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Theory

Socialism as a wager, from Lucien Goldman to Daniel Bensaïd

- Features -

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Lucien Goldmann (1913-1970) is one of the most important representatives of the humanistic and historicist current of Marxism in the twentieth century. His works of philosophy and sociology of culture – including “The Hidden God” (1955), an innovative study of the tragic world vision in Pascal and Racine – are strongly marked by the influence of the Lukacs of “History and Class Consciousness” and are radically opposed to positivist or structuralist readings of Marxism. A Romanian Jew who had lived in France since the 1930s, Goldmann identified with a self-managed socialism, critical of both social-democracy and Stalinism. Whereas in the United States and in Latin America his thought and work continue to generate a very keen interest, a strange forgetfulness seems to have affected him in France. [1]] It is true that this is a sociology in total rupture with the dominant tradition of French social science, stretching from Auguste Comte to Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, via Emile Durkheim. But, on the other hand, through his reinterpretation of Pascal, he is nonetheless the heir of a dissenting current of French modern culture.

We know of Hegelian Marxism, Kantian Marxism and Weberian Marxism, but the concept of Pascalian Marxism is unknown in the annals of Marxism. However, it seems to me that it is entirely appropriate to the author of *The Hidden God*. Certainly, several Marxists have been interested in Pascal; at about the same time that the Goldmann's book was published, two volumes by Henri Lefebvre on the author of *Pensées* were published, but, as we shall see later, the latter made no claims to the Pascalian legacy.

So can we speak of an *influence* of Pascal on Goldmann? As the latter explains in a key passage of *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, influence explains nothing: it needs to be explained: “Any writer or thinker finds around themselves a large number of literary, moral, religious, philosophical, and so on works, which are all possible influences, among which they will necessarily have to choose. The problem which arises for the historian is by no means confined to whether Kant was influenced by Hume, Pascal by Montaigne, Voltaire by Locke and so on; they must explain why they have been subjected to precisely this influence and not another, and why at this time in history. “Influence” is therefore in the final analysis a choice, an activity of the individual and social subject, and not a passive reception. This activity is also manifested by the transformations/deformations/metamorphoses that the creator undergoes in the thought which surrounds and influences them: when we are talking about, for example, the influence of Aristotle on Thomism, it is not exactly what Aristotle has really thought and written, but Aristotle as he has been selected and understood by Saint Thomas”. [3]

This applies absolutely to the relationship of Goldmann to Pascal: it is about a choice, an appropriation, an interpretation, in a determined historical context. At a certain moment of his intellectual and political journey, Lucien Goldmann needed certain arguments that he found in Pascal and that he integrated, by reinterpreting them, into its system of thought. This is especially true for the concept of the *wager*.

For Goldmann, dialectical thinking, socialism, are borne by a **faith** – secular, non-religious – in trans-individual values. What is this materialist “faith”? “Marxist faith”, he wrote, “is a faith in the future which men make themselves in and through history. Or, more accurately, in the future that we must make for ourselves by what we do, so that this faith becomes a “wager” which we make that our actions will, in fact, be successful. The transcendental element present in this faith is not supernatural and does not take us outside or beyond history, it merely takes us beyond the individual”. As rationalist thought, the Marxist dialectic is heir to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but by its faith in trans-individual values, it “leaps over six centuries of Thomist and Cartesian rationalism and renews the Augustinian tradition”, with which Pascal and the Jansenists identified. The act of faith, says Goldmann, is the common basis of Augustinian, Pascalian and Marxist epistemology, although in the three cases the “faith” is essentially different:

evidence of the transcendent, wager on the transcendent, wager on an immanent meaning. [4]

If the term “faith” often appears, in rhetorical form, in Marxist literature, Goldman is the first to have tried to explore the philosophical, ethical, methodological and political implications of this use. Without fearing “heresy” in relation to the historical materialist tradition, he discovers, thanks to his unorthodox and profoundly innovative interpretation of Pascal, the hidden affinity, **the underground tunnel which connects, passing under the mountain of the Enlightenment**, the tragic (religious) vision of the world and modern socialism.

The act of faith, which is located at the point of departure of the Marxist approach, is like any similar act, based on a **wager**: the possibility of historic realization of an authentic human community (socialism). Indeed, as Pascal and Kant showed, nothing on the level of indicative judgments, scientific “judgments of fact”, allows us to assert either the erroneous character or the valid character of the initial wager. The latter is not the subject of a “proof” or factual demonstration, but gambles on our joint action, in collective praxis. On the other hand, only the future realization of socialism is the subject of the wager: the other theses or assertions of Marxism are subject to doubt and to the permanent checking of facts and reality.

Individualistic worldviews – whether rationalist or empiricist – ignore the wager. It only finds its place at the heart of forms of thought inspired by **a faith in trans-individual values**: what the Pascalian wager and the dialectical wager have in common is **risk, the danger of failure and the hope of success**. What distinguishes them is the transcendental nature of the first (the wager on the existence of God) and the purely immanent and historic aspect of the second (the wager on the triumph of socialism in the alternative that offers humanity the choice between socialism and barbarism) (5). It is obvious that this formulation owes much to Rosa Luxemburg's *Junius Pamphlet – The crisis of German social democracy (1915)* - where the expression “socialism or barbarism” appears for the first time. Goldman had a copy of the original edition, in German, of this document, published in Berne in 1915, which he had probably acquired during his stay in Switzerland (during the Second World War), and this expression appears often in his writings. [5] In one of his final texts – in September 1970 – he wrote, this time in direct reference to Luxemburg: “The alternative formulated by Marx and by Rosa Luxemburg remains valid; at the two extreme poles of developments we see emerging the extreme images of barbarism and socialism”. [6]

To the question “is it necessary to wager?” Pascal responded that the human being is always already “in the game”. Whatever the obvious differences between his faith and that of Marx, “the idea that humans have “joined in”, that they must wager, would after Pascal, be the central idea of any philosophical thinking aware of the fact that human beings are not isolated monads sufficient to themselves, but a partial element inside of a *totality* which transcends them and to which they are connected by their aspirations, actions and faith; the central idea of any thought which knows that the individual cannot realize themselves alone, by their own forces, any authentic value and that they always need a trans-individual aid on existence on which they must bet because they cannot live and act without the hope of a *success* in which they must believe”. [*The Hidden God*, cited above] More than a tribute to Pascal, this passage offers a new, quite heterodox, interpretation of the meaning of Marxism as **revolutionary wager**.

For a system of thought based on linear progress and historical evolution in a single direction, the paradox of a system that is both more lucid and more “retrograde” – Pascal against Descartes, representative of scientific and rational progress – is incomprehensible. Goldman recognized that “the tragic and **non-revolutionary** character of Jansenism has allowed it to avoid some of the illusions of progressive rationalism and grasp better than the latter many of the aspects of the human condition (a similar phenomenon, Lukacs has shown, occurred in Germany, where dialectical thought was born)”. [7] These remarks could be the starting point of a Marxist critique of the ideology of progress, which unfortunately Goldman did not consider. The writings of Walter Benjamin were unknown to him and those of the Frankfurt School seemed to him too pessimistic.

The reflection on the wager is without a doubt one of the most fascinating aspects of Goldman's work, but it has not

found much place in the main works dedicated to his thinking. Certainly, the wager figures in the title of the excellent intellectual biography published by Mitchell Cohen, “The Wager of Lucien Goldmann”, but there is very little discussion of the wager in the text of the book itself. With respect to the remarkable book by Pierre Zima, it includes a chapter entitled “Tragic wager/dialectical wager”, but paradoxically it dedicates only two paragraphs to the wager properly so called. [8] This criticism applies also to the book published in 1973 by Sami Nair and myself, which contains only a page and a half on the wager. It was only much later (1995) that I wrote an essay entitled “The communitarian wager of Lucien Goldmann”. [9]

That said, there are, here and there, echoes of this approach. For example, in a clear reference to Goldmann – who he had chosen to supervise his thesis – Ernest Mandel argued, in an essay on the reasons for the foundation of the Fourth International (1988) – when the socialist revolution is the sole chance of survival for the human race, it is reasonable to speak of a wager on it in fighting for its victory. As Mandel put it: “Never was the equivalent of the “Pascalian wager” in relation to revolutionary commitment as valid as it is today. By not committing oneself, all is lost in advance. How can one not make that choice even if the chance of success is only one per cent? In fact, the odds are much better than that.” [10] However, this intuition would not be developed in his writings; it remains an isolated occurrence, in this little known article.

A few years later, another brilliant Marxist intellectual belonging to the same current as Mandel, Daniel Bensaïd (1946-2009), would, in his beautiful book *Le Pari mélancolique* (1997) take up and develop, in his own way, the argument on Goldmann’s wager. In fact, he was the first Marxist to place the wager at the centre of a revolutionary vision of history.

Following Walter Benjamin, Bensaïd shows that the idea of revolution is radically opposed to the crippling faith in a guaranteed future, as well as to the mechanical series of an implacable temporality. Refractory to the causal sequence of ordinary facts, it is interruption. A magical moment, the revolution returns to the enigma of emancipation, breaking with the linear time of progress, this ideology of the savings fund so violently denounced by Péguy, where every minute, every hour that passes, are supposed to bring their small share of growth and development. As Benjamin had understood, the spectre of the revolution requires justice for the oppressed past and announces a liberated future.

The time and the space of revolutionary strategy differ radically from those of Newtonian physics, “absolute, true, mathematical”. It is a heterogeneous time, kairoic – that is to say it is about seizing the right or opportune moment. But before a crossroads of possibilities, the ultimate decision includes an irreducible share of *wager*.

For Bensaïd, revolutionary political commitment is not based on any progressive “scientific certainty”, but on a reasoned wager on the future: emancipatory action is, to adopt a formula of Blaise Pascal, “a work for the uncertain”. The wager is a hope that we cannot demonstrate but on which it is necessary to commit one’s entire existence. The wager is inescapable, in one direction or the other: as Pascal wrote, it is necessary to wager, we have embarked. In the religion of the hidden God (Pascal) as in revolutionary politics (Marx), the obligation of the wager defines the tragic condition of modern humanity.

This argument has the immense advantage of ridding Marxism of the heavy positivist/scientist and determinist load which has weighed on it so much during the course of the twentieth century, reducing its subversive and emancipatory potential, and gives full place to the “subjective factor”, “optimism of the will”, commitment, collective action and, therefore, strategy. Thanks to the detour via Pascal, Daniel gives a philosophical foundation to his revolutionary Leninism: this is not the least paradox of this amazing book.

Bensaïd – like Goldmann himself – is not much interested in the “mathematical” aspect of the Pascalian wager, the calculation of probabilities, the comparison between the finite happiness achieved on earth and the infinite happiness

of eternity – an argument that serves to justify, according to Pascal, the choice to wager on the infinite. It seems to me that this is however a crucial difference with the revolutionary wager: while the Christian believer wagers on eternal happiness through the salvation of their individual soul, the “socialist believer” wagers on a collective happiness in which nothing ensures that they will themselves take part. Could it be that a communist faith is more ascetical than the Jansenism of Pascal?

Why is this wager therefore melancholic? Daniel’s argument has an impressive lucidity: the revolutionary, he wrote, has always been acutely aware of risk, the feeling of the recurrence of disaster. Hence the inflexible melancholy of Blanqui, the suicidal melancholy of Benjamin, the lucid melancholy of Tucholsky, the ironic melancholy of Guevara, the irreducible melancholy of Trotsky. Their melancholy is that of defeat, a defeat “recommenced how many times” (Péguy). In a letter from his youth, Benjamin paid tribute, recalls Daniel, to the grandeur of the “fantastic controlled melancholy” of Péguy; and in his essay on surrealism (1929), he refers to the Trotskyist Pierre Naville, according to whom pessimism is an essential dimension of the Marxist dialectic. This revolutionary melancholy of the inaccessible, without resignation or cessation, distinguishes itself radically, according to Daniel, from the powerless grief of the inevitable and post-modern lamentations bereft of purpose, with their aestheticization of a disenchanted world.

Nothing is more alien to revolutionary melancholy than the crippling faith in a necessary progress, in a future which is assured. Pessimistic, it nonetheless refuses to capitulate, to bend before failure. Its strategic utopia – quite the opposite of the “chimerical Utopias” of the past and of the present – is that of the principle of resistance to probable disaster. [\[1\]](#)

Daniel Bensaïd gives a new insight into hope, an insight that helps us to restore the circulation between the memory of the past and the opening of the future. Without complacent optimism, without any confidence in the “laws of the history”, he affirms nonetheless the necessity, the urgency, the actuality of the revolutionary wager. A wager, certainly, melancholic, but never resigned, never fatalist, never passive, neutral or indifferent – the attitude of those who wager, whether they are conscious of it or not, on the non-revolution, that is on the eternal return of the same, the infinite reign of capital, the persistence, *per omnia saecula saeculorum*, of the infernal round of the commodity...

[\[1\]](#) The only biography published of Goldmann, Mitchell Cohen, *The Wager of Lucien Goldmann*, Princeton University Press, 1994 has not been translated into French.

[\[2\]](#) The only biography published of Goldmann, Mitchell Cohen, *The Wager of Lucien Goldmann*, Princeton University Press, 1994 has not been translated into French.

[\[3\]](#) translated from L. Goldmann, *Sciences humaines et Philosophie (SHP)*, Paris 1966, Gonthier, pp. 97-98.

[\[4\]](#) L. Goldmann, *The Hidden God – A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, Routledge, 2013, p. 90.

[\[5\]](#) I possess this copy, generously given to me in memory of “Gica” (Lucien Goldmann to his friends), by Annie Goldmann.

[\[6\]](#) This text has been published as *Le testament théorique de Lucien Goldmann*.

[\[7\]](#) *The Hidden God*, cited above.

[\[8\]](#) P. Zima, *Goldmann, Dialectique de l'immanence*, Paris 1973, Éd. Universitaires, pp. 74-75.

[\[9\]](#) M. Löwy, “Lucien Goldmann ou le pari communautaire”, *Recherche Sociale* number 135, July-September 1995, pp. 54-61.

[10] Ernest Mandel, "The reasons for founding the Fourth International and why they remain valid today", *International Marxist Review*, vol. 3, number 2, Autumn 1988, p. 20.

[11] See Enzo Traverso, *Left wing Melancholia: Marxism, History and Memory*, Columbia University Press, 2016.