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Ontology of the False State

On the Relation Between Critical Theory, Social Philosophy, and Social Ontology

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Abstract: In this paper I will argue that critical theory needs to make its socio-ontological commitments explicit, whilst on the other hand I will posit that contemporary social ontology needs to amend its formalistic approach by embodying a critical theory perspective. In the first part of my paper I will discuss how the question was posed in Horkheimer's essays of the 1930s, which leave open two options: (1) a constructive inclusion of social ontology within social philosophy, or else (2) a program of social philosophy that excludes social ontology. Option (2) corresponds to Adorno's position, which I argue is forced to recur to a hidden social ontology. Following option (1), I first develop a meta-critical analysis of Searle, arguing that his social ontology presupposes a notion of 'recognition' which it cannot account for. Furthermore, by means of a critical reading of Honneth, I argue that critical theory could incorporate a socio-ontological approach, giving value to the constitutive socio-ontological role of recognition and to the socio-ontological role of objectification. I will finish with a proposal for a socio-ontological characterization of reification which involves that the basic occurrence of recognition is to be grasped at the level of background practices.

Keywords: Social ontology; Critical theory; Recognition; Reification; Searle; Honneth; Horkheimer; Adorno.

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1 Introduction

In this paper I will analyze certain aspects of the relation between social philosophy, social ontology, and critical theory. On the one hand, I will argue that critical theory needs to make its socio-ontological commitments explicit, whilst on the other hand I will posit that social ontology needs to amend its formalistic approach by embodying a critical theory perspective. A key role in my argumentative strategy will be played by the notion of ‘recognition,’ which will serve as a bridge category between contemporary social ontology – where recognition is addressed mainly in terms of the act of ‘acceptance’ of statuses – and contemporary critical theory – where the intersubjective dynamics of recognitive interaction between agents is thematized (Habermas 1994; Honneth 1995).

In the first part of my paper I will discuss how the question of the relation between social philosophy, social ontology, and critical theory was posed in Max Horkheimer’s essays of the thirties, and I will explore two options that these texts leave open within classical critical theory: (1) a constructive and critical inclusion of social ontology within social philosophy, or (2) an understanding of social philosophy that excludes social ontology. In the second part of my paper, leaving option (1) in the background, I will analyze some general features of a prominent contemporary model of social ontology, namely John Searle’s “philosophy of society” (Searle 2010, p. 5), which could be read, to use Horkheimer’s terms, as a contemporary example of constructive inclusion of social ontology within social philosophy. I will offer a critical analysis of Searle’s approach, assessing both its value as a contribution to an understanding of recognition (*qua* acceptance) in terms of social ontology – including what might be called a post-metaphysical re-evaluation of the problem of objectification – as well as the shortcomings of Searle’s formalistic approach to social reality, which leads to a constructive yet uncritical way of including social ontology within social philosophy. In the third part of my paper I will consider the traditional rejection of social ontology in the Frankfurt School critical theory – option (2) – which is epitomized by Theodor W. Adorno’s labeling of dialectics, both of the Hegelian dialectics of objective spirit and his own negative dialectics, as an “*Ontologie des falschen Zustandes*”: “ontology of the false state of things”, or “ontology of the false condition” (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 11, my translation). I will try to show that such a negative understanding is in fact forced to resort to a hidden social ontology. Thus the very idea of an “ontology of the false state” can become productive once its paradoxical character is amended and the socio-ontological commitment of critical theory is explicitly articulated. In the fourth part of my paper I will try to put forward some ideas on how option (1) could be pursued and reconstructed within contemporary debates. In this sense I will explore some ideas on how critical theory, understood as a kind

of social philosophy that is both descriptive and critical, could incorporate a socio-ontological approach, giving value both to the constitutive socio-ontological role of recognition, and to the socio-ontological role of objectification. This will lead me to argue that a distinction between recognitive ‘objectification’ and ‘reification’ should be reintroduced in order to make sense of the very idea of an “ontology of the false state”. I will then try to read Axel Honneth’s fundamental ontology of recognition and his theory of reification within the framework sketched out so far, developing some ideas on how an ontology of intersubjective recognition could be combined with a social ontology of the constitution of objective spheres through recognitive objectification. I will then go back to Searle, arguing that even his theory immanently demands a distinction between objectification and reification to be drawn. I will finish with a proposal for a socio-ontological characterization of reification – understood as having the habitual mode of being of a second nature – which means that the basic occurrence of recognition is to be grasped at the level of background practices, pre-intentional habits, rather than at the level of intentional beliefs and attributive practices.

2 Horkheimer and the Task of Social Philosophy: Two Options

In his 1931 essay ‘The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research’ Horkheimer connects social philosophy with the idea that there are certain phenomena that can be understood only in relation to the “context of human social life” (Horkheimer 1931/1993, p. 1). This idea, arising from German Idealism, is connected (according to Horkheimer) with an ontological commitment: i.e., the thesis that a certain ontological structure exists that is wider than the personal sphere of individuals and that can be discovered only within “social totality”, that is, within the “collective whole in which we live” (Horkheimer 1931/1993, p. 2–3). This is also the socio-ontological core of the Hegelian notion of objective spirit – the idea that our being, in its content and its value, is socially mediated, namely that it can be known only within the social totality through which it is constituted.

According to Horkheimer, the social philosophies of his time, such as Neo-Kantian philosophies of value (Hermann Cohen), or phenomenological social ontology and material ethics (Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann and Adolf Reinach) all share the exigency of a “new philosophy of objective spirit” (Horkheimer 1931/1993, p. 5), insofar as they all understand individual, personal existence as mediated by an objective, supra-personal sphere of social being: that is, insofar as

they all share that ontological commitment. Horkheimer wants us to see the shortcomings of these philosophies of society. Here it is important to note that these shortcomings, according to Horkheimer, do not consist in the socio-ontological commitment itself, but rather in the way in which it is conceived, that is, in the fact that “objective spirit,” the “supraindividual sphere” of sense, “national character,” “social world” and the like, are understood – and thus reified – as original, essential and “more authentic” ontological forms (Horkheimer 1931/1993, p. 7), rather than as historical and concrete forms of being that can be subjected to internal criticism. Furthermore, Horkheimer criticizes the tendency to understand social philosophy as an a priori, merely descriptive knowledge, concerned with the description of such a fundamental sphere of social being: a knowledge that can be developed independently of the results of empirical sciences, consisting entirely of foundational issues that cannot be falsified by empirical research and over which social reality cannot exert a critical control.

When Horkheimer, in his 1937 essay “Philosophy and critical theory”, comes to delineate the features of a critical theory of society, he understands it as incorporating the core idea of the social philosophy emerging from German Idealism – that is, as conceiving social objects and their perception as something that is not simply given by nature, but also constituted, and dependent for their existence and structure on human activities (Horkheimer 1937). He now sees the principal limit of German Idealism consisting in the fact that its authors understood the human activity that manifests itself in social facts as “merely spiritual”, that is as a formal, abstract and disembodied subjective intentional activity. In contrast, critical theory realizes that it is only through the material and concrete process of social labor within the social totality that one can really appreciate how human activity manifests itself in social facts. Again, the great divide between idealistic philosophy and post idealistic critical theory is not constituted by the ontological commitments concerning the social world – since this is something they both share.

If we read Horkheimer in this way, I think there are at least two ways to develop his notion of a critical theory. Let us keep in mind that Horkheimer understands critical theory as a kind of post-traditional social philosophy that is both descriptive and critical of social phenomena – and that according to him critical theory can only be both insofar as it understands social phenomena dynamically, as constituted through material social practices within the social world. Furthermore, according to Horkheimer, such a critical social philosophy must retain a dialectical relation with the praxis and contents of particular social sciences, and thus should not be understood as an a priori foundation that can be developed independently of empirical research.

Option (1) would be to embody social ontology within critical theory, that is, to explicate the latter’s ontological commitments affirmatively in a socio-ontological

theory. This is an option that the texts of the thirties do not explicitly exclude and that they thus leave open. The problem with traditional theories, as said, is not in their ontological commitments, but rather in their understanding of ontological forms as something “original,” “substantial,” and “fundamental.” This means that there is room for a different development of the ontological core of the theory.

Option (2) would be to consider ontological theory in general responsible for the reification of social being. Critical theory would of course not cease to have ontological commitments, but this option means that it could not develop them into a consistent, affirmative socio-ontological theory, as ontological forms were seen as invariant structures. In this alternative, ontological theory in general is considered as a form of reifying “identity thinking,” always keen to transform whatever comes under its grip into essential, meta-historical structures. Option (2) is in fact the one that was adopted in later decades by Adorno, who in the early 1930s was still open to the possibility of developing a historical and social dialectical ontology of natural being (Adorno 1932/1984, p. 120–121), but successively, due to the increasing sharpness of his critical confrontation with Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, came to identify ontology with identity thinking, ending up in his *Negative Dialectics* in the paradoxical notion of “ontology of the false state.” I will return to this notion and to the option that it implies below. What I would like to do next, is to discuss a leading contemporary project that develops social philosophy in terms of a social ontology. I will first provide an analysis of its basic features and then assess it in light of option (1), in order to see whether this contemporary constructive inclusion of social ontology in social philosophy could also satisfy the desiderata of critical theory.

3 A Critical Analysis of Searle’s Social Ontology

Searle’s social ontological project – first expounded in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995) and later developed and amended in *Making the Social World* (2010) – fundamentally addresses the problem of the constitution of social reality. According to Searle social reality is to be understood as a reality *sui generis*, which differs from first natural entities that can be described exhaustively in physical, chemical and biological terms, and whose mode of being is assumed to be independent of the existence of intentional agents. In contrast, social objects such as money, rights, or other institutions, are in a certain sense constituted, or “ontologically subjective”: their being depends on the existence of agents and their intentional activities. Such entities can nevertheless be known as really out there, which is to say that they are “epistemologically objective”: they can be assessed intersubjec-

tively as something that has objectively knowable properties. The “social world” is thus understood in Searle’s theory as something that is both constituted and nonetheless real: as an objective sphere. One might say that it is understood as a second natural reality: a second level of existence that differs from the way of being of merely first natural entities. Searle’s ontology of the social world is clearly a contemporary theory that concerns the sphere that Hegel (and Horkheimer after him) called objective spirit and understood as a second natural realm of being (Hegel 1821/1991, par. 151). One does not have to share Hegel’s metaphysics, whatever it might be – in fact both Horkheimer and Searle do not – to make sense of the idea of the social world as something both constituted and objective.

3.1 Recognitive Constitution

I will next reconstruct the fundamental core of Searle’s social ontology from a recognition-theoretical perspective, in a way that makes explicit that the mode of being of social reality is a ‘recognitive’ one, constituted through recognitive activity. Once we have established that recognition plays, implicitly or explicitly, a fundamental role in Searle’s theory, and that his social ontology unveils certain important features of this phenomenon, we are better positioned to identify important areas of common ground that it shares with contemporary critical theory. The idea of an intersubjective constitution of social phenomena through a dynamic of reciprocal recognition or acknowledgment between agents plays an important role in the Frankfurt School critical theory, but the socio-ontological implications of recognition have remained undeveloped in it. On the other hand, I will argue that Searle’s grasp of the phenomenon of recognition, while revealing its socio-ontological significance, does not capture adequately its intersubjective dynamics. This means that critical theory and Searle’s social ontology can profit from each other, as the latter helps in articulating the ontological implications of the first, while the first helps in revealing the intersubjective dimensions of recognition undeveloped by the latter.

The recognitive aspect of Searle’s theory is something that remained concealed in Searle’s *The Construction of Social Reality* (see Testa 2011) and that *Making the Social World* makes somewhat more explicit, though even there Searle never quite appreciates the significance of this concept for social ontology, nor develops it theoretically. In what follows I will try to unpack the significance of the concept of recognition for Searle’s social ontology and point out a way in which this notion should be developed in order to gain theoretical weight and to overcome what I will argue to be the shortcomings of Searle’s approach to intentionality.

According to Searle the social world is a world of statuses. Status is the fundamental way of being of social objects. Social entities are such that they perform their functions not in virtue of their physical or chemical properties. For example, a coin is money not because of the first natural properties of the metal of which it is made (money can be made of totally different matter or of no matter at all, as in the case of electronic money), but because of its having the status of money, that is, because of its being taken collectively to be money. Social objects have objective properties that do not depend on the first natural properties of physical objects but that are ontologically dependent for their existence and for their maintenance on intersubjectively shared recognition.

Searle analyzes the assignment of status functions somewhat differently in the two books mentioned above. In *The Construction of Social Reality* he conceives assignment under the general model of imposition of functions on pre-existing natural objects. This model of assignment is expressed by the logical formula of linguistic constitutive rules “X counts as Y in C” – implying that the existence of social entities in a social context C required the existence of a first natural object, event or person X on which the function Y is imposed (Searle 1995, p. 28). In *Making the Social World* Searle faces the problem of the “free-standing Y terms” (Searle 2010, p. 20–21), that is, the fact that in some cases assignment does not require a pre-given thing or person on whom the status is imposed. Think of institutional entities such as corporations: these are social objects where a status function is at work without there being a pre-existing thing or person who is counted as its bearer. This leads Searle to fundamentally reframe institutional entities as something that is brought into existence by being represented as existing, as occurs in performative utterances, where a promise is created by saying “I promise”. This model of assignment, understood as linguistic declaration, can be expressed by the general formula “we (or I) make it the case by declaration that the Y status function exists in context C” (Searle 2010, p. 93). The formula of constitutive rules “X counts as Y in context C” is now understood as a form of declaration which Searle calls “standing declaration” because, through the application of a constitutive rule, it makes it the case, but it applies in the indefinite future to “an indeterminate number of such somethings” (Searle 2010, p. 97).

What is relevant for our purposes is that in both models – the first conceiving status function assignment in terms of constitutive rules (Searle’s model I¹) and the second in terms of performative declarations (Searle’s model II²) – the

¹ This model of assignment is expressed by the logical formula of linguistic constitutive rules: “X counts as Y in C”: as if it were always required, for there to be social entities in a social context C, the existence of a first natural object, event or person X on which the function Y is imposed.

² This model of assignment, understood as linguistic declaration, is expressed by the general formula: *We (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists in context C.*

fundamental operation that constitutes social entities involves an act of recognition or acceptance. Status functions come into, and remain in, existence if and only if they are “recognized or accepted” (Searle uses “recognition” and “acceptance” as synonyms) (Searle 2010, p. 8). Once one comes to see all the consequences of this that Searle himself does not follow, then I think the ontologically constitutive role shifts from the logico-linguistic operation to which Searle attributes the fundamental role to recognition. Thus recognition, whatever it is exactly – and here Searle does not help us much, since recognition remains in his model a primitive, not further analyzed notion – seems to implicitly play an ontological constitutive role in this model. One could say that social constitution is a recognitive constitution, since for there to be social objects, that is entities whose fundamental properties are statuses, there must be practices of recognition on which the existence and maintenance of such statuses depends.

If this is the case, then recognition plays a socio-ontological role insofar as it is a matter of what might be called ‘objectification’: a notion, implied by Horkheimer’s understanding of objective spirit, which Searle does not use but that may be applied to redescribe his understanding of social reality as something that comes into existence because of subjective human activities of acceptance. Understanding the social world – objective spirit – as a matter of objectification might not be just an old fashioned strategy based on a substantial and finally subjectivist and Promethean notion of spiritual activity, as has often been argued against the Hegelian model of objectification and its consequences in the Marxist tradition (for this criticism see for example Haber 2007, p. 148–149). The appreciation of the ontologically constitutive role of recognition may open the way to a kind of post-metaphysical – at least in the sense of uncommitted to subjectivist metaphysics – reconstruction of the notion of objectification: we can think of social objects as entities that are constituted through the objectification of recognitive practices, or in other words as a kind of social embodiment of interindividual practices of reciprocal recognition.

3.2 Some Shortcomings of Searle’s Models

So far I have tried to appropriate within a recognition theoretical perspective some insights from Searle’s social ontological model. More exactly, I have derived the recognition theoretical approach from Searle’s own model(s) by making explicit the dependence of status function assignment on acts of recognition. Once this substantial role played by recognition within Searle’s model(s) is ascertained and its ontological meaning clarified, we can pin down the shortcoming of Searle’s social ontology in its incapacity to account for its own presupposition:

there is no theory of what recognition exactly consists of and of its relation to intentionality.³

Performative declarations, and the exercise of deontic powers implied by the application of constitutive rules are, hence, the intentional activities that according to Searle are the fundamental operators of the constitution of social institutional reality: they are the logico-linguistic intentional activities on which institutional reality depends for its existence and maintenance. My point is that in Searle's model such intentional activities in fact presuppose recognition/acceptance in order to function. Yet, his conception of the fundamental operator of the constitution of social reality – “We (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists in context C” – does not involve an account of recognition, and it leaves open the question of whether recognition is another kind of intentional activity, or whether it is rather some sort of pre-intentional background capacity or habit that enables the exercise of intentional activities that are constitutive of the social world.

Nor does the notion of “collective intentionality” that Searle introduces at some point of his account as the most primitive notion of his model (Searle 1995, p. 23–26; Searle 2010, chap. 3), make the situation clearer, since also the very notion of collective intentionality, as we will see, presupposes the notion of recognition. Searle argues that in order to give an account of social reality we have to admit some form of strong collective intentionality, that is, a form which is not reducible to individual intentionality. Certain intentional acts performed by individuals have a “we” form – they have to be analyzed in the “we” mode – such as in “we are playing the duet” – and cannot be reduced to mutual knowledge of “I” modes – even though their content is always an individual one. “I am playing the piano part” and “you are playing the trumpet,” but in “our” playing the duet the “we” is not simply the sum of these two individual intentional acts in the “I” mode (Searle 2010, p. 50). My point is that this is not an account – in terms of a most basic notion, i.e., collective intentionality – of what recognition is. It is rather an analysis of the “we” form of the formula of declarative assignment:

“We (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists in context C.”

³ Arto Laitinen has carefully analyzed Searle's notion of acceptance (Laitinen 2011, p. 309–347). Such an analysis makes it clear that acceptance of institutions differs in many aspects from acknowledgment of reasons. At the same time, Laitinen's analysis of institution-creating acceptance is based on a kind of recognition modeled on deontic powers and on linguistic constitution through constitutive rules. This could neglect the fact – which is true for Searle's model too – that, in order to create institutions, we need to presuppose, as I will argue later, a simpler form of pre-intentional, background cognitive constitution (which I suspect cannot be reduced either to acknowledgment of norms or to full-fledged recognition of persons).

Searle himself notes that in this formula the logical operator that creates the status function presupposes for its existence and its functioning collective acceptance and recognition. Thus we must introduce a new formula:

“We collectively recognize that a Y status function exists in context C.” (Searle 2010, p. 103)

So even if Searle’s argument in favor of the irreducibility of the “we” form to the “I” form in the case of the constitution of social entities were sound, and even if we were to accept the idea that declarations are the logical operator of the constitution of social reality, this could not be taken as an account of what that “acceptance/recognition” consists of. In the end, in Searle’s model recognition reveals itself to be a more primitive notion than the kind of collective intentionality expressed by “We-modes,” since the latter is accounted for by means of the formula “we collectively recognize that”. And the same could be said about the relevant “I-modes”, since in the formulation “we (or I) make it the case...”, it is also clear that “I-mode” intentionality presupposes here acts of recognition. Hence, both the collective and the individual form of individually performed intentional acts seem to be based on a more basic recognitive activity.

Furthermore, when Searle comes to discuss the relation between the notions of language, strong collective intentionality, cooperation and recognition, he explicitly asserts that some social phenomena can be constituted through a form of shared recognition that requires neither strong collective intentionality (shared recognition being reducible to the “I” form of individual intentionality: “I recognize that you recognize that I recognize that you recognize...”) nor cooperation understood as the collective intention to cooperate (Searle 2010, p. 56 ff.). Thus we might say that strong collective intentionality and cooperation are constituted through recognition, whereas recognition itself is not constituted through strong collective intentionality or cooperation. I take this to mean that an analysis of strong collective intentionality cannot exhaust the notion of recognition, but somehow presupposes it. If recognition is in fact the most basic concept in the model, then one could ask what is the point of adding “collective intentionality” to the picture. Either it is identical with “collective recognition” – and thus may be eliminated in favor of the latter – or else it is derived from it. If the latter is the case, then it would be useful to give an account of how intentional phenomena – be it individual or collective ones – are constituted by recognitive dynamics. Furthermore, since recognitive acts seem to be presupposed by intentional acts both in the “I-mode”, and in the “We-mode”, it seems plausible to think that by further investigating the embodied social dynamics of interindividual recognition we can gain better understanding of the otherwise rather obscure switch from the “I-mode” to the “We-mode” (and vice versa) of individual intentionality.

The unclear relation between strong collective intentionality, weak collective intentionality and recognition is a sign that Searle's analysis lacks an understanding of the intersubjective dynamics of recognition, and precisely of how the dyadic intersubjective form of I-thou recognition expressed by what he calls weak collective intentionality – "I recognize that you recognize that I recognize..." – relates to stronger forms of triadic social recognition – "we recognize" – not reducible to dyadic recognition.⁴ The obscurity of Searle's notion of collective intentionality, as well as the lack of any account of the dynamics and levels of intersubjective recognition in his theory, could in the end be related to the fact that Searle does not include intentional self-consciousness among the objects that are socially constituted.⁵ Intentionality – be it individual or collective – is simply presupposed by Searle as a first natural biological phenomenon. In other words, Searle does not entertain the Hegelian idea, nowadays explicitly followed by authors such as Robert Brandom, that both individual and collective intentionality may be constituted through reciprocal recognition (Brandom 1999). As I have tried to argue, there is an internal reason why he should, namely the fact that the supposed primitive intertwinement between individual and collective intentionality cannot be accounted for without presupposing some dynamics of 'recognition' as constitutive of it. And here it would be a poor move to simply assert the primitiveness of recognition as something not further analyzable, since contemporary recognition theories dispose of a whole lot of models to account for its interindividual and social dynamics.⁶

4 A similar flaw in Searle's theory has been detected by Titus Stahl, whose proposal is to ground collective intentionality in a normative theory of reciprocal deontic recognition (Stahl 2011, p. 349–372).

5 On the contrary, critical theory (see Habermas 1994; Honneth 1995) has adopted from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* the model of the constitution of self-consciousness through reciprocal recognition, even though the socio-ontological implications of such a notion of 'constitution' have been neglected within this tradition and may be better appreciated once we go through Searle's social ontology.

6 This argument converges with Margaret Gilbert's idea that what is missing from Searle's account of joint actions is that they require a kind of antecedent *agreement* between their participants to already be in place in order for them to be able to form the sorts of "We-intention" Searle speaks of. And such an agreement cannot be understood as a purely mental, "internalist episode," but is rather an external, socially embodied phenomenon (Gilbert 2007). By looking at the phenomenon Gilbert here names "agreement" through the spectacles of the social dynamics of recognition (which is by the way not only a matter of "agreement") could lead us to better appreciate the externalist, recognitive social preconditions of "We-intentions." Gilbert uses elsewhere the notion of "mutual recognition" to analyze the presupposition of joint attention, but understands here under "mutual recognition" a cognitive mechanism consisting in being "jointly committed to recognize as a body our co-presence as beings capable of joint commitment" (Gilbert 2011, p. 281) and which offers us a rather abstract and not dynamic picture of recognitive practices.

Nonetheless, when he comes to consider human personhood, Searle seems keen to consider some of its traits – being the bearer of human rights – as socially constituted through dynamics that might easily be re-described in terms of recognition (Searle 2010, chap. 8). ‘Being human’, ‘being a person’ are assumed by Searle to be equivalent with being assigned a status that implies being recognized as someone endowed with deontic powers, as a co-author of the constitution of the social world. Once again, the real ontological burden in the constitution of human personhood (for being a person) lies upon recognition. But again, Searle does not seem to appreciate the foundational consequences that such an understanding – that the social self-consciousness required for being a co-author of social constitution is itself a recognitively constituted status – may have on his model.

We could generalize our criticism of Searle by saying that his social ontology is fundamentally centered on the objective pole of social constitution – focusing on an analysis of social objects among which it furthermore does not include social self-consciousness – and that it ignores the subjective-intersubjective pole of social constitution simply presupposing it as the intentional correlate of the objective pole. This way he ends up in providing a very thin – I am tempted to say idealistic – account of the subjective side of social constitution reduced to an exercise of linguistic deontic intentionality, a sort of disembodied subjective spiritual activity isolated from the material processes of social production and reproduction and from the whole complex of social totality. This is an account that does not consider the interaction between the subjective and objective poles, nor how the subjective side might be itself at least partially socially constituted. As a consequence, Searle’s social ontology ends up with a rather abstract and ahistorical account of social reality. It is an abstract account because Searle’s social ontology consists of a mere logical analysis which gives us a single formula – the formula of status function declaration – understood as the fundamental logical operation whose recursive application constitutes all objective spheres of human sociality. This way social ontology reduces itself to a formal a priori account, abstracted from material and historical content, which he understands simply as what contingently comes to fill the X in his formula (in cases where there is an X). This brings us back to Horkheimer’s diagnosis, as Searle’s model seems to fall under the criticism Horkheimer addressed to the social ontologies of his day and hence it does not seem to satisfy the desiderata of option (1) of being a social ontology which is both *constructive* and *critical*.

Secondly, Searle’s social ontology is fundamentally a sort of social static, because it is concentrated on the static properties of social reality. Searle understands social entities as an objective reality that is constituted through status

7 Note that Searle uses “human being” and “human person” as synonyms (see Searle 2010, p. 182).

function declaration and recognition. But his formula of social constitution merely describes the structure of existing objective institutional realities – rights, markets, the state, and so on – having little to say about social change. How do such objective institutional realities change over time? Searle connects social change with the ad hoc supposition – a real *deus-ex machina* – that at some point there is an interruption of continuity in the acceptance of social institutions: the recognition presupposed by status function declaration ceases to be there. This is a phenomenon destined to remain rather mysterious within Searle's model, since he has no theoretical means to analyze the intersubjective dynamics at work both in the acceptance and the refusal of acceptance of existing institutional spheres.

For these reasons Searle's social ontology reveals itself to be a rather hypostatizing philosophy of sociality. The rediscovery of the role of objectification in the constitution of the social world, since it is not accompanied by an intersubjective analysis of the dynamics of recognition, nor by an analysis of the historical and concrete mediation between subjective and objective pole, ends up hypostatizing social constitution – identifying it with an essential, abstract or formal intentional activity. Moreover, it ends up hypostatizing social reality, conceiving it exclusively in terms of static objects. One could say that there are no theoretical means within Searle's social ontology to distinguish between 'objectification' and 'reification', or in other words to criticize some forms of social objectification as reifying in the sense of concealing their contingent, socially produced character, presenting themselves with the false appearance of necessity and immutability and thus blocking rational change of the social setting. In fact, with Searle we have to assume that the existence of given institutional entities implies that they are somehow recognized as rational, since acceptance is the ontological glue of institutional objects and of the sort of rationality they embody, which consists in the fact that institutions give us desire-independent reasons for action. Searle does say – having little to say on how this distinction works – that being accepted does not necessarily mean being approved of, nor being accepted as justified (Searle 2010, p. 8 and 57). Yet, acceptance is for him sufficient for the existence of institutional entities and hence for their basic rationality (even not approved nor politically justified institutions are basically rational insofar as they provide those who are subjected to them with desire-independent reasons to act).⁸

All in all, I have argued so far that Searle's account of social reality is intersubjectively underdetermined, ahistorical, does not account for social change,

⁸ This all seems to be related to Searle's tendency to understand the social institutions of private property, market economy and liberal state as justified *qua* existing – having survived their negation through socialism – and furthermore as necessary, i.e., as institutions that somehow develop natural traits of human beings. On private property as a basic human right see for example Searle 2010, p. 186–187.

and is not capable of distinguishing between objectification and reification. One could of course ask why this criticism should worry Searle – after all, Searle does not identify himself as a critical theorist and may not share its concerns. But I think there are internal reasons within Searle’s model to take this criticism seriously. Firstly, the problem of recognition is not external to Searle’s social ontology, but on the contrary a foundational part of it. A comprehension of “recognition/acceptance” requires an analysis of its intersubjective dynamics, and thus in order to make its own presuppositions clear, Searle’s theory would benefit from developing the analysis of recognition in the intersubjective direction which has been traced within contemporary critical theory.⁹ Secondly, Searle is interested in historical phenomena and social change and would clearly like his model to be capable of accounting for them.¹⁰ After all, Searle’s account of society supports a developmental model of human institutions, according to which there seems to be a growing process of institutional realization of rational freedom, where mere acceptance is in the long run progressively (and reflexively) substituted by approved, justified acceptance (Searle 2010, p. 139–144). Thus Searle subscribes to a dynamic and historical model of intertwinement of institutions, reason and freedom. But since he cannot ground his model of recognitive constitution of social reality in concrete and material intersubjective social practices, he cannot succeed in putting flesh on the bones of the model. Furthermore, the very idea that forms of acceptance reflexively modify themselves over time, and can be substituted by more approved, justified and freedom-enabling ones, seems to

9 For an overview of the recent development of the recognitive approach see Schmidt Am Busch and Zurn 2010; Ikäheimo and Laitinen 2011.

10 In his reply to Jonathan Friedman, who made the point that Searle’s social ontology neglects the historical component, and that his notion of collective intentionality “erases real history as well, by assuming that institutions are simply created on the spot” (Friedman 2006, p. 74), Searle rejects this criticism and affirms: “I am struck by the fact that institutions with entirely different histories can have similar logical structures [...] I am trying to provide us with the tools within which that history can be intelligibly described. There is no *opposition* between the historical approach and the analytical approach. They are complementary to each other and, indeed, unless we have our analytic categories right to begin with, we cannot hope to give an intelligent account of the histories in question” (Searle 2006a, p. 84). The problem here is that when analytic categories (and in particular, the analytic categories related to the phenomena of acceptance/recognition) are formulated “right to begin with” and only afterwards applied to historical empirical contents, then they end up being characterized within a dualism between form and content (a priori logical forms and a posteriori historical contents to which they apply) which abstracts from historically developed unities of content and form of social recognitive practices. For such a dualism between “underlying” fundamental logical structures analyzed by analytic social ontology, and historical phenomena reconstructed by historicist approaches, see also Searle’s reply to Neil Gross’ objections (Searle 2006b, p. 68).

imply the need to explicitly distinguish between objectification and reification. Ontologically objectified forms of acceptance (that is, institutions) may be, but do not have to be, reified, that is, forms of social objectification which, asserting themselves with the false appearance of inescapability and immutability, end up acting causally over us in a way which blocks further rational change, and constrains us in an unfree form of life. The notion of reification would here be the ontological complement to the idea that some forms of objectification are unfree and irrational.

In the final analysis Searle's social ontology is a philosophy of sociality without criticism, or a merely positive ontology. Social ontology is here understood as a descriptive theory of the second natural sphere of social objects and of their constitution which does not include a critical side, that is, theoretical tools to criticize some forms of social second nature as negative, reifying, unjust, and so forth. In other words, Searle's social ontology looks like a non-dialectical "ontology of the false state", as Adorno would put it. Also, to use Horkheimer's distinction between "traditional" and "critical" theories, Searle conceives the role of social philosophy as social ontology and its relation with empirical sciences in a traditional way. He calls his social ontology a "philosophy of society" in order to distinguish it from normative political and social philosophy concerned with the normative justification of political and social notions, as well as from the philosophy of social sciences understood as methodological analysis of empirical disciplines and of their procedures (Searle 2010, p. 5). Social ontology, according to Searle, is a more fundamental discipline than political and social philosophy, philosophy of social sciences or empirical sciences. It analyzes the general logical features that are proper to, and that constitute the mode of being of the entities that are studied by empirical social sciences and justified by normative political philosophy (Searle 2010, p. 200–201). This is to say that Searle's understanding of his philosophy of society appears to fall within the range of philosophical theories criticized by Horkheimer as "traditional" insofar as they understand social philosophy as foundational, descriptive knowledge, concerned with a descriptive analysis of fundamental spheres of social being and of their constitution, and capable of being developed independently of the results of empirical social sciences.

4 "Ontology of the False State": Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*

So far I have analyzed Searle's approach, leaving in the background the two options on how to think of the relation between social philosophy, social

ontology and critical theory that emerged from Horkheimer's texts. But in fact my critical reading of Searle could be understood as a hypothetical interpretation in light of the first option: if we were to choose the first option, then Searle's approach could offer us some insights, even if it would not be able to satisfy the requirements of a critical theory of society. But what are we then to think of the relation between social philosophy and social ontology within critical theory? What about the second option, that is, the understanding of the social ontology of objective spirit as a dialectical "ontology of the false state"? Is this a viable option? And what does "ontology of the false state" mean exactly? This notion that Adorno uses in his *Negative Dialectics* to qualify dialectics – both Hegelian and his own 'negative dialectics' (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 11) – epitomizes a certain attitude towards social ontology within 20th century critical theory. This attitude presupposes the identification of ontological forms with invariant structures and of ontological theories with instances of "identity thinking": a theoretical and practical way of thinking prone to essentialization, that is, to transforming whatever comes under its grip into an essential, meta-historical structure. According to Adorno, once Hegel describes objective spirit as "second nature", that is, as a social world whose structures can be described as a realm of objects distinct from the objects of first natural physical nature, he is already reifying spirit (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 356–357). In this way Adorno takes up the Marxist idea that György Lukács had already developed in his *Theory of the Novel*, denouncing the second natural sphere of juridical, economical, social and political structures as stiffened, frozen spirit (Lukács 1920/1971, p. 140–156): an objectified sphere consisting of relations between persons reduced to dead things, to relations between (social) objects. Thought of in this way, the objective sphere of second nature is hence identified with reification.

According to Adorno, the Hegelian theory of objective spirit, in comparison with classical economy and Kantian thought, already reveals the historical and social mediation of the second natural sphere of institutions, but in the end transforms such mediation into an essence, into an invariant meta-historical structure. One should note that the reason why the Hegelian theory of objective spirit is, according to Adorno, an "ontology of the false state" is not exactly the fact that Hegel in the end falls back into ontological thought – understood as an instance of identity thinking. This would be merely paraphrasing how Adorno understands the notion of "ontology", but it would not contribute much to an understanding of the relation between "ontology" and the "false state". By characterizing Hegel's dialectical theory of objective spirit as an "ontology of the false state" Adorno wants to say something more than that. He means that the theory of objective spirit is a description of the structure of a reified social world, and thus really refers to an existing ontological state of things, even if a false, reified

one. If this is true, then Hegel's theory of objective spirit is in fact a fitting social ontological description of the constitution of the structures of being of the objective world of institutions: the only problem is that Hegel's ontology of the false state is merely descriptive and not critical. Hegel describes as true and justified social structures that should instead be criticized as false *qua* result of reification. This is why Adorno also characterizes his own 'negative dialectics' as an "ontology of the false state", yet in contrast to Hegel's as a *critical* one.

We need to see the paradoxical character of such use of the idea of "ontology of the false state". Adorno does not want to embrace ontology, which he equates with a reifying attitude that understands being as an invariant structure. This is why the very notion of social ontology would sound contradictory to him. Still he needs to understand the theory of objective spirit as a description of the constitution of the social world of second nature. We could say, using Horkheimer's terminology, that Adorno himself understands the theory of objective spirit as a kind of social philosophy, and furthermore that he recognizes the ontological commitment of this theory, which describes the objective structures of the historical social world. But since he cannot develop this commitment into an affirmative ontological theory, he ends up presupposing a negative social ontology that he cannot give an account of. This is why he understands "second nature" merely negatively, as a reified sphere. If this were not the case – if there were no implicit ontological commitment in his theory – dialectics as a theory of objective spirit could not be a simultaneously descriptive and critical theory. Without being implicitly committed to a socio-ontological view of the dynamic constitution of social facts, critical theory would not be able to describe objective spirit as reified.

On the other hand, if Adorno would positively develop this commitment into a socio-ontological theory, then on his negative explicit understanding of social ontology, his dialectics would turn into a legitimating theory of a reified, false state of things. This is why Adorno's project of developing a critical theory without ontology is always on the verge of turning into a mere negative social ontology (that is, into a theory which involves a social ontology but can refer to it only negatively, by way of criticizing the "identity thinking" form of current ontological models). This is the paradox Adorno is faced with whenever he strives to put together and mediate dialectically within critical theory both social self-reflection and social totality or social mediation,¹¹ or in other words the socio-epistemological moment of self-reflection as social knowledge on the one hand, and the socio-ontological notion of totality or the idea of the constitution of objects through social mediation on the other.

¹¹ See Renault 2011 for an analysis of the different levels – dialectical, systemic, and dynamic – of the relation between self-reflection and social totality in Adorno.

It should be clear by now that what triggers this paradoxical and in the end untenable movement to Adorno's position is the fact that he identifies objectification as ontological constitution of the social world with reification. Following the tradition opened by Lukács – not only in his *Theory of the Novel* but also in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923)/1971a) – Adorno is prone to thinking in his *Negative Dialectics* that every objectification is reifying, and thus that second nature always has to be criticized as a reified realm.¹² We could say then that whereas Searle does not distinguish between objectification and reification, Adorno tends to think that every objectification is reification.¹³ Let me

12 This is the thesis underlying the excursus on “World spirit and natural history” (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 300–360). Note that in his early writings Adorno was keen to use the notion of second nature not only in a negative meaning, but also as an affirmative ontological category, apt to grasp the ontological element of “transience” (Adorno 1932/1984, p. 120) which is common both to nature and history.

13 Even great, authentic works of art are cases of “objectification [*Objektivierung*]”, which, in a false society, come to be inescapably entangled, already in their form, with some sort of reification. “Art”, as Adorno writes in his essay on *Commitment*, “even in its opposition to society remains a part of it” (Adorno 1965/1980, p. 193–194). For this reason even works of art which are a model of “integrity” cannot escape the effects of reification (this is the reason why Adorno writes that “today every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch”, Adorno 1965/1980, p. 194). Still, notwithstanding the reified situation in which they are themselves entangled – the “crystallization” by which their form is affected – and in some sense by way of radicalizing their reified form, eminent works of art can paradoxically point to something different, to the idea of a praxis which would produce just forms of life. In this sense, authentic works of art do not overcome by themselves reification, but rather *through reification* point towards a counterfactual state of things. We may assume that in such a just form of life, social praxis would not be paradoxically entangled with reification. I am not sure, however, that Adorno, at least in his *Negative Dialectics*, could apply the notion of “objective spirit” to describe such a reconciled situation, as he thinks that such a category is intrinsically affected by the false condition it describes. As I have suggested, a major reason why he is prone to think this way, is that the notion of “objective spirit” according to him is indebted to identity thinking. That is why in *Negative Dialectics* the occurrences of the expression “objective spirit” (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 179, 204, 307, 308, 325) mainly have a pejorative meaning (this happens in this book also to the notion of “Objektivierung [*Objektivierung*; *Objektivierung*]”). Consequently, when he comes to hint at a right form of life, and in order to avoid the paradoxical consequences to which the use of ontologically committed notions such as ‘objective spirit’ would lead, he uses utopian images such as that, taken from Joseph von Eichendorff, of “beautiful strangeness [*schoene Fremde*]” (an expression which was unfortunately not included in the English translation, and which refers to what Adorno describes as the situation where “the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own” (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 191). One could counter-argue that Adorno, for example in the *Commitment* essay, when he analyzes the structure of the works of art, affirms that “objectification” (Adorno 1965/1980, p. 183) is a necessary moment of every work of art – hence, using the expression in a non pejorative sense – and

add the further hypothesis that this is related to the fact that Lukács and those who follow him tend to understand alienation (*Entfremdung*) in terms of objective alienation.¹⁴ This has had a strong impact on classical and contemporary critical theory – as we will see again when we come to analyze Axel Honneth’s theory of reification – and it has influenced the negative attitude towards social ontology that prevails in this tradition. According to such an understanding, alienation would essentially be due to the constitution of spheres of objectification. These are dominated by anonymous complexes of instrumental rationality that become autonomous and exert an overarching domination over individuals, depriving them of their essential capacities. Alienation would be essentially reification (*Verdinglichung, Versachlichung*). Thus the burden of social constitution is fundamentally shifted to the objective side of anonymous, systemic objective processes, underestimating the weight that subjective-intersubjective practices play within the dynamics of both social constitution and alienation. According to Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, within modern capitalism reification assumes the form of commodity fetishism. Commodities become the general form of “social being as a whole” (Lukács 1923/1971a, p. 86, my translation), that is, the general form of the social world as reified second nature, constituted by the objective mode of production of modern capitalism. This makes it clear that the negative theory of second nature inaugurated by the young Lukács and adopted by Adorno in fact conceals a hidden social ontology, and it also explains why the late Lukács, once he had given up his notion of reification (*Verdinglichung*) in favor of a more traditional notion of alienation (*Entfremdung*), would come to explicitly understand the Marxist theory of modern capitalism as a form of social ontology (Lukács 1971/1978–1980).

criticizes Sartre as subjectivist for not acknowledging that. Hence, Adorno should in principle distinguish the mechanism of “objectification” from the mechanism of reification. Moreover, in his *Negative Dialectics* he affirms that the overcoming of reification would not merely consist in “liquefying” every “thingness [*Dingheit*]” (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 189) and connects this with the thesis of the “preponderance of the object” – which means that in the relation between subject and object there is an asymmetry in favor of the latter. But since he cannot acknowledge the ontological commitments objectification implies, in the end he is not able to categorically distinguish the mechanism of objectification from that of reification, and ends up putting the burden of objectification mostly on the shoulders of reifying social processes. In other words, Adorno is not able to affirmatively connect the thesis of the ‘preponderance of the object’ with a theory of social objectification, since this would imply the use of ontological categories he is not willing to adopt.

14 For a reading and a criticism of Lukács’ reduction of alienation to objective alienation through the use of the theory of reification see Haber 2007, p. 116–134.

5 Towards a Critical Social Ontology

So far we have been discussing, and tried to appreciate the advantages and limits of a positive social ontology of objectification in the form of Searle's a-dialectical theory of the social world as objectification of linguistic acts on the one hand, and a negative ontology of reification or an ontology of the "false state" that we find in the early Lukács and Adorno on the other hand. Since both approaches have serious problems, I would now like to come back to option (1) which we saw emerging from Horkheimer's essays of the thirties, that is, the possibility of developing critical theory in terms of a critical social ontology that can be both descriptive and critical of the social constitution of the objective world of social and historical being. Of course this implies the possibility of elaborating within social ontology a conception of social and historical reality that escapes the essentialism of traditional ontological theories – a possibility that the young Adorno had in fact pursued in his effort to elaborate an ontology of natural history understood as transient being, but which he later rejected.¹⁵

My suggestion is that in order to work out the relationship of critical theory and social ontology in a non-paradoxical way, and to develop a critical account of social and historical being, the nexus between social ontology and recognition theory needs to be clarified. The need to work out the relationship of social ontology and recognition theory is due not only to the fact that recognition theory is nowadays the core of contemporary critical theory of society in its different versions – in Habermas, Honneth, Fraser, and others. Our reading of Searle provided us with a supplementary insight, emerging from outside critical theory, into the socio-ontological role of recognition. From Searle (and Hegel) we can take up the idea of the recognitive constitution of social objects, or of the constitution of the second natural sphere of the social world through recognitive objectification. I argued that this could help us in re-evaluating the very idea of objectification (through recognition) within social ontology, an idea that should be extended to an understanding of the constitution of intersubjective self-consciousness that is left aside by Searle's account of the social world. We have seen that Searle's social ontology lacks a socio-ontological account of the subjective/intersubjective side of recognition that Hegel developed through his account of self-consciousness as constituted through reciprocal recognition.

I have argued that in order to be critical, social ontology should not confine itself to mere description of the constitution of social objects, but should take up from critical social philosophy the task of providing a critical diagnosis of social

¹⁵ Here Adorno affirms the need for a "double [*doppelte*]" "ontological turn [*ontologische Wendung*]" in philosophy (Adorno 1932/1984, p. 121).

reification. This means introducing a distinction between necessary mechanisms of objectification constitutive of social objects, and additional mechanisms of reification providing some forms of objectivation and the resulting social objectivity with an appearance of necessity and immutability and thus constraining free, rational agency. Doing so would finally vindicate in a non-paradoxical way the very idea of critical social philosophy as ontology of the false state.

5.1 Honneth's Fundamental Ontology of Recognition

With the results of the previous sections in mind, I will now turn my attention to Axel Honneth, a contemporary critical theorist in whose work the theories of recognition and reification are brought together. I will read Honneth's work in terms of the framework that I have developed so far, sketching out some ideas on how an ontology of intersubjective recognition such as Honneth's could be combined with a social ontology of the constitution of the objective sphere through cognitive objectification. Starting from his seminal *Struggle for Recognition* (1995) Honneth has developed a model which identifies three "spheres of recognition": love as care for the well-being of others as vulnerable embodied beings, respect as universalistic acknowledgment of others as independent persons, and social esteem as appreciation of others' contribution to social cooperation. These three spheres designate three different types of reciprocal interaction that are necessary conditions for the development of positive self-relations and relations to others, and thus of full autonomy. Their denial – the experience of misrecognition – may lead to negative forms of self-relation and relation to others, but it may also furnish a motivational basis for struggles for recognition. What is interesting here is that recognition is not simply assumed as a primitive, not further analyzable, ahistorical notion (as is the case in Searle), but rather as a phenomenon which comes in different forms (Honneth's claim, right or wrong, is that *at least* three basic forms of the intersubjective level of the phenomenon can be identified), and allows for social and historical variation (the forms of intersubjective recognition constitutive of modern subjects are assumed to be different from those – centered on honor and less differentiated – that were constitutive of pre-modern subjects). Secondly, Honneth follows the Hegelian idea that self-consciousness is mediated by recognition, and develops this into a model of the cognitive constitution of practical intentionality – a model which could in principle be further developed within a socio-ontological framework. Finally, Honneth's focus on the struggles for recognition has the advantage of making it clear that the phenomenon of recognition is animated by an internal conflictive dynamic which historically intertwines consent and dissent, acceptance and refusal, and whose logic is to be

rooted at the level of practices of reciprocal interaction. There is thus much more to be said about the presence or absence of recognition than Searle manages to say.

Later in his book *Reification* (2008) Honneth deepens the ontological dimension of his account of recognition. Recognition theory becomes now explicitly socio-ontological in that it is an ontology of the intersubjective foundations of human praxis. This new ontological understanding of recognition provides us with a frame that can better illuminate the ontological significance of recognition and the intersubjective dynamics of acceptance left unarticulated by Searle. Honneth's understanding of intersubjective recognition could thus make a contribution to contemporary social ontology, delivering a number of conceptual tools that Honneth formerly developed independently of an ontological model, and that might be useful for analyzing the intersubjective dynamics of acceptance which Searle leaves unarticulated. But rather than concentrating on how to make fruitful use of Honneth's previous triadic theory of intersubjective recognition within contemporary social ontology, I will rather concentrate here on how ontology works in his book *Reification*. The point I want to stress is that Honneth in fact does not explicate the ontological significance of recognition with reference to the socio-ontological Hegelian thesis concerning the recognitive constitution of self-consciousness and objective spirit, but rather through recourse to a Heidegger-inspired fundamental ontology of "care" (*Sorge*) (Honneth 2008, p. 28–40).

The reason for this seems to be that Honneth now wants to develop the ontology of recognition in terms of primary structures of intersubjectivity that are not themselves socially constituted. He is interested in an "existential" mode of recognition that he conceives as the normative foundation for the three more substantial forms of recognition (Honneth 2008, p. 90n70). Hence, rather than analyzing the socio-ontological significance or structure of the more substantial forms of recognition themselves, Honneth concentrates on grounding the three spheres in a more primary sphere which he conceives in terms of an existential ontology. As a consequence, Honneth does not elaborate in *Reification* on the socio-ontological role of recognition and thus on its role in the constitution of social objects (objective spirit, the social world).

Furthermore, Honneth takes up from the Lukácsian tradition a negative account of second nature, describing reification as petrified second nature (Honneth 2008, p. 24–25). Thus what we have is, on the one hand a positive existential ontology of recognitive intersubjectivity; and on the other hand a negative ontology of reification as oblivion of recognition. Honneth understands reification in a classical Lukácsian way as relations between persons materializing themselves in relations between objects so that the interpersonal relations are

concealed. And he conceives of relations between persons as original recognitive relations, understood in terms of an affective, evaluating and participating attitude that is ontologically fundamental insofar as it is not itself socially constituted. This attitude is not a matter of second nature, or acquired disposition, but is “original” (Honneth 2008, p. 35, 54–55). Reification on the other hand is to be understood here as something second natural: as a social habit that comes to be rooted in customs and in our very agency through socialization (Honneth 2008, p. 25).¹⁶

Honneth does in fact distinguish between reifying and non-reifying objectification, and on this basis he criticizes Lukács for having simply identified objectification with reification (Honneth 2008, p. 65). According to Honneth, recognition is a condition of possibility of all objectification, and reifying objectification is characterized by some kind of “forgetting” of this condition. But unfortunately Honneth limits his discussion to epistemological objectification and does not elaborate on the socio-ontological role of objectification more generally. Were he to do so, he would need to use the notion of “second nature” also in a positive sense, for describing the constitution of social and institutional objects and structures, instead of using it merely for criticizing reified ones.¹⁷ The fact that Honneth limits his discussion to epistemic objectification may be responsible also for the fact, noted in the literature, that he does not seem able to socially and historically substantiate the forms of reification he describes in the book.¹⁸ Forms of reification are not rooted in Honneth’s conception in substantive material and historical practices of recognitive objectification, but are described merely as derived manifestations of interaction that are oblivious of their foundation in the original affective recognition. I suggest that here we would need to develop a broader conception of the role of recognition in objectification and thus in the constitution of social objects. Such a conception would be able to encompass both reified and non-reified

16 Note however that there is a certain asymmetry between what Honneth calls “original” habits of recognition and natural social habits of reification. The former are supposed to be “fundamental” existential dispositions – first nature? – whereas the latter are acquired and thus second nature dispositions. See Honneth 2008, p. 33 (“the original ‘caring’ character of this activity”), 53 (“original form of behavior”).

17 A positive use of the notion of “second nature” is compatible with the Hegelian framework Honneth develops in his later *Freedom’s Right* (2014). Still, as I will argue later, the Hegelian framework is developed here in the fashion of a normative political theory, whereas the socio-ontological layer remains underdetermined.

18 See, for instance, Jutten 2010, who argues that Honneth’s account lacks historical substance, and Chiari 2010, according to whom this depends on the fact that Honneth separates the normative aspects of reification from an analysis of their socio-economical basis.

institutions (including self-consciousness understood as a social institution) as a second natural realm.

Let me end my discussion of Honneth with some remarks on the fate of this issue in his recent ambitious project of *Freedom's Right* (2014). In this book Honneth develops a Hegelian theory of modern institution as “objective spirit” “realizing” or “embodying” normative relations.¹⁹ Still, even in this work Honneth does not introduce conceptual tools for grasping objective spirit in terms of a socio-ontologically characterized notion of recognition, an undertaking which would involve giving an account of recognitive constitution of both social institutions and social subjects by means of the notion of objectification. In characterizing “objective spirit” Honneth talks loosely of “embodiment” and “realization”, without spelling out the socio-ontological meaning of these terms (see, for instance, Honneth 2014, p. 3, 4, 113). And where he in fact uses the notion of “objectification”, he does not connect it positively with “recognition” (Honneth 2014, p. 3, 50, 53, 90, 169, 171).²⁰ One of the reasons why Honneth does not follow the socio-ontological path, is probably that he is still indebted to Lukács’ negative account of second nature, and still shares something of Adorno’s suspicion of an affirmative deployment of the socio-ontological commitments of social theory. This may also be somehow related to the problems that Honneth encountered in his previous project, where he was not able to historically and materially substantiate the phenomenon of reification. In *Freedom's Right* Honneth seems to have abandoned reification as a key concept in his project (the word does not occur at all in the book) and is therefore also driven to drop the ontological understanding of recognition that he had adopted in *Reification*. As a consequence, whereas in *Reification* we are faced with an ontologically characterized notion of recognition without a theory of objective spirit, in *Freedom's Right* we find a notion of objective spirit without a socio-ontological understanding of recognition and its objectification.²¹ Hence, though Honneth’s work is an important step towards the

19 See Honneth 2014, p. 4: “Every society embodies objective Spirit to a certain extent, because its institutions, social practices and routines reflect shared normative beliefs about the aims of cooperative interaction.”

20 At p. 233 and 234 (Honneth 2014) the relation between recognition and ‘objectification’ finally shows up but only in the context of the discussion of the alienating effects of modern divided labor. Hence, when he writes that “objectifying activity of labour relies on mutual recognition in an overall social framework,” Honneth is not really capturing the overall internal relation between recognition and objectification, but is instead saying that even “objectified activity” resulting from reifying processes presupposes that at some level there are mutual recognitive relations.

21 Such a tension seems to be due to a sort of dualism between an ontological and a normative approach similar to the one which Jean-Philippe Deranty has detected as a major problem in

integration of social ontology and critical theory, due to the tensions we have detected it does not accomplish this task.

5.2 Reification and the Concealment of Social Contingency

Let me end with reflections on how to go about the concept of reification, following the insights discussed above. I have spoken of reification as additional objectification, that is, as a specific form that objectifications may take. Such a form has to be understood as a result of a social mechanism that masks the ontological contingency, the socially produced character of certain objectifications by imposing on them an “appearance of necessity” to borrow from Adorno, that is, a false appearance of being necessarily binding, immutable, invariable, and inescapable.

Hence, reification has been characterized not as an epistemic, nor as a moral notion, but first and foremost as a socio-ontological one, since it involves a social fact, a specific way in which the social reality is constituted and experienced. This is the idea that Adorno tried to capture with the notion of a “false state of things”. Such a state of things is qualified as “false”, not because it violates some epistemic, moral, or social norms, nor because it betrays some more original, more authentic, or truer state of things, but because it masks or falsifies its origins, taking on an appearance of necessity. This is a socio-ontological characterization of reification because what is falsified here is the ontological contingency of social being. Secondly, because such social structures, habitualized patterns of action and institutionalized norms, tend to “freeze” our way of life – think of the images of “frozen spirit” and “petrified second nature” in Lukács – that is, they prevent us from further developing our potentialities and block social change. A stronger way to grasp such a freezing effect would be to characterize it in terms of absence of freedom and rationality, or in other words as a state of things which does not enable our freedom to develop and which blocks rational modifications of the social setting. The reason why lack of rationality and absence of freedom are however not enough to qualify such forms of objectification, and why a further notion of reification is needed in order to account for them, is that we are

the entire work of Honneth. The prevalence in Honneth’s model of the concern for normative foundation of modern society over the ontological moment, means as a consequence that the ontological understanding of recognition is weakened and deprived of material substantiation (see Deranty 2009, p. 476). I think this is reflected also in the fact that, when the ontological moment is made explicit, as happens in *Reification*, it tends to be framed in a proto normative way which is disconnected from substantive practices of objectification.

here dealing with structures of the world out there, and moreover with structures which literally act causally over us – in the causal order of things rather than in the rational order of persons. Hence, to qualify them only as lacking rationality and not enabling freedom – that is, to qualify them only by means of a theory of agency or of a theory of rationality – would only capture negatively their consistency and would miss their socio-ontological significance.

If this is right, then not only critical theory, but also contemporary social ontology should be concerned with reification as a phenomenon that concerns the constitution and the experience of many highly important social facts. Interestingly, even if he never uses the word nor introduces a corresponding category, even Searle in fact acknowledges the phenomenon. In chapter 5 of *Making the Social World* Searle introduces the question “why do people accept institutions and institutional facts?” According to Searle this question does not admit “any general answer” (Searle 2010, p. 107–108). He notes however that “one feature that runs through a large number of cases is that in accepting the institutional facts, people do not typically understand what is going on” (Searle 2010, p. 107). Such an epistemic opacity of the origin of social facts is then connected with the idea that people tend to take such facts for granted and thus to naturalize them: “they tend to think of them as part of the natural order of things, to be taken for granted in the same way they take for granted the weather or the force of gravity.” Searle adds that at least some of these social facts – for instance, money and government – tend to work best when they are “taken for granted and not critically analyzed.” On his view many such taken-for-granted institutional facts are connected with false beliefs: “acceptance of an institutional fact or, indeed, of a whole system of status functions, may be based on false beliefs” (Searle 2010, p. 118–119). Searle gives as an extreme example of an institutional fact functioning only because it is not believed to be an institutional fact: this is the case of the Pope in the Catholic Church. The status function of the Pope only works as a status function precisely because it is believed to be supernatural, that is, not a status function. Furthermore, Searle seems keen to somehow connect the occurrence of such cases with unjust arrangements of society,²² even though he does not identify the two terms.

Unfortunately Searle has no general category under which to label these phenomena, nor a theory which would connect them in an intelligible way. He merely refers to them as one specific answer to the question “why do people accept institutions?” And yet, one can see that such phenomena are easily framed under the concept of ‘reification’ of social facts, and that Searle’s discussion implies a certain

²² See Searle 2010, p. 17: “Indeed, there are all sorts of institutions, where people cheerfully accept what would appear to be unjust arrangements”.

understanding of what reification consists of. In this sense, Searle's theory immanently demands the concept of 'reification' to be explicitly introduced, and a distinction to be drawn between objectification and reification. This is because Searle needs tools for comprehending how free and rational agents can come to accept institutions which are not freedom enabling, but rather unjust and irrational.

As for the implicit understanding of reification that Searle's position implies, two things have to be noted. First, Searle seems to conceive the phenomenon of reification as a matter of naturalization. Here Edouard Machery has argued that such an understanding of reification seems to be incompatible with the socio-ontological apparatus of status acceptance/recognition as constitutive of social entities (Machery 2014). According to Machery, reification is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when a social entity is taken to be something natural. This is a quite common phenomenon in social life and can apply to norms, social roles, social kinds, races, and objects endowed with social significance (such as money). Thought so, reification is a sort of "essentialization" of social kinds (Gelman 2003). In Machery's view, the phenomenon of reification is incompatible with Searle's thesis according to which social entities exist because people collectively recognize that such entities have a social status. Since recognitive attitudes are understood by Searle under the model of linguistic declarations, "entities believed to be natural, including reified entities, are not proper targets of recognition" (Machery 2014, p. 93). If we believe, for instance, that races are natural, we cannot collectively recognize, in the relevant sense, the social status of races.

Are then reification and a recognitive theoretical model incompatible? I suggest that they are only so under a particular way of understanding recognition. Namely, if one understands recognition, as Searle does, under the general model of linguistic declarations and intentional beliefs, then an incompatibility arises. But we are not obliged to conceive of recognition in this way. Once we allow that the basic occurrence of recognition is actually at the level of background practices, and conceive of recognition/acceptance in terms of pre-intentional habits rather than intentional beliefs, the incompatibility does not arise. This is to say that entities can be objects of habitual recognition, while at the same time believed to be natural. The tendency to take some social kinds for granted is not primarily a matter of having beliefs, or consciously thinking something of something, but rather a matter of having pre-intentional habits (which may or may not be accompanied by beliefs).²³ Furthermore, reification

²³ Even if it were true, as Searle writes of some institutions, that people "tend to think of them as part of the natural order of things" (Searle 2010, p. 107), the important thing is that the notion of 'tendency' to which he appeals is what does the main job here and cannot be accounted for in terms of beliefs.

is a social experience, and hence it is not just a matter of attributive attitudes, but also a mode of being of social life and a matter of being affected by social structures. This is why the notion of reification needs to be framed ontologically and in relation to habitual background practices of recognition. For the same reason, the core of reification cannot be identified with taking social entities to be natural entities. In some sense, every socio-ontological constitution implies a mechanism of taking something for granted. A phenomenological analysis of such a mechanism of taking something for granted reveals that social objectification, insofar as it is effective, is connected with an experience of socially mediated immediacy, which is connected with a sense of living naturalness. This is what in the philosophical tradition has been addressed with the idea that the social world has the habitual mode of being of a second nature. But such a sense of living naturalness and of mediated immediacy is not the same as perceiving something as invariant, immutable, or essential. In fact, as both Adorno and John Dewey have argued (Dewey 1910; Adorno 1932/1984), the very notions of natural history and of second nature point towards an understanding of nature as transient, contingent, as something intrinsically subject to change. Hence, essentialization and the semantics of naturalness should not be identified. Reification occurs rather when the living, self-moving naturalness of the social world is masked and contingent social objectifications present themselves, and are experienced, with the appearance of necessity and immutability. As a consequence, reification is an additional objectification, where the socio-ontological mechanism of taking for granted objectifications assumes a form which conceals social contingency in a way which leads socially constituted facts and normative orders to work on us as dead things, as occurrences of a blind causal order.²⁴

24 One may wonder whether the constitution of social objects does not require a certain amount of functional reification. Do we not somehow need, in order for social objectifications to work (or at least to work better), that they are not only taken for granted, but also that their social origin is somehow concealed from us? This is what also Searle at some point seems keen to think, when he says that in accepting institutional facts, “people do not typically understand what is going on,” and that some institutions seem to work better just because they are believed not to be socially constituted. If this were the case, then it would consist of a functional mechanism of social life which reinforces social objectifications and is hence not always something to be criticized. Whether or not we may label this as “functional reification,” the important point is that such a mechanism of concealment would be double-edged, since it could become the basis of social blindness, leading to appearances of necessity that would have a blind causal and constraining impact on our lives. That would be a false state of things.

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