



ON THE DIALECTICS OF REIFICATION AND FREEDOM: FROM LUKÁCS TO HONNETH—AND BACK TO HEGEL*

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This paper addresses the question of the extent to which the process of reification is identical with domination and thus opposed to freedom. While this is clearly the case in Lukács's famous essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," the first generation of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno, rejects such a criticism of reification as still too closely tied to a false understanding of subjective freedom. Rather, as Adorno suggests in his later works, one has to take into account that any relation to oneself is fundamentally dependent upon a relation to the object. Unfortunately, this insight into the dialectic of subject and object, freedom and reification, is overlooked in Habermas and Honneth's redefinition of reification in terms of intersubjectivity. To bring out the importance of Adorno's thesis, I refer to the notion of "making oneself into a thing" (Sich-zum-Ding-Machen), as developed in Hegel's early Jena Writings, and argue that a fundamental form of reification is a condition for a specific kind of social freedom.

I. Introduction

Reviving the concept of reification for a contemporary critical theory of society might sound odd in light of the expression's anachronistic connotations. For Georg Lukács, who made the term famous in his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*, reification refers to a process by which the capitalistic commodity form becomes "second nature" and puts all human relationships under the spell of a calculating and

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objectifying attitude. Today, however, Lukács's conviction that this process leads with inner necessity to a complete revolution of the social relations of production is certainly more than doubtful. Even more problematic is the question of his normative point of reference. Although for Lukács reification clearly stands for a widely unperceived form of domination and unfreedom, he never gave a proper account of what a non-reified form of freedom would or should look like. This lack is due less to Lukács's indifference than it is to the scope of his diagnosis itself: if reification indeed takes the form of "second nature" and infects not only the relations of subjects to themselves, but also their relation to others and to the world, then it becomes difficult to locate a standpoint from which a critique of this process would still be possible. This paradoxical entanglement of reification and freedom becomes explicit in Horkheimer and Adorno: according to their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the process of reification is so deeply rooted in conceptual thinking that it affects theoretical activity itself and, thus, the very possibility of talking about freedom. Therefore, I take it that any attempt to take up the concept of reification for a contemporary critical theory has first of all to deal with its difficult relation to freedom.

In this paper, I can provide only an outline of the problematic relationship of reification and freedom and point towards a potential answer. First, I will dwell on the beginnings of the critique of reification in Lukács and on its radicalization by the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Particular attention will be paid here to Adorno's notion of the "priority of the object [*Vorrang des Objekts*]" introduced in his later works (II). Second, I will discuss two recent positions, those of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, which concern the indicated aporetic history of the concept of reification: while Habermas thoroughly modifies the criticism of reification within the frame of his own theory of communication, Honneth reinterprets Lukács's concept of reification in terms of the "forgetfulness of recognition" (*Anerkennungsvergessenheit*) (III). Both authors trace the normative basis of a revived criticism of reification back to intersubjective relations. However, as I will argue, in identifying intersubjectivity as the normative basis of critique, they neglect the importance of the relation to *objects* essential for Adorno. Third, I will elaborate the idea that freedom itself presupposes a specific relation to the object and, therefore, a kind of reification that is a condition for, rather than merely the destruction of, freedom. To develop this argument, I will turn back to Hegel's early Jena writings and the process of "making oneself into a thing" (*Sich-zum-Ding-machen*) introduced in his *Philosophy of Spirit* from 1805/06 (IV). I will conclude by briefly

sketching how the perspective opened up by Hegel and Adorno allows us to combine a critique of reifying commodity fetishism with an extended concept of social freedom capable of accommodating a constitutive relation to the object (V).

II. Reified Consciousness: Lukács and the First Generation of the Frankfurt School

In his essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” from *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács—drawing upon Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism—determines the basic form of reification as a “mystification” by which “a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man.”¹ According to Lukács, the reifying structure of the commodity in modern capitalist societies is not limited to the world of work, but becomes the “*Urbild*” of all expressions of social life including “all the forms of subjectivity corresponding to them.” (RCP, 84; trans. mod.) From this bold claim Lukács derives the variety of relationships subject to reification: the relation of individuals to themselves, their stance towards things, as well as interpersonal relations.

Now, to grasp this all-encompassing process of reification Lukács turns to the question of its historical formation. He agrees with Marx that the growing mechanization and rationalization of the social division of labour leads to an alienation of labourers from their manufactured products as well as to an extension of a market that is fully orientated towards the exchange value of commodities. With reference to Max Weber, Lukács reconstructs this development as a replacement of traditional institutions of society with formally and rationally organized modern systems of right, administration, and the state. In tracing Weber’s rationalization thesis back to the reifying structure of economic production, Lukács is able to claim that “the fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole.” (RCP, 91)

At the same time, however, he describes the growing individualization caused by the breakdown of traditional social bonds as a mere

¹ Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (tr.) R. Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 87. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as RCP.

but necessary illusion.² The isolation of individuals is only the subjective reflex of an all-encompassing commodity form that appears detached from its social-historical formation, and thus appears as a simply given natural law. In other words, the reification of all areas of life through rationalization takes place such that it obscures its own historical and social becoming. Moreover, in giving subjects the impression that they are isolated individuals, the process of reification alienates subjects from their “objective”—that is, material—relations to themselves, others, and the world.

Yet, from Lukács’s point of view, this fateful process of reifying rationalization contains an immanent limit. Because reification modifies the very structure of consciousness itself, these limits are most visible in the field of theoretical reflection. According to Lukács, a reified form of thinking first of all manifests itself in modern philosophy’s attempt to ground reason on mathematical method and physical laws. However, Lukács emphasizes that this kind of highly formalized rationalism leads time and again to insurmountable antinomies. In trying to ground itself on pure logical forms, modern philosophy encloses itself within a self-sufficient system, thereby losing contact with the phenomena it sought to explain in the first place. In times of social-economic crises it becomes obvious that this kind of formalism is incapable of illuminating the causes of the crisis, for it is itself part of the problem. In the transition from Hegel to Marx, Lukács detects a radically changed approach in philosophy able to “break through the barriers erected by a formalism that has degenerated into a state of complete fragmentation.” (RCP, 109)

Thus, the historical task of Marxist theory is to arouse the class consciousness of the proletariat, thereby freeing it from its reified form so that it can take on its historical role and become the true revolutionary subject. Yet, to make such a claim, Lukács has to admit two crucial points: (1) that, despite all-encompassing alienation, a genuine social praxis still exists “hidden in the immediate commodity relation” (RCP, 93; trans. mod.); and (2) that even though “the worker is reified and becomes a commodity...it remains true that precisely his humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities.” (RCP, 172) Without assuming such a residue of “true” praxis and an unchangeable core of humanity on the side of the proletarian subject, philosophy would not be able to play its intended role of—in

² RCP, 92; see also Rüdiger Dannemann, *Das Prinzip der Verdinglichung. Studie zur Philosophie Georg Lukács’* (Frankfurt am Main: Sandler, 1987), 40 f.

Habermas's words—an “*avant-garde* of world revolution”³ in the first place. But Lukács does not seem to be aware of these far-reaching normative presuppositions more or less hidden between the lines of his own text. At least in his essay on reification, neither his own normative standpoint nor a positive determination of social freedom is ever fully spelled out.

For the first generation of the Frankfurt School, the assumption of a historico-politically necessary reversal of the process of reification already seemed to have been refuted by history: instead of leading to a liberated consciousness, the crises experienced in western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century—economic and political crises, the rise of fascism, two world wars, and, finally, the Holocaust, to name only the most obvious—deepened the reified form of thinking to an utterly catastrophic degree. While retaining Lukács's notion of reification, Horkheimer and Adorno outline a much darker picture of its emergence in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. From their perspective, reification has to be traced back to the mythical period of prehistory in which men tried to master the overwhelming forces of nature by animism, rituals, and magic. The first part of Horkheimer and Adorno's twofold thesis is, then, that the old myths are narratives that already contain the seeds of world domination through language—in that they separate sign and thing and symbolize particular natural phenomena as deities. As a result, mythology not only gave birth to general concepts, but also already played an enlightening function that eventually led to the program of historical enlightenment, Weber's “disenchantment of the world.”⁴

In Horkheimer and Adorno's reconstruction, the emergence of conceptual thinking, the very condition for the rise of modern science as such, was established at the cost of a progressive objectification (*Versachlichung*) and alienation from nature: “It is not merely that domination is paid for by the alienation of men from the objects dominated: with the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men—even those of the individual to himself—were bewitched.” (DE, 28) In line with Lukács, they conceive of modernity as a scientific and economic rationalization of the world in which everything is

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, (tr.) T. McCarthy, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984-1989), 1:364. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TCA.

⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (tr.) J. Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1972), 3 f. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DE. See also Christoph Demmerling, *Sprache und Verdinglichung. Wittgenstein, Adorno und das Projekt einer kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 126 f.

subordinated to formalistic, equalizing, and identifying laws of a purely instrumental reason. As instrumental reason itself was fetishized and eventually became second nature, enlightenment—and that is the second part of their thesis—“reverts to mythology.” (DE, xvi)

From the perspective of the history of mankind that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* puts forward, the reification of inner and outer nature is also the very origin of modern subjectivity. In this respect, isolating individualization—for Lukács a mere but necessary reflection of the encompassing relations of production—is itself part of the genesis of the subject. Thus, for Horkheimer and Adorno, Lukács’s concealed normative points of reference, a “true” intersubjective practice surviving underneath the capitalistic division of labour, and a core of non-alienated subjectivity, are themselves results of the entanglement of enlightenment and mythology.

Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno strive to retain a “positive notion of enlightenment.” (*Ibid.*) In their opinion, the way to achieve this is by way of an “unrelenting theory” holding fast to the disenchanting force of enlightened thinking against its own self-mystification. Enlightenment, in other words, has to become self-reflexive in order to grasp the reasons for its own historical failure. This, of course, is itself a purely negative endeavour. The only normative refuge mentioned by Horkheimer and Adorno is the realm of art. There, a mimetic relation to the object, a passive assimilation of the thing that is neither reduced to a concept nor altered purposively, could survive. And it is this kind of mimetic relation that, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, would also be the ideal of “knowledge which really concerned the object.” (DE, 14)⁵

In his later writings Adorno extended this account into a radical “negative dialectics.” As philosophy is constitutively bound to conceptual thinking and, hence, to its identifying and therefore reifying function, the only possibility of hinting at that which is irretrievably lost is rigorous, potentially destructive self-criticism and self-negation. As a result, Adorno becomes more and more suspicious of a vulgar Marxist dissolution of reification promising an immediate experience of subjective freedom: “The thinker may easily comfort himself by imagining that in the dissolution of reification, of the commodity character, he possess the philosopher’s stone. But reifica-

⁵ See also Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne. Vernunftkritik nach Adorno* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 9–47.

tion itself is the reflexive form of false objectivity.”⁶ Against such an overly hasty criticism of reification, Adorno attempts to rethink the relationship of subject and object under the heading of the “priority of the object.” Although Adorno considers both sides to be always already mutually mediated, the subject is—due to its own materiality—more dependent on the object than the other way round.⁷ Subsequently, for the later Adorno, reification takes on the meaning of a radical separation and one-sidedness of the subject-object-relation.

As he demonstrates in one of his lectures, this one-sidedness can also be found at the centre of the modern ethical conception of autonomy. Understood as conscious self-determination of the subject, the very idea of autonomy is based on a domination of the object that becomes a mere product of the understanding. With great clarity—rather unusual for Adorno—he points out that this representation derives from a misunderstanding of the concept of freedom, where freedom is restricted to a purely conscious self-relation and defined as the total absence of heteronomy. By contrast, Adorno argues with and against Kant that any spontaneity, the very origin of freedom itself, always implies an irrational moment of impulsiveness, “an involuntary adjustment to something extra-mental.”⁸ What Adorno here calls an “adjustment to something extra-mental” is nothing other than a way of describing mimesis. Freedom is thus not the opposite of reification, but, on the contrary, it requires an “additional factor” (*Hinzutretendes*), namely, an irreducible moment of mimetic adjustment to the object, a fundamental passivity on the side of the subject as a result of its own materiality.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (tr.) E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), 190; translation modified. Later in the same text Adorno writes: “The category of reification, which was inspired by the wishful image of unbroken subjective immediacy, no longer merits that key position accorded to it, overzealously, by an apologetic thinking happy to absorb materialist thinking.” (*Ibid.*, 374)

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, (tr.) H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 246.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, (ed.) R. Tiedemann, (tr.) R. Livingstone (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, 2006), 213.

III. The Intersubjective Turn in the Criticism of Reification: Habermas and Honneth

In Horkheimer and Adorno the criticism of reification becomes abyssal in a double sense: on the one hand, the very fact that the origin of instrumental rationality lies in the pre-historical beginnings of conceptual thinking *as such* turns every critical theory into an accomplice of what is being criticized. On the other hand, the subject's potential for resistance comes down to a mere somatic impulse in Adorno's later writings. Horkheimer and Adorno's announcement in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of the development of a "positive notion of enlightenment" thus not only remains unfinished, it even turns out to be impossible.

Now, Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* can be understood as a comprehensive effort to give this pessimistic diagnosis of reification a positive turn by referring both to sociological theories of modernity and to analytic philosophy of language.⁹ In order to do so, he comes to revise a number of premises defended by the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Decisive in this respect is his—and also Axel Honneth's—willingness to perceive the social process of modernization all in all as an achievement rather than as a total catastrophe viewed from the bird's eye perspective of a dialectical philosophy of history.¹⁰ The trajectory, then, is to find a way out of the impasse of prior critical theory by uncovering reason's concealed potential within enlightened modernity itself.

One motivation for this "paradigm shift" is the observation that specific fields of civil culture and everyday life are structured such that they allow for both social integration and individual self-unfolding.¹¹ It is Habermas's fundamental conviction that this so-called "life-world" reproduces itself through communicative interactions based on the principle of consent, thus allowing for the coordination of human actions through intersubjective communication. Following Weber, Habermas also assumes that modern social sys-

⁹ See also Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, (tr.) K. Baynes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), ch. 9.

¹⁰ As Honneth recently admitted, such a cautious optimism also requires—at least to some extent—certain historico-teleological assumptions. (Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* [Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011], 22.)

¹¹ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (tr.) T. Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

tems outsource the basis of material reproduction and political administration from the life-world to separated and independent subsystems. Within these subsystems, the “generalized steering media,” money and power, replace the necessity of a consensus. Consequently, social agents do not have to coordinate their actions through communication; in line with given patterns of behaviour, they can just follow their own interests strategically.

Against the backdrop of this two-stage model of society—namely communicative life-world and the economic-political “system” based on strategic action—, Habermas is able to reject Lukács’s as well as Horkheimer and Adorno’s reification diagnoses as totalizing. (TCA, 1:399) In his reconstruction, the communicative everyday praxis of the life-world is—at least ideally—situated in a space that is free of domination, and which could thus function as a normative basis for a critical theory of society. For Habermas, even the differentiated system of economy has integrating effects since the general orientation towards exchange value stabilizes patterns of action and makes them calculable for the agents. As long as this “system integration” is limited to the sphere of economic exchange, actors, in Habermas’s words, “gain the freedom of strategic action oriented to their own success.” (TCA, 1:359)

Apart from his tendency to give credit to instrumental rationality, at least to a certain extent, for its stabilizing function, Habermas by no means loses sight of its dominating claim to power strongly criticized by Lukács and the first generation of the Frankfurt School. However, the *Theory of Communicative Action* limits the reifying moments of modern rationalization to the threshold between “system” and “life-world,” where the imperative of the market encroaches on the decoupled life-world reproducing itself through communication. Yet, such a specific kind of distortion can no longer be grasped using the old notion of reification: on the one hand, this notion is too encompassing to see the “utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom” (TCA, 1:398) embedded in the life-world; on the other hand, it is too narrow since the very meaning of the word “reification” (*Verdinglichung*) primarily refers to subject-object relations and only in a very loose sense to pathologies within interpersonal relations. That is the reason why Habermas replaces the term reification with expressions as carefully crafted and technical as “colonization of the life-world by imperatives of the system [*Kolonialisierung der Lebenswelt durch Systemimperative*]” or “systematically induced life-world-pathologies [*systemisch induzierte Lebensweltpathologien*].” (TCA, 2:325 and 2:197)

In general, Axel Honneth follows Habermas's paradigm shift from a philosophy of subjectivity to an intersubjective approach, but he rightly doubts the dualistic conception of rational agencies and its corresponding dichotomy of "life-world" and "system." According to Honneth, the everyday communication of the life-world is not free from domination and an imbalance of power, nor can the functionally differentiated spheres of economy and political administration arise without norm orientation or communicative agreements.¹² Honneth's own approach in social philosophy, outlined in *The Struggle for Recognition*, thus seeks more fundamental processes of social integration underlying the spheres separated by Habermas. With reference to Hegel's early Jena writings and the work of George Herbert Mead, he goes on to conceptualize a model of mutual recognition in order to explain how individuals gain full self-understanding only within intersubjective relations. The three types of recognition differentiated by Honneth—recognition in personal relations, in the sphere of law, and within social groups—only name the formal conditions for a positive self-relation; their content remains contestable and thus revisable, such that individuals have the freedom to contribute (and struggle for) different conceptions of life.¹³

Interestingly enough, Honneth, at least in *The Struggle for Recognition*, leaves out the sphere of the economy entirely.¹⁴ It is thus all the more remarkable that ten years later he would dedicate a small study to the notion of reification, one which aims to revive central aspects of Lukács's work on the topic. It is the normative point of reference concealed in Lukács's text that is of greatest interest to him. In line with his own earlier writings, Honneth now reconstructs this missing normativity in terms of relations of recognition, thereby rejecting Lukács's one-dimensional explanation of reification as traced back only to the capitalist commodity-form. In contrast to his predecessors in critical theory—who, despite all their distancing from orthodox Marxism, never gave up the economic aspect—, Honneth understands reification above all as a socio-ontological problem. Taking up ideas from Heidegger, Dewey, and Cavell, he develops the rather bold thesis "that a recognitional stance enjoys a

¹² Honneth, *Critique of Power*, 301.

¹³ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Social Grammar of Moral Conflicts*, (tr.) J. Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 171 f.

¹⁴ Honneth has begun to fill that gap in recent works; see Axel Honneth, "Arbeit und Anerkennung. Versuch einer Neubestimmung," in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 56 (2008), 327–41; and Honneth, *Recht der Freiheit*, 317 f.

genetic and categorical priority over all other attitudes towards the self and the world.”¹⁵ On these grounds, he interprets the process of reification as a change of attitude (*Einstellungswechsel*) by which an antecedent stance of recognition is replaced by a merely objectifying stance towards the other. As a consequence of such a “forgetfulness of recognition,” partners of interactions or even whole social groups appear as depersonalized objects, losing all human qualities that have to be attributed to them by the antecedent stance of recognition.¹⁶

However, with this far-reaching conceptual reorganization, Honneth not only gives up the socio-economic derivation of the notion of reification in favour of a rather moral-philosophical approach, but also seeks to differentiate the internal connections between various reifying attitudes affecting the self, others, and the world—as emphasized by Lukács, Horkheimer, and Adorno alike. In accordance with Habermas, he criticizes the strong interconnection between the three types of reification for displaying a totalizing tendency that he wants to overcome by distinguishing categorically between an intersubjective and a self-related type of “forgetfulness of recognition.” In order to achieve this aim, he has to introduce a second, monological mode of recognition, as it were, covering the subject’s genuine acquaintance with herself.¹⁷ Thus, a self-reifying mode of a “forgetfulness of recognition” occurs when we erroneously treat our own desires, emotions, and intentions as neutral objects. However, the reinterpretation of a reifying stance towards objects in terms of a “forgetfulness of recognition” is itself derived from a reifying intersubjective relation. Accordingly, for Honneth the reification of outer nature—which, for Horkheimer and Adorno is the very root of reified consciousness—becomes a mere secondary phenomenon and takes on the meaning of denying or disregarding those multiple perspectives and meanings of an object that have been attached to it by other persons.¹⁸

Besides the fact that this rigorous separation of an intersubjective and a self-related “forgetfulness of recognition” contradicts Honneth’s own idea of an internal interconnection between self-

¹⁵ Axel Honneth, *Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at University of Berkeley, March 14-16, 2005), 109 [http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/Honneth_2006.pdf].

¹⁶ Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, (ed.) M. Jay (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73 ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

realization and intersubjective relations of recognition¹⁹, a more fundamental problem related to the paradigm shift introduced by Habermas and Honneth alike comes to light here. Driven by the suspicion that the aporias of earlier critiques of reification are a legacy of an outdated philosophy of consciousness, both relocate the conditions for realizing subjective freedom in the sphere of intersubjective actions, which, in turn, are meant to serve as a normative basis against reifying attitudes of any kind. As a result, however, both approaches lose sight of the important relation to the “thing.” It is precisely this devaluation of the object in the criticism of reification that Adorno opposed in his later works and tried to overcome through an asymmetrical dialectics of subject and object.

Now, it might seem odd to illuminate Adorno’s dialectics of freedom and reification, subject and object, by going back to Hegel’s *Jena Philosophy of Spirit*—especially since Hegel is supposed to be an exponent of an idealistic philosophy of identity that every critique of reification wants to eliminate. Although there is certainly some truth to this objection, there are, in my view, at least in Hegel’s early writings, certain detectable motifs that have the potential to give the relationship of freedom and reification a new turn.

IV. “Making Oneself into a Thing”: Hegel’s Jena Philosophy of Spirit

The strange notion of “making oneself into a thing” (*Sich-zum-Ding-Machen*) comes up remarkably often in the first two chapters of Hegel’s lectures on the *Philosophy of Spirit* from 1805/06, and in fact always in connection with the concept of labour. Since, in the second chapter, Hegel elaborates upon the modern social division of labour in a way that reads like an anticipation of Marx’s theory of alienation, it would be unsurprising if “making oneself into a thing” described a process similar to that of reification. However, astonishingly enough—and totally against the grain of Lukács’s critique of reification—Hegel introduces this figure as a specific form of freedom. This becomes clear if one takes a closer look at the three contexts of the *Philosophy of Spirit* in which Hegel uses the expression “making oneself into a thing”—namely, consciousness, will, and recognition.

¹⁹ In *The Struggle for Recognition*, for example, Honneth assumes “an indissoluble connection between, on the one hand, the unassailability and integrity of human beings and, on the other hand, the approval of others.” (131)

Hegel begins his lecture by providing a striking linguistic explanation of how consciousness attains to a self-relation through the perception of outer objects. In immediate intuition, the thing perceived first becomes an image of consciousness, and thus loses its independent existence: the image takes on a meaning for consciousness, or in Hegel's words: "counts as a *sign*."²⁰ Through this movement, things are made into the I, as it were, so that the I possesses the images of those things and is able to associate them with one another arbitrarily. For Hegel, this possibility of free imagination is but an "empty freedom," for signs and names gain a specific meaning only insofar as they can be reproduced in memory without the actual sense impression. Yet this requires a fixed order of memory in which signs no longer gain their meaning from their relation to an immediate sensation, but rather through their connection to one other.

According to Hegel, such a transition from arbitrary association to memory is the result of the hard work (*saure Arbeit*) of repetition by which "the I renounces its free arbitrariness." (JPS, 93 n.) In so doing, as Hegel puts it, "The I makes itself into a thing, in that it fixes the order of names within itself." (JPS, 93) In reflecting upon itself in the formal order of memory—or in Kantian terms, in the categories of understanding—the I is freed from all particular content and gains the freedom to abstract from everything. As the universal form of all possible content, the I thus turns out to be the purely negative unity of consciousness. For Hegel this kind of universality nonetheless remains both merely abstract and formal. (JPS, 99)

What matters here is that the work of memory describes the initial instance of "making oneself into a thing," an instance that serves as the very condition for freedom of intelligence beyond the arbitrariness of association. But as pure negativity, the particular consciousness lacks being—that is, a real foothold in the world. From this fundamental lack, in the next paragraph on the will, Hegel derives a drive proper to the I that urges it into a practical attitude towards objects. Here, the double movement of perceiving consciousness—namely making the thing into the I and the I into a thing—recurs. In the sphere of praxis, the first part of this movement occurs as desire finding its satisfaction in the annihilation or incorporation of the object. In annihilating the object, however, desire is incapable of

²⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805/06)," in *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805/06) with commentary*, (ed., tr.) L. Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 88. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as JPS.

giving itself a fixed content and thus “must always begin anew.” (JPS, 103) Here again, the reverse movement for Hegel is labour, this time understood as the practical formation of the object. In contrast to the inner work of memory, Hegel now calls the labour dealing with an object a “this-worldly making oneself into a thing.” (*Ibid.*; trans. mod.) For this, the use of tools is decisive. They function as an instance of mediation between the labouring I and the objects worked upon. In this context, “making oneself into a thing” means reflecting one’s own will into the means of action—that is, into the tool. Furthermore, as an enduring cultural artefact, the tool stands both for a content-related universality—since the needs of many others are incorporated into the tool—and for a tradition of practices.²¹ Nevertheless, for Hegel, this universality too remains “dead” because the material tool only abstractly hints at a multitude of volitions.

Accordingly, in the following parts of the text dealing with love, family, and the struggle for property, Hegel tries to develop those social relations and institutions in concrete terms that are implicitly but abstractly given within instrumental action. Although in these contexts he does not mention the movement of “making oneself into a thing” explicitly, the relation to the thing still plays a significant role, since the material dimension now takes over the function of a mediating third. In fact, for Hegel, even the immediate union of two (sexual) desires in the love relationship requires objectification, on the one hand, in family property and, on the other hand, in the offspring. While the parents in educating their offspring pass on, as it were, their self-consciousness to their children and thus cognize themselves in another, the family works as a unity for the needs of all its members and the common store is “the permanent, ongoing possibility of their existence.” (JPS, 108) According to Hegel, it is only in such a basic form of the division of labour that desire becomes “rational” and that the product of shared labour becomes a “spiritual possession” (JPS, 109) in which one’s own desires come together with others’ in a concrete object. Since the individuals cognize themselves both cognitively and practically in another, Hegel can call the family relationship a “spiritual recognition” of “free individualities” whereby the particular will of each individual is identical with that of the totality. (JPS, 110)

²¹ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *System of Ethical Life (1802/3) and First Philosophy of Spirit (Part III of the System of Speculative Philosophy 1803/4)*, (ed., tr.) H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), 246 f.

However, at the end of the chapter Hegel shows that this individual freedom is not recognized outside the family and thus comes into conflict with other individual volitions right up to a “life-and-death struggle.” Remarkably, by the beginning of the next chapter on “Actual Spirit,” Hegel simply presupposes such a “universal recognition” whose absence was in fact the very reason for the struggling conflict in the first place. This new approach becomes comprehensible if one assumes that Hegel now wants to spell out what is missing in the struggle. To do this, he transforms the interconnection of shared labour and recognition that he found within the structure of the family into the division of labour characteristic of modern societies, where the multiple needs of individuals are satisfied by the work of many anonymous others. But precisely because of this anonymity within the social division of the labour-process, individuals can cognize neither themselves nor others in the products of their work; hence labour becomes abstract and the manufactured product something alien to them.

This alienation caused by the social division of labour is the third context in which Hegel uses the expression “making oneself into a thing.” Yet it is not insignificant that here Hegel reverses the double movement described in the passages on consciousness and drive: in abstract labour the I first makes itself into a thing and then “returns from thinghood back into the I [*an der Dingheit in Ich zurückzugehen*].” (JPS, 122; trans. mod.) This second movement takes place in commodity exchange, which, according to Hegel, functions as a “return to concretion.” In exchange, the individual not only has the experience “that its [*i.e.*, the thing’s] thinghood consists in *being the possession of another*” (*ibid.*), but moreover, in the thing received it can re-appropriate its externalized will, or, to be more precise, appropriate its own will in the first place. As individuals exchange the products of their abstract labour through mutual consent, they know by the same token that their particular wills are recognized. The things given thereby provide concrete mediation, and their relation to a universal measure of value allows equilibrium in exchange. This “equality in the thing,” as Hegel notes in a remark, thus realizes a “unity of absolutely different [individuals]” in which the contrary wills of the individuals are recognized as equal. (*Ibid.*) In short, to become a universally recognized person, the free individual, emerging from the family, necessarily has to “make itself into a thing” within the sphere of labour and engage in an equal and mutual exchange with others. Thus, and in contrast with the Lukácsian tradition, “making oneself into a thing” is not at all synonymous with

unfreedom, but is rather the very condition of an enhanced form of social freedom mediated by object-relations.

V. Freedom as Being for Another

Against the backdrop of a Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, Hegel's emphatic description of exchange in terms of freedom certainly seems naïve. Although the Jena writings provide an analysis of the modern social division of labour that comes quite close to that of Marx, Hegel's notions of exchange, commodity, and value still seem deeply entwined with the traditional economics of his day.²² Therefore, in order to re-actualize the moment of freedom uncovered by Hegel within the figure of "making oneself into a thing" for a contemporary critique of reification, one first of all has to clarify whether Hegel's normative account of exchange-practices remains valid for developed forms of capitalist economies.²³

There can be no doubt that Hegel's theory of value, sketched in no more than a few sentences, is not sufficient to grasp the complexity of today's capitalist market. Apparently, Hegel believes that the value of things results from a process of negotiation and therefore virtually implies the consent of all market participants—otherwise he could not assume a universal recognition of the individual will in every action of exchange. By contrast, Marx's distinction between use- and exchange-value (contested though it may be) makes clear that in capitalism the value of an object can no longer be traced back to its capacity to satisfy a human need, as Hegel presumes, but is measured by the invested quantity of human labour. This so-called "real abstraction" is necessary to bring a multiplicity of qualitatively different goods under the universal equivalent form of money and to exchange them as commodities. Yet according to Marx this process happens "independently of will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers"²⁴—hence without any recognition of the individual will whatsoever. Furthermore, the necessary abstraction in exchange value involves a quantitative equalization of qualitatively different actions thereby turning human labour into a commodity as well, and, in this sense, reifying it. Of course, such a transformation of labour

²² Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations of Dialectics and Economics*, (tr.) R. Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1975), ch. 5.

²³ Here, I can only remark that in his *Recht der Freiheit* Axel Honneth seems to follow a quite similar intuition, though with a different aim. (317 f.)

²⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, (tr.) B. Fowkes, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 1:167.

through exchange value goes far beyond Hegel's "making oneself into a thing." Instead of cognizing one's own will in the things exchanged, the commodity form in fully developed capitalism appears as a natural character of the objects and, as Lukács points out, eventually erodes all forms of social relationships. In the light of such an orthodox Marxist standpoint, Hegel's theory of value thus clearly belongs, at best, to the bygone days of pre-capitalist barter society.

But apart from the fact that Hegel's remarks on the abstract social division of labour are tied to the early factory work of his own time, it has been argued that his conjunction of exchange with social relations of recognition follows the Aristotelian concept of a just equilibrium mediated by a universal third—namely, monetary value.²⁵ This, however, would mean that Hegel refers to an inherent normativity of the practice of exchange as such, and not to its specific modern appearance. If that is correct, Hegel's model of exchange is perhaps less outdated than it seems to be and could be re-activated as the normative basis of a renewed critique of reification.

In this respect it is decisive that the interplay of social labour and exchange described in Hegel's Jena *Philosophy of Spirit* provides a triadic model of social mediation: only when subjects engage in an interchange with others mediated by a relation to the thing will their individual wills be recognized. The condition for this recognition is the previously reconstructed structure of consciousness, which relates itself to itself in making itself into a thing. Since the thing is characterized as a sign, the basic structure of the I, cognizing itself in the form of its own thinghood, consists in a "being for another" or in pure negativity. In order to prevent this fundamental openness from turning into sheer arbitrariness, it requires universal institutions and traditional practices allowing individuals to relate themselves to the world in their actions in such way that they could realize their fundamental "being for another." For Hegel, the first step towards achieving such a complex form of self-realization is "making oneself into a thing" in abstract social labour where the products of my own activity turn out to have, as Hegel writes, "the significance of being for others." (JPS, 121 n.) This abstract "being for others," then, is actualized concretely in exchange, for both parties must relinquish a part of their possession, thereby negating themselves while at the

²⁵ See Klaus Roth, *Institutionalisierung der Freiheit in den Jenaer Schriften Hegels* (Rheinfelden/Berlin: Schäuble, 1991), 145; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (tr.) D. P. Chase (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), Book Five, Chapter 8.

same time “preserving”²⁶ themselves, since only through this can they satisfy their particular needs in cooperation with others.

What is important here is the fundamental ambivalence of Hegel’s notion of “making oneself into a thing”: on the one hand, it is the very condition of the realization of social freedom and universal recognition of the individual will; yet, on the other hand, it involves a necessary renunciation of arbitrariness and—in abstract work—an alienation from one’s own activity. It is precisely this necessary stage of abstraction that opens up the possibility for a new critique of reification. While Marx and Lukács believed that such an abstraction was characteristic of capitalist production and reifying as such, Hegel’s Aristotelian concept of exchange provides another picture: the abstraction of social labour and exchange value turns into a pathological form of alienation only when the things exchanged lose their function as social mediators and thus prevent the exchangers from experiencing their particular wills as recognized in the object given. Interpreting Hegel’s notion of exchange in this way also makes it possible to avoid some of the dangers in the critical history of the concept of reification. I will only mention three here.

A first danger consists in reducing the notion of reification to the reversal of the subject-object-relation in abstract labour. The complaint about this reversal, already present in Marx, is based on the unquestioned value judgement that the subject should master the object and not the other way around. Marx thereby establishes the basis for a devalorization of the object-relation later criticized by Adorno. By contrast, a case could be made that Hegel’s concept of social freedom relies on both the necessary abstraction of the social division of labour and a certain kind of priority of the object in exchange.

Secondly, this crucial object-relation, neglected by Habermas and Honneth’s intersubjective turn, could be reactivated for an immanent critique of capitalist commodity exchange and, by the same token, could undermine the strict opposition of reification and freedom. In this sense Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics* makes a plea for holding the “ideal of a free and just exchange”²⁷, hidden in the concept of exchange itself, against the constraint of the identifying principle of the commodity form—instead of just abstractly negating it. However, Adorno’s assertion that such an intrinsic form of normativity never fully vanishes—even under conditions of contemporary capitalism—

²⁶ In addition to meaning “preserve,” the German term “*erhalten*,” which Hegel uses here, could also take on the meaning of “receive” and “survive.” (JPS, 123)

²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147.

remains unproven. I can only suggest here that this claim could be defined more precisely in connection with Marcel Mauss's notion of symbolic gift-giving. That of course is not to say we have to go back to the archaic gift practices described by Mauss, but that we could take the structure of gift-giving as a model for the social bond still present in economic exchange.²⁸

Finally, the suggested reactivation of Hegel's concept of exchange could sidestep a certain backward-looking form of critique to which the first generation of the Frankfurt School was not always absolutely immune. The glorified image of a well-ordered pre-capitalistic society in which market participants still encountered one other with respect and recognition should be rejected with reference to a "dialectic of freedom" that Hegel clearly saw in his later writings: specifically, that the promise of individual self-actualization, associated with the historical realization of free access to the market, is from its very beginning counteracted both by an unequal balance of wealth and the dependency of wageworkers.²⁹

To sum up, a revived critique of reification, taking Hegel's and Adorno's objections seriously, must be undertaken. If it is true that social freedom can be actualized only through a specific relation to things, a reifying moment in contemporary consumer society doubtlessly lies within the excessive waste of goods and resources. What Hegel describes as isolated desire, which in annihilating the object is always reproduced anew, recurs today in the production of endless new consumer goods. In this respect, reification is the "infinite progress" set in motion by the illusion that a greater amount of goods is identical with a greater amount of freedom and self-realization. However, according to Hegel, such a form of reification has not yet entered the movement of "making oneself into a thing," in which individuals, through a practical stance towards things, can experience their constitutive relatedness to others—or to put it slightly differently, their freedom as "being for another."

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²⁸ See Stephan Moebius and Dirk Quadflieg, "Negativität und Selbsttranszendenz. Hegel und Mauss als Denker einer dreirelationalen Anerkennung," in *Journal Phänomenologie*, vol. 31 (2009), 44–57.

²⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, (tr.) T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), §§ 243 ff.