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# Reification and the Critical Theory of Contemporary Society

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Chris O’Kane, *University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA*

## ABSTRACT

This article concerns how a critical theory of reification should be conceptualized to grasp the 2007 crisis, state-imposed austerity, and the rise of right-wing authoritarian populism. It argues that Jürgen Habermas’s, Axel Honneth’s, and Georg Lukacs’s interpretations of reification cannot provide a theoretical framework for a critical social theory of these developments due to their inadequate theories of domination, crises, character formation, and historical development. It then outlines a critical theory of reification that draws on Max Horkheimer’s notion of reified authority and contemporary Marxian critical theory’s interpretation of the critique of political economy to conceive of domination, crises, and character formation as inherent to the reproduction of capitalist society, which is characterized by a process of historical development that drives humanity into new types of barbarism. It concludes by indicating how such an approach, in contrast to Habermas’s, Honneth’s, and Lukács’s theories, provides a conception of reification that can grasp our present moment.

Reification is a, if not the, core concept in Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Across “generations” and theoretical perspectives, thinkers associated with this tradition have developed different interpretations of reification to criticize different notions of domination and crises from different emancipatory perspectives. The 2007 financial crisis, state-imposed austerity, and the popular embrace of right-wing authoritarianism calls for the development of an interpretation of reification that can grasp these harrowing developments. Yet surprisingly one has not yet been developed.

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Reification has certainly been of renewed interest in contemporary critical theory during this time thanks to an interpretation developed by the leading “third generation” theorist, Axel Honneth. However, rather than addressing these developments, Honneth’s influential “new look” at this “old idea” through the lens of recognition theory further developed Jürgen Habermas’s interpretation of reification—that is to say, in the context of a theory that reconstructed the progressive realization of freedom in the differentiated spheres of the market, state, and family. Many scholars engaged with Honneth’s theory.<sup>1</sup> Some of his critics called for or developed a contemporary neo-Lukácsian theory of reification that addressed the perceived gaps and insufficiencies in Honneth’s reformulation.<sup>2</sup>

Notably missing from this discourse have been: (1) attempts to identify Horkheimer’s unique interpretation of reification as a critical social theory that explains the barbaric developmental trajectory of capitalist society as a consequence of reified authority within the crisis-ridden dynamic of capital accumulation; (2) discussions of the interpretations of Marx’s theory of value as a theory of social domination, as developed by contemporary Marxian critical theory; and (3) a contemporary formulation of reification that draws together and supplements the former and the latter to critically grasp the regressive developments of our time.

1. See Timo Juetten, “What Is Reification? A Critique of Axel Honneth,” *Inquiry* 53, no. 3 (2010): 235–56; Christian Lotz, “Reification through Commodity Form or Technology? From Honneth back to Heidegger and Marx,” *Rethinking Marxism* 25, no. 2 (2013): 184–200; Chris Byron, “A Critique of Axel Honneth’s Theory of Reification,” *Logos* 14, nos. 2–3 (2015), <http://logosjournal.com/2015/byron-honneth/>; Michael J. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds., *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), and “Axel Honneth and Critical Theory,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O’Kane, vol. 1 (London: SAGE, 2018), 564–79.

2. See Andrew Feenberg, “Rethinking Reification,” in Bewes and Hall, *Georg Lukács*, 101–21; Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School* (New York: Verso, 2014); and Feenberg’s attempt to revitalize the philosophy of praxis in “Post-utopian Marxism: Lukács and the Dilemmas of Organization,” in *Confronting Mass Technology and Mass Democracy: Essays in Twentieth Century German Political and Social Thought*, ed. John McCormick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 45–69, and *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). See also Anita Chari, “Toward a Political Critique of Reification: Lukács, Honneth and the Aims of Critical Theory,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 5 (2010): 587–606, and *A Political Economy of the Senses: Neoliberalism, Reification, Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Michael J. Thompson, “Reification, Value and Norms: Toward a Critical Theory of Consciousness,” in *Confronting Reification: Revitalizing Georg Lukács’s Thought in Late Capitalism*, ed. Greg Smulewicz-Zucker (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 67–90, and “Reification and the Web of Norms: Toward a Critical Theory of Consciousness,” *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 3, no. 3 (2019): 5–35; and Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács’s Philosophy of Praxis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). For an account that tries to bring together Honneth and Lukács’s theory, see David Schafer, “Pathologies of Freedom: Axel Honneth’s Unofficial Theory of Reification,” *Constellations* 25 (2017): 421–31.

I provide a metatheoretical engagement with these conceptions of reification in order to assess their suitability for a critical theory of these regressive developments. I argue that Habermas's, Honneth's, and Georg Lukács's approaches to reification offer inadequate critical theories of domination, crises, and character formation and thus do not provide an adequate theoretical framework for such a critical social theory. This, as I further argue, is because their approaches are based on traditional theoretical presuppositions.<sup>3</sup> They attribute reification and crises to processes of disembedding created by the progressive historical development of modern society.<sup>4</sup> Reification and crises are thus conceived as pathologies of irrational miscoordination among the spheres of modern society that can be remedied by the state's ordering these spheres on the basis of a rational subjectivity immanent to society that is neither shaped nor compelled by reification or crises. Hence domination, crises, and character formation, when addressed at all, are treated in a foreshortened manner and are incidental to their theories of society and historical development.

I outline a new reading of the critical theory of reification that draws together the insights of Max Horkheimer's notion of reified authority and contemporary Marxian critical theory's interpretation of the critique of political economy. This critical theory of reification provides an account of how the organization of the capitalist social form is realized in the crisis-ridden reified authority of capital accumulation. It likewise articulates how this dynamic mediates and is mediated by the spheres of the economy, state, and household. It also explains how individuals are compelled by and become reliant upon this process, leading to authoritarian character formation. Such a crisis-ridden process of domination is thus inherent to the reproduction of the negative totality<sup>5</sup> of capitalist society and is realized in

3. I define traditional theoretical presuppositions below.

4. See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), for a criticism of progress in Habermas and Honneth. See also John Abromeit, "Critical Theory and the Persistence of Right-Wing Populism," *Logos* 15, nos. 2–3 (2016), <http://logosjournal.com/2016/abromeit/>, for a perceptive criticism of how the assumption of progressive historical development hampers Habermas's ability to address right-wing populism and an indication of how early critical theory's conception of historical development, including Horkheimer's, provides a more promising orientation. I draw on and develop Abromeit's point in regard to Horkheimer's notion of reified authority in what follows.

5. As Heitmann and Blumenfeld show, the concept of totality entails "a whole that is more than the sum of its individual parts that stand *external to each other*; this whole, therefore, does not exist on its own *as such*, but rather subsists *in the parts*. Each moment can thus only be thought in its 'mediation' with all other moments of the 'totality.'" Lars Heitmann and Jacob Blumenfeld, "Society as 'Totality': On the Negative-Dialectical Presentation of Capitalist Socialization," in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O'Kane, vol. 2 (London: SAGE, 2018), 590. For Hegel the concept of "totality" belongs to a comprehensive "dialectical system of science." This "system" is conceived as the conceptual reconstruction of the self-actualization of 'absolute spirit' through various forms (591). Hegel conceives of this process of self-actualization to be synonymous with the realization of freedom. In

a historical trajectory that drives capitalist society into new types of barbarism. I conclude by indicating how such a critical theory of reification, in contrast to Habermas's, Honneth's, and Lukács's theories, can grasp the regressive developments of the past decade.

Section I of this article outlines Horkheimer's distinction between traditional and critical theory and provides an exegesis of his critical theory of reified authority. I then turn to the new critical theoretical reading of Marx, which rightly criticized Horkheimer's account of historical development and his interpretation of the critique of political economy but neglected his accounts of the family, culture, subjectivity, and historical trajectory. Finally, I indicate how this new critical reading has elaborated the distinction between traditional and critical theory in regard to Lukács and Habermas. Section II draws on and develops these criticisms to show how Habermas's, Honneth's, and Lukács's interpretations of reification were shaped by traditional theoretical presuppositions, leading to unsatisfactory critical theories of domination, crises, character formation, and historical development. Section III begins by evaluating these approaches to reification. It then draws Horkheimer, the new reading, and other contemporary Marxian critical theoretical approaches together to outline a new version of the critical theory of reified authority within capitalist society's negative totality. The conclusion indicates how this conception of reification, in contrast to Habermas's, Honneth's, and Lukács's approaches, can critically grasp the miserable regressive developments of today.

## I. HORKHEIMER'S CRITICAL THEORY OF SOCIETY

Max Horkheimer's writings from the 1930s laid out the fundamental distinction between traditional and critical theory. For Horkheimer traditional theory was a normative and diagnostic type of theory that proceeded from a rational standpoint within capitalist society, identifying and promoting its progressive tendencies while eliminating its abuses. Traditional theory thus advocated the implementation of policies that would purportedly lead to the progressive realization of freedom and human flourishing.

The aim of the critical theory of society, on the other hand, was "not simply to eliminate one or other abuse" by promoting progressive policies or the progressive

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*Philosophy of Right*, his reconstruction of this movement of "self-actualization" focuses on the development of the interrelated social spheres of modern society (the state, civil society, and the family) as subjective-objective expressions of the realization of freedom. The idea of negative totality inverts this Hegelian notion of society. The subjective-objective development of the interrelated spheres of modern society expresses and reproduces unfreedom.

rule of purportedly neutral institutions.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it regarded domination, crises, and human suffering as “necessarily connected with the way in which the social structure is organized.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than proceeding from the standpoint of normative rationality within such a society, the critical theory of society consisted in “the unfolding of a single existential judgment” against capitalist totality. Thus, rather than developing normative theories that would actualize the progressive realization of freedom within capitalist society via the harmonious rule of capitalist society’s neutral institutions, critical theory held that “the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.”<sup>8</sup> As this indicates, Horkheimer defined the object of critical theory—the dominating and crisis-ridden reproduction of the reified negative totality of bourgeois society—on the basis of his interpretation of Marx’s critique of political economy. Following his interpretation of Marx, Horkheimer holds that the “overall framework” of society is constituted and reproduced by the “blind interaction of individuals” whose “work and its results are alienated from them.” It thus possessed “a fate beyond man’s control.”<sup>9</sup>

From here, Horkheimer proceeds to articulate the compulsive, crisis-ridden dynamic of social reproduction through capital accumulation that compels the class relation. This “form of collaboration in society” creates an “alienated process” wherein “the exchange relationship . . . dominates social reality.” Individuals are compelled and conditioned to utilize their “powers” in accordance with the behavioral rationality of the imperative of accumulation.<sup>10</sup> On this basis, an antagonistic, crisis-ridden trajectory of reproduction unfolds. Productivity is rationalized through investment in the means of production and the displacement of the labor force. The dynamic of accumulation and reproduction, in turn, mediates “economic, political, and all other cultural fields.”<sup>11</sup>

As a result, “the critique of political economy comprehends the present form of society,” which for Horkheimer is characterized “by a real compulsiveness with

6. Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum), 206.

7. *Ibid.*, 206–7.

8. *Ibid.*, 227.

9. *Ibid.*, 204.

10. *Ibid.*, 200, 204.

11. Max Horkheimer, “On the Problem of Truth,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 205.

which the production and reproduction of human life goes on in this epoch, the autonomy which the economic forces have acquired in respect to humanity, the dependence of all social groups on the self-regulation of the economic apparatus." Consequently, "unemployment and economic crises" are an innate aspect of the "whole condition of the masses" due to the "circumstances of production which are no longer suitable for our time."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, as the postscript to Horkheimer's "Traditional and Critical Theory" makes clear, his initial formulation of the critical theory of society is concerned with the critique of the negative forms of social objectivity that are constituted and reproduced by the "organization" of capitalist society. Yet the critical theory of society is not totalizing or economicist. This is because the "economism to which the critical theory is often reduced does not consist in giving too much importance to the economy, but in giving it too narrow a scope."<sup>13</sup> The economic base does not determine the legal, political, and cultural superstructure. Rather, capital accumulation is a social process that mediates and is mediated by the semiautonomous spheres of the state and family. It dominates individuals and thus compels the reproduction of capitalist society. This means that "the economy is the first cause of wretchedness, and critique . . . must address itself primarily to it."<sup>14</sup> However, because this process of accumulation and reproduction comprises the negative totality of capitalist society, critical theory is "concerned with society as a whole."<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to traditional theory, the critical theory of society thus entails a critique that demonstrates how the organization of capitalist society is realized in the capitalist process of accumulation. This process mediates and is mediated by the semiautonomous spheres of society. It compels the actions of individuals within these spheres. As a result, humanity is driven into the crises and new barbarisms that are inherent to reproducing capitalist society.

#### A. HORKHEIMER'S CRITIQUE OF REIFIED AUTHORITY

In his essay "Authority and the Family," Horkheimer further develops these aspects of his critical theory of society in relation to his concept of "reified authority." Here, rather than a traditional theory premised on rational subjectivity, he argues that subjectivity is shaped by and reinforces the reified authority of capitalist totality. Hence "the relation of individuals to authority is determined by the special character of the work process in modern times and gives rise, in turn, to a lasting collaboration

12. *Ibid.*, 213.

13. Max Horkheimer, "Postscript," in *Critical Theory*, 249.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

of social institutions in producing and consolidating the character types which correspond to this relationship.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, in further contrast to traditional theory, Horkheimer argued that

to understand why a society functions in a certain way, why it is stable or dissolves, demands therefore a knowledge of the contemporary psychic make-up of men in various social groups. This in turn requires a knowledge of how their character has been formed in interaction with all the shaping cultural forces of the time. To regard the economic process as a determining ground of events means that one considers all other spheres of social life in their changing relationships to it and that one conceives this process itself not in its isolated mechanical form but in connection with the specific capabilities and dispositions of men, which have, of course, been developed by the economic process itself.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, “Insofar as the continuance of all social forms goes, the dominant force is not insight but human patterns of reaction which have become stabilized in interaction with a system of cultural formations on the basis of the social life-process. Among these patterns of reaction is the conscious and unconscious capacity, which conditions the individual at every step to conform and to subordinate himself; the ability to accept existing conditions in one’s thought and action, to live in dependence on a pregiven order of things and on an alien will.”<sup>18</sup> This notion of the reciprocal relationship between the organization of capitalist society, character formation, and the reproduction of capitalist society is articulated in Horkheimer’s theory of reified authority.

Building on his interpretation of Marx, the organization of capitalist society is realized in the reified authority of the “alien will” of capital accumulation, which mediates and is mediated by the institutions of the society’s semiautonomous spheres. It likewise cultivates character types that are powerless against this process and reliant upon it, leading them to conform with this dynamic. The domination and crises inherent to capitalist society thus lead to the reproduction of capitalist society. This theory can be reconstructed by first turning to Horkheimer’s account of capitalist society’s organization.

In capitalist society, there is “one social fact the acceptance of which as natural most immediately sanctions the existing relations of dependence, and that is the

16. Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” in *Critical Theory*, 97.

17. *Ibid.*, 54.

18. *Ibid.*, 67.

distinction of property.”<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, the “poor man must work hard to live,” and “the free sale of his powers of work is the condition for the growth in power of the overlords.”<sup>20</sup> Yet this relationship is not one of personal domination, nor of conscious design, nor of free will. Rather, the organization of capitalist society entails that the “new and powerful authority” of the “alien will” of capital “has come into being,” which “ultimately makes decisions on the fate of men.”<sup>21</sup> Individuals on either side of the class relation thus “experience social reality as a superordinate but blind power.” Their relationships to other men are “ruled by a faceless economic necessity.” Individuals (ranging from “leaders” to “members of the population”) thus “experience society as a self-contained and alien principle and freedom for them essentially means that they can adapt themselves to this reality by active or passive means.”<sup>22</sup> From this it follows that the authority of the alien will of capital accumulation is “the ground for a blind and slavish submission which originates subjectively in psychic inertia and inability to make one’s own decisions and which contributes objectively to the continuation of constraining and unworthy conditions of life.”<sup>23</sup>

This dynamic of reified authority characterizes capitalist production. For capitalists it is not, then, “their boasted inner decisions that motivates the apparently free entrepreneurs but a soulless economic dynamism, and they have no way of opposing this state of affairs except by surrendering their very existence.”<sup>24</sup> Hence “in decisions over the fate of men . . . caprice has been replaced not by freedom but by blind economic necessity, an anonymous god who enslaves man and is invoked by those who have no power over him but have received advantages from him.” This “dependence of the entrepreneur arising out of the irrational character of the economic process, moreover, is manifested in a helplessness before deepening crises and universal perplexity among the leaders of the economy.”<sup>25</sup> On the other side of the capital relation, workers are likewise powerless and also comport themselves in accordance with the alien will of economic necessity. By “acknowledging the economic facts” that they have to work to survive, they “in practice acknowledge the power and the authority of the owner.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as “the structural reserve army of industry swells” in response to the crisis-ridden dynamic of accumulation, this does

19. *Ibid.*, 92.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 82.

22. *Ibid.*, 81.

23. *Ibid.*, 71.

24. *Ibid.*, 82.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 86.

not lead workers to develop class consciousness. Rather, “to the extent that he belongs to the bourgeois authority-oriented type,” they “regard work as a great benefit and privilege.”<sup>27</sup> Thus “authority relations between classes . . . consists in the fact that men regard economic data (for example, the subjective valuations of goods, prices, legal forms, property relations) as immediate or natural facts, and think they are adapting themselves to such facts when they submit to the authority relationship.”<sup>28</sup> These “authority relations” are thus established by the reified authority of capital accumulation. Individuals on each side of the class relation, who are powerless and reliant on this alien will, are compelled to adapt to such an antagonistic, dominating, and crisis-prone dynamic. This leads to the reproduction of these reified conditions.

Since the other spheres of capitalist society are mediated by and mediate this dynamic of accumulation and reproduction, they are likewise inherent to the critical theory of the reified authority of capitalist society. The dependence of the political sphere on the economy is likewise an object of critical theory, because “the external circumstances of having property gives a man power to dispose of others” and “reduces to secondary rank all the other valuational norms which currently play a role in public life.”<sup>29</sup> The authority of the capitalist state, in protecting and codifying private property, thus “forces” people “to submit to the real authority [of the alien will of capital] and takes all decisions out of their hands.”<sup>30</sup> Cultural institutions naturalize these social conditions. Finally, the reified authority of accumulation and reproduction mediates and is mediated by the family. The family “sees to it that the kind of human character emerges which social life requires, and gives this human being in great measure the indispensable adaptability for a specific authority-oriented conduct on which the existence of the bourgeois order largely depends.”<sup>31</sup> This is because “the impulse of submission . . . is not a timeless drive, but a phenomenon emerging essentially from the limited bourgeois family.”<sup>32</sup> The patriarchal father socializes his children to view money as an authoritative natural entity that they must act rationally to obtain in accordance with their class position. His discipline socializes them to be compliant to authority. Education provides children with the skills needed to survive, according to their class position.

The end result is that for Horkheimer, the “fullest possible adaptation of the subject to the reified authority of the economy is the form that reason really takes in

27. *Ibid.*, 92.

28. *Ibid.*, 89.

29. *Ibid.*, 95.

30. *Ibid.*, 96.

31. *Ibid.*, 98.

32. *Ibid.*, 111.

bourgeois society. . . . This is why not only the upper middle classes but many groups of workers and employees yield ever new generations of people who do not question the structure of the economic and social system." Instead, individuals with "authority-oriented characters" "accept it as natural and permanent" and strive to better themselves within it. These individuals thus repress and sublimate the cause of suffering. They attribute it to individual moral failings and hold themselves responsible for their own unsatisfactory lot in life. They also allow their "dissatisfaction and rebellion to be turned into effective forces for the prevailing order."<sup>33</sup>

Horkheimer's notion of reified authority thus corresponds to his critical theory of society and stands in contrast to traditional theory. Such a critical theory articulates a critique of how the organization of capitalist society constitutes the alien process of capital accumulation and reproduction. Accumulation possesses a reified, crisis-ridden authority that mediates and is mediated by the institutions and individuals within the semiautonomous spheres of capitalist society. This in turn cultivates authority-oriented character types that are powerless, are reliant upon, and conform with this process. As a consequence the dominating and crisis-ridden character of capitalist society is reproduced, leading to new forms of barbarism.

Horkheimer's overlooked critical theory of reified authority thus provides a promising orientation for a contemporary critical theory of reification. But it is not without its flaws. In the first place, as Helmut Reichelt states, Horkheimer's reconstruction of the critique of political economy is fragmentary.<sup>34</sup> This is likewise the case for Horkheimer's articulation of accumulation and reproduction qua the economy, the state, and his conflation of the family and the household. Finally, as Moishe Postone has shown, the barbarous historical trajectory Horkheimer developed was likewise flawed: Horkheimer turned against his own theoretical insights to provide the unsatisfactory theory of authoritarian state capitalism in which the market and crises had been abolished.<sup>35</sup>

## B. THE NEW READING OF MARX

Despite their criticisms of Horkheimer, this "subterranean strand" of critical theory,<sup>36</sup> which developed in the shadow of Habermasian critical theory, sought to develop the critique of political economy articulated in early critical theory rather than to break from it (as Habermasian critical theory did). It did so by developing interpretations

33. *Ibid.*, 108.

34. Helmut Reichelt, "From the Frankfurt School to Value-Form Analysis," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 4 (1982): 166–69.

35. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 3.

36. Chris O'Kane, "On the Development of the Critique of Political Economy as a Critical Social Theory of Economic Objectivity," *Historical Materialism* 26, no. 1 (2018): 175–93.

of reification based on rigorous reconstructions of Marx's theory of value. Reichelt endeavored to provide a sounder basis for Horkheimer's (and Adorno's) notion of reification by developing a systematic interpretation of the critique of political economy. Reichelt reconstructed Marx's monetary theory of value as a critique of the social constitution of capital, describing it as an inverted supra-individual and super-sensible form that dominates the sensible world and compels the capital relation to reproduce capital. In this way, he developed Horkheimer's account of exchange's mediation of the process of accumulation and reproduction.<sup>37</sup> Simon Clarke developed a critical theory of the negative totality of capitalist political economy. Clarke employed the notion of capitalist social form in tandem with an expansive interpretation of Marx's theory of value to critique the crisis-ridden process of accumulation by which the internal relation between the capitalist economy and state is mediated.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Postone developed an interpretation of Marx as a critic of the historically specific contradictory and dominating reified dynamic of labor from the perspective of its emancipatory abolition.<sup>39</sup>

These thinkers made important contributions, but their critical theories neglected Horkheimer's account of how the family, culture, and character formation are likewise inherent to accumulation and reproduction. Nor did they indicate how these elements contribute to a regressive historical trajectory. They did, however, further develop Horkheimer's distinction between traditional and critical theory. In opposition to their interpretations of Marx, these figures argued that Lukács, Horkheimer, and Habermas had what can be characterized as traditional theories.

Reichelt showed how Habermas's interpretation of Marx was reflected in the traditional theoretical premises of his reformulation of critical theory, which conceived of money and the state as neutral mediums and replaced a notion of class antagonism with intersubjectivity.<sup>40</sup> Clarke argued that "Western Marxist" social theories are premised on classical political economy and Weberian and Parsonian sociology. Following Horkheimer, these can be said to be traditional theories insofar as they assume that their theoretical frameworks apprehend the normative and diagnostic principles of reason, disclosing how social maladies are caused by the improper

37. See Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1972). See also "Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx's Conception of Social Reality," in *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 31–67.

38. See Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), and *Keynesianism, Monetarism and the Crisis of the State* (London: Elgar, 1988).

39. See Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*.

40. Helmut Reichelt, "Jürgen Habermas' Reconstruction of Historical Materialism," in *The Politics of Change: Globalization, Ideology, and Critique*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 105–45.

ordering of the neutral institutions of capitalist society. These principles also apprehend a remedy: institutional conduct should be reordered so that it corresponds to these principles, thereby promoting the social harmony inherent in capitalist society.<sup>41</sup> Clarke further argued that these traditions are grounded on a number of unsubstantiated dualisms—such as the system and the lifeworld—that sunder the institutions of capitalist society from their historically specific social form. These social theories consequently naturalize the institutions of capitalist society, cannot account for their own foundational dualisms, and thus fail to grasp the constitution and reproduction of capitalist society. Clarke brought these criticisms to bear on Lukács's theory of reification, the Horkheimer of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and (in passing) Habermas.

Postone clarified how the predominant interpretations of Marx were traditional theories. Mirroring Horkheimer, Reichelt, and Clarke, he argued that traditional Marxism offers a critique of capitalism from within capitalist society. In such traditional theories, the progressive, normative, and diagnostic framework is tied to the standpoint of labor. Labor is conceived of as a transhistorical technical process without *social form* that lies at the “heart of social life.”<sup>42</sup> Class domination is seen as extrinsic to it. Capitalism is thus conceived as an exploitative and unequal mode of distribution. Communism, in turn, is conceptualized as state-directed central planning of the distribution of labor from the standpoint of labor. Postone argued that Lukács's and Horkheimer's theories were shaped by these traditional Marxist presuppositions. He also argued that in Habermas's theory, these presuppositions were reflected in the critique of the system from the standpoint of the lifeworld.

I now bring together and develop these criticisms of Habermas and apply them to Axel Honneth and then to Lukács. I show how the traditional theoretical presuppositions that underlie their interpretations of reification lead to unsatisfactory theories of domination, crisis, character formation, and historical development. I then compare these approaches to reification to Horkheimer's and contemporary Marxian critical theory and move to outline a new reading of the critical theory of reified authority.

## II. TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF REIFICATION

### A. HABERMASIAN CRITICAL THEORY

Habermas's reformulation of reification was articulated as part of his new approach to critical theory. Habermas justified his reinterpretation by contending that

41. Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*.

42. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 7.

Horkheimer's (and Adorno's) critical theory lacked a sufficient normative standpoint and possessed a totalizing one-dimensional social theory. Habermas argued that Horkheimer's critical theory rested on the "production paradigm," what he saw as the reductive Hegelian-Marxian notion of society as an expressive totality created by labor. The theory of communicative action that Habermas developed was intended to redress this perceived weakness.

At the heart of Habermas's new approach were his distinctions between the system and the lifeworld and a philosophical history of the progressive evolution of modern society. The system, consisting of the norm-free and differentiated institutions of the market and the state, were held to be necessary elements of any advanced society. The lifeworld, the realm of communicative reason, provided Habermas with the sufficient normative standpoint that he held was lacking in Horkheimer's (and Adorno's) critical theory. As a whole, this social theory was said to provide a notion of society as one of "complex differentiation" rather than "one-dimensionality."<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, Habermas recast reification on the basis of what Jeanne Schuler refers to as "demarcationism."<sup>44</sup> In Habermas's reinterpretation, reification stems from a process of disembedding created by the progressive historical development of complex modern societies. This development of modernity has caused the necessary, norm-free, and differentiated institutions of the system (the market and the state) to become decoupled from the lifeworld. Due to their unmooring from democratic reason, the neutral steering mechanisms of money and power have functioned as the primary means of social coordination. They have consequently tended to overstep their bounds, colonizing the lifeworld and leading to specific kinds of economic crises and particular kinds of reification.

More important for Habermas, in these instances of social pathology, communicative reason is rendered powerless, undermining political will formation and democracy. The governments and laws that enabled colonization are thus illegitimate. Reification and crises can and should be remedied by instituting the normative functional standards of legitimate governance on the basis of communicative reason. This should be enacted by a constitution that establishes the state as a transmission belt between the lifeworld and the system. On this basis, law will act as a democratic steering

43. See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon, 1984, 1987), particularly chaps. 4, 6, and 8; "Excursus on the Obsolescence of the Production Paradigm and the Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 75–83; and *Legitimation Crisis* (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1976).

44. Jeanne Schuler, "The Legend of Hegel's Labor Theory of Reason," *Social Philosophy Today* 14 (1998): 301–16.

mechanism, simultaneously keeping the state and the economy within their prescribed functional spheres. Crises would thus be prevented and reification overcome by a democratic state that realizes freedom.

Habermas thus developed a distinctly new conception of critical theory. In this theory, reification and crises are not conceived as inherent to the capitalist social form. Rather they are instances of institutional overreach that stem from a lack of democratic coordination of the spheres of modern society, an overreach that is caused by a process of decoupling that arises from the progressive evolution of advanced society. These social pathologies can be remedied by the state's enacting and enforcing laws of social harmony on the basis of the normative rational principles of the lifeworld. In contrast to Horkheimer's critical theory, domination and crisis do not issue from the structure of society, nor do they render individuals powerless or shape subjectivity, leading to the reproduction of such a society. The history of capitalist society does not necessarily unfold in a barbarous trajectory. Rather reification and crises are incidental to the realization of freedom and the further progressive development of the history inherent in such a modern and contemporary society. Habermasian critical theory is thus a traditional theory.

#### B. HONNETH

Despite the claim that he is providing a new look at Lukács's old idea, Honneth's "new" interpretation of reification rests on these Habermasian presuppositions. This leads Honneth to make a number of moves and distinct interpretations that eradicate totality and Marx's critique of value from Lukács's theory. They are replaced by a demarcationist interpretation of reification that pertains to the deformation of intersubjective relations of recognition by the intrusion of instrumental reason into the realm of intersubjectivity.

The Habermasian assumptions of complex differentiation thus justify Honneth's criticism of Lukács's "Marxist premise": that "involvement in economic exchange processes is assumed to have such a profound significance for individuals that it engenders a permanent change, or even a total disruption, of their entire set of relations toward themselves and the world."<sup>45</sup> In Honneth's view, not only is Marx's theory of commodity fetishism concerned with the narrow focus of the economic sphere;<sup>46</sup> it is not even appropriate there. Instead, following Habermas, Honneth holds that the instrumental relations that obtain within the economic sphere are neutral, legitimate, and indeed requisite in highly developed societies.

45. Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 28.

46. *Ibid.*, 23.

This leads Honneth to normatively separate the necessary neutral realm of the economic sphere from the domain of intersubjective reason, thereby enabling him to treat reification as a distorted form of intersubjectivity. Honneth begins by arguing that Lukács replaces the “official” “functionalist” Marxist basis of reification a few pages into the essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” with a Weberian account of rationalization.<sup>47</sup> Following his Habermasian presuppositions, Honneth then asserts that Lukács’s explanatory use of Marx and Weber is not tenable outside the sphere of commodity exchange. According to Honneth, if reification “solely denotes an occurrence in which all elements of a social situation get redefined as economically calculable factors,” these sphere-specific norms render Lukács’s adaptation of Marx and Weber insufficient for justifying the idea of reification as a second nature that encompasses para-economic realms.<sup>48</sup> This leads Honneth to argue that Lukács’s conceptual shift of perspective toward “transformations occurring in the subject’s own style of acting” provides a “more appropriate basis” for second nature.<sup>49</sup> This is because “the concepts of contemplation and detachment become essential to the explanation of what takes place in the modus of reification at the level of social agency.”<sup>50</sup>

On this basis, Honneth argues that reification can be diagnosed as a social pathology. The intrusion of instrumental reason into the realm of intersubjectivity has “atrophied or distorted . . . a more primordial and genuine form of praxis, in which humans take up an empathetic and engaged relationship toward themselves and their surroundings.”<sup>51</sup> The result is malformed relations of misrecognition in which individuals treat each other as things. For Honneth, reification thus “signifies a habit of thought, a habitually ossified perspective, which, when taken up by the subject, leads not only to the loss of her capacity for empathetic engagement, but also to the world’s loss of its qualitatively disclosed character.”<sup>52</sup> From this it follows that the remedy for reification is a type of intersubjective recognition that restores such an empathetic and engaged relationship in this realm.

Honneth’s later work *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* develops the social theoretical framework, diagnosis, and remedy that is implicit in his reformulation of reification.<sup>53</sup> In *Freedom’s Right* Honneth provides a normative

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 24.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., 27.

52. Ibid., 35.

53. Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). David Schafer perceptively argues that *Freedom’s Right* entails an “unofficial theory of

reconstruction of the progressive actualization of freedom within and between the social spheres of complex modern society: the market, state, and family. Here he utilizes the terminology of “social pathology” and “misdevelopment” in place of reification.<sup>54</sup> Yet these conceptualizations reflect the same underlying Habermasian presuppositions: “social pathology” denotes instances of instrumental misrecognition within these spheres; “misdevelopment” describes instances when the action that is appropriate in one sphere colonizes another. Mirroring Honneth’s (and Habermas’s) idea of reification, these pathologies arise when sphere-specific types of social action have become detached from their norms by the historical development of modern society, leading them to overstep their demarcated zones and colonize other areas of society. Misdevelopment, in turn, has likewise been caused by this same historical process, which has led to action in particular spheres becoming unmoored from their inherent norms. However, pathologies and misdevelopment have been and will continue to be remedied by the historical realization of a democratic state that serves as a “coordinating mechanism” or “steering authority,” establishing boundaries between these spheres on the normative bases of complex differentiation via the freedom-realizing capacities of law while also assuring that the norms of recognition within each sphere are codified into laws.<sup>55</sup>

Such a social theory likewise imbues *The Idea of Socialism*, in which Honneth seeks to “renew” the titular idea by separating it from Marx and “industrialism.”<sup>56</sup> In place of the emancipatory abolition of the capitalist division of labor, let alone capitalist society, Honneth argues for the preservation and social democratic ordering of the spheres of modern complex society. As in *Freedom’s Right*, this will occur via the state at the behest of the will formation of the political sphere.<sup>57</sup> According to Honneth, this harmonious arrangement of the neutral institutions of modern society will lead to the further progressive development of history and the realization of social freedom.

As can be seen, Habermasian presuppositions thus underlie and inform Honneth’s reinterpretation of reification. These presuppositions provide justification for jettisoning Marx’s theory of value and Lukács’s theory of totality. They likewise ground Honneth’s separation of the pathological intrusion of instrumental rationality into

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reification” that Honneth developed in his response to the criticisms of his “new idea of reification.” Schafer, “Pathologies of Freedom.” I agree with Schafer that this work continues to develop Honneth’s notion of reification. We disagree in terms of how we construe the continuity and efficacy of the development of Honneth’s ideas.

54. Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*.

55. *Ibid.* See particularly chap. 6.3.

56. Axel Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

57. *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

the realm of intersubjectivity from the economic sphere of instrumental action, which is deemed necessary for any sort of contemporary society. Consequently, Honneth reformulates reification along “unofficial” lines as a pathological disequilibrium. Stemming from the lack of democratic mediation, instrumental reason is disembedded, colonizing the realms of intersubjective reason. This induces detachment and misrecognition rather than domination and authoritarian character formation. Honneth’s critique of reification thus passes in silence over the reified form of social reproduction, crises, and domination.<sup>58</sup>

These issues are compounded in *Freedom’s Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*. In these works Honneth mirrors Habermas in diagnosing reification and crises as instances of miscoordination between and within the spheres of the neutral institutions of modern society, due to a lack of rational coordination. This is caused by a process of disembedding generated by the progressive development of modern society. These pathologies and misdevelopments must be remedied between these spheres by the rule of the democratic state on the basis of an inherent form of subjectivity that is not dominated or maimed by these misdevelopments. Once again domination and crises are not inherent to the organization of society, nor do they maim subjectivity. Rather they are mere misdevelopments incidental to the further progressive historical realization of freedom in complex modern societies. Like Habermas, Honneth reformulates reification within a traditional theory of society.

### C. LUKÁCS

Honneth’s reformulation of reification was criticized by a number of perceptive scholars such as Andrew Feenberg, Anita Chari, and Michael J. Thompson. They argue that Lukács’s formulation of reification provides the building blocks for a contemporary critical theory of reification that is missing in Honneth’s work.<sup>59</sup> These scholars raise important points about Honneth’s lack of engagement with capitalism and other shortcomings of his theory of reification. They are also certainly right that Lukács’s theory of reification possesses more critical-theoretical potential for grasping our contemporary moment than does Honneth’s.<sup>60</sup> Lukács draws on Marx’s theory of value for a critique of reified capitalist totality that involves crises, domination, and subjectivity. Yet Lukács’s theory is still inadequate for a critical theory of reification: its traditional theoretical presuppositions ultimately lead to a fore-shortened critique of these phenomena.

58. See Honneth’s interpretation of Lukács along these very lines. *Ibid.*, 25.

59. See n. 2 above for references to their work.

60. Each of their theories likewise possesses its own insights, yet a discussion of them stands beyond the scope of this article.

In his essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács’s notion of crisis is explicated on the basis of the historical specificity of the capitalist division of labor. Here he draws on Marx’s theory of value. Lukács defines reification on the basis of his characterization of Marx’s fetish character of the commodities, in which “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.”<sup>61</sup> Due to “the growth of the modern process of labour, of the isolated, free labourer and the division of labour,” Lukács holds, “the commodity has become the universal category of society as whole,” assuming “decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it.”<sup>62</sup>

The central importance Lukács identifies in Marx’s analysis of the fetish character of commodities is that “because of this situation a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man.”<sup>63</sup> As a result, fetishism creates second nature. The account of second nature that Lukács develops on this basis is concerned not with the subjective stance of agents outside of the economic sphere to which Honneth refers but with accounting for the servitude such a second nature has created, which corresponds to the autonomy of the fetish character of the commodity. For it is by virtue of the reified structure of society—engendered by the “universality of the commodity form”—that an autonomous “world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market).”<sup>64</sup> For Lukács, second nature thus consists in “the laws governing these objects,” which “confront” individuals as “invisible forces that generate their own power,” compelling individuals within the class relation to follow these natural laws.<sup>65</sup>

However, as Honneth indicates, Lukács also discusses how Weberian rationalization and contemplative action correspond to these objective and subjective aspects of reification. Yet Honneth fails to note that what he terms Weberian aspects of reification correspond to the imperative of valorization within the class relation. This means, as Lukács indicates, that they are shaped by the dominating dynamic of second nature. Rationalization thus consists in calculating how to organize production

61. Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1968), 83.

62. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

63. *Ibid.*, 87.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

to generate profit. Contemplation entails the way producers respond to a process that operates according to “fixed laws . . . enacted independently of man’s consciousness and impervious to human intervention.”<sup>66</sup>

In addition, Honneth’s commentary neglects to mention that, following this discussion, Lukács provides a description of crises that corresponds to these Marxian elements of reification. In this discussion, crises arise from the autonomous and dominating aspects of second nature as they play themselves out across the spheres of production and exchange. Crises are then a “product of the activity of the different commodity owners acting independently of one another, i.e. a law of mutually interacting ‘coincidences’ rather than one of truly rational organisation.”<sup>67</sup> This means that the unconscious natural law governing this process is one of unconscious constitution, autonomization, and compulsion that replicates Lukács’s characterization of the fetish character of commodities.

Lukács provides an account of how and why such activity is realized in a dynamic that triggers crises by focusing on how this activity unfolds in the incongruity between rationalized production and the sphere of circulation in the capitalist division of labor. Here productivity is fully rationalized in accordance with the law of value; capitalists are compelled to compete in the accumulation of capital by introducing techniques that rationalize production, increasing productivity while depleting the workforce. But this process of rationalization is not coordinated between different competing capitalist firms, and the means of realizing the surplus value created in production is entirely contingent on purchase in the sphere of circulation. Consequently, “the whole structure of capitalist production rests on the interaction between a necessity subject to strict laws in all isolated phenomena and the relative irrationality of the total process,” which is “more than just a postulate, a presupposition essential to the workings of a capitalist economy. . . . It is at the same time the product of the capitalist division of labour.”<sup>68</sup> This means that “the true structure of society appears . . . in the independent, rationalised and formal partial laws whose links . . . as far as concrete realities are concerned . . . can only establish fortuitous connections.”<sup>69</sup> In “periods of crisis this incoherence becomes particularly egregious”: these formal links between the rationalized process of production and exchange “experience a sudden dislocation because the bonds uniting its various elements and partial systems are a chance affair even at their most normal.”<sup>70</sup>

66. *Ibid.*, 89.

67. *Ibid.*, 102.

68. *Ibid.*, 102–3.

69. *Ibid.*, 101.

70. *Ibid.*

As can be seen, Lukács's account of crisis thus pertains to the aspect of his theory of reification that Honneth's reformulation of reification eschews: the mediation of production and reproduction by the capitalist division of labor and the ensuing autonomous dynamic of accumulation, as described in Marx's critique of political economy. For Lukács, the separation of producers from the means of production and of production from the sphere of circulation characterizes capitalist society. It is the uncoordinated activity of production and exchange within these domains that constitutes the supra-individual, autonomous, and inverted dynamic wherein the natural laws of capitalist second nature compel the capitalist class to rationalize production, increasing mechanization and decreasing the workforce. This dynamic triggers a crisis when production cannot be realized in the sphere of exchange. Moreover, following the trajectory of this line of Lukács's theory would imply a critique of the reified form of production and reproduction that rests on the very same capitalist social division of labor. One can then see, as Chari and Thompson hold, why Lukács provides a more promising critical theoretical notion of reification than Honneth does.

However, as can also be seen, the critique of crisis as the reproduction of reified society is only fragmentary. In the first place, as I have indicated, this discussion of crisis only pertains to the relationship between production and exchange, not to the underlying organization of production. Second, Lukács does not mention the role that other institutions, such as the state or the family, play in such a process, nor its wider social ramifications outside these realms. Finally, even within the domain considered by Lukács, his theory leaves out an account of what triggers these crises. (Presumably he is relying on a notion of the anarchy of the market.) Consequently, taken as a whole, this fragmentary account of crisis does not amount to an account of reproduction or of the domination and misery inherent to such a process in capitalist societies.

This raises an additional point. As I have indicated, Lukács discusses how capitalists are compelled to rationalize production. Yet despite his discussion of proletarian compulsion in the beginning of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," he does not mention how the proletariat is compelled or affected by such a dynamic in regard to crisis. He considers neither (1) how the rationalization of production transforms the compulsion of proletarians to sell their labor power; nor (2) the miserable ramifications that rationalization and crises have upon proletarians' ability to reproduce themselves; nor (3) how proletarian subjectivity is shaped by these aspects of capitalist society.

Instead, Lukács's account of the role of the proletariat in crises draws from a brilliant array of perspectives to formulate his larger theory of the perpetuation of reified society, perspectives that ultimately undermine this notion of critique, domination,

crisis, and subjectivity. As Honneth indicates, the main trajectory of the argument in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” depicts the objective and subjective aspects of reified totality on the basis of different explanatory strategies and leads to a traditional Marxist social theory premised on the standpoint of the proletariat, which can only be summarized here in a schematic manner. Part 1 of the essay provides an account of the material aspects of reification that form the objectified relation of the object to bourgeois and proletarian subjects in social institutions such as the factory, the state, bureaucracy, marriage, and journalism and the corresponding subjectivities of instrumental reason, detachment, and passivity that Honneth draws on. Part 2 provides an account of how the standpoint of bourgeois philosophy is likewise reified because it is premised on the objectified relation of bourgeois subjects to this object. Part 3 discloses how the standpoint of the bourgeoisie as a whole mirrors that of bourgeois philosophy, which renders it incapable of grasping the production of totality and with it the cause of crises. The proletariat, in contrast, as the subject/object of history possesses a privileged epistemological standpoint that discloses that these diverse types of reification, and by extension crises, are all part of a totality that they constitute and that has become autonomous because it has become unmoored from their control. In so doing, they overcome their passivity, recognizing that their historical role is to seize this totality and thus to reunite subject and object, leading to the progressive realization of history.

This very same trajectory of Lukács’s argument accounts for the absence of the proletariat in his account of subjectivity and crisis, which ultimately undermines his critique of the reproduction of the crisis-ridden form of reified society. This is because it is essential for his account of crisis to contrast capitalist compulsion with proletarian passivity. For if the proletariat was likewise dominated, atomized, compelled, and shaped by the law of value and its crisis tendencies in such a fashion as to reproduce society, proletarians would not possess the standpoint that can grasp and then seize totality. Instead, their passivity, coupled with their privileged standpoint, sets up a conclusion that, in the end, goes against what Lukács’s foundational account of the capitalist social division of labor implies: that only its abolition will eradicate antagonism, autonomization, and crises. In accordance with his traditional theoretical conclusion, in contrast to the initial definition of the division of labor, it is sufficient for the proletariat to overcome their passivity and seize, rather than abolish, the reified institutions of capitalist society that they have created. Rather than abolishing the capitalist division of labor that characterizes capitalist society, in this view the rational coordination of production and distribution (presumably by proletarian state rule) will thus eradicate reification, autonomization, crises, and, by extension, capitalist society through the withering away of the state.

As Lukács's 1966 preface notes, *History and Class Consciousness* is "representative" of the "great crisis" in which it was composed.<sup>71</sup> However, the crisis that Lukács refers to is a crisis of classical Marxist notions of progressive historical development and revolutionary subjectivity in response to a purported final economic crisis. It is not a critique of the necessity of recurring social and economic crises, domination, and character formation or of barbarous developments that are generated by the organization of capitalist society. This means that in spite of the critical insights others have pointed to, Lukács's theory of reproduction in the context of crisis, which draws on Marx's critique of political economy, is incomplete. More important, it also means that this aspect of Lukács's theory is undermined and replaced by a traditional theoretical critique of capitalist society from the standpoint of labor. Here social crises and reification are types of misdistribution and exploitation extrinsic to the social form of capitalist society. They merely stem from the passive relation the proletarians take to the social structures they have created but their consciousness has not been maimed by. Yet this omission is necessary in order to provide the proletariat with an emancipatory standpoint. The ensuing progressive historical task of overcoming reification is achieved through their coming to revolutionary consciousness and their seizure of the state as the means to coordinate production and distribution. Such a revolution in Lukács's scheme overcomes the social pathology of reification in contemporary society through the coordination of society into a state of social harmony by the proletariat. Lukács solves the crisis of classical Marxism, but in doing so moves the initial critique of reified capitalist society to a critique internal to capitalist society from the reified standpoint of the proletariat. His critical theory of reification is thus replaced by a traditional theory that is parallel to Habermas's and Honneth's reformulations of reification.

### III. TOWARD A NEW READING OF THE CRITIQUE OF REIFIED AUTHORITY

#### A. ASSESSING APPROACHES TO REIFICATION

Despite different social theoretical frameworks, Habermas's, Honneth's, and Lukács's notions of reification share striking similarities. For all three, reification is a malign form of rationality that stems from the absence of the rational coordination of the neutral institutions of modern society in accord with the standpoint of its inherent rationality. These traditional presuppositions conceptualize historical development

71. Georg Lukács, preface to *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), xv.

as one of progress and conceptualize crises and domination as incidental to the form of society. Finally, in premising emancipation on the rational coordination of these institutions, they fail to provide an account of how subjectivity could be shaped and maimed by these very institutions, leading to the further development of barbarism rather than the realization of history. For these reasons theirs are traditional theories of reification that are ill-equipped to critique the regressive development of contemporary society.

This is not the case, as I have shown, for Horkheimer's critique of reified authority. Horkheimer's critical theory of reified authority entails a critique of how capitalist society's organization constitutes the alien process of capital accumulation and reproduction. Consequently, accumulation possesses a reified crisis-ridden authority that mediates and is mediated by the institutions of capitalist society and compels the actions of individuals within the semiautonomous spheres of capitalist society who are reliant upon it. This in turn cultivates authoritarian character types that conform with this dynamic. As a consequence, the dominating and crisis-ridden character of capitalist society is reproduced in a historical trajectory leading to new forms of barbarism. In contrast to Lukács's, Habermas's, and Honneth's notions of reification, Horkheimer offers a promising orientation for grasping these phenomena.

However, as I have argued, Horkheimer's interpretation of the critique of political economy and capitalist society is fragmentary, and his account of historical development is unsatisfactory. Yet, as I have also argued, Reichelt, Clarke, and Postone have effectively criticized and developed these shortcomings in Horkheimer's interpretation of the critique of political economy. Yet these theorists have refrained from accounting for how the family, household, culture, and character formation are implicated in the reproduction of capitalist society or in a barbarous historical trajectory that proceeds from all of these elements. This leads me to propose a new reading of the critical theory of reified authority, one that combines the insights of Horkheimer, Reichelt, Clarke, and Postone with those of Werner Bonefeld, as well as Kirstin Munro's critical theory of household production.<sup>72</sup>

## B. TOWARD A NEW READING

Horkheimer's notion that the critical theory of society is concerned with a critique of society as a whole insofar as the organization of capitalist society constitutes an alienated "fate beyond man's control" can be further developed by drawing together Marxian critical theories that conceptualize capitalist society as a historically specific social form. Rather than a transhistorical account of labor (which Postone criticizes

72. Kirstin Munro, "Social Reproduction Theory, Social Reproduction, and Household Production," *Science and Society* 83, no. 4 (2019): 451–68.

Horkheimer for offering), I argue that primitive accumulation led to the constitution of the capital relation (via the state-directed separation of people from the means of production, the creation of private property, and its monopolization by another group of individuals) and created the spheres of the capitalist economy and state. Such a notion can be extended, following Horkheimer, to account for the creation of capitalist family, household, culture, and subjectivity. We should conceive of spheres of the economy, state, and household as coextensive with the capitalist social form in what Bonefeld terms “unity in the form of disunity.”<sup>73</sup>

We can draw together the work of Postone, Reichelt, and Clarke with Horkheimer’s notion that accumulation is an alienated, crisis-ridden entity that dominates reality, one that compels individuals within the class relation. The reproduction of such a totality is mediated by the reified authority of capital accumulation. The historically specific social form of capitalist society can be said to be realized in the contradictory dynamic of abstract and concrete labor. Abstract labor necessarily appears in the money form, which itself is the means of capital accumulation toward which the capitalist production is oriented. Consequently, the capitalist class is merely capital personified: capitalists are compelled to generate profit and thus compete against each other to sell more commodities on the market and generate more surplus value by organizing production so that workers become fragments of machines. Workers are likewise personifications, compelled to compete against each other to sell their labor power to be exploited in exchange for a wage that provides them with the means to survive. To be a worker is thus not a stroke of luck, nor the standpoint of the critique of reified totality, but, as Marx insisted, a “great misfortune.”<sup>74</sup>

As Simon Clarke argues, this process of accumulation and reproduction dominates capitalists and workers, drives their antagonism, and is crisis-ridden. Capitalist production develops the “productive forces without limit”; yet the ability to sell products is ultimately dependent on the market. Individual capitalists try to maximize their profits by opening up “new markets by commercial expansion and by displacing backward forms of production.” They likewise try “to reduce costs by lengthening the working day, forcing down wages, intensifying labour and, above all, by transforming methods of production.” This dynamic has underlain the tendency for “capital, from its earliest stages, to develop the world market and to generalize capitalist social relations of production on global scale.” It is realized in “the tendency to the global overaccumulation and uneven development of capital, as the development of social production confronts the limits of its capitalist form as production for profit” on the world market. Crucially, in Clarke’s interpretation, this tendency to overaccumulation

73. Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 64.

74. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: New Left Books, 1976), 644.

has a secular tendency that “appears in its most dramatic form” in the eruption of a “generalised crisis of overproduction,” but it is also “the everyday reality of accumulation as the pressure of competition leads to an intensification of class struggle, the devaluation of backward capital, the destruction of production capacity and the displacement of labour.”<sup>75</sup>

This dominating, antagonistic, and crisis-ridden dynamic mediates and is mediated by the form of the state, which is separate from yet interrelated to the economy by virtue of its separation. Following Clarke, Johannes Agnoli, and Bonefeld (and in marked contrast to Habermas and Honneth), the capitalist state can be said to mediate accumulation and contribute to the reproduction of capitalist society by means of its democratic constitution. The latter codifies and reinforces the separation of the economic and political spheres and thus “guarantees the predominance of the capitalist mode of production and, at the same time, satisfies the demand for mass political participation by the population.”<sup>76</sup> Consequently, the very neutral institutions that are meant to represent or implement the will of the people or be managed by the proletariat are the means by which the capitalist state secures the reproduction of the capitalist social form and the capitalist economy. This occurs through the legal enforcement of private property and through fiscal and monetary policies.

Moreover, the constitutional laws that simultaneously protect private property, contract, and civil rights decompose class relations and replace them with democratic relations of equal individual citizens in the public sphere. Consequently, class antagonism and anti-capitalist politics are displaced into the political sphere where different parties compete for the votes of citizens whom they ostensibly represent. The policies these parties support are themselves already limited by the constitution, which guarantees that “all opportunities, beyond the democratic virtue of ‘voting,’ of active meddling in politics are excluded from the ‘liberal democratic’ principles of government.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, as Horkheimer, states, the political sphere is an object of critical theory because it defends private property, takes decisions out of peoples’ hands, and thus forces them to submit to the power of capital.

In addition, Horkheimer’s statement that the family “sees to it that the kind of human character emerges which social life requires” can be developed by accounting for how the process of accumulation and reproduction mediates the household and the family. Here, as Kirstin Munro indicates, household production—whether it includes a nuclear family household, unrelated people cohabitating, or people who live

75. Simon Clarke, “The Global Accumulation of Capital and the Periodisation of the Capitalist State Form,” in *Open Marxism*, vol. 1, ed. Werner Bonefeld et al. (London: Pluto, 1992), 135.

76. Johannes Agnoli, “The Market, The State and the End of History,” in Bonefeld and Psychopedis, *Politics of Change*, 200.

77. *Ibid.*, 201.

by themselves—is mediated by and mediates the dynamics of accumulation. Precisely how production is carried out in households changes depending on the combination of inputs from commodities purchased with wages, unwaged labor, and state inputs. One output of these household production processes is the day-to-day reproduction of the commodity labor power. In households with children, another output of household production process is the intergenerational reproduction of the commodity labor power, raising a new generation of people.

On this basis, Horkheimer’s analysis might be adapted to argue that reified authority is instilled in those households by the very form of the household, compelling members to act in ways that assure their subsistence through both productive and reproductive labor. In households raising a new generation of people (adapting Horkheimer to a more flexible model of the family), children would then be socialized into viewing money as a natural entity that they must act rationally to obtain by performing a mixture of productive and reproductive labor dependent on whichever combination of the two comports with their role in reproducing totality. Moreover, it need no longer be the patriarchal father but may very well be single parents or both of the parents that discipline their children to be compliant with these different types of authority.

Given the rampant instrumentalization and commodification of cultural activity, Horkheimer’s point about how cultural institutions likewise socialize reified authority and naturalize capitalist society hardly needs theoretical development. This is likewise the case for how education imbues individuals with the skills needed to survive depending on their class. Rather, what he pointed to is far more rampant than it was in Horkheimer’s time in lower and higher education as well as other domains of contemporary culture.

Finally, the “new readings” conceptions of personification can inform Horkheimer’s cumulative notion that subjectivity is shaped by the reified authority of capitalist society. Such a notion of personification helps articulate how individuals are compelled, reliant upon, and powerless against this social dynamic of accumulation and reproduction. Moreover, this conception of personification can be supplemented by Horkheimer’s account of how socialization in these domains and processes creates authoritarian character types that do not question the system but conform to it. As a result, rather than criticizing society, they blame themselves for their failure to succeed in it. Or they allow their “dissatisfaction and rebellion to be turned into effective forces for the prevailing order” via cooption, transference, or sublimation. This would provide a richer account of how and why people continue to reproduce capitalist society, in spite of its antagonisms, reoccurring crises, and pervasive misery.

Such a critical theory would account for the respective blind spots in Horkheimer's and contemporary Marxian critical theories' conceptions of reification. It would also bring together their respective strengths, supplementing them with other contemporary work in critical theory. This would provide a new reading of the critical theory of reified authority.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Reification is synonymous with Frankfurt School Critical Theory. The leading thinkers in this tradition—from Lukács through early critical theory to Habermas and now Honneth—have provided different interpretations of this theory to criticize the malaise of modern society from the perspective of its emancipatory overcoming. This article has assessed which of these theories of reification provides a metatheoretical perspective that can grasp and critique the suffering and misery affecting contemporary society: socioeconomic crisis, state-imposed austerity, and rising right-wing authoritarian populism.

I have argued that Habermas's, Honneth's, and Lukács's theories are ill-equipped for such a task. For all three, reification consists in a type of rationality that stems from the absence of rational coordination of the neutral institutions of modern society. Emancipation thus consists in the rule of these institutions on the basis of a liberatory rationality inherent to such a society. The traditional presuppositions that shape these theories likewise conceptualize historical development as progressive. Hence these theories of reification conceive of crises and domination as incidental to the organization of society. They thus refrain from accounting for how subjectivities are shaped by and become reliant on such a society. Consequently, these recurring features of capitalist society are treated as extrinsic to its development. These traditional theories of reification are thus ill-equipped to critique these phenomena.

This is not the case, as I have shown, for a theory of reified authority that draws together Horkheimer's notion of the critical theory of society and contemporary critical theoretical interpretations of the critique of political economy. In contrast to the traditional presuppositions that shape Lukács's, Habermas's, and Honneth's approaches to reification, such an approach holds that crises, domination, and subjectivity are generated by the social form of capitalist society. The organization of capitalist society is thus realized in a crisis-ridden, objective-subjective dynamic of accumulation. This dynamic mediates and is mediated by the spheres of capitalist society: the economy, the state, and the household. It thus compels the activity and shapes the subjectivity of individuals within these spheres. Consequently, the reified authority of capitalist society results in reproduction of this crisis-ridden domination, which unfolds in a regressive historical trajectory. Such a critical theory

of reification treats these phenomena as intrinsic to capitalist society and its historical development, thus providing a metatheoretical framework for grasping and critiquing them.

Consequently, such a new reading promises to provide a more prescient contemporary critical theory of reification than Habermas's, Honneth's, and Lukács's theoretical frameworks. This is because, as a range of scholars have shown,<sup>78</sup> neoliberalism, the 2007 crisis, and our present moment can be seen as part and parcel of widespread and reciprocal ad hoc transformations within the ostensibly differentiated spheres of the economy, state, and household. They were driven by the state-facilitated crisis-ridden dynamic of neoliberal accumulation, which arose as a response to the over-accumulation crisis of state-facilitated Keynesianism. This crisis-ridden process of accumulation unfolded in a historic dynamic of reproduction that mediated and was mediated by the economy, state, and household, compelling people's actions and shaping their subjectivity. It likewise culminated in recurring general crises of over-production in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, waves of cuts to government safety net programs, declining wages, rising debts, and general misery. Such a trajectory culminated in the 2007 crisis, which led to further waves of cuts, austerity, and debt. Yet rather than a progressive countermovement culminating in progressive government policies that overcame these pathologies, the majority of people carried on with business as usual, while others embraced right-wing authoritarian populism. Since the crisis, states have only doubled down on austerity and neoliberal economic policies, planting the seeds for a lopsided recovery and further crises.

The present moment, and preceding historical trajectory, of crises, austerity, and rising right-wing authoritarian populism, thus calls into question the presuppositions of complex differentiation and progressive historical development that shaped Habermas's and Honneth's theories and their reinterpretations of reification and crises. These developments are not premised on socially differentiated spheres, non-antagonistic relations, or the neutrality of money. Nor do they stem from the deficient, passive relations of individuals to each other or toward institutions. Finally, they are not incidental to the organization or development of contemporary society and cannot simply be remedied by the continuing realization of progress, communicative action, and recognition.

78. Clarke, *Keynesianism, Monetarism and the Crisis of the State*; Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (New York: Oxford, 2010); David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM, 2011); Craig Charnock, Thomas Purcell, and Ramon Ribera-Fumaz, *The Limits to Capital in Spain: Crisis and Revolt in the European South* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Werner Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone, 2017).

Habermas's and Honneth's fragmentary and dubious accounts of these phenomena are reflective of their approaches to reification. Insofar as they address such phenomena, they attribute them to disembedding of the economy from the democratic state regulation of the lifeworld. Their argument is that the ensuing illegitimate economic and government policies have resulted in the colonization of the lifeworld by different types of social pathologies, which are nonetheless part of the process of progressive historical development.<sup>79</sup> From this it follows that their respective remedies to these pathologies is the rule of the neutral institutions of modern society by the democratic state on the basis of normative principles of the lifeworld. These theories lack an explanation of this persistent and pervasive social trajectory of accumulation, domination, and crises as played out in the realms of the economy, state, and household. They have, moreover, notably lacked an account of how these forces have culminated in the rise of right-wing authoritarian populism. From this it follows that their accounts of and respective remedies to these phenomena are likewise called into question, along with the ability of their respective critical theories to grasp contemporary society.

The ambivalent and self-undermining trajectory of Lukács's theory, moreover, likewise makes his account inadequate. For although it draws on Marx's theories of value and of totality, Lukács's traditional Marxist presuppositions likewise occlude an account of these processes, which do not stem from proletarian passivity. Nor can they be remedied by the progressive rule of the state. Consequently, Lukács's fragmentary account of crisis does not capture such a trajectory of social reproduction. Moreover, his assumptions of progressive historical development in response to crises suffer from similar pitfalls that have been mirrored in traditional Marxist accounts of the 2007 crisis as exemplary of a final crisis.<sup>80</sup> Such accounts have contended that the trajectory of the last 10 years would instill proletarian class consciousness, leading to collective actions in which these problems would be

79. For a recent example of Habermas's own use of this argument, see, for instance, his April 26, 2013, lecture "Democracy, Solidarity and the European Crisis," <https://www.pro-europa.eu/europe/jurgen-habermas-democracy-solidarity-and-the-european-crisis/>, in which he attributes the EU crisis to the "uncontrolled systemic contingencies" of an "unrestrained" market capitalism realizing itself in a political crisis incumbent on a gap between public opinion and governmental policies. Thus, as emblematic of this conception of crisis, Habermas holds in this instance that the peculiar empirical contingencies of market capitalism bled into the political realm, disrupting social equilibrium and ultimately colonizing the lifeworld. His normative prescription is to restore equilibrium via democratic solidarity and redistributive policies. In *Freedom's Right* Honneth likewise diagnoses neoliberalism as a "misdevelopment" attributed to the "uncoupling" of the economy from the state, leading to misrecognition. Honneth's account of right-wing populism would presumably follow such a logic, although he has so far refrained from an account of this phenomenon.

80. See Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010); István Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

redressed through forms such as electoralism or even revolution. But while there have certainly been waves of protest and attempts at electoralism, this has not yet happened. Even if it does, it seems implausible that obtaining state power would lead to the emancipatory outcome Lukács envisions. If the power of the state is part of the world market, those who grasp it may not be able to wield it as they intend (as demonstrated by Syriza). More important, in contrast to the noted absence of these progressive developments, Lukács's theory offers no account of why institutions and individuals have mostly acted in accordance with the reified authority of capitalist society. It thus provides little prospect for understanding the regressive trajectory of the 12 years following the crisis.

In contrast to these deficient accounts of reification, the new reading of the critical theory of reified authority that I have outlined provides a prospective metatheoretical basis for understanding the endemic aspects of capitalist historical development that pervade our present moment. Such a contemporary critical theory focuses critique on the reified form of capitalist societies' constitution of the autonomous, inverted, socially objective dynamic of accumulation. Like the events assayed above, such a dynamic mediates and is mediated by production, the state, and the household. It thus compels individual actions and forms individual subjectivity, leading individuals to become reliant upon such a dynamic or to resist it in ways that merely perpetuate it. Capitalist history does not unfold progressively but is characterized by domination, crises, and authoritarian character formation and the emergence of new types of barbarism.

Taken together, this critical theory of reified authority could illuminate the crisis-ridden trajectory of neoliberalism and the waves of austerity that followed as inherent to the historical dynamic of capitalist accumulation as realized in the reciprocal mediation of the economy, state, and household. It could likewise grasp why few people questioned the system even after the crisis or how the "dissatisfaction and rebellion" against these developments were "turned into effective forces" for the prevailing order in the guise of right-wing authoritarian populism. Finally, it could account for how the ensuing policies of authoritarian neoliberalism spurred a recovery at the cost of great social misery, even as it set the seeds for a looming crisis.

More important, the emancipatory perspective provided by such a critique points beyond the inadequacies of the traditional theoretical perspectives of Habermas, Honneth, and Lukács. Rather than merely mooring the capitalist social form to democratic rationality, recognition, or proletarian rule, emancipation is linked to the abolition of the social form of capitalist society. Although this is just a metatheoretical outline, such a critical theory of the reified authority capitalist society could thus illuminate and indicate how to transcend our barbaric present moment.