

# Towards a Critique of Reification as a Critique of Forms of Life

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*ABSTRACT.* The claim that there is “no alternative”, to contemporary neoliberal capitalism is widespread today. This paper proposes a reinterpretation of the notion of reification to scrutinize the alleged necessity of the capitalist social order. Developed by Georg Lukács, the problem of reification refers to the experience of social arrangements as thinglike entities rather than as products of social construction. By addressing the problem of reification within a social ontology of forms of life, the occurrence of reification is understood as resulting from the normatively neutral self-presentation of the capitalist form of life. To de-neutralize social norms that shape the capitalist form of life, this paper argues that social critique should turn to shared standpoints from which reification is experienced as a problem. Such standpoints can be found in social practices that are already involved in shared, normatively imbued forms of life beyond the reified logic of the capitalist form of life. Hence, it is argued that alternative forms of life are positioned to de-reify the norms that guide the capitalist form of life at large.

*KEYWORDS.* Reification; Georg Lukács; Rahel Jaeggi; Forms of life; Standpoint theory.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, reification, initially conceptualized by Georg Lukács, has lost its paradigm-setting function within critical social theory.<sup>1</sup> Although Axel Honneth's recent book *Reification* brought the concept back into prominence, his reinterpretation of reification as the lack of recognition dismisses Lukács' emphasis on reification as a problem of society as a totality.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to Honneth's reading, this paper will argue that Lukács' reflections on reification retain utmost relevance for critical theory's ambitions, aptly described by Max Horkheimer as «the philosophical interpretation of human fate».<sup>3</sup> More specifically, it would be my contention that the notion of reification captures the widespread experience of the capitalist social order as an alien entity that lies beyond the influence of individual and collective action.<sup>4</sup> Adorno phrases it succinctly by describing *all reification* as a *forgetting*, namely a forgetting of the social construction of reality.<sup>5</sup> A case in point is the neoliberal motto "there is no alternative", which denies that there is any other choice but to manage society according to economic principles. If the project of critical social theory is emancipatory social change, it must somehow contribute towards countervailing the experience of reification by emphasizing – or *remembering* – the malleability of our social world. Otherwise, critique runs the risk of remaining stuck within the confounds of Hegel's famous "empty ought".

To take up this task, I propose a redevelopment of the problem of reification within a social ontology of forms of life. In his seminal *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács already approached reification

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1 BRUNKHORST & KROCKENBERGER 1998.

2 HONNETH & OTHERS 2008.

3 HORKHEIMER 1989, 25; see also JAEggi & CELIKATES 2017, 15–19.

4 The latest European Social Survey (2018) reports 62,1% respondents believing to have very little or no influence on their governments, while 65,7% believe that the political system allows for no or very little political influence. ESS Round 9: European Social Survey Round 9 Data (2018).

5 HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO 2017, 286.

as a problem specific to the capitalist form of life (*Lebensform*).<sup>6</sup> To further inquire into the relation between the problem of reification and the capitalist form of life, however, I will build upon Rahel Jaeggi's work. Indeed, Jaeggi confirms that «one could call it the problem of reification (*Verdinglichung*) that motivates a critique of forms of life».<sup>7</sup> According to her proposal for a critical theory of forms of life, crises within forms of life can lead to the reinterpretation of social norms and practices, and hence to social change. The problem that Lukács signals, however, is that the experience of a crisis is not sufficient to motivate a contestation of the capitalist form of life.<sup>8</sup> I will therefore show that Jaeggi's model of critique does not offer a convincing strategy to deal with the incessancy of reification. More precisely, a mere immanent critique of forms of life cannot clarify from which *standpoint* it would be possible to contest reification.<sup>9</sup> Still, Jaeggi's work provides a fruitful framework for rethinking the relation between reification and the standpoint of critique. By emphasizing the resonances between the social ontological character of Lukács' work<sup>10</sup> and Jaeggi's social ontology of forms of life, I therefore propose to ground the possibility to critique reification in the standpoint of forms of life that have access to an alternative normative framework.

In the first section (I), I explain how reification, according to Lukács, is characteristic of the capitalist form of life. In section II, I highlight how Jaeggi understands critique as emerging from the reinterpretation of social norms that follow from crises within forms of life. Next (III), I map out Jaeggi's approach to capitalism as a form of life and show

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6 Lukács uses the notion multiple times: LUKÁCS 1971, 77, 176, 264, 310.

7 JAEggi 2019, 91.

8 See CELIKATES 2018, 142 for a similar argument.

9 In VERVOORT 2020 I emphasize that a critical theory needs some form of a standpoint theory to overcome the epistemological problem resulting from the theorist being situated in the same totality it aims to critique.

10 FEENBERG 1981; FEENBERG 2014; KAVOULAKOS 2018; THOMPSON 2019; THOMPSON 2020; and WESTERMAN 2018 are the main proponents of a social ontological reading of Lukács' work. In my view, their works are not only the most apt secondary sources on Lukács' problem of reification, but also provide the background to reintegrate Lukács into contemporary debates within critical theory.

how the model of immanent critique lacks an agent situated in social totality that could disrupt reification. In the fourth section (IV), I turn to Lukács' understanding of standpoint theory in order to expand Jaeggi's model of immanent critique. Finally (V), I propose an understanding of contestation that can emerge from crises and dysfunctionalities in the capitalist form of life insofar as actors also have access to the normative framework of an alternative form of life.

## 2. The Reification of Social Life

The concept of reification is often conflated with the notion of alienation.<sup>11</sup> Still, the two concepts have quite different philosophical implications.<sup>12</sup> In his *Parisian Manuscripts*, the young Marx theorizes alienation with reference to Hegel's concepts of objectivation (*Vergegenständlichung*), externalization (*Entäußerung*) and alienation (*Entfremdung*).<sup>13</sup> His theory of alienation can be summarized as follows: under capitalism, the innate human capacity to produce objects (*Vergegenständlichung*) is externalized (*entäußert*) because both the worker's labor power and its products become commodities owned by someone else, namely the capitalist.<sup>14</sup> Hence, alienation denotes a loss of agency over the capacity to produce. As such, Marx's critique of alienation builds upon an essentialist anthropology that conceives of production as the essential feature of humankind (its *Gattungswesen*). As Marx's *Parisian Manuscripts* were not available to Lukács whilst writing *History and Class Consciousness*, it does not seem likely that his notion of reification derives from Marx's theory of alienation. Still, Lukács' introduction of the concept cannot be said to be entirely original. Marx does use the notion of *Verdinglichung*

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11 See, for instance, CHRISTMAN 2019.

12 See JAEggi 2016 for the history of the concept of alienation as well as a non-essentialist reinterpretation of the notion.

13 MARX 2008.

14 For a more elaborate discussion of the difference between reification and alienation, see VERVOORT 2020.

occasionally in the third volume of *Capital*, and Georg Simmel, one of Lukács' teachers, also employs the concept. As I will show, however, Lukács' notion of reification has the advantage of avoiding the essentialist claims typical of the notion of alienation in favor of a more constructivist social ontology.

Lukács develops his theory of reification in the central essay of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), titled «Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat». By combining Max Weber's thesis of rationalization with Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Lukács argues that in modern, capitalist societies, the "commodity form" taints social life beyond the economy in the strict sense.

In his famous section on commodity fetishism in *Capital*, Marx had argued that the "exchange value" of market goods is perceived as a characteristic of the goods themselves rather than as a social relation. Such commodification finds its principal condition in an abstract form of equality – money – which is presupposed by exchange. The principle that equalizes the value of exchanged goods hence objectifies the social relation between its producers into a thing-like, calculable form. According to Lukács, this abstract form of social relations has become «the prototype of all forms of objectivity and all forms of subjectivity that correspond to them».<sup>15</sup> As Westerman aptly summarizes, Lukács' substitution of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism for the commodity *form*, expands its scope into «a particular formal arrangement of social relations [...] not only in the economy [...] but elsewhere in society».<sup>16</sup>

In capitalist societies, the commodity form hence functions as the "form of objectivity" that organizes social life *within* and *beyond* the economy. As the commodity form casts infra- and intersubjective relations in an objective, thing-like framework, it effectuates the *reification* of social practices and relations. Indeed, Lukács understands the dynamic of reification as following from a rationality based on the

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15 LUKÁCS 1971, 83.

16 WESTERMAN 2018, 91.

«principle» – the commodity form – of «what is and *can be calculated*». <sup>17</sup> Rather than merely taking issue with an ever-widening scope of commodification, he observes that the rationality typical for capitalist production is conditioned by a form of objectivity that must embrace other, not strictly economic practices. The «basis» of the commodity form might thus be that «a relation between people takes on the character of a thing», <sup>18</sup> but beyond the economy, the form of objectivity allowing for commodification turns out to function as a prototype or *Urbild* for non-economic social arrangements as well.

As Kavoulakos' work emphasizes, Lukács' emphasis on reification puts forward «a non-economistic understanding of economic categories» that stands in «structural homology» <sup>19</sup> – or, as Dannemann calls it, in «structural identity» <sup>20</sup> – with commodification. To use a Foucauldian expression, one could say that Lukács develops the commodity form as the “historical a priori”, according to which capitalist social life acquires a «new objectivity». <sup>21</sup> Like Foucault's notion, Lukács' concept of form of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeitsform*) originates from a Kantian background. More specifically, Lukács derived it from the vocabulary of his neo-Kantian contemporaries, who differentiated between various kinds of objectivity in different social fields. They described these objectivities as being imbued with a specific *form* that casts brute perceptions into a meaningful reality. <sup>22</sup> According to Lukács, however, the commodity form supersedes these separated frameworks of meaning. He tellingly claims that «what is known as economics is nothing but the system of forms objectively defining this real life». <sup>23</sup> Hence, the claim that «the factory [...] contained in concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society» <sup>24</sup> does not indicate that every aspect of social life has become

17 LUKÁCS 1971, 88.

18 LUKÁCS 1971, 83.

19 KAVOULAKOS 2018.

20 DANNEMANN 1987, 90.

21 LUKÁCS 1971, 92.

22 FEENBERG 2014, 74, 75f.

23 LUKÁCS 1971, 192.

24 LUKÁCS 1971, 90.

part of the economic production and consumption. Rather, the rational principles of production within the factory are *isomorphic* to a formal rationality that «divorces» from its economic basis and embraces «every aspect of the life of society».<sup>25</sup>

To illustrate the latter, Lukács points to the «striking similarity» between the rationality of the capitalist production process and «the formal standardization of justice, the state, the civil service».<sup>26</sup> He moreover refers to scientific, journalistic, and even romantic attitudes towards the self, others, and society that follow an instrumentalist rationality. Bureaucracy serves as Lukács main example, as he observes that within bureaucracy «[t]here arises a rational systematisation of all statutes regulating life», which «tends towards a closed system applicable to all possible and imaginable cases».<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the formal procedures of state apparatuses resemble those of the economy to the extent that both build upon formal, law-like principles that apply to all possible cases: Just as economic principles condition the rationality of commodity production, legal and formalized administrative principles provide the rationalized framework for interaction with the state and justice.

Importantly, however, the problem of reification does not only affect the *objective* structure of society. As a revolutionary thinker, Lukács emphasizes the impact of the commodity form on the *subjective* capacity to question and recreate one's social environment. Lukács emphasizes how bureaucratization implies «the adjustment of one's *way of life* [...] to the general socio-economic premises of the capitalist economy» in order to show that the commodity form also impacts a variety of non-economic social practices.<sup>28</sup> He argues that the formal rationality emerging from the commodity form inaugurates a subjective attitude (*Verhalten*) or *praxis*<sup>29</sup> that relates to the self, others, and the world in a «contemplative» vein. This attitude is characterized

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25 LUKÁCS 1971, 95.

26 LUKÁCS 1971, 98.

27 LUKÁCS 1971, 96.

28 LUKÁCS 1971, 98, my emphasis.

29 STAHL 2011, 735.

by the use of rationality to conform to rather than question the principles organizing society.<sup>30</sup> What arises is a *form of life* characterized by a forgetfulness of collective authorship over these principles. As people relate to reality by rationally adjusting their conduct towards it, their authorship of social arrangements remains out of sight. Rather, the reified subject experiences society as a “second nature”, leading to attitudes along the lines of «‘I have no choice in the matter, I have to act this way because of my position’ – as a husband, father, general, archbishop, chairman of the board, gangster or hangman, as the case be», as Berger and Luckmann have put it aptly.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, Lukács’ notion of reification signifies how in capitalist societies, a form of objectivity ontologizes social arrangements in such a way that they seem to be naturally given. More precisely, Lukács’ theory has social ontological implications in two senses. On a more ephemeral level, the commodity form plays a role as the «universal structuring principle» of society as it «penetrate[s] society in all its aspects and [...] remould[s] it in its own image».<sup>32</sup> To use a Foucauldian expression once more, the commodity form organizes the «ontology of ourselves»:<sup>33</sup> it organizes social reality according to principles known to be true and necessary. Secondly, Lukács’ social theory implies a more fundamental social ontology, insofar as reification *hides* the fact that social arrangements are constructed by social practices.<sup>34</sup> It is the dialectics between social constructionism and reification that I aim to address within a praxeological ontology of forms of life.

### 3. Against Ethical Abstinence: Criticizing Forms of Life

To further inquire into the ramifications of the problem of reification, I

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30 LUKÁCS 1971, 89.

31 BERGER & LUCKMANN 1966, 108.

32 LUKÁCS 1971, 85.

33 FOUCAULT 1984, 45-50.

34 For Lukács’ place in social ontology, see EPSTEIN 2018.

propose to build upon Rahel Jaeggi's recent work on forms of life. In an early text, Jaeggi argues that «insofar as the critique of *reification* could recognize the internal compulsiveness of *forms of life* (*Lebensformen*) [...], it could regain a terrain that was abandoned in the climate of political liberalism».<sup>35</sup> It cannot be a coincidence, then, that Jaeggi's more recent work re-centers social critique around forms of life. In her *Critique of Forms of Life* (2018), she understands forms of life as sets of both intentional and unintentional social practices that follow a patterned, repetitive, and habitual structure. These ensembles of practices are guided by norms aimed at solving the problems that the «collective conduct of life» raises.<sup>36</sup> Jaeggi claims that abstaining from critically assessing the ethical (*sittliche*) contents of forms of life does not lead to an ethically neutral social theory, as theorists such as Rawls and Habermas have it. Rather, such abstinence accepts the normative answers that «[e]very social formation has always already given».<sup>37</sup> Using Lukács' terminology, we could therefore say that abstaining from criticizing forms of life *reifies* predominant forms of life into ideologically neutral entities. Taken as such, the critique of forms of life is a precondition for any critique of reification.

Jaeggi observes that, as opposed to theories of political liberalism, critical theory has always engaged in de-neutralizing forms of life under the different guises of what could be called ideology critique.<sup>38</sup> She stresses that although forms of life «do not exist as an impenetrable and closed totality», «[t]hey are *inert* to a certain extent, because they maintain [...] praxis components that are not always open to change, explicit, or transparent. [...] As a result, forms of life [...] are not always engaged in deliberately or even reflected upon.»<sup>39</sup> Hence, forms of life – such as the nuclear family, capitalism, or the modern metropole – are often habitually given or reified. Despite their inertia, however, Jaeggi emphasizes that the social practices that make

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35 JAECCI 1999, 71, my translation and emphasis.

36 JAECCI 2018a, 41.

37 JAECCI 2015, 13; see also JAECCI 2005, 67; JAECCI 2018a, 8.

38 JAECCI 2015, 14.

39 JAECCI 2017a, 166.

up forms of life aim to solve the respective challenges raised by collective life – such as childrearing, economic distribution, or urban design – and hence have normative significance. To give a banal example, having oatmeal for breakfast helps me to properly start my day, and as such allows me to adhere to the normative productivity standards of the capitalist work ethos. When I prepare breakfast for the rest of my household, it can be part of kinship norms implied by family life, and if I use plant-based milk, my oatmeal breakfast contributes to something of a vegan form of life. As opposed to a lifestyle, then, forms of life help to achieve a certain normatively shared goal. Jaeggi can therefore argue that «[t]here is no such thing as pure functioning without reference to criteria of goodness immanent in the practice».<sup>40</sup> Indeed, she equates the forms of life notion with the Hegelian notion of «ethical life», or *Sittlichkeit*,<sup>41</sup> to stress that social norms do not only aim at well-functioning practices, but that these practices also have to be «good for something».<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Jaeggi differentiates between more mundane social practices and more all-encompassing forms of life by emphasizing the congealment of social norms and practices into material entities and social institutions. From school buildings to courthouses, from bars to the architecture of public spaces, from the police to tax authorities, and from excise duties to recycling parks; our institutional and material world is formed according to the norms that shape our collective social practices. As they materialize and institutionalize, forms of life are not only increasingly experienced as a habitual second nature, but also gain a «thinglike» side that «outlives our actions».<sup>43</sup> Hence, forms of life have an inclination towards reifying social norms. To account for this process, Jaeggi emphasizes the historically sedimented character of forms of life. She argues that the problems addressed by forms of life evolve from the ways social life has hitherto been practically and materially organized. A polyamorous form of life, for

40 JAEggi 2018a, 112.

41 In the German original, Jaeggi uses “sittlich” rather than “ethisch”.

42 JAEggi 2018a, 114.

43 JAEggi 2018a, 74ff.

instance, stands in a critical relation to the ideal of a modern nuclear family, collective housing problematizes the architecture of single-family homes, and a vegan form of life provides an alternative to a culture of alimentation built around bio-industries and animal products.

As becomes clear, Jaeggi's understanding of forms of life implies a social ontology that approaches social reality as constituted by the historical sedimentation of normatively imbued social practices. She conceives these social practices as ways of dealing with the problems raised by collective life. Within such a social ontology, social reality can be criticized by asking whether social practices achieve their own normatively imbued ends. A *critique* of forms of life consequently approaches forms of life as «problem-solving instances»: <sup>44</sup> It questions the appropriateness of forms of life as the framework to *interpret* the problems social life poses, and evaluates these interpretations vis-à-vis their outcomes.

Given the habitual inertia of forms of life, the possibility of such a critique is not self-evident. Jaeggi indeed stresses that, as social norms are engraved into reality, the authorship over forms of life is «not fully available to individual actors». <sup>45</sup> The challenge of a critique of forms of life is therefore to identify moments in which «a certain set of practices and self-understandings comes up against its limits». <sup>46</sup> In other words, the dysfunctionality of forms of life can become explicit when social norms and the outcomes of their concomitant practices run into contradiction. When a form of life becomes dysfunctional, the practical and habitual interpretation of social norms can turn into *reinterpretation* and *critique*. Such a critique questions the appropriateness of forms of life as the framework for interpreting the problems social reality poses. This, in turn, allows for an evaluation of the extent to which a form of life produces a «correct» interpretation of the challenges that social life raises. <sup>47</sup>

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44 JAEGGI 2018a, 133, 172.

45 JAEGGI 2018a, 73.

46 JAEGGI 2015, 18.

47 JAEGGI 2018a, 7.

However, in a social ontology of forms of life, norms and practices are always already intertwined: norms shape practices and practices (re-)produce norms. An immanent critique of forms of life therefore presupposes that it is impossible to transform one without the other. In that sense, a critique of forms of life does not merely problematize inconsistencies between norms and practices, but understands their relationship as dysfunctional in itself. In other words, a critique of forms of life «is immanent because it takes its starting point by referring to immanent crises» but «transformative because the evaluation of processes of problem-solving allows for a transcendence of context – and initiates change».<sup>48</sup> Jaeggi therefore labels the critique of forms of life as a «self-grounding process».<sup>49</sup> Its transformative wager does not and cannot refer to a pre-given norm or utopia. Rather, dysfunctionalities within forms of life «facilitate new possibilities for action»<sup>50</sup> as the problems that social practices aim to solve become explicit again, leading to the possibility of new solutions, and as such, the possibility of social change. In that sense, the critique of forms of life orients itself against the *reification* of predominant forms of life.

#### 4. Capitalism as a Form of Life

Jaeggi's proposal for a critique of forms of life takes up the commitment of ideology critique to de-neutralize dominant forms of ethical life. More specifically, the ideology of *capitalism* has often been at stake for Frankfurt School social theory. Jaeggi signals that early critical theory occupied itself with a «wide concept» of the capitalist economy «[i]nspired by Lukács' theory of reification», and focused on «the intrusion of the 'commodity form' into all social relations».<sup>51</sup> Jaeggi applauds this perspective, with the caveat that the classical

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48 JAECCI 2015, 27.

49 JAECCI 2018a, 192.

50 JAECCI 2017b, 221.

51 JAECCI 2017a, 160.

conception of critical theory pays too little attention to the *social practices* that make up the capitalist economy. As a result, classical critical theory left the practices that constitute capitalism outside the scope of critique, thereby unwarily prefiguring the ethical abstinence of contemporary liberal theorists such as Rawls. Indeed, Jaeggi argues that even Habermas' colonization thesis only overcame the «totalizing grip» of the first generation of the Frankfurt School by opposing the economy to other social spheres, thereby removing the economy from the realm of criticism.<sup>52</sup> In reply, Jaeggi stresses that a strict separation of economic and non-economic practices is unhelpful. She instead suggests approaching the capitalist economy as a set of social practices situated within a broader capitalist form of life. By understanding the economy as part of the same social ontological fabric as other social practices, the «narrow» goals of economic practices can be understood as standing in a reciprocal relation to a «wider» set of practices.<sup>53</sup> It is in this wider sense that capitalism encompasses a whole set of social practices that make up a form of life.

By stressing the relation between economic and non-economic attitudes, Jaeggi does not simply argue that «economic actors are not free from moral considerations, [...] ethical considerations, habits, and dispositions», but rather emphasizes that economic practices also have their own «normative conditions of success».<sup>54</sup> As a form of life, then, capitalism should be criticized regarding «the normative conditions of fulfillment underlying these practices».<sup>55</sup> As the functionality of forms of life depends on an immanent norm of success concerning their self-set goals, the critique of capitalism as a form of life should highlight instances of dysfunctionality within that form of life. Importantly, however, Jaeggi argues that «it appears to be quite characteristic of capitalism to deny [...] its status as a particular form-of-life, thereby making invisible the [...] non-self-evident character of it».<sup>56</sup> Insofar as

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52 JAECCI 2017a, 161.

53 FRASER & JAECCI 2018, 8.

54 JAECCI 2018b, 122.

55 JAECCI 2017a, 164.

56 JAECCI 2016, 62.

the capitalist form of life presents itself as ethically neutral, contradictions between its practices and normative ends do not self-evidently emerge. Whether the critique of capitalism focuses on its *dysfunctionality* as a system, its *moral* unjustness vis-à-vis a notion of social justice, or on the *ethical* claim that life under capitalism is *bad* or alienating, these forms of critique would all need to substantiate what capitalism as a form of life is meant to achieve. Hence, to successfully point out what is *specifically* wrong with the capitalist form of life, social critique carries the weight of substantializing what capitalism's immanent conditions of success are comprised of. Consequently, a critique of capitalism as a form of life must specify the regard in which capitalism is *dysfunctional*, by spelling out how capitalism would function *well*.

Again, however, Jaeggi argues that «in the case of capitalism, it is less clear what its function should be».<sup>57</sup> The critique of capitalism thus runs into difficulties because the capitalist form of life presents itself as normatively neutral. Jaeggi therefore formulates a meta-critical argument, stating that «something [seems] wrong with a social order that relies on an ethics that it at the same time conceals and universalizes as neutral».<sup>58</sup> Her critique of capitalism as a form of life, then, denounces the capitalist form of life for its very normatively neutral self-presentation. As a result, capitalism is not (merely) criticized for being exploitative, alienating, unjust, or bad, but rather for masking the possibility of reinterpreting, criticizing, and changing its normative ends. This is what I, with reference to Lukàcs, have called the problem of reification: the capitalist form of life presents itself in an objectively given, thing-like way rather than as a product of normatively authored social practices. As such, the seeming “alternativelessness” of the capitalist form of life follows from the reduced normative authorship that actors have over the form of social life.

In sum, insofar as the capitalist form of life *can* be criticized, its self-

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57 JAEGGI 2016, 50.

58 JAEGGI 2018b, 125.

constitution according to the liberal idea of neutrality must be contested. Although the idea of neutrality is supposed to allow the freedom required to interpret one's own life in a pluralistic way, it hides the normative pressure that norms and institutions exercise on individual and shared practices. Moreover, the very norms, rules, principles, and institutions that organize the capitalist form of life are reified into a second nature beyond the authorship of social actors. Still, Jaeggi continues to stress that despite its neutral self-presentation, the capitalist form of life *is* an normatively imbued ensemble of practices. Capitalism as a form of life, in other words, has its own ethical life, but this ethical life presents itself as an objective rationality aimed at utility maximalization rather than as a normative ethos. From Jaeggi's meta-critical perspective, capitalist social life can hence be judged as flawed for the simple reason that it leaves very little room to reinterpret its guiding categories. Although the meta-critique formulated by Jaeggi cannot explain from which perspectives authorship over social life could be regained, it does imply that social critique should be connected to standpoints from which the given-ness of the capitalist form of life is less self-evident.

Jaeggi indeed admits that a meta-critique can only be the first step towards a «more substantial critique»<sup>59</sup> that unpacks the way social practices within capitalism are normatively imbued from the outset. Her work, however, only provides some initial sketches for such a more substantial critique.<sup>60</sup> Strikingly, then, a critique of the capitalist form of life cannot bring forth the kind of transformation that her critique of forms of life envisages. Again, the possibility of reinterpreting norms and practices that leads up to such a transformation is cut short by capitalism's neutral self-presentation. As we will see, however, Jaeggi's observation that «one can belong to several forms of life at the same time»<sup>61</sup> provides a fruitful perspective to conceptualize the immanent critique of the capitalist form of life. By

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59 JAEGGI 2018c, 460.

60 JAEGGI 2016, 65.

61 JAEGGI 2018a, 52.

emphasizing that the possibility of immanent critique also depends on one's position within the form of life at hand, the meta-critical tendency in Jaeggi's critique of capitalism can be circumvented without making substantial claims about the good life. To develop this perspective, however, we need to return to Lukács first.

## 5. Immanent Critique as Standpoint Critique

Lukács infamously imputed the privilege to overthrow capitalism to the proletariat. During the past century, his emphasis on the proletariat as the imputed subject-object of history has rightfully been criticized, not in the least in order to differentiate struggles for emancipation beyond class-divisions. Lukács' standpoint theory, however, has been rejected from many perspectives, for being historically determinist and productivist, as well as for being too Leninist, Messianic, and voluntarist.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, thinkers such as Adorno,<sup>63</sup> Althusser,<sup>64</sup> Mouffe,<sup>65</sup> Habermas,<sup>66</sup> and Honneth<sup>67</sup> have alleged that Lukács' theory is too idealist *tout court* – despite his relentless critique of idealism. As several authors have shown, the “imputed” class consciousness of the proletariat in *History and Class Consciousness* also runs into its own theoretical and practical difficulties.<sup>68</sup> Given the «ideological crisis» Lukács signaled in the absence of a proletarian class consciousness, he moreover already moved from a more Luxembourgian to a Leninist understanding of class politics himself, leading him to «impute proletarian class consciousness to the party».<sup>69</sup>

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62 For an overview, see KAVOULAKOS, 2018; QUADFLIEG 2019; STAHL 2018.

63 ADORNO 1966.

64 ALTHUSSER 1965.

65 MOUFFE 2008.

66 HABERMAS 1984.

67 HONNETH & OTHERS 2008.

68 See, for instance, BREUER & MAIER 1982; IGNATOW 1988; JAFFE 2020; LARSEN 2011; STAROSTA 2003.

69 FRACCHIA 2013, 85, see also MEYERS 2006, LUKÁCS 2002.

The contradictions between these allegations directed at Lukács, as well as the shifts in his own work, seem to demand a careful reconsideration of his standpoint theory. Such a project should consider that an understanding of political contestation from the mere perspective of class dichotomy hardly seems viable today. In what follows, I will emphasize that Lukács connects the possibility of political contestation with everyday experiences that are unable to find their expression according to the dominant capitalist form of life. Like Jaeggi, Lukács understands resistance as conditioned by the experience of social life as being crisis-prone. Moreover, the fact that Lukács finds himself in the position to scrutinize the problem of reification, performatively presupposes that critique must be possible – even if society in its totality is conditioned by a reifying form of objectivity. After all, if the commodity form taints all social spheres, thus superseding regional ontologies or “lifeworlds” with separate frameworks of meaning, critique must emerge from within the confounds of the reified totality of social life itself. Lukács’ understanding of society as a reified totality thus implies that the critique of that totality must come from *within*. In other words, the critique of reification is an *immanent* form of critique. Indeed, Jaeggi agrees with Lukács that an emphasis on totality is needed for social theory, which leads her to support a monistic theory, according to which critique cannot rely on a normativity outside of society. However, Jaeggi’s praxeological ontology does not differentiate between standpoints within the capitalist form of life. In the following, I return to Lukács to supplement the immanence of critique present in Jaeggi’s work with a consideration of the *standpoint* of critique.

Lukács reflects on the difficulty of discursive thought to grasp the «concrete underlying reality» lying «beyond the grasp» of the reified mind.<sup>70</sup> He finds its alternative in reflexive, socially embedded perspectives that experience the capitalist form of life as being crisis-prone. A critical reflection on society must *take sides* with social positions that encounter the expressive limits of the form of objectivity

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70 LUKÁCS 1971, 104.

organizing social reality. It is from those perspectives that the crises and contradictions in the capitalist form of life could lead to their de-reification. As Kavoulakos correctly notes, Lukács' theory of reification «speaks about the *dominant* form of consciousness in bourgeois society – other, even antagonistic forms of consciousness remain of course possible». <sup>71</sup> Importantly, however, these antagonisms exist *within* a reified totality, rather than as a tension between reified and non-reified spheres. Hence, if capitalist social reality is *formed*, then the possibility of critique depends on a reflection upon the capitalist form of life from within. The wager of Lukács critique of reification, therefore, is to «prove that it [social reality] is the product of a creating subject», <sup>72</sup> and to show that the conditions of social formations are authored by intersubjective practices. Lukács indeed refers to people's particular actions and desires insofar as they are blocked by the scripts that organize social life. These blockages emerge, in Lukács words, from the «simple events of every day», which appear as «crisis», «eruption», or «cataclysm», and show the «profound irrationality that lurks behind the particular rationalistic disciplines of bourgeois society». <sup>73</sup> Lukács emphasizes, thus, that the form of objectivity that organizes society never entirely captures the «concrete aspects» and «concrete realities» of people's lives. At these moments, Lukács argues, «independent, rationalised and formal partial laws» turn out to be linked only in a «purely formal» way, so that «as far as concrete realities are concerned they can only establish fortuitous connections». <sup>74</sup>

Infamously, Lukács contends that only the class position of the proletariat has an «objective possibility» of becoming conscious of the capitalist form of life as being up for change. <sup>75</sup> Although he stresses that the immediacy of social reality is the same for everyone, the proletarian experience of being «the product of capitalist social order»

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71 KAVOULAKOS 2018, 140.

72 LUKÁCS 1971, 140.

73 LUKÁCS 1971, 178.

74 LUKÁCS 1971 101.

75 LUKÁCS 1971, 73; See also HAHN 2017, 78-114; LÓPEZ 2020, 121-79; SMETONA 2018, 43.

marks «forms in which it exists» as «repositories of reification in its acutest and most direct forms». <sup>76</sup> As a consequence, the working class experiences reification most profoundly. <sup>77</sup> More precisely, the proletariat experiences the rationalization of society from a different «vantage point», placing a different «value [...] on it» than the bourgeoisie. <sup>78</sup> Whereas the «facticity of bourgeois existence» interprets social scripts as having «the patina of an eternal law of nature or a cultural value enduring for all time» <sup>79</sup>, reification is experienced as «a matter of life and death» from the standpoint of the proletariat. As such, the immediacy of predominant forms of rationality is experienced as a problem rather than as a given. The «knowledge» of the proletariat, hence, is forced to account for «its own social situation» and to push for «the elucidation of its necessity (i.e. its genesis)». <sup>80</sup>

Expressed according to the framework Jaeggi proposes, the capitalist form of life functions well from the perspective of the bourgeoisie, as it achieves its ends (such as the propagation of wealth and the maximalization of utility). For the worker, however, the capitalist form of life manifests itself as dysfunctional insofar as parts of their life opportunities are blocked, or simply become unbearable. From these experiences of crisis, the social norms implied by the rationality of capitalism and their antagonistic outcomes become visible and can be problematized. The vantage point of the proletariat accordingly enlightens the socio-historical genesis of the capitalist form of life. Hence, Lukács concludes that the standpoint of the proletariat is positioned to challenge reification.

My aim, however, is to widen Lukács' effort to «exhibit concretely the 'we' [...] whose action is in fact history» <sup>81</sup> beyond the standpoint of the proletariat. If the problem of reification highlights that social

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76 LUKÁCS 1971, 149.

77 LUKÁCS 1971, 165.

78 LUKÁCS 1971, 157.

79 LUKÁCS 1971, 157.

80 LUKÁCS 1971, 159.

81 LUKÁCS 1971, 148.

arrangements do not seem to be up for reinterpretation even if they are experienced as being crisis-prone or dysfunctional, the possibility for contestation seems to depend on a *shared* standpoint that makes these contradictions both sensible and visible. To redevelop Lukács' "we" in a twenty-first-century context, I will orient myself towards the critical potential Lukács discovers in those shared standpoints that experience the capitalist form of life as being dysfunctional. I aim to show that if we approach social practices as part of a capitalist form of life, the possibility of critique can be decoupled from its reliance upon social class alone, while at the same time emphasizing its situatedness in a crisis-prone social totality.<sup>82</sup> If social theory wants to account for the problem of reification – and I believe it should and, in many cases, indeed aims to do so – it needs to account for the possibility of critique and contestation *within* society as a *totality*. Even if we decouple the critique of reification from the standpoint of the proletariat, we still need to assess from which standpoint emancipatory social critique *is* possible.

## 6. The Critique of Reification as a Critique of Forms of Life

As we have seen, an immanent critique of forms of life takes issue with dysfunctionalities within forms of life. These crises signal a potential for transformation insofar as individuals participating in a form of life find ways to question the social norms guiding their practices. The problem of reification, however, points out that the norms of the capitalist form of life manifest themselves as being law-like, objectively given, and thereby beyond reinterpretation, even if social practices run into contradictions with these normative expectations.

The observation that a critique of the capitalist form of life is not self-evident given the normatively neutral self-presentation of capitalism

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82 LARSEN 2011, 95-8; GILBERT 2019, 31-60.

reformulates this problem. Indeed, both Lukács, and Jaeggi use the notion of “second nature” to signify the naturalization of the capitalist form of life. Jaeggi, moreover, recognizes that Lukács was first in identifying «capitalism with a grammar of life».<sup>83</sup> The advantage of approaching reification within a social ontology of forms of life, however, is that it allows for an emphasis on how social arrangements «fail to meet certain *normative* expectations».<sup>84</sup> Jaeggi indeed argues that in Lukács’ conceptualization, what is *normatively problematic* about reification remains unclear.<sup>85</sup> By recasting the critique of reification as a critique of forms of life, the relation between reification and normativity can be made more explicit. It allows for approaching reification as being premised on the externalization of social norms beyond the authorship of social actors. Following Stahl, reification, then, manifests itself as a “second-order problem” insofar as people do not question the way social life is organized in the first place. As such, the critique of reification emphasizes that passive, “contemplative” practices reproduce reificatory social norms, and explains why dysfunctionalities within forms of life are not experienced as social problems, but rather remain stuck on an individual plain.<sup>86</sup>

Lukács’ notion of “form of objectivity” provides a key to understand the neutralization of the normative conditions of capitalist social life. As people relate to reality by optimizing their conduct as per a rationality that reflects the “objectivity” of social arrangements, the possibility of reinterpreting the norms of this rationality remains out of view. This insight allows one to explain the ethical neutrality of the capitalist form of life from the way rationalization influences it. Indeed, Lukács argues that individual standpoints vis-à-vis the totality of society run the risk of remaining bound up in an «uncritical attitude» that cannot penetrate the reifying character of the rationality organizing social life.<sup>87</sup> On an individual plane, both the reifying form

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83 FRASER & JAECCI 2018, 49.

84 JAECCI 2015, 23, my emphasis.

85 JAECCI & STAHL 2011, 698.

86 See also CELIKATES 2009, 166-73.

87 LUKÁCS 1971, 151.

of rationality and its concomitant social practices reproduce each other. Insofar as individual needs and desires defy a reifying logic, they are experienced as invalid, useless, abnormal, and irrational. When the possibility to criticize and transform social reality is at stake, Lukács recalls, the individual «is faced by a complex of ready-made and unalterable objects which allow him only the subjective responses of recognition or rejection».<sup>88</sup> In other words, an individual experience of dysfunctional social practices is not sufficient to reinterpret a form of life, let alone to propose new answers to the problems that collective life. Hence, practices, needs, and desires that do not fit the rationality of capitalist social life are left behind as a «multitude of irrational facts»<sup>89</sup> that as such cannot persist.

I therefore propose to envisage the critique of capitalism as a form of life as a standpoint critique. We have seen that Lukács connects the experience of crises in the capitalist form of life with a standpoint that is forced to move beyond the contemplative «indifference»<sup>90</sup> towards the reified scripts of social reality. Although Lukács emphasizes that these crises might invoke something of a unitary class consciousness, Lukács also signals that a «diversity of subjective attitudes orientates praxis towards what is qualitatively unique».<sup>91</sup> In other words, it could be said that Lukács mobilizes class as the collectivity that could challenge the capitalist form of life, but other forms of intersubjectivity are also commensurable with his standpoint model of critique.

Hence, a less class-oriented standpoint theory can be envisaged as the counterpart of Lukács' critique of reification. Indeed, we can imagine perspectives that experience reification as a problem precisely by participating in forms of life that are oriented towards alternative social norms. Although there is something of a capitalist form of life, this totality builds upon a variety of social practices and interpretations of social problems that are clustered in more specific forms of life, spanning from practices within the economy in the strict

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88 LUKÁCS 1971, 193.

89 LUKÁCS 1971, 155.

90 LUKÁCS 1971, 139.

91 LUKÁCS 1971, 126.

sense, to norm-guided practices in state governmentality, education, or family life (to name just a few). All of these are to some extent formed by and related to the capitalist form of life, but might also contain sedimented norms that could collide with the rationality of capitalist society as a whole. As any form of life is already part of the same social fabric – or totality – as any other form of life, the possibility to criticize reification can be located in those forms of life that to some extent participate in the capitalist form of life while not gaining much from it.

Such a forms-of-life approach preserves the social ontological tension at the heart of Lukács' theory, namely the tension between the possibility of reinterpreting social reality that is both *given* – or reified – and *open* for transformation. Although a multiplicity of social practices function as building blocks for the capitalist form of life as a whole, their problem-solving capacities do not always entirely converge with the demands of capitalism. Rather, ensembles of social practices that are part of the capitalist form of life occasionally run up against the limits of the larger social whole. At such moments, the reified grammar of the social practices in question loses its neutral, self-evident character. Consequently, the capitalist form of life might be experienced as being dysfunctional insofar as a particular social practice runs into contradiction with the dominant rationality of capitalism. Although nothing can guarantee that a critical attitude – let alone a transformative praxis – will follow from such experience, the recognition of experiences of crisis and suffering allows us to understand those who are less well off as having their *own* resources to contest reification, rather than understanding them solely as being entirely undercut by a reifying ideology.<sup>92</sup> A critique of reification could, hence, orient itself towards the standpoint of forms of life that have contradictory tenets vis-à-vis the capitalist form of life in order to “clarify the struggles of our age”.

The works of feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding,<sup>93</sup>

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92 Cf. CELIKATES 2009, 17-26; 187-240.

93 HARDING 1995; HARDING 2004; HARDING 2020.

bell hooks,<sup>94</sup> and Patricia Hill-Collins<sup>95</sup> might provide a fruitful example. Indeed, as Mariana Teixeira argues, the privileged standpoint of the proletariat «has a parallel in the affirmation made by feminist standpoint theorists that women might also attain a privileged perspective on the dynamics of patriarchal societies».<sup>96</sup> More generally, we can imagine that a multiplicity of shared positions can have a similar privileged capacity to question generally accepted forms of life.<sup>97</sup> Westerman rightly points out that «[a]lternative social practices [...] yield other standpoints from which entirely different realities would appear».<sup>98</sup> Often, this involves groups that are in some way marginalized or excluded, or, to put it in Lukácsian terms, groups that do not *immediately* profit from the structure of the capitalist form of life. Using Patricia Hill-Collins' vocabulary, one could argue that the standpoint to criticize a reified form of life hinges upon being both an "outsider" as well as being "within" the form of life in question. In other words: social practices that are somehow "within" the capitalist form of life can simultaneously be "outside" insofar as they are also situated in an ensemble of normatively imbued practices that are at odds with the form of life of society as a totality. Indeed, Lukács stresses that reification implies such «splitting up of man».<sup>99</sup> As Jaeggi succinctly puts it, forms of life are «ensembles within ensembles»; capitalism as a form of life includes and is made up of other forms of life.<sup>100</sup> As any form of life is already part of the same praxeological social fabric, the possibility of criticizing the capitalist form of life emerges from social practices immanent in this reified totality. Hence, if an immanent critique of the capitalist form of life «seeks to identify and make explicit those moments in which the formal structure of a form of life [...] *must* enter into contradiction»,<sup>101</sup> it must emphasize a

94 HOOKS 1984.

95 HILL-COLLINS 1986.

96 TEIXEIRA 2020, 228.

97 CELIKATES 2020, 81-8.

98 WESTERMAN 2018, 174.

99 LUKÁCS 1971, 162.

100 FRASER & JAEggi 2018, 56.

101 PENSKY 2018, 56.

standpoint that is part of the capitalist form of life, while at the same time differing from it. Accordingly, the norms of the capitalist form of life can become explicit from the perspectives of ensembles of social practices that are trying, aiming, or simply having to live differently.

The critique of capitalism as a form of life thus presupposes that subjects can participate in a hegemonic life-form while rejecting it at the same time.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, people continue to share experiences of alienation, irrationality, or exclusion as the result of how the economy, the state, justice, or private life is organized under capitalism. We can envisage a multitude of perspectives that grant such a standpoint for critique. *Sans-papiers*, for instance, experience the formalist logic of citizenship as exclusionary, intersex and trans people run up against the gender classifications that the state and the hospital assign to them, homeless people cannot comply to the procedures of social security by not having a home address, and members of collective households can lose eligibility for social security for not fitting the model of a nuclear family. In all these examples, a particular and often shared lived experience is at odds with the rationality governing social life. In all these cases, social structures manifest themselves as objective and given, at least in the first place. Moreover, these standpoints are indeed necessarily situated within the capitalist form of life. Nevertheless, when contradictions emerge between shared normative ambitions and the reified scripts of the capitalist form of life, the latter's neutrality and givenness can lose its self-evident character. From these experienced dysfunctionalities, then, the norms of the capitalist form of life can be reinterpreted. The demand for transformation that follows from it can be relatively small-scale or more all-embracing. Dominant forms of life can either be reinterpreted and adjusted so that critique is absorbed – thereby revealing the kind of learning process that Jaeggi emphasizes<sup>103</sup> – or the dysfunction of a form of life can turn out to be more systemic, thus implying a more transformative kind of overhaul. Whatever the scale of critique, an

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102 See JAEGGI 2005.

103 JAEGGI, 2018, 272-314.

emphasis on the standpoint of forms of life that are positioned to de-neutralize reified social forms provides a key to showcase the *possibility* of a different life, and a *justification* of critique as a re-interpretative means towards questioning hegemonic social norms.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper starts from the presupposition that many people experience social reality as a thing-like second nature. Such reification is problematic because it implies a passive, contemplative, or even depoliticized<sup>104</sup> relation to social reality that blocks the questioning, reinterpretation, and transformation of social structures and forms of life. Reification, hence, signals a second-order social problem: it addresses the fact that people *do* experience problems in their social life, but do not perceive these problems as being consequences of social arrangements which they can author themselves.<sup>105</sup> In this paper, the contribution of social critique to undoing reification is taken up within a social ontology of forms of life. I have emphasized that Rahel Jaeggi's social ontology of forms of life echoes Lukács' understanding of capitalism as a form of life. Taking up the problem of reification within a critique of capitalism as a form of life, moreover, allows us to characterize the contemplative stance towards society as being typical for the capitalist form of life. The aim of this paper is to signal the standpoints from which reification of the capitalist form of life can be de-neutralized and contested.

Both Jaeggi and Lukács locate the possibility of criticizing social life as being immanent to the particular form of life under scrutiny. Where Lukács' notion of reification describes a closed totality that can only be surpassed with an all-encompassing (proletarian) revolution, Jaeggi understands forms of life (including the capitalist one) as *open* ensembles that consist of a diversity of practices. By assessing

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104 CHARI 2015, 91-110.

105 CELIKATES 2009, 166-73; STAHL 2011; STAHL 2013, 367, 391-451.

reification against the backdrop of such an open-ended totality, Lukács' emphasis on the transformative potential of the proletarian standpoint can be differentiated, while preserving simultaneously an understanding of the social as one totality. Beyond the proletariat, we can imagine a multitude of forms of life that engage in social practices beyond the reificatory rationalities that exclude them: from squats and citizen's initiatives that provide homeless people and sans-papiers food and shelter, to experiments with polyamory and alternative kinship forms that defy the nuclear-family model; from cooperative production to participative consumption; from open-source technology to creative commons licensing, and from self-governed schools to housing cooperatives. Such examples of counter-cultures or «politics of forms of life»<sup>106</sup> show how social practices not only defy dominant forms of social life but also provide alternative answers to the problems collective life raises.

Beyond these more explicitly politicized projects, we can moreover imagine norms developing in day-to-day practices that bear the potential of being able to question dominant societal norms. These everyday practices remind us of what Foucault calls «counter-conducts», as they are not «political revolts» but do still stand in an «immediate and founding correlation» to the way conduct is constituted by prevailing norms.<sup>107</sup> People who decide to commute using bicycles in a car-heavy city, individuals who raise children as single-parents or with a community, businesses that adopt solidarity-pricing mechanisms for their products – all of these not only defy dominant norms of transportation, family life, and competition but are also positioned to de-neutralize a broader ensemble of dominant societal norms. As norms and social practices stand in a reciprocal relation, living differently can have a domino-effect insofar as a particular life-choice can illuminate how dominant social norms rely upon other norms and expectations. A single-parent family, for instance, not only defies the norms of nuclear-family life but also

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106 LOICK 2017; LOICK 2018; LOICK 2019; LOICK 2021.

107 FOUCAULT 2009, 196; see also DAVIDSON 2011.

confronts expectations concerning full-time employment, homeownership, consumption, and community life. Importantly, such perspectives can be employed to question the neutral presentation of the capitalist form of life. They constitute an enormous political resource that often remains beyond the scope of theories of political resistance and of struggles for hegemony. By focusing on forms of life that can question the reification of social arrangements, we can locate the potential of social critique within social practices, within the ways in which people coordinate their lives. As such, the standpoint of critique can be pluralized not by moving away from the problem of reification, but precisely by targeting it.

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