Reification as an Ontological Concept[*]

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Abstract: In this paper, I outline the ways that reification as a pathology of what I call "cybernetic society" shapes the fundamental structures of the self and our shared social reality. Whereas the classical theory of reification was a diagnostic attempt to understand the failure of class consciousness, I believe we must push this thesis further to show how is fundamentally an ontological and not a merely cognitive or epistemic concern. By this I mean that it is a pathology of consciousness as well as social praxis and, as such, infects the ontological substrates of social reality. In effect, reification is a collective rather than merely subjective phenomenon. I explore this dialectic between our subjective and social dimensions of being to show how reification actively shapes self and world. I end with a discussion of how this theory of reification as an ontological concept can be used to overcome it via what I term "ontological coherence," or the capacity of the self to reflect dialectically on the shapes of sociality that one inhabits, opening it up to evaluative reflection and critique.

1. The Reification Problem and Modern Philosophy

Let me begin by stating my thesis in terms that are succinct as well as unequivocal. Reification is the central problem in modern society. It affects the basic formation of the self as well as the patterns of social power and forms of social reality that configure our world. At another level, it is deeply constitutive of consciousness and the dimensions of our intra-psychic processes that shape our subjectivity. This further implies that the systems of thought and the discourses that we use to comprehend and grasp our world is also affected by these prior processes of social and self-formation. Reification is rooted in the specifically modern, technological and mechanical nature of the commodity form as well as the various forms of administrative and instrumental logics that have proliferated exponentially since the onset of the industrial age. The deep roots

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of this process have not been sufficiently appreciated by contemporary philosophy, the social

sciences nor psychological and psychoanalytic theory. What needs to be confronted is the ways

that shifts in the political economy of late capitalism – specifically its integration of commodity

production, mass consumption, cultural incorporation and technological, administrative

management or what I term the "cybernetic society" – have been able to intensify the process of

reification. Indeed, I believe we are witnessing a phase of social life that is producing a

phenomenon of *hyper-reification* where the traces of any form of critical autonomy and

integrated individuality are being swept away.[1]

What I refer to here as the *reification problem* can, taken the brief sketch above, be

understood to be a fundamental defect in our subjective and socio-relational processes that

frustrate or even completely negate capacities for critical judgment and autonomous reasoning

outside of the field of heteronomous value systems that shape and organize personal and

collective life. The reification problem does not denote reification as a general phenomenon,

rather, it maintains that reification renders our philosophical attempts to construct critical,

rational, or democratic theories defective insofar as these theories rely on *a priori* assumptions

about human reason, communication, recognition, or reflective endorsement. The reification

problem disables these post-metaphysical philosophical paradigms forcing us to reconsider a

critical-ontological approach to our ideas about critical consciousness and critical rationality.

According to the post-metaphysical conception of human rationality, valid forms of reason

emerge from dialogical, intersubjective processes that construct valid ethical norms according to

democratic, shared procedures that guide our practices of reason-exchange. The problem with

these approaches is that they fail to accommodate the ways that the reification of consciousness

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[1] I discuss this in more detail in my forthcoming book, *Twilight of the Self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism*. (Stanford University Press, 2022).

perverts the cognitive and intersubjective capacities of social agents. The result is a reproduction of forms of social power and social reality without critique thereby constricting the mutative possibilities of social rationality.[2]

Contemporary philosophical efforts to articulate a constructivist moral theory rooted in our intersubjective and reflective capacities therefore are fated to reproduce the pathologies of reified consciousness as well as the social relations, logics and processes that produce it. What is needed is a more comprehensive theory of reification, not simply as an epistemological category but rather as an ontological category. The thesis that I will defend in this paper will be that reification needs to be seen as affecting the social-relational as well as the subjective-psychological dimensions of human reality. Reification is an ontological category in the sense that it shapes and affects the self, the individual's capacities for thought, reflection, perception, libidinal motivation, and so on; but it also shapes the practices and social-relations that are instantiated by them, thereby helping to shape the way the social world, social reality itself, is articulated. Bringing these two dimensions of human ontology together – the inner, subjective dimension and the social-relational dimension – is the core aim of this paper. It is my conviction that this is the most fruitful path to grasp reification as an active process that shapes our inner and outer worlds and which also can dialectically provide us with the means to overcome it and counter its dynamics.

2. Reification as a Totalizing Process

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[2] For a more extended discussion of this shortcoming in modern philosophical thinking and critical theory more specifically, see my *The Specter of Babel: A Reconstruction of Political Judgment*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020).

To understand how reification has become so central, I want to first argue that it is a totalizing process in modern culture. There has been a paradigm shift in political economy from an industrial society that spanned roughly from the middle to late-nineteenth century to the nineteen-seventies, through a neo-liberal rupture where the social-democratic welfare states were reorganized around the imperatives of capital, public goods were transferred to private control, finance ascended as the primary form of capital, forms of social solidarity eroded, and a new hierarchy rooted in hyper-concentration of capital into fewer hands took shape. Accumulation was now the grounding logic for all other institutional logics. What has taken its place is a more systemically integrated, technologically unified social system where the self has been subsumed by the systemic logics of late capitalism.

This might seem to call into question the relevance of reification in an age that is supposedly "post-industrial." Indeed, Lukács' theory of reification was birthed from the theoretical insights of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Hegel's theory of estrangement (*Entäusserung*), Simmel's theory of the "tragedy of culture," and Weber's ideas about "rational authority" and "instrumental reason" (*Zweckrationalität*) that he saw recoding modern culture. But as Anita Chari has insightfully pointed out:

> The dominance of immaterial labor in contemporary capitalism points to a change in the position of subjectivity within the capitalist mode of production. As immaterial labor has become dominant within production, the production of subjectivity has taken on a direct role in the processes of capitalist accumulation. More and more features of social life become productive for capital: styles, forms of communication (Twitter, Facebook, smartphones), communities, affects, and desires.[3]

Indeed, the very notion that we live in a "post-industrial" society must itself be called into question. If we understand the term industrial to denote factory labor or some kind of

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[3] Anita Chari, *A Political Economy of the Senses: Neoliberalism, Reification, Critique*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 133.

exclusively material labor, then we can see that this has largely shifted to what Chari calls

"immaterial labor." However, if we take the term to mean, as I think we should, the patterned,

mechanical, mass production of commodities (services are in this sense a commodity), then we

should see that it is not a post-industrial society that we inhabit, but a society where industry is

the central organizing principle behind every form of life.[4] The process of mass

commodification is a logical consequence of the accumulation pressures that have driven down

profit rates in post-WWII developed economies, largely due to the saturation of markets. The

increasing need to turn every aspect of life into a commodity has the consequence of a total

process of reification: a kind of total subsumption of the self to the logic of the commodity form,

the severing of subjectivity from its onto-formative capacities, and the dissolution of capacities

for critical autonomy and agency.

The massification of the commodity form extends beyond the material domain and into

the subjective states of individuals, as Chari notes. But it is not only the commodity form that

has this formative power over the self and society. Also important to consider are the ways that

this new political economy is organized according to a technical-administrative needs for

regularity as time and labor become more controlled and managed. Efficiency is now the

essential logic of a financial, service based economy. The self now becomes subsumed by the

logics of efficiency and the commodification of experience and all forms of human praxis. The

new regimes of work, education, culture and "private life" are all dominated by the commodity

form, by the need for extracting surplus and, as a result, the self becomes folded into the

dynamics of the system itself. Reification now becomes hyper-reification where there are no

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[4] As Ernest Mandel observes: "Late capitalism, far from representing a 'post-industrial society,' thus appears as the period I which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time; to which one could further add the increasing mechanization of the sphere of circulation . . . and the increasing mechanization of the superstructure." *Late Capitalism*. (London: Verso, 1975), 191.

longer any viable, let alone robust, dimensions of life or experience external to the imperatives of the system itself. Now, the self lacks any reservoirs of psychic or cultural energy that can be tapped against the system's needs and norms. The self now operates according to the institutional logics of capital. This phenomenon I term the *cybernetic society* because it takes on the features of a self-regulating system steered according to the common logics of capital. To understand how this new phase of capitalism shapes the self and creates this new intensity of hyper-reification, we will need to explore the ways that is shapes our social world as well as the dynamics of subjectivity and the self.

3. The Social Field of Reification: Praxis and Social Reality

Now that I have shown how pervasive the process of reification actually is, I would like to break down the way that we can conceive of reification as an ontological category. I will do this by first arguing that human reality is *social reality*; that to be social is to be an *agent of praxis*, and that social practices possess certain features that grant them ontological status. Human beings are inherently, essentially social by which I mean that out ontogeny is functionally dependent on the relational shapes and dynamics present during the course of our biological and psychological growth. A practice is therefore an inherently social form of activity in that it requires some other to coordinate it and to generate it. Our phylogenetic capacities – say, for language, thought, intentionality, purposive activity, and so on – are really not conceivable asocially. Our social relations with others are therefore deeply constitutive of our inner world and our ontogenetic capacities.

As I define it, a social practice is an activity that seeks to realize some end or purpose. Practices can be subjective, as when I think about what I will make for supper this evening, or

they can externalized, as when I talk with a friend, teach a class, or board a train with others. The core element in each of these is some intention that I seek to realize in the world. Each social practice requires another person in some basic sense. When I deliberate with myself about what I may make for supper this evening, this process, indeed, this capacity as a whole, requires that someone taught me how to use language, which itself organizes my consciousness into discrete thoughts, and which enables me to participate in the ritual of "cooking" and "eating" a thing called supper. None of this is the product of some idiolect, but is rather made possible by the existence of others. Practices are therefore generative in the sense that they create some non-natural thing in the world. A thought, an artifact, are examples of our re-working of nature and the generation of some new reality. Making pasta for supper requires not only my subjective sense of what pasta is, how to cook it, and so on; it also requires that an external social reality exist – farmers who farm and process wheat, distribution and delivery networks so I can purchase it, and shops that are staffed with people who can make it available to me. This complex social reality interacts with and, in many ways, renders possible my intention to make pasta for supper this evening. But the key idea here is that a practice is *generative of a new reality* – without these various social processes and social relations, the reality of my supper will be impossible.

We can therefore break a social practice down into several basic features: it is relational, intentional, and generative. This means that our distinctly human world can be grasped as relationally and purposefully generated by us. Only when we see our social world in this way can we begin the process of breaking down the pathology of reification and begin to possess rational, cognitive grip of the truth-content of social being itself. As Karel Kosík rightly points out: "The onto-formative process of human praxis is the basis for the possibility of ontology, i.e.,

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for understanding being. The process of forming a (socio-human) reality is a prerequisite for disclosing and comprehending reality in general."[5] In contrast to what A. E. M. Anscombe refers to as "brute facts," a social fact or social reality is the product of our collective human practices. The social world exists, has its own ontology, in this sense, only as a product of our collective practices and the relations, structures, processes and ends or purposes toward which they are organized. This constitutes the basic essence of an ontology of the social: practices, relations, processes and purposes are the basic conceptual building blocks of our social world, of our social reality itself. The reason for this is that it accounts dialectically for the ways that our distinctive status as social beings – i.e., as *practical* beings – can be linked to the ontological status of the social world. Human beings possess world-generating powers through the capacity of social practices to serve as recombinative forces within the sphere of nature. The generative capacity is enhanced by the different arrangements of our cooperative relations and can be organized toward different ends and purposes.

Social power is, in this way, a central feature of our social ontology. How power is distributed, how it is instantiated has a formative impact on the ways our relations are shaped as well as the purposes that are set for our social processes and institutions, and so on, all constitute a field of social power in that norms need to be put into place to shape our practices, relations and purposes. The key problem with reification is that it renders our self-understanding defective; it prevents us from seeing our social world as ontological, as the product of our inherent formative powers as socio-practical beings and instead replaces this with routine thinking, with the utilitarian logic that allows us to maneuver through what appears to us as a static world. This is the realm of the *ontic*, of a social world that is alienated from a self-

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[5] Karel Kosík, *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World*. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), 139.

consciousness that it is ours; it is the product of a kind of power that enables some to control and organize social reality according to their purposes and projects. The ontic is the concealment of the ontological; it is the forgetting of ourselves as socio-practical, *poietic* beings. Such a world seems to us as appearance, not as changeable, mutative.[6] It has essentially become reified – both subject and object are split from one another and understood separately, thereby reifiying both self and world. The shift from the ontological to the ontic is therefore a shift not only in how we understand ourselves and our relations with the world, it also describes the actual ways that social power is able to organize the objective social features of the world itself: of how we relate, how our practices are shape, the ends and purposes toward which our activities and institutions should be organized, and so on.

Each of these five dimensions of social ontology – practices, relations, structures, processes and purposes – are dialectically interrelated in that none of them can be absent, each one mediating the other. Add to this that these five categories, taken as a *total process*, open up for us the ways that reification can be viewed as an *ontological* as opposed to merely an epistemological category or some kind of cognitive defect or pathology of consciousness alone. The reason for this is that, as I have been arguing in line with Hegel, Marx and Lukács, the essential nature of human being is that, as Kosík observes: "we ourselves form reality, and know that reality is formed by us. In this respect, the difference between natural reality and socio-human reality is this, that though man can change and transform nature, he can change socio-human reality *in a revolutionary way*; but he can do so only because he forms this reality

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[6] Kosík describes what I am calling the ontic in this context well when he writes: "the phenomenal form of things is the natural product of everyday praxis. The everyday utilitarian praxis gives rise to 'routine thinking' – which covers both familiarity with things and with their superficial appearance, and the technique of handling things in practice – as a form of movement and existence. But the world that exposes itself to man in his fetishized praxis, in procuring and manipulation, is not a real world, though it does have a real world's 'firmness' and its 'effectiveness'; rather, it is a 'world of appearances.'" *Dialectics of the Concrete*, 5.

himself. . . . It is the comprehension of socio-human reality as the unity of production and products, of subject and object, of genesis and structure."[7] To say that the ontological becomes ontic as a result of reification is to say that the social world becomes concealed as a human product; that it is immune to change, that we are fated to live in accordance with the dominant ideological system of values, concepts and categories that shape the practices and reproduce the social reality of our world. In this way, reification shapes our praxis in a fundamentally heteronomous way: it shrouds the projects of the powerful in the mists of second nature and cements social domination and the systems of extraction by rooting it in the shared collective concepts and norms that undergird our practices – practices that articulate the relations, structures, processes, and purposes of our social world.

4. The Subjective Field of Reification: Normative Entanglement

The subjective field of reification is the product of this reified social field. It is dialectically related to it rather than simply caused by it as if it were an external thing shaping the internal reality of subjects. Rather, the dialectical nature of the relation between the social and subjective aspects of reification is that there can be no reification of consciousness without it having an impact on our socio-relational world just as reification is itself produced within the self via the socio-relational forms of life and their dynamics exerting internalization pressures on the self. As such, reification at the level of the subject is produced by (i) the subject's internalization of norms from external, social practices and institutions, what I call *normative entanglement*; and (ii) by the internalization of external objects (i.e., relations to other persons) in the process of psychic development. These two circuits of internalization are dialectically related and cannot

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[7] Kosík, *Dialectics of the Concrete*, 7.

exist without the other, indeed, both mediate and co-produce the other. What is crucial to understand in this process is that the reification of consciousness not only affects our cognitive faculties, but the very construction of the self as a system of thinking, feeling, perceiving. The effects of reification on self-development and the intra-psychic processes of the individual are important to understand since it is here that the very fulcrum to fight reification is to take place. Only when subjectivity has been absorbed by the false totality can it be rooted in a more trenchant, more permanent way within the structure of the self.

The original theory of reification as articulated by Lukács was not concerned nor informed by the theories or approach of psychoanalysis. Instead, it emerged from the philosophical concern over the ontology of consciousness as well as debates over the phenomenological structure of perception of the object domain.[8] What I would like to suggest here is that there is a psychoanalytic approach to reification that can be pursued and grant us insight into the depths of subjective pathologies that it can cause. My strategy is to show that reification shapes the normative structures of consciousness on the one hand but also that it is able to transform our intersubjective relations with others and, consequently, the intra-psychic dynamics of the subject. The importance of this approach is that it is able to highlight the ways that this hyper-reification shapes a new kind of subjectivity: one that is unable to articulate the psychic resources needed for radical transformation no less than critical judgment and solidarism. What reification does at this level is de-autonomize the subject's inner capacities for

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[8] For more on the philosophical aspects of Lukács' theory of reification, see the important discussions by Christian Lotz, "Categorial Forms as Intelligibility of Social Objects: Reification and Objectivity in Lukács," in G. Zucker (ed.) *Confronting Reification: Revitalizing Georg Lukács' Thought in Late Capitalism*. (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 25-47; Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School.* (London: Verso, 2014); Richard Westerman, *Lukács' Phenomenology of Capitalism: Reification Revalued.* (New York: Palgrave, 2019); and Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism.* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

basic psychic creativity such as imagination and fantasy as well as re-circuit the libidinal and relational capacities of the self.

Let me begin with the theory of what I call *normative entanglement*. One central feature of our lives as social beings is the existence of norms. Norms are the means by which our practices are structured and shaped no less than the basis for our capacity to coordinate our activities with others. It is a fundamental means by which we organize our inner thoughts as well as our socio-practical field of activity. Without norms, there is no way to organize cooperative activities; without these cooperative activities, there can be no society. In essence, norms are the basis for the background conditions for how we structure our social world and, by extension, our consciousness as well. The real question is where do these norms gain their authority and how are they internalized by subjects?

Research into the ontogenetic development of human beings has focused on the ways that norms coordinate our activities, but it also focuses on the ways that social learning occurs and the ways that norms are internalized by individuals. A norm can be seen as a way of organizing intentionality – the capacity to attribute meaning to things. Collective intentionality is the basis for the ways that our cognition of social facts are organized and made possible. Collective forms of intentionality are what make possible shared concepts and practices. The bound pieces of paper in front of me is a book; it is a book not because it is so by nature, it is social not a brute fact since I have been taught along with everyone else that such an object is a book. This is a simplistic example, but more complex forms of social reality can be constructed by assembling increasingly complex and interconnected collective-intentional rules that articulate institutional forms of reality.[9] The key idea here is that these collective-intentional rule-sets are produced by

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[9] The literature here is large and familiar by now. But see John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) for a broad overview and discussion.

us; they are not natural facts or properties of nature, nor do they obey natural laws. Hence, social norms that sustain institutions such as showing deference to members within a hierarchy, ways of relating to members of different genders, and so on are all *conventions*: they create and sustain certain forms of life; they are generative of a specific kind of social ontology.

The key place where reification enters this discussion is in the ways that these collective-intentional rule sets enter into consciousness and effectively reify it, controlling and directing our onto-formative capacities according to the external, heteronomous logics of others. This distorts the phylogenetic capacities that developing members of the community possess as a core feature of human sociality. As Michael Tomasello makes clear: "Human children are born into a nexus of social norms exhorting them to behave in some ways and not in others. From early in life, children conform to social norms as articulated and enforced by adults."[10] The key issue here is the capacity of an "I-perspective" to turn into a "we-perspective"; to create the conditions for the cooperative production of cultural artifacts and social institutions, in short, to become human as part of a human community. Seen from this developmental point of view, collective intentionality is the "cognitive capacity to form a group-minded 'we' and so to participate in conventions, norms, and institutions, and to view things from 'objective' and normative perspectives."[11]

If norms are so basic and fundamental to the capacity for sociality to develop, then what happens if the "nexus of social norms" comes to be shaped by external institutional logics? What happens when parents enforce norms of "success" of consumption and so on at an early age of child development? What happens when, with the proliferation of screens and technological

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[10] Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 254. Also see 45ff.
[11] Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 305.

gadgets, become aimed at younger age groups, and their own sense of imagination and wonder become colonized by the commodification logics embedded within these devices? What happens as the norms of capitalist, consumptive, possessive individualism crowd out norms of cooperation and common goods? Think even of the ways that neoliberal regimes of management have taken over education, university life; the ways that mass culture continues to be shaped by the patterned forms of feeling that constrict human experience, and so on. *Normative entanglement* is the phenomenon where the nexus of social norms is infiltrated by the institutional, administrative, productive and consumptive logics of cybernetic society; when the developing individual come into contact with the social density of this nexus of norms, then they become the normative basis for collective intentionality. In this way, they become the very background conditions for articulating the social world. As more and more of the non-economic spheres of life are themselves colonized by the logic of capital, of efficiency, of the commodity form, the less that the nexus of norms needs to compete with alternative values and collective-intentional rules. Religion, aesthetic perception and experience, scientific and philosophical pursuits, and so on, no longer serve as guiding vocations and pursuits because the background normative conditions no longer exist to give them any integrity outside of the sphere of capital.

This is reification in the sense that the shared nexus of norms is created by and is designed to serve only the economic logics of the social system. The potential for conflict – class-based in social terms and neurotic in the form of the intra-psychic dynamics of the self – is lessened and the world that capital seeks to create is embedded in the nexus of social norms internalized by the individual through socialization processes. The cognitive problem here is obvious: as norms of cooperation are altered by the changing relations of production under capitalism, the self begins to change. The self is no longer in conflict with the demands of the

system, but comes to see the system as "natural," as the "way the world works," the "natural order of things," and so on. There should be no doubt that this is an expression of power, domination: it is a kind of domination I have called *constitutive domination* in that it expresses the power of some to be able shape the nexus of norms, the shared conventions and value-orientations that organize the social world.[12] Indeed, as the normative structure of consciousness is shaped by the nexus of norms rooted in capitalist imperatives, the entanglement of these norms within the cognitive capacities of the individual gradually eclipse the capacity for critique, for experimentation, for a desire for the new.

5. Reification of the Self: A Psychoanalytic Approach

Now, if reification is a social-ontological concept, as I have been suggesting, then the self's own relation to others will be a primary way that we can glimpse the subjective dimensions of the pathology. Normative entanglement demonstrates how external norms that are rooted in institutional logics shaped by capital become braided with the self's own structures of consciousness. But I would like to go a bit deeper than this, specifically to show that the *self can become like an object*, lacking any authentic creative, spontaneous or imaginative capacities outside of the parameters that have been internalized via the social system. The key idea here is that self becomes an object to itself just as the external relations to others take on the same character. One way that this can be glimpsed in modern culture is in the treatment of one's own body as an object: the proliferation of tattoos, piercings, of commodified phrases bandied about in public on t-shirts, and so on – all render the self inert and seek to displace language with

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[12] See my discussion of constitutive domination in *The Domestication of Critical Theory*. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

image, what is dynamic and generative with what is static, non-dialectical. One's own physical body is treated as an object, as a thing.

This extends to deeper levels of the self and its increasing shallowness of subjectivity. As self and world become increasingly infected by reification, the self's capacities for creativity, for subjective experimentation, fantasy and meaning constrict; each comes to see oneself as an object, in increasingly concrete terms. Little wonder why adolescents and adults view their own sense of self as bereft of meaning, experience anxiety at the prospects of failing in life, and fail to see meaning and value outside of the prescribed institutional goals and values of the prevailing system. Creativity, autonomy, spontaneity is crushed by the process of socialization and internalization of the norms and values of the society. The self becomes increasingly *deflected* – deflected away from one's own capacities as a creative, imaginative and generative being toward the nexus of common norms, practices and values that embody the society at large.[13] Each comes to see oneself and the society at large *as objects*. This indicates that at a deeper level there also seems to be a psychological objectification of self that emerges as reification penetrates consciousness. The constriction of meaning, the de-dialectization of consciousness, the repression of autonomous desire and generativity – all point to the effects of reification on the inner dynamics of the self.

As I see it, a psychoanalytic approach to the problem of reification emphasizes the ways that the structure and dynamics of the self, of the intra-psychic processes of consciousness are affected by the socialization of the nexus of social norms rooted in administrative, technical capitalist institutions. The penetration of the logics of efficiency, of commodification, of

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[13] The term *deflected self* I take from Christopher Bollas who notes that the deflected self is "a self that is transferred elsewhere." See his *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 152 and *passim*.

instrumentality all have deep effects on the self's organization of its inherently creative, generative, libidinal and cathectic dynamics. Reification organizes these aspects of the inner world of the self in such a way because the socialization process is not simply one where we uptake dominant external social norms. At a deeper level, these norms are introjected into the self by which is meant that the external norm or value or concept is taken and becomes part of the psychic structure of the individual. This is a deeper, more entrenched form of reifying experience than merely being socialized by patterned activities and institutions.[14] Since this occurs at a younger age than it did during the period of industrial capitalism, the cybernetic phase of capitalism is able to root its imperatives into the inner subjective world of the self. Indeed, where we can see psychic illness as manifesting itself psychotically as a person breaking with reality or at least a weak sense of reality, there can be a pathology that extends in the opposite direction, as Donald Winnicott notes: "there are others who are so firmly anchored in objectively perceived reality that they are ill in the opposite direction of being out of touch with the subjective world and with the creative approach to fact."[15]

One way this can begin is in the nexus of relations that form the self's developmental context. Since the self is always ensconced within relations, the dynamics of these relations can exhibit features that either encourage the development of a creative, reflective, dialectical being or they can frustrate the capacities and desire for an imaginative, creative and flourishing existence. The former we can refer to as *anabolic relations* and the latter as *katabolic*

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[14] As Cornelius Castoriadis observes on this point: "Socialization is the process whereby the psyche is forced to abandon (never fully) its pristine solipsistic meaning for the shared meanings provided by society. Introjection goes always much further than animal *mimesis*, because it is always reinterpretation of that which is introjected, and this reinterpretation can only take place on the basis of the existing proper schemata." "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary." In David Ames Curtis (ed.) *The Castoriadis Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 319-337, 330.

[15] Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*. (London: Tavistock, 1971), 78.

relations.[16] One of the ways that reification can shape the psychic inner world of the self is by de-symbolizing consciousness thereby creating a kind of one-dimensionality. The subject sees self and world in terms of the concrete definitions and standards that are presented to them, lacking any ability to alter their perspective or even symbolize for themselves what those objects may in fact be. As Christopher Bonovitz observes about this concrete mode of thinking: "ideas are direct replicas of reality and not representational. There is an inability to think about one's own mind or the minds of others, to reflect on the beliefs, intentions, and desires that are in the background of behavior and action."[17]

This is a serious pathology of consciousness in that the self is unable to de-reify the object domain. Other people appear to them as objects *and* the subject also is unable to reflect on a higher level on the beliefs and concepts that one possesses and which serve to anchor his thought in the world. As Bonovitz further notes: "In the concrete mode, the patient assigns objects only one meaning and is often insistent on the facts and behaviors that are observable and knowable, located in the external world."[18] What is particularly important here is that the need to focus on a single descriptive meaning implies a lack of the capacity "to play with metaphor and symbols";[19] that meaning becomes constricted and restrained. Reification encourages such a concrete mode of thinking insofar as it is able to shape the ways that we categorize and cognize the world. The key idea behind the effect of reification is, as Wilfred Bion noted about concrete forms of thought, that it was the drive to destroy knowing.[20]

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[16] See my recent paper, "An Ontological Account of Social Pathology," for a more developed account of these categories of social relations in Neal Harris (ed.) *Pathology Diagnosis and Social Research: New Applications and Explorations*. (New York: Palgrave, 2021): 113-140.

[17] Christopher Bonovitz, "On Seeing What Is *Not* Said: The Concrete Mode of Psychic Functioning and the Development of Symbolization." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2016): 280-293, 283.

[18] Bonovitz, "On Seeing What Is *Not* Said," 283.

[19] Bonovitz, "On Seeing What Is *Not* Said," 284.

[20] See W. R. Bion, *Learning from Experience*. (London: Tavistock, 1962).

This kind of subjectivity does not occur via a direct internalization of social norms alone. The relations between people – katabolic relations, in particular – are central here. The more individuals see one another as things, the less secure their own emotional attachments to others becomes. As family life, schools, work life become increasingly subsumed by instrumental logics, relations between people become more instrumental. As this happens, the emotional relations between people become constricted and the self's emotional world – no less than his capacity to empathize and cognize the other – becomes increasingly limited, shallow and small. As Stephen Seligman notes: "Without the transaction between attentive people who care about each other's minds and bodies, there can hardly be a sense of the difference between other people and things."[21] Reification has the ability to turn the inner world into this kind of one-dimensionality: it seizes the capacity of the mind to create, explore, view the world and meaning from multiple vantage points, frustrates, if not totally negates, metaphorical thinking and spontaneous symbolic thought and replaces it with the pre-fabricated structures of meaning that are required for the functioning of external (i.e., social) institutions.

In this sense, the self is unable to generate authentic meaning and experience (at least consciously, unconsciously is another matter) conflict between one's personal forms of meaning the collective forms of meaning that one encounters in one's development process. And meaning should be understood here as part of that basic intentional and purposeful structure of thought that is essential to what is distinctive about being human. Just as Marx saw "labor" as the nucleus of the onto-formative capacity of human being, imagination is a crucial expression of the onto-formative capacity of human beings within the inner dynamics of the self; imagination

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[21] Stephen Seligman, "Recognition and Reflection in Infancy and Psychotherapy: Convergences of Attachment Research with Psychoanalysis." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 5 (2017): 298-308, 302.

is crucial to one's own capacity to shape the world.[22] But reification changes this; it robs the

capacity for autonomous generativity and replaces it with heteronomous, standardized schemes

to direct our powers of "creation" and praxis. This is one more way that reification must be seen

as an ontological category: by directing the inner capacities of the self's onto-generative powers,

the self is folded into the imperatives of the external social world. Insofar as this is the case, this

self is both product and producer of that world. It is only when this imaginative capacity is de-

autonomized, when it is disciplined and even absorbed by the cultural schemes produced by a

commodified culture industry – it is at this level of reification that the self can be seen to be

erased in any effective sense. Imagination and meaning-making are taken from the subject's

autonomy and instead become tied to functionality, to instrumentality, to the demands, norms

and values of institutions.

There is little wonder why neurotic illness has decreased as capitalism has deepened and

spread being displaced by pre-Oedipal forms of psychic pathology. What space is there for

neurotic conflict when one sees one's life not in opposition to aspect of the world, but rather as a

problem of not fitting into it more perfectly, more smoothly? Nevertheless, the key idea here is

that the fetishization of the commodity world impacts consciousness in a specific way: it

conceals that one is a socio-practical being and, in the process, further reduces one to the status

of an object. This means a kind of de-subjectification of the subject, a rendering of the

individual into a patterned, predictable, heteronmously directed being. The spontaneous,

symbol-creating, imaginative, creative being is reshaped into a being who seeks out his

alignment with the prevailing social norms and institutions, who seeks not his own inner

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[22] Castoriadis has insightfully noted that: "Imagination is the capacity to make be what is not in the simply physical world and, first and foremost, to represent to oneself and in one's own way – that is, to present for oneself – that which surrounds the living being and matters for it and, undoubtedly also, its own being." "Psychoanalysis and Philosophy." In *The Castoriadis Reader*: 349-360, 356.

enrichment, but an increased conformity to the vapid values of the external world. As

Christopher Bollas notes, discussing this reified phenomenon or what he calls "normotic illness":

> What is lacking is that originating subjectivity which informs our use of
> the symbolic. The normotic does not see himself other than as an object
> (ideally smart and spruced up, productive and sociable) among all the
> objects of the material world. Since he does not perceive himself as a
> subject, he does not ask to be seen by the other, nor does he look into the
> other.[23]

Instead, the normotic (or reified subject) endows concrete objects and possessions with value,

introjecting that value back into the self. It is the need to be "normal," that is, as aligned with the

social patterns of meaning exemplified by the external, objective world instead of his own

generative sense of meaning that undergirds reified subjectivity. Bollas again: "a particular drive

to be normal, one that is typified by the numbing and eventual erasure of subjectivity in favor of

a self that is conceived as a material object among other man-made products in the object

world."[24]

What this points to is a pathology of the self that effectively smothers the capacities for

imagination, generative meaning, libidinal spontaneity and other reservoirs for psychic energy

that can be turned against the reifying forces of the patterned, commodified world. What

reification is able to achieve at the intra-psychic level is the absorption of these inherent energies

withing the self – energies that can be translated into contestatory attitudes and alternative

political and social imaginaries, new values, social and personal experimentation, and so on.

Reification as the erasure of subjectivity, of the displacement of our autonomy and spontaneity

by patterned forms of life, by the nexus of norms rooted in administrative-capitalist logics, by the

ever-increasing sphere of instrumentality – all point to a kind of self no longer capable of seeing,

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[23] Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 141.
[24] Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 135.

thinking, feeling and perceiving outside of the ontic world, the prevailing social reality itself. It is, if you will, the final frontier of capitalist development: the subsumption of the self into the normative patterns of thought and action required by the dominant institutional world.

6. Ontological Coherence and Anti-Reification

What I have been describing thus far in this paper is the phenomenon of hyper-reification: a transformation of self and world into one that has been so thoroughly colonized by the logics of modern techno-capitalism that it has been able to subsume the self into its schemata. The real question is now: is there a way out of this pathology? In spite of how thorough and total the phenomenon of hyper-reification may seem, it is an incomplete process. Perhaps most obvious is the extent to which reification engenders existential and psychic pathologies in the self. Anxiety, depression, loss of happiness and joy, the strain of meaningless competitive life, and more, all are becoming more prevalent. These are not pathological phenomena that can be fully understood outside of the broad social patterns that produce them. Access to the experience of these psychological pathologies is not enough in itself to shatter the guide of reification. But if we were able to use this as a mean to crack the edifice of reification, then we will be able to grasp a means of self and social transformation.

What I want to suggest now is that it is only by bringing the inner, subjective experiences of the reified world into contact with a cognitive grasp of our social reality that such a shattering of reification will become possible. What draws the self out into the domain of critical reflection is not some abstract cognitive procedure in and of itself; rather, it is the connection of the experiences of anxiety, depression and meaninglessness with the social-relational features and dynamics of the world I inhabit that evokes within me the drive for critique and implants a new

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desire for mutative change. Here we can see that both psychoanalysis and philosophy together can help us construct a kind of anti-reificatory way of thinking and reflecting, indeed, I would go so far to say, an anti-reificatory form of self-consciousness that can aid in the reclamation of critical judgment and critical praxis.

Since reification, as I have been reconstructing it here as an ontological category, operates centrally via a constriction of all forms of meaning, an *anti-reificatory* form of praxis must therefore begin with the self's awareness of the inadequacy of the forms of meaning that shape our practices, relations and purposes. The constriction of meaning is reified when it is essentially unformulated; that is, when we act in the world according to norms and values that remain concealed from our awareness. The value-orientation to always be punctual, on time for work, deferent to your boss or supervisor, to work hard, and so on are value-orientations that are rooted in the heteronomic-normative (as opposed autonomic-critical) social schemes of capitalism. As such, they must serve as grounding norms for our attitudes and beliefs about how the world functions. The problem is: we never interrogate these value-orientations; we never inquire into the ways that they may thwart other forms of life, other kinds of relations and practices, and so on. This is the concealment of meaning: to open these value-orientations and norms up to inquiry means thinking though them. Here psychoanalysis can grant us a crucial first step in any anti-reificatory frame of reflection.

The reason for this is that psychoanalysis is premised on the technique of working that which is essentially unformulated in consciousness into that which can be formulated in consciousness and through language. In a certain sense, reification is a kind of prohibition on thought: it requires that we continue to think through the world according to the external, heteronomic norms and values that are made ambient by the predominant social reality and its

institutions. But, as Paul Ricoeur notes: "psychoanalysis is only possible as *praxis* because in fact one can break through this prohibition and, in a way, reintroduce into the linguistic community those who have been excommunicated from it, and thereby resymbolize what had been desymbolized."[25] Ricoeur here emphasizes the dynamic of psychoanalysis to be able to root out the complex ways that embedded, unconscious forms of psychic structure possess external, relational (e.g., social) origins. The core importance here is that it is through the introjection of external norms and values that libidinal and cathectic ties are forged between the subject and the object domain. Reification is therefore rooted in new needs for possessing objects, for seeing others as objects and, even ourselves as objects rather than subjects of praxis. The libidinal and cathectic ties enmesh the self in the predominant reality; it makes the world ontic, static and seem natural or at least as second nature. Unfettering the psyche from these ties is a first step in anti-reification and the key idea here becomes the immanent critique of concepts, norms, values and practices. All need to be raised to conscious awareness and symbolized, made significant in order for the next step to be taken.

This next step is the connection of these intrapsychic forms of meaning and value that undergird our cathectic and libidinal ties to the world, with the social-ontological features of the world we inhabit. This means inquiring how our practices, institutions and the social purposes and ends toward which these are organized. The social totality now comes into view as the dialectical relations between norms, practices, relations, processes and purposes are made apparent thereby granting the subject what I call *ontological coherence*: that is, a cognitive grasp of the social totality and one's place within it. This occurs only after the self has de-cathected itself from the totality and seeks to understand it at a critical-cognitive level. This means

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[25] Paul Ricoeur, *On Psychoanalysis: Writings and Lectures,* vol. 1. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 204.

grasping how our collective forms of life are shaped: how our relations are organized, what purposes our institutions are oriented toward, and how the norms and practices I co-articulate with others maintain these social schemes. Once we come to view ourselves as cooperatively articulating forms of life, this opens up the possibility for change and transformation. It reveals how social domination is embedded in the normative regimes that we have taken up, and reveals the world as possibly mutative and open for transformation. The ontic becomes ontologized and reification is shattered.

Of course, this is a quick and, admittedly, convenient sketch of a theory of anti-reification. But I submit that it contains some basic and essential procedures for what we must consider critical reflection and critical reason. This way of relating to the world can only come about through new movements in education, in aesthetic production and political discourse. But it does demonstrate that, even in a speculative sense, reification can be overcome. Indeed, if nothing else, these reflections on reification as a deeply constitutive process and pathology of modern culture should lead us to question the central movements of modern philosophical discourse – both its analytic as well as continental variants. For any intellectual that ignores reification and the processes of administrative-capitalism that generate it do little more than reproduce a domesticated form of thought, one that will remain bereft of its capacity for critique, judgment and social change. Intellectuals do little to aid in the process of anti-reification the more that they ignore the central role is plays in distorting "rational" thought. In this sense, the first move for any reclamation of transformative, critical politics must be a reconceptualization of our ontology as social beings; of human life, as generative, cooperative and capable of progressing toward concrete freedom.

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