

Reification: From Romanticism to Revolution

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For European philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, life in modern society had become meaningless. The individual felt alienated from and powerless against an impersonal, mechanical social world that offered little hope of change. Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre saw this alienation as an eternal feature of human existence, calling on the individual to find their own personal meanings and projects. But for the Marxist philosopher György Lukács, this was the product of reification – a pathological social form characteristic of capitalism, and therefore a problem that could be solved by transforming society.

In his landmark *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923, Lukács introduced the term ‘reification’ to Marxist thought for the first time. Basing his argument on Marx’s account of commodity fetishism, he argued that the exchange of commodities had become the dominant form of social relations. This atomized society, making us feel like isolated individuals, unable to resist the overwhelming power of the market.

Marking the centennial of Lukács’s landmark work, this course will explore the origins and influence of the term ‘reification’ both within and outside the Marxist tradition. We will examine critiques of instrumental rationality, the relation between alienation and reification, the philosophical analysis of reified social relations, and the possibility of transcending it – as well as considering its relevance today.

The problem of reification	The roots of the critique of abstract rationality; Hegel’s critique of Kant; Marx’s use of Hegel in developing his notion of commodity fetishism.	Immanuel Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> G.W.F. Hegel, <i>The Phenomenology of Spirit</i> Karl Marx, <i>Capital</i>
The Neo-Romantic Revolt	Early 20 th century European critiques of modernity; the sociological critique of capitalism; the rejection of positivism; the emergence of phenomenology.	Max Weber, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> Edmund Husserl, <i>Philosophy as a Strict Science</i> György Lukács, <i>Theory of the Novel</i>
Lukács’s Theory of Reification and the Ontology of Capitalism	Lukács’s original formulation of the theory of reification; implications for understanding social structures and relations; reification and bourgeois individualism; reification and alienation; considering different interpretations of Lukács’s text, including Idealist and Phenomenological interpretations.	György Lukács, <i>History and Class Consciousness</i>

Reification in Industrialized Society: The Frankfurt School	Reification as developed in the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse; the culture industry; Freudianism and reification; rationality as inherently reified.	Max Horkheimer, <i>The Eclipse of Reason</i> Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> Herbert Marcuse, <i>One Dimensional Man; Eros and Civilization</i>
Reification and Phenomenology	Examining thinkers outside of Marxism who take up the notion of reification, including Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre; similarities and differences from the Marxist account; supplementing the Marxist account with phenomenology; Marxist critiques of the phenomenological and existentialist positions.	Martin Heidegger, <i>The Question Concerning Technology; Being and Time</i> Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>Nausea</i> . Karel Kosik, <i>Dialectics of the Concrete</i> Enzo Paci, <i>The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man</i>
Reification Today	The revival of the concept of reification in the Western Marxist tradition (Habermas, Honneth); considering the applicability of reification to modern society; examining the implications of reification for emancipatory mass movements.	Jürgen Habermas, <i>Theory of Communicative Action</i> Axel Honneth, <i>Reification</i>

Assignments

The course will be graded on one final paper of 8-10 pages and a plan you make for it. You will submit the plan on June 9th and receive feedback over the weekend. You will then have until June 18th to write the paper. Choose one of the following topics to write on.

1. Analyse any contemporary social problem that you think is appropriate through the lens of reification. Show how reification causes the problem, and explain how it can be resolved.
2. How does reification affect the individual, and how can its effects be reduced?
3. Is reification an epistemological problem or an ontological problem?
4. Is commodity fetishism the source of reification across society, or merely one kind of it?
5. How might reification affect socialist societies?
6. Is it possible to reconcile Marxist and non-Marxist theories of reification and alienation?
7. Is reification just a form of humanism or romanticism?
8. If all our knowledge of society is socially mediated, how can we see through reification and ideology to understand society as it really is in itself?
9. How can we break through the reification of consciousness to encourage people to act instead of passively accepting society?
10. What sort of social organizations could avoid reification?