An Interview With Lukacs

Members of the editorial staff of Nepszabadsag, the daily paper of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, recently interviewed the eminent Hungarian literary critic and philosopher Gyorgy Lukacs, now in his 83rd year. The text of the interview is re-published here in abbreviated form.

QUESTION: What is your opinion about the introduction of the new economic mechanism, what do you expect from the new economic mechanism?

ANSWER: This, in my opinion, has been an extremely important positive step, a continuation of the course started by the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. From what did the difficulties arise, from which a way out had to be sought? At the time of the Revolution and Counter-Revolution in the Soviet Union—in 1917—the introduction of the so-called Commis-sar System in both industry and the army had been absolutely necessary because most of the military, economic and other specialists of the old system were totally unreliable; what is more they supported the Counter-Revolution.

Under Stalin this system was further developed rather than reduced. Suspicion ruled and bureaucratic centralisation, the meticulous supervision of every trivial detail, was typical of the time.

Yet socialist development, which had been launched by Lenin, had a far-reaching educational effect and produced an extremely wide layer of technical intelligentsia and qualified workers, so much so that even America is envious today of this development in the Soviet Union. A stratum of this kind, made up of Soviet men, could not be governed in this way. Signs of this had been evident a very long time ago. This too was recognised by the 20th Congress.

The Hungarian Party also deserves credit for having recognised the need for definite action in this field, and the new mechanism is an important attempt at realising socialist production freed from distortions. This in my opinion is a very positive feature of the new mechanism. It is a step which renders a renascence of marxism possible and necessary; on the other hand again it opens the way for a return to what we used to call proletarian democracy in the early times under Lenin. Now the question that remains is this: to what extent has the break with the old ways been achieved, and in so far as it has not yet been achieved what problems do
arise? In my view certain things have been eliminated. There is no doubt that for instance, in Hungary unlawful actions and everything they imply, have been consistently liquidated; but—and this is my opinion—the necessary and radical elimination of methods earlier used extensively has not yet been accomplished in every respect.

I should like to illustrate this point with an example, with the relation between tactics and theory. One often hears criticism of the wrong thesis that class-war grows more embittered all the time. We have refuted this thesis, but we have not examined it from a marxist point of view. Is it the truth that Stalin believed in the incessant intensification of class-war and this was the reason why the trials in the thirties took place? Or—and I believe this is the truth—did Stalin need the trials for tactical reasons and so he stated that class-war had been intensified all the time. In other words, instead of using the real method of marxism, i.e., the development of strategy and tactics from an analysis of the events, the tactical decisions—be they correct or incorrect—were decisive and theory was built upon them.

Q.: Comrade Lukacs, will you permit an incidental question here? You said it was wrong to criticise without an analysis and by dogmatic methods, the Stalinist thesis of the incessant intensification of class-war. Situations may arise when class-war actually does grow more intensive. So implicitly you condemn also the setting of the thesis of the incessant relaxation of class-war against that of its incessant intensification?

A.: Definitely. Whether class war is growing more intensive or not, is always a definite question which marxists have to clarify in the light of facts and then choose their tactics accordingly. Reverting to the original question, there is a certain reticence both in this country and elsewhere, to speak plainly about the decisive nature of decisive changes. We rather make the matter appear as if there had been a certain development, essentially correct, which would not be improved and what was right would be superseded by something even better instead of saying that a bad thing is being replaced by a satisfactory one. Allow me to refer at this point to Lenin, the great man of theory and tactics. When the Russian Civil War came to an end in 1921, he evolved—as is well-known—the new economic policy. Lenin did not then say that as a matter of fact war-communism had been a good policy, which he would replace by something even better, but stated with absolute frankness that as far as principles were concerned war-communism was an untenable policy which, however, had been forced upon us by circumstances. Since the pressure of circum-
stances ceased, a change would be brought about, a new economic policy be introduced. Lenin never claimed that the new economic policy was a continuation, a development or improvement of war-communism, on the contrary he told that the new economic policy was the opposite of war-communism. My objection is that we do not sufficiently emphasise the contrast between the old and the new economic mechanism, whereas the lessons to be drawn from the "Leninist transition" confirm that often it is the very "shock" that has the effect of awakening the masses and of orientating them toward new objectives.

Q.: You said that the 20th Congress brought a decisive change. Is now a change needed also relative to the 20th Congress?

A.: Its extension is necessary. Seen dialectically, a decisive change does not necessarily take place overnight. It may be the change of a period. The decisive change for instance, in human history, when Man developed and began to work is well known; this change had taken ten thousand or a hundred thousand years. It is certain that work had been the making of Man and it is equally certain that it took ten thousand or a hundred thousand years for work to become universal.

Q.: In recent years a reform of economic direction took place in a number of socialist countries and now the new mechanism is to be introduced also in this country. Does this not prove that the change, as a process, is progressing?

A.: Certain steps forward have been taken, there is no doubt about it. The change is under way, but we cannot claim to have completed it. I consider it necessary to make people conscious of the change in methods, as opposed to attempts at blurring the issue which one still encounters quite often.

Q.: One also encounters the phenomenon of people saying: "What we have now is quite good." Not good, but "quite good". And they are afraid that their position will get more difficult in one way or the other, i.e., they are concerned about results achieved so far. So we have to argue that what is now good will eventually be better.

A.: No one doubts that a certain improvement of the economy has taken place. I do not dispute this point, I take it for granted. But I maintain that, if people are still afraid of the new mechanism, it means they have not yet understood what the mechanism will actually mean for them, and we are to be blamed if they have failed to understand it.
Q.: You have been fighting and organising for the social responsibility of literature and art for decades. What is in your opinion, the essence of this responsibility today?

A.: The real significance of literature is that in a given age it reveals the greatness and depth of the human problems arising and the artistic expression of these human problems again has a certain indirect reaction on the progress of history itself. I do not think it was by mere chance that Marx reread the Greek tragedies from year to year, that he knew Shakespeare by heart. This was not merely dabbling at aestheticism on his part, and I am sure that he learned a great deal from them too. He learned about conflicts and to see historical transitions not just as the sum total of manoeuvres but in their larger context.

It was with an awareness of this significance of literature that Soviet literature started: the great works of Gorky, the Klim Samgin, Fadeyev's Nineteen, Sholokhov's Silent Don and Makarenko's pedagogic novels all offered descriptions of the great human problems that had arisen before, and during, 1917, and in the wake of 1917. In works of this kind the historical grandeur of the 1917 Revolution has been truly reflected.

I published an article about Solzhenitsin, in which I raised the problem that it was impossible in any socialist country to write a real novel about people of today unless it contained the resolve to deal with the period of Stalinism. For apart from the young now twenty years old, all of us have lived through these times, and the way one lives, speaks and feels today depends to a great extent on how one reacted, and is reacting, to those times. We ought to encourage the emergence and development of a literature of this kind. I see a very important example of this kind of literature in the two latest volumes by Laszlo Benjamin which reflect very clearly the personality of the professed revolutionary who had seen and experienced all wrongs and despite everything has remained a champion of socialism. This is one of the types of our days. It should be the function of literature to depict an ever broader typical stratum. I am an optimist as regards further development, yet I would consider it necessary to put this part of it in the centre of literature rather than the part emphasising particularities. Think of what Brecht stands for all over the world. Brecht has enjoyed a world-wide success, both in the socialist and the non-socialist countries, but his reputation had been established in the first place by Mother Courage, A Good Man is Wanted and so forth, i.e., by plays in which he presented the historical position of contemporary Man. These important human problems should be unearthed by literature, and if they succeed in doing this there
will again come a new period of vigor in literature comparable to that achieved by Soviet literature in the twenties.

Q.: As to how far it was the responsibility of literature to elaborate the complex labelled the personality cult you said in one of your articles that you considered it was the central task. If it is the central task to grapple with the heritage of that age, it means that essentially we have not yet accomplished it.

A.: It is my opinion that this is one of the central tasks of great importance of our era. It would be a great achievement, if a writer in this country were to be found who for instance, would be able to write the story of Jozsef Revai's life, a life which I consider fraught with tragic conflicts. I know many comrades who in the early twenties had been excellent, devoted revolutionaries, who belonged to the type of men represented later by Imre Sallai, and who subsequently found themselves in opposition with what they had fought for. I know also some who have become dogmatic bureaucrats. "Central question" is a rather unsatisfactory phrase because the interrelation between the individual and the community is so complex that it must allow more than one central question to exist. One can speak of a whole complex of central questions. The complex I call the Revai tragedy is certainly one of the most important and most central problems in understanding today's Man.

Q.: Comrade Lukacs, you have emphasised only the negative aspects of the period in question. After all, the people who won the biggest battles of World War 2, and who defeated fascism, had been brought up in Stalin's time. And the generation which grew up in this country after Liberation carried out the socialist revolution.

A.: May I perhaps put my answer in this wording: I believe that even the worst of socialism is better than the best of capitalism. This is my deep conviction and it was with this conviction that I lived through those times. Since the building of socialism was going on also in those times, they too had their positive aspects. In the Soviet Union an up-to-date industry had been established that made resistance against Hitler possible. So I do not deny this positive aspect, but now for instance we are talking about literature and here we cannot evade the question that a number of people, even if in good faith, were involved in the most complicated situations distorting their human character and talent. Unless these distortions are shown, today's reality cannot be presented as a reality. Human development is extremely complex, and of all things it is literature that must never gloss over its negative aspects, because it
is literature that can show us what powers of resistance, and what reserves still to be tapped, are to be found in man's psyche and morality: it also shows the pitfalls which may influence the course of even the best of men.

Q.: Just one last question, Comrade Lukacs. What is your opinion of the present situation of marxism in the world?

A.: In most recent times a situation most favorable for us has developed. Namely, at the time when danger of war was—to some extent—removed, and a certain stage of detente was reached in the cold war, the ideologies that had emerged in the leading capitalist countries in the wake of victory in 1945 were all in a state of crisis. This is most obvious in the case of the United States where the post-1945 dreams of "American political and ideological hegemony", the illusion in connexion with the American way of life, have collapsed. Most particularly the war in Vietnam and the immense difficulties besetting the efforts to integrate the negroes, have shown that the American ideology evolved in 1945 has all but completely failed.

On our side again the situation we discussed in connexion with the first question has arisen. One of the most important consequences ensuing from this is a steady growth of interest in and a positive approach to marxism in the West. In 1945 marxism was treated as an obsolete ideology of the 20th century, while in these days it has gained ground in a remarkable way. Compare the position taken by Sartre in 1945 and his position today, twenty years later. Consider how in the 'twenties Freudians took as their point of departure the need to bolster up Marx with Freudian psychology, and how today it is their aspiration to rehabilitate Freudism with the help of marxism. In a word, there is a very great interest in marxism now emerging, and that provides for us great vistas. In the 'twenties the then still starving and destroyed Russia exercised a vast influence on western intelligentsia. Now we have come to a point where it is up to us to increase our influence upon the West. We are in a favorable situation and we have to be equal to it. We do not realise how profoundly we could influence development in the capitalist world from philosophy to literature and music, if our standards were adequate. Let me quote here Bartok's example whose impact is constantly increasing, in contrast with that of extreme modernists who tried to disparage him by negative criticism. There is no reason why our literature, our film art and our philosophy should not have a similar influence, provided that we firmly break with dogmatism.

A universal approach with real appeal to people is needed. All its elements are inherent in marxism, all we have to do is to unearth them and turn them to good account.