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## **The Internet, Social Media and Axel Honneth's Interpretation of Georg Lukács' Theory of Reification and Alienation**

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# The Internet, Social Media and Axel Honneth's Interpretation of Georg Lukács' Theory of Reification and Alienation

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## **Abstract:**

This paper asks: What are the potentials of the concept of alienation/reification for a critical theory of society today? Based on the example of Facebook, it asks: How can we understand alienation in the realm of the media?

Axel Honneth has reformulated Georg Lukács' theory of reification and alienation in the form of a critical theory of recognition. The advantage of this theory is that it is based on the distinction of three subdomains of society, reformulates Hegel's dialectic of essence and existence in moral theory and thereby transcends postmodern moral relativism, stresses the importance of sociality as moral essence, and distinguishes between alienation's subjective, intersubjective and objective dimensions. It however downplays the importance of the economy and co-production in society.

Building on and departing from Lukács and Honneth, this paper first formulates some principles of a moral theory that is grounded in the notion of co-operation as co-production that allows to identify nine dimensions of alienation: economic, political, cultural, subjective, intersubjective and objective alienation. The example of Facebook shows that alienation has not ceased to exist in the world of digital media, but has become more complex. The exploitation of digital labour, the surveillance-industrial complex, and centralised online visibility constitute example forms of digital alienation.

**Keywords:** alienation, reification, critical theory, social theory, moral theory, Axel Honneth, Georg Lukács, digital alienation, Facebook, social media, Internet, digital media

## **1. Introduction**

This paper asks: What are the potentials of the concept of alienation/reification for a critical theory of society today? Can we hold on to Lukács' grounding of the notion of alienation in Hegel's dialectic of essence and existence in the contemporary world or do we have to drop such foundations? How can we understand alienation in the realm of the media and the Internet?

The basic epistemological assumption underlying this paper and other of my works (Fuchs 2008, 2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2015) is that Internet research is predominantly a positivist science that lacks grounding in social theory and tends not to reflect on the Internet's larger presuppositions in society. For grounding a social theory and a critical theory of the Internet, we therefore need to profoundly engage with and re-interpret contemporary critical theory approaches in order to reformulate them in such a way that basic concepts can be applied to the realm of digital media that shape and are shaped by contemporary society.

For providing answers to the questions this paper asks, I first briefly revisit Lukács' theory of reification and alienation that he set out in *History and Class Consciousness* (section 2). How to formulate the concept of alienation today has been vividly discussed in contemporary German critical theory. Hartmut Rosa, Rahel Jaeggi and Axel Honneth have made important contributions to this debate. I engage with their notions of alienation in sections 2 and 3. Axel Honneth was a research assistant to Jürgen Habermas at the University of Frankfurt's Institute of Social Research in the years 1983-1989<sup>1</sup> and obtained his habilitation with a work on the theory of recognition at the same university in 1990. Honneth became the director of the University of Frankfurt's Institute of Social Research in 2001 and is professor of philosophy. Rahel Jaeggi was a PhD student of Axel Honneth at the University of Frankfurt. Her dissertation focused on the theory of alienation. She has been professor of philosophy at Humboldt University of Berlin since 2009. Hartmut Rosa has since 2005 been professor of sociology at Friedrich Schiller University Jena. His main interest is the critical theory of modern society's acceleration.

Lukács' concept of reification directly influenced the Frankfurt School's first generation, thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. This notion had impact on Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of instrumental reason and Marcuse's notion of technological rationality. Habermas as the main representative of the Frankfurt School's second generation re-interpreted Lukács' notion in his theory of communicative action as the colonisation of the lifeworld. Honneth is the key thinker in the Frankfurt School's third generation, whereas Jaeggi and Rosa can be considered to be fourth generation critical theorists. The question arises how the third and fourth generation, the theoretical heirs of Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas, understand alienation. I deal with this question in sections 2 and 3.

In section 4, I try to outline some foundations of a dialectical, materialist and Hegelian concept of alienation that is based on Honneth's approach, but simultaneously quite substantially departs from it. In section 5, I use this approach for reflecting on alienation and the Internet with the help of the example of corporate social media.

## 2. Lukács' Theory of Reification and Alienation

Georg Lukács (1971) argues in the preface to the 1967 edition of *History and Class Consciousness* that he wrote the book before publication of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and that the latter changed his view of reification and alienation. It would be necessary to discern between objectification and alienation. The first would be part of any production process in any society: "If we bear in mind that every externalization of an object in practice (and hence, too, in work) is an objectification, that every human expression including speech objectifies human thoughts and feelings, then it is clear that we are dealing with a universal mode of commerce between men" (Lukács 1971, xxiv).

The use of the term "commerce" is unfortunate in the English translation. The German original says "Verkehr[s] der Menschen miteinander" (Lukács 1967, 26), which can best be translated as "forms of intercourse among humans", a term that has often been used in the English translation of Marx's term "Verkehrsform". Translating

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<sup>1</sup> <http://philosophy.columbia.edu/directories/faculty/axel-honneth>

“Verkehr” with “commerce” creates the impression that Lukács reifies market societies, although his very thinking is anti-reifying.

Alienation is for Lukács based on Marx’s chapter on commodity fetishism in *Capital Volume 1* a form of objectification that takes on dominative and class character: “Only when the objectified forms in society acquire functions that bring the essence of man into conflict with his existence, only when man’s nature is subjugated, deformed and crippled can we speak of an objective societal condition of alienation and, as an inexorable consequence, of all the subjective marks of an internal alienation” (Lukács 1971, xxiv).

The commodity structure conceals “every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” so that “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’” (Lukács 1971, 83). In the modern rationalisation of the labour process, there is a “mathematical analysis of work-processes” so that qualities are reduced to quantities that “*can be calculated*” (88). The measurement of labour time is decisive in this context. “The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of ‘ghostly objectivity’ cannot therefore content itself with the reduction of all object for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man” (100). “Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (91), which includes “the separation of the producer from his means of production” (91), etc. Reification tries to eliminate qualities, dialectical logic, and non-instrumental action from the economy and society as a whole.

Authors in the newer generation of German critical theory, such as Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi and Hartmut Rosa, have revived Marx’s concept of alienation. Jaeggi and Rosa argue that there is no essence to which one needs to return to and that is predetermined, but that in appropriation one creates the self and the world. They have problems with Lukács’ objectivist understanding of Marx and a notion of alienation that is grounded in Hegel’s dialectic of essence and existence. Honneth in contrast takes an approach more inspired by Hegel and Lukács that assumes that there is an essence of the human and social world that is important for moral philosophy.

For Hartmut Rosa (2012, 300-323), acceleration results in contemporary modernity in a five-fold alienation from space, things, our own actions, time (e.g. lack of time), and social relations. The social theorist would not have to identify “true needs”, but to analyse disappointments of human expectations. “According to my analysis, we are not alienated from our true inner essence, but from our ability to appropriate the world in its spatial, temporal, social, practical and objective dimensions”<sup>2</sup> (Rosa 2012, 322, translation from German).

For Rahel Jaeggi (2005, 14), alienation means a form of appropriation of society, an ethical perspective of how to change the world. Kant’s concept of autonomy would neglect social institutions and their pathologies as well as the harms they cause. She argues that the critique of alienation is connected to the question how we want to live (Jaeggi 2005, 14). The alienation concept has an objective and a subjective meaning (41): the loss of power and the loss of sense/meaning. Alienation is for Jaeggi not a

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<sup>2</sup> German original: „Nach meiner Analyse sind wir nicht von unserem wahren inneren Wesen entfremdet, sondern von unserer Fähigkeit, uns die Welt in ihren räumlichen, zeitlichen, sozialen, handlungspraktischen und dinglichen Dimensionen ‘anzuverwandeln’” (Rosa 2012, 322).

lack of relations, but a relationship to something, albeit “a relationship of unrelatedness”<sup>3</sup> (19, 43, translation from German). For Jaeggi, there are two main problems of the concept of alienation: a) the objective definition of what is good independent from human self-definitions, b) the notion of reconciliation with an original essence. The notion of alienation as estrangement from an essence was according to Jaeggi first formulated by Rousseau and then also by Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Heidegger, and the Frankfurt School. The problem would be that a prescription of what is good for humans would be an objectivistic-perfectionistic paternalism (47).

Jaeggi wants to have a *qualified subjective* notion of alienation that gives up metaphysics and the notions of essence and reconciliation. Alienation for her has to do with *the conditions of successful relations to oneself and the world* (51) and Ernst Tugendhat’s question: Can we control ourselves in what we want? (52). Such an approach would take human wants serious, but also have the possibility to question them (58-59). Alienation means for Jaeggi obstructions of the realisation of what one wants (53). It obstructs the positive freedom to determine oneself. “Alienation is prevented appropriation of the world and the self”<sup>4</sup> (Jaeggi 2005, 183). It means that one cannot relate to and appropriate one’s own preconditions (185). Self-alienation is lack of *power* of and *presence* in what one does, lack of *identification* with one’s own actions and wants, or lack of participation in one’s own life.

Jaeggi understands appropriation as something active that changes the thing that is appropriated (56-57) and creates the self (184). One’s wishes, interests and actions take place in the world. Therefore self-appropriation would also be appropriation of the world (Jaeggi 2005, 184). Appropriation is a process with open results (185). The self is relational (197), self-appropriation is a change of social relations so that one is empowered in social relations. Self-appropriation means that we can articulate ourselves in the world and in our social relations (198) and that one becomes and is *present* in one’s own actions, *controls* one’s life, *appropriates* social roles, can *identify* with one’s wants, and is *involved* in the world (187). The self that is appropriated does not already exist as essence, but is created in the process of self-appropriation (Jaeggi 2005, 184) and invented in this process (self-invention).

Rosa and Jaeggi share the critique of Hegel’s notion of essence that is underlying both Marx’s and Lukács’ notions of alienation. They therefore cannot qualify objective social conditions as true or false independent of human consciousness, which makes it difficult to make moral judgements in situations when protest is forestalled and slaves love their masters. Rosa and Jaeggi argue for de-Hegelianising and de-Lukácsianising the notion of alienation, which takes out the potential of universalism and makes alienation a culturally contextual, relative, purely immanent and non-universal concept that lacks transcendental and universal potentials. Honneth (2007a) argues that Foucault under the influence of Nietzsche brought about a shift in social philosophy that displays “a distaste for universalism” (39), but whose problem is that “normative criteria remain on the whole [...] obscure and [...] overshadowed by epistemological perspectivism” (40). The task for a critical theory would be to ground principles that allow “to assess certain developments in social life as pathologies in a context-transcending way” (42) so that “institutions and practices can be taken as ‘pathological’ for the very reason that, upon unbiased reflection, they contradict the conditions of the good life” (60).

<sup>3</sup> German original: „Beziehung der Beziehungslosigkeit“.

<sup>4</sup> Translation from German: „Entfremdung ist verhinderte Welt- und Selbstaneignung“.

Rosa and Jaeggi's approaches bring up the question: How should one understand the strangeness in estrangement and *Fremdheit* in *entfremden*? What is the origin or essence that one is estranged from in class societies? Alienation implies that one has externalised something, e.g. activity, and that one has a moral right to control this something. Externalisation in alienated social relations is a loss of control because objectification is combined with asymmetric power relations that result in a loss of ownership of property, political influence, and cultural significance in the economic, political, and cultural system. Humans create these systems in all societies in common, but elites control them in class societies. One does not have to give up the notion of essence for a theory of alienation because it can be interpreted as an immanent feature of all societies that has transcendental importance. Reconciliation means to take control of what humans have produced, but cannot control in class societies. In a classless society, not elites, but the creators themselves, control objects. The logic of essence goes to the ground of humanity and society in order to show what capitalism and domination rob from humans so that they can no longer be fully social and as humans are incompletely social beings.

Rosa and Jaeggi fail to provide foundations for a universal, critical and dialectical theory of morality. I will try to show next that Axel Honneth's re-interpretation of Lukács is not without problems, but shares basic insights with the Hegelian approach so that it can be connected to a materialist and dialectical moral theory.

### **3. Axel Honneth's Interpretation of Lukács' Concept of Reification in the Critical Theory of Recognition**

Honneth bases his theory on the assumption that humans are psychological beings that strive for "self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem" (Honneth 1992, 196) and suffer if they are disrespected. He subdivides recognition into three forms: love, equality, and achievement. Honneth (1996) grounds this approach in the works of Hegel and George Herbert Mead. He argues that both Hegel and Mead advanced stage theories of recognition, in which there are three forms of recognition that build on each other. For Hegel these are the recognition of the need for love provided in the family, the recognition of human autonomy in civil society and the legal system, and the recognition of individual particularity by the State, in ethical life and in processes of solidarity (Honneth 1996, 25). The absence of such forms of recognition would be the foundation of struggles for recognition.

For Mead, the three crucial forms of recognition are love, legal rights, and solidarity (Honneth 1996, 94). Honneth (1996, 129) reformulates Hegel and Mead's approaches and argues that emotional support provided by the family and friends, cognitive respect by legal rights, and social esteem given by solidary communities of value are the three modes of recognition in society. "Taken together, the three forms of recognition – love, rights, and esteem – constitute the social conditions under which human subjects can develop a positive attitude towards themselves. For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem – provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition – that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires" (169). Social recognition would be the "presupposition of all communicative action" (Honneth 2007a, 71). Disrespect would mean a lack of recognition. In relation to the three dimensions of social activity, disrespect would mean abuse and rape, exclusion and the denial of rights, denigration and insult (Honneth 1996, 129).

Honneth (1996, 94) argues that the distinction of three realms of society can be found in many social theories, not just in Hegel and Mead's works. Therefore "a division of social life into three spheres of interaction has a high degree of plausibility" (94). Honneth however argues that it "is evidently quite natural to distinguish forms of social integration according to whether they occur via emotional bonds, the granting of rights, or a shared orientation to values" (94).

Honneth (1996) claims that Marx discusses the struggle for recognition in a "narrowed version" (146) that focuses on the alienation caused by the proletariat's lack of control over the means of production. "Marx narrows Hegel's mode of the 'struggle for recognition' in the direction of an aesthetic of production" (148). By "reducing the goals of class struggle to only those demands that are directly connected to the organization of social labour, he made it easy to abstract from all the political concerns stemming from the violation of moral claims as such" (149). Certainly there are not just class struggles, but also other political struggles in heteronomous societies. But Honneth disregards that all structures, including decision-making structures and morals, are the outcome of social co-production processes, which gives a special relevance to the notion of production that Marx foregrounds in his theory and that Honneth rather neglects in favour of the concept of recognition.

So Honneth claims that Marx has an economic reductionist theory of society, but the dimensions of work and the economy are rather missing in his own theory of recognition. His book from 1996 does not make evident how his distinction between emotions/rights/esteem relates to the realm of the production and control of use-values that satisfy human needs, i.e. the realm of work, which renders his approach prone to the accusation that it is a form of philosophical idealism that disregards society's materiality.

Although Honneth (1996) does not make it explicitly evident in *The Struggle for Recognition*, his approach seems to presuppose Habermas' distinction between system integration and social integration. Habermas bases his categories of the system and the lifeworld on this differentiation. "I have proposed that we distinguish between *social integration and system integration*: the former attaches to action orientations, while the latter reaches right through them. In one case the action system is integrated through consensus, whether normatively guaranteed or communicatively achieved; in the other case it is integrated through the nonnormative steering of individual decisions not subjectively coordinated" (Habermas 1987, 150).

Although Habermas can account for the reification of communication as the colonisation of the lifeworld, he separates the economic and political systems from the realm of communication, arguing that communication is pure, non-instrumental, and emancipatory. Communication is however part of systems of accumulation and domination. There is a whole field of studies termed "strategic communication" – defined as the "purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al. 2007, 3), which includes the four clusters of corporate communication, marketing/advertising/public relations, business communication skills, and organisational communication. Strategic communication focuses on how to use communication in order to accumulate monetary capital, which shows that communication is also a tool and instrument for system integration, rendering the distinction between social and system integration meaningless. For Habermas, colonisation is a process that substitutes communication by money and power. But in reality, com-

munication often mediates the accumulation of money and power and thereby has itself an instrumental character.

So if one assumes that Honneth leaves out aspects of the economy because he sees it as part of systems integration and only wants to cover social integration, then this separation fails theoretically. If however he thinks of social integration as covering all aspects of society, then the economy and work are the blind spots of his theory. In both cases, his approach does not adequately account for the production of social life and the role of economic processes in it.

Whereas Honneth focuses in *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1996) on recognition as love provided by the family, rights provided by the legal system, and esteem provided by communities of value and tends to ignore a direct discussion of the economy, work and exploitation, he gives more attention to these issues in his book *The I in We* (Honneth 2014). He argues that liberal theories of justice tend to be individualistic by assuming that distribution of resources must account for “ensuring individual autonomy” (39) and individual freedom so that everyone enjoys enough private property and “the use or enjoyment of goods” (38). Distributive justice is reduced to possessive individualism.

For Honneth, autonomy is in contrast relational and intersubjective (41) and can only be achieved by individuals recognising each other. “Individuals achieve self-determination by learning, within relations of reciprocal recognition, to view their needs, beliefs and abilities as worthy of articulation and pursuit in the public sphere” (46). “It does not suffice to conceive of autonomy as arising solely from intersubjective respect for subjects’ decision-making competence; rather, subjects need to be appreciated from their particular needs and individual deeds” (48). “Alongside legal relationships, we must also include familial relationships and societal relations of work within our theory of justice. [...] Just as in the egalitarian legal relations under the democratic rule of law, individuals are also obligated within the family and the exchange of services to recognize each other as free and equal” (49).

A reconstructive theory of justice would need three normative principles: deliberative equality, justice of needs, and justice of achievement (49). In the realm of work, recognition would mean an “organic’ form of solidarity” because workers’ “reciprocal recognition of their respective contributions to the common good gives them a sense of being connected to each other” (69). Work relations would not just have to do with the systemic organisation of the economy, but also with social integration in the form of solidarity as mutual recognition (71-72).

Comparing the two books published in 1996 and 2014, one sees that Honneth continues to see the family and the legal system as two important realms of society, but in the second book defines the third realm no longer as communities of value, but the realm of work, i.e. the economy. Whereas Honneth in the first book tends to speak of love, rights and esteem as the three realms of recognition, he in the second one speaks of needs, equality and work’s achievements. Although he in the second book gives more attention to the economy, the question remains how the economy, politics, and everyday life are related to each other in a theory of society and justice.

Honneth (2014, 57-58) argues that the concept of labour – and thereby the analysis of the economy – has almost disappeared from the social sciences because efforts to emancipate labour would have lost their credibility. Although he does not mention it explicitly, it is clear that the breakdown of “actually existing socialism” in Eastern

Europe has caused a crisis of the idea of a classless society. But at the same time, “the hardships, fears and hopes of those immediately affected by societal working conditions revolve around this notion more than ever” (57). Neoliberalism would have resulted in the “economization of social contexts” and new paradoxes (176). There would be a de-differentiation of private and professional life, entrepreneurs and employees (“entreploees”, 179), instrumental and non-instrumental action, the private and the public, the formal and the informal (179-181). It “becomes increasingly difficult for subjects to distinguish between instrumental and non-instrumental aspects of intersubjective relationships” (180). “[N]etwork capitalism is colonizing spheres of action that were previously distant from utility” (180). The colonisation of (almost) everything by capitalist logic calls modernity’s relative separation of spheres into question.

Also in his debate with Nancy Fraser on the relationship of redistribution and recognition, Honneth argues for a “‘moral’ monism” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 254), in which three spheres of society represent three forms of demands for recognition. Moral recognition is for Honneth the unifying principle of society. Love, law and achievement would be the three forms of recognition in modern society (138). The achievements created by a “productive citizen”’s labour emerged in capitalist society as a “third sphere of recognition alongside love and the new legal principle in the developing capitalist society” (141). The spheres of intimacy, the legal system and working life would bring about three forms of recognition: “‘Love’ (the central idea of intimate relationships), the equality principle (the norm of legal relations), and the achievement principle (the standard of social hierarchy) represent normative perspectives with reference to which subjects can reasonably argue that existing forms of recognition are inadequate or insufficient and need to be expanded” (143).

Axel Honneth (2008) does in contrast to other contemporary social theorists not drop Lukács’ concepts of alienation and reification, but rather re-interprets them in the book *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea* for a contemporary critical theory of society. He bases his approach on Michael Tomasello (2008)’s work. Tomasello shows based on development psychology and socialisation research that recognition precedes cognition: Children learn to take over the perspective of others, which enables thinking and communication. In the “9 month revolution”, the child starts perceiving an attachment figure whose perspective s/he takes over. S/he develops an emotional relation to this person and starts relating to the world and objects by observing how the attachment figure relates to them. The child imitates the attachment figure’s behaviour. Children thereby learn to depersonalise themselves and become social. “At around 9 months of age, infants begin displaying a whole new suite of social behaviors, based both on their ability to understand others as intentional and rational agents like the self and on their ability to participate with others in interactions involving joint goals, intentions, and attention (shared intentionality)” (Tomasello 2008, 139).

Developmental psychology confirms for Honneth that recognition by and of others as well as empathetic engagement precede cognition: “the acknowledgement of the other constitutes a non-epistemic prerequisite for linguistic understanding” (Honneth 2008, 50). Honneth says that Georg Lukács, Martin Heidegger, John Dewey, and Stanley Cavell made this point philosophically. Related to it would also be Georg Herbert Mead’s concept of seeing ourselves through the eyes of the other and Adorno’s notion of the libidinal cathexis of a concrete other through which children develop by imitating others.

Honneth (2007b, 57-69) distinguishes between a constructive, transcendental critique; a reconstructive, immanent critique; and a Foucauldian genealogical critique. Critical theory would combine all three forms. In the debate with Nancy Fraser, he characterises this combination as immanent transcendence. Transcendence “must be attached to a form of practice or experience which is on the one hand indispensable for social reproduction, and on the other hand – owing to its normative surplus – points beyond all given form of social organization. [...] ‘transcendence’ should be a property of ‘immanence’ itself, so that the facticity of social relations always contains a dimension of transcending claims” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 244). Recognition and sociality are for Honneth immanent qualities of society that allow moral judgements that can have a transcendental political meaning. They constitute a political categorical imperative that society as it is, is unfair and unjust and should be politically changed.

For Honneth, reification is “forgetfulness of recognition” (Honneth 2008, 56): We forget that our knowledge, being and cognition are based on recognition and empathetic engagement. If this knowledge is lost, then others are viewed as things (57). Honneth distinguished three forms of reification: reification in our relationship to others, nature/world, and ourselves. So for him there are intersubjective, objective, and subjective forms of alienation.

Judith Butler argues that whereas Lukács’ approach is subject-oriented, Honneth’s is action-theoretical and interactionist (in: Honneth 2008, 98). Both thinkers would however have “an Arcadian myth” of a “before” (108). She argues that both “love and aggression” would be “coextensive with human being” (109). The problem in this assumption becomes evident, when considering its consequences. If there are two equally important substances of humans – love and aggression –, then they must both equally matter in child development. This assumption implies that parents have to treat their kid both with love and aggression in order that the child develops, which indirectly justifies violence against children. Tomasello in contrast stresses the importance of love, care, and communication as primary and essential in child development. Children cannot develop without love, care, and communication. They however develop even better if they do not experience hate, violence, and isolation. This is just another formulation for saying that love, care, and communication form human and society’s social essence.

#### **4. Towards a Materialist Theory of Morality as Theory of Co-operation and Social Co-Production**

The bottom line of Honneth’s social theory is that humans are social and moral beings and that this essence has ethical implications for what we should consider the good life. The economic, the political, and the intimate are seen as manifestations of human social and moral being. Although Honneth identifies a unifying social principle – morality –, he on the one hand sees the three realms of society as relatively independent and on the other hand reduces them to morality. There is no doubt that sociality is a crucial dimension of society’s materiality: Human beings cannot exist in isolation, but only in social relations. Humans are capable of distinguishing what is good and bad and so make assessments of the qualities of their social and natural environments that guide their actions. Morality is however just one of the features of being human. Another crucial aspect is that humans are self-conscious beings that actively create, re-create and transform the social and natural world. They are producing and working beings.

Georg Lukács has in his *Ontology of Social Being* therefore characterised human activi-

ty as “teleological positing” that results in “the rise of a new objectivity” (Lukács 1978, 3). Human production is teleological because in it a “conscious creator” (human beings) produces with a purpose, orientation and goal (5).

Such goals are not necessarily instrumental and aimed at domination. Also for example peace, love, care and understanding are goals. Human activity presupposes that humans reflect on how, why and what they want to produce in the world. Lukács considers teleological positing (the conscious and active production of changes by realising subjective intentions in the objective world) as a common feature of work and communication, i.e. the economy and culture (for a theoretical discussion of the relevance of Lukács’ notion of teleological positing and his *Ontology of Social Being* for a critical theory of digital media, see Fuchs 2016). There is an “ontological similarity of base and superstructure as they are both based on teleological positings and their causal effects”<sup>5</sup> (Lukács 1986, 424). In the economy, where work creates goods, the intentional goals tend to be much more clearly defined, whereas in culture, where communication influences social behaviour, there is much more scope for what is considered desirable and undesirable, for “reactions to societal matters of fact, situations, tasks, etc.”<sup>6</sup> (Lukács 1986, 417). Lukács says that in the economy, the value of a product depends on whether it is “immediately useful or non-useful, whereas in artistic creation the field and possibilities of value and non-value are extraordinarily widely stretched and hardly determinable in advance”<sup>7</sup> (535).

Conscious and active production is an inherently social activity in society. Lukács’ notion of teleological positing allows overcoming the separation of work and ideas. Teleological positing is a production of physical, social, and informational use-values that satisfy human needs. We can take from Honneth the insight that many social theories agree that there are three realms of society and combine it with Lukács’ insight that production as social process of teleological positing creates the unity of these spheres. Honneth’s moral idealism that sees the importance of sociality can thereby be turned into a materialist ethics and social theory. Humans produce use-values that satisfy human needs in the economy, collective decisions in the political system, and meanings/definitions of the world (including moral judgments and identities) in the cultural system. Human social activities posit use-values, collective decisions, and definitions as the fundamental objects of society’s three realms. These three systems, the economy, politics and culture, are however not independent: Economic activities posit use-values, collective decisions and definitions are however also use-values satisfying the needs of organisation and understanding.

Political and cultural production is economic and non-economic at the same time: Both require political and cultural workers that create together with others political and cultural objects. These objects do however not just have an economic role, but as rules and definitions shape society also outside of the economy. Politics and culture

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<sup>5</sup> Translation from German: „ontologischen Gleichartigkeit von Basis und Überbau, daß sie nämlich beide auf teleologischen Setzungen und deren kausalen Folgen beruhen“.

<sup>6</sup> Translation from German: „Spielraum gewünschter (oder unerwünschter) Reaktionen auf gesellschaftliche Tatbestände, Situationen, Aufgaben etc.“

<sup>7</sup> Translation from German: „daß auf je einer konkreten Produktionsstufe der Wert des Produkts der Arbeit sich scharf danach scheidet, ob es unmittelbar brauchbar oder unbrauchbar ist, während im künstlerischen Schaffen das Feld, die Möglichkeit von Wert oder Unwert außerordentlich weit gestreckt, im voraus kaum bestimmbar ist“.

have an economic foundation and emergent, non-economic qualities (Fuchs 2015, chapters 2+3).

What are the implications of this approach for moral theory? How can we ground ethics in such a materialist and dialectical theory of society? Hegel argues that the world is often not what it appears to be, but that its truth lies hidden behind immediate existence. The essence is a “background” that “constitutes the truth of being” (Hegel 1812/1833, 337). For Hegel, not everything that exists is actual. Actuality is rather an existence that corresponds to its essence, the truth of a phenomenon: “Actuality is the unity, become immediate, of essence and existence, or of what is inner and what is outer” (Hegel 1830, §142). In contrast to poststructuralism, Honneth does not give up the notions of essence and alienation, but rather seeks to ground them in society itself as immanent standard of ethical judgement that allows principles that can transcend dominative relations towards a just, good and fair society. He finds this immanent essence of society in the social recognition that all humans already as children experience in their socialisation. For him, love, rights and solidarity are the basic forms of recognition that as a unity forms moral human essence. Reification means social relations that forget the need for recognition and thereby humiliate and disrespect others.

The missing link in Honneth’s theory is social production. Humans not just mutually recognise themselves in order to exist, they together produce the social world in processes of co-operation. No individual and no society can exist and survive without a basic level of co-operation, i.e. the solidary working together of humans in order to achieve certain goals. A club of egoistic individuals that only compete and do not aim to collaborate will sooner or later end up in constant warfare, violence, and hatred. It will not be socially sustainable, but rather destroy itself. This thought experiment shows that social co-production of the world is society’s essence. If we apply Hegel’s dialectical logic of essence and existence as moral principle, then this means that co-operation as the principle of social co-production of society is society’s essence. In relations of domination and exploitation, humans encounter each other negatively so that one person or group tries to benefit at the expense of others. The result is that certain humans are reified: They are reduced to the status of instruments and things that serve particularistic interests.

Axel Honneth shows the importance of the logic of essence and of the social as the essence of society and humans. Morally recognising each other is however just one form of co-producing the world. In processes of communication, humans can encounter each other and co-produce joint understandings of the world. Recognition is the cultural process of co-producing the world. Humans however also need to engage in collaborative work that creates use-values in the economy and in political debates and governance that creates collective decisions in the political system. If social systems take on a co-operative character at a whole and eliminate domination, then they correspond to their essence. This essence is morally grounded within society itself. It is an immanent standard of morality. A true economy is therefore commonly owned and controlled, a true political system commonly governed, and a true cultural system one that fosters mutual understanding and recognition. The ethical implication is that capitalism, dictatorships, and fundamentalisms are false forms of economic, political and cultural interaction.

Reification is the process, in which classes and elites separate humans and society from their essence, it brings “the essence of man into conflict with his existence, only when man’s nature is subjugated, deformed and crippled can we speak of an objec-

tive societal condition of alienation” (Lukács 1971, xxiv). Whereas reification is the process that implements domination, alienation is the condition that results from reification. If humans appropriate their own essence in social struggles, then they do not return to a historical origin that once existence and was lost, but they struggle for social conditions that enable a humane existence and correspond to the immanent cooperative standards of sociality itself. Social struggles in class societies are struggles with potential results that lie on a spectrum between alienated and appropriated social conditions.

<b>FORMS OF ALIENATION/ REIFICATION</b>	<b>Subject (experiences, emotions, attitudes)</b>	<b>Intersubjectivity (social agency and interaction)</b>	<b>Object (structures, products)</b>	<b>Struggles</b>
<i>Economic reification</i>	<i>Work dissatisfaction</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of labour-power: exploitation</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of the means of production and output: propertylessness</i>	<i>Individual: anti-capitalism Social: Unionisation, class struggles</i>
<i>Political reification</i>	<i>Political dissatisfaction</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of political power: disempowerment and exclusion</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of decisions: centralisation of power</i>	<i>Individual: politicisation Social: social movements, protests, parties, revolutions</i>
<i>Cultural reification</i>	<i>Cultural discontent</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of influential communication: insignificance of voice, disrespect, malrecognition</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of public ideas, meanings and values: centralisation of information</i>	<i>Individual: cultural literacy Social: struggles for recognition</i>

Table 1: Forms of reification/alienation in society’s three realms

<b>FORMS OF APPROPRIATION</b>	<b>Subject (experiences, emotions, attitudes)</b>	<b>Intersubjectivity (social agency and interaction)</b>	<b>Object (structures, products)</b>	<b>Struggles</b>
<i>Economic appropriation</i>	<i>Self-realisation</i>	<i>Self-control of labour-power: self-management</i>	<i>Self-control of means of production and output: democratic socialism</i>	<i>Individual: anti-capitalism Social: Unionisation</i>
<i>Political appropriation</i>	<i>Active citizens</i>	<i>Self-control of power: people power</i>	<i>Self-control of decisions: participatory democracy</i>	<i>Individual: politicisation Social: social movements, protests, parties, revolutions</i>
<i>Cultural appropriation</i>	<i>General intellectuals</i>	<i>Self-control of influential communication: involvement, mutual understanding, respect and recognition</i>	<i>Self-control of public ideas and values: cultural public sphere</i>	<i>Individual: cultural literacy Social: struggles for recognition</i>

Table 2: Forms of appropriation in society’s three realms

Tables 1 and 2 give an overview of processes of reification and appropriation in society's three realms. The general distinction is the one between social systems that are alienated and that are under common control. Alienation means that humans do not control basic social structures in a way that advances the common good so that a particular class or elite is in control and takes advantage of others.

Honneth (2008) distinguished three forms of reification: reification in our relationship to others, the world, and ourselves. So for him there are intersubjective, objective and subjective forms of alienation. This distinction points towards the dialectic of subject and object in social processes: human subjects have their own identities and personalities, based on which they encounter each other in the social world and in processes of social activity create, reproduce and transform the objective world. They co-produce the social world in processes of teleological co-positing. Human subjects interact in the social world and thereby co-produce objects.

Exploitation is alienation and reification's economic form, political domination its political form, and the two forms of cultural domination (cultural imperialism: unity without diversity, cultural fragmentation: diversity without unity) constitute cultural alienation. A commons-based economy, participatory democracy and cultural understanding (unity in diversity) are true social forms, in which social existence corresponds to its essence and humans have appropriated this essence.

In an alienated economic system, humans are exploited and produce property that is owned by a dominant class. In a self-managed economy, humans co-produce, co-own and co-control property. In an alienated political system, an elite centralises political decision-making power and excludes citizens. In an appropriated political system, people have the power and co-decide in a system of participatory democracy, which constitutes political rights. In an alienated cultural system, an elite centralises meaning making so that others' identities and moral values are disregarded and disrespected. In an appropriated cultural system, humans co-produce meanings of the world, mutually understand and morally recognise each other so that a unity in diversity of lifestyles and moral values exists.

At the level of subjectivity, humans experience the world through their behaviours and emotionally interpret it. Humans can feel alienated or non-alienated in an objectively alienated or non-alienated world. Objective and intersubjective alienation can, but does not necessarily have to result in emotionally experienced alienation. Slave workers, citizens in a dictatorship and people in a theocracy do not necessarily hate the slave masters, dictators, and theocrats. Physical, structural and ideological violence can make them accept domination, which can also result in moral accommodation with their situation so that they cannot imagine a different world and feel emotionally at ease with the way things are. Objective alienation however nurtures potentials for emotional alienation, i.e. emotional experiences of dissatisfying labour, political dissatisfaction and cultural discontent.

Such subjective alienation may just express itself as apathy or disinterestedness. It can however especially in situations of crisis also nurture potentials for politicisation and political engagement. Reflection, social ruptures and movements can trigger first individual empowerment (anti-capitalism, politicisation, cultural literacy) that at a social level can as aggregated and networked social phenomenon result in class struggles, political protests and struggles for recognition. There is no guarantee that such struggles are successful. If they however are successful, then non-alienated so-

cial conditions can be the result. There can however also be counter-struggles so that non-alienated conditions can turn into alienated ones.

Non-alienated subjectivity means self-realising activity, active citizenship and general intellectuality. General intellect not just means a high level of general education and intellectual engagement, but also moral intelligibility so that humans provide recognition of each other. Humans can feel non-alienated in alienated social conditions: An employee may for example love his/her job and feel it's a form of self-realisation and therefore accept that the company owners get richer and richer from the many hours of unpaid overtime in the company and the long working hours that damage social life outside professional life. In such a situation, economic self-realisation can come along with social alienation in the realm of culture and everyday life that expresses itself for example in a lack of friendships, family life, sexual satisfaction, etc.

Another example is that active citizens can feel happy in fostering a racist right-wing extremist political agenda that aims to harm immigrants. They feel emotionally non-alienated at the political level, but advance an alienated political system. Honneth argues in this context that social recognition can "just as well be sought in small militaristic groups, whose code of honor is dominated by the practice of violence, as it can be in the public arenas of a democratic society" (Honneth 2007a, 77). Struggles for appropriated social systems must take into account the fact that humans are only truly at home in society when they feel individually satisfied and exist under intersubjective and objective conditions that are commonly controlled and benefit all. This can require disrespect for structures and practices that foster disrespect as well as respect for those that disrespect disrespect.

Given these basic reflections on alienation, the question arises how this concepts matters for the critical analysis of mediated communication.

## 5. The Media, Alienation and Morality

I want to discuss the question how alienation relates to the media with a specific example, namely Facebook. Facebook is the world's most widely used social networking site and Internet platform. It enables registered users to share and comment on content publicly and in their contact network. It is an expression of the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private, the home and the workplace, work time and leisure time, labour and leisure, production and consumption (Fuchs 2015, chapter 8): Facebook brings together activities and contacts that belong to different social realms on the same profiles, which enables users to observe people not just in the social roles they are familiar with, but also other ones. It is however mistaken to see Facebook as a communications company: It does not sell communication or access to communication, but user data and targeted ad space. Facebook is one of the world's largest advertising agencies.

Some authors have discussed what alienation means in the world of Facebook. Mark Andrejevic (2012) argues that corporate social media only promise to overcome alienation, but in reality constitute digital alienation, a "form of the enclosure of the digital commons" (84). "Users have little choice over whether this [surveillance] data is generated and little say in how it is used" (85). Such "external, storable, and sortable collection of data about" users' "social lives" is "separated from us and stored in servers owned and controlled by, for example, Facebook" (2011, 88). "The result of the form of separation facilitated by Facebook is [...] the alienability of the product of

their online social activity: the fact that the fruits of this activity can become a resource whose uses range far beyond their control” (88). “The data shadow is a figure of the alienated self” (Andrejevic 2014, 182) and results in “algorithmic alienation” (189) that determines life chances based on data mining, big data analysis and statistical correlations.

Eran Fisher (2012) in contrast to Mark Andrejevic argues that alienation “signals an existential state of not being in control over something (the labour process, the product, etc.)” (173). Less “alienation refers to a greater possibility to express oneself, to control one’s production process, to objectify one’s essence and connect and communicate with others. Thus, for example, working on one’s Facebook page can be thought of as less alienating than working watching a television program” (173). “The two processes that SNS [social networking sites] facilitate – the exacerbation of exploitation and the mitigation of alienation – are not simply co-present but are dialectically linked. SNS establish new relations of production that are based on a dialectical link between exploitation and alienation: in order to be de-alienated, users must communicate and socialize: they must establish social networks, share information, talk to their friends and read their posts, follow and be followed. By thus doing they also exacerbate their exploitation” (179).

<b>FORMS OF ALIENATION / REIFICATION</b>	<b>Subjects’ attitudes and feelings</b>		<b>Intersubjectivity (social agency &amp; interaction)</b>	<b>Object (structures, products)</b>
<i>Economic reification</i>	<i>Feeling of alienation: “Facebook exploits me!”</i>	<i>Feeling of non-alienation: “Facebook is fun and voluntary and gives me social advantages. Therefore I do not feel exploited”.</i>	<i>Exploitation of users’ digital labour; users’ non-ownership of platforms</i>	<i>Users’ lack of control over the use of personal data</i>
<i>Political reification</i>	<i>Feeling of alienation: “The surveillance-industrial complex that Facebook is part of threatens freedom!”</i>	<i>Feeling of non-alienation: “For greater security, we have to give up some privacy. I therefore don’t mind state surveillance of social media”.</i>	<i>Political control and surveillance of citizens’ communication</i>	<i>Citizens’ lack of control over how political institutions regulate the Internet; establishment of a surveillance-industrial complex</i>
<i>Cultural reification</i>	<i>Feeling of alienation: “Facebook is mindless babble, narcissistic self-presentation and showing off!”</i>	<i>Feeling of non-alienation: “Facebook is a great form of socialising with other people!”</i>	<i>Asymmetric visibility of users that favours celebrities, corporations and powerful institutions</i>	<i>Asymmetric influence on public meaning making; centralised online attention structures and online visibility</i>

Table 3: 9 dimensions of alienation on Facebook

Andrejevic and Fisher both take a critical theory perspective and agree that Facebook usage means exploitation of users’ digital labour (see also: Fuchs 2014a, 2014b, 2015). They however have different understandings of alienation and therefore conceive Facebook either as alienated (Andrejevic) or de-alienated (Fisher). My argument is that these claims are not mutually exclusive in a dialectical concept of alienation. Honneth’s distinction between subjective, intersubjective, and objective alienation helps us to map these differences: Andrejevic refers to the objective dimension (data

as objects), whereas Fisher refers to subjective experiences. Table 3 outlines 9 dimensions of alienation on Facebook.

On an intersubjective and objective level, alienation on Facebook means on the economic level the exploitation of users' digital labour that generates a data commodity and thereby value and the loss of control over how their data is used. On the political level, objective and intersubjective alienation refers to the existence of a surveillance-industrial complex, in which Facebook and other communications companies collaborate, as Edward Snowden has shown, with state institutions such as the police and secret services in order to make a large amount of online communications visible to the state, which threatens liberal freedoms and shatters liberalism's promises. On the cultural level, objective and intersubjective alienation means that attention and online visibility that enable meaning-making are asymmetrically distributed so that everyday users are at a disadvantage and celebrities and powerful organisations at an advantage.

Corporate social media have a contradictory character: They enable users to easier stay and get in touch with others at the micro-level of everyday life, which enhances the quality of their lives, but at the same time this advantage comes at the price of digital economic, political and cultural alienation and reified data that serve purposes that allow powerful organisations to exploit, control and exclude the large mass of users. Given that these forms of domination are data-mediated, they tend not to be immediately visible and experienceable by the users. You do not feel and see that your data is a commodity, that the state stores and accesses citizens' communications, and how many people talk about what you have posted on Facebook or about what the marketing teams of Shakira or Eminem, who have pages that are among the most "liked" ones in the world, have published.

The subjective level of alienation refers to the experiences and attitudes of users, i.e. if they feel alienated when using Facebook. Attitudes can in this respect be alienated, non-alienated, or a combination of both. Table 3 indicates prototypical attitudes. Alienated and non-alienated subjectivity do in respect to Facebook not necessarily exclude each other: Users can think that social media sociality as such is advantageous, but that such platforms are problematic if they foster exploitation, surveillance, control and exclusion. Such an attitude implies on the level of political organisation the demand for an alternative form of design and organisation.

The political problem is that it is easier to perceive Facebook as non-alienated than a nuclear power plant that pollutes a river or lake. You can easier use and enjoy Facebook, even when it exploits and monitors you, but you cannot swim in a nuclear contaminated lake or drink its water without seriously threatening your life. The damages caused by digital alienation are more indirect, mediated, long-term, and invisible. This does however not imply that they are unproblematic, but rather that they are more difficult to challenge and contest in social struggles. Users who argue that Facebook is great because it is social and that they therefore do not feel or do not mind digital exploitation, surveillance and exclusion express a partial truth, namely that social media can pose social advantages. At the same time their consciousness is reified because they cannot see beyond immediacy. They only think about immediate individual advantages and not about the disadvantages that some users may unjustly suffer for example from being excluded from obtaining a mortgage, losing their jobs or being suspected of terrorism because credit scoring companies, employers or state institutions mine their personal data from social media or analyse it with predictive algorithms.

Digital fetishism means that the immediacy of online sociality enabled by digital media veils the realities of digital exploitation, control, surveillance, and exclusion that are more abstract. Digital media's concrete social and communicative use-value obscures the more abstract forms of digital commodities and power that underpin usage.

## 6. Conclusion

Axel Honneth has reformulated Georg Lukács' theory of reification and alienation as a critical theory of recognition. Recognition is for him the social essence of society that grounds a moral theory that allows standards for criticising disrespect for care, rights and solidarity. The advantage of this theory is that it is based on the distinction of three subdomains of society, reformulates Hegel's dialectic of essence of existence in moral theory and thereby transcends postmodern moral relativism, stresses the importance of sociality as moral essence, and distinguishes between alienation's subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions.

Honneth's moral monism however also makes recognition and morality the foundation of society and thereby ignores the importance of humans' co-production of the social world and the relevance of the economy in society as being simultaneously part and no-part of all social systems. I have reformulated the theoretical concepts of morality and alienation in a way that takes social co-production and co-operation to be the essence of humans and society. Based on this foundation, I have identified nine dimensions of alienation along the distinction between economy, politics, and culture on one axis and the subject, intersubjective communication and the object on another axis. Social struggles can challenge alienation and result in humans' appropriation and control of the conditions that shape their lives.

The example of Facebook has shown that alienation has not ceased to exist in the world of digital media, but has become more complex. The exploitation of digital labour, the surveillance-industrial complex and centralised online visibility constitute forms of digital alienation. The contradictory and mediated character of the online world makes it sometimes difficult for users to perceive and describe objectively alienated digital conditions as such and to mistake them for freedom. Digital fetishism and digital alienation can only be overcome by social struggles that aim at appropriating the Internet and put it into the control of users. Digital media that are alternatively designed, shaped and used can advance the commons, participatory democracy, mutual understanding and respect. Attaining such a world requires not just alternative projects and social movements, but also political parties, programmes and demands that make media reforms in order to enable and provide space, time and resources for alternatives.

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