

A Philosophical History of German Sociology

Frédéric Vandenberghe

Routledge Studies in Critical Realism

A Philosophical History of German Sociology

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A Philosophical History of German Sociology presents a systematic reconstruction of critical theory, from the founding fathers of sociology (Marx, Simmel, Weber) via Lukács to the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas). Through an in-depth analysis of the theories of alienation, rationalization and reification, it investigates the metatheoretical presuppositions of a critical theory of the present that not only highlights the reality of domination, but is also able to highlight the possibilities of emancipation.

Although not written as a textbook, its clear and cogent introduction to some of the main theories of sociology make this book a valuable resource for undergraduates and postgraduates alike. The following investigation of theories of alienation and reification offer essential material for any critique of the dehumanizing tendencies of today’s global world.

Recently translated into English from the original French for the first time, this text showcases Vandenberghe’s mastery of German, French and English traditions of sociological theory. The result is an important and challenging text that is essential reading for sociology students of all levels.

Frédéric Vandenberghe is a Sociology professor and researcher at IUPERJ (Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His writings on a broad range of sociological and philosophical topics have been published as books and articles around the world.

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A Philosophical History of German Sociology

Frédéric Vandenberghe
Translated by Carolyn Shread

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Introduction: the adventures of reification

A single concept was all it took to dissipate the whole of philosophy, showing how partial philosophies are founded on only one aspect and reveal just one side of the concept.

(Gaston Bachelard: *La Philosophie du non*)

Despite the quite understandable tendency of historians of ideas to trace the origins of sociology as far back as possible, returning to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, there is now a general acknowledgement that sociology emerged as a relatively autonomous discipline, distinct from economics and political science, in the nineteenth century. Sociology cannot be separated from the discovery of the relative autonomy of society, which is linked to the advent of modernity: right from the start, the new discipline expressed the self-reflexive attitude of modern societies towards themselves, and to what eludes them. As a sub-system of science, which is a sub-system of society, sociology can be viewed as a kind of large-scale psychoanalysis that seeks to reveal the historicity and facticity of functionally differentiated modern societies.

The relative autonomy of society

Historicity: between contingency and necessity

Defined vaguely as the "science of society," sociology emerged with modernity, following the collapse of the *Ancien Regime*, which gave way under the triple pressures of the French Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution (cf. Nisbet (1966), Touraine (1974), Bauman (1976), Elias (1984) and Wagner (1994)). If these revolutions taught their contemporaries any single lesson, it was the principle of historicity: the insight that society is not an immutable whole, meta-socially guaranteed by God or Prince. Instead, society is seen as an entirely human institution that is contingent, but also relatively autonomous – an institution that obeys its own laws, and even imposes its laws on agents against their will.¹ Indeed, from its inception, the discovery of the principle of historicity is inseparable from the simultaneous discovery of the

dual principles of the contingency and necessity of society: sociology rapidly understood that humans have the ability to make history freely, even as their history escapes them, either because they do not control it or because it controls them by imposing its own external laws. The founding experience of early sociology can thus be summarized as the insight that society is the ‘result of men’s action, but not a human project’ (A. Ferguson). Paradoxically, it is only when the individual is alienated from, and crushed by, his own product that individual and society can become the focus of an objective science. According to the categories identified by Jean-Pierre Dupuy (1992: 38), the task and challenge of sociology as an emerging science are the need to understand the link between two autonomies: the autonomy of the subject who makes up society, and the autonomy of the object, which follows its own laws, since subjects do not know what they are doing.

Modernity thus heralded the emergence of an artificial factor: humans became aware that society is not a natural fact, nor a gift from God; instead, it is their own creation, the product of their actions. This new awareness of the relation between social *poiesis* and human *praxis* stimulated utopian projects for conscious social transformation, as well as technocratic projects seeking to plan society from a comprehensive perspective (Saint-Simon, Marx). In counterpoint to the artificial approach, modern societies also discovered the torments of the autonomization of society. Human beings make society, but their actions and reactions produce unexpected results, multiplying, interconnecting, and developing their own dynamic, so that whatever they do, they contribute to the autonomization of the processes they initiate. In its inert facticity and structural opacity, society is in effect a “second nature” for humans, since it counters their plans and imposes external constraints on them. This is the classic view of alienation: human products are objectified, dehumanized, and eventually turn against their creators.

For and against the autonomization of society

The fundamental problematic that informed sociology as a newly emerging discipline was a concern with the relative autonomy of self-referential socio-cultural systems, functioning according to rigorous mechanisms that are able, if not to impose their necessity upon actors, then at least to considerably limit their room for maneuver (Elias, 1973: ch. 1; 1984: 37ff.). There are arguments both for and against the concept of the autonomization of society. In interpretations supporting autonomization, which are found mainly, but not exclusively, on the right of the political spectrum, a conservative emphasis focuses on the necessity for institutions; a supposedly realist approach concentrates on the inevitable differentiation of the social sphere into autonomous sub-systems; and an ultra-liberal approach highlights the advantages of spontaneous order and the detrimental effects of any form of social planning.

In his philosophical anthropology, Arnold Gehlen (1981) starts from the view that human beings are defective (*Mängelwesen*). Unlike animals, humans no longer have instincts to guide their actions. Since control no longer comes

naturally from within, Gehlen concludes that it must be imposed from without. If humans are not to be lost in the chaos of drives and affects, they must re-establish the lost link between instincts and stimuli by interposing institutions between themselves and the world. Institutions stabilize his understanding of the world and provide general rules that considerably restrict the field of action. Rationalists like Fichte and Marx, who criticize alienation in defense of the subject's autonomy, simply fail to understand that to avoid falling back into the state of nature, humans must alienate themselves in institutions and must allow themselves to be "consumed" by them (1983: 366–379).

Whereas Gehlen claims that alienation is good for humans, Niklas Luhmann (1987; 1997: II) simply drops the intellectual tradition of "old Europe" – and with it the humanist notion of alienation. For Luhmann, all social systems, including economic, political, scientific, and pedagogic systems, face the problem of complexity. To reduce the complexity of their environment, societies must control the relations of interchange with the environment, differentiate their functions, define themselves according to their own criteria, develop binary codes, and present themselves as self-referentially sealed worlds, unaffected by other sub-systems or overall inter-systemic integration. The autonomization of sub-systems is inevitable since it is a necessary pre-condition for the functional differentiation of hyper-complex societies. Of course, nothing precludes the expression of a sense of nostalgia, in a critique of the autonomization of the social sphere that appeals to the Enlightenment's cherished vision of the autonomous subject, but according to Luhmann, sociology has revealed the limitations of an approach based on obsolete principles. "Sociology is not an applied *Aufklärung*," he says, "rather it is a decanted *Aufklärung* [*nicht angewandte, sondern abgeklärte Aufklärung*], an attempt to determine the limits of Enlightenment philosophy" (Luhmann, 1971a: 67).

Friedrich Hayek (1973–1979), Nobel Prize winner in economics and neo-liberal mentor, is more openly ideological than Luhmann: his approach is founded on an affirmation of the inescapable limits of human reason. In a tirade against "constructivist rationalists," he claims that because it is impossible to know the physical and social worlds and their relations in their totality, we can only act in an acceptable manner through the tacit understanding of abstract rules over which we have no control. Just as an individual cannot attain a synoptic view of everything in the surrounding environment, so too in a complex system such as society, there is no central steering point from which to command everything related to the functioning of the whole. Society is a spontaneous order (*kosmos*), not an instituted order (*taxis*). According to Hayek, humans increase their ability to act if they recognize that spontaneous social orders exist, such as the market (the "catalaxy"), an order that emerges spontaneously from the mutual adjustment of many individuals whose actions respect property laws and contracts. In Hayek's view, this is the best of all possible orders, and this leads him to conclude that any state intervention is, by definition, an act of coercion that can only result in disorder since it impedes the mutual adjustment on which the spontaneous order is based.

In the critical tradition, the (relative) autonomization of society is seen as neither an advantage, nor a necessity, nor is it, for that matter, inevitable. Starting

from the hypothesis that socialization must be conscious to some degree (depending on the attraction of the Fichto-Hegelian model of the identity of subject and object) the autonomization of society is invariably criticized as a form of dehumanization, alienation, or reification. This book offers an in-depth analysis of the critical tradition of German sociology in relation to this specific theme. The intellectual antecedents of the tradition lie in Hegel's early writings and its (provisional) conclusion can be found in Jürgen Habermas's recent texts. By focusing the analysis on the problem of the alienating autonomization of society, I hope to show that the apparently esoteric notion of reification (*Verdinglichung*) goes right to the heart of sociology. Whether in Marx, Weber, Simmel and Lukács, or Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas, in every instance we encounter the dual question of the reification of the world and the alienation of the human being as the central theme that forms and informs their work.

The ideological pathos of the critique of reification

Autonomy, anomie, alienation

The thesis of the (relative) autonomy of society is not just an *idée fixe* that acts as an argument for the relative autonomy of sociology. Contrary to the views of constructivists, such as Tenbruck (1981) and Pels (1998: ch. 5), the object of sociology is not simply an artefact of the sociological project. In fact, the thesis about the *sui generis* existence of society is simultaneously an expression of the fundamental experience of modernity and a constitutive *a priori* of sociology. By definition, a sociologist accepts that "society" exists, distinct from the economy and the polity, and essentially irreducible to the psyche (or biology or chemistry). It does not mean, as Durkheim (1968) claimed, that social facts must always be explained by social facts, but rather that social facts – that is, social entities, relations and representations – exist, and that they cannot be reduced to psychological facts (or biological, chemical, neurological facts). The two fundamental claims that the sociologist should not question are that society is relatively autonomous in regard to individuals and that sociology makes a transcendental presupposition regarding the existence of this sphere. Anyone who rejects the thesis of the autonomy or relative irreducibility of the social sphere, from conviction or as provocation, denies the autonomy of sociology and thereby excludes himself from the community of sociologists. This categorical claim is both descriptive and performative. I understand the thesis of the relative autonomy of society transcendently: it is a necessary condition for sociology as a relatively autonomous discipline. Formulated in these terms, this thesis is no more the acceptance of the objectivist premises of the Durkheim School than it is a rejection of the subjectivist variations of sociology. It simply stipulates that the relative autonomy of sociology is analytically linked to the relative autonomy of its objective field. It is because there are social facts – social entities, relations and representations that are relatively irreducible – that sociology is a relatively autonomous discipline.

Thus, to use a typically Marxist expression, it is not by chance that sociology was established at the moment of the great transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* – a transition that can be characterized in Hegelian terms by a gradual “schism” between subject and object, between humans and their work, that was retrospectively, reflexively sanctioned by sociology – just as it is no mere chance that the notion of reification (*Verdinglichung* or *Versachlichung*) appeared at the dawn of modernity. Nevertheless, in so far as the notion of reification is inseparable from what I call, with a nod towards the founder of the history of ideas, Lovejoy (1936: 10–14), a specific “ideological pathos,” reification should not be confused with the relative autonomy of society. The relative irreducibility of society is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for reification. The proof of this, I suggest, lies in the fact that Durkheim, who insisted so strongly on the *sui generis* nature of society, did not develop a theory of reification or alienation. Indeed, although like Marx Durkheim was a radical critic of the institutions and dominant values of modern society, his normative conceptions of humans and society, which are in many ways opposed to those of the classic German sociologists whose work I discuss, prevented him from developing such a theory (cf. Horton 1964; Dawe, 1970, 1978; Lukes, 1977: 74–95). Significantly, in *Suicide* he allots only a very marginal role (one brief note) to “fatalist suicide,” that is, to a suicide which, unlike anomic suicide, is caused not by a lack but by an excess of social control (cf. Durkheim, 1960: 311, n.). To put it crudely, one could say that although moral anarchy is Durkheim’s central problem, he did not conceive the problem of reification – defined for now as the domination of the individual by external forms of constraint – as a problem, but rather, as a solution to anomie. The theory of reification and the theory of anomie presuppose different axiological systems. This explains not only why Durkheim did not develop a theory of reification, but it also shows that the relative autonomy of social structures cannot simply be confused with reification.

The enlightened Anti-Enlightenment

The notion of reification is imbued with ideological pathos. It expresses the typically romantic fear and disillusionment experienced by European intellectuals faced with the triumph of industrial-capitalist bourgeois society and the accompanying, inexorable rise of formal-instrumental reason, which undermined the foundations of community and imposed itself in all areas of life. Following Lovejoy, by “pathos” I refer to a metaphysical sensibility or sensitivity. I am not using the adjective “ideological” in the Marxist sense; by ideology, I am referring to all the non-empirical political, moral, and anthropological hypotheses that inform a social theory. Robert Nisbet (1966: 266) has argued that like alienation, which belongs to the same “conceptual family” and with which it is often associated, if not confused, the concept of reification represents “the antithesis or inversion of progress.” This claim may be true, but given that Nisbet retains and reinforces the myth of the conservative origins of sociology (Giddens, 1977: 212–218 and 1982: 47–51; Birnbaum, 1971: 81–93), I believe it is necessary to reject this thesis, on the grounds that it associates conservative, even reactionary, connotations with the

concepts of alienation and reification. Even if reification does imply a critique of the idea of progress and the Enlightenment, it should also be recognized that the Anti-Enlightenment tradition is not homogenous. Following Steven Seidman (1983: ch. 2), we can identify three different approaches within the nebulous Anti-Enlightenment, namely philosophical conservatism, anti-bourgeois romanticism and revolutionary radicalism. None of the authors considered can be included among the family of conservative Anti-Enlightenment thinkers such as Bonald, Burke, and de Maistre, which the Germans call the Counter-Enlightenment (*Gegenaufklärung*). This leaves the romantics and the radicals. Apart from Simmel, Weber, and the late Horkheimer, all of the authors whose work I consider tend towards revolutionary radicalism. Nevertheless, in my opinion the specificity of the critique of reification comes not from its link to revolutionary thinking, but from its connections to various forms of “romanticism” (Lovejoy 1948: 183–253). In my view, the origins of sociology, particularly classical German sociology on the question of reification, are found primarily in romanticism, in what Löwy (1979; Löwy and Sayre 2001), following Lukács, called “anti-capitalist romanticism.”

This thesis of the connections between romanticism and German sociology is indebted to Arthur Mitzman’s analysis (1966, 1973: Part 1). According to Mitzman, judgments and solutions vary depending on whether the critic judges modern society on the basis of a “Faustian” vision of humanity, characterized by an incessant battle to master the world, or on the basis of a “Apollinian” vision of civilized human beings who value harmony and seek to reconcile humans and nature. In the first instance, modernity is seen as intrinsically “reifying” and the solution is social; in the second instance, modernity is viewed as intrinsically alienating and the solution lies with the individual. However, this analysis is problematic. First, by characterizing romanticism as an anti-modernist movement, Mitzman seriously underestimates the progressive, modernist impact of romanticism. In looking for a non-reifying modernism, the romantic movement was not opposed so much to modernity as to reification. Furthermore, to give just two examples, it is not at all clear how Marx or Adorno would be classified on this basis. Marx clearly favored the social solution, yet it was he who formulated the classic theory of alienation; conversely, Adorno, who was fixated like no other thinker on the phenomenon of reification, rejected the theory of alienation and valued the Apollonian personality. Finally, Mitzman does not see that the distinction he establishes between the theories of reification and self-alienation follows a more fundamental distinction that can be drawn within romanticism between the individualist, modernist and progressive movement on the one hand and the holistic, anti-modernist and conservative movement on the other (cf. Mannheim (1982: 164–181) and Gouldner (1973: 323–366), as well as Ringer (1969: 128–199), Arato (1974) and Shalin (1986) who connect it to neo-Kantism).

Since this individualistic and modernist strand of Romanticism gradually becomes confused with the critical rationalism of the Enlightenment, it is somewhat problematic to associate it, as Seidman does, with the Anti-Enlightenment. Given that progressive romanticism had already incorporated, or, as Mannheim

(1964: 454) puts it in his famous essay on conservatism, “sublated” (*aufgehoben*) the modernist and rationalist moment of the Enlightenment, it is not a matter of abandoning the Enlightenment project, but rather of enlightening the *Aufklärung* in order to reflexively continue its emancipatory project. Moreover, this is why the progressive movement in romanticism, which, to use Louis Dumont’s expression (1985), fully accepts the ideology of the “individualist universalism” of modernity without reservation, can also be considered a sub-movement of the Enlightenment.

The critique of reification originates within a very specific ideological context, which I term the “Enlightened Anti-Enlightenment.” This context is characterized by individualism, modernism and above all, by an insistence on autonomy in the Kantian sense (Levine, 1995: ch. 9). If we now distinguish, within the progressive, individualist strand of romanticism, two different, but not disjunctive, structures of sensibility, namely a tendency towards ideological activism and a nostalgic-tragic attachment to the past, it is possible to classify the authors discussed in this study of theories of reification according to whether they are more inclined towards active optimism or defeatism: Marx, Lukács, Marcuse and Habermas fit in the first category; Simmel, Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno fit the second.² To explain the emergence and attraction of the concept of reification, one must refer to a modern understanding of autonomy, in the positive sense of self-determination, rather than the wholly negative sense of an absence of external constraints (Berlin, 1969: 118–172). Intellectuals, who are singularly predisposed to value autonomy due to their position and activities, criticize modern society in terms of reification because social formations, as autonomous human creations that exceed human mastery, come up against humans and threaten to crush them by undermining their autonomy. Without the humanist and individualist premises that humans are, and must be, autonomous subjects, masters of their own actions, rather than heteronomous objects, one thing among many, subject to external determinants imposed by pseudo-natural laws, reification, understood as the alienating autonomy of social forms and formations could not and would not be considered a problem.

Since modern society forms a relatively autonomous systemic fabric made up of functional interconnections that inevitably limit individual autonomy, we might well ask whether reification is not simply part and parcel of the modern human condition. After all, the disjunction between system and lifeworld, the functional differentiation of self-regulating sub-systems, and the implied heteronomy are distinctive characteristics of advanced modern societies. This is an important objection, since it demonstrates that if the concept of reification is to retain its critical edge, and if criticism is to avoid collapsing into a philosophical conservatism bemoaning the “lament of reification” (Adorno), criticism must establish and respect its own limits. This means that objective idealism must be abandoned and the relative irreducibility of the systemic structures of society must be accepted. The implication of giving up objective idealism in recognition of the relative irreducibility of the system in the lifeworld is that the unity between the system and lifeworld should not be conceived according to the Fichto-Hegelian model of a

split ethical totality (I return to this point in the chapters on Marx, Lukács, and Habermas). The critique of reification does not imply a longing to turn back the clock, nor an appeal to abolish the systemic properties of society as such; rather, it is a need to grapple with the systemic social structures that artificially limit individual autonomy. In other words, if autonomy is to retain its value and meaning as a criterion of judgment, reification should only be concerned with the “over-repressive” (Marcuse) systemic proprieties of society that impose superfluous alienation, which could be abolished under the actual circumstances without losing the functional differentiation of modern societies. The implicit challenge for reification is thus to achieve, as far as possible, the optimal conditions for autonomy.

Social reification and methodological thingification

Epistemological quarrels

The theoretical, scholarly and technical concept of reification (*Verdinglichung*) is closely connected to the development of Marxist thought. However, unlike the concept of alienation (*Entfremdung*), which is the core concept of the *Paris Manuscripts*, if not the entirety of Marx’s work, reification does not have an undisputed, canonical origin. Depending on the inclinations of the commentator (Meszaros, 1972a; Rose, 1978; Pitkin, 1987), the concept has been attributed to Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx, Simmel, Weber or Lukács. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant (1964a, IX: 197) uses the word “*Verdingung*” as a synonym of “sale by contract.” In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche (1955, II: 585) uses the verb *verdinglichen* to ridicule the hypostasis of concepts in general, especially the concept of causality. In his philosophy of law, Hegel (1970, VII: 144) uses the word *Verdingung* with the sense, and in the context of, the alienation (*Entäußerung*) of property. The substantive term *Verdinglichung* only appears with Marx; however, to my knowledge, it appears only twice in Marx’s writings, and both times in the third book of *Capital* (in the section on the “Trinity Formula” (MEW, XXV: 838) and in the chapter on the relations of distribution and production (MEW, XXV: 887). Yet according to the “official”, orthodox and canonical account, found in several dictionaries and encyclopedias of Marxism, the concept supposedly first appeared in the first volume of *Capital*, in the famous chapter, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” even though it is not in fact used there. Later Georg Simmel used *Verdinglichung* in *Philosophy of Money* (1900) while Max Weber continuously used the term *Versachlichung* in *Economy and Society* (1914–1921), but their contribution to the use of the term is so poorly known that several commentators (Pitkin, 1987: 246; Feuerlicht, 1978: 12) have gone so far as to claim that Georg Lukács, who was directly influenced by Simmel and Weber, forged it in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). The classic version of the theory of reification was indeed formulated by the young Lukács in this collection of articles, in the central chapter entitled “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”³

To my knowledge, the word *reificatio* does not appear in any Latin dictionary. Etymologically, the neologism, which appeared around 1860, derives from the

contraction of the Latin words *res* and *facere*. Reification can be defined literally as “effective or mental transformation” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) into a thing from something which was originally not a thing (*res*).⁴ Hannah Arendt (1958: 139–141) uses the term in the first sense, of effective transformation. For her, reification is related to “making,” to “the work of *homo faber*.” Thus, the cabinet maker who makes a table reifies his idea, his mental image of the table, not the raw materials, for they are already *res*, and only God creates *ex nihilo*. On the other hand, W.O. Quine (1981: 9–15 and 183) uses the term in the second sense, of mental transformation. For Quine, reification concerns the selection of entities we consider real and which we therefore accept in our ontology.

The highly critical, polemical, character of reification should not be overlooked, for its meaning and standard usage invariably carries negative connotations. As a subversive concept, reification designates the becoming-thing of that which *by right* is not a thing. This pseudo-thing can be a concept, person, animal, relation, process, social world or commodity – the list goes on. The reification of these pseudo-things involves illegitimately attributing them with, alternately, facticity, fixity, objectivity, externality, impersonality, naturalness, in short, the ontological thingness deemed inappropriate. In every case, the concept of reification presupposes an ontology which initially is only rarely, if ever, made explicit (Thomason, 1980: 163); usually it is introduced secretly. In this analysis, I seek systematically to render explicit the ontology adopted by each author so as to clarify his notion of reification.

Reification is the opposite of personalization and is therefore conceptually related. While reification transforms something which is not a thing into a thing, personification transforms that which is not a person into a person. The demythologization of world views can be seen as reification: magical objects lose their personal *anima* and become things. Reification, in Marx’s sense, can also be seen as personification: social or pseudo-natural forces are perceived and understood as quasi-human forces that rule the world. The notion of “thing” is highly metaphysical. What a thing is depends on which ontology one adopts. What some people consider a thing, for instance Pegasus or social facts, is viewed by others as a reification. Furthermore, the extension of the notion of thing is historically variable. To give just two examples, the Greeks considered slaves to be things and the colonial masters considered black people as animals. Since then, black people, women of all races, and some animals have crossed the line separating the domain of “things” from the domain of “persons” and are no longer perceived as “goods” whose trafficking is legitimate.

Finally, before proposing a typology of reification, it is important to emphasize the essentially metaphorical and metonymical character of this concept. Metaphor implies the transfer from one or more words to an object or concept that they do not literally denote in order to suggest a comparison with other phenomena. Metaphor connotes more than it denotes. It operates by analogy and, as Perelman reminds us (1988: 128), analogy relates to the theory of argument, not to ontology. Taken literally, it becomes absurd: concepts then become fetishes, and thought soon turns to myth (Turner and Edgley, 1980; Turner, 1987). As we will

see on several occasions, the danger of scientific thought falling helplessly into unreflective, tautological thought is all the more serious in the case of reification. The first methodological principle I therefore propose for the theory of reification is that reification must not itself be reified.

A typology of reification

Reification is a composite concept that conceals an amalgamation or confusion of two meanings. To untangle these different meanings, I distinguish “social reification” from “methodological thingification.” The meaning of the concept of social reification (the alienated and alienating autonomization of social structures), which can be traced back to Hegel, relates primarily to the sociological theory; while the meaning of the concept of methodological thingification (the hypostasis of the naturalist concepts and method), which originates with Nietzsche, is more closely connected to philosophy of the social sciences. Since the distinction between the concepts of social reification and methodological thingification corresponds roughly to the fundamental division between micro and macro sociology, and to the related epistemological views – a realist and objectivist view of the social field, on the one hand, and a nominalist and subjectivist view of it on the other – these concepts can be considered as truly “paired concepts” (Berger and Bendix, 1959). Indeed, like other paired concepts, such as society and community or statute and contract, which express the dual tendencies of society, the concepts of social reification and methodological thingification point to the limits of monistic epistemological perspectives and the need to reveal their dialectical complementariness (Gurvitch, 1962: 190–199). The objectivist perspective of social reification and the subjectivist perspective of methodological thingification are not mutually exclusive, like fire and water, but rather are complementary, like ham and eggs.

Methodological thingification

In philosophy of the social sciences, reification refers to both a critique of the hypostasis of concepts and to the naturalization of the subject and the lifeworld. I describe these two usages under the rubrics (a) “Critique of reism” and (b) “Critique of naturalism.”

(a) Critique of reism

The critique of the reification of concepts concerns the mental operation that transforms an abstraction (for instance, a notion, representation or concept) into material reality, a concrete object that exists “out there.” This is essentially a nominalist critique of naive realism (or “reism”). In this case reification is synonymous with what Alfred North Whitehead (1930: 65f.) called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” The common criticism concerns the hypostasis of concepts or ideal-types, the slippage from substantive to substance, from signifier to signified,

that is typical of those who take a word for a thing (Bourdieu, 1984; Lacroix, 1985). This is the case, for example, with sociologists who transform their conceptual or lay phantoms (the “State,” the “Bourgeoisie,” the “Proletariat,” etc., always in capitals) into historical subjects capable of acting and determining their own ends (“the State decides,” “the French Church combats,” “the triumph of the glorious Proletariat” . . .). In this substantializing-emanating logic, which is closely related to magical-mythical worldviews, the Concept or Idea is similar to when, in the past, the hand of God conducted the earthly affairs as a lord commands his manor. Here, as elsewhere, W. I. Thomas’ famous dictum applies: “When men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (cf. Merton, 1968: ch. 13).

In sociology, as in philosophy, accusations regarding the hypostasis of concepts are chronic, not to say endemic. Hegel is accused of hypostasis by Marx, Marx by Weber and Simmel, Durkheim and Weber by Parsons, Parsons by Habermas, and Habermas by Honneth and Luhmann These serial defamations can no doubt be explained by the collision between the differing ontological discourses of philosophy and sociology, combined with a lack of consensus about the ontological status of their empirical referents.

So far as the conflict between ontological discourses is concerned, it is important to recognize that the theoretical ontology operating in the social sciences and the implicit ontology in the philosophical critique of the theoretical concepts of the social sciences are incommensurable (Spence, 1982). This is the case because the conditions of scientific production are different from those of critical thinking. As Ernst Cassirer (1994: 279) put it: “We cannot engage the functions intended to edify the reality of experience while simultaneously submitting them to critical investigation.” Working sociologists necessarily operate with a realist ontology – they speak of “stratification,” “revolutions” and the “political system,” assuming all the while that these abstractions refer to something real. But when philosophers discuss concepts and critique theories, they understand them in terms of a post-Kantian nominalism: “categories” of thought must not be confused with the “thing-in-itself” (the surreptitious transcendental paralogism, spearhead of the deconstructive critique of the metaphysics of presence). It therefore follows that the success of the critique of reism is effectively guaranteed in advance, but what is still more troubling is that the critique of reism has the potential to put into question the very possibility of sociology. To avoid this threat, the dual relative autonomy of sociology and its objects must be reasserted and deployed from a critical realist perspective.

Beyond the conflict of ontological discourses, we encounter further confusion at every level, due to the lack of consensus about empirical referents in sociology. While individualists claim that only individuals are real, relegating groups and other collective bodies to the status of conceptual entities (*entia rationis*), the holistic approach states that collectives are real and, indeed, that they are more real than the individuals they determine. Mid-way between the individualist and holistic approaches, the interactionist view claims that neither individuals nor groups are real; they emerge through their reciprocal implications. These ontological positions underpin epistemological positions. The opposition between

ontological individualism (nominalism) and ontological holism (realism) corresponds to an equally profound opposition between methodological individualism and methodological holism. I aim to supersede these oppositions by proposing a dialectical synthesis of critical realism and comprehensive-hermeneutic sociology. Further, I believe that critical sociology should aim for a synthesis of the realist moment that characterizes ontological holism, both in its materialist (Marxist) and its idealist (hermeneutics) versions, and the constructivist moment that characterizes the phenomenological approach of methodological individualism. Put negatively, I believe that, above all else, a critical theory must refute the false rationalism of the utilitarian variant of methodological individualism since, as Homans (1987) showed clearly, in the end this variant is no more than a version of vulgar behaviorism. Although the central postulate of methodological individualism – that social facts observed at the macro-sociological level must ultimately be explained by an analysis of the rational actions of individuals – has the advantage of leading to a refusal of sociologism, the advantage is only apparent. Since methodological individualism reduces human actions to the strategic action of *homo economicus*, paradoxically it too displays the hyper-determinism of the holistic position. One of the central theses of this book is that from a meta-theoretical view reification is nothing other than the conjunction of a strategic concept of action and a materialist concept of social structure.

(b) *Critique of naturalism*

The methodological critique of positivist naturalism in terms of the reification of the subject and the lifeworld is linked to the famous quarrel of methods (Frisby, 1976; Apel, 1979) which, since the nineteenth century, has fundamentally divided sociologists between those who prefer the explanatory method of the natural sciences (*Erklären*) and those who favor the interpretative method of the human sciences (*Verstehen*).

From its inception, sociology was built on the model of the natural sciences. Auguste Comte considered sociology, which he initially named ‘social physics’, as the extension and final element of the natural sciences. In the 47th lesson of his *Cours de philosophie positive* [course on positivist philosophy], he introduced the neologism “sociology” “to distinguish with a single term the complementary area of natural philosophy relating to all the fundamental laws which relate to social phenomena” (Comte, 1974: 38, note 3). Wilhelm Dilthey quite rightly criticized this subordination of the human sciences to the natural sciences, explaining that he could not accept Comte’s naturalism, that is, his unwillingness to recognize the specificity of socio-historical reality. To establish the irreducible difference between the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and the natural sciences, Dilthey appealed to Vico’s principle of *verum factum* (*verum et factum convertuntur*), according to which, unlike nature, which is the product of God, and can therefore only be understood by him, we can understand socio-historical reality because it is the work of humans. Dilthey concluded that the human sciences are concerned with reality in as much as it is the objectification of the mind, the

exteriorization of subjectivity or the realization of the values and goals of the sensible world. In short, for Dilthey (1957, 148), “everything that is an objectification of the mind relates to cultural sciences.”

The appropriate method for the human sciences is the comprehensive-interpretative method which seeks to reactivate, by reconstitution of intentional meanings, subjective activity as it is objectified in socio-historical reality. But the intended meaning incorporated in the object can only be grasped within the signifying whole (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) through which its meaning is formed. Just as understanding a sentence involves understanding the page, and in turn the page depends on the book, and *vice versa*, so too understanding a meaningful activity presupposes an understanding of the lived context in which it takes place, through which it derives its meaning and becomes comprehensible. Together these two principles of understanding, the re-interiorizing of exteriorized meaning (the micro-understanding of action – the phenomenological moment) and the re-creation of the lived whole (the macro-understanding of a meaningful whole – the hermeneutic moment) destroy the positivist ideal of external observation.

Despite what Durkheim believed, social facts have a meaning; they cannot be treated as things subject to processes of experimentation or observation in which, through the neutralization of the lifeworld, they would be defined in terms of invariable causal sequences. To eliminate all meaning through naturalistic observation is equivalent to transforming psychic events into physical facts or reducing meaningful culture to mechanical nature. As Weber says, following Rickert, “an item *becomes* a part of “nature” if we cannot raise the question: What is its “meaning”?” (CS, 110). To eliminate meaning, the correlative of understanding, is to distort the object of investigation, dehumanizing it through a thingifying transformation. In response to Durkheim, we must assert that social facts are not things (Monnerot, 1946), and deliberately reintroduce objective meanings and subjective sense into sociological analysis. However, although “astronomic” knowledge of social phenomena cannot be the ideal of sociology, if only because in an open system there are no invariable laws, interpretative sociology has its limits and we must be aware of these. In as much as actions inevitably produce unexpected effects and form social systems that function effectively and objectively in a relatively autonomous fashion in relation to individuals, an objectifying disposition and a thingifying apparatus such as Marxism, structuralism or systems theory are appropriate (Markovic, 1972; Habermas, 1984–1987, II: 163–167). Humanists may protest all they like: when social facts are transformed into things, they must be treated as things – without forgetting, however, that things are themselves social facts which, as it happens, can be decoded as “the continuous accomplishments of the concerted activities of daily life” (Garfinkel, 1968: VIII, cf. also Maynard and Wilson, 1980).

Social reification

“Western Marxism” combines Marx’s analyses with those of Hegel, Simmel, and Weber (Habermas, TPF II: 165–236; Anderson, 1976; Merquior, 1986 and Jay,

1984a). The “holy book” of this important intellectual tradition is Georg Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, in which the concept of reification is used extensively to criticize the alienating autonomization of the social system, either as a social fact, or an ideological fact. The critique of social reification is dialectical and therefore somewhat paradoxical: by insisting on the autonomy of the object, it seeks to reactivate the subject’s autonomy. This dialectical maneuver is only possible if one presupposes that the object is a subject or, in other words, that the object is an exteriorized product of the subject. The Hegelian metaphor of the differentiation and inversion of subject and object is thus the “grammatical grounding” for the critique of reification (Gouldner, 1985: ch. 9). Once this is clear, the critique of reification offers a transformatory critique that seeks to invert the inversion of subject and object. To paraphrase Freud: where the object once was, the subject must arise.

When thought through to its logical conclusion, reification theory leads to a model of a fully administered society (*total verwaltete Gesellschaft*) without meaning or freedom. In a reconstruction of a “perfect” theory of reification, three distinct analytical levels are systematically integrated: the foundational level of social critique (a) and two further levels of ideological critique, the first related to pre-reflexive false consciousness (b), and the second to reflexive false consciousness (c) of the analyst who duplicated the *doxa* of everyday life.

(a) *The social critique*

Social reification is concerned with the relatively autonomous, alienated, and alienating functioning of systems of culture and modern society, as well as their transformation of means to ends in themselves. While the worlds of culture and society, institutions and organizations, are human objectifications, products of their *praxis*, these worlds inevitably become increasingly complex in the course of their development. They are rationalized formally and functionally to the point where they transmute into a veritable cosmos that functions independently from the will and intentions of individuals, confounding their plans and designs, threatening their autonomy, and even their very existence. Bureaucracy is the classic example of the inversion of means into ends; more dramatically, the vicious circles of “institutional counter-productivity” that Ivan Illich denounced throughout his career, illustrate the same problem. Beyond certain critical thresholds of development, production becomes an obstacle to the objectives it supposedly serves: medicine destroys health, school makes students stupid, transport immobilizes, and communication makes people deaf and dumb.

In this analysis I systematically review the development of the theory of reification, following the chronological thread from Lukács’ first major synthesis of German sociology to Habermas’ second major synthesis of Lukács and the Frankfurt School. To resume the argument that follows most succinctly, in the tradition of Western Marxism, which culminates in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Simmel’s theory of the tragedy of culture and Weber’s theory of formal rationalization will be reviewed and reconnected to the Marxist theory of alienation. From this perspective, capitalism and formal rationalization enter into

an alliance, mutually reinforcing each other to the point that they eventually form a systemic infra-structural complex that affects all spheres of culture. Culture then becomes nothing more than a passive epiphenomenon of the formally rationalized infrastructure of capitalist society. Since it is entirely determined, it no longer determines; it merely reflects the base, thereby reinforcing it. Faced with these monolithic systemic systems, the individual disappears. The powerless individual is reduced to the role of support (*Träger*) for the structure, and loses all his transformatory powers. Activated by external forces, he is a simple functioning function; deactivated, he is reduced to a passive spectator of the objective enormity that oppresses him. He maintains and reproduces the alienated/alienating functioning of reified social structures through continued passive activity.

(b) *The critique of false consciousness*

The alienated subject is powerless (“loss of freedom”), but furthermore, he does not understand the meaning of everything going on over and around him (“loss of meaning”). Within his conscience, the autonomous functioning of socio-cultural structures appear as a natural and eternal, inhuman and unchangeable, phenomenon. He is unable to go beyond immediate appearances to understand the dialectical relations under the surface of things; he is unable to mediatize social facts by placing and interpreting them in the framework of a socio-historical totality (*das Wahre ist das Ganze*), which means that they become fetishized, fixed, and frozen in their facticity and “pseudo-concrete” immutability (Kosic, 1976, ch. 3). Stuck in an illusion of immediacy, the alienated subject normalizes, legitimizes and reinforces the alienating/alienated functioning of reified/reifying social structures. In this situation, the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism is adopted, generalized and connected to the Hegelian theory of “positivity,” forming a theory of ideology and “false consciousness.” When they are brought together, the theory of reification as social fact and the theory of reified conscience logically lead to the observation (in Frankfurt) of total reification: inevitably, the reified world appears as the only possible world.

This is the point where critical theory intervenes. By illuminating the objective mechanisms of domination and revealing the social basis of reification, it tries to provoke an awareness of the pseudo-natural character of the alienated functioning of social structures. Since the goal of criticism is to stimulate voluntarism and emancipation, it is somewhat paradoxical that it believes it can achieve this by emphasizing determinism and domination. It can only adopt this approach, however, because it presupposes that domination is the result of social action and that action always underlies domination. To paraphrase Sartre, reification is other people.

(c) *The critique of science*

Moving from the critique of the natural attitude (the *doxa*) of the everyday world to a reflexive scientific attitude, and specifically to the “scientific scientist” (Marx) who applies the methods of the natural sciences directly to the social, it could be said that, given the lack of a critical conscience regarding the ideological effects of

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