

# Reification and Recognition: A New Look at an Old Idea

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"All reification is a forgetting."

Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno,  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment*

"Knowledge is in the end based on  
acknowledgment."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

In the German-speaking world of the 1920s and 1930s, the concept of reification constituted a leitmotiv of social and cultural critique. As if refracted through a concave mirror, the historical experiences of rising unemployment and economic crises that gave the Weimar Republic its distinctive character seemed to find concentrated expression in this concept and its related notions. Social relationships increasingly reflected a climate of cold, calculating purposefulness; artisans' loving care for their creations appeared to have given way to an attitude of mere instrumental command; and even the subject's innermost experiences seemed to be infused with the icy breath of calculating compliance. An intellectually committed philosopher's presence of mind was needed, however, before such diffuse moods could be distilled into the concept of reification. It was Georg Lukács who, by boldly combining motifs from the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, succeeded in coining this key concept in a collection of essays published in 1925 and titled *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>1</sup> In the center of this volume so fueled by the hope of an impending revolution is a three-part treatise called "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat."<sup>2</sup> This work moved an entire generation of philosophers and sociologists to analyze the forms of life under the then-prevailing circumstances as being the result of social reification.<sup>3</sup>

After World War II, however, the primacy of the category of "reification" as a diagnosis of prevailing circumstances was lost. As if the horror of the Holocaust had crippled any speculative tendency toward hyperbolic social diagnostics, social theorists and philosophers were instead content to analyze deficits of democracy and justice, without making use of concepts referring to social pathologies such as reification or commercialization. Although these notions lived on in the writings of the Frankfurt School—especially in the works of Adorno—and despite the fact that the memory of Lukács' work flared up once again in the student movements of the late 1960s,<sup>4</sup> the project of an analysis of reification seemed to have become part of a bygone era. Merely mentioning the term "reification" was taken as a symptom of obstinately desiring to belong to a cultural epoch that had long since lost its legitimacy in the wake of the postwar era with its own cultural reforms and theoretical renewals.

Only now do there appear to be an increasing number of signs that this situation could be changing once again. Like a philosophically unprocessed nugget, the category of "reification" has reemerged from the immense depths of the Weimar Republic and retaken center stage in theoretical discourse. There are three, if not four, indicators that lend support to this speculation that the climate in the world of contemporary social diagnostics is changing. First (and quite banally), one can point to a number of recent novels and narratives that radiate an aesthetic aura of the creeping commercialization of our everyday life. By using particular kinds of stylistic devices or drawing upon certain specific lexica, these literary works suggest that we view the inhabitants of our social world as interacting with themselves and others as they would with lifeless objects—without a trace of inner sentiment or any attempt at understanding the other's point of view. The list of authors to be mentioned in this context encompasses American writers such as Raymond Carver and Harold Brodkey, the *enfant terrible* of French literature Michel Houellebecq, and German-speaking literary figures such as Elfriede Jelinek and Silke Scheuermann.<sup>5</sup> Whereas in these literary works the concept of reification is present solely as an atmospheric mood, in recent socio-

logical analysis it has come to be studied as a modified form of human behavior. There are innumerable investigations in the domain of cultural sociology or social psychology that have discerned an increasingly strong tendency on the part of subjects to feign certain feelings or desires for opportunistic reasons to the extent that they eventually come to experience these very same feelings and desires as genuine elements of their own personality.<sup>6</sup> This is a form of emotional self-manipulation that Lukács already had in mind when he described journalism as being a "prostitution" of "experiences and beliefs,"<sup>7</sup> regarding it as the "apogee" of social reification.

Of course, in these diagnoses of a tendency to manage one's feelings, the concept of reification appears as inexplicitly as it does in most of those pieces of literature that create an atmosphere of cold rationality and manipulation. But this is in no way true of a third category of text that documents a return of the thematic of reification. Within the sphere of ethics and moral philosophy, there have been a number of recent endeavors to get a theoretical grasp on the kind of social phenomena that had clearly confronted Lukács in the course of his analysis. The concept of reification is here often explicitly used without any reference to the text from which the term originates. For instance, Martha Nussbaum explicitly uses the term "objectification" to characterize particularly extreme forms in which individuals instrumentalize others.<sup>8</sup> To take another example, although Elisabeth Anderson abstains from explicitly using the term "reification," her description of the economic alienation of contemporary life certainly touches on comparable phenomena.<sup>9</sup> In these ethical contexts, "reification" is used in a decidedly normative sense; it signifies a type of human behavior that violates moral or ethical principles by not treating other subjects in accordance with their characteristics as human beings, but instead as numb and lifeless objects—as "things" or "commodities." The empirical phenomena thereby referred to encompass tendencies as disparate as the increasing demand for surrogate mothers, the commodification of romantic and familial relationships, and the boom in the sex industry.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, a fourth context can be discerned in which the category of reification is once again being used to conceptualize certain striking developments in contemporary social life. Surrounding the current discussions concerning the results and social implications of brain research, it has often been remarked that the strictly physiobiological approach employed in this sphere betrays a reifying perspective. The argument goes that by presuming to explain human feelings and actions through the mere analysis of neuron firings in the brain, this approach abstracts from all our experience in the lifeworld and treats humans as senseless automatons and thus ultimately as mere things. Just as in the ethical approaches described, this critique draws upon the concept of reification to characterize a violation of moral principles. The fact that the neurophysiological perspective apparently doesn't take humans' personal characteristics and perspectives into account is thus conceptualized as an instance of reification.<sup>11</sup> In both contexts, therefore, the ontological connotations contained in this concept's allusion to mere things play a secondary, marginal role. Thus a certain form of reifying behavior is regarded as questionable or mistaken not because it violates ontological presuppositions of our everyday activity but because it violates certain moral principles that we hold. By contrast, Lukács still assumed that he could carry out his analysis without making any reference to ethical tenets. He took the concept of reification literally in that he assumed it possible to characterize a certain kind of social behavior as being mistaken solely because it doesn't correspond with certain ontological facts.

Although Lukács abstains entirely from the use of moral terminology, his analysis of reification is obviously not without normative content. After all, his mere use of the term "reification" betrays his assumption that the phenomena he describes are in fact deviations from a "genuine" or "proper" stance toward the world. It also appears self-evident to Lukács that his readers will agree with him when he argues for the historical necessity of revolutionizing the existing social circumstances. Yet he introduces these implicit judgments at a theoretical level that is one step below the argumentative level upon

which these other authors formulate and justify their evaluations. For Lukács doesn't regard reification as a violation of moral principles, but as a deviation from a kind of human praxis or worldview essentially characteristic of the rationality of our form of life.<sup>12</sup> The arguments he directs at the capitalist reification of social life possess only an indirectly normative character, in that they result from the descriptive elements of a social ontology or philosophical anthropology that endeavors to comprehend the foundations of our existence. In this sense, Lukács' analysis can be said to deliver a social-ontological explanation of a certain pathology found in our life practices.<sup>13</sup> It is, however, in no way certain whether *we, today*, may speak in such a way, whether *we* can justify objections to a certain form of life with reference to social-ontological insights. Indeed, it isn't even clear whether *we*, in the light of the exacting demands that present societies currently place on strategic and cold-calculating activity, can use the concept of reification at all to express an internally coherent thought.

### *I. Reification in the Works of Lukács*

To settle the question of whether the concept of reification still retains any value today, we should orient ourselves first of all to Lukács' classical analysis. However, we will quickly see that his own categorial means are insufficient for the task of appropriately conceptualizing the occurrences that he grasps in a phenomenologically more or less accurate way. Lukács keeps very close to the ontologizing everyday understanding of the concept of reification in asserting with Marx on the very first page of his treatise that "reification" signifies nothing but the fact "that a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing."<sup>14</sup> In this elementary form, the concept clearly designates a cognitive occurrence in which something that doesn't possess thing-like characteristics in itself (e.g., something human) comes to be regarded as a thing. At first it isn't clear whether

Lukács holds reification to be a mere epistemic category mistake, a morally objectionable act, or an entirely distorted form of praxis. After only a few sentences, however, it becomes clear that he must have more than a category mistake in mind, because the occurrence of reification takes on a multilayered quality and stability that cannot be put down to mere cognitive error.

The social cause to which Lukács attributes the increasing dissemination and the constancy of reification is the expansion of commodity exchange, which, with the establishment of capitalist society, has become the prevailing mode of intersubjective agency. As soon as social agents begin to relate to each other primarily via the exchange of equivalent commodities, they will be compelled to place themselves in a reifying relationship to their surroundings, for they can then no longer avoid perceiving the elements of a given situation solely in relation to the utility that these elements might have for their egocentric calculations. This shift of perspective leads in many different directions, which for Lukács constitute just as many forms of reification. Subjects in commodity exchange are mutually urged (a) to perceive given objects solely as "things" that one can potentially make a profit on, (b) to regard each other solely as "objects" of a profitable transaction, and finally (c) to regard their own abilities as nothing but supplemental "resources" in the calculation of profit opportunities. Lukács subsumes all these changes in the person's stance toward the objective world, society, and himself or herself under the concept of "reification," without taking the many nuances and diversities among these attitudes into account. He designates the quantitative appraisal of objects, the instrumental treatment of other persons, and the perception of one's own bundle of talents and needs from the perspective of profitability as all being "thing-like." Furthermore, diverse modes of behavior ranging from stubborn egoism through detachment to primarily economic interests all come together in the attitude defined by Lukács as being "reifying."

Lukács, however, intends to do much more in his analysis than merely provide a phenomenology of the changes of consciousness

demanding of people in the process of commodity exchange. Although he at first directs his gaze almost exclusively at the phenomena described by Marx as being indicative of "commodity fetishism,"<sup>15</sup> he begins after a few pages to emancipate himself from a narrow focus on the economic sphere by extending the concept of reification and its various associated forms of coercion to cover the *entirety* of capitalist social life. It isn't clear from the text how this social generalization theoretically occurs, because Lukács seems to oscillate between alternative strategies of explanation. On the one hand, he presents a functionalist argument according to which the purpose of capitalist expansion requires the assimilation of all patterns of activity to commodity exchange;<sup>16</sup> on the other hand, he asserts with Max Weber that the process of rationalization autonomously leads to an expansion of instrumental-rational behavior into social spheres in which traditional modes of behavior previously prevailed.<sup>17</sup> Yet however problematic his rationale for this generalizing process may be, it ultimately aids Lukács in arriving at the central proposition of his study: in capitalism, reification has come to constitute human beings' "second nature."<sup>18</sup> He thereby asserts that every subject involved in the capitalist form of life will necessarily acquire the habit of perceiving himself and the surrounding world as mere things and objects.

Before I can further pursue the question of what type of mistake reification constitutes, it is necessary to depict the next step in Lukács' analysis. As we have seen, he has until now quite carelessly applied the terms of "things" or "thingness" to every sort of phenomenon that a subject could possibly perceive in her surroundings, or in her own person, as an economically utilizable factor. Regardless of whether objects, other persons or one's own talents and feelings are at issue, Lukács maintains that all these get experienced as thing-like objects as soon as they come to be viewed according to their potential usefulness in economic transactions. But of course, this conceptual strategy is insufficient for the task of justifying the idea of reification as a second nature, for when we speak of a "second nature," we are dealing not only with economic occurrences, but with all dimensions

of social activity. How can one explain what reification means *outside* of the sphere of commodity exchange, if this concept solely denotes an occurrence in which all elements of a social situation get redefined as economically calculable factors?

Interestingly enough, Lukács himself seems to have seen this problem, for he shifts the direction of his conceptual approach relatively early in the course of his analysis. Instead of primarily attending to the changes brought about by the process of reification in the objects that a subject perceives, he shifts his gaze toward the transformations occurring in the subject's own style of acting. He asserts that it is also in the "behavior" of the subject itself that commodity exchange causes certain changes, which ultimately affect that subject's entire relation to the surrounding world: For as soon as an agent permanently takes up the role of an exchange partner, he becomes a "contemplative" "detached observer," while his own existence "is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system."<sup>19</sup> With this conceptual shift of perspective, the concepts of contemplation and detachment become essential to the explanation of what takes place in the modus of reification at the level of social agency. Here, the subject is no longer empathetically engaged in interaction with his surroundings, but is instead placed in the perspective of a neutral observer, psychically and existentially untouched by his surroundings. The concept of "contemplation" thus indicates not so much an attitude of theoretical immersion or concentration as it does a stance of indulgent, passive observation, while "detachment" signifies that an agent is no longer emotionally affected by the events in his surroundings, instead letting them go by without any inner involvement, merely observing their passing.

It is quite clear that this conceptual strategy provides a more appropriate basis for explaining what might be meant by the notion that for human beings, reification has come to constitute a second nature. Although a few theoretical steps still seem to be lacking for a complete explication, the fundamental idea can certainly be summarized in the following fashion: In the constantly expanding

sphere of commodity exchange, subjects are compelled to behave as detached observers, rather than as active participants in social life, because their reciprocal calculation of the benefits that others might yield for their own profit demands a purely rational and emotionless stance. At the same time, this shift of perspective is accompanied by a reifying perception of *all* relevant situational elements, since the objects to be exchanged, the exchanging partners and finally one's own personal talents may only be appraised in accordance with how their quantitative characteristics might make them useful for the pursuit of profit. This kind of attitude becomes "second nature" when through corresponding processes of socialization, it develops into such a fixed habit that it comes to determine individual behavior across the entire spectrum of everyday life. Under these conditions, subjects also begin to perceive their surroundings as mere thing-like givens, even when they are not immediately involved in the process of commodity exchange. Lukács consequently understands "reification" to be a habit of mere contemplation and observation, in which one's natural surroundings, social environment, and personal characteristics come to be apprehended in a detached and emotionless manner—in short, as things.

With this short reconstruction of Lukács' analysis, we have at least indirectly defined what kind of mistake or failure *cannot* be denoted by reification. As we have already seen, such a distorting perspective does not designate a mere epistemic category mistake. This is not only because reification constitutes a multilayered and stable syndrome of distorted consciousness, but also because this shift in attitude reaches far too deep into our habits and modes of behavior for it to be able to be simply reversed by making a corresponding cognitive correction. According to Lukács, reification constitutes a distorting "stance"<sup>20</sup> or mode of behavior that is so widespread in capitalist societies that it can be described as "second nature." As a result, reification for Lukács can be conceived neither as a kind of moral misconduct, nor as a violation of moral principles, for it lacks the element of subjective intent necessary to bring moral terminology

into play. Unlike Martha Nussbaum, Lukács isn't interested in determining the point at which the reification of other persons becomes a morally reproachable act.<sup>21</sup> Instead, he sees all members of capitalist society as being socialized in the same manner into a reifying system of behavior, so that the instrumental treatment of others initially represents a mere social fact and not a moral wrong.

By discussing what Lukács cannot mean by reification, it is starting to become clearer how he does in fact intend this key concept to be understood. If reification constitutes neither a mere epistemic category mistake nor a form of moral misconduct, the only remaining possibility is that it be conceived as a form of praxis that is *structurally* false. The detached, neutrally observing mode of behavior, which Lukács attempts to conceptualize as "reification," must form an ensemble of habits and attitudes that deviates from a more genuine or better form of human praxis. This way of formulating the issue makes it clear that this conception of reification is in no way free of all normative implications. Although we are not dealing with a simple violation of moral principles, we are indeed confronted with the much more difficult task of demonstrating the existence of a "true" or "genuine" praxis over and against its distorted or atrophied form. The normative precepts reinforcing Lukács' analysis do not consist in a sum of morally legitimate principles, but in a notion of proper human praxis. This kind of notion, however, draws its justification much more strongly from social ontology or philosophical anthropology than from the sphere customarily termed moral philosophy or ethics.<sup>22</sup>

Now, it wouldn't be correct to say that Lukács wasn't aware of this normative challenge. Although he possesses a strong tendency to polemicize with G. W. F. Hegel against the idea of abstract moral duties, he knows very well that his talk of a reifying praxis or "stance" must be justified by a notion of true human praxis. It is for this reason that he intersperses throughout the text indications of what a practical human relation to the world *not* affected by the coercion of reification might look like. For instance, an active subject must be

conceived as experiencing the world directly or in an unmediated (*miterlebend*) way,<sup>23</sup> as an "organic part of his personality,"<sup>24</sup> and as "cooperative," whereas objects can be experienced by the active subject as being "qualitatively unique,"<sup>25</sup> "essential,"<sup>26</sup> and particular in content. Yet these anthropologically thoroughly plausible passages stand in an odd contrast to the statements in which Lukács, drawing on Hegel and Johann Fichte, attempts to summarize his vision of "true" human praxis. Here he maintains that we can speak of undistorted human agency only in cases where an object can be thought of as the product of a subject, and where mind and world therefore ultimately coincide with one another.<sup>27</sup> As these passages demonstrate, the conception of "agency" employed in Lukács' critique of reification is decisively influenced by an identity philosophy similar to the one found in Fichte's notion of the mind's spontaneous activity.<sup>28</sup> There can be no doubt nowadays, however, that by grounding his critique of reification in this way, he has robbed it of any chance of social-theoretical justification.<sup>29</sup>

Yet beneath these official, idealistic statements, there are also places in the text where Lukács expresses himself much more moderately. For example, he asserts that genuine, "true" praxis possesses precisely the same characteristics of empathetic engagement and interestedness that have been destroyed by the expansion of commodity exchange. Here Lukács doesn't contrast reifying praxis with a collective subject's production of an object, but with another, intersubjective attitude on the part of the subject. It is with this trace found in Lukács' text that my following considerations will deal. I will now turn to the question of whether it makes sense to reactualize the concept of reification in such a way that it can be understood as an atrophied or distorted form of a more primordial and genuine form of praxis, in which humans take up an empathetic and engaged relationship toward themselves and their surroundings.

Still standing in the way of such an act of rehabilitation, however, is a set of obstacles connected with certain problems in Lukács' treatise that we have not yet dealt with. What makes Lukács' approach so

questionable is not only his "official" strategy of using as his normative point of orientation a concept of praxis in which all objectivity is quite idealistically regarded as emerging from the subjective activity of the species. Just as problematic is his social-theoretical assertion that commodity exchange forms the sole cause of this behavioral transformation that gradually penetrates into all spheres of modern social life. The Marxist premise remains untouched: involvement in economic exchange processes is assumed to have such a profound significance for individuals that it engenders a permanent change, or even a total disruption, of their entire set of relations toward themselves and the world. Furthermore, the question arises in this connection whether Lukács has not gravely underestimated the extent to which highly developed societies require—for reasons of efficiency—that their members learn to deal strategically with themselves and others. If that is indeed true, then a critique of reification should not be as totalizing as Lukács conceives it, but would instead have to exclude spheres of social life in which this kind of observing, detached behavior has a perfectly legitimate place.<sup>30</sup> In what follows, it is not my intention to deal with all these ambiguities and problems systematically and one by one; instead I hope that by reformulating Lukács' concept of reification in an action-theoretical approach, I can prepare the ground for a perspective from which these unsettled questions lose their dramatic character and instead prompt some illuminating speculations.

## II. From Lukács to Heidegger and Dewey

We have already seen that in developing his critique of reification, Lukács implicitly offers two opposed alternatives for explaining his recourse to a "true," undistorted form of human praxis. In the "official" version, it seems as if he intends to criticize the reifying practices that have become second nature by judging them against the ideal of a comprehensive form of praxis, in which all of reality

is ultimately engendered by the productive activity of the species. Apart from the fact that it is based on idealist premises, this first model is bound to fail because of its assertion that the existence of every kind of object and nonproduced entity constitutes a case of reification. It is only in the second alternative version of his theory that Lukács seems to take more seriously what he himself says about the derivative, merely "contemplative" mode of practices and attitudes that he classifies as cases of reification. For in this "unofficial" version, which is substantiated in many places in the text, he judges the defect of reifying agency against an ideal of praxis characterized by empathetic and existential engagement. In this version, all idealist overtones are missing, since here he is dealing more with a particular form of interaction than with a kind of world-generating activity. If we follow the indications contained in considerations such as these, we encounter an astounding affinity with ideas developed by John Dewey and Martin Heidegger shortly after the publication of Lukács' text.<sup>31</sup> And if we go a little further along in time, Stanley Cavell could also be said to belong to the ranks of authors whose theories display an affinity with the second version of Lukács' critique.<sup>32</sup> I would first of all like to concentrate on one point of convergence between Lukács and Heidegger in order to provide further illumination of the concept of engaged praxis.

It has often been noted that there is more than one point of contact between Lukács' treatise and Heidegger's *Being and Time*.<sup>33</sup> This theoretical "kinship" becomes even more apparent if one consults Heidegger's 1924 lectures on Aristotle.<sup>34</sup> To recognize the first point of agreement between these two authors properly, however, one must note that Lukács sought to do more than just give a critique of the reifying effects of the capitalist economic system. He also intended to demonstrate that modern philosophy is doomed to run constantly into irresolvable antinomies, because it is rooted in reified everyday culture and thus remains entrapped within the subject-object opposition.<sup>35</sup>