectual interest, but parenthetically Lukács makes an insightful critical remark on liberal intellectuals of that decadent age, a remark that applies to liberal intellectuals of our own decadent age: “Relativistically-minded modern liberal thinkers, while becoming very sharply opposed to the ‘dogmatic’ aspect of materialism, were extremely patient towards and indeed full of sympathetic understanding for the most obscurantist intellectual trends of the time [such as vitalism and strains of racialism]. Here again we see that objectively, this relativism of theirs was assisting the birth of fascist ideology.” Today too: materialism is ridiculously dogmatic and reductivist! It's barely worth engaging with, it's so simplistic! Its much more sophisticated to focus on *culture*—race, gender, discourses, subjectivities—than the *economy*!

—Ugh. Oh well, I guess in some respects it's not as bad as it used to be, since contemporary political correctness, as silly as it is in many ways, is better than the racialism and reactionary obscurantism of the past.

I have to give Lukács credit for wading through all the racist dreck and devoting substantial intellectual energy to analysis of it. I couldn't do that. Here's one paragraph that I find of somewhat more intellectual interest than the others (which isn't Lukács' fault, given his subject-matter):

Chamberlain expressed this philosophical allegiance to German imperialism with the most brutal cynicism: ‘Nobody can prove that Germanic supremacy is a blessing for all the Earth's inhabitants; from the beginning right up to the present, we have seen the Germans slaughtering whole tribes and peoples...so as to procure room for themselves.’ Here Chamberlain was perpetuating the Nietzschean line of indirect imperialist apologetics, the ‘blond beast’ line that so many of Nietzsche's liberal admirers would prefer to regard as nonexistent or inessential to him. But at this juncture it is plain how necessary and how central this particular line was to both of them, to Nietzsche as well as Chamberlain. In other respects they may have greatly differed, and a big difference in stature may have separated Nietzsche the literary stylist and psychologist of culture from Chamberlain. But both stood out from the other vitalists and racials in that they strove to provide a historical perspective for the imperialist age on the basis of a pessimistic cultural critique. But what kind of perspective might that be, if not an imperialist one? And if it was an imperialist



one, then what else could it contain—as its essential tenet—but the [‘glorious’] myth of imperialist aggression and inhumanity? Where this perspective was lacking, all that could emerge was a scepticism bordering on nihilism, a state of despair or of resignation as the final wisdom,’ as reflected in the history of vitalism from Dilthey and Simmel to Heidegger and Klages. [Think also of, say, the final line of Eliot’s “The Waste Land”: *Shantih shantih shantih*. Resignation, appropriate to Eliot’s complicit conservatism. And that of a galaxy of like-minded intellectuals.] Objectively considered, the imperialist period could follow one of only two courses: it could either approve imperialism along with its world wars, its subjugation and exploitation of colonial peoples and its own masses, or else imperialism could be effectively repudiated, the masses could revolt and destroy monopoly capitalism. The thinking man had to side openly and firmly, either for or against. Otherwise his life, no matter whether he sympathized with imperialism as with fascism or disliked them, could only end without prospects, in despair. (We have already repeatedly illustrated the objectively positive service to fascism of the philosophy of despair.) [Many thinking men, however, refused to take a stand, in effect choosing passive compliance with the worst trends of the age. Complicit cowards, both morally and intellectually.] Nietzsche and Chamberlain, to be sure, differed not only in stature but also in their closeness to the concrete realization of imperialism. Nietzsche was merely its prophet; hence the general, abstract, ‘poetic’ form of his imperialist myth. Chamberlain was already more active, a direct participant in the ideological preliminaries to the First World War. Hence we can already clearly discern in him the outlines of bestial imperialism à la Rosenberg and Hitler.

Anyway, onward to the final section, on the National Socialist synthesis. “National Socialism was a major appeal to...those bad qualities [of the German people] formed in the course of centuries as a result of *failed revolutions* and the *lack of a democratic German development and ideology*.” (My italics.) That’s the reason in a nutshell. The other Western countries benefited from a democratic tradition; Germany didn’t. So you got a decades-long explosion of reactionary irrationalism, even more than in France, England, and the U.S. And in the end it achieved far more political power. Because of how useful it was to the ruling class, and how ineffectual the democratic resistance was. (Here, other factors played a role too. For instance, Stalin’s catastrophic foreign policy.)

Let us also not forget the essential role of American capitalism: “Hitler’s ‘originality’ lay in the fact that he was the first to apply techniques of American advertising to German politics and propaganda. His object was to stupefy and defraud the masses...” The U.S. was rather marginal in winning World War II—that was done by the Russians—but it did provide invaluable assistance, on many levels, in causing it.

More on this topic:

This fusion of German vitalism and American advertising was no accident either. Both are manifestations of the imperialist age. Both appealed to the desolation and disorientation of the people of this age, to their imprisonment in a fetishized category system belonging to monopoly capitalism. They played on men’s numb suffering under the system and their inability to break free from it. But the American system of advertising was aimed at the man in the street, appealing to his most immediate daily needs, and in these the objective standardization through monopoly capitalism was mingled with a vague desire—within this framework—to stay ‘personal.’ Vitalism, on the other hand, reached out via extremely

circuitous routes to the intellectual elite, where the inner resistance to standardization was much more fiery, albeit—objectively speaking—equally hopeless. Hence advertising techniques were cynically demagogic from the outset, an immediate expression of monopoly capitalism, whereas vitalism was for a long time pursued bona fide or at least with indirect, quasi-scientific and quasi-literary means. But for all their differences they were united—objectively considered—in distracting attention from all objectivity, in a one-sided appeal to feelings, experiences, etc., and in trying to eliminate and pour contempt on reason and independent, rational judgement. There was, therefore, a specific social necessity which explains why the products and the method of vitalism were conveyed to the streets with the tools of American advertising.

Inasmuch as Hitler combined in his own person vitalism and monopoly capitalism, the latter's most advanced techniques, i.e., American techniques, were coupled with its most advanced imperialist reactionary ideology, i.e., the German ideology. The very possibility of this parallel, this unity indicates that we can only understand and criticize all the barbarity, cynicism and so forth of the Hitler period by considering the economics, social structure and social trends of monopoly capitalism. Any attempt to interpret Hitlerism as a revival of some barbarism or other will miss the most crucial specific features of German fascism.

It is only from the angle of these cynical, unscrupulous advertising techniques that we can accurately portray the Hitler fascists' so-called ideology. For all that they ever asked was: what use is this idea, what advantage does it have?—in total independence of objective truth which, indeed, they vehemently and scornfully rejected. (In this they were in complete agreement with modern philosophy from Nietzsche via pragmatism up to our own day.) Now, however, these coarse and muscular advertising techniques joined forces with the products of imperialist vitalism, the philosophy of the most 'refined' minds of this period. For that agnostic irrationalism which had gone on developing in Germany from Nietzsche, Dilthey and Simmel to Klages, Heidegger and Jaspers had as its final outcome a repudiation of objective truth no less vehement than that which Hitler voiced from other motives and with other arguments. Thus vitalist irrationalism's relevance to fascist 'philosophy' did not hang on individual epistemological findings; these, difficult and subtle, were only meant for small intellectual circles. It had to do with a general spiritual mood of radical doubt concerning the possibility of objective knowledge and the value of reason and understanding, as also with a blind faith in intuitive, irrational 'prophecies' contradicting reason and understanding. In short, it had to do with an atmosphere of hysterical, superstitious credulity whereby the obscurantism of the campaign against objective truth, reason and understanding appeared to be the last word in modern science and the 'most advanced' epistemology.

This is one of the greatest books I've ever read. A work of near-genius. In a sense, despite its many flaws, it almost achieves the level of Chomsky in its reverence for pure reason, science, and the traditions of the Enlightenment.

I'm sorry, but I have to include another long quotation, this time on why all the fascist bestiality was able to happen in Germany:

...As we know, Germany in the modern age developed on lines different to those taken by Western Europe as also Russia. Whereas everywhere else, the dissolution of feudalism

gave rise to unified nation-states, in Germany it led to a political fragmentation. Hence Lenin was right in saying that the central issue of the bourgeois revolution in Germany was the creation of national unity. In the development of Germany, this situation produced various results which were peculiar to the country, but always unfavourable and connected with the reinforcement of reactionary ideas. Firstly, absolutism in Germany lacked those progressive features that were visible wherever it was the organ for establishing the political unity of a nation. Secondly, this line of development was connected with a belated and feeble development of the bourgeois class and with a long retention of relics of feudalism and the political predominance of the nobility. Thirdly, the bourgeois democratic revolution was weaker, less clear-cut and more susceptible to reactionary distractions than elsewhere, since its chief task was the setting up of a missing central power and not the progressive democratic transformation of one that already existed.

The ideas are sketchy—although earlier in the book he had elaborated on them in great detail—but they're suggestive and pithy. Later he adds, “Thus in other countries the ideology of absolutism, even if it turned the State into a ‘leviathan,’ distinctly reflected class struggles and class interests, as also the position and function of the State in these conflicts—albeit by no means fully or consciously. But in Germany, because of that backwardness we have outlined, there arose the theory of the State as the embodiment of the absolute idea, a theory which degenerated into a State mystique and idolatry. (This is also clearly visible in Hegel’s law philosophy.)”

To read this book is a bracing, exhilarating experience. And its final pages—before the long epilogue—are characteristically magnificent, infused by a humanism that remains life-affirming and hopeful even in the aftermath of World War II. It begins with the following sentences and builds to a Goethe-quoting climax:

One thing is certain: 1945 was not a repeat of 1918. The collapse of Hitler’s Germany was no straightforward defeat, however crushing, no mere change of system, but the end of a whole line of development. It ended that falsely based German unity which started with the defeat of the 1848 revolution and was complete by 1870-1; it posed this central issue of the German nation entirely afresh once again. Indeed, one may say that the whole misguided history of Germany became due for revision. A hundred years before, Alexander von Humboldt—who was really not inordinately radical—had already seen that with the defeat of the Peasants’ War, Germany had lost her way. She needed to retrace her steps to that date in order to find the right direction; what had happened since was the result of it...

And so Lukács issues a call to arms for humanism, democracy, and reason. His whole book, all 850 pages of it, is such a call, perhaps the most eloquent and urgent such call in history, considering the circumstances that brought it forth. It will never be surpassed.

In the very long epilogue he takes the story up to the early 1950s, focusing on the U.S., which was now the principal imperialist power. With the defeat of fascism and the discrediting of racism, irrationalism and capitalist apologetics now mainly (as, frequently, before) took the appearance of a disinterested rational investigation. “With regard to form, mode of presentation, and style we are here [in the case of mainstream American liberals and conservatives] dealing with purely conceptual, scientific deduction. But this is only so in appearance.” In reality, such writers as Walter Lippmann—and innumerable others—are vulgar superficialists who refuse to analyze in any depth the workings of society because of the left-wing conclusions they’ll come to. For

instance, they say it's necessary to pass laws to break up the concentration of capital. But they don't ask how that can be achieved, what social forces must be mobilized to bring about such laws and make sure they're enforced. There is no real investigation of the relation between the economy and the politico-legal superstructure. There's just a shallow adherence to surface phenomena. (For a contemporary analogue, see Paul Krugman's writings. He nearly always stops just before he gets to really substantive questions of political economy and the distribution of power, and of how actually to achieve the reforms he advocates. (Because that necessitates bringing in unions, building radical popular movements, etc.)) This is a type of irrationalism, though a more subtle and, perhaps, effective type than the Hitlerian variety.

Some thoughts on analytic philosophy of the time:

But in semantics and neo-Machism also—their dividing-lines are often blurred—there has arisen a vigorous further development of the earliest Machism in accordance with the ideological requirements of modern American imperialism. The early Machist show of 'strict scientific thinking' has been preserved unaltered, but at the same time the departure from objective reality has gone far beyond the earlier standards. Philosophy's task is now no longer an 'analysis of sensations' but only one of word-meanings and sentence-structures. And parallel with the formal-academic total loss of substance which this has entailed, overt direct apologetics have emerged far more prominently than ever before. Machism came about originally as a philosophical weapon against materialism, chiefly in the field of the epistemology of natural science. The modern agnostic forms which were elaborated in the process naturally constituted a good starting-point for many an irrationalist current, and Machism was always of philosophical assistance to irrationalism. Now, a general direct apologetic has plainly emerged. Semantics examine energetically and systematically the general concepts of social and economic life, only to find them trivial, empty word-formations. What follows? The English Marxist Maurice Cornforth tells us very clearly in a quotation from Barrows Dunham's *Man against Myth*: 'As we clearly see, there are no dogs in general, no human race, no profit system, no political parties, no fascism, no undernourished peoples, no shabby clothes, no truth, no social justice. With things standing thus there is no economic problem, no political problem, no fascist problem, no nutrition question and no social question... By simply breathing out,' he continues, 'they have spirited out of the world every important problem to have tormented the human race during its entire history.'

And in addition, Cornforth showed most lucidly the social consequences of such a philosophy. He stated: 'To take a simple example, let us consider the kind of discussion that occurs very frequently between workers and employers. What is the semantic prescription for solving the dispute? It is expressed very clearly in the words of the boss who says: "Let's forget all this twaddle about labour and capital and profit and exploitation, which is only the meaningless invention of political agitators who are playing on your emotions. Let's speak man to man, as Adam to Adam, and let's try and understand each other." That is actually the way in which employers very often argue. They learnt to be semanticists before semantics was even invented.'

I recall my thoughts years ago on E. P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*, where he discusses the great use of, e.g., Karl Popper's nominalistic positivism to maintenance of the political status quo. (It's no wonder the conservative W. V. O. Quine—who once told Chomsky that the Great

Depression had never happened—was an empiricist, nominalist, behaviorist, etc.) While the conscious motivation of these people might not be to hinder leftist radicalism and organized labor—they may be too dull to see it has that effect—the point is that the reason their philosophies can become mainstream is that they’re useful to power-structures (or at least benign towards them).

In general, I don’t find the epilogue of much interest. But it has its moments. Such as when Lukács has this to say about the famous historian Arnold Toynbee: “Philosophically, his now famous *oeuvre* offers nothing new whatever. On all the main issues Toynbee is a straightforward epigone of the vitalist epigone Spengler, from whom he has borrowed all his important concepts, such as opposition to the unity of history, the equating of all civilizations, the denouncing of progress as illusory, and so on. His so-called originality is expressed in wholly trivial details; for however many such ‘culture cycles’ either one of them constructs—with equal arbitrariness—they result in as few concrete differences as exist between, to recall Lenin’s joke, a red devil and a blue one, i.e., none at all.” Yep, that seems pretty accurate. I recall not being impressed by Toynbee when I read about him years ago.

The epilogue, too, ends on a note of hope: an invocation of the worldwide peace movement as a sign of things to come. “[The movement’s] mere existence has a world-historical significance for human thought: the *protection of reason as taking the form of a mass movement*. After a century of the increasing dominance of irrationalism, the defence of reason and the restoration of subverted reason is starting on its triumphal march among the masses...” As we know, the Cold War continued and humanity survived only by the skin of its teeth. And now we’re in a new age of even greater peril. But Lukács’s hope is as ‘rational’ now as it was then, for the vast majority of humanity remains opposed to the most destructive trends of the time. Irrationalism is again on the ascendancy, but the democratic resistance is numerically far greater and may yet triumph in the end.