

Commodity Fetishism and Domination: The Contributions of Marx, Lukács,
Horkheimer, Adorno and Bourdieu

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to trace domination theory back to the influential work done by Marx on commodity fetishism. Marx's work proves to be an original account of domination that explains how the dominated many accept the rule of the privileged few. The theory of commodity fetishism develops the idea that individuals come to adopt beliefs that bolster and reproduce the status quo of capitalism. For Marx, the way that individuals experience capitalism is different from the way that it actually works because, in fact, lived experience is actually false. Oppression, inequality and exploitation are thus hidden and the main source of conflict between the oppressed many and the privileged few is obscured.

I seek to develop this insight of Marx's into a more comprehensive account of how dominating capitalism self maintains. Lukács' theory of reification explains how capitalism has become all-embracing because capitalism has developed its own type of rationality. This specific rationality shapes thought, which in turn, generates false beliefs that favour the continuation of the status quo. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that capitalism extends its influence by means of its deep involvement in modern culture. Today, culture has become an massive industry which inculcates the logic and principles of capitalism into individuals. For these theorists, capitalism has penetrated all areas of life; experience, knowledge and thought have become extensions of capitalism itself.

Marx, Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno give accounts of how false beliefs are put into practice. Hence the importance of the work of Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory of distinction describes how the status quo in capitalism is maintained by the behaviour of individuals through their daily acts of consumption. I argue that the consumption of commodities reproduces the status quo in two ways: firstly, establishing an upper-class which takes the lead in patterns of consumption, and, secondly, by creating a middle class that follows its example. Finally, I relate Bourdieu's insights to the theories of Marx, Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno and Bourdieu in order to arrive at a more inclusive account of how (and why) domination persists.

Contents

<u>Abstract</u>	p.i
<u>Acknowledgments</u>	p.iv
<u>Introduction</u>	p.1
<u>Chapter 1</u>	p.4
1. Introduction to Marx and Commodity Fetishism	p.4
2. Classical Economics and the Appearance Forms of Capitalism	p.4
3. The Concept of Fetishism: Religious Fetishism	p.6
4. Commodity Fetishism and Alienation	p.8
5. An Analysis of the Commodity	p.10
6. Use-Value	p.11
7. Exchange-Value and the Labour Theory of Value	p.12
8. The Theory of Surplus Value	p.15
9. Money and Fetishism	p.17
10. Commodity Fetishism and the Distortion of the Social	p.20
11. Objections to the Theory of Commodity Fetishism	p.23
<u>Chapter 2</u>	p.28
1. Introduction: The Contribution of Lukács	p.28
2. Reification and the Commodity	p.30
3. Formal Rationality	p.32
4. Reification, Law and Bureaucracy	p.39
5. Reification and Society	p.41
6. The Subject-Object Relationship	p.42
7. Reification and Philosophy	p.44
8. The Principle of Practice	p.49
9. The Object as Worker and the Worker as Object	p.51
10. Dialectics and the Theory of History	p.55
11. Lukács' Theory of History	p.56
12. On Dialectical Method	p.60

13. Critique of Lukács	p.62
<u>Chapter 3</u>	p.72
1. Critical Theory: The Contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno	p.72
2. The Shift from Ideological Critique to the Meta-Critique of Instrumental Rationality	p.73
3. Reason and Instrumental Rationality	p.78
4. Negative Dialectics	p.82
5. The Dialectic of Enlightenment	p.85
6. The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception	p.90
1. Mass Production and the Loss of True Individuality and Freedom	p.93
2. The Prescription of Normative Frameworks	p.96
3. The Repression of Dissidence and Rebellion	p.103
4. The Debasement of Art by Entertainment	p.104
7. Some Critiques of <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i>	p.106
<u>Chapter 4</u>	p.113
1. An Introduction to Bourdieu	p.113
2. Commodity Fetishism, Reification and Instrumental Rationality	p.116
3. Horkheimer and Adorno on Culture: The Contribution of Bourdieu	p.118
4. Commodities and Symbolic Power	p.121
5. Commodity Fetishism and Cultural Capital	p.124
6. The Social Role of Commodities Today: Symbolic Power and Domination	p.127
7. Mass Society	p.131
8. Distinction as a Zero Sum Game	p.133
9. The Vanguard and the Consumption of High-Culture	p.137
10. Commodity Fetishism and Domination	p.141
11. Conclusion	p.145
<u>References</u>	p.149

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Introduction

In the 19th century, Marx developed a body of work that dealt with the political economy of capitalism. More specifically, he set out to explain in great detail how capitalism works, how it is maintained, and how individuals are exploited within it. By identifying the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system of production however, he also created the need for an explanation of why the exploited accept social conditions that are against their best interests. In attempting to give a reason for this, Marx developed a theory of ideology which can be extended to an explanation of why the underprivileged many accept the rule of the privileged few. Marx called his original account a theory of “false consciousness”, which has since expanded into the field of domination theory.

In the 20th century many thinkers developed Marx's work into an account of how the dominated come to develop beliefs that promote the interests of the status quo. The implication of this argument is that the dominated come to behave in such a way that they actively embrace, and reproduce, conditions of their own domination.

Domination theory itself owes a huge debt to the work of Marx; in particular to his theory of commodity fetishism. The work of Lukács, the Frankfurt school, and Bourdieu all use the core concept of commodity fetishism to substantiate their social theories. The concept of commodity fetishism is therefore a traceable strand of thought that has been developed historically, and still enjoys validity in modern social theory. In fact, the concept, in its developed form, can be used as a critical tool that is capable of rendering new insights into the question facing domination theory (chapter 4). Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is invaluable in its contribution to the theory of ideology because it provides the original insight into how capitalist reality can present itself to the dominated observer in such a way that it hides real conditions of exploitation and inequality. Exploitation is thus kept hidden from the dominated individual. Her experience of reality instead suggests that she is not exploited, and that her social position is unquestionable. For many theorists, this is one of the more compelling explanations of why domination has persisted throughout history to this day.

A return to the core concept of the commodity fetish will allow us to see the way in which Marx's original insight was developed into the social theories of Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno and Bourdieu. A focus upon the commodity will also reveal how the commodity itself is instrumental to the entire system of capitalism. It is of particular interest to determine the way in which the commodity contributes to the reproduction of the status quo, what makes it so important and what maintains its prevalence in capitalist society.

This will require an understanding of the cultural importance of commodities in modern society, and how commodities have come to be associated with culture itself (chapter 3, 4). The role and importance of commodities in maintaining conditions of domination however must first be traced back to Marx, which is the intended focus of chapter 1. After replying to some objections to the theory of commodity fetishism, the economic critique of commodity fetishism is developed into a broader social critique of reification by focusing upon the work of George Lukács.

The work of George Lukács (chapter 2) was seminal in developing domination theory, and greatly influenced the direction of the theory of ideology and false consciousness. Lukács' theory of reification dealt directly with why the proletariat, faced with conditions of exploitation and servitude, remained passive. Reification has since become a widely used term, which Lukács originally used to describe how the economic and social systems of capitalism present themselves to individuals in a manner that obscures their inner workings. In fact, based on Marx, Lukács gave a more comprehensive account of how capitalism doesn't only obscure its inner workings but presents itself in such a way that the appearance of things actively conceals an underlying reality. Lukács' biggest contribution was his identification of what creates the appearance forms that constitute social reality.

Reification provides us with a compelling explanation of what makes individuals accept conditions of domination, but it does not explain in any detail the social and cultural forces at work that shape the ideology of domination. Culture is a powerful force that has the potential to influence human behaviour on a massive scale. Chapter 3 deals with this in detail, and focuses upon Horkheimer and Adorno's work on the culture industry. Of importance to domination theory is how culture, sold and consumed as a commodity, becomes an instrument of capitalist ideology and the ideology of domination. What culture effectively does is entrench the fact that capitalism is a natural human condition and that issues of social transformation are otiose.

Horkheimer and Adorno however fail to identify how the culture industry works at the level of the individual. Instead, they stick to a functional account of culture that does not properly explain the mechanisms that maintain the culture industry itself. This is where the work of Bourdieu can be used to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which individuals embrace the conditions of their own domination. Central to Bourdieu's theory is the idea of the commodity fetish, which is used to explain how commodities have become objectified forms of cultural capital that possess symbolic power. The most significant contribution to domination theory, however, is Bourdieu's theory of distinction which identifies

the mechanism that drives the consumption of commodities.

The modern competitive consumption of commodities directly contributes to the continuation of conditions of capitalism in two ways. Firstly, it causes individuals to consume commodities relentlessly in order to obtain social distinction. What results from this is the growth of a seemingly large middle class who own similar commodities. The divisions in society at the level of production are replaced by the apparent differences in the amount of accumulated goods, that are similar in quality. This obscures the real source of contention in capitalism and perpetuates domination by hiding the real source of conflict in capitalist society. Secondly, competitive consumption entrenches the social hierarchy of the class system through the consumption of “high-end” cultural commodities. This drives competitive consumption itself, and keeps the growing middle class in a cycle of catch-up consumption. Consumption functions to maintain and reproduce conditions of domination, and is a powerful explanation of the way in which humans contribute to, and embrace, the ideology of domination. At the core of all this is Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, which all of the above theories of domination are indebted to.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Marx and Commodity Fetishism

In this chapter, I will focus my explanation of domination upon, what I believe to be, one of the most important conceptual pillars of domination theory: commodity fetishism. Marx asserts that social reality under capitalism presents itself in a way that mystifies those who live in it. This mystification is political because it conditions human beings to accept circumstances of inequality, exploitation and domination. My intention in this chapter is to define the ways in which this mystification is reproduced by the actions of individuals in capitalist society. In other words, I want to identify what contributes to false consciousness and the reproduction of conditions of domination. In approaching the problem of domination theory, Marx first sets out to discover how capitalism and its processes have been *misunderstood*. This misunderstanding is based upon the way that individuals experience reality in a false way. This chapter will reveal how and why this occurs, and why such circumstances are reproduced by the very individuals who are the subjects of domination. Firstly, however, we must consider Marx's criticisms of fellow economists who have accumulated a false knowledge of the capitalist economy. For Marx, these economists, like all other individuals in capitalist society, were unable to understand the inner workings of capitalism because they were confined to an experience of “the appearance forms” of political economy which led them to deficient theoretical accounts. This insight into the theoretical insufficiency of other economists prompted Marx to demonstrate, what he thought to be, the inner workings of capitalism, and why they are hidden from individuals in capitalist society.

Classical Economics and the Appearance Forms of Capitalism

Marx argued that classical and neo-classical economists failed to look behind the direct relations exhibited in empirical phenomena, and instead de-historicized these relations and addressed them as “ultimate reality”. Related to this was the superficial understanding of these empirical phenomena themselves. Marx objected to the tendency of bourgeois economists to think of the social properties (value) of material things as if they were intrinsic natural properties; for example, money as earning interest by some inherent power of self-expansion, or gold as money because of its natural qualities¹.

Marx's intention was to produce a scientific study of political economy. Marx thought that knowledge of political economy would inevitably mature as it moved from an examination of the outward appearances of

¹ Morris, J (1966) “Commodity Fetishism and the Value Concept: Some Contrasting Points of View” *Science and Society*, 30 at p.98

phenomena to an explanation of them. At this point it is important to point out that, “whilst real in both physical and social senses, the term appearance refers to the qualities and characteristics of these forms that in various ways repress the real relations on which they are founded²”. The particular scientific quest in political economy was thus for a deeper understanding of the real processes and relations that constitute capitalism, and capitalist society. Marx argued that his approach to the study of political economy was scientific because the surface of social reality is not a simple one, on which items present themselves as they really are. Marx believed that objects have properties which are not immediately apparent. These properties can be broken down into a series of “internal relationships” which, in reality, produce these appearance forms. Marx argued that this contrast between appearance and essence is what characterizes all forms of scientific inquiry³.

This aim of debunking the essence behind the appearances of capitalism, or the substance behind the form, will act as a common thread throughout this chapter, and thesis. This process however, must not be regarded as a journey from *illusion* to reality. It is rather a process of elucidating one reality by disclosing its foundation in, and determination by, another⁴. There are two levels of reality that Marx is referring to here. Firstly, Marx is referring to the appearance forms of the economy that are manifested as fetishized value relations between people and the products of their labour. This is by no means an illusion; it is reality in so far as it is a necessary and objectively apparent product of the capitalist productive process. Secondly, Marx alludes to a reality that lies beneath the phenomenological, or the apparent. Beneath the fetishized interplay between commodities and capital, Marx believes that there exists a network of human relations that are characterized by exploitation and domination. The falsely conscientized individual is however is unable to see these relations. It is Marx's project to understand the reality that lies beneath the determinations of this false consciousness, and in doing so reveal the domination that is pervasive in developed industrial states.

For Marx, classical and neoclassical economic analyses made capitalist social relations appear as products of nature, and in a parallel fashion, allowed them to be regarded as impersonal objective formations of a natural state of affairs⁵. Marx thus endeavored to foster a more concrete understanding of the nature and essence of capitalism's inner workings – he did this by taking the initial step of construing the relations and conditions under capitalism as historically specific constructions⁶. Marx planned to address these insufficiencies in

² Wayne, M (2003) *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends* at p.190

³ Rosen, M (1996) *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* at p.205. Marx in this sense gave his own account of scientific procedure. Whether the analogy between Marxist theory and the natural sciences is a tenable one however, falls outside of the scope of this discussion.

⁴ Geras, N (1971) “Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx’s Capital” at p.215 in Jessop, C & MacLom-Brown, C. (1990) (eds) *Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought Vol IV*

⁵ Geras, N (1971) *Supra* at p.215-6

⁶ Marx writes that:

classical and neoclassical economic thought. Marx's intention was thus to show that there exists, at the interior of capitalist society, a kind of internal rupture between social relations and the manner in which they are experienced⁷.

At this point we must understand the most important and fundamental phenomenon that distorts reality and results in the many appearances of capitalism – what Marx calls “commodity fetishism”. It is Marx’s strenuous analysis of the commodity that separates him from the Classical and Neo-classical economists of his time. It is thus pertinent to deal conceptually with the nature and role of the commodity under the historically specific conditions of capitalism. Before this is done however, the nature of “fetishism” must be defined. I will provide a description of “fetishism” before describing the economic conditions that lead to its manifestation. The definition of fetishism and its basis in the alienated productive process provide the basis from which we can begin to understand how and why commodities have become fetishized.

The Concept of Fetishism: Religious Fetishism

Marx identified several fetishes that occur in the economic process. I will discuss at length the most famous form of fetishism which is commodity fetishism, but will also make a point of describing another important fetish in the form of capital fetishism. In order to understand the former fetish properly we can introduce the notion of religious fetishism which is partly analogous to commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism is similar to religious fetishism because it involves the imputation of powers to idols or concepts. The difference between commodity fetishism and religious fetishism however, is that commodity fetishism is the process of endowing an object with a power which *in a sense* it lacks, whereas the religious fetish lacks that power altogether. The other important difference between the two forms of fetishism arises from the fact that

Had we gone further, and inquired under what circumstances all. Or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we should have found that this only happens on the basis of one particular mode of production, the capitalist one. Marx, K (1976) *Capital*, Vol. 1 at p.125

The implication is that a society is capitalist if and only if its wealth predominantly takes the form of commodities. Other pre-capitalist societies are not incapable of producing commodities:

Capitalist production is distinguished from the outset by two characteristic features: *First*. It produces its products as commodities. The fact that it produces commodities does not differentiate it from other modes of production; but rather the fact that being a commodity is the dominant and determining characteristic of its products.... The *second* distinctive feature of the capitalist mode of production is the production of surplus-value as the direct aim and determining motive of production. Capital produces essentially capital, and does so only to the extent that it produces surplus-value. *Marx Capital Vol. III Chapter 51, see Marx, K (1981) Capital Volume III at p.1019*

It is precisely this historical specificity that divided Marxian thought from other contemporary forms of economic thought at the time. (see Graham, K (1992) *Karl Marx Our Contemporary: Social Theory for a Post-Leninist World* at p.82)

⁷ Geras, N (1971) at p.209

religious fetishism arises from a thought process, whereas the commodity fetish arises from the objectively real forces of production. In other words, the commodity fetish arises from the way in which production is organized in commodity society; the mind thus perceives and registers the fetish which is like a mirage: it is located in the external world. A mirage is thus not an optical illusion, it is a real phenomenon that one can take photographs of (the productive process is equally as real). We now know that a mirage is a naturally occurring optical phenomenon which entails the bending of light rays (refraction) which produce a displaced image of either distant objects or the sky. There is thus a difference between the reality of this phenomenon and its appearance. The mind registers a mirage in a similar way to the way in which it perceives the fetishized commodity. The most important distinction here is that in economic fetishism the fetish, and mirage, is an objective phenomenon. The observing individual registers the economic fetish, whereas in the religious case, the individual creates the fetish⁸.

With regards to religious fetishism, primitive forms of religion were marked by the fetishistic worship of material objects that were accorded magic powers of their own⁹. Marx similarly describes capitalism as worship of money and material objects which take the form of commodities. Marx uses this definition of religious fetishism in his analysis of the mystifying world of commodities. But we must stop and ask at this point why fetishism, both religious and economic, occurs in the first place. In other words, what function does fetishism serve, and why does it come about?

Marx answers this with his famous argument of alienation. For Marx, human beings have become alienated from their essence, or their “species being”, which acts as the basic driving force behind human behaviour. Marx argues that it is our basic function as humans to procure our means of subsistence. This however, is not the same type of automatic procurement that is found in the animal kingdom; for example, the way in which bees produce honey. Humans are capable of controlling their means of subsistence. In other words, there exists a conscious, instrumental, cognitive aspect to the way in which we procure our subsistence. It is this activity that binds the natural, conscious labour of the individual to her essence as a human; it is the fulfillment of her species being. Human beings assert themselves and are identified through their labour. Labour is humankind's most important activity (life activity) through which humankind create their world, and as a result, create themselves as individuals. For Marx, the capitalist system of production alienates the products of human labour from the individuals who produce them. The most important effect of this is that humans can no longer fulfill their life activity. I will explain later the process of alienation and its social repercussions, but for the sake of the definition of commodity fetishism it is sufficient to identify the

⁸ Cohen, G.A. (1978) *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* at p.115-116

⁹ Mulvey, L (1996) “The carapace that failed: Ousmade Sembene's “*Xala*” in *Fetishism and Curiosity*, ed. Mulvey, L, BFI, London quoted in Wayne, M Supra at p.189

detachment of human beings from their produced goods; which is in effect a detachment from their life-activity. Individuals thus lose their association with their species being, or life confirming work. They are effectively disassociated from their essence as human beings, and do not recognize this essence in others who too are alienated.

Human beings, in search of these alienated characteristics, project what is lost to the human race onto a symbolic, objectified, mythical figure: God. Marx maintains that the religious domain is the mere product of the alienated human mind. Humans fail to see that the need for divine recognition and religious identity is, in fact, a product of their alienated material circumstances. These circumstances make it impossible for humankind to fulfill their life-activity. This lack of fulfillment leads impoverished man to project his lost, objectified essence onto God. For Marx, the appeal to God is thus an appeal to a unified, free and fulfilled human form of existence. “The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself¹⁰”. Marx maintains that this amounts to fetishism because the characters that inhabit this spiritual domain appear as independent beings (e.g., God, Angels etc.) who enter into relations both with each other and the human race.

Commodity Fetishism and Alienation

On a formal level, fetishism refers to the human ability to project value onto a material object, repress the fact that the projection has taken place and then to interpret the object as the autonomous source of that value. As a category of investigation, commodity fetishism refers to the practical activities that take place under market capitalism, as well as particular forms of consciousness implicit in those practices. It is the purpose of this chapter to understand both components at work and how they act together to construct the appearance form of commodities, social relations and naturalism (ahistoricism).

The fetish character of the commodity reduced to its simplest form, consists in the fact that mans handiwork assumes a peculiar quality which influences in a fundamental way the actual behaviour of the persons concerned. It does not wield that remarkable power (as earlier economists had believed) by an eternal law of nature, yet it is endowed with such power under the particular social conditions prevailing in the present epoch of society¹¹.

Marx's concept of alienation is an attempt to explain the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are part¹². Alienation occurs in five areas: alienation from the individual's “life activity”, or “species being”, the separation of the

¹⁰ McLellan, D (1980) *The Thought of Karl Marx* (2nd ed) at p.123

¹¹ Korsch, K (1938) *Karl Marx* at p.130

¹² Ollman, B (1971) *Alienation: Marx's Concept of Man in Capitalist Society* at p.131

individual from her own products, from the work process itself, from nature, and from fellow humans¹³. With regard to alienation in the productive process, the alienated qualities and products that used to belong to humans develop a life of their own. The concept of commodity fetishism is a concept that was meant to identify, in a concrete sense, the economic form of alienation (the separation of the individual from the products of her labour). Marx's work in *Capital* was thus an attempt at an analysis of political economy that was less abstract than his youthful writings. This led Marx to the formulation of commodity fetishism as an instantiation, and expansion of, his theory of alienation which was the focus of his earlier work: *The Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts*. Commodity fetishism is thus a strictly economic critique that explains the way in which commodities come to possess value, and how this value is mistakenly attributed to the essence of the commodity itself, and not the the labour required for its production¹⁴.

Fetishism has its origin in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces commodities. It is thus a necessary outcome of a particular mode of production (capitalist). The material forces of production ,and the relations they engender, construct a world in which humans have no control. This is the difference between religious fetishism and economic fetishism: although both are the result of *misrecognitions*, religious fetishism is a world of complete illusion. There is no appearance form that masks an underlying reality in the mythical world of religion. In other words, it is the product of a mental projection that is made in response to a misrecognized need. For Marx, the realm of the divine is not objectively “real”. In capitalist society however, fetishized commodities are objectively real: they have a discernible, phenomenological existence. The fetishized forms of commodities are therefore visible. Most importantly however, their foundation in labouring activity is not: “*The social forms conceal the material content*¹⁵”.

In capitalist society, the individual comes into contact with commodities and experiences them in a specific way. She experiences commodities as autonomous objects (because of alienation) that have value inherently. This experience constitutes the individual's knowledge and understanding of social reality. In capitalist society commodities do have power (the ability to determine their own value, interact on the market etc.), because people believe that they have power. This belief can be reduced to the way in which individuals experience things, which is false. Fetishism is a term that describes why commodities appear to have this

¹³ Marx, K (1992) *Early Writings*, “The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844) at p.326-332

¹⁴ Writers such as Kolakowski have argued that Marx's concretization of human alienation in terms of commodity fetishism does not imply the negation of his earlier work. Neither does it imply that Marx's work in *Capital* is an attempt to overcome the supposed idealism of his early work. Instead, commodity fetishism is an extension or continuation of the theory of alienation and must be seen as the culmination of Marx's earlier notions of dehumanization .See Kolakowski, L (1978) *Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. 1: *The Founders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), also Perkins, S (1993) Perkins, S (1993) *Marxism and the Proletariat: a Lukácsian Perspective* at p.127-8

¹⁵ Cohen, G.A. (1978) *Supra* at p.116

power inherently. In reality however, value is delegated by material production¹⁶: “The mechanism of fetishism is thus a form of mystification which consists in the collapsing of social facts into natural ones. In this way, the value form is fetishized¹⁷”. Marx makes this point when alluding to:

...the fetishism peculiar to bourgeois political economy, the fetishism which metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things¹⁸.

The process and necessary criteria for fetishization will be dealt with later in the chapter. In order to show *how* and *why* the products of labour become impoverished we must engage in an analytical process which begins with an exposition of the commodity and its different types of value.

An Analysis of the Commodity

For Marx, a rigorous analysis of the commodity reveals the essence beyond the appearance of capitalism. Marx himself writes of the importance of commodities: “It is the commodity form itself that is responsible for the enigma [fetishism] and its solution therefore requires an analysis of this form¹⁹”.

The commodity under capitalism is roughly akin to the cell in a biological organism. There is however, an essential difference between the two – namely that the commodity is fully visible. The buying and selling of commodities is the most obvious and pervasive feature of the capitalist system in which wealth is constituted by commodities. A closer examination of the commodity however, reveals its extremely complex nature; a phenomenon comprised of many layers of appearances hiding a deeper reality beneath²⁰.

The obvious features of commodities is that they take the form of either a good or a service. Commodities must also have a discernible objective form. This physical criteria applies to goods (in their tangible physical form) as well as services (the exertion or activity that changes the form or disposition of objects). If we probe more deeply however, other features of the commodity become apparent; it becomes evident that the commodity itself is not a purely self-evident physical entity²¹: “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in

¹⁶ Cohen, G.A. (1978) *Supra* at p.116

¹⁷ Geras, N (1971) *Supra* at p.216

¹⁸ Marx, K *Capital II* at p.225 quoted in Geras, N (1971) *Supra* at p.216

¹⁹ Marx, K (1976) *Supra* at p.774

²⁰ Goldway, D (1967) “Appearance and Reality in Marx’s Capital” in Jessop, C & MacLom-Brown, C. (1990) (eds) *Supra* at p.102

²¹ Hodgson, G (1982) *Capitalism, Value and Exploitation: A Radical Theory* at p.35

metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties²².

First and foremost, Marx describes a commodity as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance they spring from the stomach or from the fancy, makes no difference²³”. The ability of commodities to satisfy human wants and desires is just one facet of the commodity. This is what Marx refers to as the “dual nature of value” comprising of use and exchange-value. The conceptual dichotomy between use-value and exchange-value is of utmost importance, as it provides the initial insight from which Marx gradually begins to reveal the underlying reality of capitalist political economy.

Use Value

In general, use-value can be summarized into the following propositions:

- 1) Human beings naturally engage with nature and fashion goods that satisfy needs and desires. This natural engagement is common to all use-values and constitutes concrete labour²⁴.
- 2) This labour is qualitatively different.
- 3) This labour subsequently creates different goods that have a qualitative value in use.
- 4) Use-value is independent of the amount of labour required to produce that value.
- 5) Use-value is an objective quality that inheres in objects, independent of their subjective utility.

Use-value is thus an objective qualitative value that inheres in the commodity and manifests itself when its physical properties are engaged. For instance ,the design, shape and chosen physical materials for a hammer constitute its form and function. The hammer thus has quality in the realization of its function; the hammering of nails. This quality exists objectively, apart from the fact that some individuals may find it more useful than others. The purpose of pointing this out is to contrast this view with that of utility which allocates value only in terms of the commodity's ability to provide subjective satisfaction. In terms of utility theory, value is

²² Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.163

²³ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.125

²⁴ Marx maintains that although use-values contain different proportions of labour and natural products, use-value as a category always comprises a natural element. This natural element is the useful activity of humans directed towards the appropriation of natural factors in one form or another. In other words, use-value is a product of humans engaging with nature in accordance with their natural urge to work (their species being). This is based on his earlier works such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in which Marx asserts that, as humans, we instinctively produce our means of subsistence. In other words, it is natural for human beings to work for their living: “...labour is a natural condition of human existence, a condition of material exchange between man and nature, quite independent of the form of society. See Stevenson, L & Haberman, D.L. (1998) *Ten Theories of Human Nature* at p.140-141

extrinsically conferred in different degrees based on preference, whereas use-value is an intrinsic objective quality inhering in the useful qualities of goods in a given social environment²⁵. The following quote shows Marx's view that use-value is not simply a subjective concept: "The usefulness of a thing makes it a use value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity and has no existence apart from the latter²⁶".

By identifying the use-value of commodities, Marx is claiming that there exists a kind of value separate from the kind of value that presents itself as a given in capitalist society. All commodities rely on this value derived from use because its essence constitutes their material wealth. At some point however, use-value has been superseded by another, more pertinent, type of value: exchange value. For Marx, in a capitalist society, where goods are freely exchanged on the market, use-value becomes superseded by exchange-value, which is a value that arises from commodities exchanging with one another. Exchange-value and commodity fetishism are inextricably bound together because fetishism explains how exchange-value becomes an attribute that seems to stem from the commodity itself. As the chapter develops, the reader will see how exchange-value contributes to the appearance forms of capitalism, and how the underlying essence of things is hidden by these appearance forms.

Value, Exchange-Value and the Labour Theory of Value

Exchange-value²⁷ is a quantitative value involving the proportions in which use-values are exchanged for one another. Thus, despite their different physical properties, products of labour are made commensurate, provided the two are available in the correct proportion: "The exchange-value of a palace can be expressed in a definite number of tins of boot polish²⁸". The result of this universal commensurability is that use-value (as the basis of differentiating between the products of labour) becomes replaced by the primacy of exchange value.

Quite irrespective, therefore, of their natural form of existence, and without regard to the specific character of the needs they satisfy as use-values, commodities in definite quantities are congruent, they take one another's place in the exchange process, are regarded as equivalents, and despite their motley appearance have a common denominator²⁹.

²⁵ Hodgson, G (1982) Supra at p.43

²⁶ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.126

²⁷ The subservience of use-value to exchange-value requires certain presuppositions: Firstly that of the prominence of the market where qualitatively different use-values are exchanged; secondly, the division of labour in society; thirdly, the legal rights of personal or corporate ownership of private property; and finally (with specific regard to labour) a body of law relating to contract between persons or corporations. See Hodgson, G (1982) Supra at p.36

²⁸ Marx, K (1970) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, edited by Dobb, M at p.29

²⁹ Marx, K (1970) Supra at p.28

In pointing out the commensurability of commodities, Marx begins alluding to a common denominator which constitutes the real value of a commodity, beneath the immediately observable exchange-value that presents itself on the market. It must be noted that value in this sense is not the same as exchange-value. Value is a shared characteristic of the exchange values of all commodities. Exchange value therefore refers specifically to the ratio in which commodities are exchanged with one another, and is a category that is influenced by market forces such as supply and demand. Value, on the other hand, refers to a shared characteristic that underpins all commodities. For Marx, this common denominator cannot by definition be derived from the qualitatively different use-values or physical properties of the goods themselves. Trying to establish a common denominator out of this category is self-defeating because of the exponential differences that arise from a given commodity's structure, composite elements, complexity and function, to name a few. If neither utility, nor use-value, provide options for establishing a common denominator that underpins value, then what category can? We can break down Marx's answer to this problem in the following way:

- 1) Commodities are proportional in different quantities on the market
- 2) This uniform proportionality requires expression in terms of a common denominator
- 3) This common denominator is the source of exchange value
- 4) The common denominator is not found in use-value
- 5) Labour is common to all commodities
- 6) Labour is thus the source of exchange-value.

For Marx, it follows that “if we disregard the use-value of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour³⁰”. Value therefore has its roots in the labour process. In capitalism however, exchange-value becomes the expression of this value; it represents the appearance form of value in trade and comes to be the only value that falsely conscientized individuals are aware of. Exchange-value therefore does not seem to derive its value from any underlying processes, and instead appears to transcend the labour process: the material content of the commodity that is formed during the productive process is concealed by the fetishized exchange-value that has come to be the measure of value for all commodities. This is the essence of the concept of fetishism: that exchange-value transcends value, thereby transcending value's material basis in labour. In capitalism, exchange-value ostensibly derives its value from the substance of the commodity itself. It is important to note that the commodity really has exchange-value. The problem that fetishism causes however, is that this value seems to emanate from it, not from the labour which has produced its true value. Fetishized exchange-value therefore, hides real value and its constituent processes, and creates a false appearance form which has led to an insufficient and deficient theoretical knowledge of the inner

³⁰ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.4-5

workings of capitalism. For Marx, it is not that commodities can be exchanged with another in certain ratios that is the source of deception in capitalist society. Instead, it is the reason why they come to exchange in the ratios that they do that is the “hidden secret”³¹.

Marx argues that the discovery of exchange-value, and its relation to commodity fetishism, allows us to understand what constitutes the surface level operations of capitalism. His point is that exchange-value is what appears to the individual in capitalist society. It also appears to the mind of the individual that this value is an independent value because its source (labour) is divorced from the commodity itself (commodity fetishism and alienation respectively). Marx insists that commodity fetishism, or the fetishization of exchange-value, is an appearance form that is a phenomenal reality, all be it a *false* one. In the past, individuals examining capitalism and the market worked off these appearance forms, and therefore developed knowledge and theories that were insufficient, as well as deficient. In other words, they did not explain the inner workings of capitalism properly. Theories that accept the appearance forms of capitalism as their premises therefore can never determine what really constitutes value, and what gives rise to profit and inequality. Rosen argues that a surface appearance for Marx is “false to the extent that it suggests or promotes a theoretical explanation that is false (or bars the way to one that is true)³²”. To give an analogy of the theoretical deficiencies associated with appearance forms, we can think of how colour appears to the human mind. Colour appears to be something that emanates from the object itself, grass thus emits the colour green. However, beneath this surface appearance, scientists have discovered that objects do not possess or “give off” colour, but reflect and absorb different wavelengths of light which enter the human eye. Colour is thus a property of light instead of being a property of the object. Marx believes that his discovery of labour as the secret behind the value of commodities is similar to scientific discoveries such as the nature of colour. It is the actual composite processes, beneath what phenomenally appears to the human mind, that explains the essence of things.

It is important to remember that the labour theory of value is what Marx considers to be “the inner workings” of capitalist society. He sees his project as a scientific discovery of the constituent elements and processes of capitalism, what he calls “the science of political economy”. For Marx, these constituent elements and processes have been hidden by commodity fetishism and alienation which leads individuals within capitalism to experience reality in a misleading, false way. It is not within the scope of this thesis to defend or critique the labour theory of value. The labour theory of value, as problematic as it is, is rather a demonstration of Marx's larger project which is to understand the underlying processes and relations of capitalism. The theory

³¹ Rosen, M (1996) *Supra* at p.208

³² Rosen, M (1994) *Supra* at p.209

of commodity fetishism still has merit, even if we disregard the labour theory of value. This is because fetishism explains how commodities are imbued with characteristics and powers that they do not have as inanimate objects³³. Marx's critique, based upon the labour theory of value, was a strictly economic critique. This thesis seeks to develop Marx's original insight into general form of social critique that has no relationship to the labour theory of value.

Apart from the labour theory of value, Marx also set out to understand the source of profit which has been obscured by the appearance forms of capitalism. For Marx, the discovery of the source of profit, or surplus value, reveals the exploitative side of the production process where workers are paid less than the true value of their labour.

The Theory of Surplus Value

In capitalist society the means of production³⁴ are the property of the capitalists, or the bourgeois class. It is thus a misnomer to incite the liberal notion of the freedom to contract, because the worker is faced with the choice of either submitting herself to work for the capitalist, or starving to death due to the fact that there is no other way to secure subsistence. In other words, the freedom to dispose of one's labour power is fettered by the overarching circumstance of “work or perish”. “Thus it is but a juridical illusion that the workers, either as individuals or as members of an amalgamated group of labour-power owners, freely dispose of their property”³⁵.

The “property” which Korsch refers to here is the commodity of *labour-power* which Marx uncovers by applying the concept of the dual-nature of commodities to labour. If all commodities have a use-value and an exchange-value, so too must labour in its commodity form, because it is an object of exchange. This occurs when the labourer sells his potential to work to the capitalist:

Our friend the money-owner must be lucky enough to find within the sphere of circulation, on the market, a commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labour, hence a creation of value. The possessor of money does find such a special commodity on the market: the capacity for labour, in other words labour power³⁶

.For Marx, profit cannot originate as a whole in the sphere of exchange. Exchange is merely the redistribution

³³ This will be the focus of chapter 4.

³⁴ According to Gerry Cohen the means of production are the physical productive resources such as machinery, raw materials and premises (1978) *Karl Marx's Theory of History* at p.485

³⁵ Korsch, K (1938) *Karl Marx* at p.134

³⁶ Marx, K (1976) *Supra* at p.270

of existing resources and commodities which use the market as their medium. The market thus cannot add to existing resources and cannot generate profit in this sphere³⁷. This is where Marx's identification of labour-power, concrete labour and labour-time become important. When applying the concept of the dual-nature of commodities to labour, use-value takes the form of concrete labour, or purposive productive activity (concrete labour in its potential form is called labour-power). Exchange-value on the other hand, is comprised of labour-time or homogeneous social labour³⁸.

Labour-power is thus a commodity that is put on the market when the labourer requires work/employment. In buying the labour-power of the worker the capitalist, like any other purchaser, has acquired the right to consume or use the commodity she has bought. Labour-power is converted or expended by simply making the worker work. In other words, the worker expends her potential labour and converts this into concrete labour which is the realization of labour's use-value. For Marx, the capitalist pays the labourer for the value of her work, and is thus allowed to make use of that property and reap any benefits that accrue from it.

Labour however, is characterized by a peculiarity. The nature of this peculiarity is that its value in use is greater than its value in exchange. This statement is true in so far as labour's use-value is the source of all exchange-values. Labour thus produces more value than it requires itself. Marx surmises that labour is paid only as much as it is required to reproduce that labour-power. The value of labour power is thus only equal to the amount of money required for sustaining the existence of the labourer. The value produced by concrete labour (labour-power in use) is, however, quite distinct from the amount required to maintain the reproduction of the labourer. Marx demonstrates this by using of the example of the spinner:

We have seen that, to daily reproduce his labouring power, [the labourer] must daily reproduce a value of three shillings, which he will do by working six hours daily. But this does no disable him from working ten or twelve hours a day. But by paying the daily or weekly value of the spinners labouring power, the capitalist has acquired the right of using that labouring power during the *whole day or week*. He will, therefore, make him work daily, say, twelve hours. Over and above the six hours required to replace his wages, or the value of his labouring power, he will, have to work six other hours, which I shall call hours of surplus labour, which surplus labour will realize itself in a surplus value and a surplus produce³⁹.

By paying the labourer three shillings, the capitalist will realize a value of six shillings because she pays for six hours of labour, and receives twelve in return. For Marx, it is this sort of exchange between capital and

³⁷ Hodgson, G (1982) Supra at p.80

³⁸ Marx, K (1970) Supra at p.52

³⁹ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.116

labour which forms the basis of capitalist production⁴⁰. This transaction, between worker and capitalist, constitutes the wages system which must “constantly result in reproducing the working man as a working man, and the capitalist as capitalist⁴¹”.

In the wage system, the labourer receives her wages after her labour is performed. She is also unaware of the productive worth of her own labour as she has never had access to the means of production herself. The result of this is that the value or price of her spent-labour (labour power) necessarily appears as the price or value of labour itself. In terms of the example above, the labourer will consider the value of twelve hours of work to be three shillings, where in actual fact it is worth double this⁴².

The source of surplus-value in the exploitation of the worker is hidden in capitalist society. For the labourer, the inequality of exchange is falsely disguised as an equal exchange⁴³. The wage form is the result of the exchange of labour power for capital, that occurs under the false pretense of a “free contract”. For Marx, the true productivity of the labourer is also something that is not truly revealed. But what prevents the exploited from arriving at a knowledge of their exploitation? And what keeps the exploitative conditions of capitalism intact? By now the reader should be aware of the fact that it is the way in which individuals experience reality that constitutes their understanding of it. For Marx, if capitalism operates in such a way that certain relationships between humans and objects, humans and humans etc, remain hidden, then the individual will not arrive at a knowledge of these relationships. Marx believes however, that he has identified what creates and reproduces these appearance forms: alienation and commodity fetishism. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an understanding of how fetishism, in its various forms, maintains the false appearance forms of capitalism.

Money and Fetishism

At this point we must return to the concept of fetishism, in particular the fetishism of money, in order to identify one of the ways in which commodity fetishism acts to conceal the social relations that underpin commodity production. For Marx, the concept and function of money in capitalism encapsulates the essence of fetishism like no other commodity. In other words, money as a commodity demonstrates all the characteristics of a autonomous “thing”, independent of its social foundations. This is conceptually important because it brings us to understand the true nature of money as a social relation, and subsequently the nature of capital as a product of exploited human labour.

⁴⁰ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.116

⁴¹ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.116

⁴² Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.117

⁴³ Geras, N (1971) Supra at p.218

Money emerges from an economic need to determine and regulate the ratio in which commodities are exchanged with one another. For the individual dealing with appearance forms, the exchange values of commodities are reducible to something common, which they represent more or less of. Being subject to reified appearance forms, the individual does not see that labour is common to all commodities. Individuals are therefore, unable to see that labour underpins value. Money instead becomes the commodity which all the different commodities are equal to, in different ratios. All commodities become equal to a third thing, money, and are reducible to money. For Marx, the result is that the values of commodities come to be expressed in terms of money, instead of labour-time which is the real source of value: “The transformation of values into different prices of production serves to obscure the basis for determining true value itself⁴⁴”.

Money, in its form as the universal equivalent, possesses a common use-value to all: that of being a carrier of exchange-value. It thus responds to the common need that arises from the exchange-process of translating different commodities into expressions of one overarching commodity. For Marx, the translation of all exchange-values into money constitutes a powerful form of fetishism. Money appears to humankind as magically possessing value, independent of the social processes that, in reality, constitute its value, and the value of the commodities it comes to represent. For Marx, all the illusions that arise from the monetary system stem from the alienating capitalist system of production. Marx maintains that the nature of this system necessarily hides the fact that “money, though a physical object with distinct properties, represents a social relation of production⁴⁵”.

It is not only the values of the objects on the market that become fetishized. Money itself is a commodity. This is because money is based upon the commodities of gold and silver. In other words, it has a value that is determined by the abstract labour time required to produce each unit of gold or silver (mining, melting, refining etc.): “These objects, gold and silver, just as they come out the bowels of the earth, are forthwith the direct incarnation of all human labour.⁴⁶”. In modern capitalism, money functions as an expression of all commodity's exchange values in terms of gold and silver. However, because of alienation and fetishism, money appears to have value independently. The fetishism of the money commodity is slightly different to other commodities because money *is* value itself: “This perverted appearance manifests itself merely in a more striking manner in money than it does in commodities⁴⁷”.

Up to this point I have explained why money is considered to be “a striking” manifestation of fetishism, but

⁴⁴ Marx, K (1993) *Capital III* at p.168

⁴⁵ Marx, K (1970) *Supra* at p.34

⁴⁶ Marx, K (1976) *Supra* at p. 92 quoted in Geras, N (1971) *Supra* at p.216

⁴⁷ Marx, K (1970) *Supra* at p.49

what about money's relation to capital? Torrance explains that in its Marxist use, capital is a sum of exchange-value that is owned for the purpose of appropriating the surplus labour of others⁴⁸. Investments of capital are plunged into production which produces a surplus (see the surplus theory of value), and appears as the interest on the initial capital invested. Capital therefore, appears to grow on its own accord. However, it is the labour process that is responsible for the growth of capital. Production processes are carried on as an investment to realize a profit, and appear as phases of the circulation of money, which therefore, appears misleadingly, to have the power of earning more money⁴⁹. For Marx, the apparent ability of capital to expand by virtue of some inherent property constitutes “capital fetishism”. Marx argues that the real reason that capital grows is because of the constitutive abstract labour of workers working to create surplus value.

To the capitalist however, capital appears as a subject, endowed with the ability to grow independently. This is the interest bearing ability of capital that is misconstrued as stemming from the nature of capital itself. The appearance form of capital to bear interest “becomes a property of money to generate value and yield interest, much as it is an attribute of pear trees to bear pears⁵⁰”. For Marx, this is a clear case of fetishism that conceals the fact that the source of capital's growth lies in the exploitation of the labourer. “Capital is not a thing, but rather a prefinite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character⁵¹”. Capital however, presents itself in an objective form, even though its content and essence are accumulated labour⁵².

If we disregard the labour theory of value, we can still speak of money fetishism because, in capitalist society, money possesses real power. Money has power because of its social function as the mediator of all transactions. Money in capitalism is the mediator between humans and the objects they produce. The things that humans need require money to purchase. Money is therefore, the mediator between humans and their objects; it enables humans to make use of objects. In this role as mediator, money exercises “real power” over humans because it is the universal mediator between humans, as well as objects. Humans experience this real power and subsequently base their conception of reality upon this experience, which for Marx, is a false experience⁵³.

For Marx, the above forms of fetishism (commodity fetishism, money fetishism, capital fetishism) create circumstances which lead individuals to perceive reality in a particular, false way. It is these false appearance

⁴⁸ Torrance, J (1995) *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas* at p.101

⁴⁹ Torrance, J (1995) *Supra* at p.101

⁵⁰ Marx, K (1993) *Supra* at p.384

⁵¹ Marx, K (1993) *Supra* at p.794

⁵² Geras, N (1971) *Supra* at p.216

⁵³ Ollman, B (1971) *Supra* at p.203-204

forms that produce a deficient understanding of what determines the value of commodities. Commodity fetishism thus explains the individual's false perception of an object, and the source of its value. The object perceived is deceptive to the extent that the immediate evidence it presents the observer with, promotes a naïve (and, indeed, false) theory about its etiology, its origins and causes. Rosen holds that the illusion is not a direct perceptual illusion, or a failure of recognition on behalf of the individual: “The idea that products have their values intrinsically is not so much an economic illusion (an illusion that in some way limits the capacity of agents to engage in economic transactions) as a theoretical illusion about the economy (a misconception regarding the way in which the economy works)⁵⁴”.

Commodity fetishism is one of the primary sources of this perceptual illusion, and subsequent theoretical deficiency. It hides the social relations that determine the commodity's value. But why do exchange-values not make this source of value apparent? Marx argues that exchange-values on the market are “accidental and ever-fluctuating⁵⁵”. In other words, Marx believes that surface reality, as it appears, is too turbulent for us to recognize the inner workings that determine surface phenomena. He also argues that this turbulent surface invites other superficial, false explanations. Beneath all this is the discovery of the labour theory of value, which, according to Marx, operates in as a “regulative law of nature. In the same way that the law of gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him⁵⁶”.

In the final section of this chapter I will examine Marx's argument that the appearance forms of capitalism persist despite the discovery of the labour theory of value, as well as Rosen's objection to this. In the next section I will be examining the social and political implications of commodity fetishism and the “false reality” that it constructs. For Marx, the social and the political are products of the alienated labour process which becomes abstracted under the dominance of the market. The next section will thus focus upon the conditions of social life under capitalism. In other words, what are the characteristics of social life governed by commodity fetishism and alienation?

Commodity Fetishism and the Distortion of the Social

The effects of the homogenization of labour, and the predominance of the market, has important repercussions for the social. I will initially look at the alienation of the individual worker from the products of her work and how this contributes to an understanding of how individuals have come to be dominated by the realm of fetishized commodity relations under capitalism. Marx argues that the false reality of commodity

⁵⁴ Rosen, M (1996) Supra at p.209

⁵⁵ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.168

⁵⁶ Marx, K (1976) Supra at p.168

fetishism and alienation hide the real, exploitative, inner workings of capitalism. Individuals are falsely conscientized because of their objective experience of the phenomenal appearance forms of capitalism. We have already discussed how fetishism works, and what it does in an economic sense. But what are commodity fetishism's social and political repercussions? Marx answers this question by arguing that:

The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra sensible or social⁵⁷.

Rosen argues that in this passage Marx identifies two separate facts, or properties, that are distorted in capitalist society. First, according to the concept of commodity fetishism, the “social character” of human's labour appears falsely as an objective character of the products themselves. And secondly, as a consequence of the first, the producer's own relationship to the collective labour process in which they participate appears as a relation between commodities, independent of the producers themselves. Marx's account of commodity fetishism can thus be reduced to two kinds of illusion:

- 1) Illusions regarding the social character of the products of labour, or how social relations between individuals appear as the relations between things.
- 2) Illusions regarding the relations between the producers themselves, or how the individuals of society relate to one another as alienated producers.

With regards to the first point above, Marx argues that social relations have come to be confused with their medium: commodities. In other words, people experience social relations as value relations between commodities. For example, an individual, in the act of purchasing a commodity, sees the transaction as an exchange between her wage packet and the pair of shoes that she wants. In this case, the money and the pair of shoes appear to relate to one another independently in the same way that individuals interact with one another on a social level. According to the theory of commodity fetishism, commodities interact as independent, social entities that determine their exchange-ratios by, what appears to be, their in-built values. This entire process however, leaves the individual, who laboured to earn the money, and the producer of the shoes, ignorant of, and alienated from, their social relationship with one another. From this it becomes clear

⁵⁷ Marx, K (1976) *Supra* at p.164-165

that individuals do not relate to one another as social producers of commodities. Instead, the fetishized commodities they produce conduct these social relations independently of their producers. This is what Marx means by saying that the social relations between humans appear as the relations between things: “To the producers... the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. They do not appear as direct social relations between persons and their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things⁵⁸”.

Marx's point, that the social relations between humans have come to take the form of the relations between things, also rings true if we consider the relationship between individuals in the market place. Individuals governed and mediated by the market come into contact with one another only in the act of exchange. Their interaction is governed by what exchange values those individuals represent. For example, when a labourer comes into contact with the capitalist, the worker is represented by the the potential labour she can perform (labour power), and the capitalist is represented by the capital she can pay in exchange. In other words, both individuals are represented by the commodities that they offer to the open market.

Human beings relate to each other as things because they do not recognize the human labour and social relations that underpin the production of a commodity (for instance, the different types of labour, the distribution, the packaging, the handling and the advertising). Humans are thus alienated from the constituent elements of the productive process. As I have established earlier in the chapter, the commodity appears on the market as something *independent* of all these different processes.

This leads us to the second point I made above concerning the way in which human beings associate with one another in capitalist society. Marx argues that abstracted, homogenized labour necessarily hides the social character of production. That is, the collective production of humankind does not entail the production of individuals for the subsequent consumption of individuals. Instead, according to Marx's account of “the two-fold social character of labour”, the labourer must labour usefully (1), aiming to satisfy the wants that are signaled to him through the market (2). Marx is arguing that the individual producer becomes aware of the role of the market in determining the way in which she labours. In other words, the producer acknowledges the fact that the goods she produces are socially useful. In this, she is quite correct. However, the producer also believes that it is the market that makes her labour useful, instead of the other way around. For Marx, this belief is false because it is the labourer who creates socially useful goods that constitute the wealth of goods on the market, and satisfy the manifold wants of the individuals of society. It is thus the collective labour of

⁵⁸ Marx, K (1976) *Supra* at p.166

individuals, producing useful things for one another, that is the foundation of the market. The reality that fetishism and alienation construct however, is different. The market appears as a mass of commodities that interact with one another as independent social entities. The flow of goods fluctuates, and values are turbulent, which makes labour appear to be the instrument of the market, instead of the market being the product of the collective labour of society. The important point for Marx here is to show how human beings have become subject to the determinations of the market because of commodity fetishism and alienation. The reality of this situation is that humans create useful goods for others, and that their production is social because it satisfies other human wants and desires. Commodities and the market are thus human constructs. As we have come to see in this chapter however, this is not how reality appears to the falsely conscientized individual.

With regards to point 2 above, Rosen summarizes the false reality constructed by the labour process as follows:

“In the case of the labour process, it is

- a) believed falsely that individual labour is socially useful only derivatively, in virtue of the market value of its products

whereas, in fact,

- b) labour has that character intrinsically, as part of the collective labour of society⁵⁹”

The world of commodities and commodity production thus produces false beliefs which are based upon a real experience of a false reality. Marx argues that the world of commodities “veils rather than reveals” the social character of private labour and of the relations between the individual producers⁶⁰.

Objections to the Theory of Commodity Fetishism

Rosen argues that the link between Marx's claim that social reality has a surface appearance, and the claim that this phenomenal form conceals its constituent real relations (and falsifies them), is tenuous⁶¹. More specifically, Rosen believes that we can't make sense of how fetishism works from a scientific materialist perspective. For Rosen, the principles of scientific inquiry are inconsistent with Marx's account of the

⁵⁹ Rosen, M (1996) Supra at p.211

⁶⁰ Marx, K *Capital I* at p.87 in Rosen M (1996) Supra at p.211

⁶¹ Rosen, M (1996) Supra at p.201

discovery of the inner workings of capitalism. As a result, Marxism should abandon this scientific materialist approach, and reconsider the scientific nature of the labour theory of value and its relation to the appearance forms of capitalism.

Rosen objects to Marx's account of commodity fetishism because he believes that commodity fetishism, as a socially distorting phenomenon, should be dissolved by knowledge of its falsehood. His principal claim is that knowledge of the true source of value in labour, and the homogenizing effects of the market upon the social character of private labour, should dispel the objective, false appearances of capitalism. Marx's claim is the exact opposite: that the mystifying appearance forms of capitalism, such as commodity fetishism, persist despite uncovering the "real relations" beneath these appearance forms. In *Capital*, Marx argues that the discovery of the real inner workings of capitalism leaves the appearance forms in tact:

The recent scientific discovery that the products of labour, so far as they are values, are but material expressions of the human labour spent in their production, marks, indeed, an epoch in the history of the development of the human race, *but by no means dissipates the objective illusion* through which the social character of labour appears to be an objective character of the products themselves. What is true only of the particular form of production with which we are dealing, the production of commodities, namely, that the specific social character of independent private acts of labour consists in their equality by virtue of being human labour, which character assumes in the product of the form of value – this fact appears to the producers, notwithstanding the discovery above referred to, to be just as real and final, as the fact that, after the discovery by science of the component gases of air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered⁶².

Rosen claims that Marx's attempt to show how fetishism persists, despite Marx's evidence of the contrary, is tenuous. Rosen also argues that Marx's scientific analogy, contained in the quotation above, fails because the scientific composition of air is in no way similar to the composition of the commodity producing labour process. Rosen argues that Marx is correct in saying that knowledge of the component gases of air leaves the atmosphere unchanged (a scientists' discovery about an object should not change the object itself). Rosen believes however, that this is not the issue: "the question, rather, is whether, having now discovered the truth about that object, individuals will still continue to entertain their previous false beliefs about the object. It is not a question of whether the atmosphere itself changes but whether what we believe about it does⁶³". With regards to the economy, Marx alleges that individuals falsely believe that commodities have values that are intrinsic to them, and that the social character of commodities derives from exchange value. Most important for Rosen however, is the fact that these beliefs are theoretical in character, unlike one's engagement with the

⁶² Marx, K *Capital I* at p.87 in Rosen, M (1996) *Supra* at p.211 (my emphasis)

⁶³ Rosen, M (1996) *Supra* at p.212

atmosphere (which for Rosen, consists of breathing) which is wholly “untheoretical”. Rosen asks “why should we assume that these beliefs will persist in the face of contrary evidence? If fetishism is a theoretical illusion, then there seems to be no reason to suppose that the discovery of the truth will not dispel the illusion⁶⁴”.

But does Marx's materialist position commit him to the view that fetishism cannot survive once it has been recognized as false? Marx's materialism is not identical to positivism. Marx is therefore, not committed to maintaining that a belief is true if, and only if, it is empirically verifiable.

More importantly however, in critiquing Marx's scientific analogy, Rosen overlooks the nature of capitalist political economy which Marx is referring to, and criticizes Marx's theory of fetishism based upon Marx's scientific analogy quoted above. Admittedly, Marx's analogy concerning the component gases of the atmosphere is not entirely successful, but I will insist on the other hand that it is redeemable. Firstly, Marx's analogy must not be read only within the context of commodity fetishism and the concealment of the social relations that exist in the labour process. Marx's argument concerning the persistence of false beliefs must be read within his overarching conception of the functioning and nature of capitalist political economy. In other words, Rosen does not consider the nature of the political economy that actively produces appearance forms, false beliefs and defunct theories. For Marx, the capitalist political economy is a self-reproducing, fully established set of systemically functional institutions. This means that capitalism, and all its constituent institutions, practices and social relations, operates to consistently construct and maintain an objectively immanent set of circumstances. In other words, for Marx, the material base of capitalism (the forces of production) constructs an objective reality which the individual *experiences*, and will continue to objectively experience *so long as the structure of capitalist society remains intact*. The point here, that Marx is making, is that knowledge of capitalism's false appearances does not amount to the undoing of the material processes and systems that continue to produce these false appearances. Knowledge is thus not tantamount to action. The capitalist political economy continues to reproduce circumstances that instill false beliefs which stem from the individual's objective experience of capitalist society. So for Marx, even if the labourer possessed knowledge of the true nature of the economy, this would not give rise to a spontaneous change in belief. This is because, in capitalist society, there are constant affirmations of one's (false) experience, which is the experience of fetishized, alienated appearance forms. For Marx, not only does the economic system affirm experience, but importantly, political institutions make laws that are compatible with, and reinforce, the labourer's experience of social relations. The language that is employed within society also serves to confirm its appearance forms: constant talk of the “price of labour” for example and references to the productive

⁶⁴ Rosen, M (1996) *Supra* at p.212

ability of capital⁶⁵. Again, Marx believes that illusions can only be properly exorcised if the society that produces those illusions is changed.

Meyerson argues similarly (from an epistemological perspective) that it is possible to acknowledge evidence but irrationally persist in belief⁶⁶. In this case, evidence is recognized but fails to have the appropriate impact on the inference because one kind of mental phenomena is passive. For Meyerson, reason is passive in this circumstance and is supplanted by experience which is more vivid. Relating this argument to Marx's work and my argument above, the experience of the alienated labourer is more believable and "real" than a complex theoretical account. For example, a labourer may read Marx who gives her an account of the value of commodities, as well as the social relations that underpin the products of her labour. The labourer may well read and understand that she shares her class position and interests with other labourers. However, in capitalist society, her experience of social reality is one of commodity fetishism, separation and alienation which leads her to believe in, and orientate herself within, the appearance forms of capitalism⁶⁷.

However, to say that people do not change their beliefs in the face of contrary evidence is not to give an account of how this occurs. Marx does not give a full account of exactly why the appearance forms of capitalism persist, despite his epistemological breakthrough. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and capitalist domination requires a more tenable account of how certain cognitive phenomena occur. This lays the foundation for the work in the following chapters. The work that follows is an attempt to explain why commodity fetishism, alienation, inequality and most importantly, domination, persist in society. This thesis will approach Rosen's objection in three broad ways. Firstly, I will show how the persisting appearance forms of capitalism, which result in exploitation, domination and the reproduction of the status quo, are explained by Lukács' theory of reification. Secondly, I will approach the issue of domination by describing Horkheimer and Adorno's account of domination and how it is maintained by the commercialization of culture (the culture industry). Finally, I will re-evaluate these explanatory theories in light of the central question in domination theory (why the dominated many continue to accept the rule of the privileged few), and attempt to provide an account of one of the ways in which individuals actively engage in behaviour that reproduces conditions of inequality and domination.

This brings us to the next chapter, and the work of George Lukács. Lukács' work is of importance because it directly attempts to give an account of why the exploited working class continue to accept the rule of the privileged few, despite Marx's work concerning class consciousness. Lukács' account also approaches the

⁶⁵ Meyerson, D (1991) *False Consciousness* at p.154

⁶⁶ Meyerson, D (1991) *Supra* at p.154

⁶⁷ Meyerson, D (1991) *Supra* at p.157-161

question of why alienation and fetishism persist in capitalist society by identifying the phenomenon of reification. As the reader will see in the next chapter, reification explains how the individual's experience of capitalism influences patterns of thought and behaviour that actively maintain and reproduce the status quo.

Chapter 2

Introduction: The Contribution of Lukács

The problems that Lukács was faced with when writing *History and Class Consciousness* arose directly from the failed Marxist approach to social change during the early 20th Century. The forecasts of historical materialism had not come to fruition, and the campaigning of the radical left parties and their attempts to conscientize the working class had also failed, especially in developed capitalist nations. The following questions subsequently became important: “How could the relationship between theory and practice now be conceived? Could theory preserve hope for the future? In changing historical circumstances how could the revolutionary ideal be justified?”⁶⁸.

The work of George Lukács attempted to directly approach these problems facing domination theory, and why the appearance forms of capitalism persist despite Marx's seminal work. The importance of Lukács' work for critical theory is how it challenged orthodoxy by rethinking Marxism in relation to contemporary events, which created a basis for a re-examination of Marxist theory and practice. *History and Class Consciousness* thus seeks to extract the concepts, theories and principles out of Marxist thought, which can be subsequently reconstructed so as to achieve the same goal.

Lukács' work is a shift from orthodox Marxism, specifically the determinist and positivist interpretations of historical materialism. Both these approaches emphasize the unalterable stages of historical development (driven by a seemingly autonomous economic “base”). Lukács thought that these approaches constituted “contemplative materialism” which neglected the importance of human subjectivity or agency. In other words, the orthodox approaches failed to consider the objective conditions which constitute reality (such as economic and social institutions etc.) and how these affect the way in which these conditions are perceived and understood (the appearance forms). It is precisely these conditions, Lukács argued, that provide explanations for what is preventing the emergence of a revolutionary subject.

Lukács was one of the first theorists to approach the problem of how political, economic and social structures of capitalism become entrenched, once orthodoxy, or reification sets in. His remedy was to introduce Hegel's concept of reflection (put forward in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*) to Marx's concept of class consciousness. This combination, Lukács believed, could break the mental shackles of reification and bring about social change. Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* cannot be underestimated in its contribution to the

⁶⁸ Held, D (2004) “Introduction to Critical Theory” in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (eds) *Critical Theory* at p.16

Frankfurt School (the focus of next chapter's work). However, Lukacs' insistence on the class consciousness of the proletariat as the sole initiator of revolutionary action, led to the decline of the political relevance of his theory because of the historical failure of proletarian class consciousness⁶⁹.

Historical materialism, for Lukács, had no meaning outside the struggle of the proletariat. The proletariat is thus society's only hope for change: “As the pivot in the capitalist totality it has the capacity to see and comprehend the essential social relations and processes⁷⁰”. For Lukács, the proletariat's position is unique because it has the ability to both understand, and change, society radically. Lukács argues that as yet, this has not taken place but we can still talk of its objective possibility because it is contained within the dynamic of the historical process. Theory must thus look to fill the space between the actual and the possible, and must look to develop consciousness and active political involvement in this way⁷¹.

For Lukács, the most predominant barrier to the development of revolutionary consciousness is reification. Reification can be described as the appearance of people's productivity, or agency, as something strange and alien to them – it thus appears as a “thing”. It is stressed that this is not simply a subjective phenomenon; instead reification

arises from the productive process which reduces social relations themselves to thing-like relations – reduces, that is, the worker and his or her product to commodities. Reification is a socially necessary illusion, both accurately reflecting the reality of the capitalist exchange process and hindering its cognitive penetration⁷².

Lukács work in *History and Class Consciousness* sought to assess this problem by first of all explaining why the dissolution of the appearance forms of social reality had not taken place. Secondly, Lukács sought to explain how reification comes about. In other words, what is it about humankind's relationship with the world that gives rise to the phenomenon of reification? Thirdly, Lukács provides, what he believes to be, a solution to the problem of reification by applying the principles of dialectical materialism to the relationship between humans and the object world. Fourthly, Lukács identifies the group of individuals (the proletariat) that will arrive at this knowledge of humankind's dialectical relationship with the world, and sets out to describe how this realization comes about.

In this chapter, I will substantiate these points by following Lukács' progression of thought that I explained

⁶⁹ Bubner, R “Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno's Philosophy” in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) *Supra* at p.97

⁷⁰ Held, D (2004) *Supra* at p.17

⁷¹ Held, D (2004) *Supra* at p.17-18

⁷² Held, D (2004) *Supra* at p.18

briefly above. Most importantly however, I will focus upon reification, its conceptual relation to commodity fetishism, and its contribution to domination theory. I will conclude this chapter with some critiques of Lukács' work in *History and Class Consciousness*. But firstly, we must establish the link between commodity fetishism and Lukács' concept of reification.

Reification and the Commodity

The insights provided by Marx's theory of commodity fetishism form the basis for Lukács' entire critique of capitalist society⁷³. For Lukács however, this critique had not been drawn to its necessary conclusion because commodity fetishism itself was a strictly economic critique. It was thus Lukács' aim in *History and Class Consciousness* to extend this to a critique of capitalist society in general.

At the end of the previous chapter it was concluded that Marx did not provide a sufficient account of why people do not change their beliefs in the face of contrary evidence. Reification is important because it is an extension of Marx's critique of formal economic rationality which extends to all areas of formalism, in all areas of capitalist social life. By elaborating upon Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Lukács aimed to directly approach the problem of why appearance forms persist, and why the dominated continue to accept their social position.

History and Class Consciousness attempts to draw out the wider implications of the commodification of things to incorporate all aspects of life in bourgeois society. For Lukács, this generalized, social version of fetishism is the "objective", or appearance form of capitalism, which bears down upon the subject in capitalist society. On the other hand, Lukács' work tries to fully explain the effect of this objective situation upon the consciousness of those who live in such a world⁷⁴. This position differs from an orthodox Marxist one because the focus is shifted from the "mechanistic influence of social conditions on ideology and consciousness to the generalized patterning of all dimensions of society by a single form⁷⁵".

For Lukács, this single – or objective form – has its roots in the fetishized commodity structure which has created a society in its own image. There is thus an inextricable link between commodity fetishism and

⁷³ Lukács argues accordingly that "it has often been claimed – and not without certain justification – that the famous chapter in Hegel's *Logic* treating of Being, Non-Being and Becoming contains the whole of his philosophy. It might be claimed with perhaps equal justification that the chapter dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism and the whole self-knowledge of the proletariat seen as the knowledge of capitalist society (and the societies that preceded it)".

⁷⁴ Perkins, S (1993) *Supra* at p.137

⁷⁵ Feenberg, A (1981) *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* at p. 72

reification because the alienation and commodity fetishism that results from the labour process is projected onto society as a whole. In the case of commodity fetishism, an individual's activity (labour) becomes something objective and independent of the worker. As I have explained in the previous chapter, this process of production involves the alienation of the product from the labourer herself. The commodity subsequently appears on the market as an object that possesses value independently, or as Ollman puts it "[i]n the fetishism of commodities the appearance of the metamorphosis of value is mistaken for its essence⁷⁶".

In this chapter I intend to show how, for George Lukács, this fetishism occurs in the same way, on a broader social scale, with the autonomous appearance (fetishization) of certain "natural laws" which govern social behaviour, knowledge and consciousness. For Lukács, the result of this is the "natural", or "given", appearance of capitalism which is better explained by the concept of reification. Reification is thus an explanation of why bourgeois dominance and proletarian passivity have continued to exist. One of the principle reasons for this is the reified or "natural" appearance of capitalist society which is based on the production of commodities. For Lukács, the system of commodity production is immensely important here because the logic of capitalist commodity production is projected onto society as a whole. The result of this is a social reality that is an image of capitalist principles of production.

Lukács argues that the system of commodity production is responsible, not only for the fetishization of the commodity itself (as Marx argued), but for the fetishization, or apparent autonomy, of all the seemingly separate spheres of society. The conceptual essence of the fetishized commodity is pervasive in all areas of capitalist life and forms the foundation of "objective" society (the way in which subjects experience the world). Our life world is thus a projection of the logic of commodity fetishism. In Lukács' words, the commodity in capitalist society becomes

Crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for attempts to comprehend the process or the rebel against its disastrous effects, and liberate themselves from servitude to the 'second nature' so created⁷⁷.

But what are these principles of capitalist production, and how does Lukács substantiate his argument that these principles have come to determine social reality as we know it? Lukács was influenced by the work of Max Weber and agreed that the principles of the capitalist productive process consist of a continuous trend towards greater rationalization. Rationalization, as discussed by Weber, can be reduced to the broad principles of calculability and predictability, which provide us with a means to identify action that would

⁷⁶ Ollman, B (1971) *Supra* at p.199

⁷⁷ Lukács, G (1971) *History and Class Consciousness* at p.86

maximize efficiency (and in capitalist society, profit). For Lukács and Weber, this progression towards rationality entails the incremental erosion of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker. Lukács, following Marx, believed that from the forms of early capitalism to the peak of the free market, the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational and specialized operations *which necessarily entail the separation of the worker from the final product of labour*. The nature of labour in advanced capitalism is thus mechanistic, repetitive and specialized, but also very efficient.

According to Lukács, it is the capitalist structure of the work process (based upon the principles of calculability and predictability) that leads to the reification of the social, political and economic conditions of capitalism. For Lukács, the capitalist organization of labour is the origin of all forms of reification: “the destiny of the worker becomes the general destiny of the entire society⁷⁸”.

In modern capitalism, the worker finds herself confronted with a completed and independent world of objects which operates according to its own logic and rhythms. It is this world that is imposed upon the worker. For Lukács, the worker's world becomes increasingly ordered by fixed laws which appear to be independent of her will or consciousness⁷⁹. Lukács' analysis here falls neatly along Marxist lines. Marx himself was at pains to express the increasing mechanization of the labour process which was alienating in nature. It was precisely this alienation that produced seemingly autonomous commodities that prevented humankind from seeing the economy (and the value of commodities) as a network of relations between individuals, and more generally, as a historical human construction:

It is characteristic of reification that this appearance of autonomy and objective lawfulness obscures the fact that the machine itself is a product of human labour, that its essence is not to be found merely in the structure of its operation, but also in the human activity which first created it and gave it that structure. In short, obscured behind the synchronic rationality of the given productive system is the diachronic development of the human species itself, of its knowledge and powers, and of the class relations of the society which created it⁸⁰.

Formal Rationality

The reification of the processes and institutions of capitalism result in the individual passively orientating

⁷⁸ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.91 in Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.94

⁷⁹ Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.94

⁸⁰ Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.95

herself within a social reality that is outside of her control⁸¹. For Lukács, this passive behaviour leads people to accept the world as they experience it. Reification, or the “naturalization” of the social, political, and economic systems of capitalism, therefore nurtures the complicity of the dominated who reproduce the validity of the laws of capitalism. The processes and laws that are produced specifically by the capitalist mode of production come to operate as unquestionably as laws of nature do. But what are the nature of these laws, and how do they contribute to the reproduction of the appearance forms of capitalist society? In order to answer this, we must look closely at the very nature of rationality itself. Lukács' intention here is to show how the logic of capitalist production has become pervasive in modern society. For Lukács, the rationality that is applied to the organization of the production processes of capitalism is also applied to bureaucracy, governance, law, and other social institutions.

For Lukács, humankind has come to rationalize the world through the application of a “taken for granted” overarching framework: that of formal rationality. Rationality here refers to the establishment of rules which yield an understanding of the causal relationships between things in the world⁸². The rationality characteristic of capitalism however, is a rationality that deals with appearances only. Formal rationality therefore, confines itself to an understanding of the causal relationships that exist at surface level. Formal rationality does not, as Marx would put it, grasp the inner workings or constitutive processes that generate these appearance forms. Instead, formal rationality concerns itself with the way in which social reality functions, and develops its knowledge from what is observed and experienced. The reified appearance forms do not reveal the inner workings and processes behind the appearance forms. Reification, in fact, conceals these inner workings. Rationality then develops a knowledge of the formal characteristics of things, without understanding their underlying essence. Formal rationality is therefore, a knowledge of the surface relationships between things which come to operate as laws in capitalist society.

These laws become universal and necessary, and operate similarly to physical laws such as the law of gravity. The laws that govern property relations, or exchange in the market-place for instance, are therefore thought to operate in the same way as physical laws. The difference however, is that bureaucratic, social and economic laws are grounded in the network of relations between people, and it is therefore people who can change and manipulate these laws. As in the case of commodity fetishism, these social relations are hidden from the

⁸¹ “Man in capitalist society confronts a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws’, his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfilment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while acting, he remains the object, and not the subject of events”. Lukács (1971) *Supra* at p.135

⁸² This is most notable in science, where scientific method provides rules for gathering evidence and evaluating hypotheses on the basis of this evidence. When evidence supports a hypothesis, a rule is formed.

subject. The alienation of social and economic laws from their basis in social relations is the result of the relentless “tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning” that is pervasive in modern capitalism. Everything must be rational, determinable and calculable, which necessitates the creation of laws which explain how everything works. Individuals subsequently act in accordance with these laws, which come to operate independently of the social relations that have created them.

As stated before, Lukács borrowed heavily from Max Weber in formulating this critique of formal rationality. Lukács can be considered to be the first Marxist to fully utilize Weber's seemingly contradictory work⁸³. Lukács saw Weber's concept of “rationalization” as perfectly complementary to a Marxian economic critique; it encapsulated the reasoning and logic of capitalism and successfully applies these critiques to social institutions. In particular, Lukács merged Weber's concept of formal rationality and quantification with Marxian categories of abstract labour and exchange value (commodity fetishism) in order to broaden social critique, and explain how the appearance forms of capitalism have become hypostatized, or 'reified'. Lukács thus adopted these Weberian concepts as analytical tools in order to develop a deeper and more explanatory critique of capitalism and domination⁸⁴.

For Lukács, formal rationality has come to underpin and determine all areas of social reality, from the economic, to the political and social. He quotes Weber at length in explaining how capitalism has “created a form for the state and a system of law corresponding to its needs and harmonizing with its own structure⁸⁵”:

The modern capitalist concern is based inwardly above all on *calculation*. It requires for its survival a system of justice and an administration whose workings can be *rationally calculated*, at least in principle, according to fixed general laws, just as the probable performance of a *machine* can be calculated.... What is specific to modern capitalism as distinct from the age old capitalist forms of acquisition is that the strictly rational *organization of work* on the basis of *rational technology* did not come into being *anywhere* within such irrationality constituted political systems nor could it had done so. For these modern businesses with their fixed capital and their exact calculations are much too

⁸³ It was Weber who took historical materialism on in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which argued that Protestantism – more specifically its Calvinist branches – promoted the rise of modern capitalism. Protestantism was able to do this not through the encouragement of unfettered free trade, or even through the pursuit of wealth; “but by defining and sanctioning an ethic of everyday behaviour that conduced to business success”. In other words Protestantism produced a kind of businessman, a different kind of person, one who aimed to live and work in a certain way. It was the way that mattered, and riches were at best a by-product of this. Historical materialists saw this simply as a process in the wrong order because values and attitudes did not shape the mode of production. Instead, the mode of production shaped ideology which in turn influenced values and attitudes. Landes, D (1999) *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* at p.175-6.

⁸⁴ Lowy, M (1996) “Figures of Weberian Marxism” in *Theory and Society* Vol.25 No.3 p.432

⁸⁵ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.94

sensitive to legal and administrative irrationalities. They could only come into being in the bureaucratic state with its rational laws where... the judge is more or less an automatic statute dispensing machine in which you insert the files together with the necessary costs and dues at the top, whereupon he will eject the judgment together with the more or less cogent reasons for it at the bottom: that is to say, where the judge's behaviour is on the whole *predictable*⁸⁶

Lukács thus sees reification as seizing, characterizing and controlling all forms of social life: from the state to administration, justice and law. Lukács' use of Weber is important to note in order for us to understand his project of showing how modern life is driven and shaped by the capitalist logic of rationalism and rational calculation. It is also crucial to understand the conceptual dominance of rationality in capitalist society: "What is novel about modern rationalism is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the *principle* which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind⁸⁷". The pervasiveness of formal rationality is thus based upon the perception that it is the paragon philosophical and scientific explanation.

Weber's analogy for this type of formal rationality was "an iron cage" because it is, at its core, a restrictive type of rationality. Lukács reduces this restrictive type of rationality to the principles of calculability and predictability. Further still, calculability and predictability can be reduced to their roots in mathematical reason. For Lukács, social inquiry has become molded and modeled around the principles of mathematics, which are insufficient for social understanding because they act as epistemological limits (which will be expanded upon later). With regard to the mathematical approach that underpins modern rationality, Lukács argues that:

It is anything but mere chance that at the very beginning of the development of modern philosophy the ideal of knowledge took the form of universal mathematics: it was an attempt to establish a rational system of relations which comprehends the totality of the formal possibilities, proportions and relations of a rationalized existence with the aid of which every phenomenon – independently of its real and material distinctiveness – could be subjected to an exact calculus⁸⁸

For Lukács, this epitomizes the modern ideal of knowledge based upon rationality at its most uncompromising, and therefore, at its most characteristic. Lukács argues that this type of rationality necessarily leads to a contradiction: the contradiction of systems as created by us on the one hand, and their fatalistic necessity (reified "second nature") apart from us on the other. This is problematic for Lukács

⁸⁶ Weber, M *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society)* at p.491 in Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.96

⁸⁷ Lukács (1971) *Supra* at p.129

⁸⁸ Lukács (1971) *Supra* at p.129

because the aim (to discover the nature of the systems created by us) is made impossible by the means (starting all inquiry from the appearance forms of reified social reality). In other words, we cannot dissolve the appearance forms of reality and discover the essence behind these forms because these appearances form the basis of inquiry.

Lukàcs problematizes the approach to inquiry in terms of a universal reliance upon the principles of mathematics in all forms of inquiry. For Lukàcs, the principles of formal rationality (mathematical precision, calculability and predictability) have come to preclude other types of theoretical analysis. What remains is a reality wholly understood and structured within the formal rational framework. The result of this is that formal rational epistemology becomes ontology. In other words, our ontological understanding of the world is constituted by, and based upon, the epistemological approach of formal rationality. Lukàcs believes that, with regards to the first approach (systems created by us), the basis of our “control” of reality “can be nothing other than the certainty that only a reality cocooned by such concepts can truly be controlled by us⁸⁹”. In other words, our ability to create, control and understand the systems around us is based upon the ontological presupposition of universal mathematical reason. With regards to the second approach (the fatalistic necessity of these systems), Lukàcs argues that “even if we suppose this universal mathematics to be entirely and consistently realized, “control” of reality can be nothing more than the objectively correct contemplation of what is yielded... by the abstract combinations of these relations and proportions⁹⁰”.

Lukàcs' point is that firstly, we cannot fully understand the nature of social reality, and secondly, that current forms of understanding amount to nothing more than an identification of abstract laws that, over time, come to operate independently. This does not mean however, that all inquiry confines itself to dealing with the formal appearance forms of phenomena. Just as the classical economists sought to define the value of commodities in terms of some underlying common property, philosophers, scientists and theorists also seek to understand the underlying, constitutive processes of reality. Proceeding from this, Lukàcs divides all forms of inquiry into two broad categories:

1. Inquiry that acknowledges that social reality is a product of human agency: that institutions, objects and social phenomena are created by us. The task here is to understand the true nature of these constructions beyond their appearance forms. In other words, the task here is to transcend the “givenness” of objects and grasp the “essence” beneath the layers of social construction.

⁸⁹ Lukàcs (1971) Supra at p.129

⁹⁰ Lukàcs (1971) Supra at p.129

2. Inquiry that does not question the social origin or nature of these objects, facts or laws, and proceeds from their “given” existence. These objects, facts and laws constitute the empirical and conceptual presuppositions of inquiry. For example, an economist plotting capital flows between industries.

With regard to the first approach, Lukàcs argues that humans have come to understand the world in terms of the epistemology of formal rationality. All inquiry proceeds from the presupposition that only a world explained within the framework of formal rational logic can uncover the concrete essence and inner workings of economic and social phenomena. This is what Lukàcs calls “contemplative” inquiry which does not grasp the content of objects, and instead gives an account of objects and their systemic functions. It thus contemplates objects without grasping their essence outside of the framework of formal rationality, and reified forms.

In terms of the second approach, Lukàcs argues that, if we begin inquiry from the point of the “given” (that systems are hypostatized, ahistorical and natural), all knowledge will be confined to the calculation of the autonomous workings of these reified systems. Inquiry will never penetrate beyond dealing with the results and by-products of the system's functions, and instead knowledge will be based upon how to deal with these systems. In other words, if we start all inquiry from the “givenness” of reified forms, and try to understand reality within the epistemological framework of formal rationality, we are bound to conclusions that verify both the foundations of that system (because we work and plan *in and around* its parameters), and its internal logic (because we project this epistemological approach onto all phenomena).

If we look at the above two levels of inquiry, it becomes clear that they are not *separate types* of inquiry, because they both progress from the same formal rational presuppositions. The only difference is their level of inquiry. The second type of knowledge is based entirely upon the immediate forms of the reified systems, and thus takes for granted how these systems came about. The first form of inquiry is, at first glance, a deeper level of inquiry that attempts to explain the nature of these systems. Lukàcs finds this level of inquiry in the works of the classical German school of philosophy, in particular in the work of Kant⁹¹. I will show later however, that in trying to discover the true nature of the world around us, classical German philosophers such as Kant employed formal rational logic which restricted their thought to that of contemplation. The importance of briefly demonstrating this is to establish the self-ratifying nature of formal rational thought, at both levels of inquiry. Both necessarily become limited by their inability to penetrate beyond the immediacy, or objectified appearance, of things. Thus the nature of formal rational thought is essentially tautological

⁹¹ This would exclude classical German philosophers such as Hegel, who is considered to be a master dialectical thinker.

because it consistently refers back to its own presuppositions and cannot progress beyond these.

For Lukács, formal rationality is contemplative (i.e. not reflexive) because it is not dialectical. In other words, humankind presupposes formal rationality as “the *a priori* of scientific explanation, to which is correlated the *a priori* ontological structure of the world⁹²”. This mode of thought does not consider the dialectical relationship between us as subjects and our influence upon things as objects. Reification is thus a limit to our understanding of the world because the individual, confronted with reified reality, discovers the nature of the object in its *structure* and not in the process of its *production*. The problem of bourgeois theory and thought is thus methodological: it cannot fully grasp reality because it is confined by its reified foundations. According to Lukács, the bourgeois social sciences demonstrate this methodological limitation by seeking to understand their objects through their rational structure, *in abstraction from the process of their becoming*. In other words, social scientists confront the products of collective human activity (reified laws) as though they are an objective reality independent of man⁹³.

What arises from this preconditioned approach to inquiry is that different categories of inquiry yield results that are correlative. However, they are only correlative because their results refer back to the same pre-theoretical laws which form the basis for the original inquiry. Formal rationality and the discovery of reality is thus a “closed system” that is methodologically incapable of discovering the true relationship between subject and object. All reified inquiry thus cannot overcome a dualist position regarding the subject, and the world of objects outside of the subject.

From the above it is clear that Lukács work transforms Weber’s methodological bracketing of formal rationality into a radical cultural critique of reification⁹⁴. For Lukács, any epistemological claim made in the name of formal rationality is characteristic of capitalist thought patterns and must be subjected to reflexive critique. It is through the reflexive discovery of formal rationality in various works (for instance in the works of the social sciences) that we can understand the nature of the cultural pattern that influences and shapes our understanding of the world. In other words, Lukács sees the need to identify this bracketed form of rationality in order to explain the system that it governs. Social science (amongst many other things) must thus be scrutinized in terms of its systemic function. Lukács holds however, that certain domains (such as mathematics and some natural science) may only make use of formal rationality because these areas of inquiry lack a dialectic of subject and object. The model of mathematics cannot be used to describe or explain the social because it can never provide a sufficient explanation thereof: “Society however is constituted in the

⁹² Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.72

⁹³ Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.104

⁹⁴ Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.76

dialectic of subject and object and so can never fully be grasped by a formal rational logic⁹⁵”.

Reification, Law and Bureaucracy

In the first chapter I discussed how the appearance forms of capitalism persist despite a knowledge of their falseness. Marx argued that his discovery of the inner workings of capitalism would not dissolve these false appearance forms as long as the systems and processes of capitalism remain in tact. This is because the way that reality presents itself to the individual would not have changed. The individual's continued experience would be that of a capitalist social reality which is more pressing, and more believable, than Marx's complex theoretical account. The individual in capitalist society experiences capitalism in all areas of life because the rationality of the capitalist production process has come to define and determine the way in which we think. For Lukács, this means that government and administrative structures have come to operate in the same way, and according to the same principles, as mass commodity producing businesses. From this, a superstructure has emerged which is a reflection of the productive system of capitalism itself.

Lukács invokes the work of Weber when describing the similarity between system and state and makes specific reference to the social implications of this phenomenon: “The modern capitalist concern is based inwardly above all on *calculation*. It requires for its survival a system of justice and an administration whose workings can be *rationally calculated*⁹⁶”. Law demonstrates this through constant attempts at attaining legal certainty, which is essentially a formalized system of laws that are capable of being generalized so as to relate to every possible situation in life. In other words, it is an exercise in creating predictability and calculability. For Lukács, this is a clear manifestation of reification because the legal system confronts the individual events of social existence as a permanently established, rigid system. The main consequence of this is that it hypostatizes the foundations of capitalist relations so that any transgression is penalized. Property relations, labour relations and social norms are codified in the reflection of capitalist values. For Lukács, law is thus a change-resistant, reactionary institution that suppresses the revolutionary forces of society by simply accommodating for them and providing the grounds for their punishment⁹⁷: “Thus capitalism has created a form for the state and a system of law corresponding to its needs and harmonizing with its own structure⁹⁸”.

The same logic that pervades the economic and legal spheres applies to bureaucracy. Bureaucratic institutions in capitalism are based upon formalization and standardization (formal rationality) which has its roots in the production process. All human issues are subjected to a generalized, objectified structure which results in “an

⁹⁵ Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.76

⁹⁶ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.96

⁹⁷ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.96-7

⁹⁸ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.95

ever-increasing remoteness from the qualitative and material essence of the ‘things’ to which bureaucratic activity pertains⁹⁹”. Bureaucracy thus becomes an overarching monolith that is based upon the logic of calculability and rationalization. This is undoubtedly a reformulation of Weber’s “iron cage of rationality” which arises out of the materials of specialization. The importance of this for Lukács is that the individual experiences capitalism in every area of life. Her thought becomes an expression of capitalist rationality which underpins the operation of social administrative structures and institutions. Lukács, in this sense, is intensifying the conditions of domination experienced by the individual in capitalist society in an attempt to explain why such conditions persist.

Lukács argues that the capitalist logic of specialization, compartmentalization and rationalization “extends right into the worker’s ‘soul’¹⁰⁰”. The subservience of humankind to reified laws, that extend from the logic of the production process, becomes the basis of all subsequent social patterning. In this sense, we can classify Lukács’ concept of reification as a form of “cultural critique” because it encompasses all areas of capitalist life – from the economic, to the social, to the bureaucratic. Lukács is therefore attempting to show how every aspect of our experience is a determination of capitalist rationality: *capitalism has become culture*.

Society is subjected to a generalized patterning of all dimensions of society by a single form which has significant philosophical and practical repercussions. For Lukács, humankind acts according to certain socialized “laws” and “facts” that amount to a generalized form of social behavior that is passive and contemplative in nature. It is precisely this generalized “culture”, or collective social behavior, that constitutes the subject’s ontology¹⁰¹. The implication of this is that the individual does not see beyond her lived experience under capitalism (her ontology) – the capitalist social and productive system thus becomes “naturalized”, or “hypostatized”. It is precisely this “naturalization” that maintains the status quo and the domination of the underprivileged many by the privileged few. For Lukács, the subject, or worker, under capitalism is wrought with contradictions: reification has nurtured a passive, compliant subject that obeys and acknowledges social laws, but at the same time the subject feels the immiserating effects of this compliance:

[M]an in capitalist society confronts a reality made by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws’, his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while ‘acting’ he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events. The field of his activity thus becomes wholly internalized: it consists on the

⁹⁹ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.98

¹⁰⁰ Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.88

¹⁰¹ Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.72

one had of the awareness of the laws which he uses, and on the other, of his awareness of his inner reactions to the course taken by events¹⁰².

The agency ascribed to the subject under these circumstances is constrained and limited. So much so, that the appearance forms of capitalism come to be perceived as the only natural human condition. The freedom, or scope of action of the subject for Lukács “is neither able to overcome the sensuous necessity of the system of knowledge and the soullessness of the fatalistically conceived laws of nature, nor is it able to give them any meaning¹⁰³”.

Reification and Society

By extending the logic and rationality of the capitalist system of production to the social, Lukács makes an important link between capitalism and human thought. Reification explains how the principles of capitalism have come to underpin all aspects of social, political and economic understanding. Social thought has thus become a part of the objective structure of social power. For Lukács, reification is the mechanism that has allowed capitalism to continue to exist despite all its inequalities; it is Lukács' contribution to social theory because it posits a potential answer for why the proletariat have come to accept their position in society. In the most crude sense, Lukács is identifying reification – an extension of economic fetishism – as the mechanism that is able to “shape the way in which the world is perceived¹⁰⁴”, and as a result, convince the dominated working class that this is the best situation they could possibly hope for.

Up to this point, Lukács' indictment of capitalism has take a similar path to that of Marx's writings on alienation and commodity fetishism. The concept of commodity fetishism (the process of attributing powers to something which does not possess them) describes how alienated labour produces products which do not refer back to the labour that produced them. The goods subsequently appear on the market as values that are determined through their relationships with other commodities; meanwhile it is the amount of labour that has been required for their production that determines their values. It is this apparent self-regulation of autonomous commodities which constitutes fetishism because we are attributing a sense of agency to inanimate objects by thinking that they mediate with each other in order to determine their respective values. Lukács' theory of reification, on the other hand, is a broader concept which describes how humans construct and perceive the products of human action as independent “things”. Reification is a broader concept than fetishism because reification does not deal specifically with the products of human labour, i.e. commodities. Reification refers to the human construction of superstructural institutions, social laws and economic laws, to

¹⁰² Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.135

¹⁰³ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.134

¹⁰⁴ Perkins, S (1993) Supra at p.135

name a few. Most importantly however, reification refers to the *way in which people think* which results in the objectification and alienation of the products of their own agency.

Extending this beyond the objectification, or fetishization of commodities, Lukács argues that capitalist productive and social circumstances have become hypostatized, meaning that the political economy of capitalism appears as the “natural given order of things”. By deriving sets of laws and facts from within the capitalist framework, (such as the laws of profit and loss, supply and demand etc) the exploitative system of production receives validation. In the same way that the commodity becomes autonomous and independent, the larger productive system and its functioning regularities become autonomous and independent. In other words, the way in which we construct and construe a commodity as a “thing” is extended to the way in which we view the capitalism as a “thing”, independent of human agency.

The worker has, as was indicated above, become socialized within the socio-economic framework of capitalism and has simply orientated herself within its confines. This is however, a superficial explanation when attempting to solve the questions of proletarian passivity and oppression. In order to identify the reason for the reproduction of conditions of domination, we must look at the problem differently. Earlier I argued that Marx gives an insufficient account of why the appearance forms of capitalism remain, despite evidence that suggests otherwise. This results in the continued domination of the exploited majority (workers). Lukács picks up from where Marx left off by giving a more complex and in depth account of why the appearance forms that result in domination remain intact. For Lukács, domination remains intact because of the relationship between humans (subject) and external reality (object). In other words, it is the way in which we relate to the world that produces conditions of domination.

The Subject-Object Relationship

One of Lukács’ main contributions to radical capitalist critique is his linking of mental processes and reason with the proliferation of capitalism. For Lukács, domination and the reproduction of the appearance forms of capitalism can be explained in terms of the relationship between subject and object, which is directly related to the nature of thought in capitalist society. Lukács argues that thought is determined by the capitalist system of production, which results in certain limitations and contradictions in both thought and action.

For Lukács philosophy is a reflection on the cultural structures of a given time. It was Lukács’ project to show exactly how reified thought had dominated the work of classical German philosophers such as Kant. For Lukács, the problems of philosophy can be extrapolated to social thought in general. In other words, what is

wrong with philosophy, is wrong with thought itself. Also, what is wrong with philosophy can be used as an explanation for the continuation of conditions of domination in capitalist society. Lukács' main problem lay in the classical tradition's inability to separate and identify cultural structures as historically constructed; instead these structures were misinterpreted as eternal principles disconnected from the accidents of history and social life. The deconstruction of philosophy was particularly important for Lukács because he believed that philosophy was the primary indicator of cultural themes and presuppositions¹⁰⁵.

Lukács' focus upon the history of philosophy is important for this work because it provides valuable insights into the pervasiveness of formal rationality in society. Lukács' project was an immense undertaking because of the nature of the problems that he attempted to tackle. For Lukács, much more was at stake in the liberation from reification than a change in property relations; at stake was the fate of reason itself. Enlightenment was infinitely more problematic for Lukács because he saw, and had to prove, that thought itself was a determination of a specific type of capitalist idiosyncratic logic. In order to substantiate this claim he looked at classical German philosophy.

Classical German philosophy for Lukács "is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the end – on the plane of philosophy... And – in thought – it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the methodological necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind's development can at least be seen as a problem¹⁰⁶". However, Lukács argues that although bourgeois thought reaches its peak in classical German philosophy, its contradictions manifest themselves there with more clarity and rigor than elsewhere¹⁰⁷.

Lukács argues that capitalism's conceptual heritage develops a specific type of thought that produces contradictions or paradoxes. In other words, the epistemology characteristic of capitalism (formal rationality), or way of knowing the world around us, creates its own self-contradictions. These contradictions, or antinomies, are limits to knowledge because they effectively block the attainment of knowledge beyond these contradictions. An antinomy literally means "conflict of laws", and is usually described as a contradiction or as a paradox. Quine has defined an antinomy as a paradox which produces a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning. It establishes that some tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning must be made explicit and henceforward be avoided or revised. Such revision, Quine says, involves nothing less than a repudiation of part of our "taken for granted" conceptual heritage¹⁰⁸. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács uses the

¹⁰⁵ Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.88

¹⁰⁶ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.121 in Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.91

¹⁰⁷ Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.90

¹⁰⁸ Quine, W.V. (1996) *The Ways of the Paradox* ch.1 in Blackburn, S (1994) *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* at p.40

term “antinomy” in this sense.

The antinomies that Lukács makes explicit are “the split between subject and object, freedom and necessity, value and fact, form and content”. Lukács maintained that the principle function of reason was to overcome these contradictions. However, the reason that has been developed and molded by capitalism is incapable of solving these antinomies, which inevitably produce and reproduce the appearance forms of capitalist society (as well as the domination of the exploited many).

Lukács saw the aim of German philosophy, from Hegel to Kant, as an attempt to overcome these antinomies by unifying the concepts of subject and object, freedom and necessity, value and fact, form and content. For Lukács, these goals were valid but their solution remained impossible because of the nature of thought and reason that the classical school employed. As has been argued before, the problem for the classical school lay in the rationality employed in trying to overcome these antinomies. Lukács argues that the problem is methodological because, for each of the discrete areas of inquiry and critique, knowledge attained can only point to where the real synthesis *should* begin, and where it *would* begin if its formal rationality *could* allow it to do more than predict formal possibilities in terms of formal calculations¹⁰⁹. Philosophy that relies upon formal rationality thus cannot succeed in resolving such antinomies. On the contrary, Lukács argues that it fixes them for eternity, therefore fixing conditions of domination at the same time¹¹⁰.

Reification and Philosophy

Lukács saw his work in *History and Class Consciousness* as a solution to the problems that have plagued certain philosophers from the German classical school. He briefly summarizes the problems facing the classical philosophy of his time as follows :“... modern philosophy sets itself the following problem: it refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product¹¹¹”. In other words, the basic proposition that needs to be qualified is that rational knowledge is the product of the mind. Lukács clarifies the above statements by stating that “[f]rom systematic doubt and the *Cogito ergo sum* of Descartes, to Hobbes, Spinoza and Leibniz there is a direct line of development whose central strand, rich in variations, is

¹⁰⁹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.134

¹¹⁰ The correct methodological approach that Lukács had in mind (that could overcome these philosophical antinomies) involved an extension of Hegelian dialectics coupled with the critique of reification based upon Marx’ commodity fetishism. It was Marxism that could provide the solution to the antinomies of classical bourgeois thought through its prescription of revolutionary change. Marxism, for Lukács, breaches the divide between philosophical speculation and practice which symbolizes the unification of object and subject. Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.90-91

¹¹¹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.111

the idea that *the object of cognition can be known by us for the reason that, and to the degree in which, it has been created by ourselves*¹¹²". As I have argued earlier in my exposition of formal rationalism, the knowledge and answers that the classical school sought were elusive because of the nature of rationality characteristic of the philosophy (and all other thought). Lukács' immediate task is to explain why the antinomies of philosophical thought could not be resolved, by sketching the connection between these fundamental problems of classical philosophy and the material circumstances (the objective reified world) from which they arise. For Lukács, there is therefore, a direct link between the philosophical approach that humans have towards the world, and the inability to solve philosophical, as well as practical problems. Most importantly however, this philosophical approach to the world reflects a common mode of thought that capitalism has developed which limits the way in which humans perceive the world around them. This common position, characterized by limiting, formal rational thought, actively reifies the structures of capitalism, making change in thought, and change in material reality all but impossible.

For Lukács, the work of Kant is enormously important because of its advance over earlier rationalism, which simply took the rationality of the universe as a given without considering the influence of the subject. Lukács argued that Kant had come to the verge of discovering dialectics, but eventually failed because of his use of the concept of the "thing-in-itself", which is essentially an unknowable object that exists outside of human consciousness. Lukács quotes Fichte in posing the crux of this problem: "What is at issue, [Fichte] says, is the absolute projection of an object *of the origin of which no account can be given* with the result that *the space between projection and thing projected is dark and void*¹¹³".

Lukács argues that the concept of the thing-in-itself results in a contradiction in thought. This is because on the one hand, the extra-mental object "is a datum in itself, antecedent to all experience¹¹⁴" and thus cannot be known. On the other hand, despite this, universal rationalism has attempted to systematize the world which requires a knowledge of these objects.

With specific regard to Kant's work, Lukács argues that the notion of the thing-in-itself is a recognition of the insurmountable opposition of form and content for a formalistic concept of reason. Despite admitting that the division between subject and object was insurmountable, Kant still attempted to overcome the contradiction of

¹¹² Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.112 (my emphasis) Following this point, Lukács states the mathematical approach to these philosophical questions begins here. The methods of mathematics and geometry subsequently provide the means whereby objects are constructed and created out of the formal presuppositions of objectivity in general, In other words they are derived from the immediate forms. For Lukács, this approach comes to constitute our knowledge of the world as a totality. Ibid at p.112

¹¹³ Fichte (1804)*Die Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804, Lecture XV in *Werke* IV at p.288 in Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.166

¹¹⁴ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.115

subject and object using a formal rational methodology¹¹⁵. So, whilst recognizing the unknown character of noumena, Kant and the German classical school strove to go beyond this by erecting a rational system of noumenal “things-in-themselves”. In other words, they tried to construct a rational system out of a world that they all agreed was fundamentally irrational and unknowable: “The greatness, the paradox and the tragedy of classical German philosophy lie in that fact that... while grasping and holding on to the irrational character of the actual contents of the concepts it strives to go beyond this, to overcome it and to erect a system¹¹⁶”.

In light of these contradictions between subject and object, appearance and essence, Lukács develops his theory of the “whole” or “totality” which aims to explain how these contradictions can be transcended. The category of “totality” did not feature in any of Kant's writings because of his explicit denial that the “totality” could ever be truly grasped or understood. For Lukács however, this dismissal of the “totality” of knowledge is wrong because a similar concept of the “totality” is central to Kant's transcendental dialectic. Where Kant turns to God, or the soul, Lukács turns to the unified subject, arguing that the former are nothing but mythological expressions of the latter. In other words, Kant's concept of God, or the soul, postulates the same core qualitative subject that is capable of transcending the subject-object divide. For Lukács however, being a follower of Marx, the unified subject that takes the form of the proletariat can only bring about a concrete change in society, and a dissolution of the appearance forms of capitalism. I will now turn to explain the category of “the totality”, or “whole” and its importance for class consciousness.

The whole, or totality, is a crucial part of Lukács' chapter on “Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat”. The “whole” is essentially a meta-theory that informs the process of history that is based upon the tenets of historical materialism as Marx laid them out. Very briefly, “historical materialism — Marx's theory of history — is centered around the idea that forms of society rise and fall as they further and then impede the development of human productive power. Marx sees the historical process as proceeding through a necessary series of modes of production, culminating in communism¹¹⁷”. Based on these economic principles, Lukács develops a theory of history that tries to give a more intricate account of the development of proletarian consciousness (utilizing many of Hegel's concepts on the way). Lukács' intention is to explain why historical materialism has not yet caused the downfall of capitalism. The whole, for Lukács, is a practical state of consciousness, or knowledge: all history is a dialectical process leading to the realization of this state. The process is methodologically similar to Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In these works, Hegel saw history as a process that culminated in the realization of “absolute knowledge” and freedom

¹¹⁵ Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.110

¹¹⁶ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.117

¹¹⁷ Wolff, J (2003) *Karl Marx* at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/>

through the dialectical negation of a series of inferior states. Marx and Lukács however, do not adopt an idealist stance as Hegel did¹¹⁸, and instead believe that while us humans have the ability to transform the world around ourselves (through ideas and consciousness), we must still carry out this transformation through actual material activity. In other words, our consciousness must be a form of praxis that changes the material world.

The whole, for Lukács, is a knowledge of the course of history which translates into a knowledge of reality, *beyond its reified appearance forms*. Lukács employs the term “ultimate knowledge” (that is brought about by an understanding of the whole) in a Hegelian sense. Hegel wrote that when the dialectic of mind had reached fruition, “absolute knowledge” would prevail. It is important to note that Hegel's “absolute knowledge” and Lukács' “knowledge of the whole”, or “totality”, does not mean knowledge of everything. These terms are employed as a way of understanding the world as it really is, in contrast to knowledge of mere appearances. In other words, a knowledge of the whole is a knowledge of the true means to understanding, not an understanding of everything. To gain absolute knowledge we do not have to know all the facts that one could ever possibly know. Both theorists aim instead to show *how real knowledge is possible*¹¹⁹. For Lukács however, reification is an epistemological limit which does not allow for a proper conception of the whole as explained above. This epistemological limit to knowledge stems from a problematic philosophical relationship with the world, which is characterized by the division between subject and object (demonstrated by the “thing-in-itself”). In other words, the division of reality into reality as experienced by the subject, and an extra-mental reality of unknowable objects, limits our ability to see that objects are influenced by human agency. Extra-mental objects are knowable if they are understood in a new way, which will be the focus of the subsequent section on dialectics.

But how does the division between subject and object manifest itself in society? For Lukács, bourgeois society, based on formal rationality, has fragmented knowledge into “parts”, “categories” or “systems” which have the apparent form of independence and autonomy. This segmented, or categorized, appearance form is dialectically transcended only if they become synthesized, or situated within the context of historical development towards a totality or whole¹²⁰. This means that knowledge is not seen within the context of history and the dialectical transition towards a Marxist state of affairs. To see something in its proper context is thus to strip it of its appearances, laying bare its social foundations. This genuine knowledge also allows us to see how each event furthers the teleology of historical materialism. In other words, each epoch, or even each event, is a development within the dialectical process of history that will culminate in systemic change; a

¹¹⁸ As I will explain in further detail later on, Hegel believed that all reality is constituted by mind. The mind thus imposes categories and reality and constructs reality, which is ultimately purely mental.

¹¹⁹ Thomas, K (ed) et al (1997) *Supra* at p.188

¹²⁰ Feenberg, A (1981) *Supra* at p.81-2 This refers directly to the whole as the movement of history based upon historical materialism.

qualitative shift away from capitalism. It is Lukács' intention to show how this shift comes about, and why it is still bound to happen.

For clarification's sake however, we must return to the category of “totality” in order to understand how these events should transpire. For Lukács, the structure of commodity production gives determination and shape to each particular “part”, or enterprise, because its logic is pervasive to all forms of production, inquiry and knowledge. There is thus a whole at work here in that each part is an instantiation of the logic of commodity production. For Lukács, “the whole” in this sense is a system that determines and gives shape to its parts but also relies on these parts for its continued existence. The role of the parts in this regard is to fragment the whole because it obscures the realization that the commodity mode of production as a system has come to determine all aspects of life in capitalist society. The nature of the system is thus not interrogated, but managed, and is not seen as a specific type of production but as a natural type of production. It is capitalism’s obsession with efficiency, and more importantly, specialization, that shatters the historical context of the capitalist mode of production in the first place. Based upon this “natural” conception of the capitalist mode of production, action, inquiry and knowledge are aimed towards creating separated fragments (systems) that appear autonomous and independent of one another. Each part is thus unable to see the image of the totality because it is immersed in developing skills and knowledge that necessarily diverge from, and destroy, the whole. This is what Lukács calls the development of “a formally closed system of partial laws”¹²¹. The appearance forms of capitalism, determined and fragmented by formal rationality, therefore hide the whole and limit our understanding of the real relations that constitute social reality. Most importantly however, Lukács believes that formal rationality limits our understanding of the relationship between human agency and history, and the historical movement towards “the whole” (a rational, self governing community of associated producers).

How are we to go about discovering the relationship of humankind with the world? In other words, what must be done in order to transcend the appearance forms of reified capitalism, and what must be done so that humankind can discover the totality? Lukács maintains that philosophy, in the past, has always adopted a contemplative stance towards the world which aimed at deducing things and concepts from their forms. In order to transcend the core duality of subject and object, Lukács proposes a shift from philosophy as “pure theory” to the conception of philosophy as a form of practice. This involves the discovery of a practical subject which is integrated with, and capable of, producing its object: “.. the task is to deduce the unity – which is not given – of this disintegrating creation and to prove that it is the product of a creating subject. In

¹²¹ Perkins, S (1993) Supra at p.157

the final analysis then: to create the subject of the “creator”¹²². I will now turn to one of the key elements in Lukács' work: the “principle of practice”, which is essentially a manipulation of earlier philosophies of “deed” or “action”. It is how Lukács pieces this together with dialectics, or a knowledge of the “whole” (discovered in history), and his explanation of exactly *how* this takes place, that distinguishes his work from other pieces of classical German philosophy, as well as Marxist philosophy.

The Principle of Practice

Kant's work in his *Critique of Practical Reason* was an attempt to show that the barriers of thought (the epistemological limits of the “thing-in-itself”) could not be overcome by theory (contemplation), but were “amenable to practical solutions¹²³.” For Lukács, Kant's turn to “practical solutions” was a movement in the right direction, and again it becomes apparent that Kant seems to be on the verge of solving the antinomies of bourgeois thought. Kant's insights were thoroughly successful in identifying the limits of thought, and at this point the solution seems to be at hand with the implementation of a theory of practice or action. Lukács however, argues that Kant's work does not bridge the gap between the acting subject, and the external object, because of the nature of the subject that Kant posits, as well as the nature of the subject's relationship with the extra-mental world.

Following his critique of Kant's principle of practice, Lukács made it his task to discover the true “practical subject”; one that is capable of transforming and influencing the world around her. This task however, can only proceed after a proper explanation of “the principle of practice”.

Lukács bases his concept of the principle of practice on the work of Fichte, who adopted the concept of the practical, the deed, and attempted to use it as the center of a unifying philosophy. For Fichte, deed is a type of activity which presupposes no object. Instead, *deed creates the object itself in its actions*. This insight, put into the context of Lukács' philosophical project (of bridging the gap between the subject and object), provides the starting point for the transcendence of the forms of reification. For Lukács, the importance of Fichte's insight is that if “[philosophy] begins from action it will stand at the point where the two worlds meet and from which they can both be seen at a glance¹²⁴”. At this point we can see Lukács' intention: if we can discover a type of action that presupposes a unity of subject and object, then perhaps we can transcend the rigid forms of reification because our actions will have an impact on the objects around us. In other words, the objectification and the autonomy of the objects around us will dissolve because both categories become

¹²² Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.140

¹²³ Lukács (1971) *Supra* at p.123

¹²⁴ Lukács (1971) *Supra* at p.123

mutually constitutive – subjects create and define objects whilst objects in turn influence the subject. This is the dialectical approach which argues that a synthesis results from the interaction of two polar opposites. In this case, a synthesis between subject and object is proposed by the notion of the acting subject who creates the world around her. At the same time, the subject is also influenced by the material world of objects, but is capable of influencing and manipulating them because she is part of the dialectical relationship¹²⁵.

For Lukàcs, action, or praxis, only truly reaches fruition if the essence of praxis consists in annulling the indifference of form towards content that characterized the thing-in-itself. In order for this to happen, thought and things need to unite under the meta-theory of dialectical reasoning. The core of this unity between thought and things is a conception of form “whose basis and validity no longer rest on that pure rationality and that freedom from every definition of content¹²⁶”. What Lukàcs is implying here is that reified, formal rational thought bases itself upon appearance forms only. The formal conception of appearance forms is thus divorced from their true nature (the material substratum). A unity of thought, or conception, and the objects of that conception, requires an understanding of objects as they exist as products of human action; it is a merging of these two levels (concepts and things) into one that makes their mutual influence apparent. For Lukàcs, Fichte's extension of Kant's “deed” needed to be reconceptualized in such a way that it tailors itself “to the concrete material substratum of action if it is to impinge upon it to any effect¹²⁷”. In other words, thought needs to become a specific type of action that influences the objects around it, and in order for this to happen, the subject must perceive the world around her in a specific manner: namely, in a dialectical manner.

For Lukàcs, reification blocks thought and knowledge that could lead to a realization of humankind's dialectical relationship with the external world. Humans understand the world according to the principles of formal rationality which subsequently reproduces the appearance forms of capitalism. The persistence of the appearance forms for Marx, as well as Lukàcs, means the persistence of conditions of exploitation and domination. For Lukàcs, the appearance forms take on independent metaphysical qualities (for instance the seemingly autonomous value of fetishized commodities) which hide the qualitative characteristics and relationships that exist between people, as well as between people and the objects around them. By construing

¹²⁵ To clarify further, the subject is capable of creating and manipulating the object world around her, but the object world also influences the subject by determining (among other things) the material constraints of action (for example resources, ease or difficulty of creation or manipulation etc). The object-world in late capitalism can be said to have a significant amount of influence over the subject. For instance, the fetishism of commodities and their subsequent autonomous self-regulation on the market are clear examples of how objects have come to influence and shape our world, and our behaviour as subjects. It is only through perceiving this situation as a dialectic that the subject can resume her position at the opposite pole of influence. Reification and fetishism thus obscure the subjects conception of her role as influencer of reality, and contributor to the dialectal interplay between subject and object.

¹²⁶ Lukàcs (1971) *Supra* at p.126

¹²⁷ Lukàcs (1971) *Supra* at p.126

objects as “things”, outside of human control, the subject becomes trapped within boundaries of objectification; she does not see her relationship with these objectified objects and systems, and thus relates to them contemplatively. In other words, she engages with the world around her based upon the objectified appearance forms of these objects and systems, without ever questioning or grasping their true content – their essence behind these appearance forms: “Bourgeois thought entered into an unmediated relationship with reality as it was given¹²⁸”.

The implication of this is that unfettered forms of praxis are simply not possible if praxis stems from an understanding and knowledge of the appearance forms only. The subject does not politically control, or influence, the world around her because she presupposes the appearance forms of the objects and systems that confront her; she works within and around these objectified forms (as I have explained earlier) and simply positions herself so as to gain the most benefit. The situation however, is not insurmountable for Lukács. The reified nature of the appearance forms of capitalism, which results in false consciousness, can be dissolved by an understanding of dialectics.

The first question that arises at this point, is how knowledge of humankind's dialectical relationship with the world comes about. What provides the initial insight into the the essence of things that lie beneath the appearance forms of capitalism? Lukács' task therefore, consisted of finding a philosophical grounding for the “principle of practice”, as well as finding the subject who is in the right material position to realize, and carry out, this form of unified action. The chapter from this point on will focus upon Lukács' responses to the questions posed above, focusing initially upon how an awareness of the falsehood of appearance forms comes about, and secondly, upon the subject of this consciousness and the impact of the unified subject-object upon the world.

The Object as Worker and the Worker as Object

The subject-object divide has already been shown to be the most problematic antinomy for philosophy to overcome. As I have stated, the capitalist system in which we find ourselves appears to be impervious to action because of the autonomy and rigidity of the reality that confronts us. Lukács thought it entirely possible to transcend this philosophical problem by conceptualizing and finding in reality “the creating subject”; the subject who is capable of discovering the true nature of agency and henceforth, the temporal nature of capitalism. In order for this to happen however, a very specific subject, living under very specific material conditions, must be identified. First and foremost, the subject must be capable of perceiving and

¹²⁸ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.156

understanding the objectification of things. In other words, the subject must be able to see the quantification of all things. She must see the pervasive calculability and predictability of all the objectified products that emerge from the productive process. She must also be able to perceive the historical “whole” of the capitalist process beyond its immediate appearance forms. For Lukács, this precise subject can be found at the very base of the capitalist productive process, at the level of the labourer. Lukács' proposition is that a consciousness of the above phenomena becomes possible because of the unique position that the labourer inhabits: namely the subject as object, or the objectified subject.

For Lukács, the system of capitalism forces the worker into “becoming the object of the process by which [s]he is turned into a commodity and reduced to a mere quantity¹²⁹”. The unique situation of the worker however, and the characteristic that sets her apart from all the other commodities in circulation is that she is a conscious commodity capable of reflexivity. It is important to note here that the worker as a human-being is not a commodity akin to all others. As Marx has argued, it is labour-power that is the commodity that the worker is forced to sell. For Lukács however, the commodity of labour-power is inseparable from physical existence. The worker is thus a fusion of a conscious human being (subject) and a quantifiable commodity (object). It is precisely this very fact that forces the worker to surpass the immediacy of her condition:

The quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as a process of abstraction of which he is the victim, and which cuts him off from his labour-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialized process that has been rationalized and mechanised, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanized and rationalized tool¹³⁰

On the one hand, in his social existence the worker is immediately placed *wholly* on the side of the object: he appears to himself immediately as an object and not as the active part of the process of labour¹³¹.

It is true that the worker is objectively transformed into a mere object of the process of production by the methods of capitalist production...i.e. by the fact that the worker is forced to objectify his labour-power over against his total personality and to sell it as a commodity. But because of the split between subjectivity and objectivity induced in man by the compulsion to

¹²⁹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.166

¹³⁰ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.166

¹³¹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.167

objectify himself as a commodity, *the situation becomes one that can be made conscious*¹³².

In the above quotations it is clear that the worker (for the capitalist) is an instrumental object akin to every other object that constitutes the forces of production. The worker thus appears to the capitalist as a quantitative object – an element involved in a process of calculation. Labour-power becomes the quantitative determinant that represents and characterizes the worker. It is this objectified labour, abstracted from the worker, that allows the capitalist to plan, calculate and predict the productive process. For Lukács, this system of production – based on alienated labour – involves the constant transformation of the qualitative into the quantitative, which is based upon Marx's writings involving the subordination of all use-values to the category of exchange-value. For Lukács, the worker is in a unique situation in which to identify this pervasive transformation of the qualitative into the quantitative. For Lukács, it is labour-time that reveals the quantification of the qualitative nature of labour-power and provides the initial insight into the worker's objectified condition¹³³.

The worker is in a unique position to become conscious of this transformation, as opposed to the capitalist, because exploitation appears to the capitalist as the simple manipulation and use of a commodity that she has purchased. The differences in exploitation thus appear in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of her calculation. To the worker however, these same differences in exploitation must appear to the worker as “the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence¹³⁴”. In other words, the quantification of labour-power in terms of labour-time (the objective appearance form of the commodity of labour-power) becomes the determining form of the worker's existence. The worker's qualitative attributes have thus been entirely transformed into quantitative categories through the objectification of the worker's labour-power which is inseparable from the worker as a human; she is determined wholly by her quantifiable, objectified role within the productive process.

The situation of the worker is unique because of this knowledge of reification, or objectification, “at its zenith”. For Lukács, the appearance forms of capitalism are thus capable of being dissolved by the worker arriving at a knowledge of her own objectification: “It is just in this objectification, in this rationalization and reification of all social forms that we see clearly for the first time how society is constructed from the relations of men with each other¹³⁵”. One of the core characteristics of the worker, as an objectified

¹³² Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.167-8 (my emphasis)

¹³³ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.167

¹³⁴ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.166

¹³⁵ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.176

commodity, is her social relation to other workers through the productive process. However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the fetishization and objectification that follows from the capitalist production process necessarily hides these relations; capitalism hides the qualitative core of humankind under the appearance forms of social reality. For Lukács, the process of becoming conscious of one's own objectification – the revealing of the qualitative core – makes it possible to recognize the fetishized character of every commodity that is based on labour power: “in every case we find its core, the relation between men, entering into the evolution of society¹³⁶”. It is thus the worker's awareness of her qualitative value that leads to a general awareness of her qualitative core, as well as the qualitative relations that exist between fellow workers and the products of their labour. For Lukács, this is an awareness of the inner workings of capitalism, beneath the appearance forms, which arises from the worker's self-knowledge of her own objectification. It is therefore, not an imputed consciousness, and arises spontaneously and collectively out of the dialectical process of history.

Above all, the worker can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity... his consciousness is the *self-consciousness of the commodity*; or in other words it is the self-knowledge, the self-revelation of the capitalist society founded upon the production and exchange of commodities¹³⁷.

The discovery of the dialectic, which allows for a true understanding of humankind's relationship with social reality, is thus reserved for the class which is able to discover within itself, on the basis of its life-experience, the identical subject-object, the subject of action; “the we whose action is in fact history¹³⁸”; the proletariat.

The situation that the worker finds herself in is thus one of exploitation and misery, but at the same time, this situation provides the very seeds of transcendence and emancipation. For the worker, the transformation of labour into a commodity removes every human element from the immediate existence of the proletariat. At the same time, Lukács believes that every direct link between nature and the forms of society is eliminated. The worker in this position has no link to humanity or nature, and stands remote from both. It is in this position that she is able to see the objectification, and reification, of all the humanly constructed social forms.

Up to this point, Lukács has shown how the exploitative core of capitalism is revealed through the subject discovering her unique objectified status. For Lukács however, this knowledge, or consciousness, of

¹³⁶ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.169

¹³⁷ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.168

¹³⁸ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.145 and 149

reification is insufficient for overcoming the antinomies that characterize bourgeois society: “this does not mean that immediacy together with its consequences for theory, namely the rigid opposition of subject and object, can be regarded as having been wholly overcome¹³⁹”. The reason that this knowledge does not translate into automatic change is that the worker has not reached a stage where “thought becomes practice”. In other words, the subject still approaches a reality that is separated from her actions; the subject-object divide is still very much in tact. The focus of the chapter from this point will be to demonstrate exactly how this knowledge of exploitation, objectification and reification can be translated into a practical project for social change. In order for this to happen however, we are required to change our entire relationship with the reality we face. Here Lukács turns to Hegel and the dialectical approach, which proves to be a decisive break with the reified, hypostatized subject-object relations that characterized earlier philosophical works. Dialectics is thus an attempt to reconstruct subject-object relations at a different level, constituting the reformulation of our whole ontological basis. Dialectics does not treat subject and object, thought and things, as separate ontological categories, as formal rationality does, because it views these categories as mutually constitutive¹⁴⁰. But for the dialectic (which influences and informs the entire historical trajectory of mankind) to become apparent, the subject (conscious of reification and exploitation) must first look to history; for it is in history that the true nature of the dialectic is discovered.

Dialectics and the Theory of History

For Lukács, reification has obscured and destroyed the true nature of the historical process in two ways. Firstly, with regard to the origin of social institutions: “The objects of history appear as the objects of immutable, eternal laws of nature. History becomes fossilized in a formalism incapable of comprehending that the real nature of socio-historical institutions is that they consist of *relations between* men. On the contrary, men become estranged from this, the true source of historical understanding and cut off from it by an unbridgeable gulf¹⁴¹”. Lukács bases this upon Marx's argument concerning fetishism, namely that “people fail to realize that these definite social relations are just as much the products of men as linen, flax etc¹⁴²”. Secondly, Lukács argues that reification has resulted in the transformation of history into the “irrational rule

¹³⁹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.167

¹⁴⁰ Formal rationality adopts a contemplative stance towards an external world of things. There is thus a distinction between things, and the subject that perceives those things. Kant and his fellow classical philosophers could not breach this divide which led to a reality that consisted of two ontological levels: the world as the subject knows it (form), and an external world of impenetrable objects, or the ‘concrete material substratum of things’ (essence). It is this ‘antinomy’ that leads Kant to “the thing in itself” which posits an object that is explained

¹⁴¹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.48

¹⁴² Marx, K Supra at p.322 345 in Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.48

of blind forces¹⁴³”. Under these conditions, history can only be described pragmatically, instead of being fully understood.

Lukács believed that a proper comprehension of history is the solution to the problems posited above: “For in the case of almost every insoluble problem we perceive that the search for a solution leads us to history¹⁴⁴”. His task is thus to explain how historical evolution annuls the autonomy of the individual factors that fragment the perception of the whole. For Lukács, the process of history itself is a solution because it provides the foundation for the implementation of dialectical thought (as well as proof of it). Lukács argues “that if genesis, in the sense given to it in classical philosophy, is to be attained, it is necessary to create a basis for it in a logic of contents which change. It is only in history, in the historical process, in the uninterrupted outpouring of what is qualitatively new that the requisite paradigmatic order can be found in the realm of things¹⁴⁵”.

Lukács argues that Hegel treats history as *reality*. For Lukács, this conception of history allows us to see the “genesis” of the object by the subject. In other words, a Lukácsian concept of history proves that humankind is capable of self-producing activity. Humans thus possess the ability to influence and change the world around them. Hegel provided the impetus for Lukács in this regard, by stating that history is the process of “the subject in constant qualitative transformation through the interaction of subject and object, form and content *in a totality*”¹⁴⁶.

Lukács' Theory of History

With specific regard to the *nature* of history, Lukács states that history as a totality (universal history):

is neither the mechanical aggregate of individual historical events, nor is it a transcendent heuristic principle opposed to the events of history... The totality of history is itself a real historical power – even though one that has not hitherto become conscious and has therefore gone unrecognized – a power which is not to be separated from the reality (and hence the knowledge) of the individual facts without at the same time annulling their reality and their factual existence. It is the real, ultimate ground of their reality and their factual existence and hence also their knowability even as individual facts.

¹⁴³ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.48-49

¹⁴⁴ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.14

¹⁴⁵ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.144

¹⁴⁶ Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.118 (my emphasis)

Individual events are thus stripped of their true meaning if they are not viewed in the context of history as a *process of change*. Lukács seems to be arguing, through inference, a design to the process of history which must inform every single instance and aspect of human deed. This is what Lukács is referring to in the above passage when he speaks of the totality of history as a “power”. It is precisely this power that shapes history in the direction of Marxism. As I have explained earlier however, the “totality” has become fragmented, resulting in the stagnation and ossification of the capitalist mode of production (reification). For Lukács, this does not amount to the negation or superfluosity of the dialectic of history; the “totality” remains conceptually intact. All that is required is for the right subject to become aware of it. It is important to emphasize that the dialectic is a constant influence throughout history. This is what Lukács calls the “unconscious dialectic”.

The category of totality begins to have an effect long before the whole multiplicity of objects can be illuminated by it. It operates by ensuring that action which seems to confine themselves to particular objects, in both content and consciousness, yet preserve an aspiration towards the totality, that is to say: action is directed objectively towards a transformation of totality.. Long before men become conscious of the decline of a particular economic system and the social and juridical forms associated with it, its contradictions are fully revealed in the objects of its day-to-day actions.¹⁴⁷

The implication of this is that the difference between any two deeds is the levels of consciousness that inform those deeds. In either case however, the dialectic of history remains the overarching force that shapes deed, whether that deed is conscious of the “totality” or not.

For Lukács, in order for the immanent, inherent nature of things to be revealed, every aspect in history must be seen “as a point of transition to the totality¹⁴⁸”; or an instance that, if unraveled, displays the social nature of the objects around us. This “ultimate knowledge” results in the realization of an emancipated society, free from exploitation, objectification, alienation and reification. Society only obtains “ultimate knowledge” once the antinomies that plagued capitalist society have been dissolved¹⁴⁹. The dialectical relationship that has now been discovered between subject and object allows an understanding of the object “in its genesis”. For Lukács, this means that the external object, or thing-in-itself, is stripped of its objectified, autonomous appearance,

¹⁴⁷ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.175

¹⁴⁸ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.170

¹⁴⁹ Again, Lukács does not use the term 'ultimate knowledge' exactly the same way that Hegel did. It does thus not refer to any type of experience of God, or the realization that all reality is determined by mind. Instead, as I have explained earlier, ultimate knowledge is the realization of a method of viewing reality that allows us to see beyond appearances (as opposed to a conception of ultimate knowledge as a complete knowledge of every conceivable thing in the universe).

because the subject is capable of seeing her dialectical relationship to it. What appears beneath this is “the object-for-us”, or “the object-by-us”. In other words, we are able to see the true relationship between the human as the constructor of the object, and the nature of the object. If we are capable of seeing our role in the construction of the objects around us, then we are also capable of manipulating them and changing them. The same applies to the objectified nature of institutions and systems.

It is this dialectical relationship with the previously separate object world that allows us to hesitantly identify Lukács as a dualist. For Lukács, objects are in a state of flux, and although they represent something physically external to us, their *content* and their meaning for us as humans can be understood and altered. This also necessarily entails the influence of the physical world of objects upon the human being. The exact extent to which this happens is only partly explained. However, we can assume first of all that influences pertain to the physical properties of things; for instance a boulder in my path influences the direction I take. There are thus physical limitations and influences that the object world imposes upon us. Lukács also tells us of how the object world influences our consciousness when he speaks of reification, and the ideological mechanisms that allow fetishized objects to rule over us. Dialectics therefore, identifies a realm of material objects that is capable of influencing us. The problem in capitalist society is that the dialectical approach has not yet been discovered, and the material side of the dualist approach is dominant. What this means is that the object world (the way it appears to humans) dominates human behaviour, instead of the other way round. It is Lukács' project to develop an understanding of the material world in terms of human agency and its influence upon the material world. This is where Lukács feels that his contribution lies¹⁵⁰. Where Kant failed to conceive of a way to truly grasp the extra-mental world, and where Hegel failed to find a subject capable of changing the real world, Lukács tells us that genuine, “ultimate knowledge” is possible if we realize the extent of our subjectivity and influence upon the world around us. This proactive subjectivity, or agency, understood within the context of the *telos* (design) of history, grants humankind the ability to practically influence change in the direction of emancipation. Based upon the insights of the identical subject-object (the worker), reality and the objects around us become extensions of our deeds and thoughts, instead of confronting humankind as reified “things” (for instance the market now becomes controlled by humankind instead of vice versa).

For Lukács, the historical context truly eliminates the actual autonomy of the objects and the concepts of objects in their apparent rigidity. Historical evolution annuls the autonomy of the individual factors which owe their autonomy to the productive process and formal rationality. History seen in this manner provides proof of our ability to influence the world around us: “The idea that we have made reality loses its more or less fictitious character: we have – the prophetic words of Vico already cited – made our own history and if

¹⁵⁰ This contribution however is problematic, and is discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

we are able to regard the whole of reality as history (i.e. as our history, for there is no other), we shall have raised ourselves in fact to the position from which reality can be understood as our ‘action’¹⁵¹”. In other words, by looking at history in this way, Lukács has been able to successfully demonstrate the dialectical foundation of previously contradictory categories. History has shown that thought *can* become practice because human beings *do* influence the world. It is at this point that Lukács' philosophy of practice can take effect:

Because the philosophy of praxis conceives of being as history and history as the product of human action, it can *mutatis mutandis* conceive of human action as pertinent to being. Then it can be shown that such philosophical antinomies as that of subject and object, value and fact can be transcended in history. Such transcending action takes on a universal significance, going beyond the merely human world to affect being as such. For philosophy of praxis, history *is* ontology, the becoming of the human species is the privileged domain within which the problems of the theory of being can finally be resolved¹⁵².

For Lukács, when we view history as a dialectical process that portends towards “the totality”, we become capable of grasping the immanent nature of the material substratum beneath the appearance forms, as well finding ways to change it. For Lukács, the integration of any specific event into the category of totality does not merely affect our judgment of the individual phenomena decisively, but at the same time *the actual content of the individual phenomenon is changed fundamentally*¹⁵³. The result of this is a change in the objective appearance forms that have become pervasive in capitalism. So, in situating and understanding objects and events in the context of the category of totality, we are effectively dissolving the hypostatized appearance forms of reified capitalism. By deriving the dialectic from her insights into history, the worker as subject and object has transcended the epistemological limits of reified thought; she has grasped the true content of objects as products of the relations between humans. She has also transcended the ontological limits of formal rational thought by perceiving objects, institutions and systems as products of human relations. The current human position is thus temporal and not “the best that the worker can hope for”¹⁵⁴. By identifying the historically specific conditions of capitalism the worker grasps the world on a new ontological level; her understanding of the world, and its functioning, has changed and has become aligned with the objective process of history, or the “totality”.

¹⁵¹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.145

¹⁵² Feenberg, A (1981) Supra at p.7-8

¹⁵³ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.152 (my emphasis)

¹⁵⁴ Perkins, S (1993) Supra at p.128 and 130

On Dialectical Method

“The genesis, the creation of the creator of knowledge, the dissolution of the irrationality of the thing-in-itself, the resurrection of man from his grave, all these issues become concentrated henceforth on the question of dialectical method¹⁵⁵”.

The dialectical process is the ending of the confrontation of rigid appearance forms, and is enacted essentially *between the subject and the object*. Dialectical thought however, can only succeed in the reconstitution of the whole, if the subject (consciousness, thought) is both producer, and product, of the dialectical process. In other words, “only if the subject moved in a self-created world of which it is the conscious form and only if the world imposed upon it in full objectivity, only then can the problem of dialectics, and with it the abolition of the antitheses of subject and object, thought and existence, freedom and necessity, be held to be solved¹⁵⁶”. It has been Lukács' task to establish the subject as both the producer and product of the world around us. This has been achieved by comprehending history as the proof, and product, of human action. For Lukács “..dialectics is not imported into history... but is derived from history made conscious of its logical manifestation at this particular point in its development¹⁵⁷”. History, in other words, demonstrates the dialectical nature of the relationship between humans and the external world. Dialectics thus demonstrates how humans have come to construct the world around them. This in itself is a dissolution of the reified appearance forms, because the very foundations of the “given”¹⁵⁸ are dissolved into the products of human action and interaction with the world of objects. It is clear in this context that the dialectic conceives of the two categories of subject and object as mutually constitutive. The object exists physically but its nature is directly linked to the faculties of the subject, which give it meaning and content. This conception changes the role of the subject to the point that the subject is no longer the unchanged observer of the appearance forms of social reality, nor is it the practical manipulator of its purely mental possibilities. Dialectics is the ending of a rigid confrontation of rigid forms (objectified, reified laws and objects) which entails an interplay between subject and object.

The problem however, is that consciousness, or awareness, that dissolves the reified appearance forms of capitalism cannot be forced upon the proletariat from an outside source; for instance, by a philosopher. It

¹⁵⁵ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.141

¹⁵⁶ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.142

¹⁵⁷ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.177

¹⁵⁸ The 'given' here refers to the 'natural' appearance forms of the capitalist production process. It is 'given' that society is based upon capitalism because it is the 'nature' of humankind.

must instead be something that has developed from the telos of history itself. In order for Lukács to be consistent with himself and his Marxist roots, proletarian consciousness must develop out of the dialectical progression of history. To solve this problem, Lukács introduces the notion of the objectified worker, or the “conscious commodity”. It is this historical development in the consciousness of the worker that ushers in a new era of dialectical thought and change. Lukács argues that the worker is able to begin to see the network of human relations that underpin capitalism and its varied transactions. However, it is only when the subject looks to history that the true nature of the dialectic between humankind and the object world is uncovered. This is the point when the subject, as a member of a collective who share this consciousness, come to understand “the whole”. In the same way that Hegel invokes the term “ultimate knowledge”, Lukács similarly uses the term “genuine knowledge¹⁵⁹”, or “concrete knowledge” because this new found dialectical understanding of humankind's role in reality allows the subject to see beyond the ossified, reified appearances of capitalist political economy. Lukács does not go into detail here, but we can solidly assume that the transcendence of reification amounts to a knowledge of economic reality in Marxist terms; for instance, the value of goods comes to be understood in terms of the labour-theory of value, the source of profit is seen in the exploitation of surplus labour, and the relations between commodities and their exchange values is found instead, in the relations between humans and their labour.

The abolition of reified thought however, if it is to be a true abolition, cannot simply be the result of thought alone; it must also amount to their *practical* abolition as the *actual forms of social life*¹⁶⁰. For Lukács, the transcendence of reified bourgeois thought requires the following:

Firstly, humankind, who is the core of all relations, can only discover their qualitative core if *the immediacy of all reified relations is abolished*. Secondly, if these forms of immediacy are to be abolished, the concept of reification and all its manifestations must not be thought of as “mere modes of thought¹⁶¹”. This again refers to the Marxian position stated in the previous chapter regarding the objective nature of commodity fetishism. Here, Lukács reiterates the need to conceptualize bourgeois society as possessing these objective characteristics that exist in a very real sense. The implication of this is that any change to this objective system must be made practically, and not simply in thought (which would be sufficient if reification were

¹⁵⁹ “Genuine knowledge” also refers to the ability of humans to see capitalism, and other historical epochs in terms of their transitory roles in history, and each epoch's contribution towards the discovery of a free, classless, Marxist society. Most importantly however, it must be reiterated that this experience of “totality”, or “the whole”, or “genuine knowledge” only refers to the methodological ability to grasp reality in non-reified terms, and not to a thorough knowledge of everything there is in the universe.

¹⁶⁰ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177

¹⁶¹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177

simply subjective; an illusion)¹⁶². So in order to overcome the reified nature of the capitalist political economy (which actively produces and reproduces the dominating ideological mechanisms of fetishism and reification), the nature and structure of capitalist economy itself must change. Most importantly, for Marxists such as Lukács, the productive process and the concept of private property need to be altered in order for the ideology and false consciousness of capitalism to be dissolved.

Thirdly, thought and practice must be contingently related. For Lukács, praxis cannot be divorced from knowledge if we consider the two to be related dialectically. The dialectic thus necessarily implies a unification of subject and object, thought and action. This is also a necessary condition of effective revolutionary proletarian action. It must be remembered at this point that it is in history that dialectics is discovered, or rather, that the dialectic is derived from history. This means that history is an objective process which is based upon dialectics, and the very fact that it has been based upon dialectics –without the knowledge of humans to this point – means that humans have not foisted the concept upon history, but that it has been derived from it¹⁶³.

Critique of Lukács

Most importantly however, Lukács argues that reification can only be overcome “*by constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development*”¹⁶⁴. Here Lukács is referring directly to the teleology of history, based upon the dialectical process of historical materialism. It is also important to note from the above quotation that a necessary part of the historical process is an awareness of the contradictions of capitalism, and a consciousness of where history is headed.

But how exactly does this consciousness come about, and what conditions must exist at its inception? Lukács does not address this question properly at all, but satisfies himself with the explanation that this new found consciousness “is nothing but the expression of historical necessity”¹⁶⁵. In this final section, I will briefly consider whether Lukács' work relies on a teleological conception of history, and if so, whether this even constitutes an objection to his work. Lastly, I will question the unclear relationship between history and human agency, which underpins *History and Class Consciousness*.

¹⁶² Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177

¹⁶³ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177

¹⁶⁴ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.197 (original emphasis)

¹⁶⁵ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177

Lukács argues that the structure of capitalism and reification can only change if the *immanent contradictions of the process are made conscious*. These contradictions become apparent to the proletariat in their privileged position when they are seen as phenomena in a state of flux, and as the product of human action. It is also this realization that conditions an awareness of “totality”; a category that embodies the facets and goal of historical materialism. Lukács seems to be saying that consciousness is reached if, and only if, the telos of history is discovered by the proletariat:

only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled... will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality¹⁶⁶.

As I have pointed out, Lukács argues that the uniquely conscious object (the worker) discovers the hidden dialectic in history. This is however, insufficient for overcoming reified thought. It is imperative that the proletariat realizes their role within the design of history. The objective necessity of history thus requires the realization of the proletariat to manifest itself in practice, signifying the dissolution of the subject-object, theory-praxis divide. In other words, history has an objective, necessary path, and the role, or deed of the proletariat, “can never be more than to take the next step in the process¹⁶⁷”.

Lukács, like Hegel, believed that the historical process had a determined goal of its own, actualized (for the most part unconsciously) by individuals, nations and classes. But the insistence on the category of totality implies that the totality has an objective which dominates the process of history itself. There is thus an aim dominating the process as a whole¹⁶⁸:

Thus dialectical materialism is seen to offer the only approach to reality which can give action a direction. The self-knowledge, both subjective and objective of the proletariat at any given point in its evolution is at the same time knowledge of the stage of development achieved by the whole of society. The facts no longer appear strange when they are comprehended in their coherent reality, in the relations of all partial aspects to their inherent but hitherto unelucidated roots in the whole: we then perceive the tendencies which strive towards the centre of reality, to what we are wont to call the ultimate goal. This ultimate goal is not an abstract ideal opposed to the process, but an aspect of truth and reality. It is the concrete meaning of each stage reached and an integral part of the concrete

¹⁶⁶ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.197

¹⁶⁷ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.198

¹⁶⁸ Wood, A. W. (1974) “Book Review: History and Class-Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics” in *The Philosophical Review* Vol.83, No.3 at p.421

moment. Because of this, to comprehend it is to recognize the direction taken (unconsciously) by events and tendencies towards the totality. It is to know the direction that determines concretely the correct course of action at any given moment – in terms of the interest of the total process, viz. the emancipation of the proletariat¹⁶⁹.

Wood argues in his review of *History and Class Consciousness* that the proletariat's role is to identify the telos of history and to subsequently make itself the vehicle of its actualization (just the same way world individuals and certain nations actualize the World Spirit). The telos of history is the perception (and ultimate form) of history as a whole, which allows the proletariat to see the overarching “design” or process of humankind towards a classless, Marxist society, where workers collectively control the forces of production. Totality thus seems to be a historical inevitability, *but an inevitability that requires agency to progress*. The proletariat utilizes its new found knowledge of the “totality” of history, along with the systemic contradictions of capitalism, to bring about change at the opportune moment:

Only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe. In other words, when the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, *the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness*¹⁷⁰.

The difficulty arises from trying to establish the true relationship between the dialectic, as an unconscious meta-process, and the development of proletarian consciousness. Lukács makes it clear however, that he wants to avoid anything that smacks of fatalism¹⁷¹. He sees his work as a project in establishing a new impetus for social change that is in the true spirit of Marxism. At the same time however, Lukács' approach relies on a teleological theory of history that seems to correlate with Hegel's work more so than Marx's. Instead of intensively focusing upon the economic processes that bring about change, he chose to focus upon the development of consciousness based on an awkwardly explained process, which is supposed to lead to the development of the identical subject-object (the objectified worker)¹⁷². It is because of this unclear position, or relationship between history and emerging consciousness, that Lukács is forced to rely so heavily upon the teleology of history. This problem can be reduced to the fact that Lukács himself was unclear on how, and at which point, consciousness is supposed to come about. The consciousness of the worker that is supposed to

¹⁶⁹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.23

¹⁷⁰ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.70

¹⁷¹ In the preface to the second edition of *History and Class Consciousness* he announces “My deep abhorrence of ... mechanistic fatalism” Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.xxv

¹⁷² Again, this situation is the coming to consciousness of the same subject-object, because the worker realizes that she is a object akin to all other commodities herself.

emerge from this uncertain position is later refuted by Lukács in the preface to the second edition of *History and Class Consciousness*. The emergence of this revolutionary consciousness, as explained in *History and Class Consciousness*, is instead referred to as “purely intellectual” and therefore, only “contemplative¹⁷³” (as opposed to practical).

The problem that Lukács' work encounters is how to reconcile these issues of agency and historical design (the whole or totality) without placing too much emphasis on either side of the dialectic. What I mean here is that, by conceding too much agency to the individual or subject, important Marxian concepts, such as the theory of ideology and the process of historical materialism, might become trivialized. It would imply that the economic structure of society and the productive forces (which determines the way in which the individual perceives the world around them) do not construct a reified social reality of appearance forms. An entirely independent subject thus poses the problem of uncertainty of action, which implies uncertainty in the historical process. For historical materialism to remain at the core of Lukács' work, the subject necessarily needs to be influenced by the appearance forms of capitalism, which develop a false-consciousness with regards to the nature of social reality. What is unclear however, is the exact extent to which the appearance forms shape consciousness, and if so, if a true liberation from this type of consciousness is possible given the nature of the passive subject up to this point. A further problem with agency is that, if an entirely passive subject is posited, the possibility exists that reification and false consciousness become insurmountable forms of domination. It is thus Lukács' project to construct a historical subject that agrees with the economic and ideological determinants of Marxism, but who also has sufficient capacity to consciously change the material world through revolution.

Lukács tries to indirectly solve this problem by positing an opportunistic relationship between the subject (agency, or consciousness) and historical materialism (the teleological path of history). For the most part, the totality, or the teleological path of history, takes place without the knowledge of human beings: “the totality does not need to become explicit, the plenitude of the totality does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action¹⁷⁴”. For Lukács, unconscious actions necessarily entail “an aspiration towards the totality”, meaning that they help develop and further the course of history towards its Marxist goal. This process however, will not bring about systemic change if it is to remain an unconscious force. The contradictions and antagonisms within the capitalist mode of production can only present themselves, in all their intensity, to the proletariat in her privileged position. The “next step” relies upon the ideological maturity of the working class as they act upon their new found knowledge. If the proletariat fails to take this

¹⁷³ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.xix

¹⁷⁴ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.198

step the situation will not pass, or become unrecognizable in any sense. Instead, “the contradiction will remain unresolved and will be reproduced by the dialectical mechanics of history at a higher level, in an altered form, with an increased intensity. It is in this that the “objective necessity of history consists¹⁷⁵”. So the system of capitalism will always contain and present its contradictions, but these contradictions will only be revealed to those capable of seeing them (the proletariat). Again, what makes these contradictions apparent to the worker, along with the telos of history, is an awareness of the dialectical nature of reality (and therefore history) brought upon by the workers insights into the economy. We can isolate the tenuous process of the proletariat's “coming to consciousness” or “ideological maturation” into the following steps:

Awareness, or consciousness, of the the true nature of political economy (alienation, exploitation, inequality, domination) all starts with the worker's consciousness of her own objectification. This is an objective awareness and happens not to individuals within a class, but to the whole class of workers collectively. Workers thus become aware of the essence of political economy and the contradictions of capitalist society (for example, the concentration of increasingly large amounts of capital in fewer and fewer hands, the ownership of the means of production, by the few, to the detriment of the dispossessed many).

When the proletariat become aware of these contradictions, Lukács argues that

what is 'reflected' in the consciousness of the proletariat is the new positive reality arising out of the dialectical contradictions of capitalism. And this is by no means the invention of the proletariat, nor was it 'created' out of the void. It is rather the inevitable consequence of the process in its totality; one which changed from being an abstract possibility to a concrete reality only after it had become part of the consciousness of the proletariat and had been made practical by it¹⁷⁶

For Lukács, it is the proletariat that embodies this process of consciousness. Its consciousness appears as the immanent product of the historical dialectic. Lukács rephrases this by saying that

this consciousness is nothing but the expression of a historical necessity. When this consciousness comes about, brought on by the dialectical historical process, it can “only breathe life into the things which the dialectics of history have forced into a crisis; it can never 'in practice' ignore the course of history, forcing on it what are no more than its own desires or knowledge. For it is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become

¹⁷⁵ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.198

¹⁷⁶ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.204

conscious¹⁷⁷.

Lukács thus believes that the culmination of the historical process, as Marx foresaw it, is still at hand; he even goes so far as to say that it is a “historical necessity”. He goes on further to say that the bourgeois reified forms of thought (for instance that of the rule of capital over labour) “will stand helpless when confronted by the enigmatic forces thrown up by the course of events, and the actions open to [the bourgeois] will never be adequate to deal with this challenge¹⁷⁸”. Here, Lukács is referring directly to the course of history as it reaches its teleological goal, the rule of the proletariat. He argues that the bourgeoisie “live in the past” and are unaware of the objective developments of the historical process as it advances towards its goal. The working class, on the other hand, act upon their new knowledge and awareness, something that the bourgeoisie simply cannot obtain. Lukács describes the situation of the bourgeoisie as an “image of frozen reality that nevertheless is caught up in an unremitting, ghostly movement¹⁷⁹”. The proletariat are privileged in their position because they can see this objective historical transformation. Lukács makes a more clear and simplistic reason for why it is only the proletariat that witness this: “This can be seen only from the standpoint of the proletariat because the meaning of these tendencies is the abolition of capitalism and so for the bourgeoisie to become conscious of them would be tantamount to suicide¹⁸⁰”.

Proletarian class consciousness depends on the worker realizing that she is nothing more than a commodity herself¹⁸¹. The material and ideological circumstances that are required to lead to this development of consciousness are however, not explained in any detail. The worker's consciousness of herself as a commodity may be one thing, but the leap to a critical deconstruction of the economic processes of capitalism in Marxian terms is something completely different. The extension of this realization to all those in the working class seems so unlikely that we could call this new found consciousness nothing more than an imputed consciousness. But to Lukács, this is a historical necessity explained by the telos of history, based upon historical materialism: it must happen, and is historically bound to happen, because of the dialectical unfolding of the historical process. The problem that Lukács encounters in *History and Class Consciousness* is exactly *how* to concretely identify the conditions that would lead to historical materialism's fruition. What

¹⁷⁷ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177-178

¹⁷⁸ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.181

¹⁷⁹ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.181

¹⁸⁰ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.181

¹⁸¹ “By becoming aware of the commodity relationship the proletariat can only become conscious of itself as the object of the economic process. For the commodity is produced and even the worker in his quality as commodity, as an immediate producer is at best a mechanical driving wheel in the machine. But if the reification of capital is dissolved into an unbroken process of its production and reproduction, it is possible for the proletariat to discover that it is itself the *subject* of this process even though it is in chains and is for the time being unconscious of the fact”. Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.181.

Lukács achieves in *History and Class Consciousness* is an identification of what needs to be done (the mobilization of class consciousness), who needs to do it (the proletariat), but fails in convincing the reader of the means required to achieve this goal.

This is why Lukács' work in *History and Class Consciousness* becomes reliant upon teleology: in failing to concretely identify the ideological and material conditions required for class consciousness to emerge, Lukács falls back upon the inevitability of the historical process, saying that history is destined to provide such conditions by virtue of the principle of the dialectic. This is apparent in Lukács' use of explanatory terms like “inevitable consequence” and “historical necessity¹⁸²”. The historical fact that society will undergo systemic change is an inevitability, that is justified methodologically, according to the principles of the dialectic.

The process of “coming to consciousness” is never properly explained. It becomes clear that Lukács instead, projects the consciousness of the worker onto the historical process; something he admits to doing in the preface to the second edition of *History and Class Consciousness*: “I was unable... to progress beyond the notion of an 'imputed' class consciousness¹⁸³”. He goes on to say that “[i]n my presentation it would indeed be a miracle if this 'imputed' consciousness could ever turn into revolutionary praxis¹⁸⁴”.

But even if there is a teleological aspect to history, does this mean that Lukács is guilty of relying on a “mythological” force, as Hegel did? Proponents of orthodox Marxism would argue that historical materialism, whether we are conscious of it or not, is by no means a mythological force. It is an objective, demonstrable process that is systemic. In other words, it is the necessary result of a system in dialectical tension. The forces are material, not mythological or transcendental. It is not within the scope of this work to argue either for or against the theory of historical materialism, and I will therefore, limit myself to a brief internal analysis of Lukács' work, focussing particularly upon the unclear relationship between history and agency.

What we can solidly conclude at this point, is that the teleological basis of Lukács' thought – in itself – does not negate his project or his work, because it can be justified by an explanation of history based upon dialectical methodology. What might be implied by a description of his work, as a work in teleology, is that the historical processes driving the design are mysterious and mythological, and not properly explained. But it has been established that Lukács, and Marx's, teleology is materially substantiated, as opposed to Hegel's, which is more

¹⁸² Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.177

¹⁸³ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.xviii

¹⁸⁴ Lukács, G (1971) Supra at p.xix

mythological because it relies upon the unexplained force that is “The World Spirit”. Historical materialism is thus not a phantom force; it is a theory of history based upon material processes that results in the political empowerment of previously alienated subjects. Again, this is not a defence of historical materialism and all its tenets, but serves to highlight the principle point of departure between a mythological teleology, such as Hegel's, and a theory of the material development of history, such as Lukács'. What has emerged from this brief analysis is that there is one aspect of Lukács' thought that is unclear. Although the teleological process in itself may not be mythological, the relation of the historical process to the consciousness of the subject remains mysterious. The tenuous link between history and consciousness asks important questions of historical materialism in general (such as the nature of agency). It is however, Lukács' attempt to explain how consciousness, and hence historical change, come about, that is specifically problematic. I have argued earlier that the process of the worker identifying herself as the identical subject-object is an opportunistic one and fails to explain “the next step” in the historical process clearly.

The first problem comes from ascribing an objective circumstance to all those in the working class. This is an expedient way of assuring that consciousness is not reached by an individual, or a specific few, but is instead obtained as a class, so as to ensure the maximum possibility for systemic change. The leap of logic and intuition for the worker is improbable in any individual case, let alone a massive group of disassociated individuals involved in different types of labour. It is simply obscure and entirely opportunistic to state that even if a worker becomes aware of herself as an objectified commodity, she will be capable of deconstructing the entire political economy down to its exploitative roots, as Marx did. And even if the worker was able to come to these conclusions, and establish a consciousness and genuine knowledge of reality, this knowledge does not translate into a dissolution of reification, or objectification. Lukács himself concedes in the preface to the second edition of *History and Class Consciousness* that the genuinely identical subject-object cannot be created by this proposed self-knowledge, “however adequate, and however truly based on an adequate knowledge of society¹⁸⁵”. He goes further to say that “even when the content of knowledge is referred back to the knowing subject, this does not mean that the act of cognition is thereby freed of its alienated nature¹⁸⁶”.

The unclear relationship between the teleology of history and the “next step”, which sees the working class arrive at a new practical consciousness, makes it apparent that Lukács project begins with its conclusion, instead of arriving at a necessary conclusion through a series of logically argued premises. In other words, Lukács starts out with the conclusion: the certainty of systemic change, the rule of the working class and the abolition of capitalism. He then proceeds to establish a process that would lead to this conclusion. The conclusion thus necessitates the premises, instead of the other way around. This explains Lukács' expedient, and convenient, functionalist

¹⁸⁵ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.xxiii

¹⁸⁶ Lukács, G (1971) *Supra* at p.xxiii

conception of the worker and how she comes to see her own objectification and exploitation. It is subsequently proposed that the dialectical nature of history becomes known, which again is a realization that is foisted upon the process by Lukács. It is for these reasons that the entire conscientization of the working class in *History and Class Consciousness* is an imputed process.

Lukács' work thus aimed to provide the means to a presupposed end, and it is the means which hang together so problematically. This however, does not mean that *History and Class Consciousness* lacks relevance. What we can take away from this analysis is Lukács' powerful critique of objectified alienated society based on his concept of reification. Reification was Lukács' answer to the question of why revolution had not yet happened in his time. Although most consider the Marxist project of communist revolution to be outdated or otiose, the critique of reification acted, and still acts, as a powerful insight into the fundamental question facing domination theory: Why do the oppressed many accept the rule of the privileged few? The critique of reification and the expansion of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism led to a significant expansion of social critique as a whole. It was Lukács' intention to try and show how culture, technology, law, bureaucracy, political institutions, such as democracy, and the market driven economy are all based upon the same principles which stem from the production process of capitalism itself. The social, political and economic areas of life are all reflections of the underlying rationality and calculability which is endemic to the capitalist productive process. As I have explained earlier, the political result of this is that capitalist social reality appears to us as “natural” and “the best we can hope for”.

In many respects, the seemingly impervious presence of capitalism today, despite various disruptions, such as the communist challenge of Lukács' time, serves to verify that, at some level, the reified appearance forms of capitalism remain very much intact. As Herbert Marcuse argues, advanced capitalism has smoothed over all the previous glaring contradictions that are supposed to act as areas of intense contention between the dominant and the oppressed classes. Although I will focus upon arguments such as these later in this thesis, it is important to take note of how Lukács' theory of reification still rings true, even more so, in advanced, modern capitalism. Marcuse argues that the reified mind (or One-Dimensional man as he calls it) is a consciousness which

..cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action. Advanced capitalism has thus developed a capacity to contain and manipulate subversive imagination and effort. There are various mechanisms that allow for this adaptation and suppression to take place, such as technological advances, mass media and commodity fetishism. It is important to note however that all of these amount to an acceptance of the contentions of

modern capitalism; i.e. the promise of an ever-more-comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people¹⁸⁷.

In the next chapter I will turn my attention to the monumentally influential work of Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno and their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The chapter will reveal the progression of social critique which I have traced back to Marx's crucial concept of commodity fetishism. Most important is their work on the culture industry which serves as an explanation of how the appearance forms of capitalism are maintained by the institutions of capitalism itself. The culture industry thus helps create a social reality that falsely conscientizes individuals, resulting in the continuation of conditions of domination.

¹⁸⁷ Marcuse, H (1991) *One Dimensional Man* at p.25-6

Chapter 3

Critical Theory: The Contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno

Horkheimer and Adorno agreed with Marx and Lukács that philosophy could demonstrate that capitalism “was not merely an economic or political crisis but a catastrophe for the human essence¹⁸⁸”. The work of the Frankfurt school is greatly indebted to the work of Lukács, especially to his theory of reification that was discussed in the previous chapter. The theory of reification constitutes one of the conceptual pillars of critical theory. The common thread that holds the founders of critical theory together, most significantly Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, is the tradition of Marx's critique of the fetish character of capitalist social production. The Frankfurt school intended to approach this problem on a theoretical level in order to “break the spell” of reification and fetishism under which everything (human beings, objects and the relation between them) lay¹⁸⁹.

Critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno retained many of Lukács' concerns: “the interplay between history and theory, the importance of theory as a “promotive factor in the development of the masses”, the relation of production and culture, the effects of reification and the way each aspect of society contains within itself “the possibility of unraveling the social whole or totality”¹⁹⁰”. Although many criticized his conception of the standpoint of the proletariat, it was the interrogation of orthodox Marxism that set Lukács apart from his contemporaries¹⁹¹; an approach that the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno sought to further.

Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* aimed to show how humankind have reached an unreasonable state of affairs by intending to achieve the exact opposite¹⁹². For Horkheimer and Adorno, the development of capitalism, as a system of domination, did not unfold in the same way as Lukács saw it. There is thus no historical necessity (historical materialism) at work in the historical process. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the products of history such as feudalism, or capitalism, can be attributed to the underlying search for enlightenment. I will proceed to give a detailed analysis of this process later on in this chapter. The point is to recognize that Horkheimer and Adorno do not agree with Lukács that reification, and indeed, domination, are specific products of capitalism. They accordingly divorce the concept of domination from its historical development in capitalism, and instead focus upon the the relationship between enlightenment and domination from as far back as early Greece.

¹⁸⁸ Wiggershaus, R (2004) “The Frankfurt School's “Nietzschean Moment” at p.7 in Rassmusen, D & Swindal, J (eds) *Critical Theory Vol 1: Critical Perspectives* at p.7

¹⁸⁹ Wiggershaus, R (2004) *Supra* at p.8

¹⁹⁰ Held, D (2004) “Introduction to Critical Theory” in Rassmusen, D & Swindal, J (eds) *Critical Theory* at p.18

¹⁹¹ Held, D (2004) *Supra* at p.18

¹⁹² The development of a reasonable, rational social state of affairs that is characterized by stability.

I will proceed to unpack these conceptual shifts from earlier forms of Marxist social critique in the section below. However, in order to afford these changes some sort of perspective, a brief historical context to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, must be provided. We can summarize the historical circumstances that influenced the theoretical shifts in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as follows: 1) The Frankfurt School was faced with the peculiar development of Marxism in Russia (Stalinism); 2) In Germany and Italy they encountered Fascism, a political system which proved that capitalism could overcome the contradictions predicted by Marx's historical materialism by reorganizing the political order, and 3) In their exile in the United States they experienced the success of a capitalist system which integrated the underprivileged masses through organized mass culture (the culture industry).

The theoretical continuity from the work of Lukács remains in Horkheimer and Adorno's belief that modern society is characterized by alienation, and the pervasiveness of reified appearance forms. The individual's experience of social reality in capitalism therefore develops patterns of thought, which reflect the logic of the productive process. However, the conditions of late capitalism could no longer allow Horkheimer and Adorno to maintain any hope in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Horkheimer and Adorno, in agreement with Marcuse, believed that the contradictions in “liberal democracies” were being annulled by an integration of the oppressed masses into the existing system through the commodification of culture in the form of entertainment¹⁹³. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the integration of society into a “mass-society”, controlled by the culture industry, has made real class divisions invisible; or as Marcuse would argue, obscures the points of contention and contradiction between the classes in capitalist society.

The Shift from Ideological Critique to the Meta-Critique of Instrumental Rationality

The questions that faced Horkheimer and Adorno arose directly from the failed Marxist approach to social change which had been prevalent in the 20th century, up until the Second World War. The forecasts of historical materialism had not come to fruition, and the campaigning of the radical left parties, and their attempts to conscientize the working class, had not amounted to anything. The following questions subsequently became important: “How could the relationship between theory and practice now be conceived? Could theory preserve hope for the future? In changing historical circumstances how could the revolutionary ideal be justified?¹⁹⁴”.

¹⁹³ Hohendahl, P (1985) “The Dialectic of Enlightenment Revisited: Habermas' Critique of the Frankfurt School” in *New German Critique* No.35 at p.11

¹⁹⁴ Held, D (2004) *Supra* at p.16

Horkheimer and Adorno, in abandoning Marx and Lukács' theory of historical materialism, and the potential revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat, were faced with the task of providing an entire new social theory that held the same principle at heart: freedom from domination. In other words, they still believed, as Marx and Lukács did, that existence in capitalist society is inauthentic and exploitative, but disagreed with both on how this situation arises, and what could liberate humankind from these circumstances. In the section below I will show the principal theoretical shifts that Horkheimer and Adorno made in order to establish their own new form of social critique. The aim here is to demonstrate the differences in thought between Marx, Lukács and the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and how Horkheimer and Adorno came to formulate their own answer to the problem of domination.

One of the most significant shifts to take place between Marxist social theorists and Horkheimer and Adorno, was the shift from a Marxian critique of ideology to a meta-critique of all ideologies. For Marxist social theorists, the role of ideological critique was to challenge the truth of a suspicious theory (for instance the theories of the Classical economists) by exposing its falseness, or lack of veracity. This took the form of an ideological critique of essence and appearance which I explained in the first chapter. The aim here was to discover the underlying exploitative reality of the economy by establishing the falseness of capitalist economic theories which analyzed only “appearance” forms¹⁹⁵.

Marxist critique is a critique of ideology that aims to reveal the essence, or reality at work behind these apparent forms of capitalism. The type of knowledge that this ideological critique provides can be described as a kind of enlightenment, because it demystifies, and rationally explains, the workings of the economy and the subservience of the worker to conditions of exploitation. Habermas argues poignantly that the Marxian critique of ideology “furthers the process of Enlightenment by unearthing a category mistake which stems from the fusion of declared validity claims with hidden power claims¹⁹⁶”. The critique of ideology is thus

¹⁹⁵ Marx's analysis of political economy was to begin with the accepted definitions of the categories used by political economy and to show how these categories turn into their opposites. His method was not to contrast his own dialectical methodology and standards with that of traditional political economists. Instead, he critiqued the enterprise of political economy by expanding upon and explicating new and varied results of the traditional approach. His intention was to show that when the logical implications of traditional political economy were thought through to their end, the concepts failed to explain the capitalist mode of production. Marx concluded that the categories of political economy were simply being measured against their own content. In other words, capitalist economic theory used concepts derived solely from the appearance forms of capitalism and applied these to the same phenomena which they intended to explain. For example, by creating theories of capital flow economists derived knowledge from the workings of the capitalist economy, and did not understand what in fact constituted capital and its value. These bourgeois theories of political economy were thus theories based on the observed functioning of capitalism, and not on a deeper knowledge of what drives the processes of capitalist production. It is for this reason that the traditional categories of political economy cannot be used to truly understand the workings of political economy. This aspect of Marx's procedure has been called immanent “categorical critique”. Benhabib, S (2004) “The Critique of Instrumental Reason” in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (eds) (2004) at p.6-7 (Sage: London)

¹⁹⁶ Habermas, J (1982) “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*” transl. By

Enlightenment carrying out a critique on its own products (its theories). It is the first indication of Enlightenment's reflexivity. For Horkheimer and Adorno on the other hand, it is not only the separate ideologies that are untruthful or problematic, but the enterprise of ideological critique itself. The authors argue that the critique of ideology, as an attempt to establish truths through reflexivity, can no longer produce or discover truth. Horkheimer and Adorno's work is thus a critique of a critique that is aimed at negating the proposed intentions of the critique of ideology. Enlightenment has thus become reflexive for a second time, in a new manner¹⁹⁷: Horkheimer and Adorno argue: "The point is... that the Enlightenment *must examine itself*, if men are not wholly to be betrayed. The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past¹⁹⁸".

At the time they wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno believed that the critique of ideology could not be continued because the reason that constituted its foundations should be questioned. The Marxian idea that reason existed in two potential forms, that of the theories articulated by "bourgeois ideals" (appearance) and "the objective meaning of existing institutions" (essence), no longer applied. As I have shown in the first chapter, it was Marx's intention to depart from the theories posited by "bourgeois ideals" by showing that these ideals only serve to dominate the working class. As I have shown in the chapter on Marx, the epistemology of bourgeois theories was debunked and critiqued according to a different type of critical reason that before, was hidden unto itself. For Horkheimer and Adorno however, the very basis of this critique has been destroyed, and can no longer reveal the truth. This however, is not only incredulity towards the Marxian critique of ideology, it is a suspicion of all ideologies *because of the specious nature of the very reason that they themselves employ*¹⁹⁹.

At this point we must remember that all these social theories, from Marx's work, to Lukács and Horkheimer and Adorno, deal with emancipation from a world that is characterized by alienation, fetishism, reification and domination. There is thus a degree of consensus regarding the circumstances of capitalist society. What Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno focus upon is the fact that such circumstances persist, and even flourish, despite evidence that these circumstances are exploitative and oppressive. The authors approach the problem differently from writers such as Lukács, who attempted to reinterpret and reapply Marxist theory to changing circumstances, whilst still believing in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Horkheimer and Adorno

Levin, T.Y, *New German Critique*, No. 26, Critical Theory and Modernity (Spring - Summer, 1982) at p.20

¹⁹⁷ Habermas, J (1982) *Supra* at p.20

¹⁹⁸ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* at p.xv

¹⁹⁹ This is in fact the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which I will expand upon later. For now it is sufficient to note that Horkheimer and Adorno shift their critique from a critique of ideology, to a critique of all ideologies because of the reason that capitalism has come to embrace and reify.

undercut this position by questioning the effectiveness, and role, of this type of emancipatory theory altogether. The authors question the role of emancipatory theory by further problematizing the theory-practice debate. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* intensifies the problematic relation between theory and practice. Horkheimer and Adorno critically question the possibility of political action by problematizing the relationship between humans and the world. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno “raise the question of the extent to which emancipatory practice and theory already contribute to unfreedom and undercut emancipation²⁰⁰”.

Horkheimer and Adorno criticize both capitalism and Soviet socialism. For them, capitalism does not only generate its own form of repressive ideology. Marxism has also become a repressive ideology in its Stalinist manifestation, thereby confirming that its doctrines do not necessarily offer a key to truth. Classical Marxist concepts are therefore inadequate to account for Stalinism and fascism²⁰¹. The most important question for Horkheimer and Adorno is: how is thought to function in the attempt to overcome alienated life without becoming a co-conspirator in the practice of domination? The authors approached this question in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and came to the conclusion that theory alone could not overcome alienation and domination. If the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* draws any conclusions, it is that the problematic relationship between theory and practice, or theory and political emancipation, has become a question in and of itself. In other words, Horkheimer and Adorno's work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* problematizes the very expectation that the theory-praxis divide could ever be resolved²⁰².

Horkheimer and Adorno see Marxian immanent critique as an enterprise that criticizes prevailing practices and knowledge in an attempt to show that they are false. They argue however, that once an ideology has been successfully critiqued, immanent critique is required to offer a means for the achievement of emancipation from conditions of domination.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, emancipatory theory derives its ideals from the very same reason that leads to the establishment of conditions of domination in the first place. This is principally because the formation of any approach to emancipation *is blind its own self-formation* (or deformation) and it therefore *incorporates what it seeks to overcome*. A new means and end to emancipation, such as Lukács' theory of class consciousness discussed in the previous chapter, grounds its ideology in reason, which is, according to the

²⁰⁰ Sullivan, M & Lysaker, J.T. (1992) “Between Impotence and Illusion: Adorno's Theory of Art and Practice” in *New German Critique*, No.57 (Autumn, 1992) at p.83

²⁰¹ Bottomore, T (1991) *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (2nd ed) at p.208-209

²⁰² Sullivan, M & Lysaker, J.T. (1992) *Supra* at p.94

authors, bound up with domination. The ideals of emancipatory theory cannot be drawn up *ex nihilo*²⁰³, and instead rely upon existing frameworks of reason and understanding. Horkheimer and Adorno thus believe that emancipatory theorists, such as Hegel, Marx and Lukács, have been blind to the conditions out of which their theories of emancipation grew. They did not see the overarching rationality that guided their theories, and how this drove them to develop emancipatory programs that were bound up with principles of domination.

If this is the case, from where should critical theory formulate its ideals? Horkheimer and Adorno found that by questioning the formulation of ideals, one questions the overarching reason, or epistemology, that one takes for granted which informs these ideals. It is precisely the authors intention to problematize this overarching reason which they believe to be responsible for the continuation of domination and exploitation. However, to problematize both reason, as well as the way in which we formulate emancipatory ideals, is to leave emancipatory theory between a rock and no-place: “it has neither the ends nor the means with which to achieve emancipation²⁰⁴”. The question is whether emancipatory theory really does have either the ends or the means with which to achieve emancipation. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the previous forms of emancipatory theory (such as Marx and Lukács' theories) do not possess either. The authors bring into question ends – means rationality altogether, over and above the questioning of what a “means” or an “ends” is. Habermas captures Horkheimer and Adorno's position concisely in the following quote: “Reason, once instrumentalized, has become assimilated to power and has thereby given up its critical power – this is a final unmasking of a critique of ideology applied to itself²⁰⁵”.

The shift from Marxism, and the work of Lukács, to the critique provided by Horkheimer and Adorno can be described as “a fateful shift from concrete socio-political analysis to philosophico-anthropological generalization. The shift necessitates that reifying “instrumental reason” is no longer grounded in concrete capitalist social relations, but itself almost imperceptibly becomes their quasi-transcendental “principle” or “foundation”²⁰⁶”. This is the shift to “totalizing” critique: a general critique of society that identifies a type of domination that extends from a common and inclusively pervasive type of thought: instrumental rationality. I will show later how instrumental rationality has become fetishized in the unquestioned methods and status of science, and how this amounts to the mythologizing of science, and an extension of the concept of reification. But for now we must make note of the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno change the focus and intentions of social critique and create a new sweeping type of critique called “totalizing critique”, based upon pervasive

²⁰³ “Out of nothing”

²⁰⁴ Sullivan, M & Lysaker, J.T. (1992) Supra at p.95

²⁰⁵ Habermas, J (1982) Supra at p.22

²⁰⁶ Zizek, S (2000) “From History and Class Consciousness to the Dialectic of Enlightenment and Back” in *New German Critique*. No. 81 Dialectic of Enlightenment at p.112-113

instrumental reason:

By fusing a critique of scientism with a critique of science and technology, Horkheimer and Adorno strip domination of any class character, and reduce it to a general, totalizing type of domination²⁰⁷.

The critique of instrumental rationality is not simply the identification of a new type of reason that has, of yet, not been discovered. The shift in Horkheimer and Adorno's work is to conceptualize instrumental reason as the driving force behind history and the development of the social. Other Marxist social theorists, such as Lukács, identified instrumental thought (Lukács focused upon formal rationality) and action in capitalism, but attributed this to the normative and ideological effects of the historically specific capitalist work process. For Lukács, the principles underlying the forces of production became the principles of human thought and action. In contrast to this, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that instrumental rationality creates the instrumental forces of production. In other words, instrumental rationality exists long before capitalism. The authors argue that instrumental rationality is developed and perfected historically alongside the development of the human species, and therefore, cannot be the specific product of capitalism.

Reason and Instrumental Rationality

In what way do Horkheimer and Adorno employ the concept of “reason”, and how it is related to instrumental rationality? Reason,, in Horkheimer and Adorno's work can be reduced to two categories: 1) reason in its original Greek use as *nous* which establishes reason in an external objective sense; and 2) reason in a subjective sense which establishes reason in the individual consciousness alone. With regard to the first conception of reason, reality is subject to reason that is universal and transcendent . Reason thus exists in an objective sense, outside of the consciousness of humans. According to the second category, reason is “entirely a faculty of a subject who confronts a world which, aside from the significance which he imparts to it, is totally devoid of meaning. It is the view of the world born from man's urge to dominate nature ... [the] calculating contemplation of the world as prey²⁰⁸” that characterizes humankind's approach to the world. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the second category is called “instrumental reason” which comes to underpin the epistemological approach of the Enlightenment. It must be remembered that enlightened thought, based upon fear, strives to continually purge reality of mythology (unknowns). Reason is thus committed to the

²⁰⁷ Zuidervart, L “Historical Positions” in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) *Supra* at p.129

²⁰⁸ Horkheimer, M (1976) *The Eclipse of Reason* at p.176 in Shaw, B.J. (1985) “Reason, Nostalgia and Eschatology in the Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer” in *The Journal of Politics* Vol.47 No.1 at p.170

demythologization of nature by explaining it rationally. In order to explain away the unknown, Bacon wrote that the world should be “put to the rack²⁰⁹”. This approach meant that the external object world was to be wholly quantified and understood as a diverse range of things that were subject to observed laws. “Putting the world to the rack” therefore aims at an understanding of how things work, and by knowing how things work, humans come to be able to manipulate them for their own self-preservation. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this is the essence of instrumental rationality.

Horkheimer draws upon a definition of reason provided by Locke in order to outline the relationship between reason, outlined above, and instrumentality. Locke writes that “the word reason in the English language has different significations; sometimes it is taken for true and clear principles; sometimes for clear and fair deductions from those principles; and sometimes for the cause, and particularly the final cause²¹⁰”. Along with this definition, Locke appended four degrees of reason: discovering truths, regularly and methodically ordering them, perceiving their connections, and drawing the right conclusion. Horkheimer argues that apart from the final clause, these functions are today still held to be rational²¹¹”.

It must be remembered that the goal of the epistemological approach of instrumental reason is to arrive at a truth free from myth and fear of the unknown. In order to do this the enlightened, instrumental mind approaches the world in terms of its material existence. This material existence is presented to the consciousness exactly as it is with “no further determination of any sort²¹²”. This does not mean that humans cannot grant external objects a sense of significance. Aside from this however, reality is understood materialistically: it is pure stuff. By objectifying the external world, the subject comes to approach the object instrumentally. In other words, the subject sees objects in the external world as objects to be manipulated and controlled. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that this approach to the world is what characterizes reason. For the authors, by developing this type of reason into an epistemology, “matter would at least be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect²¹³”.

²⁰⁹ Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.170

²¹⁰ Horkheimer, M (1937) “Traditional and Critical Theory” in *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1974) as quoted in Horkheimer, M (1978) “The End of Reason” in Arato, A & Gebhardt, E (1978) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* at p.28

²¹¹ Horkheimer uses the example of the military in order to describe how these tenets inform rational behaviour today: “Reason in this sense is as indispensable in the modern technique of war as it has always been in the conduct of business. Its features can be summarized as the optimum adaptation of means to ends, thinking as an energy conserving operation. It is a pragmatic instrument oriented to expediency, cold and sober”. Horkheimer, M (1978) *Supra* in Arato, A and Gebhardt, E (1978) *Supra* at p.28

²¹² Hegel, G.W.F. (1967) *Phenomenology of Mind* transl. By Baillie, J.B at p.590 in Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.170

²¹³ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* at p.6 in Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.170

Enlightenment thought, based on instrumental reason, entails the radical separation of reality into a knowing subject on the one hand, and inert, senseless matter on the other. The latter is thus always dominated by the former. Horkheimer and Adorno draw upon the work of Hegel to explain the aims of the Enlightenment. For Hegel, the divide between subject and object could be overcome by the self-recognition of reason in the world which eventually supersedes enlightened thought. It is the discovery of this ultimate form of reason that transcends the previous forms of enlightened thought (this conception of reason is explained as external and objective). For Horkheimer, Hegel succumbs to the charm of the Enlightenment by arguing that a final objective state of reason could be achieved. Reason should thus strive for a total understanding of reality. The problem of this approach is that it is “totalizing”: it leads to the domination of the world by the concepts that reason constructs.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the nature of reason in modern society is “totalizing”. All phenomena come to be explained in terms of reason, and this is precisely what scientists such as Bacon intended to do by “putting the world to the rack”. Reason is an “absolute concept” which means that it explains all particular, separate external objects in terms of a universal concept. Our understanding of all objects, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is bound up with reason. The world of different explanatory concepts that arise thus have reason in common. Reason therefore “emerges, on the one hand, as a universal property of reality and as the criterion by which reality is judged, and, on the other hand, as an instrument for the subjugation of reality in the service of self preservation²¹⁴”.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the aim of reason is thus not to establish objective truths, but to subject the world to its dictates. For the authors, truth is strictly instrumental: “it is whatever the subject is able to impose upon reality as the truth²¹⁵”: “Truth (and identity) does not consist of correspondence between consciousness and reality or between concepts and their objects; it is an instrument imposed on the reality which it constructs²¹⁶”.

It is at this point that Horkheimer and Adorno's objection to “totalizing reason” becomes apparent. The authors believe that there is no single truth or set of truths that can be established objectively. Humans thus impose truth onto the alienated object world. The goal of achieving the “identity”, or unity of reason and reality, which informs approaches such as Hegel's, is thus a “dishonest” one. The totalizing approach of reason cannot overcome the divide between subject and object, and instead ossifies the subject-object divide.

²¹⁴ Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.169

²¹⁵ Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.173

²¹⁶ Rose, G (1978) *The Melancholy Science* at p.22 in Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.173

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the attempt to provide an inclusive, final account of reason is a totalitarian impulse to dominate the world entirely. It is the human drive to arrive at this final account of “the whole” that characterizes enlightened thought.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, reason drives humankind to explain the world in terms of its causal, rational relationships. Reason thus builds a system of knowledge that places objects within a rationalizing set of explanatory concepts and laws. The external world becomes ordered and explained according to these laws, and so becomes predictable and manipulable. Rationality thus extends to all areas of life under late industrial capitalism. Modern capitalism is a state in which the individual submits herself to the dictates of this rational plan. Horkheimer and Adorno argue, similarly to Lukács, that over history, society becomes increasingly subject to these rational laws (exemplified and refined by the productive process and the market) until culture itself is a mere extension of capitalism. Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno believe that the thought processes, or epistemology, characteristic of modern capitalism, extends from the “internal theoretical foundations of science, to the universalist foundations of morality and law which have come to be embodied in the institutions of constitutional states, in the forms of democratic decision making, and in individualistic patterns of identity formation²¹⁷”.

The drive to explain everything rationally is inextricably linked to the desire to control the object world instrumentally. The instrumental capabilities of humankind develop over time as rationality explains away the unknown. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, instrumental rationality is argued to be responsible for the rise of the complex industrial capitalism of today. It is also maintained that this situation is barbarous, objectifying and inauthentic. The goal of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to explain how humankind have failed to recognize and rectify their conditions of domination. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the answer is a derivative of reification. Instrumental rationality has not been concretely recognized in social critique because it itself has become reified. It has come to define and determine all forms of thought and behaviour, so much so that even critical thought is inextricably bound up with its principles (self-preservation, manipulation for maximum personal utility). The capitalist system of production is instrumental in refining and perfecting these principle of thought, which culminates in the reified approaches of science and technology. In other words, industrial capitalism constructs a political, social and economic system that remorselessly concretizes the principles of instrumental rationality, to the point that they become entirely pervasive and inclusive. In this sense, instrumental rationality becomes unquestioned and all-determining: it has become truly reified.

²¹⁷ Habermas, J (1982) *Supra* at p.18

Negative Dialectics

Although the work of Horkheimer and Adorno differs greatly from that of Marx and Lukács, the former still maintain the Marxist ethic of emancipation from the conditions of capitalist domination. But how do they develop this emancipatory ethic without the use of historical materialism, or the notion of the revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat? One of the developments in the work of the critical theorists, influenced largely by Adorno, was the shift towards “negative dialectics” from the Marxist position of “immanent critique”. I have explained the meaning and intent of immanent critique earlier in this chapter, and for now it is sufficient to say that the purpose of immanent critique is to negate the facticity of the given, or of appearances, so as to arrive at a genuine knowledge of material and social reality. This critique is altered by Adorno, and to a lesser extent, Horkheimer, into a critique based on “negative dialectics”. Negative dialectics is based upon the principles and intentions of Marxist critical theory, but differs in how one should go about pursuing change. One of the important overall goals of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical project is to go beyond the empirical comprehension of the given laws and structures of society. What is discovered is held up to the normative standard of the “realization of the free development of individuals through the rational constitution of society²¹⁸”. In other words, the critical project at hand is the critique of the given in the name of a Utopian-normative standard²¹⁹.

Negative dialectics arose from Horkheimer and Adorno's conviction that emancipation could no longer be sought in the proletariat because there is simply no collective group that could bring about revolutionary change in society. The shift was from a view of history that contained the seeds of change (through contradictions and dialectics) to a view of history that documents the increasing impossibility of change through repression. In other words, regression rather than progress best explains current social conditions; fascism is seen as the logical extension of state capitalism (Adorno calls this process “retrogressive anthropogenesis”)²²⁰. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is thus a grim documentation of what “is”, as well as how humankind have arrived at this repressive state. Bronner states succinctly that the purpose of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to “situate the critique of bourgeois society within an anthropology of domination; they wished to show how progress resulted in barbarism and how the very mythology of domination the Enlightenment sought to destroy reappears as its own product²²¹”.

²¹⁸ Benhabib, S (2004) “The Critique of Instrumental Reason” in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) Supra at p.91-2

²¹⁹ Benhabib, S (2004) Supra in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) Supra at p.92

²²⁰ Bronner, S.E (1994) *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* at p81, also see Honneth, A (1991) *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* transl. Kenneth Baynes p.37 (MIT Press: Massachusetts)

²²¹ Bronner, S.E (1994) Supra at p.81

The biggest objection that Adorno had towards Hegelian and Marxist theory was that, like all Enlightenment philosophers, they strove to establish an “end point”: for Hegel it was absolute reason, for Marx, communism. For both Hegel and Marx, there existed a historically obtainable state of affairs that would be governed by an inclusive, ultimate form of reason with no contradictions. This state would reconcile the divisions between subject and object, appearance and essence, general and particular. The intention of negative dialectics is to show that there is no end to this process of reconciliation. This is because the reason that is employed to reconcile these divisions is bound up with the intention to dominate external reality, which only reinforces these divisions.

For Adorno, Marx and Hegel's dialectic did not offer a satisfactory resolution to social problems because they ended up canceling the tension and the conflict that actually exist within human experience. Adorno believed that Marx and Hegel's dialectical reconciliation²²² is ideological, which leads to an affirmation of the reified present. This is because such “affirmative” dialectics have an end point that inclusively explains all phenomena. For Adorno, such an end point is another form of reification because affirmative dialectics considers the antinomies of bourgeois society to be resolved. Adorno believes that this is not the case however, because the end point is simply a manifestation of the human desire to totally explain and dominate nature. The Hegelian and Marxist concepts of reason are thus unobtainable, and their conceptions of reason are instead foisted upon the external world, creating an ideological understanding of it. For Adorno, reality in affirmative dialectics is attributed with rational properties and therefore, becomes acceptable and unchanging. Adorno argues that Marx and Hegel's²²³ dialectical approach “turn into an ideological defence of one or another of the existing orders and renounce criticism. Therefore any positive formulation of the critical instance becomes useless, even self-defeating²²⁴”.

The approach of negative dialectics must thus be seen in contrast to what it is not. For Adorno, the affirmative dialectical approach simply leads to a continuation of the problems posed by Marx and Hegel (such as alienation, exploitation and domination, as well as the philosophical problems such as subject-object, appearance-essence). This statement is based upon the authors observation that:

The death of philosophy through its own fulfillment in praxis, which revolutionary Marxism promised, has produced unemancipated rationalized societies, in which the philosophy of Marx, as affirmative dialectic of the surpassed contradictions, has been transformed into

²²² For Hegel the realization of Absolute reason as an ordering concept in the world, and for Marx, the culmination of historical materialism and the progression towards a rational communist state.

²²³ Lukács would also fit into Adorno's criticism because of his support of Marx's historical materialism.

²²⁴ Sevilla, S (1997) “Critical Theory and Rationality” in *Boundary 2* Vol.24, No.1 at p.72

ideological concealment of the of the real contradictions²²⁵..

Adorno's criticism of an inclusive rationalizing whole is closely bound up with the refutation of praxis as the goal of critical, emancipatory theory. I have already noted that Horkheimer and Adorno further problematize the relationship between theory and praxis by questioning emancipatory theory's complicit role in perpetuating conditions of domination. For Adorno, a philosophy based upon practice and emancipation requires both a conception of emancipation and an understanding of how one would relate such a conception to practice. Adorno's work in negative dialectics continually highlights the lack of both²²⁶.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, (Adorno in particular) the role of philosophy is to revive and revise the aporetic relationship between theory and praxis, thought and actuality²²⁷. Adorno explains that negative dialectics seeks a “dissonance” between thought and actuality, concept and object, identity and non-identity²²⁸. It is exactly how these categories contradict, and conflict with, one another that allows us to understand the nature of social reality, and the role of the subject within it.

The task of the critic is to illuminate those cracks in the totality, those fissures in the social net, those moments of disharmony and discrepancy, through which the untruth of the whole is revealed and glimmers of another life become visible²²⁹.

Adorno approaches the failure of affirmative dialectics by refuting the notion of a realizable, rational whole. For Adorno, reality is irrefutably irrational and cannot be ordered once and for all in terms of one single concept of reason. But if there is no alternative to irrefutable irrationality, what role is philosophy destined to play? For Adorno, the only relation that the individual can have towards the “absolute” is a vague longing for its incomprehensible transcendent. The contradiction here is that Horkheimer and Adorno are suggesting that the individual should believe in a transcendent concept, but not identify or theorize it, because it would then lose its transcendent character. This is because, according to negative dialectics, only a negative conception of the absolute can negate present reality. If this approach changes towards a positive conception, or identification, of what this absolute is, the concept loses all of its value.

²²⁵ Sevilla, S (1997) *Supra* at p.75

²²⁶ Sullivan, M & Lysaker, J.T. (1992) *Supra* at p.95

²²⁷ Adorno describes the divide between theory and praxis, thought and actuality, subject and object is aporetic because, for him, such problems are, by definition, insoluble contradictions, or unsolvable puzzles, there is no end point, or resolution between them.

²²⁸ Benhabib, S (2004) *Supra* in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) *Supra* at p.107

²²⁹ Benhabib, S (2004) *Supra* in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) *Supra* at p.107

So, for instance, one can yearn for a perfect sense of justice, but as soon as one attempts to deliberately describe and understand what this entails, the concept becomes “affirmative”. This is because the explanatory concept immediately relates to its content and content becomes “rigidly attached”. The immediacy between concept and content thus describes a conceptual link between the concept and the material object that subsequently becomes “fixed”. Concept thus determines the content to which the concept refers. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this is a case of reason projecting its motives (the instrumental domination of nature) onto the external object world. The subject foists meaning upon the external object world, further contributing to the rationalized whole which is instrumental knowledge.

Adorno argues that no single rationality must prevail, and that critical theory must remain sensitive to the “constant displacement in unforeseeable directions of an impoverishing social rationalization process²³⁰”. There is thus no type of reason that will emancipate all humankind. Historical experience is thus open, and cannot be inclusively explained in terms of an “ultimate form of reason”. The *Dialectic Of Enlightenment* therefore, provides a “totalizing critique” of contemporary society, and does so without formulating a proper emancipatory dynamic because it would be inconsistent with the principles of negative dialectics. As I have noted above, Horkheimer and Adorno did not believe in the Marxian conception of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Horkheimer himself wrote prior to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the working class, instead of being the vehicle of social change, “... are the apes of their wardens, worship the symbol of their prison and, far from attacking their guardians, stand ready to tear to pieces the person who undertakes to free them from their tutelage²³¹”. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the development of the forces of production, and humanity's increased mastery over nature, clearly did not lead to a diminished state of domination as Marx thought. Instead, they maintain that the more rationalized the domination of nature becomes, the more sophisticated societal domination becomes²³².

The Dialectic of Enlightenment

But what is it exactly about the totalizing nature of reason that necessarily results in a social system characterized by domination? Apart from it being totalizing, what is wrong with instrumental reason? Horkheimer and Adorno answer this indirectly by showing that instrumental rationality (or Enlightenment) is responsible for creating the undesirable, barbarous and impoverished conditions of modern society. We have therefore, arrived at the crux of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument: how Enlightenment has resulted in its

²³⁰ Sevilla, S (1997) Supra at p.73

²³¹ Horkheimer, M (1978) *Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland* at p.89 in Shaw, B.J. (1985) Supra at p.168

²³² Benhabib, S (2004) Supra in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) Supra at p.98

exact opposite: barbarism and domination.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the essence of Enlightenment is emancipatory: “its goal is to overcome the myths which keep humanity in a state of thalldrom and fear and this it does by replacing human fancy with scientific knowledge²³³”. However, this quest for Enlightenment has had the opposite effect: it has produced new structures of myth, fear and domination. This reversal takes place “behind the back of the increasingly enlightened individual, and is thus beyond enlightened self-reflection²³⁴”. Jurgen Habermas poignantly explains the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as follows:

In terms of world history, the human species has distanced itself ever further from its origins, through the process of Enlightenment, while still not freeing itself from those mythical origins. An almost completely rationalized modern world only seems to be demystified; on it rests in fact the curse of demonic objectification and fatal isolation²³⁵.

Enlightenment is thus based upon freedom from superstition and myth. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the progression towards scientific thought, from mythical thought, was based on the notion that “From now on, matter would at least be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities”. “Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown²³⁶”.

In the light of the statements above, it seems strange to argue that Enlightenment could possibly become mythological. The central thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that this process of Enlightenment capitulates to the domain of myth, despite all its attempts to divorce itself from myth²³⁷. To reiterate, the authors argue that the common perception that “modernity itself is the end of myth” is misguided. Modernity, or Enlightenment only *presents* itself as the end of myth, and in its attempts to obliterate myth, it comes to embrace and embody it, only in a different form: that of the fetishization of the methods of science. In other words, the instrumental methodological approach of science and technology becomes the new unquestioned myth that dominates the explanation of the world around us.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, nature becomes subject to calculation and quantification (science), which allows humankind to instrumentally manipulate it for its own ends (technology). In this way, enlightened thought becomes an instrument for the domination of nature. Enlightenment is therefore, a process based on

²³³ Fluxman, T (1991) “Bob Dylan and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Lyricist in the Age of High Capitalism” in *Theoria* 77, May 1991 at p.91-92

²³⁴ Bubner, R (2004) Supra in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) Supra at p.

²³⁵ Habermas, J (1982) Supra at p.16

²³⁶ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.16

²³⁷ Habermas, J (1982) Supra at p.14

the human desire to dominate nature and assert the individual, i.e. establish the self as a self-determining subject. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this process is perfected by the methods of science.

At this point we are reminded of the overarching thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: that even though it seems as if rationality and enlightened thought are overcoming the irrationality of myth, science as an epistemological approach is becoming a form of mythic thought itself. For Horkheimer and Adorno, it has become mythical because, as a paradigm, it doesn't question the basis of its knowledge or the practices of thinking. Science comes to create a limited and closed system of thought which is “an automatic, self-activating process; and impersonation of the machine that it produces itself so that ultimately the machine can replace it²³⁸”.

Instead of thought being free, enlightened thought becomes predetermined. Thought, in other words, is controlled and repetitive because of an unreflexive reliance upon the principles of the scientific approach. It must be remembered that this occurs in the same way that myth, or the supernatural, becomes the unquestioned basis for early humankind's approach towards reality. Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is that science comes to fulfill the same function. The adoption of the methodology of science becomes the only true way in which reality can be understood. It is this unquestioned reliance upon the methodological paradigm of science that amounts to a myth-like condition.

Humans and nature become the subjects of domination, submitting themselves and their thought to the preconditions of reason and modernity, science and rationality. This analysis of the role of science is similar to Lukács' theory of reification, which also argues that the “law-like” nature of the processes of capitalism dominates humans, sealing their fate as dominated subjects of capitalism. This is because the methodology of the instrumental scientific approach analyzes facts as they appear to humankind. Facts are placed into explanatory scientific theories which, when verified, become laws. These laws become reified and are foisted upon other unexplained phenomena in order to fit them into their rationalizing framework. Horkheimer and Adorno, when referring to the unquestioned, fetishized practices of science and instrumental rationality, are thus clearly borrowing from Lukács and his theory of reification.

It should be noted at this point that the authors are not against science as a mode of thought per se. They accept it as an appropriate methodology for understanding the material world. The critique of science and technology is rather based upon the argument that it is not appropriate to use the methodology of natural science to understand the human world of history, politics, philosophy and sociology. Mathematically based

²³⁸ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* at p.25 in Dant, T (2003) *Supra* at p.25

science thus should not be the model for all human knowledge because not every phenomenon can be reduced to its grounding in sensory experience and observation. This approach to the understanding of the social is found in the positivist school²³⁹ which Horkheimer and Adorno criticize at length.

For Adorno, positivism is characterised by two features which are not necessarily linked together. One is the application of the natural sciences to society, the other is the notion that one presupposes that which exists positively to be absolutely existent²⁴⁰. Positivism's drive to explain all things rationally characterizes the efforts of science, which becomes the paragon of enlightened thought.

Reason abandons its self-consciousness as something other than the world and declares itself by fiat to be identical with it. This is strikingly evinced in Hegel's system, but asserts itself also in the natural sciences and their self-understanding, positivism. Positivism is the *terminus ad quem* of enlightenment: the surrender of the enlightenment to the sheer brute force of facts²⁴¹.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, positivism is like all other philosophical systems in that it seeks to annul “all that refuses to be swept up into it”. For the positivists truth is self-evident. This approach however is based upon the assumption that positivism possesses the necessary analytical tools to appropriate the truth unproblematically. For Horkheimer and Adorno, positivism as an approach simply “yields to the facts as they are”.

Logical positivism is believed to be the consequence of scientific fetishism. Scientific fetishism here refers to the pervasive methodology of science which has become the dominant, and unquestioned approach to explaining the world around us. Horkheimer and Adorno's objection is that the positivist approach to the social tries to reduce the subject to an object (the human to an abstracted object of empirical study) that can be studied with the techniques and methods of the material sciences. Adorno argues in his later life that this criticism of positivism does not mean that the study of the individual as an object is necessarily wrong (this

²³⁹ Logical positivism, also called positivism, is a philosophical movement based upon the core approaches of empiricism and verificationism. The driving force of the positivism that grew out of the 1920's was the adherence to verifiability criteria for the meaningfulness of cognitive statements. For the positivists, this meant that theory that could not be subjected to scientific criteria was not worth studying. Positivists thus rejected religion, morality and metaphysics. The positivist approach is based upon experience, and how thoughts about the world can be reduced to their constituent material experiences. They thus believed that any statement about the world must be verifiable through experience and observation (Audi, R (ed) (1995) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* at p.445). Positivists argue that theories should be built upon generalizations which are in turn based upon observation. If this is not possible, the subject of study must fall outside the realm of proper scientific discourse (Kuper, A & Kuper, J (eds) (2004) *The Social Science Encyclopedia* 3rd ed at p.770).

²⁴⁰ Heller, A & Ritter, M (1978) “The Positivism Dispute as a Turning Point in German Post-War Theory” in *New German Critique* No.15 (autumn, 1978) at p.56

²⁴¹ Shaw, B.J. (1985) *Supra* at p.173

would mean that the advances of biological science and medicine are themselves wrong), but that the subject of society, or the task of studying humanity as a whole, cannot be reduced to the status of an object. For the authors, the very methodology, or approach that is used to understand the social, must be scrutinized.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, positivism (which can also entails a scientific approach to the social) cannot take up a position that is outside of society and therefore, can never study it objectively. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that such an approach renounces the ideals of morality, struggle and “what could be” for an explanation of “what is”. Scientific positivism creates an insular understanding of the world which does not formulate alternatives to current, observable reality because it only examines the factuality of “what is”. For Horkheimer and Adorno, validity claims have come to be monopolized by the scientific approach. In effect, what results is a fusion of power and validity claims which contributes to the power of scientific explanations over all other forms of explanation. This is demonstrated clearly by the positivist approach to the human sciences which the authors believe should not adopt the fetishized methods and principles of the physical sciences. Despite this, science and instrumental rationality increasingly inform the process of knowledge formation and legitimation outside of physical science. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the natural scientific approach to the social has a social impact that goes beyond the domination of nature: it results in the domination of human nature as well. The critique of Enlightenment is thus a critique of the fetishization of science and its methods, not only within science but within culture as a whole. The principles of rationality, as explained earlier, thus come to pervade all areas of thought and knowledge. Their reified, law-like nature is what Horkheimer and Adorno mean when they argue that “science has become myth”²⁴².

The logic of instrumental rationality is therefore, pervasive in modern society. Instrumental rationality is also directly related to the historical development of social domination. It is Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that not only science and the economy display characteristics of instrumental rationality: all areas of life in capitalist society do. Domination is so complex because it is an ontological state. Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that the last remaining sphere of freedom from this pervasive domination, culture, has also become an extension of capitalism. The culture industry is of particular importance because it is received and consumed relentlessly, *en masse*. The culture industry deals with people's minds directly, and is capable of propagating values and norms through the mediums of radio, television, newspapers, movies and magazines. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry, based upon the principles of instrumental rationality and the capitalist profit incentive, convinces individuals that capitalism is a “natural” state. The culture industry therefore disseminates the ideology of capitalism, and actively contributes to the reification of the social system of capitalism.

²⁴² Dant, T (2003) *Supra* at p.25-26

The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception

The concepts of commodity fetishism and reification explain the way in which capitalism appears to humans. In other words, fetishism and reification explain the way in which phenomena are objectively experienced in capitalist society, which leads individuals to an understanding of the world that is different to the way that it actually *is*. Commodity fetishism and reification conceal the human processes and actions that constitutes the economic and social structures of capitalism, as well as how they come to be. The ossification and subsequent inability to see beyond these appearance forms, is what binds individuals to the fate of capitalism and its productive processes. I believe that the importance of the culture industry lies in how it represents and displays its own version of reality, which is instrumental in maintaining the ideology of fetishism and reification, resulting in the reproduction of domination.

Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism provides the model for the critique of Lukács' reification, and continues to do so for Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of culture. Again, what is important here is the reification of the social and historical into the natural. The authors argue accordingly that:

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a process by which the domination of nature results in regression to nature in the form of a society that is a second nature; history as domination is a natural history that recreates barbarism²⁴³.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, culture conceals the constitutive activity of humans in the same way that the exchange of commodities conceals the process of the production of commodities, or the laws of the market conceal the constitution of these laws in concrete human activities and relations. Culture thus hides the collective activities of humans beneath its appearance. This collective activity is constrained and controlled by the reification that Lukács identified. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the dominant rationality of capitalism develops into a social reality, where all contradictions disappear along with the possibility of formulating alternatives to the capitalist system of political economy.

In this situation, the authors argue that humans lack the ability to be properly self-reflexive. They do not, and cannot, see that they are being controlled by a totalizing system whose ideological mouthpiece is the culture industry. This human condition is one where the economy rules over all personal relationships, and the universal control of commodities extends over the totality of life, creating “a new and naked form of

²⁴³ Hullot-Kentor, R (1992) Supra at p.105

command and obedience²⁴⁴". The oft repeated word "totalizing" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* refers directly to the totality of domination, and that nothing is outside its reach. For Horkheimer and Adorno, domination has evolved since the work of Marx and Lukács: it has changed from a quasi-natural phenomenon which denies its own historicity, into a type of domination that strives to increasingly manipulate nature by internalizing and controlling it. Marx and Lukács sought to demystify the naturalization of the historical by showing the human relations that constitute economic and social institutions²⁴⁵. The point was to show that history is a product of the collective agency of humans, and can thus be changed (in principle). Horkheimer and Adorno on the other hand, attempt to demystify the historicization of the natural by analyzing the movement of history differently. The authors intention is to reveal the mechanisms at work that come to construct the present condition of domination in society (the focus of the sections preceding this one).

Horkheimer and Adorno agree entirely with Marx and Lukács that the commodity is pervasive in industrialized society. In modern capitalism, commodities lose all their economic qualities except for fetishism, which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as extending "its arthritic influence over all aspects of social life". Commodities are instrumental in creating and maintaining conditions of domination, which have only become more advanced and pervasive with the development of the culture industry. The authors argue that through "countless agencies of mass production and its culture the conventionalized modes of behaviour are impressed upon the individual as the only *natural, respectable, and rational ones*²⁴⁶". This statement is again similar to Lukács' argument that reification, and the "naturalization" of the political economy, results in a reified consciousness which perceives capitalism as "the best we can hope for". Capitalism becomes all embracing, and in turn models experiences and perceptions from the classroom to the trade union. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry contributes immensely to this process of socialization. The culture industry thus conditions the individual into accepting, and continuing to accept, conditions of exploitation and domination. I will explain *how* it does this as this chapter unfolds.

Horkheimer and the Frankfurt school intended to explore "the interconnection between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual and transformations in the realm of culture²⁴⁷". In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, culture is argued to be the mediator between the individual and broader society. Amongst other things, the concern of the authors stems from the manipulation of the population of Germany under National Socialism. It is a concern that is based on the propagation of ideas from one to the many. In particular, radio and film could be used to broadcast ideas to a number of people never before thought

²⁴⁴ Hullot-Kentor, R (1992) Supra at p.103

²⁴⁵ Benhabib, S (2004) Supra in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) Supra at p.103

²⁴⁶ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.28

²⁴⁷ Dant, T (2003) Supra at p.110 quote taken from Held, D (1980) Supra at p.33

possible. The technology of the new forms of mass communication meant that a relatively small production process, controlled by a relatively small amount of people, could reach a large amount of people. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the new medium could also be used to encourage the consumption of identical cultural goods, even if potential consumers lived different lives in different corners of the country, and indeed, the globe²⁴⁸.

It is this possibility of mass cultural dissemination, combined with the fact that the culture industry aims principally to pacify and “dumb down” mass society, that Horkheimer and Adorno find so alarming. The culture industry achieves this “dumbing down” of the populace by overshadowing the potential of art to provoke critical thought. Instead, the industry engages in the mass production of idiotic, bland and repetitive cultural commodities. Critical and artistic forms of culture are thus drowned out by the continual bombardment of the inane. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry fetishizes its ideas and presents them as things in the same way that the alienating production process fetishizes commodities which appear as things: “As with commodity production in general, the social form fetishizes cultural products, creating specific cultural and economic value in intangible commodities such as the entertainment value of a film or the artistic value of a painting²⁴⁹”. Powers and value are attached and attributed to the products of the culture industry in the same way as commodities are fetishized in the realm of exchange value. Humans thus come to fetishize the cultural product and give it value that it does not have in itself.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the power of the cultural commodity is immense. The cultural commodity remains the only retreat from the mundane and repressive labour process, which accounts for its popularity and influence. In other words, humans look to the consumption of cultural commodities to salvage any sense of happiness in life. Horkheimer and Adorno's argument however, is that culture has become an extension of the work process itself. What humans perceive to be an escape from the pains of the labour process, is instead another form of domination based on the same principles.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, modern culture reflects the values and principles of capitalism. It is this insight that contributes extensively to our understanding of conditions of domination. The culture industry accounts for the continuing acceptance of this situation by the oppressed who are kept in a state of bemused depression by the products of the culture industry. This is the functional importance of the culture industry: it maintains the inequalities and injustices of capitalism. In brief, we have discovered “what it does”. The culture industry is Horkheimer and Adorno's answer to why social change has not occurred in any effective and substantive

²⁴⁸ Dant, T (2003) *Supra* at p.110

²⁴⁹ Adorno, T (1991) at p.33-35 in Dant, T (2003) *Supra* at p.110

way. At this point it becomes important to establish exactly “how it does this”. The rest of this section will address this issue in detail by identifying the various ways in which domination is extended and maintained. For clarity's sake I will establish these mechanisms here and explain them in detail below. The authors break the mechanisms of cultural domination down into the following categories²⁵⁰: 1) the loss of true individuality and freedom; 2) the prescription of normative frameworks; 3) the repression of dissidence and rebellion; and 4) the debasement of art by entertainment.

1) Mass Production and the Loss of True Individuality and Freedom

Horkheimer maintained that the idea of true individual freedom was inimical to the specific form of bureaucratic domination that existed within the era of advanced industrial capitalism²⁵¹. In modern capitalist society however, individuality is lost because of the mass production of culture. Individuality today can only be expressed through the consumption of standardized, mass produced cultural commodities. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this modern form of commodified culture “impresses the same stamp upon everything²⁵²”. This uniform culture is the product of the modern system of mass media; films, radio and magazines thus constitute a system “which is uniform as a whole and in every part²⁵³”. This however, seems counter-intuitive. Surely the sheer quantity of different publications and films catering for different tastes, lifestyles and interests proves otherwise? Horkheimer and Adorno extend this critique to the Western pluralist democratic system. They argue that even the appearance of choice and the apparent political opposites, such as the Democrats and the Republicans, or Labour and the Conservatives, “are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system²⁵⁴”. Again, how is this possible with such apparent opposites?

The authors substantiate their position by arguing from a systemic perspective. Their critique is thus a meta-critique that examines how the apparent choice and freedom that we consider to be the pillars of Western civilization, are in fact a subtle and advanced forms of domination. Where the democratic citizen sees freedom of choice and equality, Horkheimer and Adorno see producers and consumers who exercise a specious freedom which acts to reproduce and ratify the status quo. For Horkheimer and Adorno, society is a

²⁵⁰ These categories by no means provide an inclusive list of all the issues covered by Horkheimer and Adorno in their essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”. It will also become apparent that the content of each category is largely overlapping, and at times repetitive. This is largely due to the nature of the work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was in fact a transcription of a series of conversations between Horkheimer and Adorno. This accounts for the unsystematic content of each chapter, and why it has proved difficult to extract separate and defined threads of argument from the chapter on the culture industry. Despite this, I believe that a slightly refined argument is possible, so long as each category is placed within its broader context: as an explanation of *how* the culture industry prolongs and perfects the conditions of capitalist domination.

²⁵¹ Bronner, S.E (1994) Supra at p.80

²⁵² Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.120

²⁵³ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.120

²⁵⁴ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.120

collective of individuals that are drawn together into the center of a system in search of work, pleasure and identity. The most important thing to note however, is that all the choices that the system offers, as multitudinous as they appear to be, are still choices that fit neatly into a particular framework. This framework is that of reified capitalism. The freedom that it provides is the freedom to work and live within its parameters.

It is important to remember that the culture industry remains the entertainment business. Its influence is exercised through the medium of entertainment and leisure. But the industry and its relation to individuals is not yet dictatorial in the sense that it can make an entire populace want the same individual thing. It can however, make them want different things, and it is this universal “desire” for “things” that is essentially the same. The desire to consume, is thus the universal maxim, and it is the culture industry which provides the means to satisfy these wants.

For Horkheimer and Adorno however, the ability to choose different things does not constitute freedom. In reality, individualism in capitalist society is an illusion. There is, in fact, no distinction between the particular (the desires and tastes of the individual) and the general (the culture industry which caters for these desires) because all mass culture is fundamentally identical. It is important to note that the forms of mass culture are identical in their systemic function as, opposed to their individual, physical, or apparent differences. For instance, it is obvious to state that there is a difference between a publication concentrating on cars and a publication aimed towards women and the beauty industry. Their similarity however, arises from the fact that both prescribe and condone lifestyles based upon the consumption of commodities in order to a sense of pseudo-individuality: “Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape: the distinctions are emphasized and extended²⁵⁵”.

The culture industry is based upon the ideals of liberalism, freedom of choice and individuality. However, the authors believe that liberalism and individuality cannot exist substantively because of the rigid principles of the culture industry, and how it creates the boundaries of choice and action. Horkheimer and Adorno thus argue that one of the main purposes of the culture industry is to constrain thought and action. At the same time however, these constraints are not subject to critical reflection because the culture industry portrays itself as a proponent of liberalism and freedom of choice (it apparently provides an array of alternatives which are

²⁵⁵ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.123

based on the various desires and tastes of self-determining individuals). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the liberalism and freedom of choice that the culture industry offers is only pseudo-individualism – individualism within strict parameters. This is what Horkheimer and Adorno mean when they state that “[t]he culture industry, the most rigid of all styles, proves to be the goal of liberalism²⁵⁶”.

It might seem strange to the reader that thought could be constrained by the culture industry. It appears, at first glance, that the culture industry offers a variety of forms of entertainment, and no particular form of thought could arise from it. Horkheimer and Adorno argue otherwise. They contend that even though differences exist, the fundamental principles, messages and norms remain constant in all forms of cultural commodities. One of the most important mechanisms of repression that result in the “dumbing down” of the populace is “monotony”: “Anyone who doubts the power of monotony is a fool²⁵⁷”. Horkheimer and Adorno go on to say that “the bread which the culture industry offers is the stone of the stereotype²⁵⁸”. The constant and monotonous production and reproduction of the industry itself serves to confirm the immutability of current circumstances, both of capitalist production, and of the culture industry. It has already been argued that the culture industry is totalizing, and the authors push this point further by stating that “this hollow ideology is in deadly earnest: everyone is provided for²⁵⁹”. The way that the culture industry involves everyone is through the guarantee of freedom of choice. However, this freedom of choice is systemically fettered because of the process of socialization. The authors describe this situation as one where

No one is officially responsible for what he thinks. Instead everyone is enclosed at an early age in a system of churches, clubs, professional associations and other such concerns, which constitute the most sensitive instrument of social control. Anyone who wants to avoid ruin must see that he is not found wanting when weighed in the scales of this apparatus. Otherwise, he will lag behind in life and finally perish²⁶⁰.

Individuality is lost as soon as one embraces and identifies with the ideology of capitalism and the culture industry. Only pseudo-individuality remains, with the difference between people being so small that it becomes obsolete. The differences between individuals are based upon peculiarities which become commodified. What we perceive as difference, for instance, an accent, a hairstyle or a type of dress, is a type of pseudo-individualism that simply provides for a multitude of variations which do not detract from the

²⁵⁶ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.131

²⁵⁷ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.148

²⁵⁸ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.148

²⁵⁹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.149

²⁶⁰ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.150

central uniformity of the individual. Horkheimer and Adorno describe this situation using the metaphor of mass produced Yale locks: each lock must remain different (for argument's sake), but this difference is only measured in fractions of millimeters. The mechanism, function and overall appearance of the lock is uniform. But by providing the illusion of difference in the insignificant (appearance, manner, taste), the underlying conformity and oppression of capitalist society can continue unchallenged.

The choice within the framework of consumer capitalism does not mean that everybody freely expresses a differing and divergent sense of identity. Conformity is the basis of advanced capitalism, and is greatly influenced and determined by the culture industry. If we think about the relationship between individualism and conformity, it becomes clear that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the desire for individuation is subsumed by a larger act of conformity: “On the faces of private individuals and movie heroes put together according to the patterns on magazine covers vanishes a pretense in which no one now believes; the popularity of the hero models comes partly from a secret satisfaction that the effort to achieve individuation has at last been replaced by the effort to imitate, which is admittedly more breathless²⁶¹”. Conformity is thus the underlying process that dominates the actions and behaviour of the subject. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the quest for individualism is shallow because it has been replaced by a larger, more silent, effort to imitate.

2) The Prescription of Normative Frameworks

For Horkheimer and Adorno, one of the most important effects of the culture industry is the prescription of normative behavioural frameworks which come to inform and define how humans react to society and each other:

The culture industry tends to make itself the embodiment of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order. It skilfully steers a winding course between the cliffs of demonstrable misinformation and manifest truth, faithfully reproducing the phenomenon whose opaqueness blocks any insight and installs the ubiquitous and intact phenomenon as ideal. Ideology is split into the photograph of stubborn life and the naked lie about its meaning – which is not expressed but suggested and yet drummed in²⁶².

The most important effect that the culture industry has is the mass conformity of behaviour and thought, alluded to in the above section. The culture industry, in its portrayal of human events (in film for instance), prescribes norms of behaviour, or what is “expected” of the ordinary individual, faced with alienating,

²⁶¹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.156

²⁶² Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.147

oppressive social reality. The culture industry does this by disseminating the same underlying messages to a vast number of people through the media of radio, film, television and publications. As I have argued above, the culture industry utilizes the same techniques and methods as propaganda to drum in the social reality of capitalism, which humankind come to take for granted. Horkheimer and Adorno believe that the culture industry has been so successful in this regard, that the dominated have come to wholly embrace their position of unhappiness and servitude:

As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them²⁶³.

The authors argue that the persistent commodification of the culture industry has become instrumental in shaping humankind's behaviour outside of work. Leisure time, previously viewed as an area of life in which humankind could express creativity outside the fetters of the oppressive work process, has become confined to the offerings of the culture industry. The individual's leisure time is confined to an acceptance of what the culture industry offers her. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the subject of mass culture is passive: she is absorbed by the world which is created for her and “no scope is left for the imagination²⁶⁴”. Individuals become conditioned by the normative representations of the products of the culture industry. The problem however, is that cultural commodities are products of the capitalist productive process, and are therefore created according to capitalist principles.

But what are these capitalist principles that underpin the production of all cultural commodities? In short, capitalist production is driven by rationality, calculability, predictability, efficiency and profit. In order to earn as much profit as possible, the productive process must be as efficient as possible. Most importantly, the finished product must be consumed by as many people as possible. Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that, in order to guarantee favourable profit margins, capitalists have come to utilize certain formulas and techniques that can be seen in the commodity itself. Formulas allow the financiers and backers of the culture industry to determine the success of a production to a large degree. An example of a rudimentary formula is that of simplicity: The content of the various commodities is simplified in order to maximize predictability and acceptance by the public. This simplification follows a tested pattern, which is foisted upon the consumer with cyclic regularity. For Horkheimer and Adorno, formulas are aimed at encouraging as little imagination and critical thought as possible in order to maximize profit margins.

²⁶³ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.134

²⁶⁴ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.127

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that, over and above the use of repetitive and rudimentary formulas, the culture industry produces goods which tell stories on how to orientate one's self within capitalist society. These stories, articles, movies etc. demonstrate how individuals should deal with misery and oppression in modern society. These normative lessons are however, presented as entertainment; an escape from social reality. The culture industry uses sex, violence, fun and laughter as formulas for creating the illusion of enjoyment. But the repeated exposure of these formulas inevitably acts to devalue and strip them of their content. Love is downgraded to over-dramatized romance, and violence between the characters on screen becomes a form of violence against the spectator. The following point made by Horkheimer and Adorno refers directly to the normative influences of the culture industry, and how they entail lessons and principles that individuals should live their lives by. For the authors, the use of violence in movies becomes a lesson that:

...continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment²⁶⁵

Violence therefore, takes the form of a threat; it is a threat to those who deviate from the expected behavioural norms.

The reader must be careful when reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to not experience it as a work in cultural elitism. Adorno in particular criticizes the popular music industry and argues that “hit songs” and “jazz music” are products of the culture industry, thus working to dumb-down the audience through mass production, standardization, simplicity and repetition. It very well might be, and probably is correct to say, that Adorno did not like jazz music at all. He was a classically trained composer and musical critic, but he saw the need to criticize jazz and popular music on grounds other than taste. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno argues that the formulaic approach of the film, radio and television industries can be applied in the same way to the popular music industry. It is not the type of music in itself that is bad or repressive; it is the fact that it is a form of commodified art that reflects and propagates the logic and structure of capitalism, and therefore, actively works to maintain domination and alienation. One of the ways that popular music, or jazz music for that matter, does this is by approaching its cultural product formulaically. In the factory, production is reduced to a set of systematic, formulaic steps that produce qualitatively similar commodities. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the production of cultural commodities, such as a jazz song, follow the same productive logic. For the authors, popular music and jazz music become different expressions

²⁶⁵ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.138, 139, 140

of these underlying formulas.

In hit music... the structure underlying the piece is abstract, existing independent of the specific course of the music. ... For the complicated in popular music never functions as 'itself' but only as a disguise or embellishment behind which the scheme can always be perceived²⁶⁶.

It is thus clear that for Adorno, jazz music does not divert from an underlying rhythm and structure: In jazz there is thus “an overlaying of superficial change upon underlying musical elements that are repeated more or less unaltered²⁶⁷”. The underlying elements that remain largely unchanged are things like beat and tone. For Adorno, these constants are masked by things such as vibrato, syncopation and displacement.

Jazz for Adorno is thus rigid, unchanging, or non-dialectical. The musical elements that would usually develop out of each other sequentially, each bearing a necessary relationship to its antecedent or consequent, are instead strung out beside one another: a juxtaposing of co-incidentals. For Adorno, jazz is drained of all dialectical relations. Jazz is instead based upon a structured strand of individual performances that are essentially formulaic (main riff – solo – main riff – solo – etc). The rigid structure of jazz music is indicative of all the products of the culture industry. They are images of totalitarian control. Collective oppression, massification, authoritarianism thus appear in the inner elements among jazz compositions²⁶⁸.

Adorno's contempt towards jazz can be seen as a case in point of what both Horkheimer and Adorno view as the impoverishing effects of all cultural commodities. In other words, what is wrong with jazz, is what is wrong with all cultural commodities. For Horkheimer and Adorno, cultural commodities are bound up with the principles and logic of mass production and instrumental rationality. Jazz music, and all other cultural commodities thus reflect, in its inner relations, the larger social relations that exist in capitalist society. The principle of “structuration” is thus present in jazz, and other cultural commodities. Structuration means that the repetition of the individual acts, or parts of a jazz song, reproduces the rigid structure, or formula of the song. For Adorno, this principle also applies to the social where the repetition of the acts of individual agents reproduce the structure of society.

The formula of popular music is also meant to keep the audience in their situation of passivity; they do not need to actively listen and engage with the various parts of the music because it is mass produced, and

²⁶⁶ Adorno, T (1990) at p. 305 in Dant, T Supra at p.113

²⁶⁷ Witkin, R.W. (2000) “Why did Adorno Hate Jazz” in *Sociological Theory* Vol.18, No.1 at p.146

²⁶⁸ Witkin, R.W. (2000) Supra at p.146

intended to cater for the lowest common denominator. Mass produced cultural commodities are therefore, packaged to be unchallenging and uncritical. All disturbing content is removed, and the cultural commodity becomes affirmative of the conditions of life in capitalism, *instead of critical of them*. In the case of music, the listener, subconsciously responding to mass produced, familiar song formulas, thus feels “on safe ground” when faced with “cutting edge” popular music. For Adorno, even the improvised jazz solo was not aimed at disrupting a smooth listening experience because ultimately, it formed a part of the jazz standard. The formulaic approach to music, in any form, constrains and limits music's potential as a work of art²⁶⁹.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the formulaic approach of the culture industry “dumbs down” mass society by inhibiting the individual's critical capacity to think beyond these formulas. In other words, it atrophies the faculty of reflexive, critical thought. It is also important to note that, through the formulaic and repetitive approach to entertainment, humankind come to adopt the behavioural characteristics that are represented as “the norm” by the culture industry. The authors argue that the continued repetition of these formulas and conventions result in them becoming behavioural norms (for example, the romantic comedy prescribes a set of roles and behaviours that become the nature of romantic relations in real life). The culture industry is normative, and through repetition, it becomes an apparent reflection of normal human life and behaviour. The reality of this reflection however, is that it is caused by humans conforming to the model of the culture industry, instead of the other way around. For Horkheimer and Adorno this condition is demonstrated by:

The way in which a girl accepts and keeps the obligatory date, the inflection on the telephone or in the most intimate situation, the choice of words in conversation, and the whole inner life as classified by the now somewhat devalued depth psychology, bear witness to man's attempt to make himself a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry. The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions²⁷⁰.

It has been established that the meticulous representation of the world by the culture industry elevates the disagreeable conditions of existence to a “given”, or “second nature”. By portraying the world, the appearance forms of capitalism become facts. Whatever the camera reproduces thus shapes our understanding

²⁶⁹ Dant, T (2003) *Supra* at p.113 Popular music for Adorno clearly does not allow for critical reflection. This implies that there is another type of music that encourages critical reflection, and which could be potentially emancipatory. For Adorno, emancipatory music does exist, but his analysis of what constitutes emancipation is tied up with the theory of negative dialectics.

²⁷⁰ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.167

and perception of the world around us; it contextualizes and tells a story of it. By doing this, the culture industry becomes normative and provides behavioural guidelines for its subjects. The culture industry is normative because it forces upon its mass audience a type of human existence and behaviour that is idealized, or “expected”. It also prescribes, and demonstrates the most efficient forms of existence that deal with the “difficulties of life”, or the miseries of life under capitalism:

The masses, demoralized by their life under the pressure of the system, and who show signs of civilization only in modes of behaviour which have been forced upon them and through which fury and recalcitrance show everywhere, are to be kept in order by the sight of an inexorable life and exemplary behaviour. Culture has always played its part in taming the revolutionary and barbaric instincts. Industrial culture adds its contribution. It shows the condition under which this merciless life can be lived at all²⁷¹.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, films represent the “permanently desperate situations” which are endemic to oppressed existence. It is the function of cultural commodities (e.g. films) to show that, in such circumstances, “one can go on living”²⁷². The culture industry is thus a clear instrument and broadcaster of ideology; it propagates the ideology of defeatism, of one's nothingness, which is shared with society as a whole. The culture industry explains how individuals come to embrace social conditions which dominate them. In this process humans renounce their claim to equality, freedom and true happiness: “everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness²⁷³”. In order to substantiate their claim that the culture industry develops and nurtures normative models of behaviour, Horkheimer and Adorno turn to the concept of tragedy.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the concept of tragedy demonstrates how forms of contentious thought, that intend to challenge the normative frameworks and values of capitalist society (part of the old liberal-bourgeois culture), have become debased and meaningless. In the past, tragedy used to glorify the opposition of the individual; it represented “the bravery and freedom of emotion before a powerful enemy, an exalted affliction, a dreadful problem²⁷⁴”. Tragedy no longer typifies meaningful opposition in contemporary society. The new concept of tragedy is not based on defiance, but of defenselessness and the capacity to survive one's own ruin in the face of an oppressive force. This signifies the abolition of the self-assertiveness of the individual, or as Horkheimer and Adorno put it: “This liquidation of tragedy confirms the abolition of the

²⁷¹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.152

²⁷² Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.153

²⁷³ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.153

²⁷⁴ Nietzsche, F *Gotzendämmerung, Werke*, Vol. VIII at p.136 in Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.154

individual²⁷⁵”.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the culture industry uses the concept of tragedy to prescribe how society should “go on with their lives”, despite the pervasiveness of human tragedy (for example, poverty). The authors argue that by empathizing, society vicariously admits to the suffering which it has created. Horkheimer and Adorno believe however, that the culture industry turns the tragedy of the destitute into an inevitability. The culture industry does not hide from this reality and instead “takes great pride in looking it in the face like a man²⁷⁶”. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the approach of the culture industry is no shrink from tragedy at all. Mass culture deals with the tragedy of the destitute directly “in the same way as centralized society does not abolish the suffering of its members but records and plans it²⁷⁷”. Tragedy is dealt with by carefully constructing it as a calculated and accepted aspect of the world, which for capitalism as a whole, is a blessing. It creates the impression that society does not completely ignore the reality of destitution. At the same time however, the adoption of tragedy by the culture industry fosters a perception of tragedy as an inevitable and uncontrollable part of society. The culture industry thus assigns tragedy a fixed place in the routine. Tragedy will, and does, happen to those who do not cooperate with capitalism: “Tragic fate becomes just punishment²⁷⁸”. This ideological manipulation of human tragedy into “a necessary suffering” is what Horkheimer and Adorno describe as “a blessing for capitalism”²⁷⁹.

The tragic film also acts to prescribe a set of morals, foisting them upon the demoralized masses. The culture industry in this sense, demonstrates the behavioural norms that are required in the face of tragedy. The masses for Horkheimer and Adorno thus “only show signs of civilization in modes of behaviour which have been forced upon them²⁸⁰”. The most significant mode of behaviour that is forced upon the masses (through representation by the culture industry) is pacifism. This pacifism is a direct result of the perception of the world as an inexorable, reified whole. The culture industry in effect propagates culture that tames the revolutionary potential within humans. Culture prescribes the manner in which we are supposed to live if we are to deal with the merciless conditions of capitalism. In films, the authors argue, “those permanently desperate situations which crush the spectator in ordinary life somehow become a promise that one can go on living. One has only to become aware of one's own nothingness, only to recognize defeat and one is one with it all²⁸¹”.

²⁷⁵ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.154

²⁷⁶ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.151

²⁷⁷ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.151

²⁷⁸ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.152

²⁷⁹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.151-152

²⁸⁰ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.152

²⁸¹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.153

The requirement of affirmative living means that humans come to embrace their domination wholly: “Life in late capitalism is one long initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belabouring him²⁸²”. If this is embraced, everyone may find acceptance within this omnipotent society, everyone can be “happy” (or at least, this is what is promised). What this process truly entails is a capitulation on behalf of the individual and a sacrifice of her claim to true happiness.

3) The Repression of Dissidence and Rebellion

As I have argued above, the culture industry is instrumental in constructing the most subtle forms of domination that are disguised beneath a veil of liberalism and pseudo-individualism. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that, in modern capitalist society:

tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul. The ruler no longer says: You must think as I do or die. He says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us²⁸³.

Horkheimer and Adorno continue by arguing that a true form of dissidence or non-conformity would mean being rendered powerless economically and spiritually. It would entail a withdrawal from all areas of capitalism, which would require one to adopt a lifestyle outside civilization and makes use of none of its channels. The choice is thus either to orientate oneself within the parameters of the system, and subscribe to its ideology, or become “left behind” (destitute). As Marx argued many years before Horkheimer and Adorno, this is by no means a free choice at all. The choice is basically whether to give into domination or perish.

In many ways, the culture industry has become so advanced and accommodating that it is able to reformulate rebellion against this suppression into new forms of exploitation and manipulation. The fetishized cultural commodity utilizes the revolt of suppressed nature to further mystify the forms of exploitation of both internal and external nature. This seductive exploitation of repressed nature by the mass media and the culture industry, along with the nostalgia for the natural, organic and unsuppressed, have this in common: “they manipulate the revolt of repressed nature into submission, oblivion and pseudo-happiness²⁸⁴”.

²⁸² Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.153

²⁸³ De Tocqueville, A (1864) *De la Democratie en Amerique*, Vol II (Paris 1864) at p.151 in Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.133

²⁸⁴ Benhabib, S (2004) *Supra* in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) *Supra* at p.103

Horkheimer and Adorno noticed that this is not simply a process of co-optation. Over and above co-option, any legitimate skepticism is reorientated within the culture industry's channels. Critical substantive content is lost because media must make use of the circuitry of the culture industry if it is to reach people. This also gives the illusion of the culture industry as a pluralist institution, entailing critical, as well as, affirmative content. The culture industry thus acts as primitive humankind did when performing a mimetic ritual. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that mimesis is a process of incorporating the threatening "other" into the self. By taking the enemies into itself, the culture industry also disarms its enemies of their threatening content²⁸⁵.

The culture industry thus silences dissidence and deviation. Once a particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted by the industry, it becomes owned and prone to manipulation. Dissidence is thus quickly reconciled in capitalism by the culture industry. "Anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in"²⁸⁶. Practical, or realistic dissidence, thus takes the form of new ideas within the framework of capitalism, for instance a new idea in business²⁸⁷. For Horkheimer and Adorno then, any form of dissidence or rebellion against the culture industry is always confined to a feeble resistance which that very industry has fashioned. Criticism is thus a tool of the culture industry, and is by no means a threat to it at all²⁸⁸.

4) The Debasement of Art by Entertainment

In their excursus on the culture industry, and its effect on "mass-society", Horkheimer and Adorno strive to establish that art, when commodified and fused with entertainment, becomes devoid of any critical, utopian content.

If we are to fully understand why the degeneration of art is of such importance to Adorno and Horkheimer, we must briefly look at the way they view "true art". For the authors, art that is made without purpose, without the intention of it being used to entertain as many people as possible, does not subscribe to the principles of instrumental reason. True art, as a manifestation of culture, should have no ends in sight, other than the intention of inspiring others "to transcend the earthly limits of experience, to imagine the freedom of an alternative and to engage in critical praxis with the world around them"²⁸⁹. True art thus imagines that which is different, and through perceiving this, the audience comes to resist taken-for-granted, or reified reality. This is art in its true, liberating form. It is a form of culture that does not subject its products to the

²⁸⁵ Gunster, S (2000) "Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form" in *Cultural Critique* No.45 at p.63

²⁸⁶ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.132

²⁸⁷ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.132

²⁸⁸ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) *Supra* at p.145

²⁸⁹ Dant, T (2003) *Supra* at p.113

logic of the market, and in this way, it retains its true value²⁹⁰.

As I have argued above, the culture industry is an industry that uses the same mass production techniques as factories and other advanced industries. This process of production has caused a change in the character of the “art commodity”: “What is new is not that it is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits that it is one; that art renounces its own autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods constitutes the charm of novelty²⁹¹”. Art, by becoming something that provides entertainment etc. becomes something of use, a category that is at odds with its useless, purposeless nature: “The work of art, by completely assimilating itself to need, deceitfully deprives men of that liberation from the principle of utility which it should inaugurate²⁹²”. The culture industry thus becomes a projection of the industrial production process because of the penetration of the organization and business practices of industrial capitalism. The culture industry is, in other words, an industry based upon the framework of its established parent: industrial capitalism²⁹³. Under these conditions art becomes another commodity devoid of any critical content. It is subsumed by the capitalist exchange ethic and no longer exists for itself, but for its value as a commodity. Art as a commodity becomes a form of entertainment and amusement. Amusement is the complete opposite of true art. True art represents the incompatibility between humanity and the socio-economic conditions of modern society. It thus reflects the contradictions of life in capitalist society. It is reflexive of the divide between subject and object, appearance and essence, the particular and the general. The more it represents these divisions, the more it resembles the seriousness of life; art is modern society's antithesis. In the realm of entertainment and amusement, the possibility of this negation “does glimmer for a few moments. But of course it cannot happen²⁹⁴”.

At this point we must return to the overall project of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this next section I will very briefly consider whether Horkheimer and Adorno's entire project is undermined by their inclusive, totalizing approach to the explanation of domination. I will aim specifically here at the theoretical tenets of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, instead of the cultural critique provided in the section above. The point is to provide an internal critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's project by seeing if they “dig themselves into a theoretical hole”. In other words, by shifting towards a meta-critique of ideological critique (i.e. the critique of instrumental reason), it becomes apparent that the authors negate all types of critique in general, including their own. They thus cannot transcend the limits impinged by their own critique.

²⁹⁰ Dant, T (2003) Supra at p.113

²⁹¹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.157

²⁹² Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.158

²⁹³ Dant, T (2003) Supra at p.110

²⁹⁴ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.142

Some Critiques of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

By the end of the 1940's Horkheimer had arrived at a theory of history which negated the possibility of societal change. Horkheimer tried to understand and explain why the masses had been so susceptible to manipulation in both European fascist countries, and “free” Western countries. In the West, Horkheimer saw the culture industry, and other late capitalist superstructural institutions, effectively brainwashing large sectors of the population. In Europe, Horkheimer and Adorno saw people embracing barbaric authoritarian regimes. For both authors, humanity (for whom hope always appeared bleak) now seemed beyond redemption: the processes at work in both the East and the West “must necessarily lead to dictatorship and the regression of humanity²⁹⁵”.

What solution do Horkheimer and Adorno offer which could remedy this impoverished state of affairs? The answer quite simply is none. The implication of Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of history is that war, genocide, fascism, domination and exploitation are the products of a historical process that was set in motion long before the first proletarian was ever exploited by the first capitalist:

One might say that the collective madness that ranges today, from the concentration camps to the seemingly most harmless mass-cultural reactions, were already present in germ in the primitive objectivization, in the first man's calculating contemplation of the world as prey²⁹⁶.

As I have shown earlier in this chapter, and as the above quotation shows, the totalizing dominance of instrumental reason cannot be reduced to the capitalist system of production. It is a historical, human condition, which is why instrumental rationality and the dominating drive of the Enlightenment cannot be overcome through traditional theoretical means. For Horkheimer and Adorno, emancipation now lies in the unredeemed Utopian promise of culture, art and philosophy²⁹⁷. I will now interrogate this position, and see if Horkheimer and Adorno's negative dialectical critique is in contradiction with their philosophy of history. In other words, do they contradict their critique of instrumental reason by continuing to engage in philosophical critique?

Earlier in this chapter I made an effort to establish the way in which the work of Horkheimer and Adorno differs from that of Marx and Lukács. These shifts become important at this stage because they form the basis for the critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I will focus here upon the

²⁹⁵ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1978) Supra at p.153 in Shaw, B.J. (1985) Supra at p.175

²⁹⁶ Shaw, B.J. (1985) Supra at p.176

²⁹⁷ Benhabib, S (2004) Supra in Rasmussen, D & Swindal, J (2004) Supra at p.107

shift from ideological critique (appearance and essence in Marxism, and reification in the work of Lukács) to the historically detached critique of instrumental reason. Habermas summarizes this shift succinctly in the following paragraph:

Horkheimer and Adorno detach the concept [of reification] not only from the special historical context of the rise of the capitalist economic system but from the dimension of interhuman relations altogether; and they generalize it temporally (over the entire history of the human species) and substantively (the same logic of domination is imputed to both cognition in the service of self-preservation and the repression of instinctual nature). This double generalization of the concept of reification leads to a concept of instrumental reason that shifts the primordial history of subjectivity and the self-formative process of ego-identity into an encompassing historico-philosophical perspective²⁹⁸.

This “encompassing historico-philosophical perspective” is the totalizing critique of instrumental rationality. For Horkheimer and Adorno, instrumental reason alone can account for the regression of humankind towards barbarism and conditions of reified domination. In its entirety, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an expansive work that argues for the destruction of humankind's capacity of critical thought. This notion is however, paradoxical because, in performing this very analysis, it must make use of the same critique that it has problematized: “It denounces the totalitarian development of the Enlightenment with its own means²⁹⁹”.

Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in the same predicament as Nietzsche: if they do not want to give up the goal of an ultimate unmasking and want to *carry on their critique*, then they must preserve at least *one* standard for their explanation of the corruption of *all* reasonable standards. In the face of this paradox, the totalizing critique loses its direction³⁰⁰.

Habermas argues that Horkheimer and Adorno negate the possibility of formulating emancipatory theory, without being sufficiently reflexive to the fact that this position also negates their own theoretical position. Habermas calls this philosophical dilemma a “performative self-contradiction”³⁰¹. A performative self-contradiction contradicts the conditions of an asserted proposition. It is the logic of the performative self-contradiction that Habermas extends to criticise Horkheimer and Adorno's work in *Dialectic of*

²⁹⁸ Habermas, J (1983) *The Theory of Communicative Action* Vol. 1 at p.379-380 in Hohendahl, P (1985) *Supra* at p.12-13

²⁹⁹ Habermas, J (1982) *Supra* at p.22

³⁰⁰ Habermas, J (1982) *Supra* at p.28

³⁰¹ A performative self-contradiction occurs when the propositional content of what the speaker says contradicts the conditions of the asserted proposition itself. For instance, the utterance “I do not exist” contradicts the conditions under which such an utterance of self-reflexivity can actually be said. By saying that “I do not exist”, one asserts one's existence by referring to an existing self. Existence is thus a necessary condition for making the statement “I do not exist”.

Enlightenment.

Habermas' argument is a derivative of Apel's argument regarding philosophical skepticism. Apel maintains that the logic of a performative self-contradiction can be used against a philosophical skeptic who rejects the possibility of grounding a principle of universalization. This is because, as soon as the skeptic begins to give reasons for such a belief, she is already asserting universal presuppositions of the validity of argumentative discourse. In other words, by arguing from a radical skeptical position, the skeptic necessarily engages in a form of rational criticism that bases itself upon the presupposition of valid forms of argument. There is thus an implicit claim to the universally accepted valid forms of argument. This means that the critique of radical skepticism is grounded in the philosophical foundation of the transcendental, pragmatic argument (universality). Habermas treats Horkheimer and Adorno's work as a work in radical skepticism. He argues that Horkheimer and Adorno reject the possibility of fully understanding the noumenal world. Horkheimer and Adorno, at the same time, also reject the enterprise of emancipatory theory, and instead choose to focus upon the individualistic approach of negative dialectics. Habermas contends that the approach of negative dialectics may be a theoretical reversal, but it still relies upon certain presuppositions such as the validity of argument and language. Habermas also argues that, in critiquing the dominated world, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to forget that they are also subject to the same rationalized ontology as the dominated, alienated historical subject. Despite this, they still engage in critique. Habermas' argument is that by continuing to engage in critique and theory, Horkheimer and Adorno come to rely upon the very instrumental, dominating and alienating means that all other previous theories rely upon. Horkheimer and Adorno's theory is therefore just as tainted by the status quo as affirmative, emancipatory theory is. For Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno are in no position to argue that other theories are complicit in domination, but negative dialectics is not. If the argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is carried through to its logical conclusion, Horkheimer and Adorno simply cannot formulate any theory from their position, because their skepticism is too far reaching. It leaves Horkheimer and Adorno in the same place that they believe all theory to be in: "between a rock and no place". To restate the argument: by saying that ideals and emancipatory theory can no longer be generated (because they simply lead to further domination), Horkheimer and Adorno renounce the possibility of engaging in theory at all. Habermas concludes that Horkheimer and Adorno paid a very high price for this radical skeptical turn, a turn that leaves their work in a type of theoretical limbo³⁰².

Horkheimer and Adorno were more than likely aware of this performative contradiction, although the issue is not raised at all in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The authors instead chose to intensify the contradiction by

³⁰² Hohendahl, P (1985) Supra at p.13

developing a critique that was truly totalizing. As Habermas argues, "... the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers hardly any prospective of escape from the constraints of instrumental rationality³⁰³". Emancipation, for Horkheimer and Adorno, is markedly different because of its individual, momentary nature where humans experience "glimpses of the truth". Their denouncement of affirmative dialectics is thus a renouncement of emancipatory theory that has the grand goals of systemic change and class consciousness. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that such grand visions of emancipation can no longer be entertained because of the intensification of domination. On top of this, the existence of art that can provide moments of emancipation is becoming increasingly rare. The authors argue that the culture industry relentlessly commodifies all forms of art that possess emancipatory potential for the individual. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can thus be characterized as an account of regression towards a self-imposed catastrophe, from which there is an ever decreasing chance of escape.

It is clear, from the above arguments, that Habermas believes that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues itself into a self-defeating position because it amounts to the end of reason altogether. In the work of Habermas one can find a repertoire of criticisms of Adorno's philosophy that focuses in on one direction: "the absence of a consistent epistemological formulation of reason in general terms, and of the critical instance, leads to the self-dissolution of philosophy understood as a theory of reason³⁰⁴". The implication of this critique is that, without a grounding in any concrete concept of reason, Adorno's philosophy becomes post-rational, or postmodernist. This would mean the abandonment of dialectics in favour of a critical project that is formulated in terms of the "linguistic turn"³⁰⁵.

But is this an accurate reflection of where Horkheimer and Adorno leave social theory? And if so, what are their contributions and shortfalls? If we reduce the argument contained in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* into general terms, we can see that Horkheimer and Adorno rely upon an essentialist explanation of human nature, and the subsequent development of instrumental rationality.

1. Human beings are driven by the basic principle of self-preservation.
2. Humans fear the unknown, natural world; it is a threat to their lives.
3. They seek to control it.
4. To understand is to control.
5. In trying to understand, rationality is discovered in the natural processes.

³⁰³ Habermas, J (1982) Supra at p.18

³⁰⁴ Sevilla, S (1997) Supra at p.59

³⁰⁵ Sevilla, S (1997) Supra at p.59

6. Rational understanding leads to the instrumental manipulation and control of nature.
7. The instrumental rationality that orders nature is applied universally to the social.
8. Humans extend the desire to control and dominate nature to the social realm.
9. Humans, in positions of privilege (seized by violent means), instrumentally control and manipulate those who are in inferior social positions, and originally do so by the threat of violence.
10. Society develops according to this class structure. The division of labour is reified.
11. Over time, the threat of violence subsides.
12. Inequalities are maintained by more subtle, ideological means.
13. Culture comes to convince the dominated that their social standing is natural and incontestable.

Horkheimer and Adorno's argument explains domination as a necessary result of human interaction with external, unknown nature. Instrumental rationality, the logic of domination, is the product of the development of the ego, independent of social influences. This development of the ego remains the basis for Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of history, although it remains largely unsubstantiated. Instrumental rationality, and the development of structures of domination in society, seem to be necessary and inevitable products of our natural human inclinations. It is also unclear how instrumental rationality universally, and necessarily, arises out of the human fear of unknown nature.

The most tenuous part of Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of history is the link between the domination of nature, in order to purge it of the unknown, and the domination of the social. This is what Honneth calls the “argumentative bridge between the philosophical-historical construction and the theory of social domination³⁰⁶”. Both nature and groups of individuals within society are explained in terms of the general concept of “the Other”, which the instrumental, rational mind strives to control. If we think about the two processes however (dominating nature, and dominating the social), it becomes clear that they are not one and the same thing. How is controlling nature, because of the fear of the unknown natural world, similar to the fear of other humans? This is not properly substantiated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno instead project the one process (the domination of nature) onto the other (the domination of the social). Horkheimer and Adorno's argument can only be plausible if we accept the silent presupposition of a corresponding relation between social domination and the domination of nature³⁰⁷.

In light of this criticism, I propose a reversion to the the historical specificity of the structures and ideologies of capitalism. In other words, in agreement with Lukács, the nature of both subject, and object, are

³⁰⁶ Honneth, A (1991) *Supra* at p.51-52

³⁰⁷ Honneth, A (1991) *Supra* at p.52

contingently related to the historical process. This means that, in modern society, both the nature of agency and domination are products of the historically specific material and social structures of capitalism *beneath the false appearance forms*. If we revert to the dialectical position of Marx and Lukács, the epistemology of instrumental rationality becomes a historically conditioned state that develops along side the productive forces. Capitalist epistemology is not the ontological fate of human beings. We must therefore, return to ideological critique, which is capable of providing insights into the economic and social structures of capitalism. This is theoretically important if we are to uphold the appearance-essence distinction which is fundamental to the concepts of commodity fetishism and reification. Both concepts explain how reality appears to humans in such a way that it hides the real relations and processes of economic and social reality. I have discussed what Marx and Lukács believe to be the real, “inner workings of capitalism”. These insights that penetrate the appearance forms, constructed and maintained by commodity fetishism and reification, must not simply be discarded as “products of an overarching, historical form of instrumental rationality”.

But where does this leave us with regards to the work of Horkheimer and Adorno? I would like to disregard their anthropologic-philosophical argument concerning the development of instrumental rationality and domination, and instead focus upon their work concerning culture. The next chapter will develop and refine Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of culture in order to understand how commodity fetishism, reification and domination are produced by the cultural activities of human beings. Horkheimer and Adorno have a significant contribution to make concerning the reification of society through the commercialization of culture. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains a landmark in radical thought. Their analysis of the culture industry has profoundly influenced the discourse surrounding the role of media in society. Their work however, needs to be complemented with an inclusive theory that makes use of the concepts of commodity fetishism and reification, which also describes the many ways in which humans practice culture, why they do so, and why this results in an intensification of domination.

The final chapter approaches the question of domination theory by trying to understand how domination has become more subtle, and hence more difficult, to overcome. I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno that class consciousness and systemic revolution are failed concepts. Marx and Lukács attempted to explain why this is the case, and what needed to be done in order to maintain the revolutionary ideal. Horkheimer and Adorno subsequently argued that the reason that such ideals failed was because of the nature of reason itself, demonstrated by the Enlightenment and the rise of fascism and capitalism all over the world. The work of Horkheimer and Adorno thus all but negates the idea of genuine revolutionary action³⁰⁸.

³⁰⁸ Bronner, S.E (1994) *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* at p. 79

Today, disaster, war, humanitarian crises, poverty, waste and environmental destruction are just as prevalent as before (in some cases, even more so). So the problems, that Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School sought to deliver us from, are still very much immanent. Despite these immense problems, change remains elusive. I agree with Marx and Lukács that the reification of the capitalist political economy creates conditions that appear, and come to be, impervious to change. I also agree with Horkheimer and Adorno that culture has come to the ideological aid of capitalism, entrenching the values of capitalism, whilst nullifying areas of resistance. These explanations however, all focus upon “top down”, structuralist explanations of passivity and domination. But are people really the impoverished, passive, stupid cultural pawns that Horkheimer and Adorno make them out to be? In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the authors tend to focus upon the manner in which their arguments are made, as opposed to the actual content of what they're saying. There is no systematic, focused explanation of the techniques deployed by the culture industry, and how these necessarily lead to cultural impoverishment and domination. The work on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes the form of a series of conclusions that are not properly substantiated. The authors spend more time lamenting the loss of autonomy than actually explaining the mechanisms at work that suppress autonomy³⁰⁹.

In the following chapter I will attempt to identify some of these mechanisms. I intend to focus upon the ways in which individuals construct, and reproduce, the reification of the capitalist political economy on a daily basis, through their own social transactions. In other words, I will focus upon answering the question of how individuals contribute to, and maintain, their own domination. I will show how the dominated underprivileged classes have come to embrace their own domination, reveling in the very practices that result in domination through the practice of competitive consumption.

³⁰⁹ Gunster, S (2000) *Supra* at p.41

Chapter 4

An Introduction to Bourdieu

This final chapter aims to apply all the concepts I have developed and explained so far to today's circumstances. The concepts of commodity fetishism, reification and instrumental rationality were developed in circumstances that were different from today, and it is important to reconsider their validity. I will argue that the role of commodities has, if anything, increased in its systemic importance. In other words, the commodity has evolved to become one of the most powerful instruments of domination. I argue that the commodity form has become so pervasive that it has become inextricably bound up with the expression of individual identity. Commodities thus define who we are because they are used to express identity. There is obviously a huge social dimension to this argument which touches upon psychological issues, such as social conditioning and identity formation. I will however, focus upon the commodity fetish, and its political implications, insofar as commodity fetishism maintains the domination of the privileged classes over the poor. In developing this argument, I will look at how Marx's theory of commodity fetishism can, and should be, extended to accommodate not only the economic fetishism of exchange-value, but also the association of human and social characteristics with commodities such as status, taste, knowledge, individuality and class. Fetishism in this chapter, is thus a broadened concept that explains how individuals have come to associate their identities with the consumption of commodities. I will then explain how this developed theory of fetishism contributes to the reified structure of capitalism, with specific regard to how the commodity form, and its consumption, amounts to an affirmation of class divisions within society. In other words, the consumption of commodities, as an expression of identity, is an act that relies upon class divisions if it is to have any symbolic importance. According to Bourdieu, this is because modern patterns of consumption are based upon the desire to be distinct from others. I argue differently however, that it is the desire to be distinct from "*mass society*" that drives modern consumerism. I also depart from Bourdieu's social theory in arguing that the desire to be distinct extends to all classes, which in turn results in the desire of individuals to want goods that confer status. The result of this is the emergence of a large class of people who own and consume similar goods. In modern capitalist society therefore, the desire to be distinct finds expression in the act of consumption, which reproduces class divisions, but also blurs class divisions.

This seemingly contradictory argument will require the relation of Bourdieu's theory to the social theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, and their work on the culture industry. I intend to argue that both approaches to culture can contribute to a better understanding of the role of culture and commodity consumption in the reproduction of capitalism. The reader will become aware of the fact that I extend the critique of the culture

industry to the critique of commodity production in general: commodities are thus inextricably bound up with culture. The intended result is to show how commodity fetishism should be reinterpreted in broader social terms. The social dimension to the commodity fetish helps explain why people in all classes of society continue to purchase commodities, and how this bolsters the current divisions within society, reifying the social structure of capitalism. On the other hand, I will also argue that in some developed countries, commodity consumption acts to blur class differences to the point that everybody possesses qualitatively similar commodities in different amounts. This is because, in wealthy nations, all classes participate in this mass culture and the consumption of aesthetically similar goods, albeit unequally. The effect of this is that the ostensible class differences are leveled by the consumption of standardized commodities. Real qualitative differences in class power take on the appearance of merely quantitative differences in the possession of the same goods³¹⁰.

Aside from the question of domination, a broadened conception of commodity fetishism is also capable of explaining apparent anomalies, such as why even the poor choose to purchase commodities that are aimed at acquiring social status, to the detriment of their welfare. In other words, why people are driven to acquire social capital (which confers status) before satisfying basic needs, such as nutrition. A recent South African Government report highlighted the issue of competitive consumption, and its effect upon welfare. I have included the sections of relevance below:

At the same time, lifestyles tend to be determined not only by social status, but the desire to flaunt such status – *even in instances where remuneration does not allow it* (my emphasis). To generalise: so neighbours compete in conspicuous consumption: poor university students seek other sources of income to keep up with their richer peers; households go into debt to finance unaffordable; and the country cannot introduce a low-cost entry level vehicle because everyone prefers some ‘extra’ for comfort and bragging! Rich and poor are impelled by the demands of an individualistic system to operate on, and sometimes beyond, the margins of legality- be it with regard to finding ways to minimise tax payments, avoiding to pay rates and licenses, and succumbing where regulation is weak to the temptation as worker and employer to ‘make it’ by fair means or foul....

In this context, our social system is a market based economy which retains most of the features of racial exclusion within which it was constructed. As such, survival-of-the-fittest does inform a great part of society’s morality; and individuals and groups ally with one another or act variously

³¹⁰ Gartman, D (1991) “Culture as Class Symbolization or Mass Reification? A Critique of Bourdieu's Distinction” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.97, No.2 (Sept., 1991) at p.426

in order to thrive in the market jungle: as owners or producers of wealth, as holders of political office or the governed, or as the economically marginalized³¹¹.

This document expresses something that is almost patently obvious. Individuals will purchase commodities that express symbolic power, before satisfying basic needs. In today's society this applies to the purchasing of cell phones, clothing, shoes, cars, technology and other commodities that visualize and express identity, individuality and distinction from others. This is because consumption activities in late capitalism operate as complex and condensed signifiers that communicate to others – as well as back to the generating consumers themselves – who they are³¹².

the concern with lifestyle, with the stylization of life, suggests that the practices of consumption, the planning, purchase and display of consumer goods and experiences in everyday life cannot be understood merely via conceptions of exchange value and instrumental rational calculation. The instrumental and expressive dimensions should not be regarded as exclusive either/or polarities, rather they can be conceived as a balance which consumer culture brings together.... Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle³¹³.

An empirical study of this would contribute extensively to the theory provided in this chapter, but proved to be beyond the limits and resources of this thesis. Instead, I aim to provide a theoretical account of why the competitive consumption of commodities exists, and how this contributes to the overall body of work concerning domination. In other words, the theory of symbolic power and distinction, based upon the conceptual pillars of commodity fetishism, reification and the culture industry, contributes to our understanding of the question “why do the dominated many accept the rule of the privileged few?”

Another related problem, that the theory of commodity fetishism and competitive consumption can provide insights into, is the issue of the continual use of resources, and the subsequent production of waste that results from the relentless consumption of commodities. Commodity fetishism thus gives us an insight as to why

³¹¹ Presidency's Policy Coordination and Advisory Services (2006) “*A nation in the making: A Discussion Document in macro-Social Trends in South Africa*” at p.87-89 <http://www.info.gov.za/otherdocs/2006/socioreport.pdf>

³¹² Featherstone, M (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* at p.86

³¹³ Featherstone, M (1991) *Supra* at p.83

waste on such a grand scale exists. I will begin however, with a discussion of the three core concepts, commodity fetishism, reification and instrumental reason, that I have introduced so far in this thesis. My intention is to relate the concepts explained in the previous chapters and show how fetishism, reification and instrumental rationality still exist in even more intense forms than they did in the days of Marx, Lukács and Horkheimer and Adorno. It is also important to relate these concepts to current practices of competitive consumption, and determine to what extent they contribute to an understanding of why competitive consumption exists, and how it contributes to domination.

Commodity Fetishism, Reification and Instrumental Rationality

The concept of commodity fetishism is central to my entire argument concerning consumption, reification and domination. I will start off by explaining the link between commodity fetishism and reification. At this point I would like to focus upon two central pillars of capitalism; namely the economy and the superstructural enterprises that work alongside the economy. By this I mean bureaucratic institutions such as government and the legal system. It was Lukács' argument that the concept of fetishism (the attribution of characteristics to things which did not possess such characteristics in and of themselves) could be extended to social and bureaucratic systems that have become "reified". His argument was that the organizational principles and structure of capitalist institutions, both economic and social, have become "things" that exist independently, outside of human influence. This occurs in the same way that the commodity appears to have value independent of the processes that produce it. Reification is thus an extension of the concept of fetishism, which Lukács' applies on a cultural and institutional scale. Lukács' argues that "capitalist culture legitimates exploitative class relations by hiding them behind façades of nature³¹⁴". The political implications of reification for Lukács are that the political-economy of capitalism is transformed into something "natural", or "unquestionable", a "thing". "Things" such as the market, political institutions, bureaucracy and the division of society into classes thus appear to the reified gaze as "second nature".

It is Lukács' contention that reification is based upon the production and reproduction of an ossified socio-economic system that is characterized by the domination of the working class. The dominated are unable to see that the system of capitalism is the product of human action. Reification makes humans the subject of its institutions, instead of institutions being subject to human thought and behaviour. In other words, a reified world is one where the social, political and economic structures of capitalism rule over humans. For Lukács, reification is an ideological mechanism of domination that prevents the dominated proletariat from

³¹⁴ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.426

collectively realizing that capitalist conditions of inequality, alienation and exploitation are not ahistorical, and that humans are capable of changing the object world for their own benefit.

Commodity fetishism and reification are conceptually related because they both entail a process of attributing characteristics to things (the products of labour, or the capitalist political economy) which do not possess them independently. Commodity fetishism and reification produce a misrecognition, in the mind of the individual, as to the true nature of the objects that the individual perceives. In the case of commodity fetishism, the individual misrecognizes the source of the exchange-value of a commodity and attributes it to the commodity itself. In the case of reification, Lukács argues that the subject misrecognizes the source of the power of political, economic and social institutions, and attributes these powers to the institutions themselves. In both cases, the social relations, that are the true source of value and power, are not recognized.

But what about the differences between reification and commodity fetishism? When Marx first introduces the concept of commodity fetishism in *Capital I*, he uses a religious analogy to substantiate his argument. In religious fetishism, objects such as idols possess real social properties such as sacredness. Such objects appear to possess properties such as sacredness autonomously. For Marx however, these social properties and powers are reducible to causal social relations which are responsible for constructing the object. When the underlying causal relations for the religious object's existence are hidden, the object is said to be a “fetish”. Fetishes therefore, cause individuals to believe that objects do have magical powers that they *appear* to have because of a misrecognition of the source of that power. For Marx, this occurs in the same way with commodities. Commodity fetishism activates objects into value roles which causes people to act as if these objects actually have powers. For Torrance, commodities can possess real powers if everyone acts as if they have them, which is the case in capitalist society³¹⁵. The “powers” that commodities have stem from their value which is wrongly attributed to them as independent objects. In the case of religious fetishism, the magical power that an object (such as an idol) exerts is unreal. In the case of commodity fetishism however, the value of a commodity, and the purchasing power that an object exerts on the market, is real. This real power however, is a fetish because commodities possess value by virtue of human labour. Elster summarizes this argument as follows: “economic fetishism, generally speaking is the tendency to neglect the hidden or implicit relational structure of economic predicates ... Commodity fetishism is the belief that goods possess value just as they have weight, as an inherent property³¹⁶”.

For Torrance, reification provides the basis for fetishism because it explains how objects are made into

³¹⁵ Torrance, J (1995) *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas* at p.110

³¹⁶ Elster, J (1985) *Making Sense of Marx* in Torrance, J (1995) *Supra* at p.112

external “things” or “objects”. Reification therefore, describes the process of objectification. Fetishism, on the other hand, describes the way in which the consciousness reflects a reified social reality. In other words, fetishism is the result of reification. Economic reification is a form of objectification that creates the false beliefs of fetishism. Economic reification however, can only give rise to false beliefs (fetishism) if the nature of commodities and money, as social embodiments and representations of value determined by the labour process, is misrecognized³¹⁷.

When we apply the concept of reification to today's society, it becomes clear that it has, in no way, been overcome. Instead, the reification of the political economy of capitalism, as well as its social characteristics, are the collective product of many forms of current social behaviour. The form of social behaviour I wish to focus upon here is the consumption of commodities, and how this contributes to the reification of capitalist society. Reification explains the way in which the social structure of capitalism appears to be “a natural expression of the human condition”, an “ahistorical phenomenon”, which has, and always will be, present *in any human society*.

Horkheimer and Adorno on Culture: The Contribution of Bourdieu

I must now shift from the work done on the concepts of commodity fetishism and reification to the concept and role of culture in capitalist society. My intention is to apply the concepts of commodity fetishism and reification to the work done on the culture industry by Horkheimer and Adorno. Commodity fetishism and reification give us important insights into the nature of the culture industry. This is because the culture industry bases its entire enterprise upon the reified, mass produced commodity. I will also be focusing upon how the culture industry reproduces the capitalist social system of alienation, exploitation and inequality. I will do this by using the work of Bourdieu to explain in detail the mechanism of distinction that drives the culture industry. Bourdieu thus provides us with an important extension of Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of culture, and the culture industry.

Horkheimer and Adorno's work on culture however, differs quite fundamentally from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Both employ Marx's class analysis of society, but disagree on the role that culture plays within the reproduction of capitalism and its social conditions. The difference between Bourdieu and other Frankfurt theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno is that, for Bourdieu, culture legitimates class by making class divisions visible in a recognizable form. Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, argue that late capitalist

³¹⁷ Torrance, J (1995) *Supra* at p.110-111

culture legitimates and reproduces class structure by *obscuring* classes altogether, rather than establishing a hierarchy of honour between them. Bourdieu argues that culture displays class differences, but more importantly, misrepresents the origin of these differences as differences in individual worthiness. In reality however, the origin of cultural difference lies in one's "habitus", or class socialization, which is influenced by one's wealth, upbringing, education, family, etc. By contrast, Frankfurt critical theorists argue that culture performs its ideological function for the class system by preventing the recognition of class differences, even a mistaken one like Bourdieu's. Horkheimer and Adorno's argument concerning the culture industry was that culture makes class unrecognizable by burying class divisions beneath an indistinct, reified mass culture shared by all³¹⁸.

This seems to be an irreconcilable point of contention between Bourdieu and the Frankfurt critical theorists. Both approaches however, provide us with valid insights into the nature of capitalist society. Bourdieu, on the one hand, reveals the indispensable contribution that the consumption of symbolic goods, in the form of commodities, makes to reproducing class domination through legitimation and distinction. The Frankfurt school, on the other hand, apply Lukacs' theory of reification to the cultural realm, arguing that "capitalist culture legitimates exploitative class relations by hiding them behind unifying facades of nature³¹⁹". For Horkheimer and Adorno, modern consumer capitalism is defined by the production of cultural goods on a large, concentrated scale. The "culture industry" seeks to mass produce culture for the sole purpose of obtaining profits. As a result, culture becomes a commodity, which means that culture is subordinated to the technological rationality of domination in both the factory and the marketplace. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry produces art, music and literature as commodities, which means that they become subject to the standardization and homogenization of mass production. In the process, all critical, disturbing and disruptive connotations are eradicated from cultural commodities to make them appealing and palatable to the broadest possible market.

It must be remembered that this mass culture is offered to consumers as compensation: a form of substitute satisfaction for the needs denied to them as alienated workers of capitalism. Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that all classes participate in this mass culture. Most importantly, despite the fact that the consumption of cultural commodities occurs unequally, class differences are still leveled by the consumption of aesthetically similar, standardized commodities. This is because the real qualitative differences in class power appear instead as quantitative differences in the possession of *the same goods*. Differences between cultural commodities provide the individual with a pseudo-individuality to placate the need for real

³¹⁸ Gartman, D (1991) Supra at p.426

³¹⁹ Gartman, D (1991) Supra at p.423

individuality denied in production. In the end, cultural commodities are only superficially different from one another. In reality, commodities are fundamentally similar “mass products”, made to cater for all³²⁰: “mechanically differentiated products prove to be all alike in the end³²¹”. For Horkheimer and Adorno, acts of consumption therefore, do not correspond to, but conceal class differences because the difference between commodities is artificial. The logic is thus that if we all (mass society) consume similar commodities, there ceases to be a visible difference between the classes. And it is exactly this which the mass producing culture industry seeks to do. If we are all part of a homogenized mass culture, there appears to be no sharp class divisions. Difference is thus made less apparent, or even “invisible”. This social appearance, where everybody participates and consumes the same generic cultural commodities, reifies the social system of capitalism because inequality and class differences are obscured. However, this is only an appearance that the culture industry helps to construct, which hides the real, qualitative social inequalities of capitalism. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the class system is thus reified and legitimated by making real social differences invisible. The real differences here refer to the Marxian concept of *contention* between classes. It is this point of contention that is made invisible, and instead the divisions within society are presented as divisions between individuals who have either more, or less similar consumer goods than others.

Horkheimer and Adorno however, do not properly explain how and why the economic system of production fully determines cultural practices under capitalism. As I argued in the previous chapter, their approach to this problem is rather implicit and functional: The dominating, exploitative system of capitalism requires a cultural system that supports and reproduces it, so it emerges. Horkheimer and Adorno's approach gives us an essentialist account of human development, which results in the development of the culture industry as a functional, ideological mechanism of domination. Horkheimer and Adorno thus give us an historical account of the rise of class and culture that “reads like the unfolding of an essence inherent in capitalism³²²”. Most importantly, Horkheimer and Adorno's account of culture does not explain the concrete mediating mechanisms that account for the spread of economic reification into the cultural realm³²³. This is what brings us to the work of Bourdieu, and his theory of class symbolization, which I use alongside the work of Marx, Lukacs, and Horkheimer and Adorno in the hope of better understanding the nature of modern capitalism.

At this point we must return to the concept of commodity fetishism in order to explain the relation between class society and commodities. It is also important to develop the concept of commodity fetishism beyond its initial Marxian formulation. I believe that Bourdieu's work on cultural capital should be related to Marx's pioneering work done on commodity fetishism. The concept of objectified cultural capital, which I will

³²⁰ Gartman, D (1991) Supra at p.427

³²¹ Horkheimer, M & Adorno, T (1997) Supra at p.123

³²² Gartman, D (1991) Supra at p.432-437

³²³ Gartman, D (1991) Supra at p.437

substantiate later, must be thought of as an extension of the concept of fetishism to other values aside from the economic fetishism of exchange-value. This broader concept of commodity fetishism will allow us to investigate how reification and domination (characterized by the domination of the underprivileged proletariat by the privileged bourgeoisie) is reproduced and maintained by the consumption of objectified cultural capital, or commodities.

Commodities and Symbolic Power

In this section I will focus upon the argument that commodities have become fetishized over and beyond Marx's original account of economic fetishism. I will argue that commodities, as an expression of culture and difference, have become expressions of tastes or preferences, and that this assertion of taste is a violent assertion of one's class and power which acts as a symbolic form of reification, as well as domination. At the same time however, we must consider this argument within the broader framework of Horkheimer and Adorno's work on the culture industry, which argues that class has become "invisible" in many respects. Bourdieu's work on class symbolization and cultural capital can be balanced with Horkheimer and Adorno's apparently opposing account of culture and the consumption of cultural commodities. This is because Bourdieu is correct in theorizing that commodities are an expression of *distinction*, as well as an assertion of class superiority. But what he doesn't account for is the fact that it is not only the wealthy bourgeoisie that strive for social distinction through the consumption of "elite" commodities that are associated with "culture" or "taste". Individuals across class divisions desire distinction which make them feel part of superior groups within society. What this amounts to is a mass appropriation of commodities that signify one's freedom from poverty. In the first world especially, the result is a society that is more or less middle class³²⁴, with households and individuals possessing similar kinds of commodities.

This, to a lesser degree, occurs in third world countries. Class divisions remain far more stark in the third world. At the same time however, this does not stop the poor from wanting forms of objectified cultural capital which signify freedom from poverty. I argue that the desire for distinction, exercised within the limits of average class income, has resulted in the creation of a broad middle class, which blurs the ostensible distinction between the upper and lower echelons of bourgeois society. I believe that Horkheimer and Adorno are correct in this regard, especially within the context of the first world. As I have pointed out before

³²⁴ The term middle class here refers to the sociological definition of class. Class in this sense refers to the hierarchical division of society along economic and social lines. For instance, occupation, property, income or education. The argument is that the Marxist concept of class, the relation of the individual to the means of production, is obscured by the ownership of commodities that are aesthetically similar. The sociological definition of class is therefore a concept that helps conceal the real conditions of exploitation that exist in capitalist society, beneath the appearance forms of commodity consumption and ownership.

however, Horkheimer and Adorno do not give an account of the mediating mechanism that drives cultural consumption. Bourdieu's theory sheds light on the fact that class, and class distinction, drives and explains the growth of the broad middle class. At the same time however, I intend to argue that class divisions, especially at the level of the wealthy, are adamantly maintained by the appropriation of cultural capital in non-material forms³²⁵.

For Bourdieu, “class is a structural position in a distributional space of two resources: economic capital and cultural capital. An individual's combined returns from these two fields determine his or her class position³²⁶”. At the same time, Bourdieu postulates that people incessantly, but not necessarily rationally, pursue strategies to optimize their returns from their capital within a given field³²⁷. One of the most important forms of capital in society is “cultural capital”. This is because “culture”, in particular, high culture, acts as a symbolic expression of social hierarchy (class) and therefore power. The amount of culture that one is associated with, or that one “obtains”, is referred to as “cultural capital”. For Bourdieu, cultural capital acts as social relation within a system of exchange³²⁸. In other words, cultural capital is a form of capital which can be possessed, obtained and exchanged between members of a social group. Society therefore consists of the distribution of agents in an overall social space; firstly, *according to the overall capital that they possess*, and secondly, *according to the structure of that capital* (the relative weight of the different types of capital, economic and cultural, in the total volume of their assets)³²⁹.

When economic and cultural capital are recognized and legitimated by others, they become a form of symbolic or social capital: “symbolic capital is nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is known and recognized³³⁰”; “[symbolic capital is] the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate³³¹”. Symbolic capital is related to symbolic power because symbolic capital is a form of social credit. Symbolic power is therefore granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition. For Bourdieu, recognition is obtained through the appropriation of economic and cultural capital which is asserted and displayed socially. Economic and cultural capital together, when socially validated, become social capital, which determines one's social position within a group.

³²⁵ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.444

³²⁶ Bourdieu, P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* at p.99-125 in Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.436

³²⁷ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.438

³²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_capital

³²⁹ Bourdieu, P (1989) “Social Space and Symbolic Power” in *Sociological Theory* Vol.7, No.1 (Spring 1989) at p.17

³³⁰ Bourdieu, P (1989) *Supra* at p.21

³³¹ Bourdieu, P (1989) *Supra* at p.17

Bourdieu defines the constituent elements of cultural capital as “embodied, objectified and institutional cultural capital”. Institutional cultural capital is composed of forms of knowledge, skill and education. It is Bourdieu's contention that knowledge and education fall into the domain of the bourgeoisie who can afford expensive schooling and tertiary studies. It is these bourgeois educational institutions that equip the privileged individual with specialized knowledge and skills.

Embodied cultural capital is directly related to Bourdieu's concept of “habitus”, and is the set of economic, class and social relations that we are born into. One's embodied cultural capital is thus inherited, not in the genetic sense, but passed on and inculcated in a process of socialization.

The final form of cultural capital is the one I intend to focus upon in this chapter. Objectified cultural capital is the cultural capital associated with things that can be owned; for instance art, books or furniture. This is associated with economic capital because the appropriation of culture, especially high culture, requires the expenditure of money³³². To own objectified cultural capital also implies the possession of embodied cultural capital because it implies that one has the requisite knowledge and skills to appreciate or understand the cultural commodity in question. Whether the individual does possess the requisite skills or knowledge to appreciate a given cultural commodity is beside the point. Instead, what is important is the fact that objectified capital implies embodied capital. To appropriate cultural commodities is to assert one's superior cultural status, and therefore one's position within the social hierarchy of the classes. From this it is clear that the consumption of commodities, associated with cultural capital, is an act of symbolic power because it asserts one's power (both embodied and economic) over those who do not, and cannot possess similar cultural commodities. It is this link between the acquisition of objectified cultural capital and symbolic power that will be investigated in this chapter, and the extent to which it contributes to the reification of the inequalities of capitalism (domination).

For Bourdieu, modern capitalist society entails “a set of objective relations between positions occupied within the distribution of resources which are, or may become active, effective, like aces in a game of cards, in the competition for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this social universe is the site³³³”.

Today, the pursuit of cultural capital, in the form of objects or commodities, is something that we all partake in, whether we are conscious of it or not. It must be remembered that we are not dealing strictly with “culture” as Horkheimer and Adorno used the term. Horkheimer and Adorno concerned themselves with the

³³² I will explain why high-culture is associated with the expenditure of money and the display of wealth later in the chapter in my argument concerning scarcity.

³³³ Bourdieu, P (1989) “Social Space and Symbolic Power” in *Sociological Theory* Vol.7, No.1 (Spring 1989) at p.17

culture industry and its stupefying, homogenizing effects upon modern civilizations. Cultural capital, as I use it in this work, includes the culture industry as Horkheimer and Adorno saw it: radio, the news press, magazines, movies, television, advertisements etc. The sense in which I use the term “culture” thus refers to anything that can be purchased (i.e. has an exchange-value) that confers cultural capital. In other words, anything that is purchased in order to become part of, or reconfirm one's membership of a socially “superior” group can be said to involve the purchasing of cultural capital.

Commodity Fetishism and Cultural Capital

But what is the link between Bourdieu's concept of “objectified cultural goods” and Marx's commodity fetishism? If we cast our minds back to the first chapter, we will remember that fetishism, for Marx, was an economic critique of the capitalist process of production, and referred strictly to the way in which labour-power, which constituted the value of the product, was not reflected in the commodity as it appeared on the market. This is because of the historically specific circumstances of capitalist production, and how workers are alienated from the products of their labour.

Commodity fetishism for Marx thus refers to the way in which a commodity's exchange-value apparently has nothing to do with the labour-process because of the phenomenon of alienation. The commodity's exchange-value, expressed in money, becomes attributed to the commodity itself, which appears to have such value independently. The conceptual shift that has taken place over time is that “fetishism”, the process of attributing powers to an object that it does not, in itself possess, has been extended to accommodate symbolic powers over and above exchange value. In capitalist society, the apparent, immanent reality of things is that commodities possess exchange-value independently, but also possess other qualities such as status, taste, wealth, power, class etc. As Adorno argued, these powers are very closely related to exchange-value, and the dictum is that the higher the exchange-value of the commodity, the more it becomes a symbol of power, and the more pleasure the individual derives from it. It has been long acknowledged that commodities are linked with the expression of identity, but what we don't often hear is how this notion can be traced back to Marx, and the economic concept of commodity fetishism.

The expansion of the concept of fetishism to social power, over and above economic power, leads us to the importance of culture. I included the section on culture in this thesis because it demonstrates most clearly the attribution of powers to the products of labour. Culture is an area which allows us to see to what extent people fetishize the objects of labour, and how important the fetishized powers of a commodity become in expressing and asserting identity. Culture is also an ideal marker of individuality because of the importance

individuals place upon culture as a source of distinction.

But what exactly constitutes and characterizes culture in modern society? I would describe today's culture industry in different terms to Horkheimer and Adorno. For Horkheimer and Adorno, culture has become a monolithic, one-dimensional industry³³⁴. I instead contend that culture is the one area where inequality is actively encouraged. The nature of culture is that there will never be one commonly adhered to cultural standard. This is because culture, or at least “high culture”, is precisely the denunciation of mass culture. We can thus speak of culture in two senses here: that of mainstream, mass culture; and of “high culture” which tries to distinguish itself from mass culture. Individuals associated with “high culture” do not share elite culture with those who are incapable of appreciating it (traditionally, the lower classes). This is due to cultural capital's nature. Cultural capital is itself scarce and therefore cannot be owned by many individuals at the same time (mass society). Those who do not possess cultural capital are thus an integral part in determining the value of a cultural product. The simple maxim is that if very few possess, or consume, a form of cultural capital, the more valuable it becomes, and the more it serves as a source of distinction which denotes wealth, success, and class. Cultural capital is thus used to determine and enforce one's class position in society. This assertion of distinction is essentially a negative act which separates one from mass society.

Horkheimer and Adorno did not explore the concept of cultural capital and the need for distinction. They believed that mass society was an inclusive term, and that all forms of consumption were acts of conformity. Their argument is more general and does not concern itself with the particular struggles for cultural capital that occur within the culture industry. For Horkheimer and Adorno, these struggles within the culture industry for cultural capital and distinction would have no bearing upon the fact that the culture industry, as a whole, oppresses and “dumbs down” society, at the same time concealing the divisions within capitalist society.

Horkheimer and Adorno, along with the Frankfurt critical theorists, saw culture in a very different way to Bourdieu. For Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as Lukács, culture is a form of praxis that is capable of transforming, as well as reproducing, reified capitalist society. Critical theorists, especially Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, base their theories upon the Marxist postulation that human beings are by nature active, self-creating creatures whose consciousness gives them the potential for self-determination, or activity free from necessity. Capitalism constrains and limits the realization of this potential; however, it can never totally suppress the natural desire for freedom. For critical theorists, culture is a realm of praxis that expresses these human needs. As we have seen in the previous chapter, culture for Horkheimer and Adorno, is capable of

³³⁴ Although they wrongly argue that modern culture only consists of one dominant form of “mass culture”, the reader will come to find that “high-culture” is no different to mass culture in terms of its function. “High culture”, as different as it tries to be, poses no threat to dominant capitalist practices or values. It is the intention of this chapter to argue the opposite: that “high culture”, or any act of denunciation or distinction is in fact an expression of capitalist values in itself.

serving a Utopian function of negating existing, alienating society because culture is an expression of human longing for fulfillment, which modern society does not provide. Culture is thus potentially disruptive because it is an expression and retainment of our “species-being”, or innate desire to be free. For Horkheimer and Adorno, commodified culture nullifies this critical component. This is because the production of cultural goods today takes place in large industries which are driven by the profit motive. What individuals receive as culture is thus devoid of any critical or disruptive content because firstly, it would disrupt the very system upon which the culture industry is based. And secondly, in order to obtain maximum profits, cultural goods must appeal to the largest possible audience in order to maximize profit, which means that esoteric, disturbing and intellectual topics are avoided. The commodity form thus destroys the Utopian potential of true culture for Horkheimer and Adorno³³⁵.

Horkheimer and Adorno explain that the culture industry acts to reproduce the system of alienation, fetishism, inequality and domination in an overall sense, but what happens at the level of the individual? Bourdieu's theory of distinction and culture can be used to contribute greatly to the theory of culture, the consumption of commodities and the reproduction of conditions of domination. The notion of cultural distinction is important because it was not considered by Horkheimer and Adorno (who believed that it was the mass producers of culture who maintained the conditions of domination in modern society). In this chapter, I would like to argue that the consumption of “high culture” (which can be extended to the consumption of “high-end” commodities) is instrumental in maintaining the status quo, and that the desire for distinction at most levels reproduces mass-society as much as it denounces it. At the same time however, the drive for distinction, and the desire to be seen as “free from necessity” or poverty, has resulted in the rapid growth of a broad middle class which encompasses the working class and consequently blurs the contention between the labouring class and the owners of the means of production in the consciousness of the people. In reality however, the inequality of social power between workers and the owners of the means of production remains intact.

In a Marxist sense, the ownership of commodities amongst the broad middle class (especially in the first world), actively conceals the real contention between the working class and the bourgeoisie. In other words, the differences between an individual's position in the system of production is obscured beneath the circulation and ownership of commodities. What becomes invisible is the fact that the worker is still forced to sell her labour to the capitalist who owns the means of production, and is thus in a position to exploit the worker. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this class reality is subsumed by a difference in the amount of similar

³³⁵ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.426

commodities individuals are able to appropriate. What this means is that qualitatively similar, mass produced “things”, or commodities come to represent differences between workers and capitalists, *and not the difference in social position with regards to production*. Workers therefore do not identify their alienation and exploitation as producers, and see social divisions as a difference in the accumulation of aesthetically similar material things. This broadening group of consumers who own own similar goods blur the class divisions within society³³⁶. This does not mean however, that class differences do not exist, and that the principle of distinction does not apply to the middle class. Bourdieu's theory is important because it is capable of giving us an insight into the processes that create this broad middle class. This can then be used to substantiate Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that this burgeoning middle class reifies the social system of capitalism.

At this point it becomes important to relate this argument to the overall project of commodity fetishism, reification and domination. By discussing the relationship between culture and the consumption of commodities, we can come to understand the extent to which fetishism and reification still play a role within today's society, and how both are still important tools for understanding the domination of the privileged class over the poor.

The Social Role of Commodities Today: Symbolic Power and Domination

In modern capitalist society, there is a connection between cultural capital and class. The problem we need to look at however, is not simply the relationship between class and cultural appropriation. The question is more complex than this. Bourdieu puts the question as follows: “how do the apparently autonomous practices of the agents involved in two different classes (bourgeoisie and proletariat) interact as to not just produce but reproduce the class patterns of cultural practice in general and by doing so tend to reproduce the given sets of class relations in general³³⁷”.

I will answer this question by arguing that domination is exercised by the bourgeoisie in the form of *symbolic power*. This will require us to look at, what I argue to be, one of the most prominent manifestations of symbolic power today: commodities. This is because commodities have a fetishized value that is closely related to exchange-value, but different from it. Commodities thus represent one's appropriation of cultural or social capital, over and above the economic form of exchange-value. Social capital is related, but different

³³⁶ The result of this is that people, participating in mass culture, own aesthetically similar goods. The only difference that arises from this is the amount of similar goods that can be accumulated by any given individual. In day to day transactions, all of one's accumulated goods cannot be displayed. The result is a social existence that is governed by the apparent ownership of qualitatively similar goods on an immediate level.

³³⁷ Garnham, N & Williams, R (1987) “Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture: An Introduction” in Collins, R *et al* (1987) *Media Culture and Society: A Critical Reader* at p.127 (my text in brackets)

from economic and cultural capital in that it represents a more general type of symbolic capital. In other words, social capital is the amount of honour or prestige possessed by a person within certain social groups. As we will see, this honour or prestige is directly related to the objectified cultural capital that one is capable of appropriating, which is in turn related to a display of one's economic capital. Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital is a form of social power which is based on “a cultural misrecognition of economic capital through its conversion to symbolic capital³³⁸”.

The symbolic power of a commodity is its ability to represent superiority. Symbolic power is therefore a fetishized value that displays privilege. In today's society, one's worth, success and cultural disposition are revealed by the commodities we consume. The consumption of cultural commodities, such as film, art and music, are tied up with the same logic as “personal” purchases, such as furniture, clothing or cookery, because such acts are aimed towards the attainment of social capital. Marx did not consider how the comprehension of the commodity, or the fetishism of the commodity, extended beyond the economic fetish of exchange-value. The extension of fetishism thus considers how powers, such as status, class, taste, intelligence, wealth, etc., are reflected in the act of consumption. This extended concept of fetishism is rooted in the assertion of individuality through acts of distinction. The consumption of commodities is a thus a

..distinctive expression of a privileged position in social space whose distinctive value is objectively established in its relationship to expressions generated from different conditions. Like every sort of taste, it unites and separates. Being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions but only by distinguishing them from all others. And it distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and of all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others³³⁹.

Before I develop the argument for distinction further, I would like to explain where conspicuous consumption and the intense desire to be distinct from others comes from, and how the competitive consumption of commodities is practised among even the poorest members of society. Bourdieu argues that, in its most reduced form, the drive to be distinct arises from the human desire to appear to others as “free from necessity”. To be “free from necessity” is to be free from troubling over the acquisition of life's basic amenities; in other words, acquiring and maintaining the basic standard of living (i.e. sufficient food, water and shelter). In today's class society, this freedom from strife shows that one has surplus wealth, and is thus

³³⁸ Bourdieu, P & Passeron, J.C. (1977) *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* at p.196 in Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.435

³³⁹ Bourdieu, P (1984) “The Aristocracy of Culture”, an Extract from *Distinction* p.11-57 (London: Routledge) in Collins, R *et al* (1987) *Media Culture and Society: A Critical Reader* at p.192

an exhibition of freedom from the struggles of the lower classes. As one's distance from necessity grows, one's lifestyle increasingly becomes the product of what Weber calls the “stylization of life³⁴⁰”. In other words, one's life can be orientated and organized according to choices that clearly demonstrate how one has conquered necessity. Bourdieu argues that this display is an affirmation of bourgeois power and “always implies a claim to a legitimate superiority over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for contingencies in gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies³⁴¹”. It is important to note that the tastes associated with the expression and exhibition of economic freedom (and therefore class) can only assert themselves in relation to what they are not, tastes of necessity which are reduced to the level of the aesthetic and so defined as “vulgar taste”³⁴². A life of necessity is thus characterized by low levels of aestheticism, culture and intelligence. The lifestyles of the lower classes, bound to toiling over the acquisition of basic amenities, are not free to indulge in cultural activities such as literature, philosophy and art. The lower classes, first of all, cannot afford to acquire cultural capital, or social capital. At the same time, they cannot afford to engage in cultural activities because they are too busy acquiring basic necessities such as food and shelter. Bourdieu argues that the lower classes, unable to engage in cultural activities, develop “tastes” that can be attributed to class position. His argument is a structuralist account that sees classes as groups of people who are collectively socialized, and in turn develop similar tastes and lifestyles. Individuals are thus socialized and influenced by the structures and social conditions that constitute “habitus”, or their lived, inherited social position (class). Individuals internalize class which determines their behaviour. Choice is thus constrained by the structural determinants and experiences of class: “these enacted choices imply no acts of choosing, for [an individual's] actions and choices are determined by their habitus³⁴³”.

For Bourdieu, aesthetic tastes and consumer preferences are determined by one's inherited social position, or habitus. Class socialization thus determines the limits of one's choices, especially amongst the lower classes who are circumstantially forced to develop a “taste for the necessary”. This is because the lower classes, forced by their conditions of existence, cannot entertain the idea of living luxuriously. Being unable to afford a bourgeois education, (also, not having the time outside work, and being generally unable to afford high-end cultural commodities) the lower classes are excluded from cultural activities such as art, theatre, literature, etc. Bourdieu maintains that a taste for such cultural activities and commodities is out of reach for the lower classes, who in turn dismiss all alternatives as mere daydreams, and instead turn to what they have and know. The result of this is that the lower classes develop a taste for the necessary: the low end products and forms of

³⁴⁰ Gerth, H.H. (2003) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* at p.191

³⁴¹ Bourdieu, P(1984) *Supra* in Collins, R *et al* (1987) *Supra* at p.191

³⁴² Bourdieu, P(1984) *Supra* in Collins, R *et al* (1987) *Supra* at p.191-192

³⁴³ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.438

entertainment in society. Bourdieu's argument is that workers actually have a taste for the low-end cultural practices and goods forced upon them in their subordinate class position. This is in contrast to the class-specific bourgeois taste for freedom which is found in high-culture. For Bourdieu, workers have so thoroughly internalized their own domination that they are forced to rely on the symbolic goods and tools supplied externally from the bourgeoisie to organize and express their interests. However, because these tools are bourgeois in origin, they are limited in their challenge to the totality of bourgeois society³⁴⁴. Bourdieu relates this to domination by arguing that these class-determined tastes and stratified cultural practices inevitably and inexorably reproduce the class divisions and structures that produce them³⁴⁵.

Bourdieu's structuralist theory of culture however, is not entirely accurate in describing modern capitalist societies, as well as growing capitalist societies. What Bourdieu doesn't account for is the fact that individuals, regardless of class, *desire the same things*. Working class individuals therefore desire the same material goods as the bourgeoisie, and are driven by the desire to own the same distinguishing commodities. Working class, or lower-class individuals therefore, also have a taste for distinguishing forms of objectified cultural capital such as fashionable clothes, cars, cellphones, electronics, accessories etc. Bourdieu is thus wrong in arguing that the lower-classes develop a strict taste for low-end lifestyle goods that are simple, frugal and functional. Instead, a taste for modern cultural commodities that represent lifestyle is something that is shared by all classes alike. It is only the means available for obtaining such cultural commodities that differs in capitalist society.

Bourdieu's principle of distinction can be used to explain why the lower-classes strive to accumulate the same goods as the middle and upper classes, and how the whole of society is involved in a competition for scarce forms of cultural capital. From here onwards, my argument differs from Bourdieu's. For Bourdieu, class divisions are inexorable because one's lifestyle (taste, culture, aesthetics) is pre-determined by the class position one is born into. As I have argued above, a taste and a desire for cultural commodities is shared by all classes. Most notably, material goods are becoming more and more homogeneous because no individual wants to possess goods that are ostensibly "lower-class". The aesthetic of upper-class taste is reflected in most commodities, even low-end commodities because the upper-class aesthetic is what people have a taste for: it is what they desire³⁴⁶.

Bourdieu's theory of distinction can be used to explain why individuals in all classes are driven to differentiate themselves from others. Distinction is thus, first and foremostly, an expression of individuality

³⁴⁴ Bourdieu, P (1985) "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups" in *Theory and Society* at p.735-744 and Bourdieu, P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* at pp.397-465 in Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.440

³⁴⁵ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.438

³⁴⁶ See Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.438

through the display of objectified cultural capital; and secondly, it is a movement away from a negatively defined “mass group” which has been given the label of “mainstream” or “mass society”.

Mass Society

Bourdieu did not consider the role of “mass society” in his social theory. For Bourdieu, distinction entails the individual acting upon her predispositions (informed by habitus), which results in her asserting her superior class position. Distinction is thus driven by the urge to differentiate oneself from lower classes. As we have seen above, Bourdieu also contends, wrongly in my opinion, that the lower classes do not engage in similar acts of distinction because their habitus confines them to “simple tastes”. I believe however, that the desire to be distinct, or express one's individuality, is something common to all classes. At the same time, it is not only the lower classes (relative to one's current class position) that individuals seek distinction from. The theory of distinction, as something that explains what continually drives individuals to consume commodities, provides us with a better picture of consumer society if we apply it to the concept of “mass society”. This being said, it must be acknowledged that the pejorative concept of mass society is bound up with the negative cultural associations attributed to the lower classes.

The “masses”, or “mass society” have come to be equated with those who are not sufficiently “free from necessity” (traditionally, the lower, or working class). Mass society today represents a large group of people who are “uncultured”, “stupid” and “barbarous”, who concern themselves with acquiring basic goods instead of culture and social capital. For Horkheimer and Adorno, (as well as many other cultural critics³⁴⁷), the notion of mass society is always pejorative. This does not only go for intellectual circles either. Mass society has come to be thought of as an unthinking, uncultured, stupid herd of humans; it is characterized by compulsive conformity and the need for acceptance. Clichéd phrases such as “keeping up with the Joneses” and “sheep mentality” have come to typify the perception of mainstream, mass society. In order to avoid an association with mass society, the consumer's consumption patterns must demonstrate that she does not associate herself with “mass society”.

The pejorative concept of mass society helps us understand why a distance from this group is so important. But why is mass society considered so negatively? I have already provided a brief explanation of why the lower classes are considered to be “simple”, or “uncultured” . This is because they do not have “freedom from necessity”. For Bourdieu, it is exactly a freedom from necessity that represents success and superiority

³⁴⁷ See Naomi Klein's *No Logo* or the popularity of *Adbusters* for a glimpse of how manipulable and passive “mass society” is argued to be. This may or may not be true. The point here is to give the reader an example of modern perceptions of “mass culture”.

(a source of distinction from others). In modern society however, freedom from necessity does not explain the continual desire to be distinct from groups or classes that are not associated with the poorest of the poor. In other words, what drives the individual to distinguish herself from her middle class contemporaries? This is where the argument of “freedom from necessity”, as well as Bourdieu's theory of class based distinction, must be expanded to explain the contempt for “mass society”, even in comparatively wealthy first world countries.

The following quote from Ortega y Gasset clearly demonstrates contemporary attitude towards the concept of mass society:

For a century and a half, the 'people', the mass, claimed to be the whole of society. The music of Stravinsky or the plays of Pirandello have the sociological power of obliging them to see themselves as they are, as the 'common people', a mere ingredient among others in the social structure, the inert material of the historical process, a secondary factor in the spiritual cosmos. By contrast the young art helps the 'best' to know and recognize one another in the greyness of the multitude and to learn their mission, which is to be few in number and to have to fight against the multitude³⁴⁸

The above passage shows how modern society has become divided into two broad “castes”: the culturally and intellectually “inert” on the one hand, and the culturally “gifted” and “progressive” on the other. This occurs regardless of whether society is first or third world because the desire to be distinct remains universally applicable. The quote refers specifically to art, and how certain types of new art only appeal to a special minority. For Ortega y Gasset, this anti-mainstream art can only be grasped by the culturally privileged who are endowed with knowledge, “a sensuous nobility, an instinctive sense of aristocracy³⁴⁹”. As I have already argued, the consumption of cultural capital, such as art, can be extended to the consumptive patterns of other commodities (furniture, cooking, clothing etc). It can be argued that many, if not most commodities today, have become an extension of culture, with certain commodities possessing symbolic power³⁵⁰. It is not only through art and music that the individual asserts one's cultural status. The argument in the passage above rings true for the current trends in consumption, and is based solidly upon the concept of a commodity fetishism.

³⁴⁸ Ortega y Gasset (1976) *La deshumanizacion del arte* at p.15-17 in Bourdieu, P(1984) in Collins, R *et al* (1987) *Supra* at p.175

³⁴⁹ Bourdieu, P(1984) *Supra* in Collins, R *et al* (1987) *Supra* at p.175

³⁵⁰ Again, the commodity symbolizes the taste, knowledge, individuality, class, wealth and success of the individual. In short, it shows how she is different, even better than others who cannot appropriate similar commodities.

The consumption of commodities, or objectified cultural capital, is thus an exercise in asserting power over others who are excluded economically and socially from similar practices. For Bourdieu, this is because the dominated do not possess sufficient economic or cultural capital, and are excluded from doing so by the nature of class society. I have already made it clear why I believe this explanation is insufficient. However, I do agree with what is implicit in Bourdieu's argument: That it is precisely those who excluded from forms of elitist behaviour and consumption that give the entire system meaning.

Distinction as a Zero Sum Game

In today's society, distinction can be identified as the explanatory mechanism that drives modern patterns of consumption. One of the results of this universal desire to be distinct is the creation of an ostensible broad middle class. In contrast to this is the upper, wealthy bourgeois class who seek to distance themselves from this middle class. Both classes, and even the lower classes in society however, operate according to the principle of distinction which is an assertion of individuality. The principle of distinction thus explains why the middle class has become so encompassing, as well as why "high-culture" is so important amongst the upper-classes.

The principle of competitive consumption can be simply put as follows: to own certain commodities that others do not have, or cannot afford, constitutes an act of distinction. It is always an exclusionary act because the consumer either joins, or affirms her membership of a group or class at the expense of others who do not merit membership. The entire process thus relies upon the excluded individual who, as a group of excluded individuals, constitutes mass society.

The most important conceptual characteristic of elitism or distinction, whether it be through the consumption of general commodities, or cultural commodities, is that it relies upon what it rejects for its content. This is not to say that there is nothing substantive to works of art, or other commodities. A discussion of this falls outside of the scope of this chapter. The substantive, qualitative or aesthetic qualities of cultural commodities (or any other commodity for that matter) do not have to be considered. We can consider the value of a given commodity in different terms: namely, scarcity and distinction. These qualities have a very real existence that appear to the individual as qualities that stem from the commodity itself (exactly the same way in which exchange value appears to stem from the commodity itself, independent of its constitutive processes). We can therefore identify some of the social processes involved, and the political repercussions of the system of commodity consumption, without considering the aesthetic or qualitative aspects of a given commodity.

Returning to the extended concept of commodity fetishism, my argument is that commodities possess

symbolic power which, in a way, acts to maintain the division between the elite class, and the lower classes. Underpinning this is the consumption of commodities, which is an expression of disassociation from the negative concept of “mass society”. The problem however, is that if everybody desires products that guarantee social distinction, large groups of people end up consuming goods that are qualitatively similar. This is apparent in trends where individuals buy similar, or the same commodities, which secure their place within a group associated with superior “taste”. I will explain the effects of this type of production later. At the moment, we must discover why individuals end up buying similar goods, as well as what keeps them buying more and more goods, even once they are established as “middle class”, or “upper class” etc.

The social capital of a given commodity, and the amount of distinction it subsequently confers upon the individual, relies upon its exclusivity, or distance from mass society and all its pejorative connotations. This is because one's appropriated commodities are a representation of one's distance from the “historically inert”, “uncultured” masses. In a more direct sense, this means a distance from the poor and the stupid who constitute the majority of human civilization. The concept of an elite group, distinct from the popular, naïve group, thus reproduces the social structure of two competing classes, which have come to be masked as an aesthetic, or cultural division. As I touched on above, elite groups explain their elitism in aesthetic terms, justifying their contempt for the culturally inert “others” in terms of their greater aestheticism, culture, knowledge and intellect. What underlies this however, is a deep sense of exclusivism which associates the excluded masses with vulgarity and stupidity. From this it becomes clear how objects that represent distinction act to reproduce the inequalities of capitalism. The interesting result of competitive consumption however, is that, if everybody is driven by the desire to be in an elite group, apart from the masses, the elite group itself becomes too large to offer a sufficient source of distinction; it comes to take on the characteristics of mass society itself. The desire to be distinct is therefore self-reproducing because in modern society everybody eventually ends up owning similar things, which no longer act as a source of distinction.

One of the reasons that modern society produces so much waste is because the consumption of commodities is an exercise that never reaches equilibrium. The fleeting nature of social capital requires individuals to continually purchase new commodities in order to reaffirm their social status. I have already described how current patterns of consumption obscure the class divisions between the working, and the middle to upper-middle class. The Frankfurt school argued that, in the first world, consumption reifies the social conditions of capitalism because it obscures the real class relations that exist beneath the accumulation of similar material goods. A broad, inclusive middle class however, can only be identified with certainty in first world countries. Nevertheless, in the first and third world, the desire to be distinct causes individuals to appropriate forms of social capital in order to distinguish themselves from others. As I have explained, this common drive results

in the ownership of lifestyle goods that are qualitatively similar. Society is thus ostensibly more homogeneous; firstly because individuals can afford more or less of the same commodities (even if they can't afford them, they can go into debt), and secondly, because the bourgeois aesthetic is common to most objectified forms of cultural capital, which appear on the market as commodities. Distinction therefore becomes more difficult to obtain, and it is because of this difficulty that competitive consumption becomes more important.

In modern consumer society, competitive consumption continues, even after an individual has confirmed her membership of a class that is distinct from “mass society”. If we ended the explanation here it would imply that if the requisite level of accumulated goods had been attained, one would be identifiably middle class, or bourgeois, and there would be no need for further consumption (which is the possible scenario in some first world countries). This is not the case however. The reason for continual consumption beyond this point is that commodities, over time, lose their symbolic power. There are many explanations that can be offered for this (for instance material depreciation). I would argue however, that the main reason behind the loss of symbolic, fetishized power, can be reduced to devaluation by popularity.

If we remember that the act of consumption is an act of distinction from a group with negative connotations (mass society), we can understand how a commodity can come to lose its symbolic power, if it becomes associated with this group. In other words, the more individuals who possess commodity X, the more it ceases to act as a marker of a select group. This is the devaluation of a commodity's value because of increasing “mass appeal”. The individual who does not want to be associated with, or who believes herself to be different from mass society, is thus forced to purchase more commodities which place her in a smaller, exclusionary group.

The problem is that such acts of perpetual competitive consumption are self defeating because the more people that engage in such acts, the more the symbolic power of the commodity becomes devalued. The competitive consumption of fetishized commodities can be seen in this regard as a “zero-sum” game. Competitive consumption means that in order for one person to win, someone else must lose. In other words, the drive for distinction and status necessarily involves bumping either someone else, or everyone else down. Those who are “bumped down”, driven by the same urge to be distinct, must make up for this loss by consuming something that will bump others down (who will themselves feel the urge to make this up by outdoing others).

Veblen argues that such consumptive behaviour is “wasteful” because when everyone does it, *everyone winds up right back where they started*. Thus the expenditure of time and energy does not generate any improvements for society: “It is called waste because this expenditure does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole³⁵¹”. This situation can be best described in terms of the concept of an arms race, which is a zero-sum game: The entire process is self-defeating because any increase must be outdone by a subsequent increase.

Take for example the following: An entrepreneur seeks to instill investor and customer confidence by presenting an image of success. The most immediate way to achieve this is not through a display of intellect but of wealth (which is synonymous with success). The entrepreneur thus finds it important to drive a BMW because it distinguishes herself from other entrepreneurs and projects an image of success, even though the purchase is to the severe detriment of her bank balance. The consumer's purchase however, only remains meaningful whilst others entrepreneurs drive Golfs, and when they upscale to a BMW, our entrepreneur's point of distinction collapses. The other entrepreneurs and businessmen are also driven by this impulse which leads to more and more of them buying BMW's – our entrepreneur thus returns to the same position she started out in. Her next task is to buy a Jaguar in order to set herself apart from her competition, and the same process begins again.

The result is that competitive consumption generates no lasting increase in happiness because the source of that happiness (the distinction from others, or sense of superiority and individuality) decreases over time as others catch up. The characteristic feature of this type of competitive consumption is that individuals are in opposition with another, and engage in strategic consumption in order to appropriate a form of capital that is most elusive and scarce: social capital. The quotation below goes to show the nature of competitive consumption, and how the process of distinction relies upon the opinion of others:

The exigencies of the modern industrial system frequently place individuals and households in juxtaposition between whom there is little contact in any other sense than that of juxtaposition. One's neighbours, mechanically speaking, often are socially not one's neighbours, or even acquaintances; and still their transient good opinion has a high degree of utility³⁵²

Veblen argues that one's contemporaries are seen as competitors. To gain the upper hand over our fellow competitors, we need to witness them lose, or at least take a position that is behind us in the race for social

³⁵¹ Veblen, T (1934) *The Theory of the Leisure Class : An Economic Study of Institutions* at p.73 To clarify exactly what constitutes “waste” Veblen states that “in strict accuracy nothing should be included under the head of conspicuous waste but such expenditure as is incurred on the ground of an invidious pecuniary comparison”. Ibid at p.74

³⁵² Veblen, T (1934) *Supra* at p.65

capital. What determines one's position within the hierarchy of society is the opinion of others who validate one's social status by recognizing the appropriation of symbolic goods, and therefore, power. As I argued earlier, it is this opinion that “has a high degree of utility” for the individual because it confers a sense of social distinction from others. The opinion of others, the ones who are left trailing after other's consumptive gain, is thus instrumental in giving the entire hierarchical system of social power credence. The processes involved in these social acts of distinction are processes that rely upon, and drive the current productive system of capitalism. As I have noted before, the competition for social capital is self-perpetuating because of the problem of popularity and the decreasing scarcity of a given commodity that is supposed to provide distinction. Individuals are thus required to continually consume commodities. This drive to consume new commodities that assert, or reaffirm ones membership of groups or classes that are distinct (and superior) from mass society, has shaped and refined the productive systems of capitalism. This is what I mean by stating that capitalism is maintained by its own processes. The social processes of competitive consumption maintain the productive processes, because competitive consumption means continual consumption, which means a continual source of commercial income or profit.

The Vanguard and the Consumption of High-Culture

We must now turn our focus to the groups that keep society in a constant state of competition and consumption. I have already explained why the symbolic power of commodities decreases as their popularity increases. This depreciation in symbolic power happens from the “bottom up”, and occurs when mass society becomes increasingly associated with a commodity, that before provided a source of distinction. It is this process that requires those who possess the highest amounts of social capital to continually distinguish themselves from those who “catch up” (traditionally those who possess lower amounts of social capital). Here we shift our focus from the depreciation of symbolic power, through popularity, to its opposite: the appreciation of higher sources of social capital through scarcity. More specifically, I will now explain how the upper classes react to the “catch up” movements within mainstream society by striving to create new areas of social capital. This argument however, can be extended to all acts of consumption within today's society, because it is not only the upper classes who strive to obtain new forms of social capital. Again, the defining principle, with regards to a commodity's social value, is its scarcity; and it is this competition for scarce forms of social capital that characterize consumer behaviour across the classes. It must also be remembered that both scarcity and social capital are instruments of domination which act to maintain the class divisions within society, because each act of competitive consumption is exclusionary (it excludes others and forces them into a lower class position).

Objectified cultural capital, or in its broader sense (as we extend it to all commodities), social capital, is thus based upon the scarcity of the commodity. It might be argued that the scarcity of a commodity can extend from a variety of factors (for instance, limited distribution). I would argue however, in agreement with Horkheimer and Adorno, that the commodity is valued primarily along the lines of its exchange value. Scarcity, in a general sense, should be thus understood in terms of exchange-value. What this basically means is that the higher the exchange-value of a commodity, the fewer the number of individuals who can afford such a commodity. This explains why pleasure is so directly related to the exchange-value of a commodity. The pleasure derived from the appropriation of an expensive commodity is a personal affirmation of one's distinctness and individuality, because wealth itself is scarce. The more one spends, the more one acquires independence or distinction. Modern consumer society can thus be thought of as an intense competition for ever decreasing amounts of social capital.

What I mean by “ever decreasing amounts of social capital” is based upon the “zero sum” game analogy that I provided earlier. Social capital only works as a marker of distinction if others don't possess it. As soon as others possess similar goods, one's point of distinction collapses. Apart from this, there is a continual urge to be part of the “highest elite”, which means that the individual must appropriate things that constantly distinguish herself from others in a similar position. This requires the individual to appropriate things that cost more and more. This process is not limitless however. It can stop at a certain point (the individual simply might not have enough money to accumulate further). This does not mean that the desire to continue consumption ceases. In many cases, people are willing to go into debt to accumulate commodities that will provide them with further sources of distinction. The process of competitive consumption can also continue for the few individuals who can afford to do so. It is this group of fewer and fewer individuals who compete for the most valuable, and most scarce forms of social capital. The simple equation is that, because so few people can afford such valuable commodities, so few are produced, and because so few people have such commodities, they act as an ultimate form of distinction. This is exactly what Bourdieu means when he argues that the rarity, or uniqueness of a cultural good comes to determine its value. The idea is that the more elite, or rare a commodity is, the more the commodity would act as a source of distinction (social capital), and the more exchange value it becomes associated with (economic capital).

The competition for social capital drives individuals to compete for ever decreasing amounts of social capital (economic, cultural and social capital), which brings us to the driving force of the vanguard in capitalism. This process of attaining these forms of capital takes the form of making claims to new sources of cultural capital; for instance, by creating new trends. It is this area (the redefinition, or creation of new sources of social capital) that constitutes the vanguard: the cutting edge of consumption. It is also the vanguard that

keeps people consuming in order to confirm their membership of elite groups and classes. The consumption of commodities is thus a continual, shifting process that reproduces and recognizes the reified, dominating divisions within society. From this it becomes clear that the structure of capitalist society is kept intact by its own processes.

The vanguard drive the consumptive patterns of others because they are believed to possess cultural knowledge, or “taste”. As with any assertion of taste, the actor makes a claim to knowledge that expresses her cultural knowledge and status. But what gives these assertions of taste value or substance? In other words, why do others identify and validate these new sources of social capital? The reason that certain assertions of taste (for instance, the wearing of new fashionable shoes) develop such influence is that they arise from areas of power. The elite thus have the ability to create new sources of social capital because they are believed to be in possession of social capital. Their claims are thus legitimized by their monopoly over cultural capital, which is a form of elitist power. New areas of social capital are developed by the vanguard, who are essentially “self-legitimizing”. The cultural vanguard who drive the entire process of trend creation, and thus continually redefine the areas rich with cultural capital, or social capital, are self-legitimizing because they are believed to possess an aristocratic instinct, or gift. Bourdieu's argument is that acts of cultural consumption objectify the class differences in capitalist society. Class differences are relationships of economic domination which are direct and personal. Bourdieu argues that these relations of economic domination are reproduced daily through the exercise of violence. This violence is however, by no means overt. Class legitimization, for Bourdieu, is secured by economic capital which is used to dominate others. Economic capital is continuously translated into, and disguised as cultural or symbolic capital, which is equated with honour and entitlement. Bourdieu's argument is that this legitimation of class domination entails a cultural misrecognition of economic capital through its conversion into symbolic capital³⁵³. Class power is therefore misrecognized as individual giftedness, or worthiness. The bourgeois individual is attributed with taste and cultural knowledge which, according to Bourdieu, stems from her socialization and education (“habitus”). This taste, or cultural knowledge, is however, perceived as a personal faculty, or ability that the lower classes do not possess. The bourgeois individual is thus associated with symbolic power (taste, cultural knowledge and goods) and consequently takes her place within a superior group³⁵⁴. For Bourdieu, the misrecognition of economic power as symbolic, social power subordinates the working class, effectively validating the class divisions within society:

class differences produce “visible cultural differences in all fields, but but because these cultural

³⁵³ See Bourdieu, P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* at p.196 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

³⁵⁴ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.435-436, 444

differences are mistakenly perceived as originating in *individual worthiness* rather than *class position*, they end up legitimating the class system³⁵⁵.

At this stage, it should not be surprising to the reader that bourgeois taste and culture are expressions of a conscious, or unconscious intention to be distinct from “common people”, or mass society. Common people could simply not appreciate cultural goods of such value, and even if they were presented with such goods, they would not possess the faculties or intellect required to appreciate them:

In the past, the masses did not have access to art; music, painting, and even books, were pleasures reserved for the rich. It might have been supposed that the poor, the 'common people', would have enjoyed them equally, if they had the chance. But now that everyone can read, go to museums, listen to great music, at least on the radio, the judgement of the masses about these things has become a reality and though this it has become clear that great art is not a direct sensuous pleasure. Otherwise, like cookies or cocktails, it would flatter uneducated taste as much as cultivated taste³⁵⁶

The above quotation serves to demonstrate the perception that culture cannot be shared equally because taste and culture are innate faculties that some possess, and others don't³⁵⁷. The pleasure derived from appreciating culture is not based upon direct sensuous pleasure (an abased type of pleasure similar to the pleasure derived from “eating cookies”). The appreciation of culture is thus the domain of the few who are capable of deriving pleasure in other ways; ways that are not commonly understood, which are not open to everyone. This is why culture and taste signify individuality, because only a few possess it (and to possess it, means that one is associated with positive things such as intelligence, wealth and status). The real source of the capacity to understand culture (a bourgeois intellectual upbringing) is not acknowledged. The connection between economic privilege (directly related to education) and cultural knowledge is not scrutinized, and is instead taken to be an immediate argument for the legitimization of the elite's cultural monopoly. For the elite, the masses are simply not interested in aesthetics, culture and knowledge. They were not born with the ability, and therefore do not have the desire or need to appreciate high culture. As I have argued before, this cultural

³⁵⁵ Gartman, D (1991) Supra at p.429 (my emphases)

³⁵⁶ Langer, S (1968) “On Significance in Music” in *Aesthetics and the Arts* at p.183 in Bourdieu, P(1984) Supra in Collins, R *et al* (1987) Supra at p.175

³⁵⁷ This differs from the democratic perception of political freedoms or economic equality. These concern things (rights, or money) that are, by definition, capable of being extended to all citizens within society. Culture on the other hand (if thought of as a personal capacity), by definition cannot be shared equally because some possess the ability to appreciate it, and others don't. The extension of culture to all would make as much sense as giving all the members of society tennis equipment. This wouldn't make sense because only a few people are capable of playing tennis well. The same type of logic applies to the distribution of culture to all. It doesn't make sense because of the common perception of culture as a “talent” or inherent individual capacity.

monopoly is self-legitimizing because of this very exclusivist, essentializing explanation of culture and taste. What the elite bourgeois individual fails to recognize is that higher tastes, and an understanding of cultural goods (i.e. art and literature), are the result of bourgeois schooling and conditioning. Taste and culture can thus be reduced to the bourgeois expression of class and superiority of knowledge. This assertion of privilege and distinction from the lower classes has become so reified that it has come to be regarded as an innate capacity of the upper classes, instead of a conditioned capacity. This entire process can of course be reduced to the desire for distinction from mass society through the consumption of symbolic commodities. In reality, the bourgeois, who rejects mass society, is instead rejecting what is generic, i.e., common, easy and immediately accessible, in other words, the idiocy associated with mass-society³⁵⁸.

Commodity Fetishism and Domination

It has been stated before in this chapter that in culture, the desire for distinction is a drive that relies more upon what culture is not, than what it is. In other words, higher forms of culture define themselves in stark contrast to what they are not: mainstream culture. Pierre Bourdieu argues accordingly that:

[t]astes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are first and foremost, distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others. There is no accounting for tastes.... because each taste feels itself to be natural – and so it almost is, being a habitus – which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious. Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes: class endogamy is evidence of it. The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessor of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated³⁵⁹.

Starting from the point of the commodity, we can now come to fully appreciate how the commodity becomes an expression of taste, which is an expression of both cultural and economic power. For Bourdieu, tastes are

³⁵⁸ But what about individuals who are aware of competitive consumption, its wasteful effects, and the fact that it amounts to a zero sum game? Bourdieu argues that middle, or upper class individuals who are privileged, but who are aware of asserting this privilege engage in “strategies of condescension”. Strategies of condescension are those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus reaping the profits of the recognition granted to a purely symbolic denegation of distance (“she is unaffected,” “he is not highbrow” or stand-offish,” etc.) which implies a recognition of distances. Bourdieu, P(198) Supra at p.16

³⁵⁹ Bourdieu, P(1984) Supra in Collins, R *et al* (1987) Supra at p.192

practical, which means that they are purposeful, active demarcators of *difference*. The assertion of taste (which each individual believes to be a superior, differentiating sense of taste) thus establishes categories. Most importantly however, taste establishes negative categories (i.e. what it is different from)³⁶⁰.

The competitive consumption of commodities is an expression of power through the ownership of objects. I have already established that the fetishism associated with commodities extends far beyond Marx's original economic account. Commodities, as a form of objectified cultural capital, are also a tangible display of purchasing power (economic power), as well as culture (social power). So, not only do commodities result in the perpetuation of the forces of production, they are also instrumental in maintaining the class divisions that are characteristic of capitalist society in two ways:

- 1) By obscuring the division between the working class and the middle to upper-middle class through the mass consumption of mass-produced commodities (material forms of culture).
- 2) By reproducing and legitimizing the division between the privileged bourgeoisie and lower classes (who come to adopt the negative connotation of mass society) through the consumption of non-material forms of culture (“high-culture” such as art, literature, music, intellectualism etc.)³⁶¹

In modern consumer society, things like clothes, household appliances, technology, cars etc. actively conceal class divisions because ostensibly, everybody appears to have similar goods of similar quality. Developed societies therefore have a narrow, and ever closing gap between the relative level of commodities consumed by the working class, and the middle class. This point follows Horkheimer and Adorno's argument concerning mass society, and how the mass production of culture in society actively reifies, and obscures the inequalities, exploitation and alienation of late capitalism. On the other hand, Horkheimer and Adorno's argument regarding the culture industry seems insufficient in explaining how humans engage with, and practice, forms of culture that reproduce capitalist conditions of domination.

I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno insofar as they argue that humans, blocked in their efforts to achieve self-determination at work, spend their wages on constructing a small realm of freedom at home, buying products that *superficially satisfy their displaced desires*. Horkheimer and Adorno argue further that, in order

³⁶⁰ For example, to make a claim to cultural knowhow (and hence cultural capital) it is passable to have some Bach or John Coltrane in your CD collection, but it is utterly inconceivable to have Celine Dion's latest album in there as well. This is because a Celine Dion CD indicates a lack of taste. Most importantly however, the reason that it is considered to represent a lack of taste (and therefore a lack of cultural capital) is because it implies mainstream behaviour, synonymous with conformity and the inane. It is thus good taste, a vicious form of conspicuous consumption, that provides the individual with a sense of superiority. And as Veblin argued, it is precisely this that we wish to obtain.

³⁶¹ Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.434-445

to serve as substitute satisfactions for needs denied at work, domestic and cultural commodities need to contain no marks or referents that link them to this original site of displacement. People therefore can only forget workplace degradations if their homes and leisure time is filled with products that bear no visual reference to the alienating work process. Commodities therefore need to, and do, conceal the relations between mass-produced commodities and the productive process³⁶².

What Horkheimer and Adorno fail to do however, is provide an account of how individuals, as participants in mass-culture, practice, and reproduce conditions of domination. Their argument often degenerates into a form of instrumentalism, in which the powerful elite consciously, or unconsciously, manipulate culture in order to perpetuate the domination of the masses, who passively accept whatever is foisted upon them. Despite this, Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of a mass culture that obscures class differences is a powerful tool for understanding the overall legitimizing role that culture plays in late capitalism. It is this insight however, that needs to be substantiated and explained at the level of individual transactions if we are to understand the way in which culture is practiced, and exactly how culture reproduces and reifies the alienating conditions of capitalism. This gap in Horkheimer and Adorno's theory is filled by Bourdieu's theory of distinction, which allows us to understand what continually drives individuals to consume commodities that obscure, as well as concretize class divisions, and how competitive consumption reifies the conditions of capitalist society.

The contributions of Horkheimer, Adorno and Bourdieu however, must be understood as extensions of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. My work in this chapter has been an attempt to understand how commodity fetishism can be extended and used to explain how capitalism is reproduced and objectified by its own processes. Commodity fetishism also explains one of the ways in which individuals contribute to their own domination. Property, taken as a fetishized expression of symbolic power, is also an example of reification at work because it demonstrates how wholly devoted individuals are to the processes of capitalism. Even amongst the lowest income groups, competitive consumption is practiced relentlessly. Modern capitalism is thus thoroughly driven by the desire to purchase symbolic commodities that signify one's economic capital and social capital (in relation to one's contemporaries).

In this chapter I have argued that reification provides a very compelling answer for how the dominated many have come to accept their exploited conditions. Beyond this, I have investigated the mechanisms of reification, and chose to focus upon the role of two mutually constitutive practices: commodity fetishism and the consumption of commodities that have symbolic power. I have shown how the systems of consumption

³⁶² Gartman, D (1991) *Supra* at p.428

and production both aim to fetishize the commodity and construct it into an expression of social, economic and cultural superiority.

I have also shown why Horkheimer, Adorno, and Bourdieu's work regarding culture must be reconciled to provide a more accurate account of how culture reproduces conditions of domination. By including the concept of “mass society” into the theory of distinction, and doing away with Bourdieu's structuralist account of fixed, class specific tastes, we arrive at a better understanding of *why* and *how* individuals contribute to the reproduction of the inequalities of capitalism. The work in this chapter has thus been a small contribution to the theories of domination that were put forward by Marx, Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Bourdieu. I consciously however, only engage in an identification of *how* current forms of cultural behaviour contribute to, and reproduce systems of domination. In other words, my work is an understanding of, and a small contribution to, the diagnosis of the problem of domination, but falls short of a solution to this problem. This would require a substantial amount of work, and falls out of the scope of this thesis. However, I do believe, that by properly understanding some of the processes involved, we can move towards structuring a better solution to the problem of domination.

Conclusion

Commodity fetishism has been the core concept that underpins all the elaborations upon the theory of domination contained in this thesis. The essence of the fetish has been used widely by theorists to explain how the very nature of social reality in oppressive societies makes it difficult for the dominated to comprehend the exploitative, illegitimate nature of capitalist societies.

The work of Lukács followed directly from Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which he extended into a thorough critique of pervasive capitalist rationality. Capitalism, as he saw it, was shot through with a particular type of thought called formal rationality, which was a projection of the rational principles that underpin the capitalist process of commodity production. Formal rational logic was based upon calculability, efficiency and predictability. This logic, when applied to capitalism as a whole, reifies the processes, systems and institutions of capitalism. Capitalism as a system becomes law-like, unchangeable and unquestionable. Capitalist social reality therefore appears as the only legitimate, functional social system whose operational laws govern each individual's actions. Reification therefore hides real social relations beneath these independently functioning laws, making it difficult for individuals to understand the exploitation and inauthenticity of life in capitalist society.

It is not so much Lukács' diagnosis of why individuals accept societies that are illegitimate, but his solution to this problem that proves to be problematic. His dialectical materialism is argued to be teleological. The revolutionary class consciousness that is supposed to emanate from the dialectical process (which clearly never occurred) is instead argued to be an imputed class consciousness.

In light of Lukács' failure, Horkheimer and Adorno attempted to reformulate domination theory in its entirety. Straying from the “positive dialectics” of Hegel, Marx and Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno set out to provide a new answer to the question of why proletarian class consciousness had failed. Instead of relying upon ideological critique, they developed an entirely new theory of the development of domination which intensified the problem of domination more than anything else. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the dominating social system of capitalism is by no means reducible to capitalism itself. Instead, domination is the natural and inevitable result of human interaction with nature. Instrumental rationality develops out of human dealings with nature, which extends to an instrumental, rational ordering and control of the social. Humans therefore, come to control other humans in the same way that they instrumentally control nature. This control is exercised by the privileged few over the underprivileged many. Over time, the threat of violence that keeps this social system in place subsides, and the underprivileged must be forced in new, subtle ways to accept

their domination. Up to this point, Horkheimer and Adorno's theory may seem problematic. It is their concentration upon the ideological role of the culture industry, based upon the logic of mass commodity production, that is of particular relevance to this thesis.

The culture industry operates in such a way that it placates the frustrated needs of the alienated worker. The worker therefore turns to the culture industry in her leisure time to escape the drudgery of every day life. Culture, in this respect, is potentially disruptive because it used to be, and can be, a space for the individual to find and express freedom, outside of the constraints of the productive process. In modern capitalism however, this potential for freedom is blocked by the commodification and mass production of culture. In modern society, culture is no longer about the expression of freedom and creativity, but about the consumption of mass produced commodities that are bound up with the logic of the capitalist productive process. Leisure is therefore a return to the images and logic of work.

Horkheimer and Adorno's work on culture provides us with critical insights into how culture contributes to domination, and how modern capitalism pacifies all potential areas of rebellion and criticism. The culture industry maintains the smooth operation of capitalism as a totalizing system. The way in which the dominated individual experiences capitalism becomes "totalizing", in that nothing exists outside of the processes of capitalism. One of the principal contributions to this "totalizing" state is commodification. I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno that things that were once free from the logic and impressions of capitalism, when produced as commodities, become instruments of capitalist domination.

The individual therefore experiences capitalism as an ontological state. This means that nothing exists outside of her knowledge of capitalism and its systems. She cannot therefore conceptualize alternatives to the social and the political. Capitalism is drummed in until it is naturalized. However, despite the importance and scope of their criticism of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno do not identify the concrete mediating mechanisms that exist in the culture industry. They do not give us a sufficient enough explanation of *why* individuals come to embrace the culture industry, and *how* the culture industry is able to operate on a continual basis. I believe that their argument falls short in this regard because they do not account for the way in which the individual actively participates in culture, and how her consumption of culture in the form of commodities reproduces and reifies the system of capitalism.

This brings us to the final chapter which draws upon the work of Bourdieu. My work, particularly in the final chapter, can be seen as a defence of the theory of ideology. The theory of ideology explains how capitalist society presents itself in such a way that it conceals its underlying, exploitative inner workings. Based upon

these false appearances, people develop forms of behaviour and beliefs that are contrary to their best interests.

A focus upon the competitive consumption of commodities has shown exactly how individuals engage and embrace forms of behaviour that are not in the interests of their welfare. Competitive consumption also creates no lasting happiness, and results in massive amounts of waste and expenditure. Nevertheless, individuals relentlessly partake in competitive consumption. Bourdieu provides an explanation of why people continually consume commodities. His theory of distinction is an invaluable contribution to domination theory, and is powerful in its simplicity and its broad relevance. Bourdieu's theory however, must move away from its strict structuralist approach of “habitus”, and the well defined tastes of each particular class, to a more embracing account of aestheticism and taste. This will develop his theory of distinction and make it applicable to all classes, and all forms of competitive consumption. The desire for distinction must be recognized as a universal social desire. Individuals, regardless of taste, seek to own social capital which is found in its highest concentrations in scarce, expensive commodities.

Bourdieu's theory must adapt from its strict focus upon classist forms of consumption that are made to exclude the lower classes, to a more general form of exclusivism that seeks to denounce “mass society”, or “the mainstream”. Although there are associated similarities between the two (mass society and the lower classes), an explanation that includes the concept of mass society lets us understand how the poor also engage in competitive consumption. Those with relatively little economic capital (lower class) can therefore also desire to be distinct from the the pejorative concept of mass society. By broadening Bourdieu's theory of distinction to all classes, and by including the common disdain for mass society, we can arrive at a better understanding of exactly how, and why, individuals develop beliefs and behaviour that favours the reproduction of the status quo. Competitive consumption also explains how individuals, preoccupied with consumption, reify dominating, illegitimate societies through their daily transactions.

Finally, the competitive consumption of cultural commodities results in the reification of the social reality of capitalism because it obscures the points of contention between the classes in modern society. Individuals across class divisions partake in mass culture which obscures the division between capitalists as owners of the means of production, and workers as dispossessed employees, forced to labour by their social position. By homogenizing culture, capitalism becomes seemingly more embracing, less contentious, and more equal. Mass culture has, to a large degree, created a broad, encompassing, class obscuring “middle class”, or group. Horkheimer and Adorno however, do not identify what creates this group, and what maintains it. Mass culture owes its existence to the principle of distinction. This is because mass culture did not start as mass society, but became a mass movement because all individuals are driven to keep up with movements of social

capital, which mass culture follows relentlessly. The fact is that everybody desires cultural capital, and when everybody acts upon this desire at the same time, it becomes a mass movement, which constitutes mass society. Over and above this however, there is an intense desire to be distinct from mass society, which is expressed most discernibly by the upper-bourgeois classes. Despite the fact that this division between the broad middle class (and lower classes), and the rich upper class is readily apparent in society, it is by no means a threat to capitalism. In other words, the division between the majority (lower, and middle classes), and the minority (upper, super-wealthy class) is not a point of contention. Instead, these upper classes drive, and maintain the system of capitalism because the lower classes see upper class lifestyle as something to be desired. In modern society however, as soon as the middle classes start acquiring goods that are associated with the upper classes, the upper classes are forced to acquire different goods which re-establish their social position as a group distinct from mass society. Inequality therefore, drives competitive consumption, which reproduces the class division between the wealthy, cultured minority, and the uncultured lower classes. At the level of the lower classes however (lower, middle, and upper middle), social divisions are becoming less visible because individuals end up owning similar cultural goods in an attempt to be associated with the upper class.

My work in this thesis is thus a contribution to, and implicit defence of the idea that oppressive societies self-maintain. This particular argumentative position has been upheld, developed, and altered historically by the likes of Marx, Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Bourdieu; it has been my intention to show in what way their work still has merit, and in what way it can be used to provide answers to the question of why the many accept the rule of the few. I believe that all the theories entailed in this thesis have merit as explanations of why the dominated many accept the rule of the privileged few. This is not to say however, that the theories of ideology contained in this thesis provide the only explanation of why conditions of domination persist. It has however, been my task to study, and determine the relevance of these theories, as well as to contribute to them. As I stated in the closing lines of the last chapter, the work in this thesis serves to build a better understanding of the way in which domination is practiced and reproduced without providing an emancipatory solution. The development of an emancipatory solution however, would be indebted to the theories entailed in this thesis because it is only through a thorough understanding of the problem that a solution may be found.

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