“IT is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure. Of course the problem can only be discussed with this degree of generality if it achieves the depth and breadth to be found in Marx’s own analyses. That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.

The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the central importance of this problem for economics itself. Nor shall we consider its implications for the economic doctrines of the vulgar Marxists which follow from their abandonment of this starting-point.

Our intention here is to *base*ourselves on Marx’s economic analyses and to proceed from there to a discussion of the problems growing out of the fetish character of commodities, both as an objective form and also as a subjective stance corresponding to it. Only by understanding this can we obtain a clear insight into the ideological problems of capitalism and its downfall.

Before tackling the problem itself we must be quite clear in our minds that commodity fetishism is a *specific*problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism. Commodity exchange an the corresponding subjective and objective commodity relations existed, as we know, when society was still very primitive. What is at issue *here,*however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total*outer and inner life of society?” (Lukacs, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.1 https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc05.htm

“The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality* as a *social process*. For only this conception dissolves the fetishistic forms necessarily produced by the capitalist mode of production and enables us to see them as mere illusions which are not less illusory for being seen to be necessary. […]. Only when this veil is torn aside does historical knowledge become possible. For the function of these unmediated concepts that have been derived from the fetishistic forms of objectivity is to make the phenomena of capitalist society appear as supra-historical essences.” (Lukacs, “What is Orthodox Marxism?” in *History and Class Consciousness* [https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lukacs/history\_and\_class\_consciousness\_georg\_lukacs.pdf p.23](https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lukacs/history_and_class_consciousness_georg_lukacs.pdf%20p.23))

3.“Thus the barrier which converts the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie into ‘false’ consciousness is objective; it is the class situation itself. It is the objective result of the economic set-up, and is neither arbitrary, subjective nor psychological” (“Class Consciousness” in *History and Class Consciousness* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs3.htm> *(few lines before the beginning of section 2)*

4. “With the emergence of historical materialism there arose the theory of the “conditions for the liberation of the proletariat” and the doctrine of reality understood as the total process of social evolution. This was only possible because for the proletariat the total knowledge of its class-situation was a vital necessity, a matter of life and death; because its class situation becomes comprehensible only if the whole of society can be understood; and because this understanding is the inescapable precondition of its actions. […]. From its own point of view self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the whole so that the proletariat is at one and the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge. […]

Marx concretises this idea with great clarity by applying it to social development: [[35]](https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/orthodox.htm#35)

“If socialist writers attribute this world-historical role to the proletariat it is not because they believe ... that the proletariat are gods. Far from it. The proletariat can and must liberate itself because when the proletariat is fully developed, its humanity and even the appearance of its humanity has become totally abstract; because in the conditions of its life all the conditions of life of contemporary society find their most inhuman consummation; because in the proletariat man is lost to himself but at the same time he has acquired a theoretical consciousness of this loss, and is driven by the absolutely imperious dictates of his misery – the practical expression of this necessity – which can no longer be ignored or whitewashed, to rebel against this inhumanity. However, the proletariat cannot liberate itself without destroying the conditions of its own life. But it cannot do that without destroying all the inhuman conditions of life in contemporary society which exist in the proletariat in a concentrated form.” “(Lukacs, “What is Orthodox Marxism?” in *History and Class Consciousness* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/orthodox.htm>*, (towards the end of the text)*

“The self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society. When the proletariat furthers its own class-aims it simultaneously achieves the conscious realisation of the – objective – aims of society, aims which would inevitably remain abstract possibilities and objective frontiers but for this conscious intervention.” (“Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, in *History and Class Consciousness* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07_1.htm>*,* beginning of the section “the standpoint of the proletariat”)

6.“The tragic dialectics of the bourgeoisie can be seen in the fact that it is not only desirable but essential for it to clarify its own class interests on *every particular issue,* while at the same time such a clear awareness becomes fatal when it is extended to *the question of the totality.*The chief reason for this is that the rule of the bourgeoisie can only be the rule of a minority. Its hegemony is exercised not merely *by*a minority but *in the interest*of that minority, so the need to deceive the other classes and to ensure that their class consciousness remains amorphous is inescapable for a bourgeois regime. (Consider here the theory of the state that stands ‘above’ class antagonisms, or the notion of an ‘impartial’ system of justice.)

But the veil drawn over the nature of bourgeois society is indispensable to the bourgeoisie itself.” (“Class Consciousness” in *History and Class Consciousness* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs3.htm>, in the last part of section 3)

**QUESTIONS (Choose one)**

1. To which Marxian idea does the first extract from Lukacs refer and which dimensions does it give to this idea?
2. Which idea can we draw from the extracts 3 and 4?
3. Analyse extract 6
4. Analyse Lukacs’ idea of the “imputed class consciousness” of the proletariat. What sort of critique can be made to it?