REIFICATION: A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: The concept of reification is used by Marx to describe a form of social consciousness in which human relations come to be identified with the physical properties of things, thereby acquiring an appearance of naturalness and inevitability. This essay presents a systematic reconstruction of Marx's theory of reification, with an emphasis on the social-structural dimensions of the concept. This reconstruction differs both from the conceptions of reification that are found in non-Marxist sociology and from the interpretations of some of Marx's followers. Marx's concept of reification is then taken as the model for a more general theory of ideology. In the final section of the essay, I show how this theory can be used to analyze the emergence of new forms of reification in capitalist society, including those that are based on the growth of technology, the spread of bureaucracy, and the rationalization of occupational selection.

Sociology has been aptly described as a graveyard of critical concepts. Nowhere is this more true than in its appropriation and "operationalization" of concepts deriving from the Marxist theoretical tradition. Several critics have noted, for example, the emasculation which the concept of *alienation* has suffered at the hands of empirically oriented sociologists (Horton, 1964; Blackburn, 1969). In this instance, it is precisely the most crucial and distinguishing features of Marx's theory that are lost in the translation to mainstream sociology: the multi-dimensionality of the concept of alienation, the insight it provides into the inner structure of capitalist work relations, and the unity it forges between empirical analysis and radical critique. For Marx, the concept of alienation describes the situation of the individual worker, but also implies a theoretical conception of capitalist society as a whole. It offers an analysis of objective social relations which is also a critique of the false or "inverted" nature of those relations (Meszaros, 1970; Ollman, 1971; Colletti, 1972; Geras, 1973). By contrast, as appropriated by mainstream sociology, the descriptive elements of the concept of alienation have been separated from Marx's critique of capitalism, and the focus has been narrowed from an analysis of capitalist production relations to the study of individual attitudes (Seeman, 1957; Dean, 1961). The result is a dehistoricized and psychologized concept which, in becoming grist for interview questionnaires and statistical correlations, has been stripped of its capacity to illuminate the hidden structure of capitalist society and

severed from its original connection with the struggle for human liberation.

On the other hand, Marx's thought has long had the distinction of suffering equally from its professed advocates as from its opponents. While the latter have tended to reformulate Marx's concepts within a positivistic framework – separating them from their political and historical context – the former have shown the reverse inclination to moralize and polemicize those same concepts – separating them, with equally negative effect, from their analytic and scientific context. This tendency is also common in the case of the alienation concept, where many of those who identify themselves with the Marxist tradition seem attracted to the concept more for its polemical value as a critique of the "inhuman" consequences of capitalism than as a conceptual tool for the analysis and understanding of capitalist society. The polemical element, of course, is not absent from the work of Marx, but neither is it his primary concern. For Marx, alienation is above all a scientific category whose value is to be judged by its capacity to lay bare the internal dynamics of capitalist society. He is always careful to distinguish himself from those who would reduce the analysis of alienation in its various concrete forms to mere criticism in the name of some ethical ideal or abstract conception of human essence (Marx and Engels, 1970:56 and 94; 1972:355-358).

These twin distortions of Marx's theory – of positivistic psychologism on the one hand and moralistic polemicizing on the other – are found equally in contemporary applications of a second and related Marxist category: the concept of *reification*. In Marx's theory, the concept of reification specifies the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness – that is, between objective social relations and the subjective apprehension of those relations – in a society dominated by commodity production. It describes a situation of isolated individual producers whose relation to one another is indirect and realized only through the mediation of things (the circulation of commodities), such that the social character of each producer's labor becomes obscured and human relationships are veiled behind the relations among things and apprehended as relations among things. In this manner a particular (historical) set of social relations comes to be identified with the natural properties of physical objects, thereby acquiring an appearance of naturalness or inevitability – a fact which contributes, in turn, to the reproduction of existing social relations.

Marx's concept of reification is a multi-dimensional concept: his analysis addresses both the nature of the social structure and the nature of social consciousness, as well as the reciprocal relations between these two levels. By contrast, as appropriated by mainstream sociology, the first of these dimensions (the social-structural dimension) disappears and reification, like alienation, is reduced to a psychological characteristic of the abstract individual. This tendency is apparent in the writings of Peter Berger, the theorist most responsible for introducing the concept of reification into American sociology. In Berger's construction, reification is interpreted as a state of amnesia in which the individual "forgets" the human origins of the social world. Social phenomena are apprehended instead "as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:89). This "forgetfulness" is explained, in turn, as a defensive reaction by which the individual seeks to establish psychic stability in the face of "some fundamental terrors of human existence, notably the terror of chaos" (Berger and Pullberg, 1966:68). The analysis of reified consciousness is thus separated from the analysis of the particular social relations that are reified, and translated into a cultural and historical universal.

Paradoxically, there are similarities in the manner in which the term "reification" most often appears in the Marxist literature. Although opposite in many respects, the use of the term is similar in the extent to which the discussion of reified consciousness tends to take place independently of any analysis of the underlying social relations producing such reification. Just as the concept of alienation is frequently employed in a merely critical or polemical fashion, the concept of reification is likewise restricted to a polemical role – in this case as a derisive term for a recurring form of ideological mystification in "bourgeois" social science. "Reification" in this context becomes a derogatory label, ritualistically applied to any theory that uncritically takes existing social relations and institutions for granted and elevates these to general principles of social organization. While such polemics are often well-founded and directed against theories that are indeed mystifying, as ideology critiques they are also subject to definite limitations. To the extent that they operate only at the level of critique, they remain, in Marx's words, merely "interpretations of interpretations," and therefore unable to penetrate to the root of the matter (Marx and Engels, 1970:41). Too often we are left with the impression that reified conceptions are merely the result

of some willful distortion or interest-induced blindness on the part of the social theorist who imposes interpretations on the world which are at odds with the way things "really are." No doubt this sometimes happens, however it is important to point out that this is a quite different situation than Marx has in mind in his analysis of reification. For Marx, reification is not merely an illusion foisted upon consciousness from the outside, but derives from the objective nature of social institutions; hence the critique of reified theories is never more than a preliminary to the analysis of the social relations which produce such reifications.

In this essay, my aim is to recover the original content and theoretical utility of Marx's concept of reification from the twin distortions I have outlined above: from its psychologistic reduction in mainstream sociology and its polemical trivialization at the hands of Marxist critics of ideology. Toward this end, the following section presents a reconstruction of Marx's theory of reification, with an emphasis on the social-structural dimensions of the concept. The subsequent sections build upon this basis to show how Marx's concept of reification provides the model for a more general analysis of the nature of ideological mystification in contemporary capitalist society.

MARX'S THEORY OF REIFICATION

The necessary starting point for an examination of Marx's theory of reification is the famous section in Chapter One of *Capital* entitled "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof." The notion of commodity fetishism which lies at the heart of Marx's theory of reification is introduced in the following passage:

> A Commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor. This is the reason why the products of labor become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. . . . A definite social relation between men . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. . . . This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (Marx, 1967a:72).

In this passage, Marx notes that the relations of interdependence between individual commodity

producers are not manifested as social relations *per se*, but appear instead in the "fantastic form" of relations between things. This "fantastic form" is the relative value (viz., exchange value) which commodities assume in the process of exchange. What is "mysterious" here is that, as a value, the commodity exhibits a property which cannot adequately be explained by any material or perceptible attribute of the object. The mystery is solved, however, once we recognize that value is an expression, not of any physical-technical characteristic of the object, but of the social relations with which it is connected in the commodity economy. Value is the "social form" which objects acquire as a consequence of the "peculiar social character of the labor that produces them" (Marx, 1967a:72).

The point to be stressed here is the precise nature of the illusion or mystification which commodity fetishism implies. This illusion is not, as some have suggested, that human relations take on the *appearance* of relations between things. This, Marx makes clear, is nothing but an expression of the *real* nature of social relations in a competitive market economy. Individual producers do not confront one another directly as social beings, nor is their collective labor regulated by any common plan. Each contributes to the total social product solely on the basis of private calculations of individual advantage. Consequently, it is only through the relative values which are established among their products in the act of exchange (and individual actions responsive to those relative values) that each individual's labor is coordinated with that of the rest. Thus, social relations among individual producers not only take on the appearance of relations among things, they are in fact *realized* only through the relations among things.

> As a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labor of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other. The sum total of the labor of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labor of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labor does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the labor of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labor of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter, therefore, the relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but *as what they really are*, material relations between persons and social relations between things (Marx, 1967a:72-73, emphasis added).

Neither does the illusory nature of commodity fetishism lie in the fact that human relations appear *subordinate* to relations among things. This too is an expression of the real nature of social relations in a

competitive market economy. Since individuals do not enter into productive relations with one another directly as social beings, but only as owners of particular things, the possession of things becomes a condition for and determines the nature of each individual's participation in the productive relations of society. Persons are thus reduced to functioning as representatives or "personifications" of the things in their possession, while productive relations among them become dependent upon the market relations that are established among those things (Marx, 1967a:85; 1967c:819 and 824).

The subordination of human beings to things and the relations among things follows directly from the privatized nature of social production in the commodity economy. Individual producers, each privately concerned with the quantities of commodities which he or she can obtain in exchange for his or her product, experience their own activity as conditioned by the ratios of exchange which prevail in the market. These ratios are merely an expression of social character of each individual's labor – that is, of the mutual dependence among individual producers – as manifested through the dynamics of the market. Yet, because of the privatized manner in which production takes place, this mutual dependence is not manifested as a direct and explicit social relation, but necessarily asserts itself "behind the backs" of the producers, confronting each of them in the form of quantitative relations among the objects of their production over which they have no control.

> These quantities vary continually, independently of the will, foresight and action of the producers. To them, their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them (Marx, 1967a:72).

Commodity fetishism thus implies a condition of alienation similar to that described by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*: "the object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an *alien being*, as a *power independent* of the producer" (Marx, 1964:122). This alienation is not merely an illusion or appearance, but is rooted in the actual nature of commodity production.

The illusion implied by commodity fetishism is thus neither that human relations appear in the form of relations between things, nor that these relations between things appear, in turn, to dominate their human producers. These are both expressions of the real, albeit distorted and inverted, nature of human relations in the commodity economy. Marx refers to these twin phenomena respectively as the

"materialization of productive relations" and the "personification of things."

> [I]mplicit in the commodity, and even more so in the commodity as a product of capital, is the materialization of the social features of production and the personification of the material foundations of production, which characterize the entire capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1967c:880).

By the "materialization of productive relations" Marx refers to the fact that productive relations in the commodity economy are realized only through the mediation of things, and that these things, by functioning as the material entities by which and through which people enter into particular productive relations, acquire, as a consequence, a specific imprint or "social form." Historically, these social forms become sedimented as fixed and stable characteristics of the material elements of the production process. By the "personification of things" Marx means that the existence of things with such a determined social form enables, indeed compels, the owners of those things to enter into a determined form of productive relations with one another. Hence, as things acquire human form, humans are reduced to executing or "personifying" the social characteristics of the things in their possession. These twin processes constitute the underlying dialectic through which the reproduction of commodity relations takes place.

What Marx describes as the "illusory" aspect of commodity fetishism is the distorted manner in which this dialectic is experienced and apprehended from the standpoint of the individual producer. At this level, historically determined social relations of production take on, in the process of their materialization and personification, an appearance of *naturalness* or *inevitability*. Productive relations, to the extent that they are manifested not as relations between persons but relations between things, appear to be rooted in the inherent properties of things as natural objects. The subordination of the commodity producer, to the extent that it takes the form of a subordination to things rather than directly to other persons, appears therefore as subordination to the immutable laws of Nature. In short, under commodity fetishism the social form of things as commodities is equated with their natural existence as material objects, with the result that the particular social and historical relations which are mediated by those things acquire an illusion of permanence. In Marx's words:

> [F]etishism . . . 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 things (Marx, 1967b:225).

This collapsing of social characteristics into natural ones is a form of mystification which pertains not only to the commodity, but to each of the other material elements of the capitalist mode of production. The fetishism of commodities is merely the most abstract and universal instance of a more general and pervasive fetishism encompassing all aspects of capitalist relations of production. In Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx applies the concept of fetishism to an analysis of the "Trinity Formula" of capital, land, and labor. Just as commodities acquire a specific social form in becoming values, so do the means of production acquire specific social forms as capital and landed property, and productive human activity a specific social form as wage-labor, as a result of the historically specific social relations in which they are embedded.

> [C]apital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character. . . . Wage-labor and landed property, like capital, are historically determined social forms; one of labor, the other of monopolized terrestrial globe, and indeed both forms corresponding to capital and belonging to the same economic formation of society (Marx, 1967c:814-816).

As in the case of commodities, these social forms which attach themselves to the material elements of the production process are, at once, a consequence of a determined form of productive relations, and, at the same time, a precondition for the reproduction of those productive relations. Here again, we encounter the dialectic of the "materialization of productive relations" and the "personification of things" – the mutual reproduction of material objects with a determined social form and social relations with determined material conditions.

> We have seen that the capitalist process of production is an historically determined form of the social process of production in general. The latter is as much a production process of material conditions of human life as a process taking place under specific historical and economic production relations, producing and reproducing these production relations themselves, and thereby also the bearers of this process, their material conditions of existence and their mutual relations, i.e., their particular socio-economic form. . . . Like all its predecessors, the capitalist process of production proceeds under definite material conditions, which are, however, simultaneously the bearers of definite social relations entered into by individuals in the process of reproducing their life. Those conditions, like these relations, are on the one hand prerequisites, on the other hand results and creations of the capitalist process of production; they are produced and reproduced by it (Marx, 1967c:818-819).

Marx thus distinguishes between the the material existence of capital, land, and labor as

elements of production *in general* and their historically determined social form as elements of *capitalist* production. From the fetishistic standpoint, however, this distinction is not apparent. To the individual confined within capitalist relations of production, the latter appear identical with the former, so that capitalist relations are apprehended as natural and inherent properties of the material elements of production.

> To those in the grip of capitalist production relations . . . wage-labor does not appear as a socially determined form of labor, but rather all labor appears by its nature as wage-labor. . . . [I]f labor as wage-labor is taken as the point of departure, so that the identity of labor in general with wage-labor appears to be self-evident, then capital and monopolized land must also appear as the natural form of the conditions of labor in relation to labor in general. To be capital, then, appears as the natural form of the means of labor and thereby as the purely real character arising from their function in the labor-process in general. Capital and produced means of production thus become identical terms. Similarly, land and land monopolized through private ownership become identical. . . . Their definite social character in the process of capitalist production bearing the stamp of a definite historical epoch [appears as] a natural and intrinsic substantive character belonging to them, as it were, from time immemorial, as elements of the production process (Marx, 1967c:824-825).

This identification of the social form of productive elements with their concrete material existence obscures the exploitative nature of capitalist relations of production. From this standpoint, profits, rent, and wages appear to grow directly out of the material role played by capital, land, and labor in the process of production. Each of these elements of production appears to generate, out of its own intrinsic nature, a corresponding form of revenue: capital produces profit; land produces rent; labor produces wages. The non-human means of production are thus endowed, no less than the human agents of production, with the generative capacity to produce value, and the distribution of value into the various forms of revenue appears simply as an expression of the material contribution of each element to the total product. In this manner, the social relations of surplus appropriation appear to inhere within the material nature of the production process, acquiring thereby an illusion of naturalness and inevitability.

> In capital-profit, or still better in capital-interest, land-rent, labor-wages, in this economic trinity represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the conversion of social relations into things, the direct coalescence of the material production relations with their historical social determination. . . . This formula simultaneously corresponds to the interests of the ruling classes by proclaiming the physical necessity and eternal justification of their sources of revenue and evaluating them to a dogma (Marx, 1967c:830).

Bourgeois political economy, which bases itself uncritically on the everyday conceptions of those entrapped within capitalist production relations, merely systematizes these ideological notions and perpetuates them within its conceptual framework. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism provides a critique of bourgeois ideology by penetrating the "estranged outward appearance" of capitalist social relations in a manner which reveals their underlying internal structure and which also accounts for their "inverted" appearance at the phenomenal level.

TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF REIFICATION

The aim of this section is to show how Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism can be taken as a model for a more general theory of reification as a generic form of ideology (cf. Lichtman, 1975; Mepham, 1979). This theory should be distinguished from the conception of ideology found in Marx's earlier and better-known writings on the subject. In Marx's early writings the relationship between social existence and social consciousness, by which the latter assumes an ideological form, is described in largely "instrumental" terms. The correspondence between the interests of the ruling class and the dominant form of social consciousness is attributed to the control which that class exercises over the means of intellectual production.

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (Marx and Engels, 1970:64).

According to this widely held theory, ideologies are thus the product of an instrumental process of intellectual manipulation by which ideas, beliefs and conceptions compatible with the interests of the ruling class are imposed upon the consciousness of subordinate classes.

Most Marxist (and many non-Marxist) studies of social consciousness have been based on an instrumental conception of ideology. These studies have made important contributions to our understanding of social consciousness by documenting the manner in which the media, schools, advertising and other institutions of intellectual production are controlled by ruling groups and employed for the purpose of ideological domination (Schiller, 1973; Smith, 1974; Ewen, 1976; Parenti, 1986). As a

general theory of ideology, however, this model has serious limitations. First, it presupposes a degree of unity and class consciousness among the ruling class that is empirically questionable. Second, it fails to explain why particular forms of ideological mystification occur rather than others. By treating ideologies as simple rationalizations of ruling-class interests, it tends toward a voluntaristic conception of ruling ideas as the freely created product of the ideologist's imagination. Third, it does not account for the receptiveness of subordinate classes to the ruling ideology, but tends to reduce the members of these classes to passive objects of manipulation. The instrumental theory is therefore subject to Marx's own critique in his famous *Theses on Feuerbach* of all theories which disregard the active element in human subjectivity or which restrict it to a privileged stratum of society (Marx and Engels, 1972:107-109). Finally, the instrumental theory denies the "relative autonomy" of ideological practices by exaggerating the extent of ruling-class control over the means of intellectual production. A degree of autonomy from direct and visible ruling-class control is, in fact, essential to the maintenance of a stable and effective legitimating ideology. Such autonomy confers upon the dominant ideology an appearance of neutrality and objectivity without which it would be neither effective as a means of mobilizing and vindicating ruling-class action, nor resistant to delegitimation through the unmasking of its underlying instrumental basis.

The theory of reification contained in Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism provides the necessary elements which are lacking in this instrumental conception of ideology. It accounts for the illusory quality of social consciousness in a way which does not depend solely upon the deliberate actions of certain individuals to manipulate the ideas and beliefs of others. It locates the existence of specific forms of ideological consciousness in terms of their organic relationship to the social order which they represent and from which they derive. It preserves a dialectical conception of human individuals as simultaneously the subjects and objects of ideological mystification. And finally it illuminates the hidden structural dimensions of ideology formation which generate illusory representations of social reality while presenting an appearance of neutrality and objectivity. In this sense, Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism provides the basis for what may be described as a "structural" theory of ideology.[1]

Earlier attempts have been made to extend Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism into a general theory of reification, but these have proved generally unsatisfactory. In *History and Class*

Consciousness, for example, Lukacs argues that fetishistic forms of consciousness are not restricted to commodity production, but that reification has become a universal characteristic of social consciousness in capitalist society. In a famous essay, Lukacs (1971:83-222) dissects the forms of consciousness associated with bourgeois science, law, and philosophy and shows how each of these exhibit tendencies toward fetishism similar to those which are found in the sphere of commodity production. What is lacking in Lukacs account, however, is any analysis of the structural relationship between these specific forms of fetishism and their underlying existential basis. Arguing largely by analogy, Lukacs fails to show how these broader forms of reification are linked to the underlying social relations of capitalist society in a manner comparable to Marx's account of the origins of commodity fetishism. Instead, they are treated as purely derivative forms of reification – the product of an ill-defined "diffusion" of reification from commodity production to other social spheres.

This failing is linked to the more general tendency in Lukacs' thought toward "essentialism" (Jones, 1971; Colletti, 1973). For Lukacs, capitalism is conceived as an expressive totality with reification as its essence. Within capitalism, reification functions as a "universal structuring principle" which "penetrates society in all its aspects," including human subjectivity itself.

> [A]s the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man. . . . It stamps its imprint on the whole of consciousness (Lukacs, 1971:93 and 100).

As the master principle of social and cognitive organization, ingrained upon the very structure of consciousness, reification is progressively extended to all spheres of social experience. The medium of this diffusion is described by Lukacs as a distinctive form of "rationality" which emphasizes abstract, quantitative calculability to the exclusion of other forms of human sensibility. At times this universalization of reification is equated with the extension of bureaucratic rationality as described by Weber. Elsewhere it is identified with the ascendence of positivism in modern science as criticized by Dilthey, Rickert, and Windelband. Apart from identifying these broad socio-cultural correlates of reification, however, Lukacs provides little analysis of the concrete relationship between reified modes of consciousness and the specific social relations which produce and are reproduced by them.[2]

In order to move beyond this impressionistic application of the concept of reification, it is necessary to reaffirm Marx's notion of the structural basis of reification, conceived as a determinate relation between specific patterns of social organization and their phenomenal expression at the level of social consciousness. Using Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism as a model, two structural causes of reification can be identified. The first is a generalization of Marx's notion of the "materialization of productive relations." Implicit in this notion is a distinction between two types of social relations. Social relations which are realized directly through communicative interaction (action which is oriented towards the reciprocal actions and expectations of other participants within a shared intersubjective framework) can be distinguished from those which originate in the instrumental actions of isolated individuals and are constituted as *social* relations only indirectly through the relations that are established between their technical means and objects. Social relations of the first type presuppose what Habermas (1971) calls a "practical" cognitive interest in the discursive validation of consensual norms of behavior. Social relations of the second type presuppose no such cognitive interest, but are grounded instead in the instrumental orientation of isolated actors who confront what appear to them as technical problems of selecting and applying appropriate means to individually defined ends. In the first instance the humanly constructed nature of the social relations is implicit in the action orientation of the participating subject and is therefore (potentially) open to reflection, while in the second instance it is relatively obscured. The organization of social relations independently of communicative interaction (as in the organization of productive relations through commodity exchange) thus establishes the objective precondition for the reification of those social relations as beyond human control.

A second and related cause of reification is suggested by Marx's notion of the "personification of things." With this notion Marx draws a direct connection between alienated forms of social practice and reified forms of social consciousness. Reified consciousness, like all forms of consciousness, is determined by the concrete life-activities of which it is a part. For Marx, knowledge of social relations ("theory" in the broadest sense of the term) is constructed in and through the actions which produce, maintain, and transform those social relations ("practice"). To the degree that human agents exercise autonomy over the production and reproduction of their social relations, the humanly produced nature of

those relations will be readily accessible to them. On the other hand, when social actions are determined heteronomously, as an adaptive response to forces and circumstances over which the individual has no control, the dependence of social institutions on the ongoing constitutive actions of human subjects will be less accessible to consciousness. Reification can thus be viewed as a characteristic form of social consciousness under conditions of alienation and powerlessness.

Marx is not the only theorist to see a connection between powerlessness and reified forms of social consciousness. Piaget (1960), in his studies of child development, notes the extreme reification (or "realism") of the young child's conception of the social world and attributes this to the underdevelopment of the infant's sense of autonomous subjectivity. Confronting a system of pre-existing, external, and frequently coercive social institutions, the infant views the ontological status of these as equivalent to that of natural objects. Names, for example, are understood as belonging to the intrinsic nature of things and emanating from them. Moral norms are projected onto the objective realm and understood as categorical imperatives. Such reification declines as the child becomes increasingly autonomous of adult constraint and gains a stronger sense of his or her own subjectivity.[3] A similar connection between powerlessness and reification is suggested by Prandy (1979). On the basis of his studies of social cognition among adults, Prandy argues that perception of the world as amenable to change depends upon the experience of effecting change in one's everyday life, and that the lack such experience engenders a view of the world that simply accepts things as they are and assumes that they could not be otherwise. Evidence for this view is provided by his finding that lack of control in the work situation is associated with the adoption of a fatalistic world view. Similar findings are reported by Kohn and Schooler (1969), who show that lack of self-direction at work is associated with conformism and resistance to change.

Combining these two elements, we may say that reification should be most pronounced when social relations are an indirect product of the instrumental actions of isolated individuals and where the autonomy of the acting subject is severely constrained by social and material conditions which are beyond its control. Conversely, the humanly constructed nature of social relations should be more immediately present to consciousness where the social relations in question are realized through an explicit process of communicative interaction and where human subjects exercise some autonomy over

the means and conditions of their actions. The social relations of commodity production and exchange within an unregulated market economy provide the archetypal model of reified social relations. As I shall argue in the following section, however, there are other spheres in contemporary capitalist society which exhibit similar characteristics and can also be fruitfully analyzed in terms of Marx's concept of reification.

REIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALIST SOCIETY

In the competitive capitalism of Marx's day, the social relations of the market were arguably the chief source of reified forms of social consciousness. In contemporary capitalism, however, market relations have been modified by the power of monopolistic corporations and the bureaucratic state. The application of science to industry has transformed the relations of production, while mental labor has displaced manual labor in many parts of the economy. In the process, new forms of reification have emerged. Alongside the fetishism of commodities, we now have a fetishism of technology, a fetishism of bureaucracy, and a fetishism of occupational credentials.

One of the most important sources of reification in contemporary capitalist society has been the introduction of new technologies of mass production, communication, and control. Social relations that were once realized directly through communicative interaction are now mediated by technical apparatuses of various sorts. In the sphere of production, for example, relations of supervision have been depersonalized through the introduction machine pacing and other mechanical and electronic means of monitoring labor output. Functions of decision-making and coordination of production have been transferred from workers to machines, so that work roles have become atomized and deskilled. At the same time, the scale of technology has increased to such a degree that the powers of the individual worker are dwarfed by those invested in the technical means of production. Where once the worker employed the instruments of production, now the instruments of production employ the worker. As a result, social arrangements that were once visibly the product of human agency now appear as technological imperatives.

The development of technology in capitalist society provides a straightforward example of Marx's dialectic of the "materialization of productive relations" and the "personification of things." As Marxist

historians of industry have shown, the process of technological innovation is shaped by more than the simple pursuit of efficiency (Braverman, 1974; Marglin, 1974; Noble, 1977; Edwards, 1979). Insofar as technology assumes the form of capitalist property, its development reflects the class interests of those who control its design and application. Generally speaking, innovations that concentrate knowledge and decision-making in the hands of managers, enforce stricter control over the pace of work, reduce the need for skilled labor, and/or undermine the potential for worker unity and resistance are favored over technologies that exhibit the opposite characteristics. Capitalist social relations (exemplified by the hierarchical and atomized nature of the labor process) are thus "materialized" in the form of technology – i.e., they are literally built into the structure of the machinery. The obverse of this process is that the characteristics of modern technology serve to reinforce capitalist social relations. As technology acquires a particular social form, human behavior is made to "personify" (i.e., accommodate itself to) patterns of social organization compatible with the accumulated mass of technology. The subordination of labor to capital is thus both reflected in and guaranteed by the subordination of the worker to the machine.

At the level of social consciousness, this dialectic produces a form of mystification comparable to that which Marx ascribed to the fetishism of commodities. From the standpoint of the individual producer, it appears as if it were technology itself, rather than the social forces shaping the development of technology, that is responsible for the alienating character of work in contemporary society. The subordination of the worker, to the extent that it takes the form of a subordination to the machine rather than directly to other persons, appears as an inherent consequence of machine production *per se*. Capitalist social relations thus acquire, in the process of their materialization and personification, an appearance of naturalness and inevitability. This mystification is manifested both as a nonreflective fatalism in the realm of everyday life, and in the more explicitly articulated theories of technological determinism that are so popular in bourgeois intellectual circles. A good example of the latter is Jacques Ellul's best-selling work, *The Technological Society*. Commenting upon the "dehumanized factories" of modern society, Ellul writes: "It is useless to rail against capitalism. Capitalism did not create our world; the machine did" (Ellul, 1964:5).

Analogous forms of reification can be found in other spheres of modern capitalist society. In the

political sphere, for example, the spread of bureaucracy has played a role similar to the growth of technology in the economic sphere. Just as the machine serves to mediate and depersonalize the social relation of authority between capitalist and worker, the impersonal rules and regulations of bureaucratic procedure now serve as a buffer between the citizen and the powers of the capitalist state. Introduced as a means of centralizing authority, depoliticizing the administrative process, and insulating political decisions from popular pressure, bureaucracy has evolved into a machine-like and seemingly autonomous apparatus that appears as the root cause, rather than the effect, of political alienation (Wolfe, 1977). This fetishism of bureaucracy is manifested in the prevalence of everyday sentiments that treat the unresponsiveness of government as an unalterable fact of nature. The same perspective is given more systematic expression in the writings of social theorists who (following Weber) interpret the spread of bureaucracy as a technical imperative and view the inflexible and undemocratic nature of bureaucracy as an inescapable feature of modern society.[4]

A further source of reification in contemporary capitalist society has been the development of a mass system of public education as an institution for the acquisition of occupational credentials and the sorting of individuals into positions within the social division of labor. The intergenerational transmission of class privilege, once the direct and visible outcome of the inheritance of property, is now mediated by a complex system of unequal schooling. The social relations responsible for the reproduction of class inequality have, in effect, been incorporated within (and disguised behind) the technical processes of skill acquisition (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Credentials, like other commodities, come to be fetishized as an inherent source of value, rather than seen as a token of the underlying structure of social relations. Insofar as schooling is perceived as an essentially technical process of acquiring and certifying productive skills, rather than as a social process of selection for an already stratified social order, differences in educational attainment are seen as a reflection of individual differences in intelligence or motivation. Poverty and inequality, from this perspective, appear as the consequence personal deficiencies in the capacity to acquire technical skills, rather than the normal outgrowth of capitalist economic institutions. This appearance lays the foundation for the meritocratic legitimation of class inequality, both at the level of popular ideology and in the more elaborate theoretical constructions of bourgeois social science.[5]

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have argued for the continuing relevance and utility of Marx's theory of reification. The concept of reification presented here differs both from those that are typical in non-Marxist sociology and from the interpretations of certain Marxist theorists. In contrast to Berger's phenomenological concept of reification, I have argued that reification should be viewed as the result of specific social-structural conditions rather than as a universal feature of human psychology. By emphasizing the social-structural bases of reification, I have also tried to go beyond those Marxist theorists, who employ the concept of "reification" as a critical or polemical category, but without inquiring into its underlying causes.

Building upon Marx's concept of reification, I have attempted to show how it provides a model for a more general "structural" theory of ideology. Compared with the more traditional "instrumental" concept of ideology, this structural theory emphasizes the organic relation between specific forms of ideological consciousness and their underlying existential basis. Two general aspects of the social structure are identified as conducive to the development of reified forms of social consciousness: the organization of social relations independently of communicative interaction and the subordination of human subjects to social and material conditions over which they exercise little control.

Capitalism, because of the pervasiveness of commodity relations, provides a fertile ground for reified forms of social consciousness. However, the fact that reification is grounded in specific social-structural conditions, plus the fact that these conditions change in the course of capitalist development, means that reification will vary in form and intensity, both historically and across different sectors of capitalist society. With the trend toward monopoly pricing, administered wage levels, and increased state intervention in the economy, I have argued that the forms of reification that Marx associated with the operation of the market have declined in significance. In their place, new forms of reification have emerged, based on the growth of technology, the spread of bureaucratic administration, and the rationalization of occupational selection.

FOOTNOTES

1. The distinction employed here between "instrumental" and "structural" theories of ideology is similar to the distinction that is often made between "instrumentalist" and "structuralist" theories of the state. Instrumentalist theories view the state's role in reproducing capitalism as the result of self-conscious manipulation by members and representatives of the ruling class. Structuralist theories view state policy as more the outcome of impersonal processes and constraints that are ingrained within the structure of political and economic institutions. See Gold, Wright, and Lo (1975).

2. A similar interpretation of reification can be found the writings of the Frankfurt School, and especially the works of Adorno. Here also there is a tendency to treat reification as an all-encompassing essence of capitalist culture and social life, but without any analysis of the underlying structural bases of reification (see Held, 1980:367-374).

3. See Burris (1982) for evidence of this developmental trend in the child's conception of economic relations.

4. The classical statement of this view is found in Weber's *Economy and Society*: "The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization. The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration" (Weber, 1968:973). For a Marxist perspective on Weber's theory of bureaucracy, see Wright (1978:181-225).

5. Examples include human capital theory in economics (Schultz, 1961) and functionalist theories of stratification in sociology (Davis and Moore, 1945). See Collins (1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) for an incisive critique of this perspective.

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