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Lukács’s Theory of Reification and Contemporary Social Movements

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Abstract: Lukács’s theory of reification, explained in his 1923 work *History and Class Consciousness*, is often interpreted as a theory of ideology, however it is also a theory of social practice and a social ontology. Reification and dereification describe different types of social practice, individual technical practices aimed at adaptation, survival, and success, and collective transforming practices with the potential for establishing a solidary socialist society. Although many aspects of Lukács’s early work are no longer applicable, this distinction is relevant to struggles around technology today, such as environmental struggles or struggles over medical practices.

Keywords: Lukács, reification, technology, social movements

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Introduction: The Two Swords

Reification, according to Lukács, means taking social relations for things. An institution, for example, a university, is in reality a complex of social relations, but it appears as a solid and substantial thing like a natural object. Breaking with the illusory thinghood of social institutions and recovering their contingency is “dereification.” This idea is usually explained as a theory of ideology, but implied in the contrast between social relations and things is a deeper argument concerning the nature of action, or practice as Lukács calls it. Practices establish a world within which reified objects appear. These objects are understood “immediately,” that is to say, without critical awareness, in a reified standpoint. That standpoint is derivative of the practices, not their origin, but the standpoint contributes to the reproduction of the world the practices sustain.

The theory of reification thus explains the relation of structure to agency. Reification provides structure through determining a specific type of practice that reproduces the institutions, while dereification involves another type of practice with the power not only to penetrate the illusion of reification but to transform the practices and the structures it establishes.¹

¹ The contrast between viewing reification as an ideology or psychological fact and viewing it as a real relationship is developed in Lotz (2013). Lotz argues that Heidegger’s critique of technology can be best explained from the standpoint of an interpretation of the fetishism of commodities as a process of real abstraction. The argument is persuasive but omits to note that Heidegger responds to a world in which the Soviet Union exemplifies reification without conforming to Marx’s understanding of capitalism. Technology seems to be the common feature of capitalist and communist societies. The generalization of Marx’s categories thus requires more than Lotz

I want to illustrate this correlation of reification and dereification with a story about the medieval Japanese sword maker, Masamune, reputed to make the sharpest blades. This account is from Suzuki.

Masamune flourished in the latter part of the Kamakura era, and his works are uniformly prized by all the sword connoisseurs for their excellent qualities. As far as the edge of the blade is concerned, Masamune may not exceed Muramasa, one his ablest disciplines, but Masamune is said to have something morally inspiring that comes from his personality. The legend goes thus: When someone was trying to test the sharpness of a Muramasa, he placed it in a current of water and watched how it acted against the dead leaves flowing downstream. He saw that every leaf that met the blade was cut in twain. He then placed a Masamune, and he was surprised to find that the leaves avoided the blade. The Masamune was not bent on killing, it was more than a cutting implement, whereas the Muramasa could not go beyond cutting, there was nothing divinely inspiring in it. The Muramasa is terrible, the Masamune is humane. One is despotic and imperialistic, the other is superhuman, if we may use this form of expression (Suzuki 1959, 91-92).

This story describes two different practical world relations. Muramasa's swords do what we expect of swords: they cut, in this case with a miraculously sharp blade that slices through leaves gently propelled by the river's flow. In so doing these swords accept their purpose, their commonly accepted meaning, as fixed and unquestionable. In this respect the Muramasa operates as a normal technical device. It obeys the law of nature and of its own nature in order to accomplish its owner's goals. The Muramasa exemplifies instrumental practice. This form of practice

gives us. Lukács is not mentioned in the article but his contribution helps to address this issue as I will show here.

involves a specific relation between passivity and activity, passivity in the face of the law, activity in its application. As Francis Bacon put it: “Nature to be commanded must be obeyed” (Bacon 1939, 28).

Masamune’s sword, on the contrary, is paradoxical and mysterious. It does not do what we expect of swords but overthrows the whole logic of swordsmanship. The blade does not cut the floating leaves but bends the river’s flow to enable them to pass by unharmed. This sword is not merely sharp. It is beyond sharpness in altering nature and its own nature. In the hands of a swordsman it would keep the peace rather than triumph in war. But such action can hardly be called technical. The Masamune is not an instrument but something far more powerful, able to change the law rather than operating under its horizon.

This story contrasts the power to act on the world and the higher power to act on action itself. This abstract dichotomy has different applications in different types of societies. In medieval Japan, it was a religious response to civil war. But in modern society it illuminates the correlation of reification and dereification, the one addressing the world on technical terms, the other transforming the terms on which the world is addressed. Keep these two swords in mind now as I turn to a detailed explanation of Lukács’s theory.

Reification in Lukács and Marx

The concept of reification is situated in the context of the critique of science in German thought at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This was a time of rapid industrial development accompanied by the rise of scientific ideology. Many German thinkers reacted by introducing a sharp distinction between the cultural and the natural sciences: in the one domain, meaning prevails, in the other, causality. The philosopher Dilthey is associated with this

trend. He argued that interpretive methods are suited to social and cultural artifacts while science and technology employ a different type of explanatory method.

Max Weber developed a sophisticated sociological version of the methodological distinction. His concept of rationalization described the spread of technical rationality in modern society, imposing the requirements of efficiency on institutions and attitudes that were formerly governed by traditional meanings. Meanwhile, conservatives such as Oswald Spengler transformed the distinction into a political critique. Germany was identified as a culture-nation in opposition to England and France, criticized for their materialistic civilization. Humanistic learning and artistic achievement, or for some social critics, irrational intuition, were said to characterize culture and to mark it as superior to the domineering rationality of the natural sciences and their crass technical applications. In the writing of some thinkers after World War I, the culture/civilization dichotomy fed into Nazi ideology (Herf 1984).

Lukács was the first to appropriate the critique of technical rationality for the left. Reification is the encroachment on society of an attitude toward the world appropriate to nature. He writes, "what is important is to recognize clearly that all human relations assume increasingly the form of objectivity of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of the natural sciences and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature. And also, the subject of this action likewise assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these artificially abstract experiences, the attitude of the experimenter" (Lukács 1971, 131).² Thus "rationality" has become a cultural form. Rationality in this context is, of course, purely instrumental in the critical sense in which Marx and Weber explain its institutionalization in markets and bureaucracies under capitalism.

In later comments on his early book *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács tended to agree with his critics that the theory of reification was a romantic critique of objective thinghood.

² For a fuller account of the theory of reification, see Feenberg 2014 (chap. 4).

This passage makes it clear that Lukács had something more specific in mind. He was not opposed to the objective reality of things. He was not even critical of the existence of stable social institutions. Rather, what concerned him was the emergence of a social world that resembled a second nature. It is the specific form of thinghood that is in question, a form of thinghood that situates the subject in a technical relation to a law governed world.

Confined within the framework of reification, individuals relate to society just as they would to natural objects. This relation establishes structures that would better serve human needs if they were open to constant revision from below rather than armored against change by an illusory naturalization. Thus Lukács writes,

the world which confronts man in theory and in practice exhibits a kind of objectivity which—if properly thought out and understood—need never stick fast in an immediacy similar to that of forms found earlier on. This objectivity must accordingly be comprehensible as a constant factor mediating between past and future and it must be possible to demonstrate that it is everywhere the product of man and of the development of society (Lukács 1971, 159).

At the deepest level, reification depends on fragmentation. Not only are the individuals separated from each other and defined socially as individuals rather than as members of a family, clan or class, but all the institutions of the society are set off against each other as independent “things,” with their own laws of movement. The autonomization of the fragments is then compensated by pressing them into external and accidental relationships. Marx called such fragmentation in the competitive capitalist economy the “anarchy of production.” The mechanism linking the fragmented units is commodity exchange.

Marx's critique of political economy thus lies in the background of the concept of reifica-

tion. According to Marx capitalism is generalized commodity production. In the early chapters of *Capital*, he treats the phenomenon of the commodity as a puzzle to be unraveled. He writes, "a commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor, because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves but between the products of their labor" (Marx 1906 reprint, I, 83).

Marx calls this "fetishism" because commodities are treated as though they were alive and had a will and power of their own. This is unprecedented in human history. Until the capitalist era most goods were produced for use. But as a market society, capitalism is a system in which the use value of goods is subordinated to their exchange value. The decision about what to produce, how much to produce, where and how to produce, is made in function of salability rather than human need. And since exchange value is expressed as a quantity, that is, a price, the social world is for the first time quantified not just in specialized domains but as a whole.³ What is real under capitalism in the sense of having significant effects on the world, are those quantities and the laws that regulate them, not the concrete qualities of individuals and things. Lukács's concept of reification generalizes this critique of the fragmentation and quantification of social reality from the market to society at large.

This generalization gains another dimension from Marx's critique of capitalist technol-

³ Sohn-Rethel (1978, 78). Sohn-Rethel distinguishes between various epochs in the development of quantification which he describes as a principle of social synthesis derived from monetary exchange. The concept of social synthesis is similar if not identical to Lukács's concept of form of objectivity. Both concepts derive from a neo-Kantian background.

ogy. In *Capital*, Marx discusses the relation of the worker to the machine in considerable detail. The deskilling of labor is an essential aspect of the industrial revolution. Craft workers are gradually replaced by machines tended by unskilled women and children. The worker is now external to the process of production rather than its center and organizer. The machine has its own logic, its own law of motion, and the worker simply maintains or services it.

Finally, Lukács shows how the Weberian analysis of bureaucracy and the legal system exhibit the same structure and can be incorporated into the theory. Thus all the principle institutions of modern capitalist society are united by the same reified form. All are governed by rigid atemporal laws.

By “law” in this context is meant statistical regularities determined by spontaneous action on the market, or the mechanical requirements of the machine, or the rule of bureaucratic administration. The law individualizes the actors even as it confronts them with the massive reality of an apparently unchangeable social world. As individuals, they have no choice but to adapt and pursue advantage in the framework of the system. In applying the law in practice, the reified actor reproduces it. Just so the investor on the stock market reproduces it in following the logic of its movements. Investors “act” not by creating something new but by anticipating what will happen regardless of what they do. According to Lukács, this is the very model of practice under capitalism, essential to the functioning and reproduction of the system.

In his early work Marx described this relationship to the world with the concept of alienation. The *Manuscripts of 1844* in which he introduced this concept were not published until nearly 10 years after Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness*. But Lukács reconstructed the essential idea from other references in Marx's writings. By alienation Marx means that the common creation of the working class becomes a dominating power over its creators. Workers

build all the machines and institutions of capitalism but find themselves enslaved by their own products. As Marx puts it, “dead labor,” the crystallized efforts of so many workers going back generations, dominates the “living labor” of workers today. Revolution is the re-appropriation of this alienated world. Lukács's concept of reification recapitulates this idea with the proviso that the domination takes the form of rational institutions and impersonal laws. Workers do not simply build the machines and institutions that dominate them, but in so doing create a law governed world of reified social “things.” As such the workers’ products stand over against them as an overpowering second nature.

Historical Ontology⁴

This cultural critique of capitalism is also a social ontology. Lukács begins the essay on reification in *History and Class and Consciousness* with the comment, “the structure of commodity relations can be made to yield a model of all forms of objectivity of bourgeois society and all the corresponding forms of subjectivity” (Lukács 1971, 83, trans. modified). The key concept in this opening sentence is the phrase “form of objectivity.” This concept is drawn from contemporary neo-Kantian philosophy. A brief explanation of it helps to understand Lukács’s innovation.

⁴ For the heading of this section I am borrowing the title of Ian Hacking’s book (2002). Working in a loosely Foucauldian framework, Hacking shows how the meanings of social objects described in social and medical sciences interact with the objects they describe with effects in the real world. What he does not do is to seek a general theory of the imposition of scientific form on the social world yet this is almost implied in his approach as it was in Foucault’s. This was Lukács’s project. There is an interesting relation to be explored.

Kant's basic idea is by now familiar. Briefly and roughly summarized, this is the notion that our perception of objects depends on a priori forms and categories of the mind. These a priori shape a content, namely, the flow of sensory experience. They impose order and meaning on what would otherwise be a senseless chaos of stimuli. In particular, thinghood, as the distinctive identity and durability of objects, is imposed by the mind on the flux of sensation.

The neo-Kantians generalized these ideas. They regarded meaning as such as an a priori form organizing perception. The "content" of meaning so understood is simply the object known. We do not encounter a raw mass of sensation when we sit down at the table to eat or pick up a book to read, but an ordered meaningful thing. Sensation is always already formed by such meanings. This use of the Kantian category of form creates a conceptual distinction between meaning, both in the mind and in the world, and existence. Applied by the neo-Kantians to the sciences, this view holds that each field is determined by the meanings or categories that specify its object as a slice or cross-section of an infinitely complex reality.

Lukács introduces a social interpretation of this form-content distinction. Capitalist economic practice is the origin of the a prioris, the meanings that form social content. At the highest level of abstraction the nature of these forms is summed up in the concept of reification which is the "form of objectivity" of capitalist social reality, the general way in which things are perceived and structured. Reified social objects function and are conceived as law governed things. Correlated with this thinglike form of the objects, reification imposes an individualistic subjectivity and a technical form of practice.

In the original neo-Kantian version the forms are logical entities. For Lukács, by contrast, the reified forms are actual social phenomena such as corporations, institutions, profits, wages, laws and official classifications. Their content is living human beings with their needs and self-

hood, whose relations and practices unconsciously sustain the social world in being. This marks a fundamental change in the notion of the a priori. For Kant and the neo-Kantians the a priori is essentially conceptual. The meanings it imposes organize experience but they are not themselves things in the world. But for Lukács, the relation between form and content is no longer just logical but belongs to the social world. The forms, as real abstractions, now interact with social subjects and objects.

This transformation enables Lukács to proceed from epistemological considerations to ontological ones and from there to a new conception of the revolution. He argues that the reified forms fail to fully embrace their human content. This results in crises and class struggle. He writes,

The quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as processes of abstraction of which he is the victim, and which cuts him off from his labor power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates himself into a specialized process that has been rationalized and mechanized, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanized and rationalized tool.... The quantitative differences in exploitation which appeared to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence. (Lukács 1971, 165-66)

Class consciousness arises from awareness of the gap between quantity and quality. The worker is defined as a commodity, labor power, and, as such, is a strange kind of living eco-

conomic category. Acting out of its established social definition, as a reified social object, the worker has an individualistic, technical relation to social reality. Following instructions, asking for a raise, seeking a better job, manipulating whatever can be manipulated to advantage, all these are the characteristic reified practices that individualize the worker and reproduce the oppressive system. But as a living commodity, the worker is more than an economic category. A life process is contained in that category and that life process overflows its official social definition in every direction. The worker becomes, Lukács says, the “self-consciousness of the commodity” in becoming aware of the conflict between labor and life.

There is thus an entity in capitalist society that is *essentially* irreducible to its economic meaning. This is the first step toward class consciousness, significant because it mediates the reified form of objectivity which defines the worker immediately. But interpreting class consciousness as self-consciousness has puzzling implications. Lukács argues that class consciousness changes the structure of society in itself prior to any particular action. We are familiar with the notion that our *individual* self-consciousness can change who and what we are and not just our behavior, but Lukács aims at just such an immediate relation between consciousness and reality at the collective level. He calls this the “unity of theory and practice.”

Perhaps this notion can be clarified by reference to the feminist movement which made a core principle of changing the *collective* self-understanding of individuals in gendered roles. This resembles Lukács’s argument: in self-consciousness the proletariat transcends its own reified form of objectivity. It necessarily sees itself as more than a wage earner and this in itself constitutes a significant social change. The “standpoint epistemology” that is associated with the revival of feminism traces its roots back to Lukács (Hartsock 1983). Here self-consciousness transforms apparently rigid, permanent, quasi-natural gender roles. Jameson comments, “one has the

feeling that the most authentic descendency of Lukács's thinking is to be found, not among the Marxists, but within a certain feminism, where the unique conceptual move of *History and Class Consciousness* has been appropriated for a whole program..." (Jameson 1988, 64).

Once they conceive themselves outside the framework of reification as the living human basis of the system, workers are no longer isolated individuals competing for a wage; they are members of a group that can join in solidarity. Instead of merely acting in accordance with the given laws of the system workers can change those laws.

Lukács's concept of class consciousness thus sets up a contrast between two different types of practice, the technical practice associated with reification and the dereifying, transforming practice of the revolutionary proletariat. Transforming practice reverses the fragmenting logic of capital and dereifies capitalist society. The process of change it initiates is the dynamic of the revolution. The Marxist concept of socialism is reconceptualized as the shattering of the reified forms of capitalism by their proletarian content.

This concept of revolution is distinguished from a utopian demand for the immediate abolition of reification. Lukács's "post-utopian" theory argues that reification is a necessary presupposition of the struggle, creating potentialities that can be realized through the overthrow of social institutions that form and constrain the lives of the proletariat (Lukács 1971, 78). Thus class consciousness does not discover something original, prior to society, a human essence, but rather exposes the human potential created and suppressed by capitalism.⁵

In terms of the metaphor of the swords with which we began, reification and dereification determine the logic of the cut. Just as the sword that cuts the leaves obeys the law of war, so rei-

⁵ In this respect, Lukács's theory has a certain similarity to Foucault's theory of power as constituting resistant subjectivity.

fied practice obeys the law of the capitalist system. That system depends on a generalized technical relation to the social world which, in turn, reproduces the system. “Society to be commanded must be obeyed.” But the system is not beyond human power; there is another sword that bends the river’s flow, exemplified by the revolutionary proletariat.⁶

Writing shortly after the Russian Revolution, Lukács advocated workers’ councils (“soviets”) and state control of the economy. These measure effectively reduced the role of commodity exchange, but they did not diminish the alienation and reification of Russian society as expected. Lukács underestimated the reifying consequences of top down control under conditions which liberate administration from concern with the interests of subordinates and the surrounding community. I call this “operational autonomy;” it prevails in both capitalist and communist societies (Feenberg 2010, chap. 4).

The theory of reification is significant because it helps to understand the failure of versions of socialism that rely on political controls and economic planning rather than the mass movement. This technocratic form of socialism is usually criticized with normative arguments about democracy that Marx himself rejected as historically ungrounded. But how can we ground the preference for a bottom up socialism without such arguments? Lukács provides an original answer. There is something more basic than economic institutions and this is the mode of action favored or excluded by the system. Capitalism and Soviet style socialism depend on the reification of the society. They individualize the members of society and force them into a manipulative

⁶ The power of consciousness to initiate change at the level of “law” is of course confined to society which is contingent on human action. Lukács does not suggest anything similar in the context of natural law. This is a complicated issue discussed in detail in Feenberg (2014: chap. 6).

relation to the system. The dereification of the society would open other possibilities.⁷

We can verify the importance of this distinction in reflecting on our own radical politics in late capitalism. When Marx wrote and even in Lukács's day most technology was found in factories. Workers were assembled in large masses by the technologies they used and could therefore resist capitalism collectively as they became class conscious. Since 1923 a few things have changed. Technology is no longer to be found mainly in factories but is now involved in every aspect of social life. Reified technical disciplines of all sorts reflect and determine every aspect of life, and not just the economy. The generalization of technical mediation has extended reification well beyond its earlier economic limits. In the conclusion of this paper I will consider in what ways recent social movements have responded to this generalized reification.

The Dialectic of Reification and Dereification

Some contemporary social critics would object to this line of argument. They would claim that far from having revolutionary implications, dereification actually supports a new form of capitalist society based on information technology. Business today does not need mechanical submission but imaginative fantasy enabling it to anticipate and meet demands for new products. Challenges to the system such as participatory democracy, environmentalism and feminism open new markets served by the creativity capitalist enterprise now extracts from its workers. This would imply that capitalism today relies not on the equivalent of Muramasa's sword but on Masamune's. Could it be that capitalism is constantly soliciting the disruption of its own logic in order to advance...capitalism? This objection is implausible as soon as it is stated clearly and

⁷ For a study of the failure of Soviet Communism that confirms this argument but without explicit reference to reification, see (Lebowitz 2012).

simply.

What is disrupted by the creativity contemporary capitalism solicits are lower level or transverse logics subsumed by the higher level logic of capitalism. The disruption at those levels takes the form of innovations, products and reforms, many of them responses to unanticipated public demands. For example, Internet commerce is based in large part on satisfying the demand for human communication on a network, the Internet, originally conceived for quite different purposes.

This and other dereifications are not trivial but they are incomplete as they take place within limits set by the capitalist system, that is, the limits of the commodity form. Put another way, so far the capitalist system has been able to “metabolize” exogenous changes, to digest them and incorporate them into the commodity form in the course of reproducing itself. This is discouraging when measured by the standard of the socialist movement’s two traditional conceptions of social change, revolution and radical structural reform. But something else is happening that is without precedent, a shift in the locus of repression and resistance.

Despite my skepticism about this objection, I agree that it forces a serious rethinking of the concepts of reification and dereification. To understand why, it is useful to look back at the genealogy of this style of social criticism. It originates in the 1960s in the debates around Herbert Marcuse’s famous book *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse argued that capitalism had become capable of absorbing its contradictions through partial reforms and adjustments that “integrated” the proletariat. Liberals had long made such arguments. What was different about Marcuse’s version was his explicit Marxism. He took seriously the revolutionary potential of the labor movement in earlier times, when strikes could spiral out of control and threaten the system. No more. Marcuse explained how new ways of understanding and responding to labor struggle defused

that potential. In the debate over this thesis the concept of “co-optation,” sometimes pretentiously transliterated from the French as “recuperation,” received a great deal of attention. Co-optation transformed dereifying critique and struggle into immanent accommodation (Marcuse 1964, chap. 5).

This argument has been updated with the concept of the post-Fordist transformation of the labor process. The assembly line has become irrelevant, we are informed, and new non-hierarchical and “humanized” forms of labor incorporate workers into the system even more completely than did the satisfaction of wage demands in the early post-war period. Whether this transformation ever affected the majority of the labor force is questionable, but the valid point is the introduction of a new ideology of participation and individuation that co-opts not merely oppositional demands but oppositional ideology as well.⁸

Recently, a similar argument has been extended to the Internet. The New Left articulated a democratic critique of the mass media in the expectation that free communication would have radical consequences. As a support for wide public participation the Internet appears to fulfill such democratic demands. At first it was widely assumed that the massifying impact of the media would be subverted by the free play of reciprocal communication online. But in reality, the critics argue, participation in forums such as Facebook integrates the participants to a new form of “communicative capitalism” (Dean 2005).⁹ Once again dereification turns out to be simply a new mechanism of integration.

In sum, the objection holds that reification and dereification are not opposites but mutually dependent aspects of capitalist social life. This is partially correct, but dereification is not

⁸ A recent influential treatment of this theme is Boltanski and Chiapello (2005).

⁹ For my critique of Dean’s position, see Feenberg (2015).

reducible to a mechanism of integration; it holds the future open. I will focus on three issues in support of this assertion.

If the dialectic of reification and dereification is interpreted exclusively under the horizon of capitalism, then all political struggle appears hopeless. That way lies either conformism or terrorism as the only alternative to complicity. It is still necessary to maintain the possibility of transcendence in the midst of co-optation rather than collapsing all critique and struggle into their opposite. As Marcuse wrote, “*Objective ambivalence* characterizes every movement of the radical opposition—an ambivalence which reflects at one and the same time the power of the Establishment over the whole, and the limits of this power” (Marcuse 1972, 49). There is plenty of evidence for this ambivalence. Consider the Internet where, despite the prevalence of triviality and commercialism, important political usages have emerged. Rather than dismissing such evidence of ambivalence, it should be taken seriously and analyzed.

To be sure, the process of co-optation has gone much further than in Marcuse’s day, but as a result we can see that it is not simply about the survival of capitalism. It is also transformative *within* capitalism. That confirms Marcuse’s reference to ambivalence and gives it a more positive content than he probably intended. Reforms have not just integrated advanced capitalist societies but have changed them. What would they be like today had they not incorporated so many popular demands and struggles? Imagine a world in which the movements stemming from the New Left and later struggles, popular innovations and hacking had all failed not just to overthrow the system but even to alter its face. We must not measure the changes that have occurred with respect to an ideal of socialist revolution but rather as part of a new dynamic in which capitalism is caught up with a still uncertain outcome.

That dynamic has so far evolved through three roughly distinguishable stages. In the

1960s movements for political participation challenged the technocrats on a mass scale for the first time. The concept of “alienation,” hitherto an obscure technical term in Hegelian and Marxist philosophy, became a popular slogan. Technocratic claims raised awareness of the extraordinary centralization of power in modern societies despite their democratic political system. Infrequent elections did not alter the fact that in everyday life the citizens were subordinated to management and administration at work, in dealings with medical and educational institutions, government agencies, even unions and political parties. The concept of alienation was widely employed in this period to signify the resulting loss of agency.

In this first stage of the reaction against technocracy, the American New Left called for participatory democracy by which was meant general consultation in opposition to hierarchical control. In France in 1968 a much more powerful movement demanded self-management in the economic and political institutions of the society. Council communist ideology, revived in a new form, was briefly put into practice in factories, government ministries, universities and hospitals, everywhere the individuals experienced the established structures as oppressive and wasteful.¹⁰

The first phase of the movement opened the space for a new kind of militancy, freed from vanguardism and workerism. In a second stage the demand for participation was relayed in the 1970s and 80s by movements with a more specific focus on the environment, medicine and gender. Environmentalists demanded alternative technologies and regulation of the existing tech-

¹⁰ Forgetfulness of the May Events on the Left is puzzling. This was the last general revolt against capitalism in an advanced capitalist country. It has lessons almost as significant for us as those Marx derived from the study of Commune of Paris a century before. See Feenberg and Freedman (2001). An extensive collection of documents is available at

<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/projects/mai68/>

nologies. At first business leaders and politicians explained that these demands contradicted the “imperatives” of technology. The demystification of this proposition required the dereification of institutions, technologies, and technical disciplines, the demonstration that they are changeable human products, not law governed things of nature. Today, most people agree that we are better off for having cleaner air and water and fewer dangerous chemicals in our environment.¹¹

Where feminism has intersected with technical issues, struggles exhibited a dynamic similar to environmentalism. For example, feminists challenged medical practices in significant ways. The 1970s saw changes in childbirth procedures under pressure from women and women’s organizations. The most enduring of these changes is the routine presence of a partner or friend in the labor and delivery room. Like environmental demands, this demand too was at first resisted by professionals who exaggerated the risks of an unfamiliar arrangement. The fall of this prejudice was the harbinger of a less paternalistic practice of medicine in many domains.

The third stage emerged with the Internet in the 1990s and continues down to the present. This is not a traditional political terrain, but progressive demands on the Internet have been loosely associated with the Left throughout its history, and of course aggressively co-opted by business. The Internet exemplifies technical potential invisible to the experts but known to users who realize it through hacking and innovation. Human communication was not envisaged by those who originally created the Internet to support time sharing on mainframe computers. Online sociability was literally a reinvention of the system, modifying it to meet new demands. The basic framework was supplied by the government but reworked by innovative users with technical skills and picked up by millions of users. Their innovations include essentially all the communicative applications of the Internet. The fact that these innovations were widely adopted by the user community gives them a democratic character.

¹¹ Ironically, in the end it was not environmentalists but bankers who brought the economy low.

Although often accused of technophobia and anti-modernism, none of these movements are correctly characterized in their main lines as such. At each stage the Left has struggled for constructive changes in society and its technical systems. It does not simply reject reification in the name of past glories but dereifies the institutions and technologies it challenges in view of their reconstruction in more humane forms. In sum it treats “objectivity” as a “factor mediating between past and future, . . . the product of man and of the development of society.”

Micro-political activism of this sort is the specific form of agency associated with dereification today. It may lack long term organization and is often focused on a single issue and sometimes a single location. This is its weakness. Nevertheless, the effects of micro-politics are not trivial. Its demands are translated into new regulations, new designs, even in some cases the abandonment of technologies. This is a special and irreplaceable form of activism in a technological society. It limits the autonomy of experts and forces them to redesign the worlds they create to represent a wider range of interests.

Technical Politics

I want to consider now in more depth the implications of Lukács’s theory of reification for contemporary radical politics. This requires drastic revisions that bring out aspects of the theory Lukács himself under-emphasized. Its essential contribution, the critique of reified rationality, survives the disappointment of his revolutionary expectations.

Lukács concretized his theory in Marxist terms appropriate for his time. The reified rationality of capitalism manifested itself primarily through the market and dereification primarily through the labor movement. This concretization of the theory is less persuasive now than for the most part, at least in wealthy capitalist countries, labor struggle has been stripped of the larger

significance it achieved in the context of the socialist movement while the spread of technology and bureaucratic administration open other terrains of struggle.

Contemporary radical movements such as the environmental and gender based movements are not revolutionary in the Lukácsian sense. But like the proletarian movement which inspired Lukács's critique, these movements respond to the limits finally reached in one domain or another by the reifications that underlie the capitalist system. Many of these movements involve struggle over technology and other technically mediated systems. Such controversies raise the question of power indirectly through challenging the capitalist application of technical knowledge. These challenges are based on the experience of those who live within the environments capitalism creates. Those environments have now become total as technical mediation encompasses every aspect of life, bringing bureaucratic administration in its wake. In confronting them, radicals have made advances which are universally valid, at least for modern societies, and these must be preserved wherever socialism appears on the agenda of history.

Lukács's theory offers an original angle from which to interpret these advances. It has suggestive applications today long after the decline of the revolutionary movement that inspired it. The general structure of the new technical politics is adumbrated in *History and Class Consciousness*. Certainly reification has not gone away. Who does not recognize it in the notion that "there is no alternative" and the correlated notion that we must adapt to the system and struggle for survival or success within it? We are if anything ruled even more imperiously by this capitalist logic than before. This was the argument of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. We live, he claimed, under the domination of a "technological rationality," another way of expressing the

idea that reification has achieved the cultural generality of a “world.”¹² Such critiques are now commonplace. The target is not simply capitalist economic relations but the technocratic order which supports them and extends them into the non-economic spheres of life.

The social movements that emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s dereify the system at points different from traditional class struggle in the factory. They are based on contemporary manifestations of the gap between form and content Lukács described and exhibit the same immanent dialectic between reification and dereification, between capitalism and the resistant lives it organizes but fails completely to contain. Today movements of this sort define the horizon of protest. However, they aim not at revolution but at smaller but significant changes in modern life that I call “democratic rationalization.”

This notion appears to be contradictory. Weberian rationalization signifies the imposition of calculation and control on social life through the growth of bureaucratic administration. Weber assumed uncritically that rationalization was inseparable from bureaucracy as indeed it was in the German government and corporations of his day. As a result his theory of rationalization led to a pessimistic conclusion. He warned that modern societies were headed toward an “iron cage of bureaucracy.” Technocratic ideology and practice appears to bear out Weber’s prediction. It replaces traditional forms of bourgeois ideology and religious mystifications as the hegemonic ideology in advanced capitalism while subordinating institutions hitherto sheltered from exploitation to technification and the rigors of capitalist style management.

But Weber’s prediction relied on deterministic assumptions that are no longer accepted by contemporary technology studies. Technology is not a fate but is “underdetermined” by pure-

¹² “When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality - a world,” (Marcuse 1964, 154).

ly technical considerations. This leaves a space for social influences to alter the direction of development. David Noble's Marxist study of industrialization anticipated this now widely held view (Noble 1984). At every stage in the process leading to our technology, choices appeared and decisions were made that were strongly influenced by the interests of the dominant capitalist class. Thus the current technological system responds not just to a generic interest in progress served by universal knowledge but also to the specific requirements of capitalist development.

Of the many possible forms progress might have taken, we have a particular one. This is evident in the structural indifference this technology exhibits to the welfare of workers, consumers and the natural environment. There is nothing specifically "technological" about this indifference, nor is it particularly "efficient" from the standpoint of society as a whole whatever its contribution to corporate profits. This indifference, made possible by the operational autonomy of the capitalist and his or her representatives, forms the background of many current struggles now that modern technology and the bureaucratic systems that accompany it have such vast and threatening impacts that they can no longer conserve the degree of independence they formerly enjoyed.

Today a generalized "rationalization theory" can be formulated on the basis of Lukács's theory of reification. With Weber it recognizes the role of instrumental rationality in modern society, but drops his insistence on control from above. Rationalization can occur under any system of social control, including democratic control, various systems of collegial management, spontaneous mass adoption of innovations and actions, and what I call "democratic interventions." These latter are the temporary, local, public engagement with social issues called "direct action" by the New Left and practiced down to the present by radical social movements.

It is reasonable to consider these interventions rationalizations where they improve the

instrumental effectiveness of technologies and technical systems. The result may not be visible from the standpoint of specific corporations or government agencies, which often pay the price of changing technical designs to conform with public demands. We hear their protests in the name of “efficiency” all the time. But if the value and usefulness of the technological system is measured from the standpoint of society as a whole, then it is clear that interventions for such things as pollution control or opportunities to communicate freely do constitute technical as well as human progress.

The agents who support this new politics are formed as was the proletariat through technical links, mediations, but mediations of a new type. Technical mediation creates new social groups that react to the technologies that form them. Some of these technically based groups are latent, while others are immediately visible. For example, workers brought together by a production technology are aware that they form a group and as such they may be active through the labor movement. By contrast in the 1980s AIDS patients formed a latent group, unaware at first of their common interests. These patients confronted a medical crisis through individual participation in clinical research, but discontent with the design of the research soon led to conscious group formation and protests. The medical system forged a technical link between the patients which exceptionally became the basis for a political movement in the technical domain (Feenberg 1995, chap. 5).

Similarly, exposing a neighborhood to toxic wastes enlists it unawares in a network that threatens the health of its members. The famous case of Love Canal illustrates this phenomenon. Although experts were brought in to reassure residents of this neighborhood, the community believed it was sickened by toxic wastes and enlisted other scientists and eventually government in pursuit of compensation. Many environmental struggles resemble this one. Official, supposedly

"scientific" definitions of the situation are challenged by victims on the basis of their own interpretation of their experience and independent scientists recruited to help out.

In sum, participation in a technical network constructs a latent collective that may emerge as a community of struggle where its technical involvement evokes needs that overflow network boundaries. The technocratic system imposes its restrictive form of life on populations capable of resisting in their own interests, just as in Lukács's theory of reification the capitalist form was imposed on a resistant working class. The restriction is no longer primarily experienced as poverty, but as the fulfillment of human needs through individual consumption at the expense of solidarity and non-commercial values such as health. The mental and material pollution that accompanies this system shapes what Adorno once called "damaged lives" (Adorno 1974).

The object of technical struggles is not just particular institutions and technologies but the reified knowledges that underlie them in modern societies. Social movements respond to the consequences of the fragmentation of these knowledges. Lukács notes the connection between fragmentation and specialization, and the crises resulting from the unplanned interactions of the capitalist economy. In the real world everything is connected in what Lukács calls a "totality," but specializations tend to isolate and separate out a particular cross-section of reality for analytical treatment. This makes more rigorous and systematic knowledge possible but it can lead to unanticipated problems.

The limitations of the specialized disciplines are aggravated by commercial considerations. The professional technical disciplines have grown up with capitalism and share in its biases. This intimate relationship between knowledge-making and economic power is felt not only in the form of the professions but also in the content of the knowledge on which they base their claim to authority and the designs of the systems they shape. As conflicts become increasingly

commonplace a dialectical pattern emerges. Like the political economy Marx criticized, the technical disciplines are reified "sciences" that interact with a lifeworld they describe. Of course they differ from economics in many respects, but they share its alienation from the social processes that underlie them.

And just as class consciousness breaks through the reified appearances, so the resistance to technocratic ideology constitutes a new form of disseminated knowledge grounded on everyday experience with a technologized society. This is knowledge from below. As Jameson writes, we need

to make an inventory of the variable structures of 'constraint' lived by the various marginal, oppressed, or dominated groups—the so-called "new social movements" fully as much as the working classes—with this difference, that each form of privation is acknowledged as producing its own specific 'epistemology,' its own specific view from below, and its own specific and distinctive truth claim" (Jameson 1988, 71).

In technically mediated domains of social life, this epistemology is based on experience informed by counter-expertise and is occasioned by harms of technical systems that have been ignored, or unexploited potentials. Such potentials exist where users can imagine and even in some cases implement features that have not been identified by the technical specialists themselves. The chief examples of these two categories are the effects of industrial pollution on health, and the communicative usages of the Internet.

Environmentalism and the Internet have proven that public participation is neither impotent nor incompetent. They have demonstrated practically that rationality is multiple, held in part in the various specialized disciplines, and in part in the experiential knowledge of concrete social actors. Feedback from "reality" as it is experienced by ordinary people is thus not extraneous to

the technical but essential to its successful development. In sum, neither technical nor everyday rationality are complete in themselves; they form halves of a fragmented whole which communicate through democratic processes (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009).

The technical disciplines respond to public interventions by gradually incorporating a broader range of concerns in their “a priori” concept of their object and their practices. These concerns do not appear within the disciplines directly and immediately, but indirectly through changed technical codes, that is, through specifications that address side-effects and opportunities identified in protest, hacking and innovation (Feenberg 2010, chap. 4). The results in such cases are improved technical disciplines and technologies as judged from both a technical and a normative standpoint.

The inherited technical system, based on technical codes and disciplines elaborated at a time when resistant publics were systematically disempowered, are now contested on a widening scale. Those codes constitute the equivalent of the “law” to which technical action must conform under the horizon of reification. But another kind of action, dereifying action, can modify that “law” and bring it into conformity with human needs. This is transcending practice, the cut that changes rather than kills.

Conclusion: Deep Democracy

Liberals in the 19th century over-estimated the significance of political democracy. Marx pointed out the limits of any purely political emancipation that left the economic system unchanged. Lukács’s theory of reification began to introduce a third level of democratization that concerns forms of social order based on “rationality,” whether it be the market or the technical disciplines governing administration and technology. This could be called a “deep democracy,”

expanding on political and economic rights to engage with the technical and bureaucratic structures of daily life. But Lukács followed contemporary Marxism in over-estimating the significance of public ownership. It was left to the Frankfurt School, and later independently to Foucault, to develop the critique of rationality implied in Lukács's concept of reification. The implications for democratic theory remain to be drawn.

This requires a new concept of the revolutionary process focused not just on the state or the economy but also on all the technically mediated domains of social life. In these domains rational systems organize the actions of participants, whether administrators or administered, in terms of a reified logic. Resistance to bureaucratization, technical control and the commercial capture of scientific-technical authority are new forms of dereifying practice.

Although these practices do not change the mode of production, they are important both for what they accomplish within its boundaries and as harbingers of new social relations in technologically advanced societies. We have seen the failure of the experiments in bureaucratic socialism. Their democratic deficit was not compensated by ideological adherence to Marxism. There can be no doubt any longer that socialism will be democratic or it will not be.

Every form of democratic initiative must therefore be studied as we learn how to reconceptualize socialism in the wake of its historic failure. Early theories of democratic socialism and workers' councils must be reconceptualized in terms of what we have learned from the endless back-and-forth struggles between administrations and experts on the one hand and the lay clients they nominally serve on the other. Those struggles must continue in any modern society whether it be capitalist or socialist. We are only at the beginning of the emergence of this new form of democratic politics. It is too early to predict its future. The theory of reification shows how it can be integrated to a Marxist understanding of social struggle.

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