

## **‘Reification a Myth’ Shock (or What Gillian Rose Tells Us About Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Ancient Greece)**

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July 27, 2010

1 – ‘The ‘Lament Over Reification’ [1]

“Reification“ is frequently associated with the term “alienation” in the writings of Marx and Hegel, although, as Gillian Rose pointed out, “reification” has no canonical source in Marx or Hegel. Amongst post-Marx marxists “reification” is variously, though not exclusively, defined as:

The process by which a social totality (or “wholeness” of a person) is fragmented, destroyed or denied.

The process by which concrete labour is abstracted to constitute exchange-value.

The transformation of social relations into the appearance of relations between things.

The identifying of an abstract concept with a concrete reality.

In the theory of George Lukacs (1886-1971) reification is the specifically capitalist form of objectification, which determines the structure of all capitalist social forms. But, as shown by Gillian Rose (1947-1995), in post-Lukacsian “Critical Theory” there is a crucial shift, in which theorists concerned with “the point in history at which reification irrupted into society, and the possibility or impossibility of overcoming it” usually date it “from the end of Greek antiquity!”

The bemusement denoted by the exclamation mark is significant; for in Rose's view the equation of “alienation “ and “reification” ignores Marx's notion of “species being” which he developed to counter the unhistorical view of “human nature” as fixed, unchanging essence (part of the problem for Lukacs and those influenced by him was that Marx's 1844 writings on alienation were unknown until the 1930s). [2]

Also, as Rose was well aware, “reification” for some Marxists dated not from the end of Greek antiquity but from the earlier period (early 5th century BCE) which gave birth to Greek philosophy. George Thomson, as quoted by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1899-1990), argues that “civilised thought has been dominated from the earliest times down to the present day by what Marx called the fetishism of commodities, that is, the false consciousness generated by the social relations of commodity production.” [3] This misreading and misuse of Marx’s theory is compounded by Sohn-Rethel’s attempt to build on it.

Sohn-Rethel, sees the pre-socratic philosopher Parmenides as the first exponent of “pure thought” to emerge with “a concept fitting the description of the abstract material of money,” Sohn-Rethel thus sees “reification” as “at the root of the intellect” and as arising “when social relations assume the impersonal and reified character of commodity exchange.” [4]

Marx however, says that his ‘Capital’ starts with the “simplest social form in which the labour-product is presented in contemporary society” (note: “contemporary” i.e. capitalist, society – not Antiquity). In ‘Capital’ Marx draws an analogy between the “phantasmagoria” of commodity fetishism and the illusory representations of religion. But as Rose points out, Hegel saw no such “representation” in Greece, because there was no division between state and religion or law and custom. In Rose’s interpretation of Hegel:

“Ancient Greece is a society where life is ‘aesthetically lived’. The human culture of man himself is the ‘subjective’ work of art; and the state and the relations of those who compose it are the ‘political’ work of art... Greece stands for a society in which there is no subjectivity and hence no representation. It stands for a society which contains conflict and substance, but which is substantially free, and hence the conflict and injustice are transparent and intelligible.” [5]

Rose refers to Sohn-Rethel’s argument as one of the “ostensibly most fastidious exegeses of Marx’s work” accompanied by “terminological confusion.” [6] Although Rose does not comment further on Sohn-Rethel, her work – especially on Theodore Adorno – in my view provides insights for a critical assessment of the Sohn-Rethel thesis.

### 2 – May the Middle be Unbroken? Commodity Fetishism and Consciousness

The error of separating commodity fetishism from its specifically capitalist form has, as Gillian Rose argues, obfuscated the importance of the structure of the theory of value on which the theory of commodity fetishism depends. The “social form” in the first chapter

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of 'Capital' is the commodity, analysed as Marx says, "from the beginning in the form in which it appears" This is "expressed" only in the form of exchange-value. But in "neo-Marxism" generally, Rose points out,

"'Reification' has often been used in order to generalize the theory of value and of commodity fetishism without taking up the theory of surplus value or any theory of class formation and without developing any theory of power and the state." [7]

And in the thought of Theodore Adorno (1903-69), "Marx's theory of value is generalised as 'reification' with minimal reference to the actual productive relations between men, and without any identification of a social subject." [8]

In the post-World War Two period Adorno and Sohn-Rethel pursued divergent "ideological" paths. Adorno rejected the "actually existing socialism" of the "East" as well as the 'sixties "New Left", whilst retaining a highly critical stance towards capitalism. Sohn-Rethel remained loyal to the British Communist Party until 1972, when he returned to West Germany and adopted the role of an *éminence grise* of the New Left.

Sohn-Rethel, who was no Stalinist, was doubtless highly critical of the divisions and inequalities in the Russian "socialist" economy between mental and manual workers. Note his insistence that, "to the conditions of a classless society we must add, in agreement with Marx, the unity of mental and manual labour, or as he puts it, the disappearance of their division." But this goal is ungrounded in Sohn-Rethel's works, and his statement that the struggle against the division between intellectual and manual labour had formed "a central issue in the construction of socialism in China since the victory of the proletarian cultural revolution" betrays, at best, a Kantian dualism between what "ought" to be and what "is," if not a Maoist voluntarism. [9]

In both Adorno and Sohn-Rethel we can see a common weakness in their understanding of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and the Hegelian dialectic – a weakness Rose assigns to the entire 19th century reaction to Hegel's thought. Rose does not exempt Marx's 1844 'Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic as a Whole' from this "misconstrual" of Hegel's "speculative" dialectic of state and religion (in the 'Philosophy of Right'). Rose nevertheless argues that in Marx's 'Capital':

"The theory of commodity fetishism is the most speculative moment in Marx's exposition of capital. It comes nearest to demonstrating in the historically specific case of commodity producing society how substance is (mis-)represented as subject, how necessary illusion arises out of productive activity."

Rose sees Marx as posing “a phenomenological question about the relationship between acknowledgement of actuality and the possibility of change.” She goes on to say:

“This is why the theory of commodity fetishism, the presentation of a contradiction between substance and subject, remains more impressive than any abstract statements about the relation between theory and practice or between capitalist crisis and the formation of revolutionary consciousness. It acknowledges actuality and its misrepresentation as consciousness. [10]

We can glean some important questions for today from Rose’s work, such as: if the statements about commodity fetishism and the contradiction between substance and subject are so “impressive”, why should questions about the relation between theory and practice or between capitalist crisis and the formation of revolutionary consciousness remain abstract?

### ENDNOTES

1 The Lament over Reification’ is the heading for chapter 3 of Gillian Rose’s ‘Melancholy Science’ (1978).

2 Rose, The Melancholy Science 28, Rose , Hegel Contra Sociology (1980) 27-31.

3 Sohn-Rethel, The Historical Materialist Theory of Knowledge, Marxism Today, March 1965

4 Sohn-Rethel, Intellectual and Manual Labour (1978) 70-1. The Sohn-Rethel-Thomson thesis of “commodity production and the rise of philosophy” has been criticised by Richard Seaford, in Money and the Early Greek Mind – Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy (2004), which draws on the most recent scholarship. Seaford argues that the Thomson/Sohn-Rethel thesis claims too much in its implication of a “one-to-one relation” (as reflex or projection) between Parmenides’ concept of the “One” and the substance of exchange-value. Sohn-Rethel’s premise – that Parmenides set philosophy on its “objectively deceptive” course for all time - is thus open to the charge of reductionism. According to Seaford, exchange-value is only one of a series of factors making for the Greeks’ metaphysical representations of reality: namely: democracy, tragedy and comedy, the popular religions, relations of production and private life, etc.

5 G Rose, Hegel Contra Sociology (1980) 125-26

6 Melancholy Science 29

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7 Melancholy Science 28

8 Melancholy Science 141

9 Intellectual and Manual Labour 169

10 Hegel Contra Sociology 232-233

(This article originally appeared in *Hobgoblin*.)