

# Is Historicism Relativism?—The Distinction between Lukács' and Leo Strauss' "Historicism" by Class Consciousness

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**How to cite this paper:** Li, X. Y. (2025). Is Historicism Relativism?—The Distinction between Lukács' and Leo Strauss' "Historicism" by Class Consciousness. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 468-478.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2025.152027>

**Received:** March 21, 2025

**Accepted:** May 10, 2025

**Published:** May 13, 2025

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## Abstract

The discussion on the relationship between historicism and historical materialism has always existed in the academic circle. Some theorists believe that there is no qualitative difference between the two, and equate historical materialism with historicism under the concept of "historical determinism". Others point out that historical materialism transcends historicism and represents a fundamental innovation. These two different views stem from different understandings of historicism, and a key concept behind this distinction is class consciousness. Whether class consciousness is involved or not is the difference between two different types of historicism. By comparing Strauss' and Lukács' discussions on historicism, we can better present the importance of class consciousness in distinguishing the two types of historicism.

## Keywords

Historicism, Historical Materialism, Lukács, Leo Strauss, Class Consciousness

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## 1. Introduction

How to understand historicism directly affects the judgment of the relationship between historicism and historical materialism. Whether to take class consciousness into account is the key to distinguishing different understandings of historicism. In the history of Western thought, both Lukács and Strauss have expounded on historical methods. Lukács followed the theoretical context of Marx's historical materialism and established class consciousness as the fundamental method of his ideological system. Strauss, adhering to the view that historicism ultimately leads to nihilism, criticized Lukács and then Marx. By comparing Lukács' and Strauss' understandings of historicism, we can see that the presence or absence of class

consciousness is the biggest difference between them, and it is also the key to distinguishing historical materialism from the traditionally narrow-defined historicism.

## 2. Preface

There are several different understandings of historicism: one view is that historicism is synonymous with historical relativism. Giambattista Vico advocated that history is the product of human creative activities, proposing “Il mondo delle nazioni è certamente opera degli uomini...la storia segue leggi che derivano dalla natura comune della mente umana.” (Vico, 1744). Benedetto Croce posited that “all history is contemporary history” (Croce, 1976). Viewing history as the reconstruction of the past through thought. Historical materialism is the core theory of Marxist philosophy, aiming to reveal the objective laws of human society development through the analysis of material production and social relations. Karl Popper defined historicism as a methodology that predicts the future through historical laws, stating “Historicism is the approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.” (Popper, 1945).

Historical materialism, as the core theory of Marxist philosophy, focuses on the impact of the development of productive forces on production relations and vice versa, thereby revealing the laws of human society development. Marx and Engels first formally proposed historical materialism in <The German Ideology>, stating “The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones... They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.” Marx approached history from the perspective of class analysis, pointing out that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” (Marx & Engels, 1976b)

Therefore, class consciousness is a very important concept in Marxist philosophy. Lukács defined class consciousness as the consciousness of a class’s historical position that has become conscious, meaning that members of a class, based on their own social status, consciously grasp the laws of historical development. He emphasized that it is not merely the sum of individual thoughts but a totality related to the class’s historical mission, “Class consciousness is the ‘imputed’ (zugerechnet) consciousness of a class’s historical position. It is not the psychological consciousness of individual workers, nor even the empirical consciousness of the working class as a whole, but rather the possible consciousness that a class would have if it fully grasped its role in the historical process.” (Lukács, 1923) Lukács’s historical theory, starting from class consciousness, proposed the concept of totality, thereby distinguishing itself from other schools’ understanding of historicism. Thus, starting from class consciousness is key to understanding historical materialism, and it is precisely due to the emphasis on class consciousness

that it proves that historical materialism, as a specific form of historicism, is not relativism.

### 3. Two Understandings of Historicism

Generally speaking, historicism originated from the Enlightenment on the European continent, starting in Germany and being expounded by French Enlightenment thinkers, which had a huge impact on the Western intellectual circle. French Enlightenment philosophy, characterized by the rational tradition, inherited this tradition and also understood history at the metaphysical level, regarding history as the manifestation of the universality of “God”. In the view of French Enlightenment thinkers, history could progress continuously under the impetus of human reason. However, this process actually simplified historical issues, ignoring the complexity of human social development. Their understanding of historical issues was more similar to the paradigm of natural science.

In response to this problem, Vico criticized Descartes. He believed that history should “focus more on the civil world rather than the natural world created by God”. Vico’s *New Science* had a profound impact. Marx praised his thoughts as “genius flashes”, and Labriola and Lafargue also regarded Vico as the founder of historical materialism. Herder built the foundation of historical philosophy on the basis of Vico and pointed out that French Enlightenment thinkers had the problem of despising the past: they over—emphasized the role and influence of people in the present, which was undoubtedly a kind of ignorance. In response, Herder proposed to understand different nations sympathetically, recognizing that nations at different historical development stages had different cultural characteristics and thus presented different development situations.

In contrast, the historicism of French Enlightenment thinkers started from human reason and the universal reason represented by God, while German historicism paid more attention to the particularity of individuals, emphasizing the influence of individuals on history rather than the pursuit and attention of universality. The representative figure of the former, Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern historiography, attached great importance to the verification of historical materials and insisted on basing on the individual, opposing the introduction of absolute and universal value presuppositions such as spirit or idea into historical research.

In the middle of the 20th century, the influence of historicism expanded further and began to be widely used as a research thinking and method by many scientists and thinkers. However, as the scope of its influence expanded, the understanding of its connotation became more diverse, and even confusion and misunderstandings emerged. An important part of the study of German historicism is Hegel’s philosophy of history. Hegel continued the rationalist tradition of Germany, emphasizing the decisive role of thinking logic in the historical process and regarding spirit as the subject of historical movement. This idealist philosophy of history is actually closer to the French Enlightenment philosophy that emphasizes reason

and universality. Marx believed that the historical sense in Hegel's philosophical system was the biggest difference between Hegel and other philosophers. In *The German Ideology*, Marx directly defined his own philosophical system as historical science, stating that "we know only one single science, the science of history." (Marx & Engels, 1976a) While acknowledging the value of historical sense, Marx paid more attention to real and sensible people in historical activities. He opposed Hegel's view of regarding the absolute spirit as the subject of historical movement and proposed that history should be viewed from the perspective of human sensible activities. This is where the divergence of historicism began: "he (Hegel) has only found the abstract, logical, speculative expression for the movement of history, which is not yet the real history of man as a given subject, but only the act of creation, the history of the origin of man." (Marx & Engels, 1975). Marx sublated Hegel's philosophy of history, replacing the absolute spirit with man, focusing on man's actions and roles in history. Man was no longer a tool for God or the absolute spirit to promote history but the subject of historical activities.

In Marx's historical science, conscious people emerged as subjects, thus dividing different development directions of historicism. Lukács inherited Marx's theoretical path and also emphasized the particularity of different historical subjects. He regarded the historical method as the fundamental method of philosophy and the correct method for studying human society. Strauss, on the other hand, believed that historicism emphasizing particularity lacked absolute value standards. Such historicism was undoubtedly a kind of relativism and would ultimately lead to nihilism, resulting in a society of "last men" without moral values. The key to these two different understandings is that Strauss failed to clearly recognize Lukács' definition of class consciousness and ignored the moral and value orientation contained in class consciousness, thus wrongly concluding that historicism is nihilism.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács defined history as human survival activities: "History is precisely the history of the continuous and thorough change of the specific forms of human existence." (Lukács, 1923). History is the product of human activities and is human-related. The natural world without human beings is non-historical. Since human society is constantly changing and developing and is dynamic, both Marx and Lukács recognized that historical movement is composed of particular individual things. Each stage should be "phased" and non-eternal, and should go through a process from origin, development to extinction. Based on this understanding, Lukács' historical method focuses on the development process of history, which is an integral whole composed of different historical stages. Thus, Lukács put forward one of the most important concepts in his philosophical system-totality, and pointed out that "the totality is history." Therefore, Lukács' historicism is first of all a historicism that focuses on the whole, "It is the whole of the historical process that is the real historical reality." (Lukács, 1923).

In addition, Lukács' historicism also paid attention to the special situation of

the development of things, emphasizing the grasp of the historical process in a specific time and space, and understanding people and things in the moving time, opposing universal value standards. The fluidity and generativity of history make the historical method emphasize the change of time and space, oppose a universal and uniform goal, and emphasize the uniqueness of things in a specific time and space. Lukács believed that the essence of history lies in the change of social structure forms. “Man relates to his contemporary world through these structural forms... This is only possible when the individuality, i.e., the uniqueness of a certain era or a certain person, lies in the characteristics of these structures.” (Lukács, 1923).

Finally, Lukács’ historicism also implies that history develops in a progressive direction. That is to say, history will not stay in any social form, and there is no ideological form that is eternally applicable to the current social development. This theory has inspired the proletariat to break its own shackles and pointed out that there is indeed a path forward. Once the proletariat realizes that its current situation is only temporary and is just a link in historical development, it can promote history to the next stage through revolutionary means.

In contrast to Lukács, Strauss did not think that history was full of individuality and particularity. What he pursued was the eternal value beyond history, and he emphasized that the eternal value was natural, that is, non-human. Strauss understood historicism as a kind of relativism. Compared with classical political philosophy that pursues virtue and eternal value, historicism “emphasizes that things belonging to a specific time and space have a higher value than the universal.” (Strauss, 1999). The research method of historicism means that an ideological consciousness, such as philosophy, religion, or morality, is usually understood as the product of a specific era and a specific civilization. This directly leads to the result that people will no longer “understand past thinkers as they understood themselves.” The unified standard is dissolved in the historicist method, and everyone understands the world from their own situation.

The truth that Strauss believed in did not change with time. On this premise, Strauss thought that the method of historicism to understand history and truth from its own perspective was wrong. Historicism always views all things in human society, such as thoughts, consciousness, and philosophy, in a linear time and is used to understanding the past with current experience. Interpreting history with linear time means that there is no longer a universal cognitive and judgment standard, and there is no continuous, time-transcending eternal standard. Strauss believed that this was a denial of natural right, replacing universality with the particularity of each historical stage. This understanding is obviously contrary to the methodology emphasized by historical materialism. Strauss believed that historical materialism dissolved “a standard for judging right and wrong that is independent of real rights and higher than real rights.” (Strauss, 1999). Therefore, he judged historical materialism as a kind of relativism. Historicism that denies absolute standards and eternal truth will ultimately lead to nihilism, which is com-

pletely different from the recognition of historicism from Marx to Lukács.

#### 4. Different Understandings of the Relationship between History and Nature

Strauss' denial of historicism stems from his belief that absolute standards are superior to all, and historicism is not tenable. The temporality it emphasizes will encounter self-contradiction when applied to historicism itself. Lukács, on the other hand, believed that historical materialism did not have this fallacy. "Historical materialism can and must be applied to itself, but this movement does not lead to a complete relativism. It by no means leads to the conclusion that historical materialism is not the correct historical method."

The key difference between the two views lies in how to understand history and the relationship between history and natural right. How to define the relationship between history and nature is also the question of whether human history has a unified, universal, and eternal standard, which will directly affect the judgment of whether historicism is a kind of relativism.

Engels pointed out in *Karl Marx: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that the first person who tried to prove the internal connection of history in history was Hegel. The philosophy of history established by Hegelians also did not escape the framework of Platonism—through the summary and induction of specific events, they obtained the transcendent idea of "God" or the abstract universal human nature, and bridged the gap between the subjective and objective worlds with human reason and the absolute spirit. On the basis of Hegel's "historical concept", Engels saw the inheritance relationship between the new dialectics developed by Marx and Hegel's dialectics. Hegel's historical theory started from the absolute spirit, and what Marx did was to invert it, thus deconstructing the traditional hierarchical relationship between logic and history, nature and history, and thought and action. Hegel believed that history must be human-related, so pure nature has no history and cannot be used to measure and judge history. According to Hegel's understanding, the origin and change of nature are nothing but the logical evolution of the conceptual world. Although from the perspective of scientific epistemology, spirit can also be regarded as a product of nature, from the ontological sense, Hegel firmly believed that logic was prior to nature. Nature only provided an environment for the unfolding of historical movement, could not constitute the content of history, and could not be the master of history.

In Marx's view, nature was no longer a pure scientific concept or a historical concept. Marx's concept of nature was not only a part of human history, nor simply the material condition for human survival or the means to meet human needs, but the most basic link among history, man, and nature connected by practice. According to Marx's understanding, history followed the laws of nature, nature followed its own laws, and man, as the subject of history, was also restricted by the legislation of nature. When interpreting *The German Ideology*, most people are used to thinking that Marx understood the concept of nature under a cer-

tain social relationship, that is, elevating human consciousness and devaluing nature. Undoubtedly, Marx's historical view has always been understood within the framework of modernity, and readers often grasp Marx's concept of "nature" based on their own understanding of "nature". For example, Grünewald labeled Marx as a "human-centered and man-as-god" thinker, which we should correct. Although Marx's texts did contain the view of transforming nature and humanizing nature, these views could not fully represent Marx's understanding of the relationship between nature and man.

With the help of Strauss, we can further understand Marx's concept of nature. Strauss believed that the greatest crisis of philosophy was the transformation of the "view of nature" since the 17th century: "Nature" became the "object" of natural science research and the object of human conquest. In Strauss's view, one of the manifestations of the difference between the classical and modern eras was that objectivity was increasingly incorporated into subjectivity. Even in Kant's speculation, objectivity was completely absorbed into subjectivity. The Enlightenment broke the religious shackles that bound people, discovered the rational glory of people, enabled people to stand on top of nature as subjects, and began to use their own abilities to confront God—that is, nature. The history formed in this process was the history of people. Strauss used three waves to present the gradual formation process of modernity. Machiavelli initiated the rejection of theology, which was the first doubt and shake of natural right and destroyed the foundation of classical political philosophy that Strauss favored. Rousseau and Burke, who initiated the second wave, although emphasizing the state of nature and virtue, still could not reach the level of respect for nature in the original classical state. By the time of Heidegger, radical existentialism completely broke the authority of natural right. Strauss found it difficult to accurately locate Marx in the structure of these three waves. According to the time division, Marx seemed to belong to the second wave, but in terms of content, Marx's historicism was obviously closer to the third wave. After the modern transformation, history no longer moved spontaneously in a logical way according to nature, but was operated and transformed under human will. The most prominent feature of history "born" from nature is that it is marked with the imprint of people. People's actions began to be noticed, and people's consciousness dominated people's behavior of transforming the world. Marx connected the subjective and objective worlds, which had always been in a dual-opposition state in the history of Western thought, through the concept of "human practice". Lukács pointed out that the historical materialism established by Marx found the real driving force of history: "The essence of scientific Marxism lies in the recognition that the real driving force of history is independent of man's (psychological) consciousness of it. At the initial stage of cognition, this independence is first manifested in that man understands this driving force as a natural force and sees 'eternal' natural laws in these forces and their regular interrelationships." (Lukács, 1923). Lukács further specified it, not as general people but as the proletariat capable of violent revolution, and thus put for-

ward the concept of class consciousness.

## 5. The Role of Class Consciousness in Historical Materialism

Historical materialism provides a possibility to understand human society from the perspective of productivity. Therefore, the level of productivity development, production systems, and production relations are the issues that historical materialism particularly focuses on. “We adopt this method, starting from the simplest and most basic relations that are historically and actually presented to us.” (Marx & Engels, 1975) People’s lives are first manifested in the production of material life. This production process not only produces material means but also produces social relations, which in turn gives rise to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Production relations are constantly moving and changing, and the driving force for this change lies in the promotion of class consciousness. Lukács distinguished historical materialism from previous historicism through the concept of class consciousness.

As the driving force of the revolutionary movement, class consciousness has a very high status in Lukács’ view. He pointed out that class consciousness is not a simple accumulation or repetition of the cognition of a certain class, but a rational cognition of the environment in which one’s own class is located. “It is the appropriate rational reaction, which is due to the special and typical position in the production process. Class consciousness is therefore neither the sum of what the individual members of a class think and feel, nor their average.” (Lukács, 1923). Through Lukács’ creative elaboration, the long-ignored class consciousness has been elevated in status. Lukács started from specific research and used the overall historical method to dialectically grasp class consciousness. The essence of class consciousness is not the sum or average of the psychological consciousness of each individual, but the overall perception of the historical status of one’s own class and the overall awareness of the historical role of one’s own class. “Class consciousness is not the psychological consciousness of individual proletarians, or the group psychological consciousness of all of them, but the consciousness of the class’s historical position.” (Lukács, 1923). The class consciousness of the proletariat is to realize that it has the ability and mission to promote historical development, thus going beyond the calculation of individual economic interests and participating in the class revolution.

Through the elaboration of class consciousness, Lukács proved the totality of the historical process. The proletariat and its class consciousness are the subjects of history, thus proving the legitimacy of the proletarian revolution. In Lukács’ view, only the proletariat can achieve the unity of subject and object because only the proletariat can achieve an overall understanding of social history. In the pre-capitalist era, the social structure determined by the then-existing productivity was hierarchical. Under the influence of religious theology and other factors, there was no clear class consciousness. Neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat had formed their own class consciousness and were in an abstract and unconscious

state. After entering the capitalist society, groups with opposing economic interests gradually formed, and class division became clear. Thus, the bourgeois and proletarian consciousness gradually emerged. Historical materialism points out that all existing things will perish, which is exactly what the bourgeoisie does not want to see. “Since the starting-point and the goal of bourgeois thought are always (though not always consciously) to defend the existing order of things or at least to prove the immutability of this order, it is bound to encounter an insurmountable limit.” (Lukács, 1923). The development of productivity will inevitably lead to changes in production relations, thus changing the existing production system and inevitably touching the existing interests of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the bourgeoisie rejects social change and development, denies the assertion of historical materialism that things are constantly developing and changing, and cannot face the essence of the development and movement of human society. According to Lukács’ argument, the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie is not an overall understanding. Since history is an overall movement, the subject of history can only be the proletariat with an overall understanding.

The establishment of the proletariat’s class consciousness also needs a certain process. The proletariat must first have a clear understanding of its own situation. “Although the fact that particular individuals are actually confined within the narrow limits and prejudices of their life-situations must be transcended, the limits set for them by the socio-economic structure of their age and their position within this structure cannot be overstepped. Therefore, class consciousness—abstractly and formally considered—is at the same time a class-conditioned unconsciousness of men’s own social and historical economic position.” (Lukács, 1923). The proletariat has to sell its labor force to make a living and is trapped in heavy labor day after day. It does not have enough time and energy to think about its own situation, let alone initiate and lead a violent revolution. However, the historical process has intensified the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. As a whole, the strength of the proletariat has also increased with the progress of productivity. The proletariat can gradually become a conscious class, realize the necessity of violent revolution, and feel compelled to carry out the revolution under oppression. Different from the bourgeoisie’s stubborn resistance to the existing system, the proletariat actively breaks the existing production relations and promotes history forward. This process means that the proletariat acts not only for its own interests but also for the interests of the whole society. The class consciousness of the proletariat can be universalized into the action principle of the whole society, containing the interests of the whole social development.

## 6. Conclusion

Since the class consciousness of the proletariat represents the universal interests of the whole society, historical materialism with class consciousness as the core is not the relativism that Strauss claimed. The affirmation of class consciousness means that historical materialism has a moral dimension. The violent revolution

led by the proletariat is not only the destruction of the old system and the old rule but also the development and improvement of its own existence. "Revolution is necessary not only because no other way can overthrow the ruling class, but also because the class overthrowing the ruling class can cast off all the old and dirty things on itself only in the revolution and become the new foundation of society." (Marx & Engels, 1976a) In the process of overthrowing the bourgeoisie, the proletariat also completes self-education through the revolutionary movement and becomes a conscious class that not only exists but also realizes its own existence.

From Marx to Lukács, it is believed that history has a continuous progressive development trend, which is a process in which the class consciousness of the proletariat becomes increasingly independent and clear. Strauss's view is the opposite. He believes that the difference between philosophers and the masses cannot be overcome. No matter how history develops, there is always an abstract idea that is unattainable for ordinary people. The divergence of these two views in metaphysics has led to opposite results in the evaluation of historical materialism. Lukács believes that history is constantly moving forward. The proletariat will eventually form class consciousness, launch a violent revolution, overthrow the existing system, and become the fundamental force promoting historical development. This process means that historical materialism is not a relativism without a definite value standard or direction. Strauss denies the possibility of class consciousness and tries to find an eternal and unchanging natural right. He believes that the so-called historical method is a cycle formed by the accidental splicing of countless broken moments, which is a relativist methodology that may lead to the danger of nihilism.

Strauss ignored the decisive role of productivity in human society, especially the fact that "of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive force is the revolutionary class itself." (Marx & Engels, 1976b) As a result, he could not recognize the source of the driving force for historical development. Although he recognized the communist ideal, he did not believe that communism could be achieved through the proletarian revolution. He thought that the proletariat would be trapped in the dilemma of working and struggling for survival all day long and could not get rid of the secular pursuit of material things. Lukács did not deny that the proletariat was troubled by reification. He admitted that in a certain historical period, the proletariat "temporarily succumbs to reification." (Lukács, 1923). However, Lukács distinguished between the psychological consciousness of individual proletarians and the class consciousness of the proletariat, pointing out that the psychological consciousness of individuals is individual and temporary, while class consciousness is overall and continuously developing and progressing, and can ultimately reach the awareness of the historical mission of the proletariat itself. Strauss confused the difference between the two and did not use an overall and developmental method to recognize the potential revolutionary nature of the proletariat. Therefore, he could not recognize the importance of class consciousness and could not understand the assertion of historical materialism

that history is constantly advancing and developing through class consciousness, and could only wrongly conclude that historical materialism is a kind of relativism. Lukács adhered to Marx's historical materialism and regarded class consciousness as the driving force for the continuous progress of history. The existence of class consciousness proves that historical materialism has a moral dimension and a value orientation. In this sense, historical materialism is obviously not a kind of relativism.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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