The work of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács is a constant source of controversy in the history of the Frankfurt School. All leading thinkers of that theoretical tradition have struggled with Lukács's theory. On the one hand, it was an inspiration for their attempts to come to terms with the oppressive features of capitalist modernity. On the other hand, both its political conclusions and Lukács's actual philosophical submission to Soviet orthodoxy seemed to show that his theoretical framework was deeply flawed in one aspect or another.

Lukács's pre-Marxist work on art and literature, and in particular his essay *Theory of the Novel*, his essay collection *History and Class Consciousness*, and his later work on literature and philosophy, exhibit an underlying deep continuity in thinking but are nonetheless separated by breaks of a political and theoretical nature (Stahl 2016). His work from all of these periods was read and commented on by Frankfurt School theorists. There are two questions which have to be separated: the historical question regarding the extent to which theorists of that tradition explicitly engaged with parts of Lukács's work and the systematic question as to what extent the Frankfurt School is indebted to the philosophical insights that Lukács developed. There is evidence that the *Theory of the Novel* deeply impressed Adorno and Benjamin, and Adorno critically commented on Lukács's later aesthetic work. The relatively few explicit references to *History and Class Consciousness* in the main works of that tradition are surprising, however, given the importance of Lukács's theory. It is hard to deny that Lukács's systematic arguments, especially the concept of reification, are closely connected to central motives in Adorno's theory. The systematic influence of Lukács's social thought on a critical theory of society was only explicitly examined by later critical theorists, who engage with it from their own, mostly skeptical perspective.

To understand this complicated intellectual history, I will focus on the systematic issues, outlining Lukács's conceptual innovations that influenced the Frankfurt School (Section "Lukács's Contributions to Critical Theory"), before turning to the explicit and implicit engagement of the first generation with Lukács's thought (Section "Lukács and the First Generation of the Frankfurt School"). This allows us to understand the significance of Habermas and Honneth's respective critical engagement with Lukács's social theory (Sections "Habermas's Critique of Lukács" and "Honneth's Reconstruction of the Reification Thesis").

**Lukács's Contributions to Critical Theory**

Two of Lukács's early works accounted for his fame in the intellectual circles of Europe: *Soul and Form*, a 1911 collection of essays, and his 1916 *Theory of the Novel*. The former
introduced the idea that specific literary genres, such as the essay, are particularly adequate for late modernity. This is because they problematize the relationship between form and life on the aesthetic level and thereby reflect a dissonance of these elements in the very lives that are the material of writing, a dissonance which is in turn rooted in the condition of life no longer being able to acquire a distinct form. The latter develops similar arguments with a historical dimension, arguing that in earlier ages people could understand their lives as integrated into a meaningful “totality” (Lukács 1971 [1915]: 33). Modernity, by contrast, is a condition of “transcendental homelessness” (Lukács 1971 [1915]: 40) that is reflected in the novel as a distinctively modern genre.

These writings are important not only for the Frankfurt School, but also for any theory that assumes that aesthetic forms have a social and historical dimension. Lukács’s most famous work, History and Class Consciousness, has a more wide-ranging political and philosophical significance. Much of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory can only be adequately understood in the light of a number of groundbreaking conceptual and socio-theoretical innovations that this work presents in a highly condensed form.

The most important arguments are contained in Lukács’s essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” In this essay, Lukács advances the social-theoretical claim that the dominance of the value form in modern capitalist societies is not restricted in its effects to the sphere of market exchanges, but that it becomes the decisive factor behind the dynamics of modern capitalist societies in their entirety. In particular, it subjects all social spheres to norms of formal, instrumental rationality, and thereby colonizes first the work process, then the state apparatus and finally all scientific, social and cultural spheres and thereby human relations to the objective world in general. A second, perhaps even more important claim is that this colonization process entails, wherever we encounter it, the dominance of a form of thinking and of relating to the world that reduces the original fullness of human experience to quantitative, abstract categorization and that recommends a disengaged, contemplative stance toward the world. This change is not only largely unaffected by the subjects’ class positions (and thus more than merely an ideology), but also reflected in philosophical attempts to understand the nature of the relationship between subjective experience and objective reality that take the “reified” stance to be the natural form of this relationship. Because of this, they not only elevate that stance to the level of an ideal of rationality and thereby contribute to reproduction of capitalist social domination, but also become unable to ground a radical critique of society. A successful critique of capitalist reification therefore requires not only a correct analysis of the economic and social relationships constitutive of that mode of production, and an appreciation of the human costs that it generates, but also a decisive break with modern scientific and philosophical thinking – a break that Lukács himself tries to accomplish in the “Reification” essay.

The reification critique connects motives from Marx and from Weber. In Marx’s Capital, the “value form,” i.e. the fact that commodities appear to be comparable to other commodities in regard to an abstract property called “value” is a socially real, but epistemically misleading feature of commodity exchanges. Marx claims that it leads to apparent contradictions in economic theory that find their solution only when one also analyzes the sphere of production. The secret behind the seeming equality of things and of people within the market sphere is the domination and the exploitation in the productive process. However, for Marx, the “fetishism of the commodity form” (Marx 1976 [1867]: I: 163) – the misleading appearance of exchange value as a property of things, rather than as a social relation – seems to be primarily a problem for economic theory and, perhaps, for everyday economic consciousness. Lukács, however, argues that the “value form” has a much deeper impact. The formal rationalization of production that is induced by the dominance of the commodity form over economic life leads not only to a destruction of integrated experiences on the side
of workers who can no longer understand their activities in qualitative terms but instead have to adopt an instrumentalist, calculating stance toward their own capacities and a disconnected, “contemplative” attitude of passivity toward the greater social context (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 89). It also leads to increased rationalization pressures on other social systems, in particular the state bureaucracy and the legal system, that have to reorient their constitutive practices to conform to standards of efficiency, predictability and formal coherence. This is because rational calculation in the sphere of industrial production is only possible if the influences of these systems on the productive sphere are predictable in their effects. Lukács not only explicitly endorses Weber’s analysis of modern bureaucracy and of the rationalization of legal and political power, but also shows how the rationalization processes that it describes is an indirect effect of the dominance of the commodity form. Finally, Lukács also makes a distinctively Weberian claim by assuming that the internal, autonomous rationalization of different social spheres makes any understanding of society as an integrated whole impossible – the different value orientations operative in the individual spheres can no longer be reconciled (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 103). This leads to a situation where no individual or group can grasp the totality of social life; any political or scientific attempt to understand society must remain restricted to some specific part of the social whole. Society as a whole thus remains epistemically inaccessible. This is another aspect of reification: individuals and social groups are forced to treat society as an external, unpredictable mechanism.

Weber seems to have accepted this development as inevitable. However, Lukács holds on to Marx’s idea that this epistemological position is ideological and, in the end, self-destructive. But he puts forward a much more radical argument than Marx: he claims that “reification” denotes a distortion of the whole relation between subjects and their social and natural environment that cannot be overcome within capitalist society, except on the level of abstract philosophical anticipation of a new relation to world. He links Marx’s theory of the “value form” with the Neo-Kantian concept of “Gegenständlichkeitsform” (the “objective form of things” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 88)). The Kantian idea is that human experiences can only find expression in judgments that have objective purport once they are synthesized by being given a specific form. Lukács assumes that there is a historical dimension of such forms of thinking, and he suggests that, under capitalism, the quantified, abstract, reified conceptualization of reality that is implicit in the commodity form becomes the form of any and all potential experience of objects (Kavoulakos 2017: 68). Thus, there is no way to overcome reification merely through reflection.

Furthermore, the thoroughgoing rationalization and reification of all social spheres that Lukács describes as a process of colonization of society by the commodity form affects not only ordinary experience but also the reflexive dimension of reason – that is, it affects all theoretical attempts to understand and analyze the structure of society (be it in economics or in law) as well as philosophical attempts to more generally understand the possibilities of subjects to relate to an objective world. In the second part of the “reification” essay, Lukács argues that all of modern philosophy is animated by the attempt to overcome a “hiatus” between subject and object that arises from a picture of that relation as of one between two unconnected poles – an active subject and a reality which is alien to it. This, as well, connects to some core concerns of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, namely to the question of how far the claims of social theory and the very notion of theory itself are affected by the distorting influence of identity thinking and the capitalist exchange principle.

According to Lukács, Hegel is the philosopher who came closest to an appreciation of reification by acknowledging the principle that history and society can only be properly comprehended by the subject of the historical process. As Hegel lacked the sociological insight into who the subject of history is – the proletariat – he could not cash out that insight in the form of a political theory (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 146). This leads Lukács, finally, in the
third part of the reification essay to delineate a radical account of how reification can be overcome: it is only the process of the self-discovery of the proletariat as the “subject-object of history” that can break through reification. This process coincides with the communist revolution in which the proletariat in fact becomes the subject of history.

That Lukács’s reification theory is central to later critical theory is a thesis which is shared by many accounts of the development of Western Marxism, although there is no agreement as to which part of his theory accounts for this central position. Hauke Brunkhorst has described the two problems of reification theory and class consciousness that Lukács connects as constitutive for the paradigmatic core of early critical theory (Brunkhorst and Krockenberger 1998). Andrew Feenberg has argued that the link between philosophy and practice that Lukács’s theory entails is the central element of critical theory (Feenberg 2014, 2017). Martin Jay has focused his analysis of the relation between Lukács and the Frankfurt School on the concept of totality (Jay 1984b). Whatever the answer is, it is clear that one cannot overestimate the importance of the description of the problem provided by Lukács for the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

**Lukács and the First Generation of the Frankfurt School**

In the first years of the Institute of Social Research in the 1920s, a number of institute members were actively engaging with Lukács and his work. Lukács published not only *History and Class Consciousness* with the Malik publishing house that was financed by Felix Weil and his 1926 essay on Moses Hess in the institute director Karl Grünberg’s “Archiv,” but Weil also organized a “Marxist Work Week” in 1923 in Ilmenau where he and Pollock discussed recent work in social theory with Lukács and Karl Korsch, an event that motivated Weil’s later support for the financing of the Institute for Social Research. Adorno met Lukács in 1925 when the latter lived in Vienna after the failed Hungarian Revolution, a meeting that, as Adorno wrote to Berg, had “a profound effect” on him (Adorno 2008: 17; Müller-Doohm 2015: 94). There can be little doubt that both the *Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness* were intensively discussed in the circles of what would later become the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Both Kracauer’s review of the *Theory of the Novel* (Kracauer 2011 [1921]) and Bloch’s review of *History and Class Consciousness* (Bloch 1977 [1923]) are evidence of those debates. Benjamin emphasizes the importance of Lukács, in particular, in a letter from 1926 where he informs Gershom Scholem that Lukács’s essay made him see the “practice of communism […] in a different light than ever before” (Benjamin 1994: 248). In Adorno’s already mentioned letter to Berg, he similarly states that Lukács “had influenced me more than almost anyone” (cited according to Müller-Doohm 2015: 94).

As the *Theory of the Novel* was widely appreciated in the aesthetic debates of the 1920s and 1930s, it is not surprising that Benjamin and Adorno (who were both committed to the thesis that literary genres have a historical character) were favorably disposed toward that book. More controversial is the status of *History and Class Consciousness* for the first generation.

Benjamin explicitly described *History and Class Consciousness* as a major influence on his work throughout his life. This influence is quite easy to discern in *One-Way Street* (Witte 1975). The relation of Lukács to Horkheimer and Adorno is harder to describe. Although Buck-Morss argues that Horkheimer was, like Lukács, a proponent of Hegelian Marxism in the 1930s (Buck-Morss 1979: 21), it must be acknowledged that Horkheimer on the whole seems to be less impressed than Adorno by Lukács’s reference to the “totality.” Based on his vision of an empirically proceeding social science, Horkheimer rejects that concept at least in its Lukácsian version as useless for the purposes of a materialist theory of society and as
a remnant of metaphysical thinking (Korthals 1985: 319), although he uses a concept of totality in his engagement with psychological theories (Abromeit 2011: 82). The same holds for the concept of reification, which does not play any constructive role in Horkheimer’s thought until his closer collaboration with Adorno in the 1940s. Finally, the idea of the practice of the proletariat as the final arbiter of the correctness of theory seemed particularly unacceptable for Horkheimer. His reflections on the relation between theory, intellectuals and the proletariat in “Traditional and Critical Theory” are clearly at least an implicit critique of Lukács (see Horkheimer 1975 [1937]: 213).

In comparison, Adorno’s engagement with Lukács is much more extensive (for a detailed account of this engagement and a rich overview of textual evidence, see Braunstein and Duckheim 2015). Although Adorno is critical of both the Lukács of the *Theory of the Novel* and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, especially as far as the concept of totality is concerned, the idea that the quantitative rationalization that is both expressed by the practice of commodity exchange and promoted by that very practice is the core phenomenon of domination in modern capitalist societies is clearly central to Adorno’s thinking. The same holds for the idea that everyday phenomena of reification contain in their local experience the whole system of alienation and oppression that is characteristic for contemporary society. In fact, one can read Adorno’s philosophical main work, *Negative Dialectics*, as a successor to *History and Class Consciousness* insofar as *Negative Dialectics* takes up Lukács’s suggestion that modern rationality and modern philosophy equally reflect a form of thinking that has its ultimate roots in a structure of social domination. Both works endorse the claim that the predominance of a too narrow form of rationality also results in an impoverishment of experience that cuts off the qualitatively distinct features of individual objects. Philosophically, both works are rooted in the tradition of German Idealism, taking seriously Kant’s claim that knowledge and experience are made possible through a distinctive human activity of synthesis by means of concepts. They also agree with Hegel’s critique that these concepts are not ahistorical but instituted in specific forms of life. This does not mean that Adorno is just expanding on Lukács’s claims. There are three major points in which he fundamentally disagrees with Lukács. First, he locates the origin of reified thought not in capitalist commodity exchange but in the human attempt to isolate oneself against the danger of regressing into nature by submitting nature to conceptual control. Second, Adorno does not assume that the major defect of reified thought or “identity thinking” is the loss of access to a meaningful totality, but rather the impoverishment of experiences of the “particular.” Third, Adorno’s critique of Hegel also applies to Lukács. According to Adorno, Hegel correctly opposes the ahistorical tendency of Kantianism to locate the origins of conceptual synthesis in an abstract subject. Hegel replaces this picture with one of a historical process of experience in which subject and object determine each other. However, Hegel’s assumption that this process ends with a historical subject recognizing itself in that process reinstates the subject as the primary party. Adorno argues that in contrast to his Hegelian picture, Kantianism has the advantage of holding on to the independence of the thing-in-itself and thus to the idea that particular objects have an independence which is not dissolved in the subject’s self-reflection. It is clear how this critique also applies to Lukács’s conception of the subject-object of history.

To see how central the Lukács heritage is for Adorno, it is sufficient to consider a central passage of *Negative Dialectics* where Adorno writes,

The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that nonidentical individuals and performances...
become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.

(Adorno 1973: 146)

While this betrays quite clearly a commitment to the link between capitalist commodity exchange and reified thinking, Adorno immediately qualifies that statement by arguing that we should not conclude by endorsing an abstract rejection of the exchange principle. Capitalist commodity exchange and conceptual thinking also contain a normative promise – the promise of free interaction between equals and the rejection of violence – at the same time as they undercut the realization of that very same promise by violently imposing equality on unequal elements by negating their individuality and their qualitative differences. Adorno thus accepts certain elements of the Lukácsian diagnosis of reification, but he rejects the consequences that Lukács draws, namely that we should recover qualitative experiences that might have been possible in a world before the dominance of capitalist exchange, or, perhaps even worse, that we could overcome reification by the emergence of a collective class subject that is thereby revealed as the final, constitutive ground of all reality. This is the central point of the Lukács critique in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno argues against what he calls the “idealistic nature” of Lukács’s reification theory on two further counts. First, he argues that reification is only a subjective epiphenomenon (Adorno 1973: 190) of objective domination and that a critical theory that focuses on it therefore falsely privileges the ideological level above the material level. Second, and more importantly, the opposition to “thingness” is motivated by the tendency “to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation” (Adorno 1973: 191). The complaint against reification is thus partly based on the idea that there ought not be anything that does not submit to human conceptual understanding (Adorno 1973: 375). Adorno also argues against an idea of reification as the dissolution of a seemingly original immediacy, as all such immediacy is in fact always produced by domination and is thus itself reified. Certain kinds of reification are thus historically important indicators of freedom. This seems to suggest that we can distinguish two meanings of “reification” – a negative meaning which Adorno himself frequently employs in *Negative Dialectics* that denotes treating the relational properties of objects as fixed and unchangeable essences (see, for example, Adorno 1973: 280). However, there is also a positive sense in which “reification” can denote the recalcitrance of objects and subjects to subsumption under subjective categories and which a negative dialectics has to take seriously (Jay 1984a: 68; Feenberg 2017: 116).

The basic terms of this engagement with the reification critique of Lukács are mirrored in Adorno’s earlier discussion of Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* and in his attitude toward Lukács’s later aesthetic writings. In his early lecture “On the Idea of Natural History” from 1932 (Adorno 1984 [1932]), Adorno approvingly refers to one of Lukács’s basic theses from the *Theory of the Novel*, namely that modernity has created a second nature of commodity relations that excludes any immediate access to meaning. However, he criticizes Lukács’s insistence that there has been a past in which an immediately meaningful totality existed and that we can thus think of accessing this meaning obscured by modern second nature only “in terms of a theological resurrection” (Buck-Mors 1979: 47; Adorno 1984 [1932]: 118; Whyman 2016: 462). He contrasts this idea to Benjamin’s vision that understands (second) nature as a cipher that could be solved in any moment and would then let us recover meaning. In other words, the idea of a totality that guarantees immediate access to meaning has already invoked Adorno’s skepticism thirty years before *Negative Dialectics*.

Although by the 1930s Lukács had renounced the idea of an epistemically privileged standpoint that is only possible for the revolutionary proletariat – partially forced by political circumstances – and turned toward more modest philosophical ideas, Adorno still detects
some of his original impulses in his later writings about realism which provided a continued point of engagement for the Frankfurt School. Most famous is perhaps Adorno’s essay “Reconciliation under Duress” (Adorno 1977 [1961]), a harsh review of Lukács’s The Meaning of Contemporary Realism. This was partly prompted by what Adorno saw as mischaracterizations of his own criticism of modern music. But the background for Adorno’s open opposition to Lukács was also formed by some of Lukács’s writings during the preceding two decades in which the latter quite summarily dismissed most of nonorthodox Marxist modern philosophy as “irrationalism,” including some theorists that the Frankfurt School heavily draws on, such as Freud. Adorno acknowledges in the essay that Lukács’s “personal integrity is above all suspicion” (Adorno 1977 [1961]: 152). But he accuses him of having submitted so far to Soviet orthodoxy that his theoretical framework has been damaged, even when he wants to go beyond the dominant aesthetic positions in the East. Adorno supports this charge by a number of points. The most central ones are connected to the idea that Lukács misunderstands the political function of modern art. According to Adorno, such art has political significance insofar as its “worldlessness” (Adorno 1977 [1961]: 160) acknowledges the impossibility of reconciliation and its focus on subjectivity holds fast to the suffering and alienation in modern societies. By rejecting any overt political engagement and any reference to transsubjective meaning, modern art can thus negatively refer to reconciliation as an ideal. Lukács, however, describes these features as “decadence” and imposes the demand on art to positively refer to a social overcoming of alienation, as embodied in socialism. Rather than appreciating the Utopian dimension of modern art, he sacrifices it to political imperatives. The parallel to Adorno’s early criticism is clear: in both instances, Adorno rejects an approach to modernity in Lukács’s writings that locates the hope for reconciliation in the rediscovery of a social totality, an approach that inadvertently thereby becomes conservative. In both instances, Adorno also uses motives from Benjamin, namely the idea that salvation will not be found in the large-scale march of history toward better times but in uncompromising attention to the small details of the present age.

Habermas’s Critique of Lukács

In a 1979 interview, Habermas recounts that he read Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness in the early 1950s and that it “excited [him] a great deal” (Horster et al. 1979: 32). But even though he occasionally refers to Lukács in his early work (most extensively in his reflections on theory and practice where he argues that Lukács’s argument implies historical necessity and thus does not reflect the role of practice sufficiently, see Habermas 1971 [1957]: 444), he never systematically discusses the reification essay. As many commentators have noted, however, the sustained engagement with Marx that is characteristic of Habermas’s early career can also often be read as an implicit engagement with Lukács. There are three points in particular in Habermas’s critique of Marx that are relevant for his later explicit engagement with Lukács. First, there is the critique of Marx’s reduction of social practice to material production that Habermas formulates in the late 1960s (Habermas 1973: 169) and which plays a major role in his Knowledge and Human Interests. As Martin Jay notes, this critique of Marx leads Habermas to reconsider the notion of social totality that critical theory had inherited from Western Marxism in general, and from Lukács in particular (Jay 1984b: 474f). As this notion is connected to a model of subjectivity according to which the freedom of a subject depends on an external world that it can recognize as the product of its own activities, it suggests a model of liberation according to which society must become accessible to the (collective) subject that had created it. With the introduction of communicatively structured intersubjectivity as a sphere of social freedom that does not conform to this subject-philosophical picture, Habermas moves critical theory away from a model of
practice that privileges the relation between an individual subject and its environment and toward a model that privileges relations between different subjects and consequently conceives of liberation as the realization of the potentials of rationality and mutual respect that are immanent in this practice.

The transposition of this step to the level of sociological theory also opens up the possibility of fully integrating Weber's insight into critical theory: social differentiation is a necessary component of modern rationalization. According to Lukács's interpretation of Weber, such differentiation must necessarily involve a loss of control over the social totality and thus leads to alienation. Furthermore, the incapacity of different forms of social understanding – such as economics, legal studies and philosophy – to make sense of society as a whole is a pathological effect of reification. It is not only a sign of the irrationality of a social totality in which the epistemic possibility of making sense of the whole is systematically undermined. Because it is bound to the capitalist domination of commodity exchange, it is a historically specific and thus reversible state of affairs. Habermas, by contrast, takes Weber's theory of unavoidable and irreversible social differentiation much more seriously (Habermas 1984 [1981]: 1: 357): if we consider the differentiation of social structures as part of a process of social evolution that does not require us to understand history and society as the (conscious or unconscious) product of a collective subject (Habermas 1979 [1976]: 139), we can make sense of mismatches and tensions in social life as an outcome of unequal, one-sided processes of social evolution. The normative alternative that Habermas envisions is thus not the recovery of the potential to make sense of the social totality as a unified whole, but the idea that those specific social spheres and forms of rationality in modern life which can provide modern subjects with the resources to live autonomous lives can be reconstructed by philosophy in their autonomous logic. This is an implicit – and sometimes explicit – objection to the Hegelian Marxist picture that critical theory inherited through Lukács.

The theoretical framework that Habermas develops in the 1970s and 1980s is, among other things, directed toward taking up the insights of Lukács's diagnosis of reification as part of a social theory that analyzes the internal development of social systems of strategic interaction that increasingly become independent of lifeworld norms in modern capitalist societies. But Habermas is skeptical of Lukács's claim that strategic action orientations have already colonized all social spheres without remainder and that they have thereby deformed the relation between modern subjects and their world to the extent that recovering a more original, non-contemplative form of self-understanding requires a fundamental social transformation by which a new form of (collective) subjectivity is achieved. He is also skeptical of the idea that the development of strategic action systems should be understood as the distortion of a more fundamental and more appropriate form of productive relationship between producers and their environment. Rather, Habermas proposes to understand social reproduction as having the two aspects of material and symbolic reproduction. Whereas the material reproduction can be divorced from the establishment of understanding and be restructured to allow coordination by media-steered strategic coordination without any pathological effects, symbolic integration necessarily remains dependent on communicatively generated understanding. This is because the components of social normativity, symbolic tradition and personality structures which together form the lifeworld (from within which communicative coordination of actions becomes possible) are themselves reproduced through communication. The distinction between those social spheres that can and those that cannot be subject to non-pathological forms of rationalization allows Habermas to take up and to reformulate reification theory at a higher level of sociological complexity. Instead of describing it as a pathology of social life in general, he can now describe reification as the inappropriate takeover of communicatively integrated domains by the logic of the “system.” His engagement with Marx, Weber and Lukács in the Theory of Communicative Action in
the context of this argument is decisive for Habermas’s project at that stage, as it links his social theory with his critical project that aims to recover the core of the Lukácsian argument while revising its implausible theoretical foundations.

Habermas not only makes use of Lukács’s notion of a “form of objectivity” as the subject-philosophical predecessor notion of his own idea of “forms of understanding,” i.e. the principles which govern “the encounters of individuals with objective nature, normative reality, and their own subjective nature” (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 187), but also discusses Lukács’s reification theory twice in the Theory of Communicative Action. In the first volume, it is identified not only as a theoretical source that inspired Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s arguments but also as an element which had to be left behind because of its misconceived view of the relation between theory and practice. In the second volume, Lukács’s reification theory is – together with Weber – treated as a diagnosis of the fact of colonization that lacks the vocabulary to adequately analyze its own foundations.

Regarding the first argument, Habermas acknowledges that Lukács’s analysis of how commodity fetishism becomes a socially operative principle in the formally rational organization of production indeed recovers the missing link between Marx and Weber. According to that analysis, the independence of formally organized systems of strategic interaction accounts for the loss of a unified concept of reason. Habermas argues that Lukács agrees with Marx that this loss cannot be overcome by a philosophy that merely reestablishes unified reason at the level of theory (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 363) but has to be realized in practice. However, instead of identifying a particular practice in present societies in which a “complementary relation between cognitive-instrumental rationality […] and moral-practical rationality […]” (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 363) is embedded as an inherent standard (in other words, instead of examining communicative action) and then reconstructing this practice philosophically, Lukács makes the “decisive error” (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 364) of assuming that his theory, even though it cannot restore a substantive, unified model of reason, can anticipate a practical overcoming of the loss of unity at the level of philosophy. In other words, with the idea that his philosophical-sociological theory can conclusively show that the idea of the proletariat as subject-object of history is necessary, Lukács assumes that the practical solution of the question regarding theory and practice can still be represented by theory before being put into practice. This overburdening of philosophy, in Habermas’s view, results from the idea that the divisions within the social life of reason that are introduced by modern rationalization must be healed by the recovery of a substantive unity rather than be accounted for by means of an analysis of the internal differentiation within a practice of communication. According to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno avoid Lukács’s mistake by rejecting the idea of a reconciliation of the division between theoretical and practical reason (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 376). According to Habermas, they do not offer a positive replacement for that figure of thought and instead opt for a purely negative project of the self-critique of reason. However, this makes it impossible for them to spell out the normative foundations of that very critique.

The second, more constructive role that Lukács’s reification thesis plays in Habermas’s work is in the context of the colonization theory. Here, Habermas criticizes the first generation of the Frankfurt School for both holding on to Marxist orthodoxy relating to the theory of value and reducing Weber’s notion of formal rationality to instrumental-purposive rationality (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 334). At least in regard to the first mistake, it seems reasonable to say that they inherit it from Lukács. Habermas assumes that Marx’s theory connects two levels of social description — on the one hand the system-theoretic description of market relations, on the other hand the action-theoretic description of class struggles (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 336). The theory of value that Marx develops in Capital uncovers “real subsumption,” i.e. capitalist domination, as the explanation of the seeming independence of the systemic level, an independence which is shown by that very explanation to be a
mere illusion. Habermas objects to this picture because it presupposes a connection between the system-theoretic and the action-theoretic descriptions of social reproduction that can be captured by a semantic theory. Taking Weber's differentiation thesis seriously means that we have to assume instead that the availability of the two descriptions is best explained by the differentiation of distinct forms of action coordination and by the unequal dynamics of the rationalization of different modes of coordination (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 338–339). In other words, Marx still remains committed to the picture of society as a totality and thus has to treat social differentiation as pathological and as a misleading appearance. The same criticism, of course, applies to Lukács. Lukács's theory of reification uses the theory of value not only to make sense of the emergence of the media-coordinated sphere of the market, but also to both explain and criticize the inaccessibility of the social totality in all social domains. As the first generation of the Frankfurt School quite obviously agrees with the idea that the exchange principle is at the core of both social domination and identity thinking under capitalism, they are thus vulnerable to the same objection.

However, this does not mean that Habermas dismisses Lukács's reification claim in its entirety. Rather, the opposite: any attentive reader of Habermas and Lukács will recognize that Lukács's explanation of how reification, although initially confined to market exchanges, takes over the entirety of society is already a theory of colonization. In the reification essay, the mechanism by which the logic of value exchange subjects all cultural spheres to its rule is a formal, quantitative rationality that is impressed upon them by the functional requirements of the market. The parallel to Habermas is hard to miss. However, Habermas has the conceptual tools to distinguish formal rationality as a feature of actions from the functional rationality of media-steered subsystems and thus can replace Lukács's vague causality claims with a substantive sociological theory according to which subsystems of rational action coordination in the market and the state bureaucracy are subject to unequal and distinct dynamics of rationalization that are not available (at least not without pathological consequences) to lifeworld practices. Furthermore, the famous distinction between the systems perspective and the lifeworld perspective makes it unnecessary for Habermas to depend on the idea that there is a privileged “qualitative experience” that is obscured by reification. He thus changes the normative argument from one that depends on this notion of experience or on the idea of the totality toward a functionalist version that claims that lifeworld interactions cannot be completely adapted to functional requirements without thereby losing their integrative power in the process of social integration. This allows him to formulate the colonization thesis as a sociologically more plausible version of reification theory. In other words, Habermas's colonization thesis is not committed to the action-theoretic vocabulary that leads Lukács to envisage the proletarian revolution as a solution to the reification problem.

Habermas thus changes the substance of reification analysis in two aspects: first, by allowing that the independence of functional logics within the economic subsystem is unproblematic as long as it does not lead to colonizing effects; second, by moving away from an eminent critique of reification that focuses on how it violates normative expectations toward an external critique that takes the avoidance of pathological consequences as its presupposed standard (Jütten 2011).

The distinction between system and lifeworld is the part of Habermas's colonization thesis that has received the most attention. However, most objections, such as Honneth's (Honneth 1993 [1985]), focus on the question of whether the systems perspective is adequate, as it seems to rule out the possibility of social struggles in functionally integrated domains, especially struggles that are motivated by the violation of intersubjective expectations. The same critique, however, seems to apply to Lukács's original theory that describes the social pathologies created by recognition not as violations of intersubjective expectations, but as a subjective loss of meaning. From this perspective, a return to Lukács therefore does not seem
promising. While Chari (2010) advocates for a more materialist conception of intersubjectivity as an alternative to this approach, there has been no systematic reconstruction of Lukács from this perspective. More relevant is the objection that Habermas’s move from immanent to functionalist critique even further displaces the issue of normativity (Jütten 2011: 711; Stahl 2013). To solve this problem, Lukács reification theory would have to be reformulated as a theory of the internal pathologies of social practices.

**Honneth’s Reconstruction of the Reification Thesis**

As for other critical theorists, Honneth’s engagement with Lukács has an explicit and an implicit dimension. Explicitly, Honneth engages with the young Lukács in one of his early essays (Honneth 1995 [1986]) and extensively discusses his theory of reification in his Tanner Lectures (Honneth 2008). Implicitly, Lukács’s idea of grounding critical theory in a Hegelian theory of history forms the background for much of Honneth’s theoretical development. Although, for a long time, he seems to have rejected the idea of an immanent standard in historical social practices in favor of a more anthropological, substantive normative version of Hegelian recognition theory (Derany 2009: 323), his more recent work suggests a more favorable attitude toward an immanent historical strategy, even though he continues to reject—for good reason—Lukács’s strong subject-philosophical claims in favor of a more procedural version of immanent critique (Honneth 2014).

Honneth’s *Tanner Lectures* on reification are perhaps the most sustained engagement of any core member of the Frankfurt School with the work of Lukács. Here, he systematically evaluates the possible contribution of Lukács’s reification theory to the project of diagnosing “pathologies of the social” that Honneth considers to be at the core of the critical theory tradition (Honneth 2007 [1994]). In the *Tanner Lectures*, Honneth argues that Lukács’s implicit argument in the reification essay is a normative one. However, this normative argument is not one regarding morality or social justice, but rather concerning pathologies of a whole way of life that deviates from a more appropriate social practice of relating to the world (Honneth 2008: 21). Honneth criticizes Lukács for subsuming, without much explanation, different phenomena under the label of “reification,” but he acknowledges that, at the core of Lukács’s theory, we can find a reference to a certain detached stance toward the world in which the perspective of the uninvolved observer becomes “second nature.” Lukács condemns this stance, as Honneth observes, not in epistemic terms but rather as a form of practice that is somehow intrinsically wrong. But in this case, we must also be able to contrast it with a more appropriate form of a “genuine” practice. This is the normative core of the reification concept that Honneth sets out to reconstruct. However, he relatively soon rejects Lukács’s explicit argument that analyzes the “correct” form of practice as one in which the producers (collectively, the proletariat) are aware of their active role. There are three reasons in particular for this rejection: the first is that this idea is embedded in an “identity philosophy” (Honneth 2008: 27) according to which subjects are only free when they can conceive of the external conditions of their activity as their own product. This, as Honneth argues, robs Lukács’s critique “of any chance of social-theoretical justification” (Honneth 2008: 27). The second reason is that Lukács assumes, implausibly, and without much argument, that the commodity exchange is the fundamental and only source of reification. Finally, Lukács seems to disregard the possibility emphasized by Habermas that, in some spheres of social life, reified attitudes might not only be appropriate but actually required as part of the social differentiation process that is characteristic of modern societies.

However, there is also another reading of the normative intuitions behind Lukács’s argument, Honneth argues, that remains implicit in his work. According to this reading, we should not think of reification as something that could ever be complete in the sense
of being irreversible. Although Lukács seems to assume such an irreversibility, it would undermine his claim that the proletariat could recover from reification. Honneth argues that he therefore implicitly must subscribe to a theory according to which reification is only the obscuring of a more fundamental practice which remains always present. Honneth wants to recover this intuition through an “unofficial” reading of Lukács that conceives of the correct practice as one which supports forms of “empathetic engagement and interestedness that have been destroyed by the expansion of commodity exchange” (Honneth 2008: 27). This intuition can be spelled out neither, Honneth argues, using Lukács’s economistic explanatory strategy that sees reification only as an effect of the dominance of exchange relations, nor by his underlying theory of practice which betrays a commitment to an idealist view according to which the only basis for our world being accessible to us is its creation by us as a collective subject.

The first step in Honneth’s constructive argument is to contrast Lukács’s explicit theory (that assumes that there is no non-reified practice left in capitalist society) with his more optimistic statements about the proletariat that suggest, according to Honneth, that reification only “conceals” such practice from our awareness. This concealment, however, cannot be a mere epistemic mistake but must be rooted in a “false interpretive habit” (Honneth 2008: 33). This allows Honneth to connect Lukács’s reification theory to Heidegger’s notion of “care.” According to this interpretation, both Lukács and Heidegger see a mode of practice in which we take an interested and engaged stance toward the world and toward other people both as more fundamental and as more adequate. This leads Honneth to the following reconstruction of the issue at stake in reification theory: “the human relationship to the self and the world is in the first instance not only genetically but also categorically bound up with an affirmative attitude, before more neutralized orientations can subsequently arise” (Honneth 2008: 35). This reconstruction also allows Honneth to connect to elements of Dewey’s theory, in particular the emphasis on the qualitative experience of situations as primordial. This reconstruction conceives of reification as the dominance of a detached attitude lacking participatory involvement that amounts to a forgetfulness of a more basic form of a cognitive, caring stance. The claim that this is an empirically more fruitful definition of reification can be supported by taking note of insights in developmental psychology and by drawing on an argument presented by Stanley Cavell for the general priority of intersubjective recognition over subjective cognition. According to this argument, a stance of empathetic engagement ontologically and genetically precedes any possible stance of detached observation. Furthermore, the capacity to take up the earlier stance is a condition of possibility for taking up the latter.

If we understand reification as the effect of subjects adopting an interpretive framework that conceals this dependency relation, then of course – as Honneth himself acknowledges – we cannot make any sense of Lukács’s radical critique of reification. This is because this critique seems to make the mistake of categorically rejecting all social practices which favor detached observation, rather than only criticizing those that lead people to also make the second-order mistake of ignoring the rootedness of such observation in empathetic engagement. Of course, one might object that this objection rests on a change in the meaning of “reification.” Lukács seems to describe reification primarily as a change in the structure of social practices and only secondarily as a problem of subjects adopting inappropriate attitudes within those practices. In contrast, Honneth is primarily interested in the change in “interpretive habits” and in the ability of subjects to correctly reflect on certain features of their engagement with the world. While this conception allows Honneth to engage in extremely interesting analyses of social phenomena in terms of a loss of recognition, it is unclear whether his reformulation really amounts to a development of Lukács’s analysis or rather to a change in subject.
It is therefore not surprising that many interpreters have argued that Honneth divorces the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of reification too much from the original Lukácsian idea that intersubjective relations are determined, in the last instance, by configurations of material practice and power (Chari 2010). Although Honneth allows that reification is promoted by historically specific social practices, he also assumes that we can define the contrasting non-reified practice ahistorically and that it is, in principle, available to all people at all times (Jütten 2010: 246). This is because he derives the normative standard from anthropological assumptions. It might be possible that one cannot make sense of some of Lukács’s claims without making such assumptions, but one can safely assume that Lukács does not subscribe, explicitly or implicitly, to such a theory.

After the Tanner Lectures, Honneth has not systematically engaged with Lukács’s thought. However, one can read his recent work – especially Freedom’s Right (Honneth 2014) – as moving away from the anthropological assumptions that animate the Tanner Lectures toward a more internal critique of modern socialization. This also opens up possibilities for a new appraisal of the immanent critique implicit in Lukács’s thought from the perspective of Honneth’s theory.

References

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Further Reading