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Axel Honneth
Reification

A New Look at an Old Idea

with Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, & Jonathan Lear
edited by Martin Jay

THE BERKELEY TANNER LECTURES

Reification

The Berkeley Tanner Lectures

The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, which honor the American scholar, industrialist, and philanthropist Obert Clark Tanner, are presented annually at each of nine universities in the United States and England. They were established at the University of California, Berkeley, beginning in the 2000/2001 academic year. This volume is the fourth in a series of books based on the Berkeley Tanner Lectures. In this volume we include the lectures that Axel Honneth presented in March 2005, along with the responses of the three invited commentators on that occasion—Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear—and a final rejoinder by Professor Honneth. The volume is edited by Martin Jay, who also contributes an introduction. We have established the Berkeley Tanner Lectures series in the belief that these distinguished lectures, together with the lively debates stimulated by their presentation in Berkeley, deserve to be made available to a wider audience. Additional volumes are now in preparation.

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Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea

AXEL HONNETH

With Commentaries by

JUDITH BUTLER

RAYMOND GEUSS

JONATHAN LEAR

Edited and Introduced by

MARTIN JAY

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Acknowledgments

The Tanner Lectures enjoy a virtually legendary reputation for philosophers from Germany, so when I received an invitation from the chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, in March 2003 to give the Tanner Lectures in the 2004/2005 academic year, I was filled with a mixture of gratitude and anxiety. In March 2005, when I finally gave my series of talks on reification at the marvelously beautiful Berkeley campus, my anxiety and fear had fled, and an earnest feeling of gratitude was all that remained. The fact that I felt at ease so quickly on the campus is something I owe to two members of the Tanner committee, who did everything in their power to make my stay and my lectures as comfortable as possible: Martin Jay and Samuel Scheffler. I deeply thank them both for their generous hospitality. During my lectures, I noticed by the reactions of my commentators that the considerations I had developed on the issue of reification were met with curious attentiveness and interest. That is an intellectual virtue not to be taken for granted, and I'd like to thank Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear for their engaged involvement. Their written commentaries on my lectures contain more instructive suggestions and productive questions than I could discuss in my brief rejoinder. The same goes for the many suggestions and queries posed by Rahel Jaeggi and Christopher Zurn while I was putting together my lectures in Frankfurt. I am grateful to all of them for the criticisms to which they subjected my text. Finally, I'd like to thank the translator of my manuscript, Joseph Ganahl, who with his characteristic ease and acuity was able to solve competently all the difficulties of the text—a gift from Berkeley that I received even before the invitation to the Tanner Lectures had reached me.

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In 1984, Butler received her Ph.D. in philosophy at Yale University, having earned her M.A. (1982) and B.A. (1978) at Yale as well. She studied philosophy at Heidelberg University as a Fulbright Scholar. Subsequently, she taught at Wesleyan University and Johns Hopkins University before joining the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley, in 1993, where she is currently Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric, Comparative Literature, and Gender and Women's Studies.

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Raymond Geuss studied and taught at various universities in the United States and Germany, including Heidelberg, the University of Chicago, and Princeton University, before moving to the University of Cambridge in 1993. He is one of the series editors of Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought.

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Born in 1949, AXEL HONNETH studied philosophy, sociology, and German literature at the universities of Bochum, Bonn, and Berlin. He received his doctorate in sociology in 1982 at the University of Berlin with a dissertation that later appeared as *Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (1991). Here he reconstructed the history of Frankfurt School Critical Theory from Max Horkheimer to Jürgen Habermas, focusing on what he called its sociological deficit, and compared it with the work of Michel Foucault, whose own microphysics of power also lacked a full appreciation of the intersubjective constitution of society. It was preceded by a work coauthored in 1980 with Hans Joas on philosophical anthropology entitled *Social Action and Human Nature* (1988) and followed by a collection of essays in social and political philosophy, entitled in its English translation, appearing in 1995, as *The Fragmented World of the Social*, edited by Charles W. Wright (1995). Here, Honneth expanded his range to include a consideration of other French thinkers such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, and Castoriadis, in

addition to the Central European tradition from Lukács to Habermas. Two years later, his Habilitationsschrift written under Habermas's guidance came out as *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1995), which drew on insights from Hegel, the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead, and British object relations theory to develop a theory of recognition as the basis of social interaction, which went beyond the methodological individualism associated with the liberal tradition launched by Hobbes and Locke. His Spinoza Lectures published as *Suffering from Indeterminacy* (2000) sought to rescue dimensions of Hegel's often-neglected *Philosophy of Right* for the theory of recognition. In 2003, he defended that theory in a debate with Nancy Fraser published as *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003).

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MARTIN JAY is an intellectual historian of modern Europe and has written extensively on the Frankfurt School, Western Marxism, the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America, French attitudes toward visuality, and the discourse of experience in Western thought. He received his B.A. at Union College in 1965 and his doctorate in history at Harvard in 1971. He has taught at Berkeley ever since, serving as the chair of the History Department from 1998 to 2001 and in 2004. He has written a biannual column for *Salmagundi* since 1987.

Among his works are *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973 and 1996); *Marxism and Totality* (1984); *Adorno* (1984); *Permanent Exiles* (1985); *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism* (1989); *Force Fields* (1993); *Downcast Eyes* (1993); *Cultural Semantics* (1998); *Refractions of*

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Lear has written prolifically on philosophy and psychoanalysis, and several of his works have garnered the Gradiva Award, bestowed by the National Association for Psychoanalysis each year to the best book published about psychoanalysis. Lear's publications include *Aristotle and Logical Theory* (1980); *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (1988); *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (1990); *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (1998); *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (2001); and *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (2003). Lear's book *Freud* appeared in spring 2005 in the Routledge Philosophers Series.

Jonathan Lear received psychoanalytic training in addition to his education and research in philosophy and social thought. He earned bachelor's degrees from both Yale University (1970) and University of Cambridge (1973). Lear received his master's degree from Cambridge in 1976 and his doctorate from Rockefeller University in 1978. After teaching at both Yale and Cambridge, Lear joined the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1996, where he is now the John U. Nef Distinguished Service Professor of Social Thought.

Reification

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Introduction

MARTIN JAY

Axel Honneth prefaces his Tanner Lectures on Human Values on the theme of *Reification and Recognition: A New Look at an Old Idea*¹ with two seemingly unrelated epigraphs: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's celebrated claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that "all reification is a forgetting" and Ludwig Wittgenstein's observation that "all knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment" from *On Certainty*. What follows in the two lectures he presented to a rapt audience at the University of California, Berkeley, in March 2005, and developed further in a third lecture included in this volume is an ingenious and provocative effort to bridge the gap between these two apparently disparate assertions. Honneth attempts nothing less than a redescription and defense of the concept of reification by means of the theory of recognition—or acknowledgment, as *Anerkennung* can also be translated—that he has been developing over the past two decades.²

The theme of forgetting is an especially apt point of departure, for the concept of reification—from the Latin "res" or "thing"³—has itself fallen into virtual oblivion in recent years.⁴ During the rise of the New Left, when what became known as Western Marxism was first mined as a resource for radical politics, the term began to shoulder aside alternative candidates to define the depredations of capitalism: exploitation, injustice, and even alienation, itself a recent addition to the Marxist vocabulary occasioned by the belated reception of Marx's 1844 Paris manuscripts. First employed by the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács in his 1923 collection *History and Class Consciousness* and developed by the first generation of the

Frankfurt School, it enjoyed a revival during the 1960s in the work of such theorists as Joseph Gabel, Lucien Goldmann, Karel Kosik, and the *Praxis* circle in Yugoslavia. The concept of reification became a powerful weapon in the struggle not only to define what capitalism did to its victims but also to explain why they were unable to resist it successfully. In particular, it could function as a way to make sense of the failure of the working class to realize the historical mission assigned to it by Marxist theory.

But once the hopes in that class's redemptive project were utterly dashed, as the New Left faded into history and orthodox Marxist movements lost their grip on power in parts of the world where they once ruled, the question of why the proletariat failed seemed less urgent. Instead, many commentators came to wonder why it had ever served as the repository of those hopes in the first place. Moreover, the conceptual apparatus undergirding the very idea of reification lost much of its allure with the repudiation of the neo-Hegelian premises of Lukács' argument, premises that allowed him to substitute the proletariat for the Absolute Spirit as the subject and object of history. Structuralist Marxists like Louis Althusser, disdaining Marx's early works, considered the concept of reification a residue of a prescientific ideological humanism.⁵ Systems theorists such as Niklas Luhmann rejected the tradition of normative critique in favor of a more objectivist notion of complexity-reducing systems of communication. Poststructuralists influenced by Nietzsche or Spinoza rejected the ideal of a dereified subject, collective or individual, who could be understood as a sovereign, autonomous agent acting consciously to create a world of objectifications that did not appear alien to it. Any longing for a state of being prior to the alleged onset of reification they damned as misplaced nostalgia for a lost paradise that never really existed and can never be restored. Even second-generation Frankfurt School theorists such as Jürgen Habermas let "reification" slip from their active vocabularies.⁶

The term, to be sure, does still find its way into contemporary theories with no political implications. Computer science and artificial

intelligence experts employ it to mean making a data model out of an abstract concept, certain philosophers use it as a synonym for misplaced concreteness or hypostatization, and some linguists enlist it to indicate a process of turning a predicate or function into an object in a language. But as a tool of radical social and political critique, defining a pervasive pathology of human relations, reification has lost much of its critical power.

If it is to enjoy a revival, as Honneth hopes it will, its link with forgetting, noted by Horkheimer and Adorno, will have to be carefully explored. Many questions will have to be addressed, most notably: Who is doing the forgetting? What is being forgotten? And will remembering suffice to produce a change in actual social practices and institutions? In the case of Hegelian Marxists like Lukács, the answer to the first of these questions was straightforward: it was the incipiently universal class, the proletariat, whose labor—or sometimes more broadly, praxis—had made the social world, but whose constitutive role in that making had been obliterated.

Underlying this identification were four crucial assumptions. The first was derived from the productivist bias of Marxist theory. Making, human construction, humankind as *Homo faber*, was the key to understanding the social world, even though it may have come to appear as a “second nature,” a system of given structures and institutions outside of human fabrication and control. Insofar as the makers of history were those whose actual labor produced the world of objects that serve human needs, they rather than those who parasitically lived off that labor were the ultimate source of the social world and its value. As such, they had the power to change it.

A second assumption was derived from Giambattista Vico’s celebrated “verum-factum principle,” which stated that knowledge of the true was itself dependent on the making of the objects of that knowledge.⁷ That is, ultimate knowledge of seemingly hidden realities, essences behind appearances such as Kant’s elusive “thing-in-itself,” was given only to those who had fabricated that reality (in the way an artist can understand the work he or she has created). Only

they could overcome the analytic contradiction of surface and depth dialectically.

Epistemological questions were thus dependent on social ontology. Since the entire social world was made by human labor, it was possible for the universal class that made that world—and only that class—to have full knowledge of the social totality. For Lukács, it was precisely the inability of the inherently undialectical bourgeoisie to grasp the totality of social relations and overcome the antinomy of appearance and essence that made it ultimately inferior to the proletariat. Only the latter were positioned in society as both the ontological creators and epistemological knowers of their creation.

Why they were not yet fully in possession of the knowledge was explained by the fourth major premise of Lukács' argument. As Marx had shown in his celebrated discussion of the "fetishism of commodities" in the first volume of *Capital*, capitalism worked by creating the illusion that the objects created by men were somehow independent of their creative labor, mere tokens of exchange in a circulation that had forgotten its roots in human activity. Fetishism meant missing the meaningful whole, the totality of social relations, and concentrating on only one of its parts, on the object and not the multifaceted process of production underlying it, a process that invested value into those objects through the labor of those who had produced them. It meant abstracting discrete entities out of that concrete totality of relations—in Hegel's sense of concrete as complexly mediated interactions, not as isolated particulars—and understanding them as self-sufficient and static things. Not only were the finished products themselves turned into fungible commodities available for commensurable exchange, but living labor itself had been turned into labor-power, equally a commodity for sale in a labor market that produced a surplus value that accumulated as capital (dead labor whose roots in the living labor of real men had been forgotten). Workers were forced to sell their labor-power as a commodity to survive, which prevented the adoption of the revolutionary praxis that would change the conditions under which they were exploited, alienated, and reified.

As a result of these circumstances, so Lukács reasoned, the proletariat's self-awareness had not been able to get much beyond "economistic trade union consciousness," which focused solely on winning short-term gains within the still capitalist system. Only a vanguard party armed with a theoretical understanding of their plight could lead them beyond this condition, ascribing to them a revolutionary consciousness that they had not yet attained on the empirical level, as Lenin had understood in the revolution he had helped foment in 1917. Only by leaving behind a focus on economic goals and an expansion to a more radical transformation of the totality, which would include cultural as well as political dimensions, could the reifications of the capitalist world be overcome. Only by adopting an active, world-changing practice could the contemplative passivity of a class that had forgotten its constitutive role in making the social world, in fashioning history, be rectified.

If all reification were therefore a forgetting, dereification was a process of "re-remembering" what had been torn asunder (dis-membered), an anamnestic recovery of the wholeness of laborer and fashioned object, process and product, theory and practice, and essence and appearance. Denaturalizing unjust social relations that seemed to be an eternal "second nature" would follow, as would the dialectical resolution of the antinomies of bourgeois thought. For Lukács, then, what needs to be recovered is the fundamentally productive, constitutive role of a collective subject, which has made history unconsciously in the past but will make it consciously in the future and recognize itself in its creation. Although mere remembering alone will not suffice to make the revolution, without it no revolution can take place and no emancipation of humankind will be possible.

For cogent reasons that Honneth details in his Tanner Lectures, Lukács' formulation of the reification problematic was a casualty of a history that refused to close the gap between ascribed and empirical consciousness, and even more so of a flawed understanding of the ways in which reification operated and might be overcome. For the productivist model of subjects laboring to make external objects,

which they can either remember or forget as their own product, was inadequate to the full range of human action.⁸ As Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas had understood, *praxis* is not reducible to *poiēsis*, communicative interaction is not the same as the labor of *Homo faber*. Prior to both, Honneth argues, is a primal struggle for recognition, first explored in Hegel's early Jena writings, which is as basic, perhaps even more so, than the struggle for self-preservation posited by individualist utilitarians since Thomas Hobbes.

With this assumption, the Vichian *verum-factum* principle so vital to Lukács' version of reification, the claim that knowing follows from making, is tacitly set aside. Instead, Honneth stresses the priority of recognition to cognition, the intersubjective interaction that subtends any relationship between subject and object, self and world. More than Habermas, from whom he has learned so much, Honneth stresses the reciprocity of respect that genuine recognition demands. Not content with a perpetual split between a lifeworld based on symbolic interaction and an alienated social system based on instrumental, strategic rationality and abstract steering mechanisms such as money, he holds out hope for a more fundamental transformation of human relations.

Because of the founding moment of intersubjective recognition in the process of human interaction, it has an inevitable normative dimension that stretches from dyadic love to communal solidarity. Reification, in this optic, means a forgetting of the primal recognition that two humans accord each other in a fundamental process of intersubjective interaction. It means losing sight of what Heidegger had called the "care" or *Sorge* that was a primal dimension of the human relation to the world (or, in his special vocabulary, *Dasein* for *Sein*). It means forgetting Dewey's insight that we are intimately involved with the world before we can observe it from afar, having "qualitative experiences" that are deeper than those of the passive observer, and ignoring Adorno's valorization of mimetic over dominating relationships with both human and natural "others."

One question that then has to be addressed is, How can this insight be translated into concrete social terms? Is there for Honneth a group equivalent to the proletariat posited by Marxists like Lukács, whose reification is so severe that their suffering can motivate radical challenges to the status quo, once their true interests are revealed to them by a vanguard party? In fact, Honneth refuses to assign this favored position to any one group in society; no one has a monopoly of primal recognition in the way Lukács thought the proletariat had with regard to a reified world of objects made by their labor. In his exchange with Nancy Fraser over the relative importance of redistribution and recognition, he denies the a priori existence of new social movements that might fill this role: "The error here lies in the tacit initial premise that 'social movements' can serve critical social theory as a kind of empirically visible guiding thread for diagnosing normatively relevant problem areas. What such a procedure completely overlooks is the fact that official designation as a 'social movement' is itself the result of an underground struggle for recognition conducted by groups or individuals afflicted by social-suffering to make the public perceive and register their problems."⁹

Instead of assigning to a specific group the role of savior of society in advance, Honneth disputes the totalizing claims made for capitalism in early Marxist analyses, which tended to see the world as increasingly in the grip of a reification from which no exit was possible short of an apocalyptic revolution carried out by the most reified class. So bleak an assessment of modern life, Honneth argues, is counterproductive, missing the ways in which meaningful change is still possible short of a total overthrow of the system. Stressing the ongoing struggle for recognition—involving the inviolability of the body, legal equality, and respect for discrete ways of life—he believes he can locate the normative kernel of critique in a level of human interaction even more fundamental than the quest for perfect understanding posited by Habermas as a premise of all human communication. Because that struggle is universal, it can motivate social action whenever the desire for recognition is thwarted.

By refocusing the question of reification not on alienated labor or commodity fetishism or the inability to conceptualize the totality, Honneth inevitably invites questions about the burden he is placing on remembering the fundamental intersubjective recognition denied by reification, the sympathetic acknowledgement, in Wittgenstein's terms, that precedes knowledge. Objections might be raised about its power to rouse the unrecognized to meaningful political action, its ability to serve as a motivating force to change the institutions and practices that systematically block mutual recognition in the present. Remembering a past hurt (or recapturing the trace of positive nurturance) may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to undo the damage caused by the forgetting and all that caused it.

So, too, the implicit telos of respectful mutuality can and has been challenged. Even before his Tanner Lectures, qualms were expressed by skeptics such as Alexander García Düttmann, who argued that Honneth rigs the outcome of the struggle for recognition in advance by positing an ideologically idealized norm of anticipated and desirable reconciliation similar to Hegel's teleological narrative of dialectical synthesis. Ironically, in light of the theme of the present volume, García Düttmann refers to this idealization as itself a form of reification, and charges that there is "an essential link between the reification or objectification of recognition and an idealization which has the effect of an ideologization. It is difficult not to conclude that a politics of recognition which is determined by such a link cannot but produce and reproduce *social conformism*."¹⁰

Without explicitly drawing on García Düttmann or turning the concept of reification against Honneth, the three distinguished commentators on his Tanner Lectures—Jonathan Lear, Judith Butler, and Raymond Geuss—all raise similar questions about the fundamental anthropological premise underlying his argument. Although applauding his search for a non-intellectualist basis for social critique, they all wonder if Honneth has accounted for the less savory aspects of precognitive interaction, those that may well frustrate any hope for beneficial mutuality. Why, they ask, does elementary

recognition signify sympathetic recognition? Is there not just as powerful a potential for hate as love in the recognition of the other as a human being? Does “care” in Heidegger’s sense immediately translate into genuine concern for other human beings (a conclusion that Heidegger, the notorious apologist for Nazism, was not himself so quick to draw)? Does the psychological model of development on which Honneth bases much of his argument introduce a tacit and unearned teleological notion of successful maturation? Is there not needed a further step that allows recognition to gain the normative, ethical force that makes its forgetting the source of turning people into things? And if so, has Honneth provided a persuasive account of that necessary supplement to his theory of primal recognition?

In his reply, Honneth acknowledges and attempts to face these criticisms head-on. In an earlier work, the 1997 essay “Recognition and Moral Obligation,” he made clear that the moral obligations derivable from the primal struggle for recognition were plural rather than singular and may well be in conflict:

Attitudes of unconditional care may be legitimately expected of subjects only in those cases in which mutual bonds rest on an affective foundation; moral respect, on the other hand, designates a form of recognition that can be expected of all subjects equally; and in the case of esteem, finally, it seems to be the case that the moral action corresponding to it possesses an obligating character only within the framework of concrete communities. ... Between the three modes of recognition, which taken together constitute the moral point of view, there cannot be a harmonious relation, rather there has to obtain a relation of constant tension.¹¹

It may thus be unfair to tax him with the charge that he posits a teleological goal of perfect reconciliation in a neo-Hegelian manner. As for the concern that his model of elementary recognition, prior to the discrete moral obligations that may be derived from it, is itself too unitary and optimistically geared toward mutually positive outcomes, he insists that without at least some such assumption, no possibility of human communication would exist. However

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