Chapter Four

The Concept of Ideology from Lukács to the Frankfurt School

After the First World-War, it was mainly Lukács who disrupted the marginalisation of Marx and Engels’s critical concept of ideology by the ‘official’ party-Marxism of both Western Social Democracy and Leninism. When he published *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, he could not have known of Marx and Engels’s *German Ideology*. Instead, he started from Marx’s critique of commodity- and capital-fetishism and extended it to a comprehensive critique of ‘reification’. Lukács was one of the rare figures that became influential in both ‘Eastern’ Marxism-Leninism and in the strand of ‘Western’ Marxism influenced by the Frankfurt School.

Lukács was a leading representative of the leftist-communist tendency in the Comintern, and was therefore attacked in 1920 by Lenin, who criticised his Marxism for being ‘purely verbal’ and providing ‘no concrete analysis of precise and definite historical situations’.1 Later on, his positions permanently oscillated between what was respectively defined as ‘Marxist-Leninist’ orthodoxy and dissidence. While he was incessantly criticised and condemned by leading party-intellectuals in the GDR,2 the East-German development of epistemology and literary theory owed much to his influence. The boundaries between his

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2. Erich Hahn criticised Lukács for overestimating the subjective and thus being in opposition with materialism (Hahn 1974, p. 130). According to Hahn, Lukács’s theory of class-consciousness was an ‘idealistic approach’ which proclaimed consciousness to be a product of itself (Hahn 1974, pp. 133 et sq.).
ideology-critique and the ‘neutral’ concept of ideology could also be fluid. Some proponents of a ‘Marxist-Leninist’ notion of ideology as a medium of expressing class-interests also integrated Lukács’s concept of reification and used it as part of their critique of ‘bourgeois ideology’.

I will limit myself to reconstructing a general line that led from Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* to the Frankfurt school. However, it will become clear that this line was not linear but disrupted in several respects. Firstly, Horkheimer and Adorno came to the conclusion that after the experience of fascism and the American ‘culture-industry’, they could not continue to use their notion of ideology inspired by Lukács. Secondly, Habermas, after identifying ‘ideology’ with technological progress, abandoned the concept and denounced ideology-critique as an anti-modernist enterprise. I will conclude the chapter by outlining Wolfgang Fritz Haug’s critique of *Commodity Aesthetics*, which also began with Marx’s analysis of the commodity-form, but was, in my estimation, a possible alternative to both the totalising ideology critique of ‘reification’ and the resigned turning away from a critical concept of ideology altogether.

### 4.1. György Lukács: ideology as reification

Even though Lukács sometimes followed the Leninist usage of a ‘neutral’ concept of ideology,³ he developed his ideology-theory mainly from the critical category of the ‘ideological phenomenon of reification’.⁴ He thus sought to explain the defeat of the socialist revolution in the West after the First World-War as a consequence of ‘reification’, by which capitalism appeared to be self-evident for large parts of the working class. Correspondingly, he defined the aim of revolutionary theory as that of ‘destroying the fiction of the immortality of the categories’.⁵

Marx himself only used the term ‘reification’ [*Verdinglichung*] in *Capital* Volume Three and in the context of the ‘trinity-formula’.⁶ But the notion was also implicit in the chapter on commodity-fetishism, where Marx explained the ‘mysterious character’ of the commodity-form by the peculiarity that it ‘reflects the social characteristics of men’s labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves. . . . It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’.⁷ It was from this passage that Lukács conceptualised ‘reification’ as the process by which ‘a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes some-

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3. For example Lukács 1971, p. 70.
4. Lukács 1971, p. 94.