

What is Reification? A Critique of Axel Honneth

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Abstract

In this paper I criticise Axel Honneth's reactualization of reification as a concept in critical theory in his 2005 Tanner Lectures and argue that he ultimately fails on his own terms. His account is based on two premises: (1) reification is to be taken literally rather than metaphorically, and (2) it is not conceived of as a moral injury but as a social pathology. Honneth concludes that reification is "forgetfulness of recognition", more specifically, of antecedent recognition, an emphatic and engaged relationship with oneself, others and the world, which precedes any more concrete relationship both genetically and categorially. I argue against this conception of reification on two grounds. (1) The two premises of Honneth's account cannot be squared with one another. It is not possible to literally take a person as a thing without this being a recognisable moral injury, and, therefore, I suggest that there are no cases of literal reification. (2) Honneth's account is essentially ahistorical, because it is based on an anthropological model of recognition that tacitly equates reification with autism. In conclusion, I suggest that any successful account of reification must (i) take reification metaphorically and (ii) offer a social-historical account of the origin(s) of reification.

I. Introduction

Reification has a distinguished history in twentieth-century social and political thought. As Axel Honneth points out in his recent book on the topic, following the publication of

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Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, reification “constituted the leitmotiv” of social and cultural criticism in Weimar Germany.¹ However, in the last 40 years or so, reification has received very little philosophical attention, and Honneth's reactualization of it in recognition-theoretical terms is therefore very welcome.²

Ultimately, I argue in this paper that his account fails, but I do believe that this failure is instructive and hope that it will lead to a renewal of interest in reification as a concept in philosophy and social criticism.

Reification is hard to define, and its canonical definition, “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing”, raises more questions than it answers.³ Some commentators, including Honneth, assume that the core meaning of reification concerns the treatment of people (including oneself) as things, while others assume that it refers to the mediation of our relationships with other people by things or to the thing-like character of our social institutions.⁴ Honneth also thinks that Lukács took reification *literally* rather than metaphorically, and that he did not conceive of it as a form of moral injury. The central premise of his account of reification is that reification is “forgetfulness of recognition” (*R* 53), more specifically, of *antecedent* recognition, an emphatic and engaged relationship with oneself, others and the world which precedes any more concrete relationship both genetically and categorially. If this antecedent recognition is forgotten or suspended, one's own mental states, other people and one's surroundings are experienced as lifeless *things* to be used or abused as one pleases. This account of reification differs from Lukács' original account in *History and Class Consciousness* in many respects. I begin my discussion by drawing attention to one of them, Lukács' distinction between subjective and objective aspects of reification (§II). Next, I explain in some detail what Honneth finds wrong with Lukács' account and how

he arrives at his own recognition-theoretical alternative (§§III–IV). Then, I offer a critique of Honneth’s alternative account, focusing on two aspects of it. *First*, I argue that reification cannot be *both* literal and not recognisable as moral injury. *Second*, I argue that because Honneth’s account of reification works on the level of philosophical anthropology, it is essentially ahistorical and cannot account for the historical conditions of both the experience of reification and the possibility of its overcoming (§§V–VI). Taken together, these criticisms show why Honneth’s account fails, but I also argue that they establish two *criteria* that any successful account of reification must meet: (i) it must explain how it is possible that the treatment of people *as if* they were things can fail to be recognized as a moral injury, and (ii) it must explain reification as a social pathology that has specific social-historical conditions (§VIII).

II. Lukács’ Account of Reification

Lukács’ analysis in *History and Class Consciousness* fuses Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism with Max Weber’s theory of social rationalization.⁵ According to this analysis, the phenomenon of reification has both a subjective and an objective side (*HCC* 87). *Subjectively*, the routine participation in capitalist production and exchange alienates people from their own activities and powers. In particular, they come to conceive of their own and others’ labour (and labour power, including intellectual powers, such as a journalist’s powers of expression [cf. *HCC* 100]), as commodities ready to be exchanged on the market. This experience is intensified through the rationalization of the labour process itself, which comes to be dominated by the principle of rational calculability.⁶ The resulting mechanisation, specialization and repetition in the labour process alienate people from the products of their labour as active involvement in the labour process is replaced by a “contemplative” stance where

the observation and manipulation of seemingly independent processes of production takes precedence over such active involvement (*HCC* 89).⁷

Objectively, the thoroughgoing commercialization of society endows the system of commodity production and exchange with a seeming autonomy and independence that becomes a “second nature” to people (*HCC* 86) and renders market exchange a natural form of social interaction. Here the claim is that once exchange has been socially institutionalized, it becomes impossible to think beyond it, to see that capitalism is only one of many forms of social organisation. Moreover, Lukács fuses Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism with Max Weber’s theory of social rationalization. The “principle of rationalisation based on what is *and can be calculated*” (*HCC* 88) becomes the governing principle of society as a whole. In particular, it comes to be the organising principle of the state bureaucracy and the legal system, where calculability and the predictability of outcomes assume supreme importance (not least for the capitalist system itself) (*HCC* 95–96).

Understanding the relationship people form with the social institutions in which they participate in their everyday lives is crucial to Lukács’ analysis of reification and, at one point, he refers to it as the “reification of consciousness” (cf. *HCC* 93). By this he means the susceptibility to identify the *immediate* appearance of our social relations with their essence. As one commentator puts it, the “reification of consciousness is the passive and contemplative intellectual reproduction of the immediacy of reification.”⁸ For example, when Lukács discusses the seeming autonomy and independence of the market he writes that people try to “discover” its laws of movement and use their “knowledge” of these laws to their advantage without thereby intervening into the

process itself (*HCC* 87). Likewise, he suggests that the standardization and formalization of bureaucratic procedures assimilates bureaucrats to workers operating machines, where direct intervention into the process is eschewed (*HCC* 97–99).⁹ Thus Lukács' conception of reified consciousness shows why the subjective and objective sides of reification go hand in hand. As will be seen, Honneth severs this link and focuses on the subjective side of reification. In §VII I will argue that this focus leads him to overestimate the importance of the treatment of *people* as things to the concept of reification.

III. Honneth's Critique of Lukács

Honneth begins his interpretation and critique of Lukács by drawing attention to two features of Lukács' account that will guide his interpretation and reactualization of reification. *First*, Lukács “took reification literally in that he assumed it possible to characterize a certain kind of social behaviour as being mistaken solely because it doesn't correspond with certain ontological facts” (*R* 20). *Second*, the analysis of reification does not depend on any appeal to moral or ethical principles, but conceives of it as a “deviation from a kind of human praxis or worldview essentially characteristic of the rationality of our form of life.” It does not criticise a moral wrong, but delivers “a social-ontological explanation of a certain pathology found in our life practices” (*R* 21).¹⁰ In §V I will argue that the first of these claims is mistaken but, for now, I focus on how Honneth develops his account of reification through a critique of certain features of Lukács' account.

Honneth first criticism is that the categorial means of Lukács' account are insufficient to adequately conceptualize the phenomenon of reification. According to

Honneth, Lukács assumes that the everyday participation in commodity exchange in capitalist society leads subjects to conceive of objects, other subjects and their own abilities exclusively in terms of their utility and profitability to them and designates all of these practices as reification. Moreover, he extends the phenomenon of reification from the economic sphere to other areas of social life in modern capitalist societies, such as the bureaucratic state apparatus and the legal system (and even science and philosophy). Yet, it is altogether unclear how this extension is to be explained and why reification is an adequate description of it. According to Honneth, Lukács is aware of this problem and shifts his analysis to the action-theoretical level, where he observes a change in the behaviour or “style of acting” of those subjects that are permanently involved in commodity exchange. As Honneth puts it,

With this conceptual shift of perspective, 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. Here, the subject is no longer emphatically engaged in interaction with his surroundings, but is instead placed in the perspective of a neutral observer, psychically and existentially untouched by his surroundings. (*R* 24)

This analysis of the contemplative stance enables Honneth to interpret reification as a social pathology, a “habit of thought”, that explains how it can become second nature to people and shape their social relations in all spheres of social life. Once a subject’s consciousness has become reified, it apprehends everything, its natural and social environment and its own inner experience “in a detached and emotionless manner – in short, as things” (*R* 25).

However, if reification is a form of praxis that is structurally false in the sense just described, then it must deviate from a “more genuine or better form of human praxis” (R 26). Honneth distinguishes between an official and unofficial version of such a better or “true” human praxis and argues that Lukács’ *official* version of it robs it “of any chance of social-theoretical justification”, because it is based on the identity philosophy (Honneth’s term) of German idealism, in which “we can speak of undistorted human agency only where an object can be thought of as the product of a subject, and where mind and world therefore ultimately coincide with one another.” Fortunately, Honneth finds a second, *unofficial* version of true human praxis in the text of *History and Class Consciousness*, according to which “an active subject must be conceived as experiencing the world directly or in an unmediated way, as an ‘organic part of his personality,’ and as ‘cooperative,’ while objects can be experienced by the active subject as being ‘qualitatively unique,’ ‘essential,’ and particular in content.” Honneth calls these passages “anthropologically thoroughly plausible”, and suggests that reification “can be understood as an atrophied or distorted form of a more primordial and genuine form of praxis, in which humans take up an emphatic and engaged relationship toward themselves and their surroundings” (R 26–27).¹¹

IV. Honneth’s Recognition-Theoretical Account of Reification

Taking Lukács’ unofficial version of true human praxis as his starting point, Honneth argues that this existential and emphatic relationship with the world, which can be understood as an elementary form of recognition, is both genetically and categorially prior to cognition. In many ways Honneth’s arguments for this recognition-precedes-cognition claim form the most original and fascinating part of his lectures. As will become apparent in §§V–VI, I am less concerned with this claim itself, than with the

role it plays in Honneth's recognition-theoretical account of reification. Honneth offers three arguments in favour of the recognition-precedes-cognition claim. The first argument draws on Heidegger and Dewey. Heidegger's criticism of the subject-object model of experience in *Being and Time* has many commonalities with Lukács' critique of "bourgeois" philosophy in the second "Reification" essay in *History and Class Consciousness*.¹² Heidegger shows through an existential-phenomenological analysis that the world is always already disclosed to us in our everyday lives as a "field of practical significance", rather than first experienced in the neutral, cognitive attitude presupposed by the subject-object model of experience. In Heidegger's terms, we "cope" with the world and stand in a practical relation to it, which he calls "care."¹³ The link between Lukács and Heidegger consists in the idea that for both an emphatic relationship with the world precedes a detached and contemplative one. Hence, "reification has not eliminated the other, non-reified form of praxis, but has merely concealed it from our awareness" (R 30–31). Dewey also criticises the "spectator model" of knowledge and argues that all our experience has a dimension of qualitative engagement to it that reflects our interaction with the world and our immersion in the concrete situations in which we find ourselves. For both the subject-object model of cognition is an abstraction that succeeds this more primordial form of recognition.

If this is right, then Lukács must be wrong in saying that reification has eliminated all traces of proper human praxis. If an emphatic relationship to the world is a condition of possibility for any other form of relationship to it, then the relationship between proper and distorted human praxis must instead be one of *concealment*, as Honneth puts it in Heideggerian language.

The habit, which has become second nature of conceiving one's relationship to oneself and to one's surroundings as an activity of neutral cognition of objective circumstances, bestows over time a reified form on human activity, without ever being able to eradicate the original "caring" character of this activity completely.
(R 33)

Unfortunately, while Honneth criticises Lukács' *official* claim that reification has eliminated all traces of proper human praxis, he offers very little support for the *unofficial* version he favours, according to which Lukács must in fact endorse this concealment thesis, since the complete absence of proper human praxis from modern capitalist life would make it impossible for the proletariat to be guided by it in its struggle against capitalism.¹⁴ I will say a little more about my own view on Lukács' position in §VII. For now, I return to Honneth's arguments in favour of his recognition-precedes-cognition claim.

Honneth's second argument is based on evidence from developmental psychology and socialization research. He reports the findings of research on autism in children, which suggests that the antecedent identification, through emotional attachment, with a psychological parent figure is a condition of possibility for the subsequent ability to take over the perspective of another, in turn a condition of symbolic thought about an objective world. From this he concludes that "a world of meaningful qualities is disclosed to a child *as* a world in which he must involve himself practically" (R 45).¹⁵ Finally, Honneth offers a categorial or conceptual argument. Stanley Cavell's language-philosophical argument in "Knowing and Acknowledging" is said to show that "the fabric of interaction is not, as philosophers often assume, spun out of the material of cognitive acts, but instead out of that of recognition." According to Honneth, Cavell

maintains that “the acknowledgment of the other constitutes a non-epistemic prerequisite for linguistic understanding” (R 50). To be sure, such an acknowledgment does not entail a positive disposition toward the other, but is a condition of possibility for any such particular emotion.¹⁶

Pulling together all of these arguments, Honneth claims that *reification is forgetfulness of recognition (Anerkennungsvergessenheit)*, that is, of the primordial form of recognition that precedes cognition both genetically and categorially.¹⁷ He knows that this claim is problematic in the light of the recognition-precedes-cognition claim: “How then can the process of reification be explicated as a social occurrence, if that which is supposedly lost is of such major significance for human sociality that it must somehow be expressed in *all* social occurrences” (R 53)? He first considers and rejects Lukács’ own explanation in the notorious 1967 preface to the new edition of *History and Class Consciousness*.¹⁸ According to this explanation, reification occurs whenever the emphatic relationship to the world is neutralized to such an extent that an objectifying attitude to the world is achieved. In this construal “objectification” refers to the process whereby subjective and objective components in experience are separated such that objective knowledge can be attained. But such an objectification of thought is a precondition of speech, as well as labour and any number of human activities, as Lukács also notes (*HCC* xxiv). Furthermore, it is implausible that socially compelled objectification equals reification, since that would imply a conflict or tension between recognition and cognition (R 54).¹⁹ Instead, Honneth suggests distinguishing between cases where we remain conscious of the acts of recognition constitutive of our acts of cognition and cases where we are not. The latter constitute reification, a form of “reduced attentiveness” to the fact of antecedent recognition, where “in the act of our

cognition, we lose our attentiveness to the fact that this cognition owes its existence to an antecedent act of recognition” (*R* 59).

Honneth follows Lukács and considers three objects of reification, the self, others and one’s physical surroundings, but he focuses on self-reification and interpersonal reification. The reification of everyday objects, be they natural or artificial, does not play an important role in his account. All he suggests is that it occurs when we forget that such objects possess a “multiplicity of existential meanings for the people around us” (*R* 63); the reification of objects is derivative of interpersonal reification. Self-reification is significantly more complex, as Honneth has to show that the self-relationship is recognitive rather than cognitive in the first instance. In my view, his discussion of this issue is the most successful part of the book. Honneth shows that the proper form of self-relation, our relationship to our own feelings and desires, is exploratory and requires that we take the disclosure and articulation of these feelings and desires to be a worthwhile activity. He contrasts this “expressive” view of our relation to our mental states to two deficient views, called detectivism and constitutivism respectively.²⁰ In the former case, this relationship is conceived as a cognitive one modelled on our cognition of outer objects of experience, and in the latter case it is conceived as voluntarist, in that it is assumed that we create our feelings through our articulation of them (*R* 72). This characterization of self-reification is very promising, and I will return to it briefly in §VII. This leaves Honneth’s account of interpersonal reification, which poses significant problems.

V. A Critique of Honneth (I): Literalness and Moral Injury

Honneth suggests that interpersonal reification follows one of two patterns. It occurs either when “cognitive goals have become completely detached from their original context”, or through a “retrospective denial of recognition for the sake of preserving a prejudice or stereotype” (R 60). In the first case, “we might pursue a goal so energetically and one-dimensionally that we stop paying attention to other, possibly more original and important motives and aims”, and, as a result, “we stop attending to the fact of antecedent recognition, because...the purpose of observing and cognizing our surroundings asserts its independence, so to speak, to such a degree that it banishes everything else to the background.” Originally, Honneth gave the example of a tennis player who is so focused on winning that she forgets that her opponent is her best friend, “for the sake of whom she took up the game in the first place” (R 59), but this example was not well received by his critics during the original Tanner Lectures, and in his “Rejoinder” to these critical responses he acknowledges that it was “most likely a poor choice” (Rej 155).²¹ His new example is the behaviour of soldiers in war, where the purpose of annihilating the enemy becomes independent of all forms of antecedent recognition and even innocent bystanders such as women and children “come to be treated as life-less, thing-like objects that deserve to be murdered and abused” (Rej 156). Since in these cases all attentiveness to “fellow human qualities” is lost, Honneth is inclined to call them cases of reification, rather than emotional indifference.

In the remainder of this section I will argue that Honneth’s examples of interpersonal reification fail due to his insistence that reification be taken *literally* as a social pathology where persons are taken to be things *and* where the extreme instrumentalization this implies is not recognised as a *moral injury*. It seems to me that such literal reification is impossible. Honneth explicitly distinguishes his analysis of

reification from discussions of objectification, which proceed from the Kantian distinction between persons and things and criticise various forms of mistreatment on moral grounds.²² Thus, according to Martha Nussbaum's analysis of sexual objectification, treating a person as an object (or as a thing, as Kant would have it) implies one or more of the following: their instrumentalization, the denial of their autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership or denial of their subjectivity.²³ However, none of the various forms of mistreatment Nussbaum discusses constitute the literal treatment of a person as a thing; rather, the moral injury consists precisely in the fact that a person is treated *as if* she was a mere thing.

By contrast, Honneth means his examples to suggest that the tennis player and the soldiers in war treat their opposites literally as things. But I cannot see how this could be the case. Maybe the tennis player really forgets (in Honneth's specific sense) that her opponent is her friend and focuses solely on winning the match, but her competitive attitude still depends upon the presence of the other. One cannot really win a game against a thing.²⁴ Likewise, maybe soldiers in war sometimes really come to think that the women and children they encounter are fair game for abusing and killing. But one cannot abuse or kill a thing, and I would suggest that the satisfaction (if that is the right word) that hordes of looting, raping and murdering soldiers gain through those deeds may be explained best in terms of its illicit character, that is, the temporary ability to inflict *on people* pain and suffering that they could never inflict on anyone in any other circumstances. It remains the case that both winning and humiliating presuppose the presence of the other, so that he or she can be defeated or humiliated.²⁵

I also disagree with Honneth's view that the two cases under discussion are not open to *moral* evaluation. Honneth seems to agree with Lukács that reification cannot be conceived as moral misconduct or a violation of moral principles because "it lacks the element of subjective intent" required by moral evaluation (cf. *R* 25–26). But this characterisation of the domain in which moral evaluation is appropriate is far too narrow. To see this, consider Barbara Herman's discussion of responsibility and moral competence. Herman starts with a familiar picture of moral development, where we acquire some virtues and some faults from those who are responsible for our moral education. The question then becomes how we bridge the gap between the limits of our moral character and the requirements of moral competence and responsibility.²⁶ For present purposes, I am particularly interested in Herman's claim that we can hold someone responsible for their moral *blind spots* if they are otherwise morally competent. Her example concerns a man whose cruel and abusive upbringing has damaged his moral character and made him a certain kind of "casual abuser", too, someone who seeks and betrays trust and intimacy in personal relationships. As Herman points out, it will not be sufficient to consider his motives "just-prior-to-action"; rather, her first step is to ascertain that the casual abuser is morally competent across a wide range of situations and, therefore, "satisfies normal conditions of imputability and responsibility, extending to nonintentional wrongdoing."²⁷ The second step is to ascertain that he is not psychologically compelled to betray his lovers, but acts for his own reasons when he does. He has incorporated his particular needs in his conception of the good and, whether with a bad conscience or not, he acts on them. It is for these reasons that we hold the casual abuser responsible for his actions. As Herman puts it, "his actions are not beyond his reach. He has the capability to identify them for what they are...[a]nd he is able, if he chooses, to avoid causing injury."²⁸

Consider Honneth's tennis player example in the light of this discussion. Honneth must assume that the reduced attentiveness to her friend's presence is not a momentary lapse of attention, but characteristic of her approach to racket games in general.²⁹ But then we can imagine her friends telling her that she is inconsiderate when competitive, and she will understand what they are saying. After all, she is competitive, she wants to win and she acts from her conception of the good when she plays as she does. She is not subject to some compulsion that makes her do it. Moreover, her energetic and one-dimensional focus on winning asserts itself every time she plays, and if this is pointed out to her regularly, her friends will expect her to acknowledge this to herself and to work on it. If she does not, they will hold her responsible for who she is as well as for what she does. The same holds for the behaviour of soldiers in war. We hold them responsible for what they do in the sense that we attribute to them knowledge of what is right and wrong and judge them accordingly.³⁰

Finally, let us turn to the second pattern of interpersonal reification, the forgetting of antecedent recognition due to "thought schemata and prejudices that are irreconcilable with this fact" (*R* 59). Here Honneth also speaks of denial or defensiveness. Apparently, he has prejudices such as sexism, anti-Semitism and racism in mind (cf. *R* 78, 81) and, again, I would suggest that Honneth has got his phenomenology wrong. Sexism, anti-Semitism and racism are attitudes and practices where Jews, women or people of other races come to be seen as lesser humans, who can be looked down upon, discriminated against and, in the worst case, killed or maimed. But I cannot see why these attitudes and practices should be construed as treatment as a thing *in a literal sense*. Rather, it seems to me, the victims of sexual, anti-Semitic or racial discrimination are treated *as if*

they do not count as full persons in some sense.³¹ As to the moral evaluation of these attitudes and practices, I think it is fair to say that in most Western societies sexism, anti-Semitism and racism are widely condemned and their incompatibility with our conceptions of respect for persons is recognised. Of course, these attitudes and practices still exist, but they are recognised for what they are, and their morally injurious character is obvious.³²

This consideration of Honneth's examples in terms of moral responsibility leads to an important conclusion. The reason why the tennis player and the soldiers in war are responsible for their actions is that neither act in a vacuum. The tennis player lives a life in which moral considerations count in her relationships with others. Honneth's construal of the example renders her behaviour on the tennis court *exceptional*. But it is precisely this exceptional character of her transgression that makes its moral evaluation possible. She should know better. The same is true of the behaviour of soldiers in war and of sexists, anti-Semites and racists. For reification to be unrecognisable as a moral injury it must be a part of everyday life and its damaging effects must be below the radar, as it were, unrecognisable on the basis of our everyday moral commitments.

Thus Honneth's examples of interpersonal reification fail on his own terms, and I believe that the reason for this failure is that the twin characterisation of reification as *both literal and not recognizable as a moral injury* cannot be made sense of. As Honneth acknowledges in the rejoinder to his critics, true cases of reification (on his definition) are "improbable", "rare" and "exceptional" (*Rej* 154, 157). In fact, I have not been able to find a single example of it in his text. True, he suggests three more cases of *literal* reification, namely, slavery, human trafficking (a "modern" form of slavery

found in the sex trade) and the industrial mass murder during the Holocaust (*Rej* 149, 158). But even if these cases entail the literal treatment of persons as things (and I am not at all sure that they do), they are still not cases of reification on Honneth’s account, since they certainly violate moral principles, and our outrage at them is based on our moral judgments about them! One way of putting this is to say that the case Honneth discusses, literal reification that is not recognisable as a moral injury, does not exist:

	<i>Recognisable Moral Injury</i>	<i>No recognisable Moral Injury</i>
<i>Literal understanding</i>	(Possibly) slavery, human trafficking, the Holocaust	X
<i>Metaphorical understanding</i> ³³	Objectification (Nussbaum)	Reification

Table 1: Possible combinations of moral status and literal/metaphorical understandings of reification

VI. A Critique of Honneth (II): Autism, Anthropology and Antecedent Recognition

I now move on to the second aspect of Honneth’s recognition-theoretical account of reification that I wish to criticise in this paper. So far, I have argued that no literal conception of reification is possible. Now I would like to argue that Honneth’s account, because it is based on anthropological considerations, is essentially ahistorical. This claim can be supported by two considerations. First, consider once more Honneth’s contrast of reified consciousness with Lukács’ unofficial conception of genuine or true human praxis (see §III). Whereas reified consciousness apprehends its natural and social environment and its own mental states “in a detached and emotionless manner – in short, as things” (*R* 25), a genuine or true human praxis is one where ‘an active

subject must be conceived as experiencing the world directly or in an unmediated way, as an “organic part of his personality,’ and as ‘cooperative,’ while objects can be experienced by the active subject as being ‘qualitatively unique,’ ‘essential,’ and particular in content” (R 26–27). The same contrast reappears when Honneth discusses the empirical evidence for his recognition-precedes-cognition claim (see §IV). He argues that research on developmental psychology and socialization research shows that cognitive access to the world depends on prior emotional attachment to a caregiver and suggests that autistic children’s cognitive abilities are impaired by their inability to establish such emotional attachments. This argument effectively equates the absence of antecedent recognition with autism.³⁴

The first thing to say about Honneth’s arguments is that they establish a *difference in kind* between reified and non-reified consciousness. To return to his examples of interpersonal reification, Honneth does not think that the over-ambitious tennis player or the soldiers in war act as they do because countervailing reasons are silenced or defeated due to their immersion in a specific situation, be it a very competitive game of tennis or deployment in a combat zone.³⁵ Rather, he thinks that, at this point in time, they literally do not inhabit a practical standpoint from which responsiveness to the presence of others is possible. This characterization of reified consciousness has two consequences. On the one hand, it renders reification utterly discontinuous with everyday life in which moral reasons do count. On the other hand, absent some further explanation, reification becomes essentially ahistorical. Presumably, a direct and unmediated experience of the world and the experience of objects as qualitatively unique and essential could be had by almost everyone at almost every time. Moreover, it seems that if antecedent recognition is contrasted with autism, then everyone who is

not autistic can, in principle, live a non-reified life. What we really need at this stage is an account of the social and historical circumstances, which make it possible that people regress (if this is the right word) to a state in which they do not recognise people as people. However, Honneth's focus on the subjective side of reification prevents him from offering such an account.

However, even if Honneth could offer such an account, it far from clear whether it would serve an explanatory function. To see this, recall that, for Honneth, antecedent recognition is an anthropologically necessary, pre-rational condition of possibility for the recognition of someone as a human being. But, as he also points out, it is not possible to speak of norms or principles of reciprocal recognition on the basis of this antecedent form of recognition. Rather,

Normatively substantial forms of recognition such as are embodied in social institutions of traditional honor, modern love, or equal law, represent instead various manners in which the existential scheme of experience opened up by elementary recognition gets “filled out” historically. (*Rej* 152)

Honneth's explanation of “filling out” is ambivalent, because it mirrors his strategy in establishing *both* the categorial *and* genetic priority of antecedent recognition. On the one hand, he suggests that antecedent recognition is “a kind of transcendental condition” for the normatively substantial forms of recognition while, on the other hand, he suggests that it is a developmentally earlier form of recognition, which is subsequently enriched by these normatively substantial forms in the process of socialization (*Rej* 153).³⁶

In any case, this characterization of the relationship between antecedent and substantial forms of recognition raises the question of why Honneth appeals to antecedent recognition at all. After all, he could conceive of reification as forgetfulness of a specific, socially and historically adequate form of substantial recognition. This alternative makes possible an analysis of failures of recognition in terms of the specific reasons people have to relate to others in certain ways. Why, we might ask, does the tennis player fail to recognise her friend *as a friend*? How did her desire to win a game of tennis become more important than spending time with her? What happened to this friendship, *a historically specific social relationship*? The same could be asked of the soldiers in war. Why, we might ask, do they fail to recognise civilians in war as human beings, whose bodily integrity and status as persons is worthy of recognition? The answer to this question might appeal to an analysis of socially produced indifference *in a specific historical situation*³⁷, but it seems to me that such indifference is best understood in terms of the absence of certain moral reasons, rather than as a pathology where an anthropologically necessary form of recognition is temporarily suspended.³⁸

VII. What is Reification? Two Criteria

In §§V–VI I have argued that Honneth’s reactualization of reification fails, at least where the interpersonal case is concerned. If I am right, then this failure is due to the two aspects of his account that I have tracked throughout this paper, his insistence that reification be taken literally and the ahistorical anthropological basis he gives it. Earlier, I suggested that Honneth’s account of reification focuses on the subjective side of reification to the detriment of its objective side and that this leads him to overemphasise the action-theoretical aspect of reification to the detriment of its cognitive aspect. The importance of these insights is that they enable us to formulate two *adequacy criteria*

that any alternative account of reification will have to meet: (i) it must explain how it is possible that the treatment of people *as if* they were things can fail to be recognised as a moral injury, and (ii) it must explain reification as a social pathology that has specific social-historical conditions. It should be clear by now that the objective side of reification has an important part in both of these claims.

(i) Treating people as if they were things

In §V I argued that it is not possible to literally treat a person as a thing in a manner that is not recognisable as a moral injury. This raises the question of whether reification involves the treatment of people *as if* they were things and, if it does, what such treatment entails. As we have seen, it cannot entail the extreme instrumentalization or dehumanization that Honneth has in mind when he designates slavery, human trafficking and the Holocaust as forms of reification, because such treatment is readily recognised as moral injury. Thus what we are looking for, and what we expect from any account of reification is an explanation of how such metaphorical reification is possible in everyday life without being recognised as moral injury.

Lukács' account of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* suggests that the everyday participation in commodity exchange leads us to conceive of our own and others' abilities and powers as commodities ready to be exchanged on the market (see §II), and it seems to me that this is the kind of treatment of people as if they were things that is implied in reification. Here the subjective and objective sides of reification go hand in hand. It is only because commodity exchange is all-pervasive in modern capitalist societies that people begin to commodify aspects of life that were non-commodified before (including their own and others' abilities and powers). Moreover, it

is only in capitalist societies that such commodification seems *natural*, and, in my view, it is this naturalising character of commodity exchange that is best described by reification.

To see this, consider a more recent critique of commodification. According to Margaret Jane Radin, universal commodification is a conceptual scheme, according to which “all things desired or valued – from personal attributes to good government – are commodities”, subject to free market exchanges in principle, and where the market is universalized both literally and metaphorically (where non-commodified objects are considered as if a market existed for them, for example children or body parts).³⁹ This universalization of market rhetoric entails value commensurability, which here means that all values can be expressed in monetary terms and therefore be compared as to their relative value, and a specific view of human freedom as the ability to freely exchange one’s possessions on the market. It also entails “extreme objectification”, because commodities “are socially constructed as objects separate from the self and social relations.” Universal commodification

assimilates personal attributes, relations, and desired states of affairs to the realm of objects by assuming that all human attributes are possessions bearing a value characterizable in money terms, and by implying that all these possessions can and should be separable from persons to be exchanged through the free market.⁴⁰

As Radin points out, this account of commodification and the objectification it entails closely resembles Lukács’ account of reification.⁴¹ However, there is a very important difference between the two. Radin’s critique of commodification is a transcendent form of *moral* critique. She defends a version of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen’s neo-

Aristotelian human capabilities approach and argues that some forms of commodification are morally objectionable, because they threaten human flourishing.⁴²

By contrast, reification is not a moral injury but a social pathology. The importance of this difference cannot be overstated. The moral critique of commodification is always a critique of commodification in a specific domain (human sexuality, the provision of organ transplants or education, for example). Radin is convinced that commodification is incomplete and must remain incomplete⁴³, and that market and non-market understandings of value compete, as it were, on an equal footing. By contrast, Lukács assumed that once the commodity form exists, universal commodification becomes inevitable and will persist until the capitalist system as a whole is overthrown.⁴⁴ Of course, his hopes of a proletarian revolution that would overthrow capitalism have dissipated in the twentieth century. However, the salient feature of his assumption is the claim that as long as capitalism as a social form exists, modern subjects will, as a matter of fact, relate to themselves and to others in objectifying ways, because the conceptual scheme of universal commodification has been *naturalized* and *internalized* by modern subjects, and because this instrumental and strategic attitude is a prerequisite for success in attaining their goals. Honneth's discussion of self-reification is very instructive in this context, because it shows how the increasing pressure on subjects to "sell" their personal attributes or character traits in job interviews and in online-dating deforms their self-relation (R 83). Unfortunately, he is unwilling to extend this analysis to interpersonal relationships and the attainment of social goods. Instead, he suggests that the objectification of exchange partners cannot be equated with reification, because in exchange the other remains present to us as a distinct person (as bearer both of individual characteristics and of legal rights) (R 76, *Rej* 157). But this claim is only an

objection to Lukács because Honneth operates with a *literal* conception of reification, where reification means to deny someone's existence as a human being. If, as I have urged in §V, we take reification *metaphorically*, it can be understood as the claim that we relate to others or to social institutions in terms of their objectified attributes that are useful or valuable to us *and* that this behaviour seems natural to us.

(ii) *The social and historical conditions of reification*

My discussion of commodification has suggested already that reification has social and historical conditions. According to Lukács, reification only occurs when commodity production and exchange have penetrated all aspects of society (cf. *HCC* 84–85), because it is only when capitalism is all-pervasive that people start seeing it as the *natural* social form. This account is preferable to Honneth's because it explains which social circumstances incline people to relate to themselves, others and their social institutions in reified and reifying manners. But there is another aspect to this, namely, the normative question of how reification comes to be seen as a social pathology. This consideration leads to one of the biggest problems in appropriating Lukács' theory of reification for today's social philosophy. When he wrote *History and Class Consciousness* a few years after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia Lukács had reason to be optimistic about imminent revolutions in Western Europe, and particularly in Germany. As a result, Lukács does not offer an argument about the specific social pathology engendered by reification. For him, reification is bad because it prevents the proletariat from seeing its world-historical mission, to overthrow capitalism.⁴⁵

From our perspective at the beginning of the twenty-first century we can no longer do without a normative foundation for the claim that reification is a social pathology.

Honneth's account of literal reification provides such a foundation; if antecedent recognition is forgotten or suspended, the literal treatment of people as things makes possible their use and abuse in slavery, human trafficking and so on. Since I reject Honneth's account, I will sketch a very rough outline of a normative foundation for reification that is mindful of the social and historical conditions of its occurrence in the remainder of this paper.

According to Honneth, Lukács' account of genuine human praxis robs it of any chance of social-theoretical justification, because it appeals to Fichte's notion of the mind's spontaneous activity and Hegel's subject-object identity, issuing in the claim that all reality "is ultimately engendered by the productive activity of the species" (*R* 29), and that the subject is not opposed by any otherness (see §III).⁴⁶ By contrast, I would argue that Fichte and Hegel's claims express (albeit in an obscure and difficult to understand manner) a fundamental aspect of our self-understanding as modern subjects. To say that reality is engendered by the activity of the species is to say that the world is ours and of our making. This is particularly relevant to the reality of our social institutions, which we (that is we *modern* subjects, unlike our pre-modern predecessors) have come to expect to be of our making (and to depend on our assent), rather than God-given or the product of natural law, custom or tradition. For these institutions determine whether we can live our own, free lives (where the freedom at issue here is one which we can no longer give up, because it is central to our self-conception as modern agents).

To be sure, there is much more to be said about which conditions must be fulfilled so that we can say that the world is ours and of our making. In particular, to make this

argument work, I would have to show that the economic conception of freedom implicit in the worldview of universal commodification is inadequate for these purposes, and that the market models of freedom, democracy and the state fail us in a way that is incompatible with our self-conception as modern subjects.⁴⁷ This understanding of Lukács' appeal to Fichte and Hegel, which goes beyond Lukács' own intentions, goes some way toward explaining why modern subjects suffer from reification. They suffer from it because it alienates them from the social institutions in which they routinely participate and which determine the kinds of lives they can live.⁴⁸ Moreover, reification diminishes freedom in a very specific sense: it forecloses possibilities for individual and social change, because it represents the world in its immediate *this-ness* as the only possible world. This is why reification is bad.

VIII. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined Axel Honneth's reactualization of reification. I have argued that, as an account of interpersonal reification⁴⁹, it fails on its own terms due to Honneth's insistence that reification be taken literally and his inability to elucidate the social and historical specificity of reification as a social pathology. In §VII I sketched the very rough outline of an alternative account of reification. While this account will have to be developed much further before it can be put to use, I would suggest that reification is a promising concept for social criticism and that its reactualization along the lines I have suggested here remains desirable.⁵⁰

Notes

¹ Axel Honneth, *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea*, trans. Joseph Ganahl, ed. Martin Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 17 (henceforth *R*). This is an expanded version of Honneth's 2005 Tanner Lectures, which were published in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Grete B. Petersen (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), vol. 26, pp. 89–135. The Oxford edition contains two more chapters, the critical responses to the lectures and Honneth's rejoinder: Judith Butler, "Taking another's view: ambivalent implications", pp. 97–119, Raymond Geuss, "Philosophical anthropology and social criticism", pp. 120–30, and Jonathan Lear, "The slippery middle", pp. 131–43, Honneth, "Rejoinder", pp. 147–59 (henceforth *Rej*). The German version, *Verdinglichung. Eine anerkennungstheoretische Studie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), contains the two additional chapters but not the responses.

² In fact, Frankfurt School critical theory is probably the only academic movement in which reification has played a significant role throughout the twentieth century. Adorno's writings address reification frequently both as a philosophical problem and a social diagnosis and Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* is intended as a major restatement of the critique of reification. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 399.

³ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 83 (henceforth *HCC*). German version: *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein. Studien zur Marxistischen Dialektik* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1969). I have modified some translations.

⁴ Hannah Pitkin has found no fewer than 21 meanings for reification, around half of them in the text of *History and Class Consciousness* itself. Cf. Hannah Pitkin, “Rethinking reification”, *Theory and Society* 16:2 (1987): 293, n. 88.

⁵ For more detail on Lukács and *History and Class Consciousness* see, for example, Andrew Arato, “Lukács’ theory of reification”, *Telos* 11 (1972): 25–66; Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); Jean Grondin, “Reification from Lukács to Habermas”, in *Lukács Today. Essays in Marxist Philosophy*, ed. Tom Rockmore (Dordrecht NL: Reidel, 1988), pp. 86–107; Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács. From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (London: New Left Books, 1979); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Western Marxism”, in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 30–58; and Rüdiger Dannemann, *Das Prinzip Verdinglichung. Studie zur Philosophie Georg Lukács’* (Frankfurt: Sandler, 1987).

⁶ In fact, this discussion draws as much on Max Weber and Georg Simmel as on Marx. Cf. Dannemann, *Das Prinzip Verdinglichung*, chapters 3–4.

⁷ The similarities of Lukács’ account of subjective reification with the early Marx’s theory of alienated labour is striking, given that the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* had not been discovered yet when Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness*.

Cf. Karl Marx, “Economic and philosophical manuscripts” (1844), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), vol. 3, pp. 270–82. Marx discusses four forms of alienation: (i) alienation from the product of labour, (ii) alienation from the process of labour, (iii) alienation from species being, and (iv) alienation from other people. The clearest discussion of alienation that I know of is

Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), chapter 1.

⁸ Arato, “Lukács’ theory of reification”, p. 37.

⁹ As Grondin puts it, “the subject loses its active character in order to become the passive spectator of what happens to it. Man no longer appears as the bearer and the accountable source of social reality, as the axle which makes the system, but as one of its cogs” (“Reification from Lukács to Habermas”, p. 90).

¹⁰ Here Honneth draws on his conception of a social pathology developed in an earlier paper. Cf. Axel Honneth, “Pathologies of the social: the past and present of social philosophy”, reprinted in *Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 3–48.

¹¹ The words in single inverted commas in the second quotation are Lukács’.

¹² In this essay Lukács argues that bourgeois philosophy and bourgeois science are reified, too. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss this claim in this paper.

¹³ Of course, as Raymond Geuss points out, the quasi-transcendental structure of “care” in Heidegger prohibits any inference from such care to any concrete relationship to the self, others or the world. In particular, it does not imply any “positive” relationship (“Philosophical anthropology and social criticism”, p. 127). In fact, this is fairly clear from Heidegger’s characterisation of care (*Sorge*) as opposed to worry (*Besorgnis*) or carefreeness (*Sorglosigkeit*). Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §41. Honneth acknowledges this in *Rej* 151–52.

¹⁴ This is a version of a well-known issue in critical social theory: how can the normative commitments of immanent social criticism be reconciled with the negativism of its analysis? Honneth’s work has always eschewed negativism, but here I find his

case under-argued. For an excellent discussion of this “normative problem” in critical theory see James Gordon Finlayson, “Morality and critical theory: on the normative problem of Frankfurt School social criticism”, *Telos* 149 (2009): 1–35.

¹⁵ Honneth thinks that Theodor W. Adorno has a similar argument in *Minima Moralia*.

¹⁶ Cf. Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and acknowledging”, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 238–66. As Geuss points out, Honneth equates recognition and acknowledgment, but it is not entirely clear whether they refer to the same phenomenon (“Philosophical anthropology and social criticism”, p. 130, n. 6).

¹⁷ The suggestion that “all reification is a forgetting” goes back to Adorno, who used this phrase at least three times in writing. Cf. Adorno’s letter to Benjamin dated 29. February 1940, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928–40*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p. 321; Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 191; and Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Christoph Gödde (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 150.

¹⁸ I don’t think that this criticism has any additional weight becomes it comes from Lukács himself. He is a notoriously unreliable commentator on his own work, because he constantly adjusted his pronouncement to the political constellation in which he found himself.

¹⁹ In addition to his criticism of Lukács’ account, Honneth also criticises Habermas’ attempt to explain how reification occurs. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas suggests that reification is “a pathological de-formation of the

communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld” that occurs when the steering media of the social system (money and power) take over mechanisms of action coordination which cannot be removed from the lifeworld without such pathological consequences. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 375. According to Honneth, this strategy of explanation burdens the functional explanations at issue with a normative weight that they cannot shoulder (R 55).

²⁰ Honneth takes these terms and the phenomenology of the self-relation they signify from Davis H. Finkelstein, *Expression and the Inner* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), chapters 1–2.

²¹ Thus Butler and Lear criticise Honneth’s radical separation of instrumental and engaged behaviour, arguing that effective instrumental (and even exploitative) action often requires engagement. See Butler, “Taking another’s view”, p. 107, and Lear, “The slippery middle”, pp. 134–35.

²² In the *Groundwork* Kant draws the distinction between a person and a thing in the following manner: “Beings the existence of which rests not on our will but on nature, if they are beings without reason, still have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called *things*, whereas rational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means, and hence so far limits all choice (and is an object of respect).” Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, ed. Christine Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ak 4: 428. Since persons are ends in themselves and things mere means, the instrumentalization of persons is always morally problematic. In fact, Barbara Herman has suggested that the acknowledgment of the distinction between persons and things is constitutive of moral

literacy *per se* (“Responsibility and moral competence”, in *Moral Literacy* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007], p. 97). In what follows I draw on Herman’s discussion.

²³ Cf. Martha Nussbaum, “Objectification”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24:4 (1995): 257.

²⁴ It seems to me that the only game one really could win against a thing is a game of computer chess. And in that case there is a fundamental asymmetry built into the encounter that renders playing a computer essentially different from playing another person. At least that is how it seems to me. I am very grateful to Daniel Steuer for pressing this objection on me.

²⁵ As an aside, Honneth seems to reduce these “unofficial” activities of the soldiers to side effects of their official tasks, but in my view that won’t do as a phenomenological explanation of these atrocities. They can only appear as such side effects from the vantage point of an analysis that presupposes that the official tasks of these soldiers can be neatly separated from their unofficial “side effects” (cf. *Rej* 155–56).

²⁶ Cf. Herman, “Responsibility and moral competence”, p. 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.

²⁹ If it were a mere lapse, brought on perhaps by an act of concentration or exertion, then it would be overcome either when the concentration or exertion subsided or when pointed out. But Honneth, like Lukács, thinks that reification cannot be overcome by being pointed out (*R* 25, cf. *HCC* 87).

³⁰ There is a different question to be asked about whether on occasion it seems appropriate to *excuse* or *forgive* certain kinds of misbehaviour if exonerating

circumstances prevail. But this is very different from suggesting that no wrong has been done.

³¹ Thus maybe women are not counted as *full* members of the workforce, Jews are not counted as *full* Germans or Brits or Americans and people of other races are not counted as *full* citizens. If “treatment as a thing” means anything in these cases it means that their full personhood is denied in some sense.

³² The history of the civil rights struggles in the United States and the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa also suggest that these struggles were always already *moral* as well as political “struggles for recognition.”

³³ At one point, Honneth calls this metaphorical understanding of reification “fictive reification” (*Rej* 157).

³⁴ I am grateful to Brian O’Connor, who first drew my attention to the importance of the contrast between antecedent recognition and autism for Honneth’s account of reification.

³⁵ On silenced and defeated reasons see Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 47ff. and 109ff. Briefly, a reason is silenced when a categorical reason trumps it; it is defeated when another reason outweighs it.

³⁶ Elsewhere, Honneth suggests that there are three principal forms of intersubjective recognition that are necessary conditions for personal integrity and a successful life, love, respect and social esteem. See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1995), especially chapters 5 and 9. He further elaborates on the third form of recognition in his discussion with Nancy Fraser. Cf. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

³⁷ On the issue of socially produced indifference see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), especially chapter 1. Of course, Bauman's account has a similar problem to Honneth's, in that it also posits a *natural* morality that is eroded through certain social practices, whereas it seems to me that the right account of socially produced indifference is one where a socially produced concern with others is eroded by other social mechanisms.

³⁸ In fact, Honneth has suggested such an account of recognition in an earlier paper, which considers the phenomenology of social "invisibility", that is "non-existence in a social sense." (Axel Honneth, "Invisibility: on the epistemology of recognition", trans. Maeve Cooke and Jeff Seitzer, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 75 [2001]: 111–26). Taking Ralph Ellison's novel, *The Invisible Man*, as his example, Honneth discusses the case of a black man who is socially invisible, because he is studiously ignored, "looked through", by the white people he encounters (pp. 111–15). This invisibility is produced by the absence or denial of recognition, but the recognition at issue here is more substantial than antecedent recognition, in that it implies a moral commitment to limit one's egocentric behaviour and to behave benevolently toward the other.

As Honneth points out, this form of recognition is very similar to Kant's conception of respect, and he suggests that "morality coincide[s] with recognition" in the sense that the recognition of the other as a source of valid claims is a prerequisite of any more substantial form of morality (p. 123). For present purposes it is especially noteworthy that the recognition-precedes-cognition claim holds for this form of recognition, too, because the perception of other persons is always already morally loaded. According to Honneth, it is only in exceptional cases that a mere perception of another human being occurs, and in these cases the original recognition is "neutralized" (p. 126).

This account of elementary recognition fulfils a parallel function to antecedent recognition, but it does not appeal to an anthropological model of forgetfulness of recognition. Rather, it locates the social pathology at the level of people's attitudes and dispositions towards others. And while this social pathology is not reification, I find it much more convincing as an analysis of forgetfulness of recognition than Honneth's recognition-theoretical account of reification. Apparently, Honneth now assumes that antecedent recognition provides the foundation for this form of recognition (cf. *R* 90, n. 70). But that still doesn't explain why forgetfulness of recognition has to be conceptualized on the level of antecedent recognition.

³⁹ Margaret Jane Radin, *Contested Commodities. The Trouble with Trade in Sex, Children, Body Parts, and Other Things* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 2. Elsewhere Radin writes that universal commodification is a "conceptual scheme that supposes, for purposes of justification and explanation, that every human interaction is a sale" (p. 21).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–83.

⁴² Likewise, Elizabeth Anderson's critique of commodification is a *moral* critique in that it contrasts the cost-benefit analysis usually associated with the universal commodification view with Charles Taylor's expressive theory of rational action. Cf. Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). For a thoughtful discussion of Anderson's and Radin's books see Rahel Jaeggi, "The market's price", *Constellations* 8:3 (2001): 400–412.

Finally, Stephen Wilkinson's qualified defence of organ sales, baby sales and the patenting of DNA is also the result of a critical analysis and, eventual, rejection of

moral objections to these practices. Cf. Stephen Wilkinson, *Bodies for Sale. Ethics and Exploitation in the Human Body Trade* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴³ Radin believes that there are both conceptual and empirical reasons to believe that commodification is and must remain incomplete (*Contested Commodities*, pp. 102–14).

⁴⁴ Radin calls this the domino theory of contagious commodification (*ibid.*, p. 95).

⁴⁵ On this problematic, and the problems of a theory of revolution in general, see Arato and Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, chapter 9.

⁴⁶ In *History and Class Consciousness* Hegel's subject-object identity becomes the claim that the proletariat is the identical subject-object of history (cf. *HCC* 149).

It is ironic that Honneth dismisses Fichte and Hegel in this manner, since elsewhere he shows how productive the reactualization of German idealist social philosophy can be. See, for example, Axel Honneth, *Suffering from Indeterminacy. An Attempt at a Reactualization of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2000).

⁴⁷ Moreover, some sociologists and philosophers have argued that the modern capitalist system involves a trade-off, whereby increased efficiency and social wealth are acquired at the cost of direct participation and understanding of the complex processes that make these increases possible. A full account of reification will have to consider this argument and establish a criterion by which the justification of this trade-off can be evaluated.

⁴⁸ The relationship between reification and alienation is a complex one, and I am unable to examine it here. Rahel Jaeggi draws attention to the overlap that exists between *some* forms of alienation and reification as I conceive of it here. Cf. Rahel Jaeggi, *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2005), pp. 22, 42.

⁴⁹ As I have said (see §§IV+VII), I think that Honneth's account of self-reification is much more promising.

⁵⁰ This paper has been in the making for some time, and I have presented earlier versions to audiences at three conferences: *Society for European Philosophy/Forum for European Philosophy Third Annual Joint Conference*, University of Sussex, Brighton, September 2007, *Re-Thinking the Frankfurt School*, York University, Toronto, September 2007, and *Beyond Reification: Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis*, John Cabot University, Rome, May 2008. I am grateful to these audiences for helpful discussions. I am particularly grateful to Bert van den Brink and Fred Neuhouser for valuable advice on a much earlier draft of this paper, and to Gordon Finlayson, Brian O'Connor and Daniel Steuer for detailed comments on a later draft.