HOW CAN A SUBJECT BE REIFIED? THE ROLE OF “THINGLIKENESS” IN GEORG LUKÁCS’S ACCOUNT OF SUBJECTIVITY IN CAPITALISM

Saulius Jurga (University of Messina)

This paper examines Georg Lukács’s conception of reified subjectivity under capitalism. I claim that Lukács’s transition from his ethical pre-Marxist notion of the reified subject, to his early-Marxist understanding of capitalist reification of the subject contains the elements of a potential Lukácsian anti-critique of any epistemic or normative reinterpretation of his theory of reification. In particular, the shift in Lukács’s conceptualization of the thinglikeness of objects implied in his dialectical social theory points to a historically precise interpretation of the subject’s reification. The paper also suggests that Lukács’s project of dereification is rooted in the affective experience of reified subjects.

Cet article examine la conception lukacsienne de la subjectivité réifiée en régime capitaliste. Mon propos est de montrer que le passage de la notion éthique pré-marxiste du sujet réifié à une compréhension marxiste précoce de la réification capitaliste du sujet chez Lukács contient des éléments d’une critique lukacsienne potentielle de toute réinterprétation normative de sa théorie de la réification. Le tournant dans la conceptualisation lukacsienne de l’apparente « choisité » (Dinghaftigkeit) des objets, implicite dans la dialectique de sa théorie sociale, fait signe vers une interprétation historiquement précise de la réification du sujet. L’article suggère également que le projet lukacsien de la dé-réification est enraciné dans l’expérience affective des sujets réifiés.
The concept of reification has recently acquired new relevance in philosophical discussions. The last decade has seen a proliferation of publications on the topic in excess of anything since the first rediscovery of History and Class Consciousness (1923),¹ the early-Marxist work by Georg Lukács, within the student and New Left movements of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In that context, the book offered a critical perspective on oppressive cultural patterns of authoritarian social order and inspired hope for the constitution of a new conscious and active subjectivity capable of transforming the state of things. After a few decades of relative, and in no small part historically motivated, disinterest in the problematic of reification, Axel Honneth made a famous attempt to reactualize the concept from the standpoint of recognition theory.² At the same time, though, Honneth’s relative distance from the original terrain of socio-economic analysis, present both in Lukács and in first-generation Critical Theory, has attracted criticism.

The underlying hypothesis of this paper is that behind the revived interest in reification today, there is a strong need to provide a novel account of subjectivity under late capitalism. Although it acknowledges the obsolescence of any hope in a palingenetic revolution with a vanguard-party-led proletariat as its genuine subject, Critical Theory has not renounced either attempts to redefine the status of a (reified) subject under capitalism, or efforts to assess its emancipatory potential. However, any explicit attempt to revive an author’s ideas must inevitably deal with the original context of their formation. This obligation often seems to have been disregarded, when it comes to Honneth’s use of the term “reification” to define the defective state of forgetfulness of recognition.³ The reified subject


² Axel Honneth, Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as R. It is worth noting that authors such as Adorno and Habermas had already attempted to reformulate Lukács’s notion of reification within their respective theories of immanent critique and communicative action, although without dedicating separate works to the topic, as was the case with Honneth. On this point, see Markus Wolf, “Verdinglichung kritisieren. Was, warum und wie?,” in Ding und Verdinglichung: Technik- und Sozialphilosophie nach Heidegger und der Kritischen Theorie, (ed.) H. Friesen, C. Lotz, J. Meier, and M. Wolf (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 273–97, here 278 ff.

³ For a criticism of this position, see Konstantinos Kavoulakos, “Philosophy of Praxis or Philosophical Anthropology? Andrew Feenberg and Axel Honneth on Lukács’s Theory of Reification,” in Critical Theory and the Thought of Andrew
that interests us here appears, in Honneth’s work, as a subject that is forgetful of an antecedent state of pre-reified self-relation. I deem this view unable to provide a satisfactory account of reified subjectivity under capitalism. Honneth’s interpretation also contends that, due to radical differences between the social and economic contexts of the early 1920s and our own times, reification had to be substantially reconceived (R, 17–18). But a curious result of this attempt to confer an amnestic, essentially normative, foundation to the notion of reification is that instead of renewing the original concept, Honneth seems to have overlooked the overall socio-economic dimension of Lukács’s critique. Contrary to this, I claim that understanding Lukács’s idea of reified economic categories is essential for conceptualizing the reification of subjectivity under capitalism. In other words, if reification, following Lukács, has to do with a universal form of objectivity (Gegenständlichkeitsform) that confers a thinglike character (Charakter einer Dinghaftigkeit) to the appearance of any object in capitalist society and thus shapes our subjective experiences, mental states, patterns of action, and intersubjective relationships, then this notion must be exposed in its structural core rather than in one of its possible manifestations. In this sense, the normative or recognition-centered level of analysis can only offer a partial perspective on reification.

In this paper, I will therefore look at the development of the notion of reified subjectivity in the thought of Lukács, moving from his implicit pre-Marxist ethical conception of reification to his explicit early-Marxist formulation of it. This brief account of the internal transformations of Lukács’s understanding of reification is not intended to be merely illustrative; it should also shed light on the limits of any attempt to reconceive Lukács’s notion of reification without also engaging with the socio-philosophical presuppositions internal to his account.

In section I, I will trace the origin and define the content of the idea of reified subjectivity in Lukács’s pre-Marxist phase. Without intending to be exhaustive, I will draw on Meister Eckhart, one of Lukács’s major influences at the time, using Eckhart’s critical approach to thinghood as my departure point in order to assess Lukács’s early account of reified subjectivity. Although rooted in a medieval religious worldview, Eckhart’s theory, or more specifically the use Lukács makes of it during his pre-Marxist period, exemplifies the structure of any purely ethical approach to reification. A brief

reference to Husserl will show the insufficiency of any epistemic approach to reification of the subject from the young Lukács’s ethical viewpoint. In section II, I will consider Lukács’s transition from an ethical perspective on reification to one informed by his new acquaintance with dialectical social theory, identifying a shift in the conceptualization of thinghood with respect to his previous account. At this point, understanding the historically determined character of the res of reification becomes indispensable for an adequate comprehension of the reification of both objectivity and subjectivity in Lukács. In this context, I will look at Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, since it provides the model for Lukács’s description of the appearance of all social phenomena in capitalism. Section III will discuss the repercussions of the natural-scientific conception of objectivity employed in the capitalist organization of the labour-process for the constitution of reified subjectivity under capitalism. After this, I claim that Lukács’s notion of initial dereification is achieved through the illumination of an affective level of reification, in which the categories of capitalist economics, such as abstraction and quantification, far from being merely mental constructions, are experienced directly by subjects. This should bring us closer to grounding the claim that Lukács’s underlying intention was to present reification as both a theoretical-reconstructive and an experiential-genetic concept. To paraphrase a well-known Kantian tenet, Lukács’s idea was that for the reconstruction of the origin of reified forms of objectivity not to be empty, it must be translatable into a critique of concrete experiential structures of reification; and this critique, in order not to be blind, must in turn be rooted in a genealogy of the elementary forms that organize our experience under capitalism. Only these two layers of reification taken together can lead to a third conception of reification, understood as a praxico-critical concept. Finally, in section IV, I conclude by identifying both the limits of recognitional approach to reification, and its value in highlighting possible developments of the Lukácsian model of subjectivity under late capitalism. This will be done, however, without renouncing the original socio-economic context of Lukács’s theory of reification.
I. Meister Eckhart and Lukács’s Early Anti-Psychologistic Ethical Account of Reification

In the German-speaking philosophico-theological tradition, the notion of reification goes back as far as Meister Eckhart, whose mystical theology had a significant impact not only, as is well known, on the formation of Hegel’s and Heidegger’s thought, but also on that of the young Lukács. Throughout his sermons and writings, the medieval Dominican preacher warned against the risks of reification of the soul, seeing human psychological dependence on thinglike images and representations as a principal obstacle to the detachment (Abgeschiedenheit) from everything creatural necessary to achieve a God-like freedom within a non-psychic spiritual domain. From this perspective, Eckhart defines the original unreified subjective dimension as a “little castle in the mind”:

It is free of all names and devoid of all forms, entirely bare and free, as void and free as God is in himself.... [T]his castle is one and simple, an identical unity so highly elevated above every mode and above every power that no power nor any mode can ever look into it, not even God himself.

This “little castle” indicates the direction for a dereifying return to an antecedent state. Eckhart’s claim is that a pure spiritual principle exists within the human mind, after which a detached subject should strive; here, “spiritual” stands for imageless, non-representational, and nameless. Hence, we are dealing with a radical model of both res and reification. Heidegger observes that, in Eckhart, “thing” is a

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generic term indicative of the being of anything posited, and it can
denote even the soul or God:

Meister Eckhart uses the word thing (dinc) for God as well as for
the soul. God is for him the “highest and uppermost thing.” The
soul is a “great thing.” This master of thinking in no way means to
say that God and the soul are something like a rock: a material
object. Thing is here the cautious and abstemious name for some-
thing that is at all.7

Thus, Eckhart’s mystical proposal for achieving detachment is no less
than a radical method for overcoming reification. It is the call to
return to a pre-originary origin (ursprunc) in which, as Reiner
Schürrmann argues, “the will sets itself loose from any principle; it is
anarchic.”8 In order to escape the reifying attitude, the subject of
detachment has to liberate her mind from alien determinations, even
if these determinations concern God’s own names: such naming
would imply representing God as a created thing and thus perverting
God’s nature, as well as perverting the nature of the mind by subju-
gating it to determinate being.

Naturally, introducing terms such as “psychological” and “rei-
fication” to the discussion of a medieval author risks anachronism. But
the use of this terminology retains its relevance as long as we bear in
mind that we are dealing with the reception of Eckhart within the
anti-psychologistic currents of thought of German philosophy at the
beginning of the twentieth century.9 Lukács was part of a genuine
Eckhart renaissance during this time.10 Eckhart’s critique of the soul,
understood not only as a mere receptacle of thinglike images but
primarily as the most hidden and therefore most menacing thing,
was welcomed by young thinkers seeking a way out of the dead-end

10 See Kurt Flasch, Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity, (tr.) A. Schindel and A. Vanides (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 12. Among the pro-
tagonists of the Eckhart revival, Flasch names thinkers as diverse as Robert
Musil, Karl Mannheim, Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, Gustav Landauer,
Lukács, and even the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg.
of a psychologism that reduced consciousness to a spatiotemporal thing, analyzable by means of the natural-scientific method. For Lukács and his peers, such scientific rationality endangered the last remaining idea of autonomous subjective agency, which had already been undermined by the development of modern forms of life.

Husserl’s critique of the reification of consciousness, first formulated in *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* (1911/1912), was well-known. In this manifesto on the phenomenological method, Husserl claims that “to follow the model of the natural sciences almost inevitably means to reify consciousness.”11 In other words, consciousness is reified if it is methodologically derived from the corporeal world of spatially extended things that are describable on the ground of natural causal laws. For Husserl, this was the case with the strands of modern experimental psychology that treated consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon of objective physiological processes. What interests us in Husserl’s account is that if, on the one hand, he conceived reification as a “pathology” deeply rooted in the phenomenon of modernity and having substantial practical implications for our lives, on the other hand, he also thought of this pathology as entirely internal to scientific thought and, as such, a “theoretical error,” a “fruit of a methodological prejudice.”12 Hence, for Husserl, we also have to seek a dereifying solution within the methodological domain, namely, within the new phenomenological method aimed at exposing the effective non-deterministic functioning of conscious life.

It might be worth noting that, in his attempt to revitalize the theory of reification Lukács formulated in *HCC*, Honneth returns to terminology that echoes Husserl’s critique of naturalist psychology one hundred years earlier. In Honneth’s account of self-reification, the subject enters into a reifying self-relationship by approaching her own mental states cognitively, as “these states are grasped as given, thing-like objects...[and] the subject experiences her own


feelings as ‘internally’ self-contained and static objects that are to be uncovered” (R, 73). This self-reification points to the fact that the subject has forgotten an originally non-reified and affirmative self-relationship: a primordial recognition of one’s genuine feelings and desires. However, unlike Husserl’s methodological resistance to reification, Honneth responds to the cognitivist error of his interpretation of the reifying attitude with a normative remedy that consists in remembering that the subject’s “desires and feelings are worthy of articulation and appropriation” (R, 74; my emphasis). The introduction of Honneth’s thesis on dereification at this point in our argument serves to show that the inner development of Lukács’s theory of reification from a pre-Marxist to a Marxist phase contains the elements of a potential Lukácsian anti-critique of the theoretical positions that sought to correct or revitalize his original theory.

But it is time to ask why the young pre-Marxist Lukács pursued a model for dereified subjectivity in the works of a medieval preacher rather than in the detailed analyses of consciousness presented by Husserl. Why is it Eckhart’s detached “nobleman” that appears as the prototype of a dereified subject rather than a phenomenologist? And why did Lukács not even contemplate the subjective recognition of the worthiness of one’s own mental dispositions as a possible way out of reification?

The germs of Lukács’s later critique of reification are certainly present in his early project of anti-intellectualist ethics, which he began working on before, and further developed during, the First World War. In one text of this period, “On Poverty of Spirit” (1912), Lukács observed that nothing could be further from Eckhart’s intention than promoting “mysticism as a life-style”; rather, for Lukács, Eckhart’s thought is fundamentally “practical-ethical” and “worldly-active.” Indeed, detachment is only indicative of one side of dereification in Eckhart, a passive-receptive preamble to a proper dereifying practice. If a detached subject permanently strives to maintain her distance from things, this in itself does not break the dependence on thinghood. A detached subject also has to return to worldly affairs. Accordingly, instead of being oriented to contemplation or

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13 In-depth discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but for more see Konstantinos Kavoulakos, Ästhetizistische Kulturkritik und ethische Utopie: Georg Lukács’ neukantianisches Frühwerk (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 177–202.


15 Schürmann, “Like a Vase,” 117.
monastic refuge from worldly things, Eckhart enunciates “a call for a certain type of existence among things.”

Lukács correctly understands Eckhart’s dereifying solution to be practically motivated and this, in his eyes, constitutes the Dominican preacher’s advantage over the excessively theoretical approaches to reification among Lukács’s contemporaries.

For Lukács and like-minded young thinkers, with the eruption of the Great War, any methodological way out of reification appeared flawed, and their hopes were instead directed towards the idea of a conciliation of theory and praxis. At this time, Lukács had already distanced himself from any approach that saw reification as a source of epistemic error and conceived dereification as an adjustment of epistemic attitudes. And it is in these intense years of theoretical reconsideration that Lukács abandoned, once and for all, any neutral-observer standpoint towards reality that would leave intact the ontological relation between the acting subject and the sphere of objectivity in favour of an engaged encounter with the world. At that time, along with Eckhart, Lukács named Kierkegaard’s Abraham, Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin, and Alyosha Karamazov as prototypes of dereified subjectivity. He defined them as “Gnostics of deed,” saying “their thinking left the purely conceptual realm of knowledge” in favor of a “knowledge of men that illuminates everything, a knowledge wherein subject and object collapse into one another.”

However, at this stage of Lukács’s philosophical maturation, overcoming the division between subject and object still presents itself as an ethical ideal. In the outline of the ethical theory scattered throughout his unfinished book on Dostoevsky and The Theory of the Novel (1916), Lukács’s understanding of the subjective stance towards thinghood is still profoundly Eckhartian. Reified objectivity is semanticized thanks to the wide-ranging term “formation” (Ge-bilde), which encompasses the whole domain of exterior, ossified, and purely factual objectivities that appear to a subject (a non-psychological soul) in dead and emptied-out forms, deprived of the

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16 Reiner Schüermann, “Commentary on Sermon: Jesus Entered,” in Wandering Joy, 45; my emphasis.
19 The “psychological subject” is defined by Lukács as belonging to “external world [das psychologische Subjekt...zur Aussenwelt gehört]” (ibid., 174). Lukács’s
living element of interiority that had previously brought them to life. Formations are here indistinctly understood as self-referential political, religious, and legal institutions, or even cultural objects in which subjectivity is not able to recognize itself anymore. In genuinely Eckhartian style, Lukács also conceives dereification as “the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved” these formations. We will later see the term “awakening” reappear with a completely new, historically concrete meaning in Lukács’s early-Marxist interpretation of the dereification of subjectivity.

In the next section, I will look at the shortcomings of the ethical conception of reification according to Lukács, and I will discuss his transition from an ethical critique of reified subjectivity to a dialectical one, as presented in the central essay of *HCC*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” Lukács’s early-Marxist dissociation from both epistemic and ethical approaches to reification does not mean he fully abandoned these dimensions of inquiry, but rather it shows the necessity of integrating them into the critique of the socio-historical reality of capitalism. Lukács was convinced that the structure of social life, along with epistemic and ethical critiques of reification, can only lose its partially abstract character after identifying a rational core of reification in capitalistic categories. Reflecting first on reified objectivity and then on reified subjectivity in the following sections will therefore, surprisingly, anticipate a Lukácsian response to any normative of cognitive reinterpretation of reification, including that of Honneth.

**II. Reified Objectivity in *History and Class Consciousness***

Why is the model of subjectivity that Lukács identified at the “Eckhartian” stage of his philosophical career insufficient for overcoming reification? In this section, I will argue that a new figure of reified subjectivity can only be adequately conceptualized by first paying attention to the transformation of the theory of objectivity, of thing-

critique of the subject of psychology in his early-Marxism is discussed in section III below.

21 An analysis of the elements of ethical idealism in Lukács’s first Marxist period exceeds the scope of this paper. For a detailed discussion, see David Kettler, “Culture and Revolution: Lukács in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19,” *Telos*, no. 10 (1971): 35–92.
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hood as such, in Lukács thought. Then, after discussing Lukács’s renewed conception of objectivity, gained by assuming the historical standpoint of the critique of capitalism, I will claim that the key for dereification in Lukács lies in subjectivity, in particular reified subjectivity. This concept of reified subjectivity will, furthermore, show both continuities and discontinuities with Lukács’s previous understanding of reification.

The distance between Eckhart’s and Lukács’s accounts of dereification can be preliminarily assessed through two terms of central importance for Eckhart’s thought: *gelâzenheit* (or *Gelassenheit*) and *Vergessenheit*. *Gelâzenheit*, or releasement, is key to understanding the paradoxical nature of the special modality of existence among things advocated by Eckhart. If we still consider the Eckhartian mode of detachment as a dereifying operation, then this dereification consists in letting things be. From this perspective, thinghood still appears as fixed, alien, and autonomous, but this only constitutes an occasion for self-dereification to the extent that the subject does not intend to reject or negate the thingliness of things by turning away from them, but rather, thanks to releasement, actively lets things be in their unmodifiable being. However, although Eckhart’s *gelâzenheit* leaves things to subsist in their standalone being, this operation does not have the ambiguous practical neutrality that it will acquire in Heidegger’s reading, which is “in contradiction neither with the most abject political regimes nor with the most authentic experience of God.”

In Eckhart, *gelâzenheit* is functional for acquiring a new attitude to life, which is obtained by forcing the empty God towards the emptied-out subject.

Notwithstanding the strong practical overtones of Eckhart’s *gelâzenheit*, in Lukács’s Marxist philosophy, dereification, including dereification of subjectivity, assumes radically new, praxis-focused importance. The idea of dereification as praxis, in the strict sense attributed to it by Lukács, is conceptualizable only as a structural “transformation of forms of objectivity that shape the existence of human beings” (HCC, 186; see also 177). The paradoxical active passivity or passive activity, the attitude of accepting the pre-constituted forms of objectivity that ground the appearance of objects in their immutable thinglike character, as implied in *gelâzenheit*, is defined throughout *HCC* as a “contemplative” attitude and opposed to a new transformative standpoint towards objectivity. Hence, in Lukács’s form of Marxism, dereification assumes a double task from the very beginning, including both a theoretical critique of

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22 Schürmann, “Proclaim the Word,” 201.
the forms of appearance of objects under capitalism, and active engagement in practices aimed at transforming such forms of appearance.

Vergessenheit, or forgetfulness, meanwhile, indicates an even larger discrepancy between Eckhart’s ethical and Lukács’s Marxist accounts of reification. In Eckhart’s thought, forgetfulness is a positive mode of existence that enables one to engage with things “sunder warumbe, without a why.” Furthermore, if the idea of forgetfulness is at all adequate for revitalizing Lukács’s notion of reification, it would at best negatively describe the state of affairs under reification. But even a Honnethian idea of reification as the forgetfulness of antecedent recognition would be vulnerable to the same critique that motivated Lukács’s abandonment of his previous ethical Eckhartianism. Hence, even if we consider the two opposed meanings of Vergessenheit in Eckhart and Honneth, namely, as a remedy against reification and the cause of it, we do not get to the bottom of Lukács’s idea. Now, let us examine Lukács’s novel definition of thinghood, which, according to the dialectical framework of HCC, also explains the reification of subjectivity. Since our goal here is limited to pinpointing the paradigmatic shift in Lukács’s view of objectivity (and, consequently, subjectivity), as entailed by his adoption of a Marxist perspective on society, we will mostly consider the first section of the central essay in HCC, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” which should suffice to illustrate this change.

One could by no means argue that Lukács’s ethical critique of reification was completely ahistorical. On the contrary, it was rooted in a strong historic-philosophical view about the essence of modernity. However, at this ethical stage, Lukács at best targeted the categories of the capitalist economy sporadically, without identifying a clear structural principle. Starting with the “Reification” essay, however, the notion of reification is used to investigate the way in which the commodity-structure shapes the various manifestations of life under modern capitalism. As a result of his reading of the first chapter of Marx’s Capital, Lukács identifies the commodity-structure as “the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its life-expressions” (HCC, 83; trans. mod.); it is “the universal category of society as a whole” (ibid., 86). Lukács thus conceives of the commodity-structure as a true “paradigm,” an all-pervasive categorial

24 The term “paradigm” is used here in the sense set out by Giorgio Agamben in The Signature of All Things: On Method, (tr.) L. D’Isanto and K. Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 21–22: reification is a “general rule” of capitalist society, but
framework of capitalism: it constitutes the immanent condition of possibility and determines the mode of appearance of objects in their commodity-form in a society based on generalized commodity exchange. At the beginning of the essay, Lukács deals with Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism and identifies it with Marx’s own conception of reification:

The essence of commodity-structure...is that a relation between people takes on a thinglike character and thus acquires a "spectral objectivity"...that in its strict, apparently fully-enclosed and rational autonomy conceals every trace of its fundamental essence: the relation between people. (HCC, 83–84; trans. mod.)

In dealing with Marx’s account of thinghood in capitalism, Lukács is first struck by how products of human labour appear to social actors, and to their producers in the first place, as governed by the “natural laws” of exchange. Marx argues that in the process of producing a commodity, social labour (a “relation between people”) conducted by private, isolated producers is expressed as the commodity’s exchange value and, in this sense, the social character of labour immediately appears to become an objective property of the commodity object, as if it were autonomous from the conditions of its production.25 Thus, there is an ontological inversion within the commodity: what is essentially social appears natural.

Lukács also refers to this passage from Capital:

[T]he products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.... [T]he existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.26

not something that can be applied to any single phenomenon from the outside. Rather, “it is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule.” In this sense, commodity is “an exemplar of a general rule that can never be stated a priori.” Commodity is an elementary form, a structuring principle that becomes intelligible only in its sensible manifestations at different layers of life under capitalism and that does not idealistically subsist outside these manifestations.

This quote describes the opposite inversion of social and natural qualities within the commodity to the one set out in Lukács’s discussion of commodity fetishism above. By presenting themselves in the form of exchangeability, commodities appear as social things, and their qualitative material aspects, represented by their use value, appear as mere expressions of their abstract exchange value. Thus, a commodity-thing is a fundamentally split bearer of both use value and exchange value.27

At this point, let us ask ourselves whether epistemic or ethical models of dereification could be developed based on this reimagined conception of thinghood. Would, for example, a corrected method or an adjusted epistemic, ethical, or normative attitude at least suffice to “penetrate the veil of reification” (HCC, 86)? The answer to this has to be negative for at least two reasons.

First, the phenomenon of reification implied in capitalism is not a misperception, an erroneous attitude, or an ethical fallacy. It rather demonstrates how things necessarily appear and are experienced under capitalism. Instead of being rooted in our mental representations or in physico-chemical qualities of natural things, objects present themselves in their real categorical form of objectivity.28 And if all social objects in capitalism tend to appear in an abstract form, the origin of this mode of appearance is to be sought in the concrete social practice of generalized commodity exchange, which constitutes these objects in their abstract thinglikeness.29

By critiquing subjectivist theories of value, Marx had already expressed his conviction that the effective critique of capitalist economic categories has to lie in the exhibition of “the social conditions

27 In the effective practice of exchange, this immanent opposition within a commodity-thing is represented by an external one, namely, the opposition between the commodity-form and money-form of commodity. See Marx, Capital, 199. However, neither use value nor exchange value are to be understood as properties of things themselves: they exist only in a value or exchange relation in which a thing qua commodity stands with respect to other commodities. See, Christian Lotz, “Gegenständlichkeit—From Marx to Lukács and Back Again,” in Critical Theory and the Thought of Andrew Feenberg, 71–89, here 83.

28 For a detailed exploration of this argument, see Lotz, “Gegenständlichkeit,” 77ff.

which make the existence of value-form necessary."30 Lukács echoes this sentiment by conceiving commodity as a universal category of social being, grounded in concrete commodity relations (HCC, 86). Similar to Marx’s critique of subjectivism in economics, Lukács identifies subjectivism as a limitation of economic theories that, instead of effective laws of production and circulation of goods, take the subjective comportment (subjetiven Verhaltungen) of individuals as their departure point with respect to understanding markets (ibid., 104). Hence, depriving reified phenomena of their economic-ontological foundation equals, for Lukács, depriving them of their intelligibility as such (ibid., 95).31

The second reason that previous solutions to reification are insufficient for Lukács lies in his newly acquired belief in social revolution as the key to overcoming reified forms of social organization. This aspect of Lukács’s theory, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper, since it represents an advanced stage of his overall conception of dereification. The main issue at stake for Lukács in his project of dereification, from a Marxist perspective, is to identify a fissure, a negative moment within the picture of all-pervasive reification that could reveal the split nature of all objectivity under capitalism rather than persistently reproducing representations of objects in self-enclosed monadic perfection.

Before discussing Lukács’s view on reified subjectivity in capitalism, let us take a look at two different, and seemingly opposed, meanings of the term thinglikeness (Dinghaftigkeit) used by Lukács. The first is the most recurrent and refers to the appearance of social relations as natural things, as well as the tendential increase of the mediation of relational categories through thinglike forms. But when Lukács uses the term “natural,” he does not use it exclusively in relation to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. He also draws upon Max Weber’s conception of modern rationalization, contending that so-called instrumental rationality, based on the formal calculation of technical factors directed to reach expected results, has pervaded all spheres of the human lifeworld, resulting in the rigid parcellation, fragmentation, and formalization of modern existence. In this scheme, all social phenomena appear as idealized and formalized objects, analysable in terms of causal laws understood in the mathematical, natural-scientific tradition. Within this framework,

31 It is worth noticing that Lukács, following Marx, conceives economic categories ontologically, as “forms of existence, determinations of existence [Daseinsformen, Existenzbestimmungen]” (HCC, 57; trans. mod.).
social objects are engaged with only inasmuch as they are predictable, quantifiable, comparable with one another, and instrumentally manipulable. Such is the case with economic laws, where the movement of commodities acquires a nature-like autonomy with respect to any subjective agency. But, as we have already seen, this mode of appearance cannot be reduced to a methodological confusion rooted in the application of natural-scientific methods to social analysis. Instead, Lukács argues that naturalistic approaches to society are only particular cases of a deeper ontological inversion at the core of how social interactions are effectively structured. In other words, the ontological status of social reality under capitalism lends itself to being investigated naturalistically.

The second use of thinglikeness in Lukács seems to be an inversion of the first. Here, the term Dinghaftigkeit denotes a loss of the original distinctive features of objects as soon as they become commodities. As mere equivalence of exchangeability, an object conceals those aspects that had individuated it from the diverse ocean of other things and that conditioned the possibility of it entering into relations of exchangeability as such. As Lukács writes,

This rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—thing-character of all things [Dingcharakter aller Dinge]. When use-values appear universally as commodities they acquire a new objectivity, a new thinglikeness [Dinghaftigkeit] which they did not possess in an age of episodic exchange and which destroys their original and authentic thinglikeness. (HCC, 92; trans. mod.)

Thus, a commodity-object can have a thinglike form and not have it at the same time. It assumes a thinglike form by concealing, as exchange value, the social relations incorporated in its body (social labour). And it loses its thinglikeness in the sense that, thanks to the value-form, it then appears as an abstract object, deprived of its original distinctive qualities.

This novel sense of thinghood in Lukács’s Marxist paradigm leaves no space for a merely epistemic or ethical-normative interpretation of the phenomenon of reification. Neither conceptual level can be isolated from the general framework of the interpretation of capitalist economic categories. In the following section, I will therefore discuss this updated notion of thinglikeness in light of Lukács’s conception of reified subjectivity under capitalism.
III. Reified Subjectivity: The Affective Experience of Reification

In the previous section, we explored Lukács’s definition of the commodity-structure as an all-pervasive form of objectivity that shapes the appearance of all objects in their necessarily thinglike form within capitalism. We have also seen that the abstract character of this mode of appearance is not illusory, but rather that it has to be traced back to the social practices that generate it, such as commodity exchange. In this section, I will show how, according to Lukács, this account of objecthood is key to understanding capitalism’s peculiar object: the subjectivity of the worker. I will claim, moreover, that the awareness of reification is not disclosed cognitively. Thus, if understood as a mere mental category, reification remains inaccessible to critique, since it gives no criteria for identifying its qualitative content. Such content has to be sought at the point where it first becomes accessible to reflection, namely, in the affective experience of reified subjectivity.32

Following the previously established principle of the universality of the commodity-structure, Lukács maintains that “the subject of the exchange is just as abstract, formal and reified as its object” (HCC, 105). This leaves no doubt that, in Lukács’s account of reification, each subject of capitalist society is subsumed under the laws of reification. However, not everyone is a dialectical subject of reification in the sense understood by Lukács. Only a worker qua mere possessor of the commodity labour-power falls into this category. This might not be immediately obvious, because, as a member of capitalist society, the worker is a part of the same reified social world as the capitalist. And thanks to the rule of the commodity-form, this shared world undergoes an ever-expanding homogenization of all spheres of life under the principle of commodification. In order to provide a detailed picture of this process, Lukács refers extensively to Weber’s well-known description of the “iron cage,” an unescapable bureaucratic machine governing modern politics, law, business, industry, and even academia. Among other exemplars of reified consciousness under capitalism, Lukács identifies journalism with its abstract, fragmented, and depersonalized style of subjective

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32 The discussion of the affective, somatic, and sensuous registers of critiquing capitalism is a guiding thread in Anita Chari’s *A Political Economy of the Senses: Neoliberalism, Reification, Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For a discussion of Lukács’s theory of reification from this perspective, see chapter four, “Lukács’s Turn to a Political Economy of Senses.”
expression (HCC, 100). Moreover, we could name countless occasions where all subjects are equally subjected to scientific methods—i.e., treated as abstract objects that are analysable, divisible, and manipulable in accordance with the rules and experimental procedures of the natural sciences (the world of medicine serving as just one example).

I believe, however, that the real target of Lukács’s critique of the natural sciences is their use exclusively for purposes of capital accumulation, their full integration into a rationally organized dominion of capital over the worker. This is, first of all, evident in the fact that objects and processes can be infinitely disaggregated into isolated parts and then strategically rearticulated to achieve increased productivity of labour. If assessed from the standpoint of capital, the capacity of modern science to isolate segments from the organic texture of the natural world and construct scientific theories for cognitive and technological purposes is thus seen as functional for capitalistic organization of the labour process.

Now, let us look at the issue of class distinction in Lukács’s account of levels of reification. The true link between the reified form of objectivity incorporated within commodity and the reification of the subject passes precisely through the reification of the just-mentioned work organization. Under such systems of organization, the “finished article ceases to be the object of the work-process. The latter turns into the objective synthesis of rationalized special systems whose unity is determined by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other” (HCC, 88). The material outcome of the abstract labour-process is just as much an abstract commodity-object. Inevitably, this requires the producing subjectivity, the worker, to be subject to the same principle of abstraction as the commodity. Objectively, this implies that a subject is reduced to a passive element within a highly standardized, repetitive, mechanical system of actions that she finds herself able to perform passively, or contemplatively as Lukács terms it. Subjectively—and here we witness the unity of epistemology and ontology that characterizes the theoretical framework of HCC—the subject of reification becomes a “psychological subject.” This should not, however, be understood as an absurd claim about workers lacking an interior psychic dimension before being subsumed under reification.

What Lukács means is that the worker increasingly becomes a subject construed on the ground of experimental psychology: a previously non-existent theoretical notion that acquires substance within the capitalist organization of the labour-process. This is the case with Taylorism, described by Lukács as follows:

With the modern “psychological” analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanisation extends right into the worker’s “soul”: even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts. (HCC, 88)\(^34\)

The analysis that Lukács has in mind does not refer to the acquisition of new knowledge, but it does point to the proper constitution of a reified subject of capitalism. As we saw in Eckhart, reification of subjectivity consists in the fact that the reified subject, the “soul,” is understood as nothing but a reflection or even assumption of the structure of objectivity that it confronts. But instead of reflecting the generic category of any positive being, here the reified subject is invested with a historically peculiar form of objectivity: that of the commodity.

But if the commodity-form is all-embracing and has invaded both objectivity and subjectivity, how should one conceive dereification? In the following, I will briefly explore Lukács’s idea of the commodified subject’s experience of the reifying effects of capitalism. This view will contrast with any conception that treats Lukács’s theory of an identical subject-object as offering a quasi-miraculous solution to the problem of reification, where the exploited proletariat automatically becomes the revolutionary subject thanks to mere acquisition of awareness of her position within society which thus breaks the spell of reification. I believe that such criticisms are made possible only by ignoring the role of affectivity in reification. Moreover, we will see that the limit of Honneth’s reactualization of Lukács’s notion of reification lies in the separation of the (correctly thematized by Honneth) affective dimension of experience from the critique of economic categories of capitalism. At the same time, though, Honneth’s analyses allow us to raise questions about the status of the

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\(^34\) For a post-Fordist interpretation, see Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, (tr.) F. Cadel and G. Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).
subject in Lukács, which should be taken into consideration in further attempts to conceptualize subjectivity in capitalism.

We have seen how capitalist work organization requires introducing a “psychological subject” to optimize the productivity of labour. This, in turn, requires the extension of the process of abstraction beyond any natural limit, which is made possible by diminishing qualitative aspects of the life of the worker in favour of abstract quantitative determinations (HCC, 166). As part of this, labour time is increased by negating workers’ free time and any claims derived from the lived experience of workers. The principle of abstraction thus comes into conflict with the lives of subjects and the triumph of quantification appears as a direct negation the worker’s needs, desires, projections, and intentions.

Existentially, the methodological spectre of the “psychological subject” is thus nothing more than a repressed subjectivity formed in negative affective experience under capitalism. Such a subject relates to her own psycho-physical life as a disengaged and disassociated observer of quantified objective processes, which is to say that the multilayeredness of individual life becomes inaccessible to the subject: her most distinctive individual features appear to her as extraneous (HCC, 89). It is precisely through the depersonalizing effects of reification that the repressed worker identifies herself within the totality of thinglike objects that constitute the social texture. The consciousness here at work is again “psychological”:

For, as in the science of psychology, this might very well be consciousness “of” an object, one which without modifying the way in which consciousness and object are related and thus without changing the knowledge so attained might still “accidentally” choose itself for an object.... [K]nowledge acquired in this way must have the same truth-criteria as in the case of knowledge of “other” objects. (Ibid., 168–69)

Psychology, as understood by Lukács, is a contemplative science in the sense that it promotes passive acceptance of the status quo of subjectivity as a mere spatiotemporal thing (Lukács was rather unfamiliar with the concept of depth psychology). The subjective functioning of “psychological” consciousness is limited to the acquisition of pre-constituted objective self-knowledge following fixed patterns of subject-object relations. The same necessity that means

social actors perceive commodities as governed by objective natural laws—thus concealing their double social-natural character—also presents subjectivity to itself and fellow social actors as identically structured. Thus, genuine subjectivation in capitalism consists in a necessary self-objectivation in a thinglike form, modelled according to the commodity-structure.

What, then, triggers a genuine dereifying process? According to Lukács, the dialectical contradiction of reification lies in how the blind expansion of capitalist abstraction becomes a directly perceived qualitative deprivation in the lives of workers, allowing the direct affective experience of the principle of capitalist abstraction through commodified self-perception. As Andrew Feenberg observes, “workers themselves are the proximate object of this initial dereification because they cannot accept immediately their own form of objectivity under capitalism as commodified labour power.” Lukács’s underlying idea here is that only negative affective experiences of corporeal and/or psychic repression can lead to qualitatively new cognitive awareness within capitalism. Beyond any unexplainable idealistic leap from individuals becoming conscious to successful collective praxis, Lukács lucidly identifies a basic level of the split self-experience of subjects under capitalism, an experience that is nonetheless a precondition for genuine subjectivation. This subjectivation would be a different register of self-objectivation, not modelled on the thinglike form of commodity. This is dictated by a worker’s direct experience of the limits of the at-first-apparently-unlimited expansion of the principle of abstraction derived from the commodity-structure. Only such subjectivation, Lukács argues, can constitute the framework for dereifying praxis, but even this does not automatically realize such praxis.37

The self-experience of the worker as a commodity is thus different from any other encounter with the world of commodities: such experience is immediately practical since the effects of reification at an affective level immanently produce an unarticulated, pre-categorial, but nonetheless not-entirely-blind dereifying tendency in the subject. Thus, the practicality at issue here does not consist in the ethical correction of subjective attitudes, as in Eckhart, nor in the Husserlian methodological critique of naturalism. Significantly,

37 On this point, throughout HCC, Lukács mentions other conditions that prompt dereifying praxis, such as, objectively, the capitalist social order entering a stage of overt crisis or, subjectively, conscious political organization.
Lukács again mentions the term “awakening” in this context, but in a completely different sense than he used it in his previous ethical work. This is not a call for a mystical awakening; rather, it shows that an awakening that depends on direct, corporeal experience of the real categories of capitalism, such as abstraction, is unintelligible outside the historical context of capitalist reification. Let us look at the crucial passage on this basic step of dereification in Lukács’s writing:

[W]hen the worker knows himself as commodity his knowledge is practical. That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge. In this consciousness and through it the special objective character of labour as a commodity, its “use-value”...which like every use-value is submerged without a trace in the quantitative exchange categories of capitalism, now awakens and becomes social reality. (HCC, 169)

The intimate experience of the unreifiable remnants of a living core behind the concrete commodity that the subject embodies, and which is ultimately ungovernable via capitalist abstraction, constitutes the experiential basis for further dereifying attitudes. The awakening of the commodity-character of labour in consciousness means precisely that, on the ground of negative experience of reification within capitalist work organization, the affective life of a subject opposes itself to its unlimited reduction to exchange-value and persists in its qualitatively perceivable features.

The possibility as such of irreducibility constitutes the framework for bringing the social character of any attempt of such reduction to reflection and points to a possible social source of overcoming this impasse. Moreover, when Lukács talks about practical knowledge in this context, he must have in the first place meant non-predicative experience, even if he did not use this term. It could not be otherwise if we keep in mind his extensive critique of cognitive approaches to conscious life throughout HCC. In reification, affective experiences that are not reflected upon are the origin of a general and not-yet-articulated sphere of needs that becomes a motivating force for dereification. Hence, the self-objectivation of otherwise unconscious economic mechanisms through affective self-experience of a reified subject represents the genetic moment of a potential irruption of reflexivity within the commodity-structure of capitalist society.38

38 For a criticism of this view, see Frank Engster, “Lukács’ Existenzialismus: oder Die Selbstreflexion der Produktivkraft durch das Selbstubewusstsein der Ware
And this experiential framework lays the ground for further methodological, ethical, or normative conceptualization of reification under capitalism. The thinglike character of capitalistic economic categories acts upon unconscious structures of subjective life in a way that means they preclude their own accessibility or full conceptualization by subjects; nonetheless they exist and are operative without being recognized. It is precisely in the intensification of the clash between capitalist rationalization and the lived experience of subjects that these structures re-emerge as available for conceptualization: “[T]he problem of labour-time...shows reification at its zenith” (HCC, 167). With such awareness, the commodity principle that structures capitalist society becomes accessible to the subject from within her affective life and not as an object of theoretical knowledge, where it would lose its dialectical and dereifying character.

For this reason, any amnesiac theory of reification cannot but distort the original terrain of Lukács’s reification critique, which is only conceivable in relation to the categories of capitalist society. This is why, for example, Honneth’s attempt to revitalize Lukács’s notion of reification on the ground of recognition theory, albeit praiseworthy for striving to complement the Lukácsian account with a deeper understanding of the subjective and intersubjective layers of reifying mechanisms, nevertheless risks remaining a set of decontextualized, ahistorical judgements about a “forgetful” subject if separated from the socio-economic terrain of critiquing capitalism. Thus, in the final section of this paper, I will conclude by briefly discussing the limits and merits of the recognitional approach to reification. Furthermore, I will look at how assessing the recognitional account of reification may suggest a possible development of Lukács’s account of reified subjectivity in late capitalism.

IV. Limits and Merits of a Recognitional Approach to Reification and the Possible Future Development of Lukács’s Idea of the Reification of Subjectivity

Honneth’s reappraisal of Lukács’s notion of reification has at least three merits. First, it draws attention to the centrality of reification in Lukács’s early Marxism, where reification encompasses, among

other things, the reification of subjectivity. Second, it reveals that reifying patterns still pervade contemporary existence. Third, via extensive use of contemporary philosophical and psychological literature, Honneth identifies profound structures of reification that shape our lived experience at the affective level.\textsuperscript{40} This level of reification, as I have tried to show, is also present in Lukács, even though he does not provide an in-depth analysis of the functioning of these mechanisms.

Honneth’s account of reification has also a substantial flaw. The first and main difficulty lies in the fact that Honneth isolates his account of the affective dimension of reification from the critique of economic categories of capitalism. In order to ground the priority of a non-reified state of recognition, Honneth employs variety of theoretical positions, including not only Martin Heidegger’s notions of “care” and “solicitude” and John Dewey’s prioritization of “involvement” over a neutral-observer stance (R, 28–40), but also Michael Tomasello and Peter Hobson’s “emotional identification or attachment” (R, 43–44), and Stanley Cavell’s “acknowledgment” (R, 47–52). A common thread among these positions, according to Honneth, is that all these authors in one way or another give central importance to pre-reflective, empathetic engagement with oneself, others, and the natural world with respect to objectifying attitudes.\textsuperscript{41}

As we have seen in previous sections, Honneth conceives dereification as the forgetfulness of recognition (R, 52ff.). He also defines the act of reification as follows: “[I]n the course of our acts of cognition, we lose our attentiveness to the fact that this cognition owes its existence to an antecedent act of recognition” (R, 59). From this perspective, any reference to social practices that necessarily generate reified social forms at a determinate stage of human history is lost. In Honneth’s account of reification, the reified subjectivity of capitalism leaves the scene to make room for a generic normative affective subjectivity. And as I have shown, for Honneth, the reifica-

\textsuperscript{40} This aspect of Honneth’s interpretation has been recognized, albeit not without critical assessment of Honneth’s overall interpretation, by Stéphane Haber, \textit{L’Homme dépossédé. Une tradition critique, de Marx à Honneth} (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009), 181–99; and Franck Fischbach, \textit{Sans objet: Capitalisme, subjectivité, aliénation} (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 97–112.

\textsuperscript{41} Similarly, Paolo Virno, in \textit{Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology}, (tr.) L. Chiesa (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2018), grounds his model of original recognition via the non-reflective neuro-physiological empathy generated by mirror neurons. However, Virno also cautiously identifies natural species-specific sources of misrecognition and conflict codified in human verbal language, particularly in its syntactic ability to negate originally recognized givenness.
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tion of a subject becomes a normative task for a subjectivity that can deliberately decide to attend to the qualitative dimension of another person, nature, or its own mental life. But Lukács had already rejected this way out of reification when he abandoned his ethical Eckhartianism. Furthermore, notwithstanding the profound foundational and historical differences between Eckhart’s and Honneth’s theories, they display some structural similarities, at least regarding the reification of objectivity: here, reification is rooted in a defective way of approaching thinghood, while the remedy consists in adjusting this attitude via one’s own spiritual or normative powers. But I would claim that the revolutionary character of Eckhart’s theory, which strives for new practical ways of existing among things, places the Dominican preacher closer to the pathos of the Lukácsian reification critique than to Honneth’s normative conception of reification. Also, the idea that the self-reification of subjectivity can be derived by adopting a specific cognitive stance to one’s mental states was known to Lukács well before Honneth discussed this idea, in the form of Husserl’s critique of naturalistic approaches to consciousness. This view was insufficient in terms of its inability to offer an ontological interpretation of the rootedness of reified categories, such as the commodity-structure, in the objective socio-economic processes of capitalism. It was also completely alien to the standpoint of praxis advocated by Lukács, which aimed to effectively transform the forms of objectivity that govern the totality of life-expressions in the world shaped by generalized commodity exchange.

To sum up my critique of recognitional stance to reification, its main weakness from a socio-critical standpoint lies in its structural inability to mediate between different (affective, cognitive, intersubjective, socio-economic) levels of reification. Nonetheless, I consider Honneth’s attempt to take a new perspective on reification an important step in revitalizing Lukács’s critical concept. It sheds light on how Lukács does not provide a satisfactory account of either subjectivity or intersubjectivity. Lukács’s account of individual consciousness, moreover, is scattered through his work and defining it exhaustively is beyond the scope of his project. What we can learn from Honneth’s reading of Lukács’s notion of reification, then, is that a serious reappraisal of Lukács’s work can demand developing exactly those elements of his thought that, even if they are rudimental and implicit in his work, might have important implications in practice.

Further developing the Lukácsian theory of reified subjectivity could be of particular interest in our age of the technological and digital expansion of reification, especially with its all-embracing
algorithmization of our everyday experience and our growing affective, emotional, creative, and imaginative involvement in the processes of capitalist valorization. Lukács’s message for us is that, regardless of any new accounts of subjective reification and methods of escaping such reification that we might develop, we should not renounce critical enquiry regarding the historically defined forms of objectivity that structure our world. Finally, dwelling on the intrinsically political relation between the one and the many in Lukács’s philosophy of (class) consciousness could still reveal its relevance for future attempts to conceptualize new forms of democratic participation in shaping our common life.

sjurga@unime.it