

Georg Lukacs 1919

Tactics and Ethics

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For all parties and classes the position and significance of tactics in the field of political action differ greatly in accordance with the structure and historico-philosophical role peculiar to those parties and classes.

If we define tactics as a means by which politically active groups achieve their declared aims, as a link connecting ultimate objective with reality, fundamental differences arise, depending on whether the ultimate objective is categorized as a moment within the given social reality or as one that transcends it. The principal difference between the immanent and the transcendent ultimate objective is that the former accepts the existing legal order as a given principle which necessarily and normatively determines the scope of any action, whereas in the case of a socio-transcendent objective that legal order is seen as pure reality, as real power, to be taken into account for, at most, reasons of expediency. The 'at most' needs special emphasis, for an objective like that of the French Legitimist Restoration, namely the acknowledgment, in any sense whatever, of the legal order of the Revolution, was already tantamount to a compromise. Even this example, however, shows that the various transcendent objectives, conceived purely in terms of a sociology which is totally abstract and devoid of all values, are to be regarded as being on the same level.

For if the social order which is defined as the ultimate objective already existed in the past, if it were merely a question of reinstating a previous stage of development, then ignorance of the existing legal order represents only an

apparent, and not a real, violation of the limits of the given legal orders: one real legal order confronts another real legal order, the continuity of development is not rigidly denied, and the most far-reaching aim amounts merely to cancelling an intermediate stage. Every essentially revolutionary objective, on the other hand, denies the moral *raison d'être* and the historico-philosophical appositeness of both present and past legal orders; how far — if at all — they are to be taken into account is therefore an exclusively tactical question.

Because, however, tactics free themselves in this way from the normal limits imposed by the legal order, some new practical criterion has to be discovered which will determine the tactical attitude. Since the concept of expediency is ambiguous, a corresponding distinction must be established between an immediate, concrete aim and an ultimate objective still remote from the ground of reality. For those classes and parties whose ultimate objective has in fact already been achieved, tactics will necessarily be determined by the attainability of the immediate and concrete aims; for them, the gulf which divides the immediate and the ultimate goal, the conflicts arising from this duality, simply do not exist. Tactics here assume the form of legal *Realpolitik*, and it is no mere chance that in those (exceptional) cases where a conflict of this kind does emerge as, for instance, in connection with war — these classes and parties practise the shallowest and most catastrophic form of *Realpolitik*. They have no choice, for the existence of their ultimate goal admits of no other course of action.

This contrast helps greatly to elucidate the tactics of the revolutionary classes and parties: their tactics are not determined by short-term immediately attainable advantages; indeed, they must sometimes reject such advantages as endangering what is truly important, the ultimate objective. But since the ultimate objective has been categorized, not as Utopia, but as *reality which has to be achieved*, positing it above and beyond the immediate advantage does not mean abstracting from reality or attempting to impose certain ideals on reality, but rather it entails the knowledge and transformation into action of those forces already at work *within social reality* — those forces, that is, which are directed towards the realization of the ultimate objective. Without this knowledge the tactics of every revolutionary class or party will vacillate aimlessly between

a *Realpolitik* devoid of ideals and an ideology without real content. It was the lack of this knowledge which characterized the revolutionary struggle of the bourgeois class. An ideology of the ultimate goal existed even here, it is true, but it could not be organically integrated into the planning of concrete action; rather, it developed in a largely pragmatic way, in the creation of institutions which quickly became ends in themselves, thereby obscuring the ultimate objective itself and degrading it to the level of pure, already ineffectual ideology. The unique sociological significance of socialism is precisely that it provides a solution to this problem. For if the ultimate objective of socialism is utopian in the sense that it transcends the economic, legal and social limits of contemporary society and can only be realized through the destruction of that society, it is anything but utopian in the sense that its attainment would entail the absorption of ideas hovering outside or above society. The Marxist theory of class struggle, which in this respect is wholly derived from Hegel's conceptual system, changes the transcendent objective into an immanent one; the class struggle of the proletariat is at once the objective itself and its realization. This process is not a means the significance and value of which can be judged by the standards of a goal which transcends it; it is rather a new elucidation of the utopian society, step by step, leap by leap, corresponding to the logic of history. This implies immersion in contemporary social reality. The 'means' are not alien to the goal (as was the case with the realization of bourgeois ideology); instead, they bring the goal closer to self-realization. It follows that there will be conceptually indeterminable transitional stages between the tactical means and the ultimate objective; it is never possible to know in advance which tactical step will succeed in achieving the ultimate objective itself.

This brings us to the decisive criterion of socialist tactics: the philosophy of history. The fact of the class struggle is nothing other than a sociological description and an elevation of events into laws which are effective in social reality; the *meaning* of the class struggle of the proletariat, however, goes beyond this fact. Essentially, of course, the meaning cannot be separated from the fact, but it is directed towards the emergence of a social order which differs from that of every previous society in that it no longer knows either oppressors or oppressed. In order that the epoch of economic dependence, which is an affront to human dignity, should come to an end,

the blind power of economic forces must, as Marx says, be broken and replaced by a higher power which corresponds more exactly to the dignity of man. (*Capital*, Volume III)

Therefore, to weigh up and understand correctly the contemporary economic and social conjuncture, the true relations of power, is never more than to meet the *prerequisites* for correct socialist action, correct tactics. It does not in itself constitute a *criterion* of correctness. The only valid yardstick is whether the *manner* of the action in a given case serves to realize this goal, which is the essence of the socialist movement. Hence, since this ultimate objective is not served by qualitatively different means; since, rather, the means signify in themselves the progress towards that objective, all means by which this historico-philosophical process is raised to the conscious and real level are to be considered valid, whereas all means which mystify such consciousness — as for example acceptance of the legal order, of the continuity of ‘historical’ development, let alone the *momentary* material interests of the proletariat — are to be rejected. If ever there was a historical movement to which *Realpolitik* presents a baneful and ominous threat, it is that of socialism.

That means concretely that every gesture of solidarity with the existing order is fraught with such danger. Deriving though they may well do from true inner conviction, our insistent protests that such and such a gesture of solidarity indicates only a momentary, immediate community of interests, nothing more than a provisional alliance for the attainment of a concrete goal, nevertheless do not obviate the danger that the feeling of solidarity will take root in *that* form of consciousness which necessarily obscures the world-historical consciousness, the awakening of humanity to self-consciousness. The class struggle of the proletariat is not merely a class struggle (if it were, it would indeed be governed simply by *Realpolitik*), but a means whereby humanity liberates itself, a means to the true beginning of *human* history. Every compromise made obscures precisely *this aspect* of the struggle and is therefore — despite all its possible, short-term (but extremely problematical) advantages — fatal to the achievement of this true ultimate objective. As long as the present social order persists, the ruling classes remain in a position to compensate, openly or covertly, for whatever economic or political advantages have been won in this fashion. Such ‘compensatory’

measures effectively worsen the conditions for the continuation of the struggle, since obviously the compromise will weaken the mood of resistance. Tactical deviations within socialism are therefore of more fundamental significance than is the case with other historical movements. The sense of world history determines the tactical criteria, and it is before history that he who does not deviate for reasons of expediency from the narrow, steep path of correct action prescribed by the philosophy of history which alone leads to the goal, undertakes responsibility for *all* his deeds.

It seems to follow from the above that we have also discovered the answer to the ethical problem; that adherence to the correct tactics is in itself ethical. But it is at this point that the dangerous aspects of the Hegelian legacy in Marxism become apparent. Hegel's system is devoid of ethics; in his work ethics are supplanted by the system of material, spiritual and social goods in which his social philosophy culminates. Essentially Marxism has taken over this form of ethics (as we see, for example, in Kautsky's book [[*Ethics and the Materialist conception of History*](#)]) merely positing other 'values' than the Hegelian ones, and without raising the question as to whether or not the quest for socially correct 'values', socially correct goals — irrespective of the inner motives of the action — is thereby in itself ethical, although it is clear that the question of ethics can only proceed from these socially correct goals. People who deny the ethical ramifications which arise at this point also deny their ethical possibility, and come into conflict with the most primitive, universal psychological facts: conscience and the sense of responsibility. What all such people are concerned with is not primarily *what* a person did or wanted (that is governed by the norms of social and political action), but whether what he did or wanted and *why* he did it or wanted it was objectively correct or false. This question of the whys and wherefores, however, can only arise in individual cases, it has no meaning except in relation to the individual, in sharp contrast to the tactical question of objective correctness, the unambiguous resolution of which is only to be found in the collective action of groups of human beings. Therefore we may state the question which confronts us in these terms: 'How do conscience and the sense of responsibility of the individual relate to the problem of tactically correct collective action?'

It is most important at this juncture to establish a mutual dependence, precisely because the two types of action being related are essentially independent of each other. On the one hand, the question whether any given tactical decision is right or wrong is independent of the question whether or not the decision was determined by moral motives on the part of those who act in accordance with it. On the other hand, an action that springs from the purest ethical source can, from a tactical point of view, be completely mistaken. This independence of each other, however, is more apparent than real. For — as we shall see later — once the purely ethically motivated action of the individual brings him into the field of politics, even its objective (historico-philosophical) correctness or incorrectness can no longer be a matter of ethical indifference. Moreover, by virtue of the historico-philosophical orientation of socialist tactics, a collective action must arise in that one individual will (once the many individual wills have been aggregated) and the governing historico-philosophical consciousness must express itself in him — particularly since the necessary rejection of the immediate advantage in the interest of the ultimate objective would otherwise be impossible. The problem can now be posed in the following terms: what ethical considerations inspire in the individual the decision that the necessary historico-philosophical consciousness he possesses can be transformed into correct political action, i.e. component of a collective will, and can also determine that action?

To re-emphasize the point: ethics relate to the individual and the necessary consequence of this relationship is that the individual's conscience and sense of responsibility are confronted with the postulate that he must act as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world's destiny, the approach of which is inevitably helped or hindered by the tactics he is about to adopt. (For in the realm of ethics there is no neutrality and no impartiality; even he who is *unwilling* to act must be able to account to this conscience for his inactivity.) Everyone who at the present time opts for communism is therefore obliged to bear the same *individual* responsibility for each and every human being who dies for him in the struggle, as if he himself had killed them all. But all those who ally themselves to the other side, the defence of capitalism, must bear the same individual responsibility for the destruction entailed in the new imperialist revanchist wars which are surely

imminent, and for the future oppression of the nationalities and classes. From the ethical point of view, no one can escape responsibility with the excuse that he is only an individual, on whom the fate of the world does not depend. Not only can this not be known objectively for certain, because it is always possible that it will depend precisely on the individual, but this kind of thinking is also made impossible by the very essence of ethics, by conscience and the sense of responsibility. He whose decision does not arise from such considerations — no matter how highly developed a creature he may otherwise be exists in ethical terms at a primitive, unconscious, instinctual level.

This purely formal and ethical definition of individual action, however, does not clarify sufficiently the relationship between tactics and ethics. When the individual who makes an ethical decision within himself then follows or rejects a particular tactical course, he moves onto a special level of action, that of politics, and the distinctiveness of his action entails — from the standpoint of pure ethics — the consequence that he must know under what circumstances and how he acts.

The concept of ‘knowledge’ thereby introduced into the argument requires further clarification. On the one hand, ‘knowledge’ is by no means to be taken as total understanding of the actual political situation and all its possible consequences; nor, on the other hand, can it be regarded as the result of purely subjective deliberations, where, that is, the individual concerned acts ‘to the best of his ability and in good faith’. If the former were the case, every human action would be impossible from the outset; if the latter, the way would be clear for extreme levity and frivolity and every moral standard would become illusory. Since, though, the individual’s seriousness and sense of responsibility constitute a moral standard for every deed, implying that the individual concerned could know the consequences of his deeds, the question arises whether or not, in the light of this knowledge, he could answer for these consequences to his conscience. This objective possibility admittedly varies according to the individual and from case to case, but essentially, both for the individual and from case to case, it is always determinable. Even now, for every socialist, the actual historico-philosophical pressure of the social ideal of socialism determines both the content of the objective possibilities for realizing that ideal and also the very

fact that the criterion of possibility should itself be possible. For every socialist, then, morally correct action is related fundamentally to the correct perception of the given historico-philosophical situation, which in turn is only feasible through the efforts of every individual to make this self-consciousness conscious for himself. The first unavoidable prerequisite for this is the formation of class consciousness. In order for correct action to become an authentic, correct regulator, class consciousness must raise itself above the level of the merely given; it must remember its world-historical mission and its sense of responsibility. For the class interest the attainment of which makes up the content of class-conscious action coincides neither with the sum of the personal interests of the individuals belonging to the class nor with the immediate short-term interests of the class as a collective entity. The class interests which will bring socialism about and the class-consciousness in which they find expression signify a world-historical mission — and hence, too, the objective possibility mentioned above implies the question: has the historical moment already arrived which leads — or rather leaps from the stage of steady approach to that of true realization?

Every individual must, however, be aware that, by the very nature of the matter, we can talk only in terms of a possibility. We cannot conceive of a human science which could say for society, with the accuracy and certainty that characterizes the astronomer's prediction of the appearance of a comet: today the time has come for the realization of the principles of socialism. Likewise, there exists no science which could say: today the time is not yet ripe, we must wait, it will come tomorrow or in another two years. Science, knowledge, can indicate only possibilities — and it is only in the realm of the possible that moral, responsible action, truly human action, is itself possible. For the individual who seizes this possibility, however, there is, if he is a socialist, no choice and no hesitation.

This is not by any means to suggest that action which arises in this fashion must necessarily be morally faultless and unexceptionable. It is not the task of ethics to invent prescriptions for correct action, nor to iron out or deny the insuperable, tragic conflicts of human destiny. On the contrary: ethical self-awareness makes it quite clear that there are situations — tragic situations — in which it is impossible to act without burdening oneself with guilt. But at the same time it teaches us that, even faced with the choice of two ways of

incurring guilt, we should still find that there is a standard attaching to correct and incorrect action. This standard we call sacrifice. And just as the individual who chooses between two forms of guilt finally makes the correct choice when he sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea, so it also takes strength to assess this sacrifice in terms of the collective action. In the latter case, however, the idea represents an imperative of the world-historical situation, a historico-philosophical mission. In one of his novels, Ropschin (Boris Savinkov^[1]), the leader of the terrorist group during the Russian Revolution from 1904 to 1906, put the problem of individual terror in the following terms:

murder is not allowed, it is an absolute and unpardonable sin; it 'may' not, but yet it 'must' be committed. Elsewhere in the same book he sees, not the justification (that is impossible) but the ultimate moral basis of the terrorist's act as the sacrifice for his brethren, not only of his life, but also of his purity, his morals, his very soul. In other words, only he who acknowledges unflinchingly and without any reservations that murder is under no circumstances to be sanctioned can commit the murderous deed that is truly — and tragically — moral. To express this sense of the most profound human tragedy in the incomparably beautiful words of Hebbel's Judith: 'Even if God had placed sin between me and the deed enjoined upon me — who am I to be able to escape it?'

1. Boris Savinkov (1879 — 1925). Of particular importance to Lukacs were the *Memoirs of a Terrorist* and *What never happened. A Novel of the Revolution*. The latter work treats of the unworldliness of the Russian revolutionaries. In a letter to Paul Ernst of 4 May 1915, Lukács wrote: 'Considering Ropschin's books as documents rather than works of art, I did not at all see them as pathological symptoms, but instead as a new manifestation of the old conflict between a primary ethic (obligation towards institutions) and a secondary ethic (obligations towards the soul). The question of primacy always takes on a peculiar dialectical complexity when the soul is not sufficient unto itself, but is involved in mankind — as in the case of political man, of the revolutionary. Here, if the soul is to be saved, the soul must be sacrificed: starting from a mystical ethic one is forced to become a brutal *Realpolitiker* and to violate the absolute commandment "Thou shalt not kill" which entails no obligations to institutions' (R.L.).
