

**Norman Arthur Fischer, *Marxism and the Moral Basis of Art. Lukács and German Idealist Art Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2024, pp. 284, € 124.79, ISBN 9783031575549**

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Published in 2024, Norman Arthur Fischer's *Marxism and the Moral Basis of Art. Lukács and German Idealist Art Theory* can be situated, at least in part, within the renewed attention to some of Lukács's writings of the 1930s, which for decades either attracted limited interest or were approached, in most cases, through rigid or schematic interpretations. By seeking to recover the moral dimension of Marxist aesthetics, Fischer returns to these texts and rereads them within a broader reflection on the relation between literature, social reality and moral life. He develops this argument through a sustained engagement with Lukács, Goldmann and Marcuse, who are treated as three distinct elaborations of a shared theoretical problem: how to think Marxist aesthetics through the legacy of nineteenth-century German Idealism, above all Hegel and Schiller. More specifically, Fischer organizes his argument around three categories – realistic embeddedness, utopian negation and formalism – which designate three distinct ways of understanding how art relates to social reality, value and historical experience. At the same time, he rejects reductive interpretations of base/superstructure theory, arguing that art and morality should not be treated as mere effects of ideology or economic determination, but can retain relative autonomy while remaining socially grounded.

The first part of the book examines Lukács's 1930s theory of historical realism in relation to Hegelian ethics, showing how, for Lukács, the historical novel becomes a literary form through which collective ethical and political conflicts can be rendered intelligible. In particular, Fischer shows that this conception of realism is tied to Lukács's attempt to think literature as a resource for opposition to tyranny in the political context of the 1930s, and thus against the rise of fascism and Nazism.

Chapter 2 reconstructs the Hegelian ethical background of Lukács's theory of historical and social realism through the opposition between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*. Fischer argues that Lukács increasingly grounds realism in socially embedded ethical life rather than in autonomous moral conscience, thereby treating works of historical and social realism as expressions of *Sittlichkeit*. At the same time, he shows that *History and Class Consciousness* still “represents a blending of naturalistic and utopian grounding for Marxist ethics” (p. 21), since teleology, class consciousness and revolutionary aspiration continue to presuppose some distance from existing ethical practice. In this respect, as Fischer underlines, *The Young Hegel* marks a later and more decisively naturalistic stage in Lukács's development.

Chapter 3 examines Lukács's account of class realism through Walter Scott and Balzac, placing it in a Hegelian and Schillerian framework. Fischer argues that realism is not a mere description of reality, but the representation of historically mediated social life through principles such as the derivation of individuality from historical form, the balance of necessity and individuality, entry into mass experience, and the experience of nationhood. Scott appears as the founding novelist of the historical novel, while Balzac represents an equally important realist, whose fiction reveals the truth of class society. The chapter's central claim is that Lukács's literature of class is inseparable from a broader theory of historical form grounded in Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*.

The next chapter places Lukács's theory of the historical novel in the broader context of his Berlin and Moscow writings of the 1930s, when his views on ethics, aesthetics and literature underwent significant changes. Fischer argues that Lukács's growing preference for social and historical realism is tied to an anti-tyrannical political vision: as he writes, “Lukács developed an account of historical novels which shows how to fight tyranny” (p. 86). This is especially evident in Lukács's reading of Heinrich Mann, through which realism is articulated in terms of public-spirited republicanism, immersion in popular life and revolutionary democracy. Literature thus appears not as a sphere of private inwardness, but as a medium through which public ethical and political conflicts become intelligible. In this way, the chapter shows how Lukács's analysis of class is

integrated into a broader conception of realism as the representation of historically embedded collective life.

Part II turns to Goldmann and Marcuse, treating them as two different heirs to the same attempt to rethink Marxist aesthetics through German Idealism. Chapter 5 presents Goldmann as a realist Marxist thinker who extends Lukács's emphasis on social totality while opening it to hope, faith and tragic ethics, above all in *The Hidden God*. Fischer argues that Goldmann remains committed to a realistic and social grounding of art and ethics, yet assigns a greater role to autonomous value and reflection than Lukács usually allows. At the same time, he notes a persistent tension in Goldmann between historically grounded community and the imagined community of hope. The chapter concludes that Goldmann's importance lies in suggesting that autonomous values can still be integrated into a realistic, though non-monistic, Marxist ethics and aesthetics.

Chapter 6 presents Marcuse as the major counterpoint to Lukács and Goldmann. If their aesthetics are grounded in realistic embeddedness, Marcuse's is centered on negation and form. Fischer shows that Marcuse, too, inherits the world of German Idealism, especially Schiller, but redirects it toward an account of art as distance from and refusal of the given social world. The chapter follows this line from *Eros and Civilization* to *The Aesthetic Dimension*, which Fischer reads as Marcuse's most sustained attempt to bring together negation theory, formalism and realistic embeddedness. In this way, Marcuse becomes the figure who most clearly forces Fischer's broader argument to confront the ethical and aesthetic significance of distance and formal autonomy.

The concluding chapter returns to the book's central problem by reconsidering the relation between realistic embeddedness, utopian negation and formalism as both ethical and aesthetic theories. Fischer argues that the opposition between facts and values parallels that between realistic and nonrealistic expression, and that, once these dimensions are thought together, "both sets of issues seem more resolvable" (p. 239). In this context, Habermas serves as an important interlocutor, since his critique of ethical naturalism helps Fischer reformulate the stakes of Marxist aesthetics as a tension between social embeddedness and moral distance. The conclusion therefore does not offer a full synthesis, but rather a qualified attempt to maintain the primacy of realism while

acknowledging the necessity of utopian negation, formalism and a certain critical distance from social immediacy.

The main strength of Fischer's book lies in its sustained attempt to reconnect aesthetics, ethics and Marxism without reducing any one of them to the others. The study is conceptually coherent and particularly valuable in the systematic attention it gives to Lukács's writings of the 1930s, showing that literary realism should be understood not as a simple description of reality but as the aesthetic expression of historically and ethically structured social life. At the same time, the book shows a certain imbalance, as its theoretical architecture is often stronger than its historical analysis. Fischer is mainly concerned with building a coherent conceptual argument, and for this reason he sometimes gives less space to the differences of context, emphasis and development that distinguish Lukács, Goldmann and Marcuse. Goldmann, and especially Marcuse, can at times appear less as fully independent thinkers than as positions within Fischer's broader argument. Even so, this is inseparable from the ambition of the book, which is not to offer a neutral overview, but to advance a proposal for how Marxist aesthetics may still be conceived today. In this sense, *Marxism and the Moral Basis of Art* is a stimulating monograph, of particular interest to readers concerned with Lukács, Marxist aesthetics, German Idealism and the relation between literature and ethical life.