How is Society Possible? Towards a Metacritique of Reification[1]

by Frédéric Vandenberghe

"Without common ideas, there's no common action, and in the absence of common action, men still do exist but not a social body" (Tocqueville, 1835/1961: II, 20).

When critical theorists jump on the post-modern bandwagon and post-modernists themselves claim to be contributing to the development of critical theory, the time has come to critically reconsider the notion of critique in order to reclaim it from those who despair of reason or, worse, despise it. Leaving aside common sense notions of critique, to which a good deal of fashionable waffle about 'deconstruction' and 'social constructivism' can be reduced (Hacking, 1999), one can essentially distinguish three notions of critique in the history of ideas: the first of those goes back to Kant and has to do with an analysis of the conditions of possibility of knowledge; the second notion of critique is to be found in Hegelian or Marxist theories and is linked to what Habermas used to call the 'emancipatory interest of knowledge' in the alleviation of unnecessary suffering; finally, the third notion of critique is of Nietzschean provenance and has been popularised by Foucaldians and other historians of the present under the name of 'genealogical critique': systematically converting apparent necessity into contingency, it aims to break open the history of the present in order to show that it could be different.

In this article, which constitutes only a preamble to the further development of a critical theory of society that aims to combine the Kantian and the Marxist notions of critique, I won't say anything at all about genealogy. Although I will link the emergence of

sociology as a relatively independent discipline in the nineteenth century to the emergence of society as a distinct entity, my approach is anything but genealogical: I am not concerned with the conditions of impossibility of sociological knowledge, but with the metatheoretical foundations of a critical sociology of action. The general thesis I would like to defend is that a critical sociology cannot remain content with a mere denunciation of systemic forms of domination but also has to indicate possibilities of transformative action and emancipation. This presupposes, however, that action is not reduced to its strategic dimension but that its normative and symbolic dimensions are fully taken into account as well. Without those, society can only take on the form of an alienating social order that imposes its constraints on the individuals from without and forces them into adaptative and calculative behaviour. Taking the history of the theories of reification in German sociology, from Hegel to Habermas, as a test case I will submit the critical theory of the Frankfurt School to a metatheoretical critique of its basic assumptions and end up with sketching out the contours of a multidimensional sociology of action that is able to criticise the reification of social structures and the alienation of man without totalising it and, thus, without mimetically reifying it for a second time.

1) The Emergence of Society and the Sociogenesis of Sociology

Notwithstanding the perfectly legitimate inclination of historians of ideas to trace back the origins of sociology as far as possible and to locate them in Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Nichomachian Ethics* (Gouldner, 1967), it is now more or less generally accepted by most contemporary social theorists of any stature that sociology emerged as a relatively autonomous discipline, differentiated from economics and politics, in the nineteenth century (see, for instance, Nisbet (1966), Luhmann (1971), Touraine (1974), Bauman (1976) and Elias (1984)). Vaguely defined at first as the science of society, sociology is born at the same time as modernity, in the wake of the industrial and the French revolutions. Those

revolutions are linked to the discovery of the principle of historicity and the idea that society is not an eternal totality, metasocially guaranteed by God or the Prince, but a human, socio-historical institution, contingent and yet relatively autonomous, following its own rules and perhaps even capable of imposing its constraints on its denizens against their will. Indeed, the discovery of the principle of historicity seems inseparable form the simultaneous discovery of the principles of the contingency and the necessity of the social: that humans have the capacity to make history and that history nevertheless necessarily goes its own way, either because humans do not control society or because society controls them, imposing its constraints from the outside – that society is the "result of human action, but not a human project" (Ferguson), this is the founding experience of sociology.

Drawing on the work of Jean-Pierre Dupuy (1992a: 32; 1992b: 247), we could say that the stake and the task of sociology is to understand the link between two autonomies, namely between the autonomy of the subjects and the autonomy of the object. Understanding this link brings us back to the classical problem of the social order: How to construct a social order, or a social body, with individuals that are separated from each other, independent and autonomous, without a common relation to each other? My thesis here is that the autonomy of the individual is conceptually linked to the autonomy of the social, or, in other words, that individualism and sociologism are two faces of the same phenomenon.

Although I'm inspired by Durkheim's, Parsons's, Habermas's and Alexander's successive attempts to develop the conceptual foundations of sociology, I will not directly refer to their metatheoretical work to make this claim hard, but I will rather draw on contemporary French political philosophy and more particularly on the work of the late Louis Dumont (1966, 1977, 1985) and of Marcel Gauchet (1979, 1980, 1985). Dumont's anthropology is a comparative anthropology of values. To the Weberian question: How come that it is only in the West that something exceptional has happened in modern history?, the

specialist of the Indian caste system gives a Tocquevillian answer: It is the democratic ideology of egalitarian individualism, the so-called "equality of conditions" (Tocqueville, 1835/1961, I: introduction) that has broken with the holism of all traditional societies that has 'switched the tracks of history' and make it run in the direction of modernity. Instead of privileging society over the individual, as is invariably the case in traditional societies, modern societies valorise the independent and autonomous individual over society and try to deduce the social cohesion from atomised individuals.

For an anthropologist like Dumont, a society is by definition always hierarchical and holistic. Even if it ideologically negates and denies the holistic principles, those still remain active in practice and continue to fashion society. On this point, Dumont seems in agreement with Pascal, Durkheim and Parsons: the belonging to a community and the sharing of its basic values is what makes society possible.[2] Modern societies seem to have repressed this basic sociological principle. Entrenching the ontological primacy of the individual over and against society, they have thus substituted an "overindividualised" to an "oversocialised" conception of man (Wrong, 1994: 128). Once the social qualities have been subtracted from the individuals, it is no longer clear, however, how one can construct a society from a bunch of atomised individuals. Hence the problem of social order.

The reconstruction of a social order on the basis of separated individuals has taken two main forms in modern political thought: one that insists on the productive function of the state and another one that stresses the integrative function of the market (Halévy, 1901/95, Parsons, 1937/68, Dumont, 1977). In the first tradition, we find Hobbes and the idea that the violence of the "state of nature" can only be overcome by means of a social contract in which each alienates his or her natural right to pursue one's own interests, submitting thus oneself to the absolute and despotic power of the Leviathan. Given that individuals cannot constitute a stable social order by themselves, the solution to the social problem of order is sought in

the despotic imposition of a constraining order from without on the individuals. In the second tradition, we find Mandeville and Adam Smith's faith in the integrative function of the free market. In this economic perspective, the public interest seems to be best served if each is allowed to freely pursue his or her own private interests, without having to think or care about others. Eventually, thanks to the intervention of a "hidden hand", the individual interests will spontaneously be co-ordinated with the private interests of each.

In his critique of commodity fetishism, Marx (1868/1972) has convincingly shown, however, that the integration by the market is only an economic variant of Hobbes's Leviathan – a "Leviathan in sheep's clothes" (Jameson, 1991: 273). The political constraints of the state have merely been replaced by the economic constraints of the pseudo-natural laws of the market. The connection between people is not established with consciousness and will but imposed from without by the connection between things (the "cash nexus"). Marx protests and sees in this kind of systemic integration by the market the mark of an ontological degradation of society from a moral "fact of consciousness" to a physical "fact of nature".

I will maintain this Marxist reading but in order to elucidate the specificity of sociology, I will add another reading which links more closely the discovery of society as "second nature" to the principle of historicity. Here I will follow the brilliant interpretation of the writings of Benjamin Constant by the eminent French political philosopher Marcel Gauchet. In the larger perspective of the empirical philosophy of history that he adopts and that aims to understand the advent of liberal democracy by linking it ultimately back to Christianism (Gauchet, 1985), the market is not seen as an ontological degradation of society but interpreted as the archetype of a new representation of society, an apolitical representation of politics, so to say, which breaks with the artificialism of the contractarian theories and conceives no longer of the social order as an order which has to be constructed and imposed from above, but as an order that emerges spontaneously from below. As a new

representation of the social, the economy constitutes the first moment of the perception of society of the power that keeps it together, independently both of the interventions of the state and the intentions of the individuals. Gauchet's central idea can now be summarised: the emergence of the autonomous individual, untied from the traditional relations of subordination, and the emergence of society as an autonomous and spontaneous order, differentiated from politics, are intrinsically linked: "No individualism without a certain degree of sociologism … without a minimal recognition of the consistency of the social order and an at least tacit account of the autonomous character of its process of creation over and against the consciousness and the will of humans (Gauchet, 1980: 34) [...] The society of the individuals is at the same time the society which conceives itself clearly and globally as historic, i.e. as being run through and produced by one or more processes that are endowed by their own logic and their internal necessity and that have to be understood over and against the meaning which individuals attach to their facts and gestures" (Gauchet, 1979: 460).

To the extent that this recognition of the autonomous existence of society, of the fact that it hangs together by itself, out of reach of humans, creates between them and society a distance which is the condition of possibility of scientific observation, we can indeed agree with Durkheim (1888/1970; 1859/1976) that the emergence of sociology as a relatively autonomous discipline is correlated to the emergence of society as a relatively autonomous formation, produced neither by God or the Prince, nor by the conscious will of man. This is important to me, as it shows that the carving out of the object of knowledge is not just formal or analytical, but is founded in the social reality itself. The object of sociology is not a reified project, as Pels (1998) claims, but it's rather the reverse: the project is grounded in the reified object.

Thanks to Marcel Gauchet, we have been able to link the autonomy of society to the autonomy of sociology. Yet, here we have to part company, if only because the French philosopher does not make a difference between the social and the systemic principle of the self-production of society (Lockwood, 1964) on which Habermas (1981, vol. II) was drawing when, combining insights form Schütz, Parsons and Luhmann, he developed his analytical-empirical distinction between the life-world and the system. Interested above all in the functional differentiation between civil society and the state, Gauchet has somehow degraded sociology to economics, overseeing thus that sociology has constituted itself against economics. Notwithstanding the newly acquired predominance of rational choice theories in sociology, it is clear that from the very beginning sociology has rejected the paradigm of interests and presented a vigorous critique of utilitarianism (Caillé, 1989; see also *Revue du Mauss*). Although sociology accepts the idea of the systemic co-ordination of actions by the market or the administration of the state, it does not stop there, but, rejecting the theoretical, ideological and practical hegemony of utilitarianism, which has now become global (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001), it tables on the fact that beneath of purposively rational action there's also a form of value-rational, symbolic or communicative action that keeps society together. Establishing itself against economics and politics, which remain tied to a strategic conception of action, sociology shows that the co-ordination of action is not only of a systemic nature but also of a properly social nature, thus by showing that the actors themselves constitute the social order from within, by co-ordinating more or less consciously their plans of action.

2) Sociology and the Metatheoretical Space of Possibilities

Social theorists are sometimes accused of being failed philosophers. This accusation is not even wrong, but to get it right, it has to be generalised and applied to all sociologists, without distinction and whatever their obedience is. Every sociologist is in fact a philosopher

who ignores him- or herself. In the same way as there's no history that is not at the same time a philosophy of history (White, 1973: xi), there's no sociology that is not at the same time a metasociology. This is the case, because whether the sociologist is aware of it or not, he or she has always already given an implicit answer to two fundamental philosophical questions. The first question is the ontological question: What is the nature of social reality? What stuff is it made off? The second question is the epistemological question: How can we know the social world? Leaving aside dialectical subterfuges for the moment and simplifying at the extreme, even to the point of making things seem rather trivial, formal and empty, we can say that there are only two possible answers to the first question: Either the 'worldstuff' is of a material nature, or is it made up of ideas. As to the epistemological question, here there are also only two possible answers: The social world can either be explained and understood in holistic terms, or in individualistic ones. Adopting the attitude of the *lector*, typical of the scholastic theorist and the writer of textbooks for second year students, which Bourdieu polemically opposes to the one of the *auctor*, we can write down the answers in a two-dimensional space of possibilities that graphically represents the metatheoretical combinative of sociology, and fill in the spaces with actually existing examples.

	Individualism	Holism
Materialism	A) Behaviourism (e.g. Rational choice)	C) Objective idealism (e.g. Marxism)
Idealism	B) Subjectivism (e.g. Phenomenology)	D) Objective materialism (e.g. Structuralism)

Given that each of the metatheoretical positions represents and realises only a single permutation of the space of metatheoretical possibilities, the latter has to be considered as a conflictual space of tensions, governed by the law of cross-cutting cleavages that underlies the respective lucidity and blindness of each of the spaces (A and B see what C and D cannot see; B and C see what A and D cannot see, etc.) and that explains their theoretical tendency to drift from one position to another (Johnson, Dandeker and Ashworth, 1984).

Inspired by Simmel's more epistemological writings (Vandenberghe, 2001a), I advocate the regulative ideal of methodological pluralism. This position is ecumenical in so far as it invites all the sociologists to collaborate in the never-ending endeavour to present a synthetic and multidimensional vision of the social world. But it is also critical in so far as it formally proscribes the construction of a general social theory based on a single quadrant of the metatheoretical space of possibilities. I will come back to that later when I will present my metacritical reading of the theories of reification and indict them for their reduction of the sociological space to a mere combination of materialism and holism. In order to understand this metatheoretical reduction and to move from this very general characterisation to a more sociological one, it is however necessary to first translate the ontological and the epistemological phraseology in terms of the generative grammar of agency and structure which characterises the language game of sociology.

To do that I will draw on Talcott Parsons's *Structure of Social Action* (1937/68), his first book and probably also his best one. In this 'charter of sociology' (Camic), Parsons has developed an analytical framework thanks to which sociology can overcome the reductionism of the materialists and the epiphenomenalism of the idealists in a multidimensional synthesis which takes both the material structures, that condition action from without, and the symbolic structures, that motivate action from within, into account. The genius of Parsons consists in showing that in social theory everything hinges in the last

instance on the concept of action. If action is too narrowly conceived and reduced to instrumental or strategic action, excluding the values and norms that meaningfully orient action, one falls back in a reified universe in which material structures determine action from without. Conversely, if action is conceived in purely symbolic terms and if the material conditions of action are not taken into account, one ends up picturing the world as an emanation of ideas or values in which action is only determined from within.

The combined errors of idealistic voluntarism and materialist determinism should not hide, however, their respective strengths. If the error of reification consists in the naturalisation of the social realm, forcing it into the mould of the critique of pure reason that imposes the social synthesis from without, the truth of reification is that the social order is not the intentional result of the actors, but a perverse effect of the functional integration of the consequences of their action. Such a form of systemic integration that imposes order from without can only be grasped by an external observer who objectifies the social world as an objective system. Insofar as the social world has become a world-wide system of alienation, imposing its constraints from without, forcing the individuals to act in a strategic way, a reifying perspective on society is not only inevitable but also necessary – if only to enlighten the struggle against the alienating and dehumanising effects of the system and to enable the individuals to actively intervene in society and change it.

In the same way as the error of reification should not detract from an inquiry into social alienation, the error of emanationism should not distract us from the fact that the social world is not only a system but also a life-world in which the actors act symbolically and consciously establish the connection between the souls by drawing on the objective spirit. To see that the social synthesis is established by the actors themselves, we have however to relinquish the 'naturalist attitude', which is not natural, and adopt what Husserl (1952: 173-184) calls the 'personalist attitude', which reveals the world as a spiritual and meaningful

world, spun by the actors themselves and directed by the causality of motivation. In so far as Husserl's causality of motivation corresponds to Kant's causality of freedom, it shows that individuals are motivated to act from within by the meanings they attribute to the elements of the life-world. Herewith we arrive again at the idea of the social synthesis which the actors accomplish themselves.

In the history of sociology, we can distinguish at least 4 different ways and as many traditions to theorise the social synthesis[3]:

(1) The first tradition is cognitivist: from Husserl to Garfinkel, as revisited by Wittgenstein, the interactions are co-ordinated thanks to the semantic constraints that are built into the language games and the logical rules of social life. By means of some kind of a spontaneous "eidetic reduction", the actors gain intuition of the conceptual content of linguistic conventions and this shared intuition is what allows them to act together. This tradition is important, but insofar as it privileges the cognitive dimension of speech acts, it has to be completed by an approach that puts more stress on the normative orientation of the actors.

(2) In the normative tradition, interactions are co-ordinated thanks to the internalisation of norms and values. The Parsonian synthesis of Durkheim's analysis of moral facts with the Freudian analysis of the super-ego into a theory of the institutionalisation of norms is probably the best known example of this tradition. It is only because actors share a good deal of institutionalised norms that incorporated in their roles that the problem of the double contingency of action can be solved and the complementarity of mutual expectations assured. Although this normative tradition has the great merit of having stressed the importance of norms and values, it nevertheless has the drawback of remaining attached to traditional norms and of not having tried to overcome them.

(3) The normative tradition has therefore to be completed by the critical tradition, as represented by the Kantian theory of practical reason, the Meadian conception of the

"generalised other" and Habermas's theory of communicative action exemplify this tradition in which actions are co-ordinated thanks to the intervention of the constraints of reason. The reciprocity of perspectives and the co-ordination of actions is not so much accomplished by the internalisation of traditional norms and values as by a critical and rational discussion of the cognitive, normative and expressive validity-claims. Although the communicative solution to the problem of order synthesises all the preceding perspectives and overcomes their limitations, it nevertheless fails to successfully resolve two important issues: first, instead of inquiring into the pre-linguistic bases of intersubjectivity, it simply takes intersubjectivity as an unassailable given. As a result, the infralinguistic constitution of intersubjectivity and the role of the body thereby is neglected. Second, this approach is just a tiny bit too rationalist and does not successfully take the motivational input of emotions into account.

 (4) In my current research I try to develop a phenomenologically inspired theory of affective action that takes the notions of empathy and sympathy as its Leitmotiv. The intuition that guides such a phenomenology of moral sentiments is that the telos of universal solidarity between humans is already implicitly given in the first appresentation of the other as an animated body. To develop this intuition, I draw on Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity, Max Scheler's phenomenology of values, Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments and Erving Goffman's theory of the interaction order. Given that my excursion into transcendental phenomenology is not finished yet and that at this stage I'm no longer sure that I am not alone in the world, I won't say more about it, but I will rather present an outline of a research project that I finished a couple of years ago and that forms the metatheoretical backbone of my current research.

3. Metacritique of reification

There are essentially four modes of writing and reading the history of sociological thought. Firstly, one can present the thinkers whose writings are part of the sociological canon (e.g. Aron, 1967); secondly, one can try to reconstruct systems, doctrines and schools of thought (e.g. Martindale, 1961); thirdly, inspired by Lovejoy's history of ideas, one can analyse the "unit ideas" of theoretical systems (e.g. Nisbet, 1966), and, lastly, one can study the ideological and philosophical presuppositions that underlie sociological theories (e.g. Alexander, 1982-1983).

In the two volumes of my book *Une Histoire critique de la sociologie allemande* (Vandenberghe, 1997-1998), I have combined those four modes of reading in an attempt to critically reconstruct the history of the unit-idea of reification (*Verdinglichung*) in German sociology, from Karl Marx, Georg Simmel and Max Weber via Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School to Jürgen Habermas. Although my book can be read as a systematic reconstruction of the history of the theories of reification in German sociology, I conceive it in fact as a critical inquiry into the metatheoretical foundations of a critical theory of modernity. Indeed, influenced by a Habermassian reading of Jeffrey Alexander's four volumes on the theoretical logic of sociology (Alexander, 1982-1983), which brilliantly formalises the insights of the early Parsons, I have tried to analyse why most theories of reification end up presenting a one dimensional view of society in which the concept of strategic action trumps all other modes of action.

In the tradition of Western Marxism, reification is meant to refer to the alienating autonomy of social structures. The Hegelo-Fichtean adjective "alienating" points to the fact that reification is not a value-neutral category. It presupposes a certain philosophical anthropology and some normative and ideological premises as well. To show that this is the case, I will take up once again the theme of the autonomy of social structures, but this not so much from an epistemological as from an ideological perspective.

In his inaugural lecture, Durkheim founded sociology on the *sui generis* character of social facts (Durkheim, 1888/1970). And yet, given that he was more concerned with the lack than with the excess of social control (Lukes, 1977: 74-95), he did not develop a theory of reification or a theory of alienation but a theory of anomie, whereas Marx, Simmel and Weber did.[4] What I want to suggest is that it only makes sense to speak of reification if human autonomy, understood in the Kantian sense of *Mündigkeit*, is the central value one adheres to. In other words, the category of reification is not a value neutral category, but a critical one. Paraphrasing Freud's famous statement, one could say that it implies that where the object is, the subject should be. Or, to say the same thing in less obscure terms, the critique of reification is a critique of the alienating autonomisation of social structures. It implies that human beings should not be objects but subjects and that they should master their own creations instead of being mastered by them.

3.1 The Antinomies of Proletarian Thought

In the first volume of my book, I have presented a systematic reconstruction of the whole oeuvre of Karl Marx (ch. 2), Georg Simmel (ch. 3), Max Weber (ch. 4) and Georg Lukács (ch. 5) around the concept and the theory of reification. From this reconstructive perspective, Lukács' classic formulation of the theory of reification, as presented in the central chapter of *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács, 1923/1968) can be appreciated as a masterful but highly problematic synthesis of Hegels theory of positivity, Marx's theories of alienation and commodity fetishism, Simmel's theory of the tragedy of culture and Weber's theory of formal rationalisation.

One of the most remarkable features of Lukács' theory of reification is that he rediscovers the theory of alienation of the young Marx (Marx, 1844/1965), which was unpublished at the time. Leaving aside the influence of Simmel, whose philosophy of life reappears under the thin veneer of Hegelian dialectics, we can say that he does that by means

of a synthesis of Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities and Weber's theory of formal rationalization (Arato and Breines, 1979).

Lukács starts his theory of reification with a generalisation of Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities. The ghostly objectivity that characterises the capitalist economy is the prototype of all other forms of objectivity. Wherever one looks, one sees the same autonomous functioning of systems, the same impersonality, the same objectivity, the same detachment from people. Those systems follow their own laws, or so it seems, as their objectivity disguises that they are nothing else but a crystallisation of the underlying social relationships. That is reification considered from the systemic side. From a more phenomenological perspective, reification involves some kind of generalised self-objectification. Not only do people tend to treat others as objects, but they also consider themselves as commodities. Whatever they conceive of is somehow pre-formed, or better, deformed by a reifying conceptual apparatus.

At this point, Lukács switches back to the shop-floor, and Max Weber's theory of formal rationalisation is brought in. The production line is rationalised, the process of production is "taylorised", and the worker is reduced to a hammer or a pinch, in any case to a simple parameter in the calculations of the managers. Reduced to a mere cog in the machine, he is powerless and the whole thing appears rather meaningless to him. Whereas Weber concluded *The Protestant Ethic* by noting that in capitalism the situation of the monk becomes everybody's fate, Lukács now concludes that the situation of the worker paradigmatically represents the general fate of everyone in capitalism. Thus, he gives a Marxist twist to Weber. But by doing so, he inevitably falls in the Marxist trap. Reducing all forms of reification to their economic determinants, he fails to problematise the reification of the subject vis-à-vis the political system, and as a result, the reformist perspective of a radical democratisation of society disappears out of the window as well. Having reformulated

Hegel's onto-theo-teleological philosophy of history in materialist terms, he falls into the Hegelian trap too, as can be gathered from the fact that from the very beginning reification is conceived as a moment of its *Aufhebung*. At the end, reification is abolished and the Proletariat is enthroned as the identical subject-object of history. The Proletariat, however, is not a subject (Harré, 1979: 139-160; Bourdieu, 1981). It cannot act. Between the worker in Manchester and the one in Montréal there's no empirical relation. The Proletariat is a taxonomic category that has been reified into a concrete subject. It is only a rhetorical category, used by the spokespeople of the working class. With a word, they make things. Or, to paraphrase Wittgenstein: they glide from the substantive to the substance.

So far I have used the concept of reification as shorthand to refer to the alienating autonomisation of social structures. Only at the very end, when I said that Lukács takes his conceptual constructions for reality and criticised him for hypostasising his concepts, I have been hinting at another meaning of the concept of reification, which can be traced back to Nietzsche (Vandenberghe, 2001b). In this second sense, the concept of reification is used to denounce the hypostasis of concepts of the naive conceptual realists who suggest that words actually refer to things and that a signified stands behind the signifier, whereas in fact words only refer to other words, if they refer to anything at all. What Weber denounced under the heading of 'false conceptual realism' (Weber, 1976: 7) is now better known under Whitehead's (1985: 65) denomination of 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'.

In fact, the whole gamut of interactionist, phenomenological and ethnomethodological micro-sociologies, which have arisen as a reaction to the "oversocialized conception of man" that alledgedly characterises Parsons' normative functionalism, can be considered as one big anti-reification lobby. By showing that things - and those things can range from social classes to statistical data - which are supposed to be "out there" and to exist independently of human actions and human descriptions, are in fact

social constructions, the action fractions systematically aim to dereify the social world. In the same way as Nietzsche said that there were no facts, but only interpretations (and today's post-modernists are only too happy to add: "and interpretations of interpretations"), one could say that there are no things but only constructions, no facts but only acts, and conclude in ethnomethodological vein that sociology should concern itself by inquiring into the ways by which people routinely thingify the world as an ongoing accomplishment.

3.2. Dialectics of Reification

There are thus two concepts of reification, a realist one and a nominalist one, which seem to point to different directions. Whereas the concept of reification, as used by the Western Marxists, leads to an objectivist view of society which puts all the emphasis on the alienating objectivity of social structures, the concept of reification, as used in the micro-sociological tradition, leads to a subjectivist view which systematically translates structures into agency.

Now the challenge is, of course, to combine both traditions of thought and to use their concepts of reification in such a way that one can properly conceive of the autonomisation of social structures without committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In other words, the challenge is to combine Durkheim's statement that social facts have to be treated like things with Sartre's statement that things are social facts, or maybe better, social acts.

My way of tackling this problem is dialectical: I use both concepts of reification as methodological tools that allow us to uncover the limits of the respective approaches:
1) The critique of the micro-sociologists points to the limits of a macro-structural approach: social structures do not act, only individuals do act. They are, as Husserl says, motivated to act by social structures, which means that interpretations always mediate between structures and actions. Sociology has thus to take the interpretative dimension very seriously indeed.

ii) The critique of macro-structural sociologists points to the limits of micro-structural approaches: they cannot conceive of the relative autonomy of social structures. Following the critical realist philosophy of science of Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1979), I take this as an injunction that sociology has to be based on solid realist foundations.

Combining critical realism with a hermeneutic phenomenology, I thus arrive at a position that conceives of society as an alienating objective structure that does not determine action, but influences the interpretations of the actors in such a way that their margins of possible action are significantly limited.

Translating the foregoing into more philosophical language, we can say that the dialectical critique of the "paired concepts" of reification points to a critical theory of society, i.e. of a social theory which is critical both in the Kantian and in the Marxist sense of the word: in the Marxist sense because it is animated by the "emancipatory interest" of knowledge and aims to actively contribute to the dissolution of reified social forces (Habermas, 1968b), and in the Kantian sense, in that it is reflexive and inquires into the metatheoretical conditions of its own possibility. Concretely, this means that a critical theory has to be able to conceptualise reification in a realist fashion without however reifying its own categories.

From this metacritical perspective, a critical theory, such as the one of the Frankfurt School, which does not sufficiently control its own presuppositions and totalises the concept of reification to such an extent that it can only point to the structures of domination, and never to the forces of emancipation, is not a critical theory but a one dimensional one. It is only if a social theory is able both to conceptualise domination and emancipation that it can truly be said to be critical. In the last instance, everything hinges on an adequate conceptualisation of the concept of action, because if the concept of action is reduced to its strategic dimension, reification automatically ensues.

3. 3 One-Dimensional Theory

In fact, the whole second volume of my book, in which I submit the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, as developed by Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas, to a metacritical assessment is nothing else but a detailed attempt to show that their theories of reification are induced by a hermetic closure of the space of metatheoretical possibilities. From this metacritical perspective, the critical theory of the one-dimensionality of society can itself be seen and criticised as a one-dimensional theoretical critique of society. Given that it systematically privileges strategic actions, it can only register the omnipresence of domination and reification. The theory of reification of the Frankfurt School is not only self-refuting, as Habermas (1981) has noted, but it is also self-confirming. Built into the premisses, it is no wonder that we also find reification in the conclusion.

Let's now move back from the metatheoretical level to the theoretical one and see how they pushed Lukacs's theory of reification in an ultra-weberian direction. Lukács's theory combines a Weberian-Marxist theory of reification with a Hegelian-Marxist one of class consciousness (Brunkhorst, 1983). The Frankfurt School decomposes this thesis in 2 steps:

1) First step - falsification of the theory of class consciousness. Lukács' thesis of the Proletariat as the identical subject-object of universal history was from the very beginning loaded with metaphysical assumptions that are philosophically dogmatic, epistemologically wrong and politically dangerous. The members of the Frankfurt School drop it. Claiming to have refuted it empirically, they show that the working class is not revolutionary at all. To the contrary, it has only one demand: to be integrated in the system. It is the stronghold of the *status quo*.

2) Second step - corroboration of the theory of reification. Without Proletariat there's no hope. Only the Weberian-Marxist component of Lukács' theory of reification remains. That is the "hard core", to speak like Lakatos, of their research paradigm. From the very beginning, from Horkheimer's first attacks of positivism to Marcuses' critique of political technology and Adorno's infamous analysis of jazz, the theory of reification is apparently verified.

A closer look reveals, however, that this conclusion is metaphysically overdetermined. Reification is no longer conceived as a heuristic device, but as a metaphysical *a priori*. Whatever they look at, gets reified. The possibility of emancipation is *a priori* excluded, refuted, included in the grand theoretical scheme of universal reification.

Reopening the metatheoretical space of possibilities and reformulating the theory of reification in communicative terms, Habermas (1968a/1981) has put the issue of emancipation on the agenda again. By simply distinguishing between work or strategic action and interaction or communicative action and refusing to reduce the latter to the former, he has reopened the metatheoretical space of possibilities of social theory and transformed the issue of reification from a metaphysical into an empirical question. Now that the alienating social forces and the resistance against them can be properly conceptualised at the same time, at least in principle, the problem of reification appears no longer as a metatheoretical problem. It is now conceived above all as a historical problem. Once the world is interpreted in different ways, the point can only be to change it.

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[2] "Everybody tends towards himself. That goes against every order. One has to tend towards the general. And the slope towards oneself is the beginning of every disorder in war, the police, the economy, etc. " (Pascal, 1976: 114).

[3] At least four. Because even if we make abstraction of the work of Honneth on recognition, of Walzer on the different spheres of justice, or of Boltanski and Thevenot for that matter on common sense and the different modalities of critique, all of which can with some fiddling and a bit of good will be fitted in one or more of the four solutions, Latour's brilliant contribution remains as a separate and original solution to the problem of order. On Actor Network Theory and the role of ordinary objects in the gluing together of society, see (Latour 1994).

[4] There's hardly a place for alienation in Durkheim's oeuvre. In *Le suicide,* for instance, the 'fatalist suicide' which is caused by an alienating excess of social control is relegated to the margins and dealt with in a single footnote (cf. Durkheim, 1897/1960: 311, note 1).