

Georg Lukács and the Possibility of Critical Social Ontology

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Edited by

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Why Still Reification? Toward a Critical Social Ontology

Thomas Telios

1 Introduction¹

In his essay “Why Still philosophy?” (1962) Theodor W. Adorno takes up arms against positivist scientism, as well as against Heideggerian fundamental ontology. What both scientism and fundamental ontology have in common is the wish to counter idealism; a wish justified and shared also by Adorno. Where they both fail is, however, the fact that while trying to do so both scientific positivism and fundamental ontology could not avoid succumbing to essentialism in the form of anthropomorphism, i.e., the assertion that there is a last, infallible and Archimedean point of truth and that this can still be none other than the subject. Against this metaphysical presupposition interwoven and prevalent in western metaphysics since Protagoras’ “man is the measure of all things,” Adorno brings forward a minimal demand that reorients philosophy by reinvesting it with a concrete utopian character: “If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, even if only as thought’s powerless attempt to remain its own master and to convict of untruth, by their own

1 The first part of this book chapter is based on a lecture given in November 2016 at the University of Vienna during the workshop “Heteronomie – Entfremdung – Verdinglichung. Grundbegriffe philosophischer Sozialkritik” organized by Andreas Gelhard in cooperation with Gerald Posselt and Sergej Seitz. The second part reflects on what was already argued in Thomas Telios, “Vom Ding zur Ware: Lektüren der Verdinglichung und die Fundamente kollektiver Handlungsfähigkeit dezentrierter Subjekte.” *EPEKEINA. International Journal of Ontology, History and Critics*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015): 1–23, and was recently translated in Spanish as “De la cosa a la mercancía: lecturas sobre la cosificación y el fundamento de la capacidad de acción colectiva de los sujetos descentrados.” In Gianfranco Casuso and Justo Serrano (eds.), *Las Armas de la Crítica*. (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2018), 320–341. The third part in its main features goes back to a paper delivered on April 2017 at a conference on the legacy of Georg Lukács that took place at the Eötvös Loránd University and the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. I am thankful to Michael J. Thompson for including this book chapter in this volume and for inspiring me to work further on this very complicated relationship between Lukács, New Materialisms and Bruno Latour.

criteria, both a fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned acquiescence. [...] It is incumbent upon philosophy [...] to provide a refuge for freedom. Not that there is any hope that it could break the political tendencies that are throttling freedom throughout the world both from within and without and whose violence permeates the very fabric of philosophical argumentation.”²

Should the apologetic of philosophy rely, according to this account, on providing freedom by means of critique while avoiding essentialism, the argument intended to be disclosed in the first part of this paper is an analogous one. Should the question be “why still reification?,” i.e., why should we keep clinging to this concept instead of discarding it alongside the useless rest of parochial terms from the Marxist literature, the answer is a relative unostentatious one: Should we regard reification henceforth as a *process of subjectification* (a), i.e., as a process of subjectivity production and leave behind the more common understanding of reification as a mere social pathology, or distortion of an original human nature, reification is capable of providing an *immanent* critique of subjectivating processes (b) because it does not fall prey to such *anthropomorphic* or *essentialist* pitfalls (c) allowing thus for the individual to convert its determination to *self-determination* (d) by setting in motion dereification processes that – taking into account the collective processes of subjectification (e) – are necessarily equally collective (f) even though contingent in their outbreak (g). The reason is that such an indubitably post-structurally inspired understanding of reification is able to obviate the subject-centered essentialisms by extrapolating a notion of the subject that is *collective in its way of becoming* because it emerges as and through a *collective process*. As Lukács points out directly in the preamble of his Reification Essay from his *History and Class Consciousness*, reification is related to the commodity *structure* to which an objective form and a subjective stance correspond. The form out of which subjectivity emerges is the commodity form. Concerning the notion of form, Katie Terezakis brought forward recently a highly insightful and radical proposition according to which “[f]orm is a demonstration of *being-in-relation*.”³ By the latter she did not only radicalize the way that Lukács’ commodity form could be understood by aligning the commodity form to a relational understanding of form. She also questioned the metaphysical character of the commodity form, thus immanentizing and rendering it a socio-philosophical

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*. (Columbia University Press: New York, 2005), 10.

3 Katie Terezakis, “Living Form and Living Criticism.” In Michael J. Thompson (ed.), *Georg Lukacs Reconsidered. Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*. (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 220.

category. With this relational understanding of commodity form as a framework and with Lukács' core notion that the structuration of the subjectivity corresponds to the commodity structure as a starting point, the reified subject can overcome its heteronomous becoming not because it is being driven by historical teleology or out of a dialectical leap of faith. On the contrary, the subject is capable of overcoming reifying processes due to – in a nutshell – the process of its socio-ontological structuration. Should the reified subject be the effect of such forms like exchange that are collective in their development since they unravel out of the interactions of more than one subjects, then the subject cannot be an integral individual but the collective product of such collective processes. Subsequently, the dereifying processes should be equally necessarily collective. The notion of labor as rearticulated by Lukács in the *Ontology of the Social Being* allows us to interpret labor as a productive, immanent process and it is this reinterpretation that will provide the theoretical instruments in order to justify whether reification can be understood as process of subjectification and how necessarily collective in their structuration albeit contingent in their appearance dereifying practices are. Despite the recent renaissance of ontological thinking, especially among the broadly understood Critical Studies, Lukács' late opus magnum, *The Ontology of the Social Being*, has received less than the deserved attention. The scope of this chapter is, seen this way, not only to provide a systematic argument, but also to invite us to re-examine Lukács' last work, that unlike the other works from his later period deserves more the received oblivion.

In what follows, I will offer a brief cartography of the different interpretations that the concept of reification underwent in its tumultuous intellectual history. Founded by Georg Lukács in his groundbreaking, homonymous, essay published the same year in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) alongside a series of equally seminal essays, the concept of reification rose to prominence – both amidst the Western Marxist discourse and beyond – as being indispensable for the purposes of a critical social philosophy. Even though it must have sounded completely different to the ears of its original readers, this text still sounds remarkably current; maybe even against the will of its author or to the historical-political context it unavoidably echoes. If we take into account the essay's main enquiry, namely “how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?”⁴ or when we, a couple of pages further, come across such statements according to which in order for the capitalization of society to be

4 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971), 84. Hereafter cited as *HCC*.

completed the commodity structure has “to penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image,”⁵ we cannot avoid but hearing passages precipitating Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* or *Subject and Power*, Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power*, or Michael Hardt’s and Toni Negri’s *Empire*. Through this cartography, I do not intend to trace such a highly differentiated, constructivist understanding of the subject back to a script that could only prefigure and not explicitly substantiate such claims, demands or frameworks. What I rather intend to make plausible, is that for us, Post-Hegelians and post-metaphysical readers schooled after the end of the grand narratives, such an anti-prescriptive understanding of the subject is worthy of being revisited because it is everything else than rusted, musty, outdated, reductionist, orthodox or reactionary. Having shown that reification in light of Lukács’ later work can also be regarded as a process of subjectification and having elucidated the practical-political effects that such a new understanding entails for emancipatory action, is yet not enough without giving a meta-theoretical account of how the epistemological foundations that are engaged in order to meet such a claim emerged also immanently and inherently to those reification processes. Therefore, a method must be devised that explicates immanently how dereifying processes can indeed be instantiated. In order to underpin the latter, a second account must be given as to on what grounds immanent judgements are possible that are still capable of staging dereifying processes. Georg Lukács’ ground axioms as laid down in the “Prolegomena” of his *Ontology* seem to point to this direction and it is here that the fundamentals for a *critical social ontology* can be found. While subject-centered “philosophies of consciousness” and object-oriented ontologies account for the main adversaries concerning an understanding of reification as a subjectification process, New Materialist tendencies (mainly Karen Barad’s epistemological model of diffraction and intra-agency and Bruno Latour’s notion of agential symmetry) will emerge as the main opponents concerning critical social ontology as methodological vector of recasting the subject in the socio-natural nexus. A differentiation and scrutinization of similar projects (like Social Ontology) will be added to the latter in order to clarify the point of convergence and divergence respectively. Should Lukács’ philosophy be worthy of rehabilitation and should he be worthy of being vindicated, then – so the quintessence of the chapter – it is precisely by showing that his theory cannot only provide an embankment to the current and reformulated “antinomies of the bourgeois thought,” but moreover that his theory can provide reasons, actions and actors that are capable of reversing the tide.

5 HCC, 85.

2 Reification: A Cartography

2.1 *French Post-war Philosophy*

It was none other than Gilles Deleuze who declared that Lukács should be regarded as belonging to the chorus of those thinkers who through their writings promoted a new understanding of (socially constructed) subjectivity. As he writes in a footnote in his book on Foucault,

[o]n the level of currents of thought we must no doubt go back to Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* was already raising questions to do with a new subjectivity; then the Frankfurt school, Italian Marxism and the first signs of “autonomy” (Tronti); the reflection that revolved around Sartre on the question of the new working class (Görz); the groups such as “Socialism or Barbarism,” “Situationism,” “the Communist Way” (especially Felix Guattari and the “micropolitics of desire”).⁶

Such an utterance was certainly not an easy one, especially if we take into consideration how vehemently Foucault himself had criticized Lukács. As Foucault unambiguously unearths in an interview on his just published *Archeology of Knowledge*, what he aimed through that book was to part once and for all with understandings emanating from notions such as “conscience” or envisaging “totalizing revolutions.”⁷ Under the latter he listed categorically Sartre, Goldman, Dilthey, the Hegelians of the 19th century and above all: Lukács. The very same line of thinkers whom Deleuze assembled as predecessors of this new understanding of subjectivity is reinterpreted by Foucault in order to explicate the limits of the thinking of consciousness and what it entailed, namely totalitarianism and authority. Similar is the case concerning the Marxist father of critique of subjectivity and copyright owner of the notion of subjectification, Louis Althusser. In his writings of the same period, i.e., the glorious 60s, Althusser directly attacked Lukács for his religious conception of the proletariat, his outrageous Hegelianism and his dual understanding of theory and practice. Nothing could be more alien to Althusser’s epistemology than Lukács’ messianic expectancy of the insurrection of the proletariat, the anthropological assumption of an original, unreified and unreifiable individual who could

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 150 (fn. 45).

7 Cf. Michel Foucault, “Michel Foucault explique son dernier livre (entretien avec J.-J. Brochier).” In François Ewald and Daniel Defert (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Dits et Écrits 1954–1988. I (1954–1969)*. (Paris : Gallimard, 1994), 775. More on this topic cf. Diogo Sardinha, “Réinvention et mort de la subjectivité.” *Labyrinthe*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2008): 91–102.

be reinstated should reification processes be aborted, his ethical reading of capitalism running counter to the scientific one that Althusser tried to establish, or the alignment of the revolutionary Marxism back to a dialectical model (Hegel) which Marx himself had tried so fervently to overcome in order to liberate history from its suffocating claws. Given that the differences at least from Althusser's perspective were so ostensible, there is in the whole corpus of his opus not a single passage where Althusser deals thoroughly with Lukács philosophy. When referring to Lukács he normally suffices in referring always in passing primarily to the "young Lukács," in bringing him in relation to the also "young Korsch" and to a lesser extent to Antonio Gramsci in order to finally reject them both (Lukács and Korsch) quickly and summarily.⁸ From this perspective, it is not surprising that the biggest follower of both Althusser and Foucault, Judith Butler, chose also not to deal in a more detailed manner with reification as a process of subjectivation. In her contribution to the book edition of Axel Honneth's Tanner Lectures bearing the promising title *Reification: A New Look to an Old Idea* Butler avails herself of this opportunity in order to comment on Axel Honneth's recognitional re-conceptualization of the concept of reification. Yet she misses the chance to reexamine the concept of reification on the grounds of her own theory of subjectification.⁹ The second time she was given a similar opportunity, i.e., when asked to write the preface to the new centennial edition of Lukács' *Soul and Form*,¹⁰ she also did not take up the challenge to scrutinize reification as a subjectification process. Irrespective of magnificent and thorough her literary critique may be and how ingeniously she brought elements of her own poststructuralist theory in Lukács' early and still existentialist framework, she did not occupy herself with a more profound reading of Lukács' early structural elements that would later culminate in his reification theory.

2.2 Feminist Philosophy

Besides Poststructuralism there is another thread of theory that finds in Butler its crowing point: feminism. For the denominations among the Feminist

8 Following quotations should suffice to sustain Althusser's irreconcilable attitude to Lukács: Louis Althusser, *For Marx*. (London: The Penguin Press, 1969), 114 (fn. 29), 221 (fn. 1); *Essays in Self-Criticism*. (London: Verso, 1978), 115 (fn. 11); *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. (New York/London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 44, 122; *Reading Capital. Vol. 1*. (London: NLB, 1970), 120, 140, 143, 249.

9 Judith Butler, "Taking Another's View: Ambivalent Implications." In Axel Honneth, *Reification: A new look at an old idea*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 97–119.

10 Judith Butler, "Introduction." In Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1–15.

scholars and activists inspired by the Marxist or Marxian literature,¹¹ not only the essay on reification from *History and Class Consciousness* was of major importance. The essay on class consciousness proved to be equally influential and inspiring. The “Standpoint Theory,” lending even its name from Lukács’ conceptual arsenal, extrapolated a category of the woman, the female and sexuality analogously to the figure and the aims of the worker and the proletariat.¹² Now, to be sure, the aforementioned chasm between Lukács and the Althusserians could not leave the Feminist discourse intangible. As Catherine MacKinnon, one of the leading figures of this Marxian or Marxist inspired Feminism, put it, Marxist methodology was

divided between an epistemology that embraces its own historicity and one that claims to portray a reality outside itself. In the first tendency, all thought, including social analysis, is ideological in the sense of being shaped by social being, the conditions of which are external to no theory. [...] In the second tendency, theory is acontextual to the extent that it is correct. Real processes and thought processes are distinct; being has primacy over knowledge. [...] Situated thought is as likely to produce “false consciousness” as access to truth. Theory, by definition, is, on the contrary, nonideological.¹³

The former tendency is attributed to Lukács; the second to Louis Althusser. Embracing Lukács’ project of theory which lies in creating “a theory of theory and a consciousness of consciousness”¹⁴ MacKinnon’s verdict concerning the practicability of the tension between Lukács and Althusser for the Feminist subject, thought and tactics is undisputable.

11 The demarcation lines between Marxist Feminism, Materialist Feminism, Radical Feminism and Standpoint Theory are for the purposes of the current article far too blurry in order to be able to be addressed suitably and with respect to their tremendous differences. The generic term “inspired by Marxist or Marxian literature” introduced so as to speak of all of them together hopefully does not harm the irreducibility and incommensurability of those tendencies more than necessarily.

12 Sandra Harding provides in her *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. (New York/London: Routledge, 2004) with articles from Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, Donna Haraway, Nancy Hartsock, Uma Narayan, Hilary Rose, Alison Wylie, etc., a very condense overview of the debates covering the standpoint theory.

13 Catherine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory.” *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1982): 515–544, here 527–528 (fn. 23).

14 *HCC*, 47.

The problem with using scientific method to understand women's situation is that it is precisely unclear and crucial what is thought and what is thing, so that the separation itself becomes problematic. The second tendency grounds the Marxist claim to be scientific; the first, its claim to capture as thought the flux of history. The first is more hospitable to feminism; the second has become the dominant tradition.¹⁵

Echoing Lukács, the feminist standpoint, as Nancy Hartsock put it,

is not an empiricist appeal to or by the oppressed but a cognitive, psychological and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by the nonessentialist, historically contingent, situated standards of strong objectivity. Such a standpoint is the always fraught but necessary fruit of the practice of oppositional and differential consciousness. A feminist standpoint is a practical technology rooted in yearning, not an abstract philosophical foundation.¹⁶

As the citation unbosoms and given that Marxist methodological aspirations reached the feminist discourse at a time when feminists were already informed by Foucault concerning technologies of subjectivity, Lukács' theory, as reappropriated by feminism, was always one step ahead of most of Lukács' interpreters who even till nowadays are afraid of betraying the founder of Western Marxism thus ossifying what once dynamically rendered Marxism capable of disambiguating the higher elaborated capitalism of the 20th century. This having been said, Lukács just as Marxian or Marxist inspired feminism and maybe the latter because it was grounded so strongly on the former, received a well-deserved critique from more elaborate and diversified feminist theories and above all from intersectionalist feminism. As long as the more essentialist feminist positions continue to unreflectingly presuppose an ahistorical female subject or set off from a dual gender construction and thus ignore further ways of production of subjectivity like race, origin, religion, nationality, etc. or misinterpret them as deriving solely from capitalist ways of production, there can be no proof of the timeliness of Lukács' philosophy. Despite Fredric Jameson's wishful thinking,¹⁷ as long as it cannot be plausibly shown that Lukács'

15 Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1982): 528 (fn. 23).

16 Nancy Hartsock, *Money, sex, and power: toward a feminist historical materialism*. (New York: Longman, 1983), 236.

17 Fredric Jameson, "History and Class Consciousness as an 'Unfinished Project.'" *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1988): 49–72.

philosophy can indeed provide us with the analytical toolkit to launch not only a capitalist, but also a holistic critique of society encompassing all possible aspects of domination, Lukács will always and on good grounds remain a reductionist, masculinist, white, Eurocentric thinker. As demonstrated shortly, the latter is definitely not the case. The fact that the German section of intersectional Feminists accrued under the hospice of the Frankfurt School with its undisputable bonds to Lukács or projects like the ones pursued by Frederike Habermann or Kevin Floyd should be considered as first indications of Lukács' still unexhausted potential.¹⁸

2.3 *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School*

Parallel to these tendencies that acknowledge in a more or less affirmative manner Lukács' influence and accordingly attempt in a more or less direct way to reconfigure reification in accordance with their own dispositions, there is another strand of thought that made reification its point of reference: the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. No matter whether Deleuze declared Lukács to the pioneer of the socially structured subject, or whether Marxist Feminism reappropriated Lukács' conceptual arsenal to substantiate its claims, and finally no matter whether Althusserian Marxism or poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault and Butler more or less tacitly avoided a direct confrontation with Lukács' theory of reification, there is probably no other concept that has haunted the conglomerate of theories we usually tend to identify as the Frankfurt School than that of reification. Hauke Brunkhorst could not be more right when claiming that the different conceptualizations the notion of reification underwent could be regarded as being indicative of the cross paths, bifurcations and modifications that the Frankfurt School's thought itself underwent throughout its entire history.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in order for the philosophers of the Frankfurt School to abide by the imperative of (a) Critical Theory that is able to inveigh the capitalistic processes of socialization, the concept of reification was a concept they could not avoid to revisit. At the very same time though, in order for reification to be embedded in the theoretical framework of every rearticulation of Critical Theory's fundamentals, reification

18 Kevin Floyd, *Reifying Desire: Capital, Sexuality, Dialectic*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015).

19 In accordance with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who declared George Lukács the grounder of Western Marxism (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1973), Hauke Brunkhorst will also identify Lukács' HCC as the "silent foundational paradigmatic undertaking" of Western Marxism and consequently of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School; cf. Hauke Brunkhorst, "Paradigm-core and theory-dynamics in critical social theory: people and programs." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1998): 67–110, here 68.

had to be translated in order to meet the new proposed aims, methods and grounds upon which critique ought to be exerted anew. Nonetheless, this “epistemological” reification resulted to a lot but not to a forfeiture of its critical character. The gradual disjunction of capitalism from the notion of totality is indicative of Lukács’ approach of reification; the gradual withdrawal from an understanding of capitalism as the only materialized totality to the dispersion of the notion of totality in order to characterize – under the guise of domination, authority, instrumentality, irrationality, pathology, etc. – henceforth societal subsystems even on the microscopic level of intersubjective relationships; the subsequent application of reification also on those subsystems so as to refer, *in addition to* processes of capitalistic socialization, to the absence of reason, identity-thinking, abuse of communicative action, colonization of the life-world and forgetfulness of recognition; last but not least the very transition from a dialectic-epistemological to a social-ontological via a linguistic paradigm, expanded and diversified the spatio-temporal range of reification’s application. This longitudinal-latitude expansion of the notion of reification, as Martin Jay called those diversified rapprochements,²⁰ did not result in altering what has always been reification’s main specific: the *exchange principle*. Nonetheless, these trajectories relate asymptotically to the question whether reification could be understood as a subjectivation process. They are not incompatible, since due to this continuous shifting of the content and areas of application of the notion of reification they did smooth the way to such an understanding of reification as a subjectivation process. Nevertheless, none of the understandings of reification brought forward by the Frankfurt School went as far as to question the sovereign constitution of the subject.

Even though, e.g., in the case of Theodor W. Adorno, reification was promoted to a transhistorical, structural feature of social coexistence *par excellence*, it did not lose its capitalism-critical punchline, but its specificity as a phenomenon apparent only under capitalist processes of socialization. Reification was henceforth not only a matter of life circumstances, but also a certain way of superimposed, mediated, disciplinary thinking that pertains to the creation of subjectivity by fragmenting it and distracting it from wholeness of its existence (cf. 91). This argument was questioned by Habermas, according to whom Adorno and Horkheimer “see themselves forced [...] to sink the foundations of the reification critique still deeper and to expand instrumental reason into a category of the world-historical process of civilization as a whole, that is, to project the process of reification back behind the capitalist beginnings of

20 Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 26, 59.

the modern age into the very beginnings of hominization.”²¹ In order to reinstate the process of reification at the capitalist beginnings of modernity Habermas extrapolated out of reification his colonization thesis and incorporated it in his theory of communicative action. According to Habermas, reification becomes henceforth apparent not only as a specific worker’s problem, but as a problem pertaining not only to workers, but to all subjects who “coordinate their interactions by way of the de-linguistified medium of exchange value rather than through norms and values, as the other side of a rationalization of their action orientations.”²² The third generation, with Axel Honneth as its figurehead, shifted the content of reification once more and expanded its normative orientation with a clear practice-oriented orientation. By going back and reinterpreting Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s dictum “[a]ll reification is forgetting”²³ as “a ‘forgetting’ of the elementary recognition originally granted to every human being,”²⁴ Honneth’s success concerning the reactualization of reification lies in broadening up once more the range of reification processes and subsequently the fields where struggles for dereification could accrue. As Martin Jay rightly notes, “[s]tressing the ongoing struggle for recognition – involving the inviolability of the body, legal equality, and respect for discrete ways of life – he [Axel Honneth] believes he can locate the normative kernel of critique in a level of human interaction even more fundamental than the quest for perfect understanding posited by Habermas as a premise of all human communication. Because that struggle is universal, it can motivate social action whenever the desire for recognition is thwarted.”²⁵ In this context, reification divests the power problematic bequeathed to it from Habermas and at the same time is purified from the strong linguistic characteristics attributed to it also by Habermas in favor of an understanding of reification as a normative socio-ontological category. Should the latter be the first set of differentiations with which Honneth furnishes his reactualization of reification, the second one pertains to the fact that he cannot avoid pointing out the productivity of reification. Reification seen this way does not belong constitutively to a certain

21 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 366.

22 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 359.

23 Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 191.

24 Axel Honneth, *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 156.

25 Martin Jay, “Introduction.” In Axel Honneth, *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

socio-cultural stage of development like capitalism (as would be in the case of Habermas), nor does it pertain intrinsically to social life as such (as would be in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer). On the contrary, reification is induced structurally by social institutions and is incorporated as a way of thinking. As he states: “if the tendency toward reifying behavior is not to be traced back to processes of mental or cultural development, it will be necessary to identify those social structures or practices that *promote* or *cause* such a tendency [my emphasis].”²⁶ In spite of this realization though, Honneth directly softens and relativizes this diagnosis by introducing epistemological criteria that my not regress to the consciousness paradigm of the earlier Frankfurt School, but nevertheless pertain to universal pragmatics for which the references to the philosophy of John Dewey furnish proof. In this framework, Honneth may successfully avoid subjectivism, but only at the price of an essentialism that manifests itself in possessing epistemological perceptual criteria and being able to use them arbitrarily in order to overcome the forgetting of recognition that the reification structures have brought about; the latter referring not only in respect of the relation of the subject to nature, the other or itself, but also in respect to its self-relation. A fourth shift could be identified in the theoretical framework of the Frankfurt School, namely Herbert Marcuse’s reading of reification in his *One-Dimensional Man*.²⁷ Nevertheless, even in the work of the most ardent social constructivist among the theorists of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse falls pray to another essentialism since desire and imagination, or even better, the individual upon which Marcuse bestows imaginary potential and socially unrestrainable desire, will at the end find its way out of the one-dimensionality in which automation and reification keep it chained.

Summing up this undoubtedly very sketchy cartography, the following can be stated: With the exception of Deleuze, who alone saw in Lukács’ notion of reification the potential for a critique of subjectivity beyond the pitfalls of anthropomorphism, whenever – as in the aftermath of the Marxist-feminist discourse – essentialism was combatted it was done by concurrently departing from the notion of reification and whenever the notion of reification was revisited in order to broaden its content as in the case of the Frankfurt School it seemed that anthropomorphism could not be circumvented. Unsatisfactory as this may be, there is nonetheless another, minoritarian, path of reintroducing reification, that was suggested by Lucien Goldmann and his pupil Nicolas

26 Axel Honneth, *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 75.

27 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. (London/New York: Routledge, 2002).

Tertulian and rearticulates reification as a productive process based on a firstly phenomenological and then socio-ontological framework. That reification leads to subjectivation is being tackled by questioning self-consciousness as the sole reason of subject formation and by outsourcing the process of the subject formation in order to transfer it firstly to the things and then the labor process as modes of subjectivity production respectively.

3 Reification as Subjectivation

According to Goldmann, Lukács succeeds in overcoming the dualistic view of the world that separates subject and object and thus all problematics related to reification as soon as he establishes that “[t]he real subject of all historical action for Lukács (inspired by Marx), the subject of all human. action, is a plural subject; the subject which at the same time is an object, since it is itself that it understands, and since it acts upon a society of which it forms a part.”²⁸ In this way, the epistemological complications of this problematic retreat in favor of a phenomenological view which holds to no longer seeking the distortions which can be self-reflexively perceived by the subject. On the contrary, we must seek the interactions that emerge between “the world, the significant universe in which men live, and the men who create it [...]. The subject is part of the world and in fact introduces meaning there practically, but this world is part of the subject and constitutes it.”²⁹ Things represent a part of this empirical, material, worldly world, and Goldmann in his *Dialectical Investigations* Goldmann continually returns to the concept of the thing in order to define capitalism from the perspective of things.³⁰

28 Lucien Goldmann, *Lukacs and Heidegger. Towards a new philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 1977), 32.

29 Lucien Goldmann, *Lukacs and Heidegger. Towards a new philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 1977), 35.

30 The *Dialectical Investigations* (1959) were published fourteen years before his later reflections on Lukács and Heidegger (1973), which remain unfinished due to Goldmann's premature death. Although Goldmann does not address Heidegger directly in the *Dialectical Investigations*, his approach to the phenomenon of reification in this work is more broadly Heideggerian than his later comparative writing. It nevertheless seems sensible to begin the treatment of Goldman's interpretation of Lukács' reification with these highly significant passages from the later work on Lukács and Heidegger, for only in the light of this more mature work can we better understand Goldmann's earlier remarks and in particular those concerning the shift from the epistemological to the phenomenological view of reification.

Furthering Marx's and Lukács' thought, he conceives of capitalism as an economic structure that "strengthens the autonomy of dead things over human activity"³¹ and "disguises the social relations between human beings, the mental and psychic realities, by giving them the appearance of natural properties of things or of natural laws."³² The abovementioned coupling of epistemological object and phenomenological thing – even the very fact that there is a material entity, a thing, under which both the epistemological dimension of the object and the phenomenological dimension of the thing are subsumed – comes to light when Goldmann refers to this entity as the "most important concept for everyday life."³³ In this longer passage, which is worth citing in full, Goldmann alternates between epistemological apperception and the phenomenological physicality of the (thing-) world, interpreting the emergence of theoretical apperception as an attempt to grasp the external, objective natural world of things. This is not derived or inspired from the Heideggerian *world-anxiety* but is perceived as compensation for meeting and resisting the constantly changing world and the things' effects on the judging subject, through which the latter becomes a subject in the first place. The relevant passage reads as follows:

In every society, social practice is closely linked to physical objects. People work together on the nonhuman reality that is constantly changing under their influence. It is probable that in every society, in order to effectively act on reality, people have been forced to separate the cognitive aspect of physical reality from their active or affective relationship with it. Thus they create a world of which man can speak *theoretically*, i.e. in the mode of determination [*Feststellung*]. It is also likely that, in order to achieve this, they were always forced to associate the ever-changing images of the immediately empirically given with conceptual invariants, of which the most important for everyday life is the concept of the *object*, the *thing*.³⁴

The volatile vicissitude of the argumentative grounds from phenomenology to epistemology obvious in this passage is not attributable to Goldmann's argumentative inconsistency. It is more likely a testament to the inherent

31 Lucien Goldmann, *Dialektische Untersuchungen*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1966), 89. Given that there is still no English translation available of this work all citations – unless otherwise indicated – are mine.

32 Lucien Goldmann, *Dialektische Untersuchungen*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1966), 87.

33 Lucien Goldmann, *Dialektische Untersuchungen*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1966), 89.

34 *Ibid.*

impossibility of distinguishing between epistemological determination and phenomenological observation. This, as the passage reveals, is due to the effects produced by things, which determine not only the cognitive but also the psychic sphere of the subject and lead the subject to reconfigure itself as a defense against these effects. Coming now to Goldmann's treatment of the phenomenon of reification from the perspective of the thing as a commodity, given that he emphasizes the constitutive meaning of things for the total personal structuring of the subject, a process which takes place in the sphere of everyday life, it is all the more surprising that he ascribes to commodities such a limited subjectivating power. He situates commodities as factors that influence economic life alone, which is part of the public life of the subjects. Faithful to his genetic structuralism, which was itself influenced by Piaget's developmental psychology, Goldman argues that things only as commodities develop a subjectivizing character. As soon as the thing that has become a commodity leaves the marketplace, thereby leaving behind its exchange value, entering the private sphere of the subject and recognizable only for its utility value, it loses its reifying character, and thus its subjectivizing function is negated. In addition, the commodities that revert to being things within the private sphere, which, according to Goldmann, include e.g., the family and friendships, are accorded neutral qualities and effects, which not only have no reifying effects but also allow for relationships that are considered as being "withdrawn from the *immediate* influence of the market" and that, "to a certain extent, remain accessible to altruism and solidarity."³⁵ Thus Goldmann's argument leads to a division of the world, driven by things that have become commodities, into a reified public sphere and an unrelated, indestructible, even de-reified, private sphere. The notion that this leads to a "*psychic dualism that becomes one of the basic structures of man in capitalist society*"³⁶ should be viewed as a shorthand interpretation of society's subsumption under capitalist ways of production and above all under the commodities rather than a presupposed distinction between an unreifiable, private and a reified, public sphere of life.³⁷

35 Lucien Goldmann, *Dialektische Untersuchungen*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1966), 85.

36 Lucien Goldmann, *Dialektische Untersuchungen*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1966), 94.

37 That there can be a de-commodified private sphere, or that the restoration of the original unity of nature and man requires a form of naïve, unreified access to things, is a notion that is not restricted to Goldmann's dialectic of reconciliation. Representatives of a more open, negative dialectic such as Adorno and W. Benjamin are equally guilty of naïve optimism, which is likely to prove useless against capitalist reification; on this see, among others, Francesca Caligiuri, "Das unwürdige der Welteinrichtung erfahren." In Tobias Goll, Daniel Keil and Thomas Telios (eds.), *Critical Matter. Diskussionen eines neuen Materialismus*. (Münster: Edition Assemblage, 2013).

With regards to the former, i.e., spelling out the effectiveness of the capitalist economic structure inherent in the commodity form, the fruitfulness of Goldmann's thought with regard to the reification problematic stems from his abandonment of the epistemological approach to the issue and his turn towards a phenomenological conception of the thing. The latter manifests itself – as seen – in the fact that there is a world of things that is independent of the cognition of the subject and that these things are the factors that structure subjects. The short-sightedness noted above, as far as the constitutivity of things/commodities in the development of the subject is concerned, is thus located not in the content but in the formal-logical structure of the argument, i.e., in the fact that, despite the phenomenological nature of his approach, Goldmann's reflections are still based on a dialectical strategy. The mental development from the neutrality of the “in itself” mode of being of things as material entities that belong to the natural world (T), to the negativity of things that have become commodities (T-C), to a commodity that has now become a thing again (T-C-T') – one which withdraws its negative effects within the private sphere, preserves its exchange character and has affirmative effects – points to a logic of dialectical reconciliation which Goldmann seems yet to have abandoned. The problem here, as will become apparent, is neither the dialectical, operative train of thought nor the synthetic consideration of the thing as both a thing and a commodity. What is limiting is the above-suggested original unity of the fabricated, reconciling world of the private sphere to be achieved through the teleological self-movement of the thing from a neutral disposition to the social self-determination of the commodity that has again become a thing. Nicolas Tertulian rightly viewed this explanatory model as being too brief. Following Goldmann's thought, he turns to the late Lukács and takes the *Ontology of Social Being* as a starting point for his reflections on the phenomenon of reification.

While Lukács remains within an epistemological framework in his earlier to middle writings, including *The Young Hegel* and *The Young Marx*,³⁸ Tertulian notes that a break takes place at least by the time of *The Ontology of Social Being*, which Lukács himself applies to his earlier exposition of the concept of reification. Reification is now understood not as a “category of historical philosophy” but as a “category of personality theory.” Subtle distinctions between objectification and alienation, between generated abilities and their synergy in the synthesis of personality, last but not least between phylogenetic

38 Cf. Georg Lukács, *Der junge Hegel. Über die Beziehungen von Dialektik und Ökonomie.* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1949); *Der junge Marx. Seine philosophische Entwicklung von 1840 bis 1844.* (Stuttgart: Neske, 1965).

humanity (*Gattungsmäßigkeit* species character in itself) and the ontogenetic individual (*Gattungsmäßigkeit* for itself) testify to this “mutism,”³⁹ this transformation of personality, that Tertulian detects as being set in motion by the process of reification. This mutism is to be attributed to the neither epistemological, nor phenomenological but, henceforth, social-ontological approximation of the phenomenon of reification, which Lukács presents in the *Ontology of Social Being*. As will be shown more thoroughly in the next section of this chapter, Lukács asserts inorganic nature, organic nature (life) and society as modes of being. However, Lukács observes these three modes of being as mere analytical categories aiming only to describe the complexity of the genesis of the social being (i.e., the subject). The three modes of being are only seemingly opposing facts,⁴⁰ since in reality they condition each other regardless how irreducible they may remain to each other. Fictitious is therefore not the ontological irreducibility of those modes of being, but the fact that they should be conceived of as being not related to one another. As a matter of fact, inorganic nature, organic nature (life) and society are interrelated and emerge as equally original. Lukács according to Tertulian succeeds in this by proclaiming that their relationship is a reciprocal constitution which depends on the ontological, i.e., *productive*, character of the labor process, during which the subject produces itself. The fact that Lukács identifies every change brought about both by and during the labor process as a new positioning [*Setzung*]⁴¹ makes possible to rethink this subjectivation process as having a never-ending, reiterating character. The fact that subjectivation is a process that must be every time reiterated makes evident not only the productive but also the *performative* character of this relationship. This reasoning leads to the notion that we can distinguish neither between the natural and the social world on the one hand nor between the public and the private on the other – as was the case with Goldmann.⁴² Because of this, not the exchange of commodities on the market is to be held responsible for the effects of reification. On the contrary, it

39 Nicolas Tertulian, “Alienation et Desalienation: Une confrontation Lukacs-Heidegger.” *Actuel Marx*, vol. 39 (2006): 36.

40 Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. Die Arbeit*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1973), 125; henceforth *Ontology/Labor*. The quotations from the labor chapter are taken from the German separate edition of this chapter and not from the posthumously appeared second book of the *Ontology* of which it is a part. Again, unless otherwise indicated, I decided to provide my own translations instead of referring to the existing English translation.

41 Cf. *Ontology/Labor*, 24.

42 From this point of view, it is easy to see why the notion of everyday life was so fundamental to deciphering the problems of capitalist socialization in the writings of the Budapest School; see Heller 1980 and 1981.

is labor as a socio-ontological and teleological, i.e., self-defining, category, that is to be held accountable for the subjectivating effects reification deploys. The reason is that through labor inorganic nature, organic nature (life) and society come to contact with one another and that through these interactions the social being is being brought about.

To be sure, and against Tertulian, it could be argued that also Lukács' earlier essay on reification from his *History and Class Consciousness* contains elements of a constructivist concept of subjectivity. Primary evidence for this can be found in passages in which Lukács categorically opposes essentialist conceptions of the subject. Lukács subsumes them under the general category "humanism" or an "anthropological point of view," which he views, for example, as underlying modern pragmatism, the revolutionary utopianism developed by Ernst Bloch, and Kant's subjective idealism.⁴³ In the case of all three, Lukács debunks that, as man becomes absolutized, he is simultaneously mythologized, thereby manifesting the inadequacy of this way of thinking to "understand reality concretely as a historical process."⁴⁴ Further evidence for Lukács' anti-humanistic conception of the subject can be found in his rejection of human's natural species character (*Gattungsmässigkeit*). Unlike Marx, who in his declination of the modes of alienation reveals man as a natural being,⁴⁵ Lukács states clearly at the very beginning of his essay that "[b]y selling this, his only commodity, he [man] integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialised process that has been rationalised and mechanised, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanised and rationalised tool."⁴⁶ Even clearer are the *Ontology*-anticipating ideas on the formal logical level of argumentation. Not only is the later Lukács of the *Ontology* anticipated⁴⁷ when the early Lukács claims in the Reification-Essay that Marx

43 Cf. *HCC*, 220 (fn. 51; on pragmatism); 222 (fn. 68; on Ernst Bloch); 192 (on revolutionary utopianism). Lukács returns to the "intellectus archetypus" of German idealism in the chapter on labor of the *Ontology*; see *Ontology/Labor*, 18. This also supports the thesis, presented here, that (against Tertulian) we should speak not of a break between the earlier and the later Lukács but rather of a further development of the former in the latter.

44 *HCC*, 187.

45 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. (Amherst/New York: Prometheus, 1988), 69–84.

46 *HCC*, 166.

47 The thesis that Lukács' early thinking already had ontological features – where ontology is used as a metonymy for productive processes – was also advanced by Andrew Feenberg. As he writes: "Lukács' theory can best be understood as a generalization of Marxian fetishism in two dimensions, in sociological breadth through Weber, and in ontological

historicized Hegel by historicizing man, i.e., by making man the “initial abstract category[y] of dialectics,”⁴⁸ according to which “*he [man] both is and at the same time is not.*”⁴⁹ It can even be said that Lukács’ equation of life with social life,⁵⁰ which is to be found in the conclusion of the *Ontology* and according to which “the existence and effectiveness of consciousness are inextricably linked to the biological process of the living organism, such that every individual consciousness [...] emerges together with its body and perishes,”⁵¹ should indeed be understood not as a departure from but as a continuation of his earlier attempt.⁵² As a matter of fact and in order to better illustrate this continuation, by staying loyal to the terminology of Hegelian anthropology, e.g., when Lukács ascribes phenomena such as affects, instincts, and needs to the sphere of consciousness,⁵³ he does not privilege the subsumption of every day, wordly practices and bodily experiences under mental categories but rather grasps the opportunity to address those bodily issues by means of the Hegelian anthropology since the latter was the only back then available conceptual set of tools to theorize such issues. Last but not least, Lukács is in his early writing not content merely to deny in purely formal terms that a certain essence resides in the core of the subject.⁵⁴ He more significantly endeavors to

depth through Hegel. So generalized, the concept of reification becomes the basis for a critique of capitalist rationality as a system of social thought and organization threatened by its inability to grasp the material substratum of its own formalistic categories and institutional structures”; Andrew Feenberg, *Lukacs, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*. (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), 61.

48 HCC, 189–190.

49 Ibid.

50 *Ontology/Labor*, 18.

51 *Ontology/Labor*, 125.

52 W.T. Newell already points in this direction when he writes: “Lukács’ relation to the Marxist tradition is a complex one. He hegelianises the Marxist maxim that social being determines consciousness by expanding its meaning beyond the idea that the economic base determines the superstructure. [...] This opens up the Marxist critique of capitalism to embrace far subtler kinds of alienation – psychological and aesthetic – than the economic”; Walter R. Newell, “Philosophy and the perils of commitment: A comparison of Lukacs and Heidegger” *History of European Ideas*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1988): 311. On this cf. also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 26.

53 On this cf. Lukács’ thesis that “the rule of human consciousness over its own suffering, [...] extends to one part of the sphere of consciousness, to habits, instincts, affects”; *Ontology/Labor*, 123.

54 As Lukács retrospectively states in his unpublished response to his critics: “The direct forms of appearance of social being are not, however, subjective fantasies of the brain, but moments of the real forms of existence, the conditions of existence of capitalist society”; Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*. (London/New York: Verso, 2000), 79.

draw attention to those specific mechanisms that are immediately elevated to social-ontological modes of subjectivity production. The administration of the capitalist market (whose laws are shaped by the commodity form) and technology (as a centralized and alienated way of organizing labor) are presented by Lukács as two paradigmatic modes of subjectivity production, that like Foucault's *dispositifs* are accorded a productive function within the capitalist discourse. Thus, Lukács radicalizes and concretizes the vague Marxist phrase that barter must strike back into the interior of the community and decompose it⁵⁵ by elevating the commodity form to a structural feature and the constitutive form of capitalist socialization. As he claims, in order to complete the capitalization of society, "it would be necessary [...] for the commodity structure to penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image. It is not enough merely to establish an external link with independent processes concerned with the production of exchange values."⁵⁶ Thus Lukács not only diagnoses the transformation of all human and social relationships into commodities but also notes that man does not remain untouched in this regard: "Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man."⁵⁷ Viewed in this way, the concept of the "contemplative stance"⁵⁸ of which Lukács speaks is to be understood not as a passive consciousness, whose possibility to self-reflection has gone astray, but as a consciousness that is generated by the reification process from the very beginning as a reified one. Not a pre-existing consciousness is replaced or distorted by new modes of perception. Rather, a reified consciousness is produced by reification that in its turn is driven by the commodity form. It is due to this diagnosis that Lukács can declare that to the extent that capitalist socialization owes its founding to the exchange of commodities, the consciousness not only of the worker, but of everyone in this thus-constructed sphere of life comes down to equate from the very beginning "the *self-consciousness of the commodity*; or in other words it is the self-knowledge, the self-revelation of the capitalist society founded upon the production and exchange of commodities."⁵⁹

At this point, what becomes clear is that, on the one hand, by virtue of the socialization of the capitalist economic structure, a product owes its

55 Cf. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 53.

56 *HCC*, 85.

57 *HCC*, 93.

58 *HCC*, 200.

59 *HCC*, 168.

commodity form to the exchange that has taken place between subjects in the marketplace. At the same time though, the reifying commodity form also conveys through its surplus-value the producer whose work has been invested and incorporated in the product. As Lukács, herein again following Marx notes, the labor, that one performs, merges with the product, whereby the producer “by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialised process that has been rationalised and mechanised, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity.”⁶⁰ Therefore, the subjectivation effects that – according to Goldmann – the commodities deploy as soon as they start getting consumed by the subject in its everyday life are to be traced back to the labor that the producer has invested in order to produce the commodity that will subjectivate the inner world of the consumer. This second relation that the commodity form brings about occurs through labor whereby labor merges with the product and through this merger the consuming subject comes into contact with the producing subject. Nonetheless, there is a third relation being instantiated through commodification processes. Beside exchange in the marketplace that creates a commodity out of a thing/product, or how labor effects the subject’s private world as soon as it becomes a part of its everyday life by getting consumed, there is a third set of relations unravelling from consumption. Through the consumption of a commodity, the consumer determines via the laws of supply and demand the socio-economic sphere of the lifeworld of the subject. The surplus value that is being incorporated through the producer’s labor in the commodity-to-be depends on the demand that the consumer determines. Therefore, parallelly to the exchange that lends the produced product its commodity form two further intersubjective relations are being conveyed through exchange: one which traces the transformation of the inner world of the consumer back to the labor of the producer invested in the product and one which traces the determination of the surplus value of the labor incorporated in the product back to the consumer who determines – amidst the capitalist regime of production in which we are still moving – through his/her demand the compensation of the producer’s invested labor. In this regard, Katie Terezakis rightly claims that “[f]orm is a demonstration of *being-in-relation* [...]. Being-in-relation is a cognitive condition of experience, insofar as experience is understood via ordering forms, and being-in-relation is the content of experience, insofar as subjectivity is only encountered in

60 HCC, 166.

intersubjective involvement and in its productive (and thereby self-productive) objectivations.”⁶¹

The above-described reading of reification as an *intersubjectively driven* and *subjectivating* phenomenon which takes place through the exchange of commodities provides a picture of the commodity as a product of labor and as an economic form between the world of things and the economic sphere of the lifeworld, which is dominated by capitalist exchange relations. This makes it possible to view the productive effects of each object, which is at the same time a thing and a commodity, synthetically, without having to attribute these effects reductively to one or the other sphere. The latter allows to conclude by assuming that there can be also other ways to found collective action. Conventionally, Lukács bases the emancipatory agency of the proletariat on the objectification that the proletariat experiences through reified labor. As soon as the proletariat becomes conscious of this heteronomous determination it is being transformed dialectically to the self-autonomous motor of history. Though this assumption does not have to be discarded, the hitherto analysis provides further foundations concerning collective agency and the possible, subsequent forms of collective practice. The latter pertains to acknowledging the consumer/producer as reciprocally subjectivating factors of the producer/consumer respectively and to integrating consumers and producers respectively in the emancipatory practices that can be derived from such a subjectivation framework. If the producer subjectivates the consumer through the labor invested in the commodity that will form the producer's inner world, then the consumer's emancipation runs through integrating the producer in his/her emancipatory practices. Similarly, if the consumer through his/her needs or demands determines the exploitation of the producer's labor, then also the consumer has to be integrated in the emancipatory practices of the producer in the producers' attempt to liberate themselves from the exploiting mechanism of the surplus value. Seen this way, Not only due to the identification of each proletarian as a member of the proletariat is what makes each proletarian agentially capable of emancipatory practices. Those identity politics can be complemented by acknowledging according to the subjectivation practices illustrated so far the structurally determining role of further subjects and include them in emancipatory practices. The latter obviously broadens up the possible practices suggested by the early Lukács in his Reification-Essay by taking off from the

61 Katie Terezakis, "Living Form and Living Criticism." In Michael J. Thompson (ed.), *Georg Lukacs Reconsidered. Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*. (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 220.

subjectivating effects that commodities social-ontologically deploy as suggested by the later Lukács in his *Ontology of the Social Being*.

4 Towards a Socio-ontological Critique

4.1 *From Ontology to Critical Social Ontology*

What we have seen so far is firstly how – on the grounds of Lukács' later, social-ontological understanding of labor – reification can be read as a subjectivation process. Secondly, we came to realize how this alternative and minoritarian understanding of reification has direct consequences concerning its addressees, i.e., the subjects whose conditions of life it pertains to. As a subjectivation process, social bonds are constituted between the subjectivating other and the subjectivated self and in order for dereification to kick in both relata of the relationship must be transformed. It would seem that such a transformation would be implied already in the early, epistemological understanding of reification as analyzed as early as in the Reification-Essay. Yet, Lukács is *eo loco* categorical concerning the incapability of the bourgeoisie to transform itself due to the fact that bourgeoisie is not reified through the reification process, does not become a part of it and therefore cannot be transformed with it. In contrast, the transition from a phenomenological to a social-ontological understanding of reification examined here seems to be more inclusive and thus provide for a broader range of actors capable of introducing and deploying dereification processes. If subjectivation, as indicated, takes place not only through labor, but also through consumption, then the subjects that could appear as capable of disentangling dereification processes are all participants of both the production and the consumption process. Seen this way, the problem of identity politics, namely the fact that only the proletariat is to be presumed as the only motor of history that arose within Lukács' epistemological understanding of reification, is being rendered obsolete. By observing reification as a social-ontological process of production of subjectivity, what we now, gain is a concept of agency that does not rely anymore on a presupposed epistemological capacity but comes around as an immanent agency arising through social practices. Nevertheless, and though this might already seem like a big step forward concerning Lukács' Up-to-date-ness and a first answer concerning the critical character of his *Ontology* on a praxeological level, we still have not answered the question concerning the critical character of Lukács *Ontology* on a theoretical level. In order to do this we have to take a narrower look at the *Prolegomena* of Lukács' book on the *Ontology of the Social Being*.

To be sure, even in the Left-Hegelian philosophical tradition, ontology and subsequently social ontology could only mean what it has always meant in every school or tendency of philosophy. As Robert Pippin argues, in the case of recognitional relationships, social ontology brings to light “the *ultimacy* of such dependence [...] and so the *necessity* of acknowledging its indispensability in our political theory.”⁶² The fact that when speaking of social ontology it comes down to interrogating the relationships that unfold between social entities and how they influence social theory and consequently political praxis is a main argument shared almost unanimously by all theories moving in this paradigm independently of their origin (analytical or continental). Concerning the former, the analytical philosophical tradition, according to Raimo Tuomela, “can be broadly understood to cover all kinds of entities and properties that rational study of the social world is taken to need. Understood in this wide sense, social ontology is not only a study of the basic nature of social reality but at least in part a study of what the best-explaining social scientific theories need to appeal to in their postulated ontologies.”⁶³ Along the same lines and emphasizing the praxeological in contrast to the metaphysical character of social ontology, Brian Epstein argues that “[s]ocial ontology should not be thought of as the study of ‘ontological claims’ such as ‘social groups exist’ or ‘there are no social spirits.’ But instead it is the study of *ontological building relations* between different kinds of entities.”⁶⁴ Should that be the case in the analytical philosophical framework, the continental camp slightly complexifies the field by trying to identify what – in addition to social ontology – a “critical” social ontology could be. Putting aside the impossible and more general question “what critique is?,” concerning social critical ontology, two lines of thinking seem to become prevalent in the continental discourse: one concentrating on elements of Marx’s critique of capitalism and one taking up some main arguments of the Frankfurt School as enriched by a renewed interest in pragmatist discourse. In regard to the former, the Marxist one, the critical character of social ontology seems to evolve around the notions of historicity and totality. Social ontology is only then critical if it extrapolates out of allegedly ahistoric (ontological) entities historical procedures of (social) becoming and if it accommodates epistemological knowledge that grasps the society in its

62 Robert Pippin, “Recognition and Reconciliation.” In Bert van den Brink and David Owen (eds.), *Recognition and Power. Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64.

63 Raimo Tuomela, *Social Ontology. Collective Intentionality and Group Agents*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ix.

64 Brian Epstein, “Framework for Social Ontology.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016): 147–167, 149.

entirety. As Reha Kadakal states, “[s]ocial theory as critical ontology grasps social reality not simply in terms of a positivist notion of ‘facts,’ but rather in terms of its very processes of becoming, and it attempts to comprehend these processes through questions that are simultaneously theoretical and normative.”⁶⁵ To the latter he adds that “[t]he purpose of critical ontology is not only to make intelligible the processes of concrete social reality and social relations, which is a necessary part of any critical social theory, but also to bring to light the categories of thought that such a reality brings into being – categories, that is to say, with their own historicity.”⁶⁶ In a similar gesture and echoing Marx’s understanding of the man as the “totality of human life-activity,”⁶⁷ Michael J. Thompson argues that “the critical conception of social ontology has in view the thesis that it is only by understanding the totality of human social life and its potential aims and goals that [such social-ontological processes as] reification can be overcome.”⁶⁸ Now, to be clear, it is not as if the analytical philosophical approach of social ontology is bereft of any critical inquiry into the existence of the social entities, the relationships among them and/or the ways to overcome them. By asking “[w]hat sets up the grounding conditions for social facts, to be what they are?,”⁶⁹ a project that Brian Epstein calls “anchoring,” we are given the possibility “if the grounding conditions for a particular social fact are partly anchored by a widely held false belief” to “‘de-bunk’ the concept may be by criticizing the anchors.”⁷⁰ Nevertheless, while merely the possibility of critique or critique as a mere possibility is brought forward here, in the continental tradition social ontology is considered – if not elevated to – a critical project *per se*. The latter is surely the case regarding the second line of thought within the continental understanding of social ontology that can be traced back to emancipatory objectives of the Frankfurt School

65 Reha Kadakal, “Toward a Critical Ontology of the Social: Hegel, Lukács, and the Challenge of Mediation.” *Globalization, Critique and Social Theory: Diagnoses and Challenges*, vol. 33 (2015): 167.

66 Reha Kadakal, “Toward a Critical Ontology of the Social: Hegel, Lukács, and the Challenge of Mediation.” *Globalization, Critique and Social Theory: Diagnoses and Challenges*, vol. 33 (2015): 177.

67 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1988), 105.

68 Michael J. Thompson, “Collective Intentionality, Social Domination, and Reification.” *Journal of Social Ontology*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2017): 207–229, 224.

69 Brian Epstein, “Framework for Social Ontology.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016): 147–167, 158; cf. also Brian Epstein, “History and the Critique of Social Concepts.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2010): 3–29.

70 Brian Epstein, “Framework for Social Ontology.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016): 147–167, 161.

no matter how irretrievably influenced by pragmatist critical ideals the rearticulation of those ideals appear to be. As Emmanuel Renault e.g., argues,

for a social theory that thinks of politics in terms of practices rooted in tendencies and contractions, and that thinks of radical transformations in terms of dynamics of social transformation, only the processual ontology is a consistent option. For sure, even a fully articulated processual social ontology could not all by itself provide a direct contribution to the study of the dynamics of social transformation and to practical efforts of transforming the world. What it could do, is to help critical theories in clarifying their principles and to offer conceptual tools for critical reflection on the social sciences as well as for bridging the gap between social theory and practical efforts toward social transformation. In other words, such a social ontology could be useful for the particular kind of self-reflection associated with the very idea of critical theory.⁷¹

Along the same lines and after acknowledging that it would be highly unlikely that Adorno would succumb to any reading of ontology as a critical project, Italo Testa argues that

in order to be critical, social ontology should not confine itself to mere description of the constitution of social objects, but should take up from critical social philosophy the task of providing a critical diagnosis of social reification. This means introducing a distinction between necessary mechanisms of objectification constitutive of social objects, and additional mechanisms of reification providing some forms of objectivation and the resulting social objectivity with an appearance of necessity and immutability and thus constraining free, rational agency.⁷²

4.2 *The Social-Ontological Foundations of the Prolegomena*

Though Lukács' *Ontology* was intended by its author as a propaedeutic to a bigger and more elaborate Marxist ethic and for which, as a propaedeutic to the "first Marxist ethic"⁷³ the *Ontology* has received – and still does – enough

71 Emmanuel Renault, "Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology." *Journal of Social Ontology*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2016): 31.

72 Italo Testa, "Ontology of the False State. On the Relation Between Critical Theory, Social Philosophy, and Social Ontology." *Journal of Social Ontology*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2015): 290–291.

73 Rüdiger Dannemann and Werner Jung (eds.), *Beiträge zu Georg Lukács' "Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins."* Frank Benseler zum 65. Geburtstag. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), 49.

acknowledgement,⁷⁴ its merit does not lie less in the reorientation of Hegelian-Marxism from an epistemological to a social-ontological project. The latter was precipitated by Lukács' evaluation of the philosophical landscape of his time according to which scientific positivism and analytical epistemology could not be fought differently but through a robust concept of social-ontology capable of taking into account the subject's be(com)ing as processualization of nature and society. Instead of leaving it to falsifiable and more prone to ideology mental categories, "the role of ontology in History and in the Present of the human thinking is concretely determined through the creation of the human being according to its being [seinshaftig] and it is therefore – de facto, not merely abstract-verbally – not able to stamp it out any system of thought, our of any domain of thinking and surely above all out of any type of philosophy."⁷⁵ For this reason, Lukács begins by introducing directly the three modes of being that must be taken into account, if we want to elaborate on the general problems of the social being, its essence and its special way of existing: inorganic nature, organic nature (life), and society. Though seemingly still moving in the Kantian dichotomization between a realm of necessity and a realm of freedom, Lukács intends to show that through the reciprocal interplay between all three of them neither necessity is to be applied solely to nature and freedom to society, nor to claim – in a relativist manner – that none of the two exist. Concerning the former, i.e., the question whether necessity resides in nature and freedom in society, Lukács' point of departure matches the state of his critique against Kant and the bourgeois philosophy expressed in his HCC and according to which condoning the epistemological existence of such a thing like the thing in itself makes impossible to be able to criticize societal structures since they quickly acquire such a status like the thing in itself rendering them automatically impossible to grasp and consequently criticize. The *a priori* characterization of nature as the realm of necessity and of society as the realm of freedom entails the same danger. It tends to depict society as an already realized freedom mitigating thus the criticality of social institutions. Concerning the latter, i.e., if there is at all freedom to be realized and/or necessity already at work and/or how they condition each other, Lukács' answer resides in the way we see the interplay between inorganic nature, organic nature (life) and society. If we keep privileging the one mode of being over the other, we will

74 Cf. Mário Duayer and João Medeiros, "Lukács' Critical Ontology and Critical Realism." *Journal of Critical Realism*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2005): 395–425.

75 Georg Lukács, *Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. Erster Halbband*. (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1984), 9; henceforth *Ontology 1*. Given that there is still no proper English translation of the text, unless differently indicated, the translations are mine.

always be deficient concerning the holistic all-encompassing processes that becoming is. The same happens if we seek to observe the exact transition from nature to life to society, i.e., when (temporally) or to what extent the human is being rather determined by its inorganic elements, its natural traits or its social identity. As he states:

The three modes of being exist simultaneously, intertwined and exert, accordingly, often simultaneous effects on the human being, on his/her practices. [...] The human being belongs simultaneously (and in a way in which it is difficult to separate theoretically) to both nature and society. Marx most clearly recognized this simultaneity as a process by repeatedly saying that the process of becoming human being carries with it a retreat of nature's barriers. It is important to emphasize that [according to Marx] there is no talk of a disappearance of those barriers nor their complete dissolution, but of their retreat. However, this process never results in a dualistic constitution of the human being.⁷⁶

Interestingly enough, the same arguments brought forward by Lukács to corroborate the relevance and value of reontologization of critical theory were almost literally repeated in the recent years from a thread of thought that was not – necessarily – Marxist: New Materialisms. Certainly, there is no common basis or a manifest to which all New Materialist tendencies found themselves obliged to abide to. Nevertheless, the complications between ethics and ontology, the need to correct epistemology through the return to a non-linguistic materiality, the aspiration to rethink materiality anew in order to spark new forms of (human/non-human, individual/collective) agency – to mention only but the most important of them – are topics that gained the greatest interest amidst the disparate field of what is being called New Materialisms. Just as Lukács apprehended the revitalization of the ontological as a political project capable of counteracting the prevailing academic thinking of his time, New Materialisms, as Coole/Frost argue, are also opposed to the currently prevailing “cultural turn that privileges language, discourse, culture, and values.”⁷⁷ Further, just as Lukács found himself – due to the aforementioned political motivation – obliged to incorporate developments in the natural sciences in his ontological framework in order to prove the ongoing validity of the Marxist

⁷⁶ *Ontology 1*, 13.

⁷⁷ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms.” In Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

critique and at the same time show the inadequacy of current critical or from Marx' philosophy inspired theories, New Materialisms – at least in Cool's and Frost's account – take into consideration the “emergence of pressing ethical and political concerns that accompany the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter and, in particular, of living matter”⁷⁸ and take off from the diagnosis that “the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy.”⁷⁹ Last but not least, just as Lukács points out the necessity to think the complexity of the interactions between inorganic matter, organic life and social being and how each of these instances mitigates the existence of one another, the New Materialists “can hardly ignore the role of *social* construction”⁸⁰ and at the same time they cannot but acknowledge that “society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed: our material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural. As in new materialist ontologies, the challenge here is to give materiality its due while recognizing its plural dimensions and its complex, contingent modes of appearing.”⁸¹ Apart from this general framework provided by Coole and Frost, some of the most distinctive voices among the new materialist theorists, like Jane Bennett, also seem to echo some of Lukács' positions. Concerning Bennett, it becomes apparent in her pursuit to reinvigorate agential thinking and extrapolate new political subjects. Abandoning the idea of “matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert”⁸² is inherently political, since it questions the epistemological, socially dependent, presumptions concerning matter. The trajectory that has to be followed in order to overcome those presumptions and help develop new political subjectivities is according to Bennet as follows:

(1) to paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received concepts of agency, action, and freedom sometimes to the breaking point; (2) to dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective

78 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 5.

79 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 6.

80 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 26.

81 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 27.

82 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham & London: Duke University, 2010), vii.

openness to material vitality; and (3) to sketch a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants.⁸³

Transgressing or, rather, demolishing dualities, going back to forms of non- or inorganic life, arguing in favor of overcoming the limits of identity, corroborating nonidentity politics are only some of the methods that could be implemented in order to leave behind individualist politics and give in to what according to Lukács, as sketched in the last chapter, could provide for collective politics and according to Bennett could lead to “politics of assemblages”: politics that acknowledge and take into account the socio-political role of things/products, etc., abort the individual as the sole basis and source of transformative action and, last but not least, question the intersubjective communicative intentionality of having to share interests or normative, identity grounds in order to underpin collective action or agency.

So far similarities between Lukács and the New Materialisms have been extrapolated that pertain to (a) the political mission of the ontology, (b) the interdisciplinary methodological rapprochement (comprising of having to take into account the latest achievements in the field of natural sciences and prevailing theoretical discourses in order to do philosophy), and (c) the content of their investigations (revisiting the notion of the subject, what matter consists in, and collective forms of action). Nevertheless, things look different concerning the notion of critique. Both Bennett and Coole/Frost agree with one another that critique ought not to constrain or limit itself to merely revealing, uncloaking or disclosing – a radical turn concerning the notion of critique in the framework of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Critique should also be able to provide viable alternatives. For Bennet, although “demystification is an indispensable tool in democratic, pluralist politics that seeks to hold officials accountable to (less unjust versions of) the rule of law and to check attempts to impose a system of (racial, civilizational, religious, sexual, class) domination,”⁸⁴ demystification is not enough since what we really need is “both critique and positive formulations of alternatives, alternatives that will themselves become the objects of later critique and reform.”⁸⁵ Similarly, Coole/Frost argue that “the prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task

83 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham & London: Duke University, 2010), x.

84 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham & London: Duke University, 2010), xiv.

85 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham & London: Duke University, 2010), xv.

as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality."⁸⁶ Though it would seem, at least according to the account that Coole/Frost provide, that the New Materialisms could suffice in assuming that the new concepts they introduce are per se political, the latter is definitely not the case. As they illustrate in their critique of Foucault, though Foucault "contra Foucault's insistence on his own nonnormative positivism, what makes such analyses grist for the critical materialist is the recognition that such dense networks of relationships support socioeconomic structures that sustain the privileges and interests of some rather than others, that these advantages are not randomly, much less fairly, distributed, and that understanding how they operate and are maintained is a crucial task for the engaged social theorist, especially one who eschews any lingering faith in the inevitability of either the present or the future."⁸⁷ The fact that critique has to go side by side with "visionary alternatives"⁸⁸ is particularly underlined in the account of New Materialisms that Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin present. In the latter's volume, Rosi Braidotti, yet another leading figure in this thread of thought, asserts unmistakably that the new materialist turn is characterized by "an oppositional consciousness [that] combines critique with creativity."⁸⁹ What is at stake, again according to Braidotti, is "to overcome the boundaries that separate mere critique from active empowerment"⁹⁰ and in a combinatory manner take off from the former (critique) and lead to the latter (active empowerment).

The case is different when taking a further prominent figure among the new materialists, Karen Barad. Responding to Dolphijn's and van der Tuin's question whether the notion of agential realism she introduced ought to be understood as a critique of conventional entanglements of matter and meaning both in the natural sciences and the humanities, Barad provides following glaring answer:

I am not interested in critique. In my opinion, critique is over-rated, over-emphasized, and over-utilized, to the detriment of feminism. [...] [C]ritique is a tool that keeps getting used out of habit perhaps, but it is no longer the tool needed for the kinds of situations we now face. Critique

86 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 8.

87 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 36.

88 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 14.

89 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 22.

90 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 23.

has been the tool of choice for so long, and our students find themselves so well-trained in critique that they can spit out a critique with the push of a button. Critique is too easy, especially when a commitment to reading with care no longer seems to be a fundamental element of critique. Thus, as I explain to my students, reading and writing are ethical practices, and critique misses the mark. Now, I understand that there is a different valence to the notion of critique in Europe than there is in the United States; nonetheless, I think this point is important. Critique is all too often not a deconstructive practice, that is, a practice of reading for the constitutive exclusions of those ideas we cannot do without, but a destructive practice meant to dismiss, to turn aside, to put someone or something down – another scholar, another feminist, a discipline, an approach, et cetera. So this is a practice of negativity that I think is about subtraction, distancing and othering.⁹¹

In this devastating critique of the notion of critique Barad cannot avoid giving away Bruno Latour as the figure she leans against to launch her attack and particularly Latour's "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern"⁹² where Latour debunks critique as a critical barbarity stemming from the fact that the critic is concerned solely with being right. Addressing his audience Latour ridicules critical projects by following simple – and not that easy to foil – assertion: "Do you see now why it feels so good to be a critical mind? Why critique, this most ambiguous *pharmakon*, has become such a potent euphoric drug? You are always right!"⁹³ Going back to Alfred North Whitehead and Gabriel Tarde and quoting Andrew Pickering and Isabelle Stengers, Latour formulates what according to him could consolidate a new critical attitude:

The solution lies, it seems to me, in this promising word *gathering* that Heidegger had introduced to account for the "thingness of the thing." Now, I know very well that Heidegger and Whitehead would have nothing

91 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 49.

92 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry – Special issue on the Future of Critique*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.

93 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry – Special issue on the Future of Critique*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2004): 239.

to say to one another, and, yet, the word the latter used in *Process and Reality* to describe “actual occasions,” his word for my matters of concern, is the word *societies*. It is also, by the way, the word used by Gabriel Tarde, the real founder of French sociology, to describe all sorts of entities. It is close enough to the word *association* that I have used all along to describe the objects of science and technology. Andrew Pickering would use the words “mangle of practice.”

Whatever the words, what is presented here is an entirely different attitude than the critical one, not a flight into the conditions of possibility of a given matter of fact, not the addition of something more human that the inhumane matters of fact would have missed, but, rather, a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence.⁹⁴

In the previous section we saw already how Lukács’ return to social-ontology parts from the philosophies of solipsistic subjectivity and what kind of collective practices it enables exactly because it takes off from an understanding of the commodity as not a subject, but exactly as a vector, a gathering, of its producers’ labour and its consumers’ socio-political norms/values/imaginaries. In this section we have seen – so far – what the epistemic object of social ontology is, what the political task of a critical social ontology consists in and after sketching the similarities between Lukács and New Materialisms we came to see what kind of challenges await any updating of Lukács’ social ontology should the latter still demand to be critical. The answer lies – so much can already be foreclosed – in the fact that Latour’s gathering, or collectivity as will be called here, forms the conceptual and methodological basis of Lukács’ taking up social ontology. As will be argued, collectivity as Lukács places it as the fundament of his *Ontology* is (as shown in the last section) in the position to promote collective action beyond the currently prevailing identity or normative politics not only because it provides for a collective epistemology but also because it is because of the latter able to exert social critique by promoting a positive alternative that moves beyond the individualist, solipsistic understanding of subjectivity in favor of collectivist mode of being.

94 Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry – Special issue on the Future of Critique*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2004): 245–246.

4.3 *Collectivization as Form of Social-Ontological Critique*

Picking up the thread where we left it concerning the critical character of social ontology, Emmanuel Renault does not randomly attribute the critical quality to any ontology or social ontology. In order for an ontology or social ontology to be critical, it has to be processual. Should social-ontological thinking be able to facilitate (conceiving) transformation in favour of (in order to realize) social change, ontology has to be processual.

What specifies a processual ontology is not the claim that substances or sets of relations have a genesis [which is the case in mere ontologies, independent whether social or critical], but that this genesis does not have less reality than its results, be they substances or sets of relations, and that these results are only moments of a becoming. To sum up, what is characteristic of processual ontologies is that they give full reality to relations and becoming. This does not mean that they give only a secondary reality to substantial and relational properties. On the contrary, substantial and relational properties are moments (in Hegelian terms) or phases (in Deweyan terms) of processes. [...] [P]rocessual ontologies give full reality to relations and becoming whereas substantial ontologies refuse to give full reality to relations and becoming, and relational ontologies refuse to give full reality to becoming.⁹⁵

That Lukács' social ontology is a processual one should have already become clear given the differentiation he grants to the different modes of being and how they determine reciprocally the be(com)ing of the social being. Through his description of how being emanates at/as the cross-point of organic, inorganic and society, Lukács provides us with a description of socio-ontological structures generating the social being and its *ex post*, epistemological faculties, which depend on those structures. While Lukács reveals himself herein as a thinker moving still in the framework of the (Left-)Post-Hegelian tradition, the pivotal point is that he conceives of them not as expressions of an always already existing spirit awaiting to emanate (entäußern), but as constructions, as products of those modes of being that provide the context in which the social being will accrue; a context, of whom there is no outside. Between Kantian transcendentalism and Hegelian logicism Lukács opts for the latter. However, between Hegelian logicism and Marxian social ontology Lukács favors again

95 Emmanuel Renault, "Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology." *Journal of Social Ontology*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2016): 22–23.

the latter since only this scheme can dictate/describe/articulate immanently its own process. This positioning has an immediate impact both on the understanding of subjectivity with which Lukács will find himself obliged to operate and the epistemological faculties that can be attributed to such a notion of subjectivity. Lukács emphatically affirms what we have already seen in the previous section and what Adorno, in the very beginning of this book-chapter, claimed as the basis of critical philosophy, namely the necessity to break away from anthropomorphic, essentialist understandings of subjectivity. In Lukács' terminology, disanthropomorphization is one of the most important and essential tasks of the analytics of social being since only through disanthropomorphization are we able to grasp the formation of social being as process where the modes of being co-determine the social being's becoming, the momentousness of the social being's current form of being and the prospective actions the social being can engage in. As he states: "Disanthropomorphization is the most important and indispensable means for the understanding of how the being really, in itself is, was and will be."⁹⁶ Furthermore, the social-ontological analytics of the social being do not allow subject-object dialectics to perforate the contingency and multiplicity of struggles that arise from this multileveled and plural process of becoming. As products of social processes, the revolutionary/emancipatory, etc. subject cannot be predetermined or bestowed upon a certain emancipatory activity, nor are the demarcation lines or fronts predetermined and *ex ante* set. Therefore and concerning this subjectivity's epistemological guarantees, not only contingency is at play, but also constructivism (i.e., that the concretization of the social being's epistemological faculties depends on the modes of being), historicism (i.e., that this concretization renders the epistemological faculties reliant to the respective reconfiguration of the modes of being in/through time), fallibilism (i.e., the fact that given the historical dependency of epistemological categories from their time of concretization and the fact that those epistemological faculties are never able to grasp their way of production through time, the epistemological faculties are prone to mistakes and constrained to an unavoidably deficient understanding of the reality's totality), and last but not least partiality (i.e., the fact that it is impossible to grasp epistemologically and implement into praxis the wholeness of ontological processes entangled in the process of the social being's becoming).⁹⁷

96 *Ontology I*, 28.

97 For this chain of rather fragmented and not that linear arguments see *Ontology I*, 16, 30, 35: "It is clear that this is ultimately the already treated ontological fact that human practice, even if scientifically sound, can never be realized in the knowledge of all individual

Should just that be the case, namely if Lukács would just decree/suggest/propone contingency, constructivism, historicism, fallibilism and partiality as characteristics of any epistemological undertaking he would just be moving amidst the framework of post-metaphysical relativism, processual metaphysics, etc. Therefore, he could never be rehabilitated as being able to indicate a new direction of thinking and provide the fundamentals for an alternative social critique that could in return result in a new emancipatory project. The move that changes the tables comes as soon as Lukács – quoting Marx as a cloak instead of directly expressing himself – argues that the just diagnosed characteristics of epistemological practice are the results of an ontological articulation of reality that is collective in its calibration. Contingency, constructivism, historicism, fallibilism and partiality as qualities are therefore not opposed only to Hegelian or idealistic teleology and metaphysics. Given their collectiveness, i.e., the fact that those qualities arise out of the collective structuration of reality and should not therefore be presupposed, those qualities are opposed also to notions like discontinuity, fragility, epochal closure, irreducibility, etc., that were made prominent from the hermeneutical or genealogical discourse in connection with e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur or Michel Foucault respectively. Lukács' notion of the "Geradesosein" is indicative for his grasping the parts of reality as collective reciprocal reconfigurations of the modes of being and therefore neither as moments awaiting to be sublated nor as fragments irrelevant to one another. As he states:

Centuries later he [Marx] gives precise details about the method of its [historicity's] exploration: the investigation of the processes themselves in their respective dynamic *Geradesosein**. Such a development is not – as the bourgeois way of thinking often asserts – merely a certain change of objects, of their relationships, etc. where the determining categories that express their essence persist essentially unaltered. [...] For the

circumstances, assumptions, and consequences. On the other hand, this leads to the conclusion that a practically used scientific thesis can in many respects, indeed in essence, be wrong from the point of view of the total knowledge and its developmental tendency and yet be able to properly solve the given task and on the other hand be correct in certain cases, yes, epochal cognitive tendencies can bring to light." (30) "For now, let us content ourselves with the statement that Marx, even in his youth, has placed this universal validity of historicity for every being at the center of his method." (16) "The totality of the respective ways of the being's determinations, which is impossible to recognize in its completeness, renders both the long, undisturbed functioning of incomplete theories, which contain only partial truths, as well as their overcoming socially possible and necessary." (35).

process of history is causal, not teleological, multi-layered, never one-sided, simply straightforward, always a trend set by real interactions and interrelations of the respective active complexes of developmental tendencies set in motion. [...] This consistently thought-through priority of historicity in its concrete *Geradososein** as a real, i.e. really processing [als reale, weil real prozessierende] way of being is already an explosive criticism of any absolutization of everyday life.⁹⁸

This passus suggests thinking the various modes of being as momentary points of encounter where, as Lukács points out a couple of pages later, the genesis of the mode of social being should never be understood as a unique moment of becoming something different, something permanent, something completely and permanently new in a reality where unity takes hand over multiplicity.⁹⁹ It is exactly for this reason why Lukács speaks of the social being as the “ensemble of social relations,”¹⁰⁰ as a “complex”¹⁰¹ of internal forces being permanently in motion, as the “co-existence”¹⁰² of the different modes of being. Even when upholding the notion of the individual, he differentiates the individual, i.e., the concrete reality of the interplay of the different modes of being, from the particular, i.e., the one-sided realization of the generality, and the general, i.e., the category invented to describe the reality.¹⁰³ In a quote illustrating the latter while underlining the overdetermined and at the same time non-sublatable process of the social being, Lukács argues that

[t]he merely natural biological detail of the individual corresponded to the stage of spontaneous biological reproduction, which in principle was overcome by work. Since their repression [Zurückgedrängtwerden] (never their total disappearance [Verschwindenlassen]) is a protracted, uneven, contradictory process, the increasing domination of the social over the merely natural, the emergence and the augmenting, both subjective and objective ponderousness of individuality in social life must also be a process of similar determinations.¹⁰⁴

98 *Ontology I*, 36.

99 Cf. *Ontology I*, 37–38.

100 *Ontology I*, 38.

101 *Ontology I*, 42.

102 *Ontology I*, 43.

103 Cf. *Ontology I*, 44.

104 *Ontology I*, 56.

As he categorically asserts: “It is therefore ontologically impossible to conceive of an individuality without this origin and without such an outcome, let alone to see the unifying principle that really governs individuality through the lenses of an individuality as isolated being, characterized – seen this way only allegedly – by its own self-movement.”¹⁰⁵ Further, it is important to realize that what Lukács diagnoses – as the last quote underpins – is a non-hierarchical structuration of the social being where neither the inorganic, nor the natural or society take a leading role in the social being’s collective articulation. Though the subject might seem to privilege and confirm by bringing to light through its actions the one or the other mode of being, this ought to be conceived a coincidental and not a normative matter.¹⁰⁶ Although there is – on the analytical level – a procession from seemingly less complex to supposedly higher and more complex life-forms, nothing changes in the original source of social being as an already-always composition comprising continuously the different modes of being independently of the different reconfigurations that the social being’s form and content can acquire.¹⁰⁷ The social being’s outline absorbs, integrates, sediments, consolidates, incorporates – to mention only some of the notions Lukács scatters in his *Prolegomena* in order to describe the process of the social being’s becoming – but collectivity never goes astray or becomes unified to a sole, synthetic mode of existence.

Through the latter, Lukács ontologizes and by that ventures to also rehabilitate the Marxian notion of class struggle. At the end, there is not much left of class. What Lukács recodifies though is the motive of the struggle as a method. Struggle pertains no more to the relationship of societal structures, like the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, to one another, but henceforth to the disposition of the different modes of being to one another. “Indeed, it must even be said that the immediately most powerful achievement of Marx’s method of the class struggle as a real motor of social development, and thus as a decisive motor in the history of the human species, cannot be fully understood as a determining factor, without the complex of decisions from which human individuality emerges fully understood as the overcoming in general of the mere particularity, as judging [wertende] and judged [gewertete] real moments of the overall process.”¹⁰⁸ The latter can be applied not only to the relation dictating the intertwinement of the different modes of being with one another, but also concerning the different modes of societal discourses of which society as

105 *Ontology 1*, 62.

106 *Ontology 1*, 56.

107 Cf. *Ontology 1*, 129–130.

108 *Ontology 1*, 60.

a mode of being consists. Further, it can be applied to the different struggles alongside which the palimpsestic fabric of – this time – societal reality is interwoven. Seen this way, not only the social being is a collectivity of inorganic nature, life and society. Collectivity also forms the basis of the subject's identity which therefore should be considered as comprised of different societal discourses. Last but not least, collectivity indicates how society's (re-)structuration can be accomplished through the collective renegotiation of its current articulation. Therefore, Lukács' social ontology accounts for much more than just a critical stance, i.e., it does not just provide for a ground to assert and evaluate current situation. It also provides for a new project according to which reality could be rearticulated. By asserting the ontological collectivity of the social being's be(com)ing, Lukács did not just contribute yet another understanding of natural and societal reality and of their interrelatedness. At the same time, he extrapolated out of this collective composition of reality second-order epistemological tools that enable us to grasp it.¹⁰⁹ Further, he radicalized the vector of these epistemological faculties, the subject, by disanthropomorphizing and deessentializing and furnishing proof of its heteronomous structuration as a product of inorganic, natural and societal structures and how even on the level of its societal structuration the subject could also be conceived of as the amalgam of different social identities. Last but not least, Lukács suggested how collective struggles running along different lines and fronts are (still) the only viable and immanent way to change social and natural reality since this mode of praxis, i.e., collective practices, corresponds immanently to reality's collective mode of be(com)ing. Seen this way, Lukács not only seems to outdo Latour's critique of the blind and futile barbarity of critique. It also seems to be more practical even in comparison to Karen Barad's notion of diffraction. As Barad summarizes both the methodological and practical-political consequences of diffraction, the epistemological advantages of diffraction as a methodology rest primarily in: "marking differences from within and as part of an entangled state"; in acknowledging the "performativity [of] subject and object [according to which subject and object] do not preexist as such, but emerge through intra-actions"; in proposing an "entangled ontology" or "onto-epistem-ology" according to which by taking off from "material-discursive phenomena" we extrapolate a notion of knowing as "a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming"; last but not least in realizing that there is no interacting of separate entities but "intra-acting within and as part of" those entities' way of becoming for which

109 For a detailed and thorough analysis of the latter cf. Titus Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*. (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2013).

reason differences may be “real material differences” but “without absolute separation.” Concerning the political impact of diffraction, Barad allocates the latter in “making a difference in the world” which is “about taking responsibility for the fact that our practices matter” given that “the world is materialized differently through different practices (contingent ontology).”¹¹⁰ While the epistemological advantages of Barad’s new materialist methodology of diffraction bear so many similarities that it could even be argued that they were anticipated by Lukács, this does not seem to be the case concerning diffraction’s potentiality as a political strategy. Diffraction does not seem possible to support radical politics, but merely exhausts itself in the traditional and conventional Weberian politics of responsibility. Radical politics should not necessarily follow the collective paradigm of practice which we saw that can be mounted according to Lukács’ social-ontology, but it should be in a position to account for something significantly more than the poor realization that “our practices matter.” They are entitled to take off and underpin, as they do, that “ethics, ontology and epistemology are not separable” in order to craft a viable, effective and powerful political scheme, but this cannot be the place where they end.¹¹¹ The latter applies also to Latour’s debunking of critique as critical barbarity. Albeit right as he may be therein, namely in the fact that critique ought to never become domesticated as a self-assuring endeavor, and regardless how drastic his critique of conventional onto-epistemological certainties may be, it does not look like that an equally robust articulated and equally drastic political project can be expected anymore. As shown, this is not the case with Lukács. The social being, as an effect and product not only of the modes of being that constituted it but also as a product and effect of the different forms the mode of being society consists of, bears with it the modes of its production. As such, i.e., by emerging as a cross-path, the social being has to be understood as the participation of every mode of being involved in its production. Read this way, Lukács’ ontology deploys a political functionality that allows for collective struggles to occur out of the commonality of the subjects’ – in plural – production. This is not identity politics since there is no concrete identity that was brought forth, but the subject as a totality of societal relations. Furthermore, read this way Lukács’ social ontology though not explicitly addressing sex or gender or race, ecological movements or the undocumented migrants,

110 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half-Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham, N.C. & London: Duke University Press, 2007), 89–90.

111 For a more favorable reading of Barad’s method of diffraction in contrast exclusively to Lukács’ social ontology, cf. the working paper by Waltraud Ernst and Ágnes Kovács: “New Materialisms, Older Ones, and New Genderings.”

provides us with a framework to conceive of them as parts and even modes of being of that mode of being that Lukács calls society. Collective agency is thus being grafted to the subject through its social-ontological emergence as a collective social being and entering collective struggles is being liberated from having to be a matter of political engagement or normative ethics, just as it does not require legitimization. And the actors in question are as innumerable as the concrete forms that these subjects' social-ontological formation can acquire. Latour may have been the one to have recently propagated in the strongest fashion gathering, association and society, but at the end it seems that Lukács is the one able to sufficiently substantiate the latter both theoretically and politically.

5 Conclusion

The chapter started by scrutinizing wherein the contemporary applicability of the notion of reification could still lie. Drawing on another similar yet broader undertaking, namely Adorno's attempt to ascertain the reasonability of not only reification but philosophy itself, a working hypothesis was established: The ongoing applicability of reification depends on where it could still be able to function as a critical category which can be asserted as such only if it can enable a radical political project. Instead of tarrying in what critique is – an undoubtedly enticing question – Adorno's answer to the question was chosen as point of departure. Just as Adorno qualifies freedom as philosophy's goal and puts an end to essentialist, anthropomorphic approaches as philosophy's method, reification should also be able to account for freedom by putting an end to essentialist understandings of subjectivity. Combining those two criteria, the working hypothesis concerning reification's ongoing topicality was translated as depending on reification being able to function as a subjectivation process that can account firstly for a socially constructed (as opposed to essentialist) understanding of subjectivity and secondly for the theoretical means to graft collective practices as a form of self-determination.

The first part of the chapter was dedicated to mapping the different substantializations of the notion of reification underwent in the course of its existence as soon as it was introduced and firstly corroborated by Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*. Three tendencies were detected in the chapter: (1) With the exception of Deleuze, for the French postwar philosophy Lukács' concept of reification remained due to the world-historical role it attributed to the proletariat still rooted in an idealist philosophy of subject; (2) For the feminist discourses, above all for standpoint theory, no matter how

consequently they furthered the decentering of the subject and how inspired by Lukács they admittedly were, their notion of choice to operate with was not that of reification, but rather that of false consciousness; (3) For the Frankfurt School reification may have been one of the very few terms that have incessantly accompanied its different generations and paradigmatic turns. However, given the fact that the Frankfurt School, regardless how critical and radical it was in radicalizing the subject–object dialectics and never giving up conceiving subjectivity in its robust Hegelian-Marxian understanding, reification never became a subjectivating phenomenon, but remained a subject-critical one.

In light of this cartography it would seem that the venture to address reification as a subjectivating process should be suspended before it even begins. This would have definitely been the case if a minoritarian, phenomenological line of interpretation of the phenomenon of reification led by Lucien Goldmann and Nicolas Tertulian had not managed to demonstrate how reification had still not exhausted its full potential. As seen, Goldmann's and Tertulian's merit lays in shifting reification from a phenomenon that determines market practices to henceforth apply also to the construction of subjectivity as a historical entity. In order to demonstrate the latter, Lukács' social-ontological understanding of labor in his *Ontology of the Social Being* was accroached. In this context, labor manifests itself not as a self-expressive activity that can be alienated, but as a process of subjectivity production. Further, the subjectivating process of labor was identified as affecting not only the subject in its producer identity, but also in its consumer identity. Through the consumption of commodities, the consumer encounters the economical and socio-cultural laws that determine the transformation of the product to commodity. As argued, the consumer becomes, as a consuming buyer, a co-determining factor of the producer's labor regimes. A new kind of social bond is therefore created between the producer and consumer that results in a shift of the reasons upon which collective practices can be founded. Collective practices do not have to rest necessarily only on production – which was the argumentative strategy of the early Lukács in his HCC concerning the forging of proletariat – which broadens the hitherto rather narrow foundation of collective practices.

Although this broadening and alternativity in founding collective practices could provide an answer to the second leg of the equation concerning reification's contemporary applicability (critique plus self-determining practice), the first leg, that of critique was yet to be answered. For the latter, Lukács' social ontology was revisited as laid down in the Prolegomena of his *Ontology of the Social Being*. At the same time, just as Adorno had to counterattack contemporaneous prevailing notions of what philosophy is, in order to strengthen the

validity of his understanding of philosophy. Lukács' fundamentals of critique had to be examined through the lenses of currently prevailing notions of critique. New Materialisms and Bruno Latour were accroached as representing the latter. After some introductory remarks concerning where the critical character of processual social-ontologies could lie, various understandings of the notion of critique as well as critical voices against the notion of critique per se stemming from the field of New Materialisms were mentioned. As argued, collectivity as the mode of social-ontological organization of reality was Lukács' solid answer concerning the demand for an alternative understanding of reality that could also account for a different analysis of society and, last but not least provide for practical considerations concerning radical politics. As demonstrated, by starting from reality as the composition of inorganic nature, organic nature (life) and society, Lukács did not just collectivize reality. The social being, i.e., the subject, and society were shown as also having to correspond to this socio-ontological collectivity that lies at the basis of existence. For this reason, self-determining practices must – as corresponding to the collective social being that instantiates them and the society they aim to change – also be collective.

Undoubtedly, there is still a lot to be clarified concerning e.g., the underlying fractions or similarities between Adorno's notion of Constellation and Lukács' understanding of collectivity, the role of networks in Latour's Science-and Technology-Studies (STS) or Michel Callon's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and how they relate to Lukács' understanding of collective action; the conceptualization of the thing according to the early or the late Lukács and the early or late Latour, etc. Furthermore, the chapter decidedly avoided discussing and counter-examining Lukács' social ontology with the ontological, epistemological and political assumptions of the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar which became prolific and increasingly importance.¹¹² Last but not least, a more elaborate look at the relationship between Lukács' processual social ontology and Whitehead's processual metaphysics or the notion of association in Pragmatism would surely have been insightful in light of recent publications.¹¹³

112 For some first inputs in what should have been a more thorough discussion cf. the public and later printed discussion between Alex Callinicos and Roy Bhaskar in: Roy Bhaskar and Alex Callinicos, "Marxism and Critical Realism." *Journal of Critical Realism*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2003): 89–114.

113 Cf. Anne Fairchild Pomeroy, *Marx and Whitehead. Process, Dialectics, and the Critique of Capitalism*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Italo Testa, "The Authority of Life: The Critical Task of Dewey's Social Ontology." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy – Special Issue on John Dewey and Social Criticism* (edited by Federica Gregoratto, Arvi Särkelä, and Justo Serrano Zamora), vol. 31, no. 2 (2017): 231–244.

Nevertheless, such shortcomings can only be promising for prospective projects and do not necessarily change the structure of the argument: that it is still worthy to operate with the notion of reification because as old and parochial as this concept may be considered to be, it can still provide radical critique and facilitate radical political practice.