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Lukács on Marx

Georg Lukács (1885–1971) is the most important figure in twentieth-century Marxist critical theory. A friend of Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Ernst Bloch, his thought emerged out of the neo-Kantian schools of German thought and an early interest in Søren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. His pre-Marxist literary essays, notably *Soul and Form* (1910) and *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), along with his later essays on literary realism, influenced literary critics such as Walter Benjamin, Lucien Goldmann, Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson. His central contribution to Marxist thought is the collection of essays known as *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). These studies in Marxist dialectics renew the Marxist dialogue with Hegel and offer a new philosophical understanding of key concepts such as commodity fetishism, alienation and reification.

'The Phenomenon of Reification' is from the central essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'. Lukács combines his exposition of Marx with Max Weber's conceptions of rationalization and bureaucracy, reconstructing the kernel of Marx's conception of the commodity structure of modern capitalism. Having set out the phenomenon of reification, Lukács goes on to argue that modern, 'bourgeois' critical philosophy is rooted in this phenomenon rather than critical of it. *History and Class Consciousness* develops such claims as a critique of Kant. According to Lukács, the formalism of Kantian critique can be overcome only through the transformation of philosophy into revolutionary praxis.

History and Class Consciousness seeks a revolutionary strategy to overcome reification through proletarian class consciousness. This positions Lukács within the dynamic response to the Russian revolution and at the centre of debates about the revolutionary tradition within what is sometimes called 'classical' Marxism. Although his book *Lenin* (1924) argues for the importance of Lenin, placing Lukács within Marxist-Leninism, *History and Class Consciousness* was attacked by the Stalinist forces of Leninist orthodoxy. *History and Class Consciousness* prefigures the discovery and publication of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which reveal a more Hegelian dimension to the work

of the young Marx. This discovery helped to make *History and Class Consciousness*, along with the work of Karl Korsch, an important influence on currents of Hegelian Marxism developed against the grain of Stalinist orthodoxy. Working within severe constraints, Lukács diverted his theoretical energies into socialist literary criticism, although *The Young Hegel* (1948) is of considerable interest in relation to *History and Class Consciousness*, not least in the way Lukács works out the philosophical history of 'alienation'. Lukács' later works nevertheless lack the critical originality of *History and Class Consciousness*. Indeed, Adorno quipped that *The Destruction of Reason* (1962) manifested the destruction of Lukács' own reason. Lukács, in turn, was self-critical of his earlier work, describing how coming to read Marx's early manuscripts shattered the theoretical foundations of *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács also criticized the residues of Hegelian idealism and subject–object dialectics in his own work. He argued that in *History and Class Consciousness* he had over-extended the concept of political praxis; underestimated the importance of labour; and wrongly equated alienation with objectification. Lukács' early exposition of Marx nevertheless provides one of the most acute introductions to Marx's thought.

Despite being rejected by its author and suppressed by supposedly orthodox Marxists, *History and Class Consciousness* became a seminal text. In *Lukács and Heidegger* (1973), Lucien Goldmann observed that references to the 'reification of consciousness' in *Being and Time* (1927) suggest that Heidegger's thought was in dialogue with Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness* was a more direct influence on Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and what became known as Frankfurt School critical theory. More generally, although Lukács himself sided with Eastern European Marxism, *History and Class Consciousness* is the seminal text within Western Marxism, and an important influence on the dialogue between existentialism and Marxism. Merleau-Ponty's critique of Lukács appears later in this anthology; resistance to Lukács' conception of dialectic and socialist humanism also motivates the anti-Hegelianism of Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze. In the mid-1920s Lukács wrote a fascinating document which has only recently been unearthed in Moscow archives and published in translation as *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (2000).

FURTHER READING

Primary works

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Georg Lukács, 'The Phenomenon of Reification' (1922), from 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 83–110.

To be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For man, however, the root is man himself.
Marx: Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right

It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its

totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-*structure*. Of course the problem can only be discussed with this degree of generality if it achieves the depth and breadth to be found in Marx's own analyses. That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.

The Phenomenon of Reification

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The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the central importance of this problem for economics itself. Nor shall we consider its implications for the economic doctrines of the vulgar Marxists which follow from their abandonment of this starting-point.

Our intention here is to *base* ourselves on Marx's economic analyses and to proceed from there to a discussion of the problems growing out of the fetish character of commodities, both as an objective form and also as a subjective stance corresponding to it. Only by understanding this can we obtain a clear insight into the ideological problems of capitalism and its downfall.

Before tackling the problem itself we must be quite clear in our minds that commodity fetishism is a *specific* problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism. Commodity exchange and the corresponding subjective and objective commodity relations existed, as we know, when society was still very primitive. What is at issue *here*, however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society? Thus the extent to which such exchange is the dominant form of metabolic change in a society cannot simply be treated in quantitative terms – as would harmonise with the modern modes of thought already eroded by the reifying effects of the dominant commodity form. The distinction between a society where this form is dominant, permeating every expression of life, and a society where it only makes an episodic appearance is essentially one of quality. For depending on which is the case, all the subjective and objective phenomena in the societies concerned are objectified in qualitatively different ways.

Marx lays great stress on the essentially episodic appearance of the commodity form in primitive societies: "Direct barter, the original natural form of exchange, represents rather the beginning of the transformation of use-values into commodities, than that of commodities into money. Exchange value has as yet no form of its own, but is still directly bound up with use-value. This is manifested in two ways. Production, in its

entire organisation, aims at the creation of use-values and not of exchange values, and it is only when their supply exceeds the measure of consumption that use-values cease to be use-values, and become means of exchange, i.e. commodities. At the same time, they become commodities only within the limits of being direct use-values distributed at opposite poles, so that the commodities to be exchanged by their possessors must be use-values to both – each commodity to its non-possessor. As a matter of fact, the exchange of commodities originates not within the primitive communities, but where they end, on their borders at the few points where they come in contact with other communities. That is where barter begins, and from here it strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it.”¹ We note that the observation about the disintegrating effect of a commodity exchange directed in upon itself clearly shows the qualitative change engendered by the dominance of commodities.

However, even when commodities have this impact on the internal structure of a society, this does not suffice to make them constitutive of that society. To achieve that it would be necessary – as we emphasized above – for the commodity structure to penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image. It is not enough merely to establish an external link with independent processes concerned with the production of exchange values. The qualitative difference between the commodity as one form among many regulating the metabolism of human society and the commodity as the universal structuring principle has effects over and above the fact that the commodity relation as an isolated phenomenon exerts a negative influence at best on the structure and organisation of society. The distinction also has repercussions upon the nature and validity of the category itself. Where the commodity is universal it manifests itself differently from the commodity as a particular, isolated, non-dominant phenomenon.

The fact that the boundaries lack sharp definition must not be allowed to blur the qualitative nature of the decisive distinction. The situation where commodity exchange is not dominant has been defined by Marx as follows: “The quantitative ratio in which products are exchanged is at first quite arbitrary. They assume the form of commodities inasmuch as they are exchangeables, i.e. expressions of one and the same third. Continued exchange and more regular reproduction for exchange reduces this arbitrariness more and more. But at first not for the producer and consumer, but for their go-between, the merchant, who compares money-prices and pockets the difference. It is through his own movements that he establishes equivalence. Merchant’s capital is originally merely the intervening movement between extremes which it does not control and between premises which it does not create.”²

And *this* development of the commodity to the point where it becomes the dominant form in society did not take place until the advent of modern capitalism. Hence it is not to be wondered at that the personal nature of economic relations was still understood clearly on occasion at the start of capitalist development, but that as the process advanced and forms became more complex and less direct, it became increasingly difficult and rare to find anyone penetrating the veil of reification. Marx sees the matter in this way: “In preceding forms of society this economic mystification arose principally with respect to money and interest-bearing capital. In the nature of things it is excluded, in the first place, where production for the use-value, for immediate personal requirements, predominates; and secondly, where slavery or serfdom form the broad foundation of social production, as in antiquity and during the Middle Ages. Here, the

domination of the producers by the conditions of production is concealed by the relations of dominion and servitude which appear and are evident as the direct motive power of the process of production.”³

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created.

Marx describes the basic phenomenon of reification as follows: “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. . . . It is only a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁴

What is of central importance here is that because of this situation a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man. There is both an objective and a subjective side to this phenomenon. *Objectively* a world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market). The laws governing these objects are indeed gradually discovered by man, but even so they confront him as invisible forces that generate their own power. The individual can use his knowledge of these laws to his own advantage, but he is not able to modify the process by his own activity. *Subjectively* – where the market economy has been fully developed – a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article. “What is characteristic of the capitalist age,” says Marx, “is that in the eyes of the labourer himself labour-power assumes the form of a commodity belonging to him. On the other hand it is only at this moment that the commodity form of the products of labour becomes general.”⁵

Thus the universality of the commodity form is responsible both objectively and subjectively for the abstraction of the human labour incorporated in commodities. (On the other hand, this universality becomes historically possible because this process of abstraction has been completed.) *Objectively*, in so far as the commodity form facilitates the equal exchange of qualitatively different objects, it can only exist if that formal equality is in fact recognised – at any rate in *this* relation, which indeed confers upon them their commodity nature. *Subjectively*, this formal equality of human labour in the abstract is not only the common factor to which the various commodities are reduced; it also becomes the real principle governing the actual production of commodities.

Clearly, it cannot be our aim here to describe even in outline the growth of the modern process of labour, of the isolated, 'free' labourer and of the division of labour. Here we need only establish that labour, abstract, equal, comparable labour, measurable with increasing precision according to the time socially necessary for its accomplishment, the labour of the capitalist division of labour existing both as the presupposition and the product of capitalist production, is born only in the course of the development of the capitalist system. Only then does it become a category of society influencing decisively the objective form of things and people in the society thus emerging, their relation to nature and the possible relations of men to each other.⁶

If we follow the path taken by labour in its development from the handicrafts via co-operation and manufacture to machine industry we can see a continuous trend towards greater rationalisation, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker. On the one hand, the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialised operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialised set of actions. On the other hand, the period of time necessary for work to be accomplished (which forms the basis of rational calculation) is converted, as mechanisation and rationalisation are intensified, from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint that confronts the worker as a fixed and established reality. With the modern 'psychological' analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanisation extends right into the worker's 'soul': even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts.⁷

We are concerned above all with the *principle* at work here: the principle of rationalisation based on what is and *can be calculated*. The chief changes undergone by the subject and object of the economic process are as follows: (1) in the first place, the mathematical analysis of work-processes denotes a break with the organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product. Rationalisation in the sense of being able to predict with ever greater precision all the results to be achieved is only to be acquired by the exact breakdown of every complex into its elements and by the study of the special laws governing production. Accordingly it must declare war on the organic manufacture of whole products based on the *traditional amalgam of empirical experiences of work*: rationalisation is unthinkable without specialisation.⁸

The finished article ceases to be the object of the work-process. The latter turns into the objective synthesis of rationalised special systems whose unity is determined by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other. This destroys the organic necessity with which inter-related special operations are unified in the end-product. The unity of a product as a *commodity* no longer coincides with its unity as a use-value: as society becomes more radically capitalistic the increasing technical autonomy of the special operations involved in production is expressed also, as an economic autonomy, as the growing relativisation of the commodity character of a product at the various stages of production.⁹ It is thus possible to separate forcibly the production of a use-value in time and space. This goes hand in hand with the union in time and space of special operations that are related to a set of heterogeneous use-values.

(2) In the second place, this fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject. In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error* when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not.¹⁰ As labour is progressively rationalised and mechanised his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*.¹¹ The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space.

Marx puts it thus: "Through the subordination of man to the machine the situation arises in which men are effaced by their labour; in which the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives. Therefore, we should not say that one man's hour is worth another man's hour, but rather that one man during an hour is worth just as much as another man during an hour. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most the incarnation of time. Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone decides everything: hour for hour, day for day. . . ."¹²

Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified, mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space.¹³ In this environment where time is transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space, an environment at once the cause and effect of the scientifically and mechanically fragmented and specialised production of the object of labour, the subjects of labour must likewise be rationally fragmented. On the one hand, the objectification of their labour-power into something opposed to their total personality (a process already accomplished with the sale of that labour-power as a commodity) is now made into the permanent ineluctable reality of their daily life. Here, too, the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system. On the other hand, the mechanical disintegration of the process of production into its components also destroys those bonds that had bound individuals to a community in the days when production was still 'organic'. In this respect, too, mechanisation makes of them isolated abstract atoms whose work no longer brings them together directly and organically; it becomes mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons them.

The internal organisation of a factory could not possibly have such an effect – even within the factory itself – were it not for the fact that it contained in concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society. Oppression and an exploitation that knows no bounds and scorns every human dignity were known even to pre-capitalist ages. So too was mass production with mechanical, standardised labour, as we can see, for instance,

with canal construction in Egypt and Asia Minor and the mines in Rome.¹⁴ But mass projects of this type could never be *rationaly mechanised*; they remained isolated phenomena within a community that organised its production on a different ('natural') basis and which therefore lived a different life. The slaves subjected to this exploitation, therefore, stood outside what was thought of as 'human' society and even the greatest and noblest thinkers of the time were unable to consider their fate as that of human beings.

As the commodity becomes universally dominant, this situation changes radically and qualitatively. The fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole; indeed, this fate must become universal as otherwise industrialisation could not develop in this direction. For it depends on the emergence of the 'free' worker who is freely able to take his labour-power to market and offer it for sale as a commodity 'belonging' to him, a thing that he 'possesses'.

While this process is still incomplete the methods used to extract surplus labour are, it is true, more obviously brutal than in the later, more highly developed phase, but the process of reification of work and hence also of the consciousness of the worker is much less advanced. Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution and destruction of all 'natural' production units, etc., and all the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace 'natural' relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations. "The social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour," Marx observes with reference to pre-capitalist societies, "appear at all events as their own personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour."¹⁵

But this implies that the principle of rational mechanisation and calculability must embrace every aspect of life. Consumer articles no longer appear as the products of an organic process within a community (as for example in a village community). They now appear, on the one hand, as abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members and, on the other hand, as isolated objects the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculations. Only when the whole life of society is thus fragmented into the isolated acts of commodity exchange can the 'free' worker come into being; at the same time his fate becomes the typical fate of the whole society.

Of course, this isolation and fragmentation is only apparent. The movement of commodities on the market, the birth of their value, in a word, the real framework of every rational calculation is not merely subject to strict laws but also presupposes the strict ordering of all that happens. The atomisation of the individual is, then, only the reflex in consciousness of the fact that the 'natural laws' of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society; that – for the first time in history – the whole of society is subjected, or tends to be subjected, to a unified economic process, and that the fate of every member of society is determined by unified laws. (By contrast, the organic unities of pre-capitalist societies organised their metabolism largely in independence of each other.)

However, if this atomisation is only an illusion it is a necessary one. That is to say, the immediate, practical as well as intellectual confrontation of the individual with society,

the immediate production and reproduction of life – in which for the individual the commodity structure of all ‘things’ and their obedience to ‘natural laws’ is found to exist already in a finished form, as something immutably given – could only take place in the form of rational and isolated acts of exchange between isolated commodity owners. As emphasised above, the worker, too, must present himself as the ‘owner’ of his labour-power, as if it were a commodity. His specific situation is defined by the fact that his labour-power is his only possession. His fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation.

2

This rational objectification conceals above all the immediate – qualitative and material – character of things as things. When use-values appear universally as commodities they acquire a new objectivity, a new substantiality which they did not possess in an age of episodic exchange and which destroys their original and authentic substantiality. As Marx observes: “Private property *alienates* not only the individuality of men, but also of things. The ground and the earth have nothing to do with ground-rent, machines have nothing to do with profit. For the landowner ground and earth mean nothing but ground-rent; he lets his land to tenants and receives the rent – a quality which the ground can lose without losing any of its inherent qualities such as its fertility; it is a quality whose magnitude and indeed existence depends on social relations that are created and abolished without any intervention by the landowner. Likewise with the machine.”¹⁶

Thus even the individual object which man confronts directly, either as producer or consumer, is distorted in its objectivity by its commodity character. If that can happen then it is evident that this process will be intensified in proportion as the relations which man establishes with objects as objects of the life process are mediated in the course of his social activity. It is obviously not possible here to give an analysis of the whole economic structure of capitalism. It must suffice to point out that modern capitalism does not content itself with transforming the relations of production in accordance with its own needs. It also integrates into its own system those forms of primitive capitalism that led an isolated existence in pre-capitalist times, divorced from production; it converts them into members of the henceforth unified process of radical capitalism. (Cf. merchant capital, the role of money as a hoard or as finance capital, etc.)

These forms of capital are objectively subordinated, it is true, to the real life-process of capitalism, the extraction of surplus value in the course of production. They are, therefore, only to be explained in terms of the nature of industrial capitalism itself. But in the minds of people in bourgeois society they constitute the pure, authentic, unadulterated forms of capital. In them the relations between men that lie hidden in the immediate commodity relation, as well as the relations between men and the objects that should really gratify their needs, have faded to the point where they can be neither recognised nor even perceived.

For that very reason the reified mind has come to regard them as the true representatives of his societal existence. The commodity character of the commodity, the

abstract, quantitative mode of calculability shows itself here in its purest form: the reified mind necessarily sees it as the form in which its own authentic immediacy becomes manifest and – as reified consciousness – does not even attempt to transcend it. On the contrary, it is concerned to make it permanent by ‘scientifically deepening’ the laws at work. Just as 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. Marx often describes this potentiation of reification in incisive fashion. One example must suffice here: “In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, is brought out in its pure state and in this form it no longer bears the birth-marks of its origin. The social relation is consummated in the relation of a thing, of money, to itself. Instead of the actual transformation of money into capital, we see here only form without content. . . . It becomes a property of money to generate value and yield interest, much as it is an attribute of pear trees to bear pears. And the money-lender sells his money as just such an interest-bearing thing. But that is not all. The actually functioning capital, as we have seen, presents itself in such a light that it seems to yield interest not as functioning capital, but as capital in itself, as money-capital. This, too, becomes distorted. While interest is only a portion of the profit, i.e. of the surplus value, which the functioning capitalist squeezes out of the labourer, it appears now, on the contrary, as though interest were the typical product of capital, the primary matter, and profit, in the shape of profit of enterprise, were a mere accessory and by-product of the process of reproduction. Thus we get a fetish form of capital, and the conception of fetish capital. In $M-M'$ we have the meaningless form of capital, the perversion and objectification of production relations in their highest degree, the interest-bearing form, the simple form of capital, in which it antecedes its own process of reproduction. It is the capacity of money, or of a commodity, to expand its own value independently of reproduction – which is a mystification of capital in its most flagrant form. For vulgar political economy, which seeks to represent capital as an independent source of value, of value creation, this form is naturally a veritable find, a form in which the source of profit is no longer discernible, and in which the result of the capitalist process of production – divorced from the process – acquires an independent existence.”¹⁷

Just as the economic theory of capitalism remains stuck fast in its self-created immediacy, the same thing happens to bourgeois attempts to comprehend the ideological phenomenon of reification. Even thinkers who have no desire to deny or obscure its existence and who are more or less clear in their own minds about its humanly destructive consequences remain on the surface and make no attempt to advance beyond its objectively most derivative forms, the forms furthest from the real life-process of capitalism, i.e. the most external and vacuous forms, to the basic phenomenon of reification itself.

Indeed, they divorce these empty manifestations from their real capitalist foundation and make them independent and permanent by regarding them as the timeless model of human relations in general. (This can be seen most clearly in Simmel’s book, *The Philosophy of Money*, a very interesting and perceptive work in matters of detail.) They offer no more than a description of this “enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur Le Capital and Madame La Terre do their ghost-walking as social

characters and at the same time as mere things.”¹⁸ But they do not go further than a description and their ‘deepening’ of the problem runs in circles around the eternal manifestations of reification.

The divorce of the phenomena of reification from their economic bases and from the vantage point from which alone they can be understood, is facilitated by the fact that the [capitalist] process of transformation must embrace every manifestation of the life of society if the preconditions for the complete self-realisation of capitalist production are to be fulfilled.

Thus capitalism has created a form for the state and a system of law corresponding to its needs and harmonising with its own structure. The structural similarity is so great that no truly perceptive historian of modern capitalism could fail to notice it. Max Weber, for instance, gives this description of the basic lines of this development: “Both are, rather, quite similar in their fundamental nature. Viewed sociologically, a ‘business-concern’ is the modern state; the same holds good for a factory: and this, precisely, is what is specific to it historically. And, likewise, the power relations in a business are also of the same kind. The relative independence of the artisan (or cottage craftsman), of the landowning peasant, the owner of a benefice, the knight and vassal was based on the fact that he himself owned the tools, supplies, financial resources or weapons with the aid of which he fulfilled his economic, political or military function and from which he lived while this duty was being discharged. Similarly, the hierarchic dependence of the worker, the clerk, the technical assistant, the assistant in an academic institute *and* the civil servant and soldier has a comparable basis: namely that the tools, supplies and financial resources essential both for the business-concern and for economic survival are in the hands, in the one case, of the entrepreneur and, in the other case, of the political master.”¹⁹

He rounds off this account – very pertinently – with an analysis of the cause and 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*, at least in principle, according to fixed general laws, just as the probable performance of a *machine* can be calculated. It is as little able to tolerate the dispensing of justice according to the judge’s sense of fair play *in individual cases* or any other irrational means or principles of administering the law . . . as it is able to endure a patriarchal administration that obeys the dictates of its own caprice, or sense of mercy and, for the rest, proceeds in accordance with an inviolable and sacrosanct, but irrational tradition. . . . What is specific to modern capitalism as distinct from the age-old capitalist forms of acquisition is that the strictly rational *organisation of work* on the basis of *rational technology* did not come into being *anywhere* within such irrationally constituted political systems nor could it have done so. For these modern businesses with their fixed capital and their exact calculations are much too 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*.”

The process we see here is closely related both in its motivation and in its effects to the economic process outlined above. Here, too, there is a breach with the empirical

and irrational methods of administration and dispensing justice based on traditions tailored, subjectively, to the requirements of men in action, and, objectively, to those of the concrete matter in hand. There arises a rational systematisation of all statutes regulating life, which represents, or at least tends towards a closed system applicable to all possible and imaginable cases. Whether this system is arrived at in a purely logical manner, as an exercise in pure legal dogma or interpretation of the law, or whether the judge is given the task of filling the 'gaps' left in the laws, is immaterial for our attempt to understand the *structure* of modern legal reality. In either case the legal system is formally capable of being generalised so as to relate to every possible situation in life and it is susceptible to prediction and calculation. Even Roman Law, which comes closest to these developments while remaining, in modern terms, within the framework of pre-capitalist legal patterns, does not in this respect go beyond the empirical, the concrete and the traditional. The purely systematic categories which were necessary before a judicial system could become universally applicable arose only in modern times.²⁰

It requires no further explanation to realise that the need to systematise and to abandon empiricism, tradition and material dependence was the need for exact calculation.²¹ However, this same need requires that the legal system should confront the individual events of social existence as something permanently established and exactly defined, i.e. as a rigid system. Of course, this produces an uninterrupted series of conflicts between the unceasingly revolutionary forces of the capitalist economy and the rigid legal system. But this only results in new codifications; and despite these the new system is forced to preserve the fixed, change-resistant structure of the old system.

This is the source of the – apparently – paradoxical situation whereby the 'law' of primitive societies, which has scarcely altered in hundreds or sometimes even thousands of years, can be flexible and irrational in character, renewing itself with every new legal decision, while modern law, caught up in the continuous turmoil of change, should appear rigid, static and fixed. But the paradox dissolves when we realise that it arises only because the same situation has been regarded from two different points of view: on the one hand, from that of the historian (who stands 'outside' the actual process) and, on the other, from that of someone who experiences the effects of the social order in question upon his consciousness.

With the aid of this insight we can see clearly how the antagonism between the traditional and empirical craftsmanship and the scientific and rational factory is repeated in another sphere of activity. At every single stage of its development, the ceaselessly revolutionary techniques of modern production turn a rigid and immobile face towards the individual producer. Whereas the objectively relatively stable, traditional craft production preserves in the minds of its individual practitioners the appearance of something flexible, something constantly renewing itself, something produced by the producers.

In the process we witness, illuminatingly, how here, too, the *contemplative* nature of man under capitalism makes its appearance. For the essence of rational calculation is based ultimately upon the recognition and the inclusion in one's calculations of the inevitable chain of cause and effect in certain events – independently of individual 'caprice'. In consequence, man's activity does not go beyond the correct calculation of the possible outcome of the sequence of events (the 'laws' of which he finds 'ready-made'), and beyond the adroit evasion of disruptive 'accidents' by means of protective

devices and preventive measures (which are based in their turn on the recognition and application of similar laws). Very often it will confine itself to working out the probable effects of such ‘laws’ without making the attempt to intervene in the process by bringing other ‘laws’ to bear. (As in insurance schemes, etc.)

The more closely we scrutinise this situation and the better we are able to close our minds to the bourgeois legends of the ‘creativity’ of the exponents of the capitalist age, the more obvious it becomes that we are witnessing in all behaviour of this sort the structural analogue to the behaviour of the worker *vis-à-vis* the machine he serves and observes, and whose functions he controls while he contemplates it. The ‘creative’ element can be seen to depend at best on whether these ‘laws’ are applied in a – relatively – independent way or in a wholly subservient one. That is to say, it depends on the degree to which the contemplative stance is repudiated. The distinction between a worker faced with a particular machine, the entrepreneur faced with a given type of mechanical development, the technologist faced with the state of science and the profitability of its application to technology, is purely quantitative; it does not directly entail *any qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness*.

Only in this context can the problem of modern bureaucracy be properly understood. Bureaucracy implies the adjustment of one’s way of life, mode of work and hence of consciousness, to the general socio-economic premises of the capitalist economy, similar to that which we have observed in the case of the worker in particular business concerns. The formal standardisation of justice, the state, the civil service, etc., signifies objectively and factually a comparable reduction of all social functions to their elements, a comparable search for the rational formal laws of these carefully segregated partial systems. Subjectively, the divorce between work and the individual capacities and needs of the worker produces comparable effects upon consciousness. This results in an inhuman, standardised division of labour analogous to that which we have found in industry on the technological and mechanical plane.²²

It is not only a question of the completely mechanical, ‘mindless’ work of the lower echelons of the bureaucracy which bears such an extraordinarily close resemblance to operating a machine and which indeed often surpasses it in sterility and uniformity. It is also a question, on the one hand, of the way in which objectively all issues are subjected to an increasingly *formal* and standardised treatment and in which there is an ever-increasing remoteness from the qualitative and material essence of the ‘things’ to which bureaucratic activity pertains. On the other hand, there is an even more monstrous intensification of the one-sided specialisation which represents such a violation of man’s humanity. Marx’s comment on factory work that “the individual, himself divided, is transformed into the automatic mechanism of a partial labour” and is thus “crippled to the point of abnormality” is relevant here too. And it becomes all the more clear, the more elevated, advanced and ‘intellectual’ is the attainment exacted by the division of labour.

The split between the worker’s labour-power and his personality, its metamorphosis into a thing, an object that he sells on the market is repeated here too. But with the difference that not every mental faculty is suppressed by mechanisation; only one faculty (or complex of faculties) is detached from the whole personality and placed in opposition to it, becoming a thing, a commodity. But the basic phenomenon remains the same even though both the means by which society instills such abilities and their

material and 'moral' exchange value are fundamentally different from labour-power (not forgetting, of course, the many connecting links and nuances).

The specific type of bureaucratic 'conscientiousness' and impartiality, the individual bureaucrat's inevitable total subjection to a system of relations between the things to which he is exposed, the idea that it is precisely his 'honour' and his 'sense of responsibility' that exact this total submission,²³ all this points to the fact that the division of labour which in the case of Taylorism invaded the psyche, here invades the realm of ethics. Far from weakening the reified structure of consciousness, this actually strengthens it. For as long as the fate of the worker still appears to be an individual fate (as in the case of the slave in antiquity), the life of the ruling classes is still free to assume quite different forms. Not until the rise of capitalism was a unified economic structure, and hence a – formally – unified structure of consciousness that embraced the whole society, brought into being. This unity expressed itself in the fact that the problems of consciousness arising from wage-labour were repeated in the ruling class in a refined and spiritualised, but, for that very reason, more intensified form. The specialised 'virtuoso', the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties does not just become the [passive] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties. (It is not possible here even to outline the way in which modern administration and law assume the characteristics of the factory as we noted above rather than those of the handicrafts.) This phenomenon can be seen at its most grotesque in journalism. Here it is precisely subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their 'owner' and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand. The journalist's 'lack of convictions', the prostitution of his experiences and beliefs is comprehensible only as the apogee of capitalist reification.²⁴

The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of 'ghostly objectivity' cannot therefore content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic 'qualities' into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. We need only think of marriage, and without troubling to point to the developments of the nineteenth century we can remind ourselves of the way in which Kant, for example, described the situation with the naïvely cynical frankness peculiar to great thinkers.

"Sexual community", he says, "is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another . . . marriage . . . is the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possession of each other's sexual attributes for the duration of their lives."²⁵

This rationalisation of the world appears to be complete, it seems to penetrate the very depths of man's physical and psychic nature. It is limited, however, by its own formalism. That is to say, the rationalisation of isolated aspects of life results in the creation of – formal – laws. All these things do join together into what seems to the superficial observer to constitute a unified system of general 'laws'. But the disregard of

the concrete aspects of the subject matter of these laws, upon which disregard of their authority as laws is based, makes itself felt in the incoherence of the system in fact. This incoherence becomes particularly egregious in periods of crisis. At such times we can see how the immediate continuity between two partial systems is disrupted and their independence from and adventitious connection with each other is suddenly forced into the consciousness of everyone. It is for this reason that Engels is able to define the 'natural laws' of capitalist society as the laws of chance.²⁶

On closer examination the structure of a crisis is seen to be no more than a heightening of the degree and intensity of the daily life of bourgeois society. In its unthinking, mundane reality *that* life seems firmly held together by 'natural laws'; yet it can experience a sudden dislocation because the bonds uniting its various elements and partial systems are a chance affair even at their most normal. So that the pretence that society is regulated by 'eternal, iron' laws which branch off into the different special laws applying to particular areas is finally revealed for what it is: a pretence. The true structure of society appears rather in the independent, rationalised and formal partial laws whose links with each other are of necessity purely formal (i.e. their formal interdependence can be formally systematised), while as far as concrete realities are concerned they can only establish fortuitous connections.

On closer inspection this kind of connection can be discovered even in purely economic phenomena. Thus Marx points out – and the cases referred to here are intended only as an indication of the methodological factors involved, not as a substantive treatment of the problems themselves – that “the conditions of direct exploitation [of the labourer], and those of realising surplus-value, are not identical. They diverge not only in place and time, but also logically.”²⁷ Thus there exists “an accidental rather than a necessary connection between the total amount of social labour applied to a social article” and “the volume whereby society seeks to satisfy the want gratified by the article in question.”²⁸ These are no more than random instances. It is evident that the whole structure of capitalist production rests on the interaction between a necessity subject to strict laws in all isolated phenomena and the relative irrationality of the total process. “Division of labour within the workshop implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist over men, who are but parts of a mechanism that belongs to him. The division of labour within society brings into contact independent commodity-producers who acknowledge no other authority than that of competition, of the coercion exerted by the pressure of their mutual interests.”²⁹

The capitalist process of rationalisation based on private economic calculation requires that every manifestation of life shall exhibit this very interaction between details which are subject to laws and a totality ruled by chance. It presupposes a society so structured. It produces and reproduces this structure in so far as it takes possession of society. This has its foundation already in the nature of speculative calculation, i.e. the economic practice of commodity owners at the stage where the exchange of commodities has become universal. Competition between the different owners of commodities would not be feasible if there were an exact, rational, systematic mode of functioning for the whole of society to correspond to the rationality of isolated phenomena. If a rational calculation is to be possible the commodity owner must be in possession of the laws regulating every detail of his production. The chances of exploitation, the laws of the 'market' must likewise be rational in the sense that they must be calculable

according to the laws of probability. But they must not be governed by a law in the sense in which ‘laws’ govern individual phenomena; they must not under any circumstances be rationally organised through and through. This does not mean, of course, that there can be no ‘law’ governing the whole. But such a ‘law’ would have to be the ‘unconscious’ product of the activity of the different commodity owners acting independently of one another, i.e. a law of mutually interacting ‘coincidences’ rather than one of truly rational organisation. Furthermore, such a law must not merely impose itself despite the wishes of individuals, it may *not even be fully and adequately knowable*. For the complete knowledge of the whole would vouchsafe the knower a monopoly that would amount to the virtual abolition of the capitalist economy.

This irrationality, this – highly problematic – ‘systematisation’ of the whole which diverges *qualitatively and in principle* from the laws regulating the parts, is more than just a postulate, a presupposition essential to the workings of a capitalist economy. It is at the same time the product of the capitalist division of labour. It has already been pointed out that the division of labour disrupts every organically unified process of work and life and breaks it down into its components. This enables the artificially isolated partial functions to be performed in the most rational manner by ‘specialists’ who are specially adapted mentally and physically for the purpose. This has the effect of making these partial functions autonomous and so they tend to develop through their own momentum and in accordance with their own special laws independently of the other partial functions of society (or that part of the society to which they belong).

As the division of labour becomes more pronounced and more rational, this tendency naturally increases in proportion. For the more highly developed it is, the more powerful become the claims to status and the professional interests of the ‘specialists’ who are the living embodiments of such tendencies. And this centrifugal movement is not confined to aspects of a particular sector. It is even more in evidence when we consider the great spheres of activity created by the division of labour. Engels describes this process with regard to the relation between economics and laws: “Similarly with law. As soon as the new division of labour which creates *professional lawyers* becomes necessary, another new and independent sphere is opened up which, for all its essential dependence on production and trade, still has also a special capacity for reacting upon these spheres. In a modern state, law must not only correspond to the general economic condition and be its expression, but must also be an *internally coherent expression* which does not, owing to inner contradictions, reduce itself to nought. And in order to achieve this, the faithful reflection of economic conditions suffers increasingly. . . .”³⁰ It is hardly necessary to supplement this with examples of the inbreeding and the interdepartmental conflicts of the civil service (consider the independence of the military apparatus from the civil administration), or of the academic faculties, etc.

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The specialisation of skills leads to the destruction of every image of the whole. And as, despite this, the need to grasp the whole – at least cognitively – cannot die out, we find that science, which is likewise based on specialisation and thus caught up in the same immediacy, is criticised for having torn the real world into shreds and having lost its

vision of the whole. In reply to allegations that “the various factors are not treated as a whole” Marx retorts that this criticism is levelled “as though it were the text-books that impress this separation upon life and not life upon the text-books”.³¹ Even though this criticism deserves refutation in its naïve form it becomes comprehensible when we look for a moment from the outside, i.e. from a vantage point other than that of a reified consciousness, at the activity of modern science which is both sociologically and methodologically necessary and for that reason ‘comprehensible’. Such a look will reveal (without constituting a ‘criticism’) that the more intricate a modern science becomes and the better it understands itself methodologically, the more resolutely it will turn its back on the ontological problems of its own sphere of influence and eliminate them from the realm where it has achieved some insight. The more highly developed it becomes and the more scientific, the more it will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand, *its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp*.

Marx acutely summed up this situation with reference to economics when he declared that “use-value as such lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy”.³² It would be a mistake to suppose that certain analytical devices – such as we find in the ‘Theory of Marginal Utility’ – might show the way out of this impasse. It is possible to set aside objective laws governing the production and movement of commodities which regulate the market and ‘subjective’ modes of behaviour on it and to make the attempt to start from ‘subjective’ behaviour on the market. But this simply shifts the question from the main issue to more and more derivative and reified stages without negating the formalism of the method and the elimination from the outset of the concrete material underlying it. The formal act of exchange which constitutes the basic fact for the theory of marginal utility likewise suppresses use-value as use-value and establishes a relation of concrete equality between concretely unequal and indeed incomparable objects. It is this that creates the impasse.

Thus the subject of the exchange is just as abstract, formal and reified as its object. The limits of this abstract and formal method are revealed in the fact that its chosen goal is an abstract system of ‘laws’ that focuses on the theory of marginal utility just as much as classical economics had done. But the formal abstraction of these ‘laws’ transforms economics into a closed partial system. And this in turn is unable to penetrate its own material substratum, nor can it advance from there to an understanding of society in its entirety and so it is compelled to view that substratum as an immutable, eternal ‘datum’. Science is thereby debarred from comprehending the development and the demise, the social character of its own material base, no less than the range of possible attitudes towards it and the nature of its own formal system.

Here, once again, we can clearly observe the close interaction between a class and the scientific method that arises from the attempt to conceptualise the social character of that class together with its laws and needs. It has often been pointed out – in these pages and elsewhere – that the problem that forms the ultimate barrier to the economic thought of the bourgeoisie is the crisis. If we now – in the full awareness of our own one-sidedness – consider this question from a purely methodological point of view, we see that it is the very success with which the economy is totally rationalised and transformed into an abstract and mathematically orientated system of formal ‘laws’

that creates the methodological barrier to understanding the phenomenon of crisis. In moments of crisis the qualitative existence of the ‘things’ that lead their lives beyond the purview of economics as misunderstood and neglected things-in-themselves, as use-values, suddenly becomes the decisive factor. (Suddenly, that is, for reified, rational thought.) Or rather: these ‘laws’ fail to function and the reified mind is unable to perceive a pattern in this ‘chaos’.

This failure is characteristic not merely of classical economics (which regarded crises as ‘passing’, ‘accidental’ disturbances), but of bourgeois economics *in toto*. The incomprehensibility and irrationality of crises is indeed a consequence of the class situation and interests of the bourgeoisie but it follows equally from their approach to economics. (There is no need to spell out the fact that for us these are both merely aspects of the same dialectical unity.) This consequence follows with such inevitability that Tugan-Baranovsky, for example, attempts in his theory to draw the necessary conclusions from a century of crises by excluding consumption from economics entirely and founding a ‘pure’ economics based only on production. The source of crises (whose existence cannot be denied) is then found to lie in incongruities between the various elements of production, i.e. in purely quantitative factors. Hilferding puts his finger on the fallacy underlying all such explanations: “They operate only with economic concepts such as capital, profit, accumulation, etc., and believe that they possess the solution to the problem when they have discovered the quantitative relations on the basis of which either simple and expanded reproduction is possible, or else there are disturbances. They overlook the fact that there are qualitative conditions attached to these quantitative relations, that it is not merely a question of units of value which can easily be compared with each other but also use-values of a definite kind which must fulfil a definite function in production and consumption. Further, they are oblivious of the fact that in the analysis of the process of reproduction more is involved than just aspects of capital in general, so that it is not enough to say that an excess or a deficit of industrial capital can be ‘balanced’ by an appropriate amount of money-capital. Nor is it a matter of fixed or circulating capital, but rather of machines, raw materials, labour-power of a quite definite (technically defined) sort, if disruptions are to be avoided.”³³

Marx has often demonstrated convincingly how inadequate the ‘laws’ of bourgeois economics are to the task of explaining the true movement of economic activity *in toto*. He has made it clear that this limitation lies in the – methodologically inevitable – failure to comprehend use-value and real consumption. “Within certain limits, the process of reproduction may take place on the same or on an increased scale even when the commodities expelled from it have not really entered individual or productive consumption. The consumption of commodities is not included in the cycle of the capital from which they originated. For instance, as soon as the yarn is sold the cycle of the capital-value represented by the yarn may begin anew, regardless of what may next become of the sold yarn. So long as the product is sold, everything is taking its regular course from the standpoint of the capitalist producer. The cycle of the capital-value he is identified with is not interrupted. And if this process is expanded – which includes increased productive consumption of the means of production – this reproduction of capital may be accompanied by increased individual consumption (hence demand) on the part of the labourers, since this process is initiated and effected by productive consumption. Thus the production of surplus-value, and with it the individual consumption

of the capitalist, may increase, the entire process of reproduction may be in a flourishing condition, and yet a large part of the commodities may have entered into consumption only in appearance, while in reality they may still remain unsold in the hands of dealers, may in fact still be lying in the market.”³⁴

It must be emphasised that this inability to penetrate to the real material substratum of science is not the fault of individuals. It is rather something that becomes all the more apparent the more science has advanced and the more consistently it functions – from the point of view of its own premises. It is therefore no accident, as Rosa Luxemburg has convincingly shown,³⁵ that the great, if also often primitive, faulty and inexact synoptic view of economic life to be found in Quesnay’s “Tableau Economique”, disappears progressively as the – formal – process of conceptualisation becomes increasingly exact in the course of its development from Adam Smith to Ricardo. For Ricardo the process of the total reproduction of capital (where this problem cannot be avoided) is no longer a central issue.

In jurisprudence this situation emerges with even greater clarity and simplicity – because there is a more conscious reification at work. If only because the question of whether the qualitative content can be understood by means of a rational, calculating approach is no longer seen in terms of a rivalry between two principles within the same sphere (as was the case with use-value and exchange value in economics), but rather, right from the start, as a question of form versus content. The conflict revolving around natural law, and the whole revolutionary period of the bourgeoisie was based on the assumption that the formal equality and universality of the law (and hence its rationality) was able at the same time to determine its content. This was expressed in the assault on the varied and picturesque medley of privileges dating back to the Middle Ages and also in the attack on the Divine Right of Kings. The revolutionary bourgeois class refused to admit that a legal relationship had a *valid* foundation merely because it existed *in fact*. “Burn your laws and make new ones!” Voltaire counselled; “Whence can new laws be obtained? From Reason!”³⁶

The war waged against the revolutionary bourgeoisie, say, at the time of the French Revolution, was dominated to such an extent by this idea that it was inevitable that the natural law of the bourgeoisie could only be opposed by yet another natural law (see Burke and also Stahl). Only after the bourgeoisie had gained at least a partial victory did a ‘critical’ and a ‘historical’ view begin to emerge in both camps. Its essence can be summarised as the belief that the content of law is something purely factual and hence not to be comprehended by the formal categories of jurisprudence. Of the tenets of natural law the only one to survive was the idea of the unbroken continuity of the formal system of law; significantly, Bergbohm uses an image borrowed from physics, that of a ‘juridical vacuum’, to describe everything not regulated by law.³⁷

Nevertheless, the cohesion of these laws is purely formal: *what* they express, “the content of legal institutions is never of a legal character, but always political and economic”.³⁸ With this the primitive, cynically sceptical campaign against natural law that was launched by the ‘Kantian’ Hugo at the end of the eighteenth century, acquired ‘scientific’ status. Hugo established the juridical basis of slavery, among other things, by arguing that it “had been the law of the land for thousands of years and was acknowledged by millions of cultivated people”.³⁹ In this naïvely cynical frankness the pattern which is to become increasingly characteristic of law in bourgeois society stands clearly

revealed. When Jellinek describes the contents of law as metajuristic, when ‘critical’ jurists locate the study of the contents of law in history, sociology and politics what they are doing is, in the last analysis, just what Hugo had demanded: they are systematically abandoning the attempt to ground law in reason and to give it a rational content; law is henceforth to be regarded as a formal calculus with the aid of which the legal consequences of particular actions (*rebus sic stantibus*) can be determined as exactly as possible.

However, this view transforms the process by which law comes into being and passes away into something as incomprehensible to the jurist as crises had been to the political economist. With regard to the origins of law the perceptive ‘critical’ jurist Kelsen observes: “It is the great *mystery* of law and of the state that is consummated with the enactment of laws and for this reason it may be permissible to employ inadequate images in elucidating its nature.”⁴⁰ Or in other words: “It is symptomatic of the nature of law that a norm may be legitimate even if its origins are iniquitous. That is another way of saying that the legitimate origin of a law cannot be written into the concept of law as one of its conditions.”⁴¹ This epistemological clarification could also be a factual one and could thereby lead to an advance in knowledge. To achieve this, however, the other disciplines into which the problem of the origins of law had been diverted would really have to propose a genuine solution to it. But also it would be essential really to penetrate the nature of a legal system which serves purely as a means of calculating the effects of actions and of rationally imposing modes of action relevant to a particular class. In that event the real, material substratum of the law would at one stroke become visible and comprehensible. But neither condition can be fulfilled. The law maintains its close relationship with the ‘eternal values’. This gives birth, in the shape of a philosophy of law to an impoverished and formalistic re-edition of natural law (Stammler). Meanwhile, the real basis for the development of law, a change in the power relations between the classes, becomes hazy and vanishes into the sciences that study it, sciences which – in conformity with the modes of thought current in bourgeois society – generate the same problems of transcending their material substratum as we have seen in jurisprudence and economics.

The manner in which this transcendence is conceived shows how vain was the hope that a comprehensive discipline, like philosophy, might yet achieve that overall knowledge which the particular sciences have so conspicuously renounced by turning away from the material substratum of their conceptual apparatus. Such a synthesis would only be possible if philosophy were able to change its approach radically and concentrate on the concrete material totality of what can and should be known. Only then would it be able to break through the barriers erected by a formalism that has degenerated into a state of complete fragmentation. But this would presuppose an awareness of the causes, the genesis and the necessity of this formalism; moreover, it would not be enough to unite the special sciences mechanically: they would have to be transformed inwardly by an inwardly synthesising philosophical method. It is evident that the philosophy of bourgeois society is incapable of this. Not that the desire for synthesis is absent; nor can it be maintained that the best people have welcomed with open arms a mechanical existence hostile to life and a scientific formalism alien to it. *But a radical change in outlook is not feasible on the soil of bourgeois society.* Philosophy can attempt to assemble the whole of knowledge encyclopaedically (see Wundt). Or it may radically question the value of formal knowledge for a ‘living life’ (see irrationalist philosophies from Hamann to

Bergson). But these episodic trends lie to one side of the main philosophical tradition. The latter acknowledges as given and necessary the results and achievements of the special sciences and assigns to philosophy the task of exhibiting and justifying the grounds for regarding as valid the concepts so constructed.

Thus philosophy stands in the same relation to the special sciences as they do with respect to empirical reality. The formalistic conceptualisation of the special sciences become for philosophy an immutably given substratum and this signals the final and despairing renunciation of every attempt to cast light on the reification that lies at the root of this formalism. The reified world appears henceforth quite definitively – and in philosophy, under the spotlight of ‘criticism’ it is potentiated still further – as the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world vouchsafed to us humans. Whether this gives rise to ecstasy, resignation or despair, whether we search for a path leading to ‘life’ via irrational mystical experience, this will do absolutely nothing to modify the situation as it is in fact.

By confining itself to the study of the ‘possible conditions’ of the validity of the forms in which its underlying existence is manifested, modern bourgeois thought bars its own way to a clear view of the problems bearing on the birth and death of these forms, and on their real essence and substratum. Its perspicacity finds itself increasingly in the situation of that legendary ‘critic’ in India who was confronted with the ancient story according to which the world rests upon an elephant. He unleashed the ‘critical’ question: upon what does the elephant rest? On receiving the answer that the elephant stands on a tortoise ‘criticism’ declared itself satisfied. It is obvious that even if he had continued to press apparently ‘critical’ questions, he could only have elicited a third miraculous animal. He would not have been able to discover the solution to the real question.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (London: Kegan & Paul, 1904), p. 53.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. F. Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1959), 3 vols., vol. III, p. 324.
- 3 *Capital* III, p. 810.
- 4 *Capital* I, p. 72. On this antagonism cf. the purely economic distinction between the exchange of goods in terms of their value and the exchange in terms of their cost of production. *Capital* III, p. 174.
- 5 *Capital* I, p. 170.
- 6 Cf. *Capital* I, pp. 322, 345.
- 7 This whole process is described systematically and historically in *Capital* I. The facts themselves can also be found in the writings of bourgeois economists like Bücher, Sombart, A. Weber and Gottl among others – although for the most part they are not seen in connection with the problem of reification.
- 8 *Capital* I, p. 384.
- 9 *Capital* I, p. 355 (note).
- 10 That this should appear so is fully justified from the point of view of the *individual* consciousness. As far as class is concerned we would point out that this subjugation is the product of a lengthy struggle which enters upon a new stage with the organisation of the proletariat into a class – but on a higher plane and with different weapons.
- 11 *Capital* I, pp. 374–6, 423–4, 460, etc. It goes without saying that this ‘contemplation’ can be more demanding and demoralising than ‘active’ labour. But we cannot discuss this further here.
- 12 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956), pp. 58–9.

- 13 *Capital I*, p. 344.
- 14 Cf. Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld, *Wirtschaft und Technik*, Grundriss der Sozialökonomik, 2 vols., vol. II, pp. 234ff.
- 15 *Capital I*, p. 77.
- 16 This refers above all to capitalist private property. *Der heilige Max. Dokumente des Sozialismus III*, 363. Marx goes on to make a number of very fine observations about the effects of reification upon language. A philological study from the standpoint of historical materialism could profitably begin here. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. C. P. Magill, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), vol. 5, p. 230.
- 17 *Capital III*, pp. 384–5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 809.
- 19 Max Weber, *Gesammelte politische Schriften* (Munich, 1921), pp. 140–2. Weber's reference to the development of English law has no bearing on our problem. On the gradual ascendancy of the principle of economic calculation, see also A. Weber, *Über den Standort der Industrien* (Tübingen, 1909), especially p. 216.
- 20 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen, 1922), p. 491.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 22 If we do not emphasise the class character of the state in *this* context, this is because our aim is to understand reification as a *general* phenomenon constitutive of the *whole* of bourgeois society. But for this the question of class would have to begin with the machine.
- 23 Cf. Max Weber, *Politische Schriften*, p. 154.
- 24 Cf. the essay by A. Fogarasi in *Kommunismus*, Jg. II, No. 25/26.
- 25 *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, Pt. I, § 24.
- 26 Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, trans. Alec West, in Karl Marx, *Selected Works*, 2 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1950), vol. II, p. 293.
- 27 *Capital III*, p. 239.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- 29 *Capital I*, p. 356.
- 30 Letter to Conrad Schmidt in S.W. II, pp. 447–8.
- 31 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 276.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 33 Rudolf Hilferding, *Das Finanzkapital. Eine Studie Über die jüngste Entwicklung des Kapitalismus* (Vienna, 1910), 2nd edn, pp. 378–9.
- 34 *Capital II*, pp. 75–6.
- 35 *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals*, 1st edition (Leipzig, 1921), pp. 78–9. It would be a fascinating task to work out the links between this process and the development of the great rationalist systems.
- 36 Quoted by Carl Bergbohm, *Jurisprudenz und Rechtsphilosophie* (Leipzig, 1892), vol. I, p. 170.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 375.
- 38 Preuss, *Zur Methode der juristischen Begriffsbildung*. In Schmollers Jahrbuch, 1900, p. 370.
- 39 *Lehrbuch des Naturrechts*, Berlin, 1799, § 141. Marx's polemic against Hugo (Nachlass I, pp. 268 et seq.) is still on Hegelian lines.
- 40 Hans Kelsen, *Hauptprobleme der Staatsrechtslehre* (Tübingen, 1923), p. 411 (my italics).
- 41 Feliz Somló, *Juristische Grundlehre* (Leipzig, 1917), p. 177.