How Reification Works:
A Case Study in Psychological Explanations of Politics

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2015
Abstract:

Reification, the process by which social constructions are experienced as real, provides a valuable case study in psychological explanations of political phenomena. This paper uses advances in social cognition to identify the psychological mechanisms by which reification works and political conceptions of reification to show why and where it does so. What emerges is a complex dance of internal cognitive bias and external ideological deception. Reification is no mere ‘cognitive mistake’ and its illusions cannot be easily overcome. As a critical concept, it serves to reveal the psychological processes that lend ideological cover to oppressive power and illuminates the ways that power subtly infects methods of psychological inquiry. The paper seeks to clarify the psychology of reification and the reification of psychology. Even as its critical blade at last cuts itself, reification shows how political psychology can inform the study of the current developments in quantification, bureaucratisation and digitisation.

[Keywords: Reification; Explanation; Ideology; Cognition; Cognitive Bias & Automation; Quantification; Frankfurt School; Political Psychology; Methodology; Rationalisation.]
Main Text

Faced with global risks, ‘wicked’ social problems and the degradation of social scientific explanation, recent advances in cognitive and neuro science raise expectations that psychology might offer some much-needed political assistance. Without psychology, politics gazes over a single ‘floor’ of human activity – the collective, the institution, the state – and generally avoids the unlit basement of the mind. Yet the ‘cognitive revolution’ in psychology now claims access to the ‘foundation on which all other social sciences stand’ and Michael Turner has described the current status of social scientific explanation (without cognition) as ‘merely functional’ – a placeholder explanation that awaits the identification of actual mechanisms. Where scholars of politics do not stipulate the psychological mechanisms underlying the phenomena they study, Turner argues, their research ‘resembles biology prior to the discovery of genetics’ (Anderson, 1995, p. 3; Turner, 2007, p. 358). Accordingly, the emerging multidiscipline of political psychology uses advances in social, cognitive and neuro science to examine a range of political phenomena and wrestles with the problems generated by the very different methodological cultures of its constituent disciplines. Flushed with its success in the laboratory, in clinical practice and marketing, psychology now stands wide-eyed in the centre of the political room.

This is not the first time. Historically, psychology has variously laid claim to a true science of mind and past preoccupations with craniometry, social Darwinism, behaviourism and disciplinary psychiatry suggest a strong temptation to overextend - and place undue confidence in – what is subsequently revealed to be false knowledge. Whether it be of a particular ‘racial’ cranial shape, a pathologised sexual preference or a cheaper way of performing lobotomies – it was, in effect, made up by psychologists, powerfully articulated, widely believed, empirically verified with methods appropriate to the scientific understanding of the time and used as though it were objective truth. Psychology has, across its long history, produced many figments, imagined them real and wielded them with a terrible impact on people’s lives. Only later are these episodes revealed as bad science, shot through with power, clearly absurd and cruel.

Students of political thought have a concept that captures the human tendency to invent knowledge, to forget that authorship and come to believe it real; to confront the socially constructed as natural; to make a ‘thing’ of an idea - this is reification. Though a crucial part of collective life, reification or ‘thingification’ (Eagleton, p. 3) is a notoriously tricky concept. Its long history includes periods of neglect but also of great critical power. Strongly implicated in our cultural products and self-perceptions, reification plays an important political role in providing ideological support for extant structures of power. It is thus a supremely political phenomenon, yet one requiring psychological explanation.
This paper explores the gains and limits of psychological explanations of political phenomena by asking how reification works. Having first clarified the concept itself, the paper shows, second, that psychology can now identify the cognitive mechanisms by which reification occurs, thus putting explanatory flesh on Marx’s merely functional and ‘placeholder’ assertion (Cohen, Elster) that humans have a strong psychological tendency – a ‘religious reflex’ - to experience the social constructions that surround them as real, (Marx).

Reification is psychological, but it is also political and the paper proceeds to explore its richness as a critical political concept. Marx found evidence of it’s political functions in the ideological maintenance of class privilege and in capitalism’s urge to commodify, quantify and mystify until at last all human value appears as a thing. The deep critiques of capitalism and modernity built upon the concept of reification - from Lukács’s reconstruction of the early Marx on alienation, through the Frankfurt School’s work on ideology critique, to Adorno, Habermas and Honneth on rationalisation - always grasped the duel psychological and political nature of reification, developed methodologies to study it and, indeed, originally drew on Freudian psychoanalysis to found the study of political psychology, (Adorno, Fromm, Reich). The fourth part of the paper sets out psychology’s own struggle with reification, particularly in its methodologies, and considers debates over IQ – this being perhaps the clearest example of reification in social science.

When we combine these psychological and political insights to show how reification works, we gain much, but we also encounter significant problems in translation – particularly in regard to methodology. What emerges is that the psychological tendency to attribute ‘reality’ to our social constructions entails a complex dance of internal cognitive bias and external ideological deception. Reification is partly a cognitive mistake, a psychological blind spot, one that often helps but sometimes hinders. Where it provides ideological cover for oppressive power and is hidden and self-confirming, reification is also political, and so constitutes a slippery customer, one that requires a respectful methodological suspicion. Both psychological and political, it thus makes a valuable case study in political psychological explanation.

The paper concludes by exploring a critical political psychology of reification as it engages with rapid changes in digitation, quantification, bureaucratisation, performance management and our post-private future. Reification here emerges as a powerful yet problematic critical concept, one that can teach hard lessons to both politics and psychology before it disappears (sic). Politics gains much from this encounter, including the cognitive confirmation of reification and the identification of the psychological processes underlying the social construction of reality. At the same time, psychology is encouraged to combine its insights with a deeper suspicion of power and a greater awareness of its own struggles with reification. The paper is about the psychology of reification and the reification of psychology.
The Concept of Reification

The intersubjective and social construction of reality is among the most complex notions in social science, challenging us to account for the process by which the construction comes about (Berger & Luckmann), to distinguish the resulting ontology from the material (Dilthey) and yet to retain an ability to interpret social realities ‘as though they were facts,’ (Durkheim). Social constructions such as money, language and political orders evince just this social authorship, yet are sufficiently objective to confront the individual as external, factual and empirically verifiable (Searle). We are symbolic beings, living among socially constructed entities we experience as real. The tendency is to make images and then, in a process of reification, to imagine them objective and natural. Reification is an ‘ancient prejudice of thought’ and a deep psychological ‘temptation’, (Gould, p. 252).

When harnessed to a project of political domination, however, reification plays an important role in the legitimation of power, as it allows the appeal to a naturel or God-given superiority of elites and supports existing social structures by conceiving of them as ‘exerting an imperious power… so that men and women submit to what are in fact products of their own activity as though they are an alien force,’ (Eagleton, p. 98). Reification confers, on the socially constructed, a ‘phantom objectivity’ (Lukács, p. 83; Bewes, p. 4) with ‘misplaced concreteness’ (Whitehead), one that amounts to a ‘confiscated creation,’ (Honneth, p. 23). This reified world becomes a ‘second nature’ as it is progressively assumed to be objective (Honneth p. 25; Lukács p. 86). Examples of reification abound, but include durable social inequalities in which class, caste, gender and stereotypes appear as natural. Other examples are more complex and contentious, such as prophesies or clinical labels that are self-fulfilling, religious beliefs and consumer driven identities.

Reification is a psychological process that enables symbolic representations to masquerade/become real. Berger and Luckmann describe social construction as having three phases, externalisation, objectification and internalisation (B&L). Once the figment is authored, placed outside and constructed, reification kicks in to render that which has been externalised into a tangible and natural order (Boulting, 2014). Where such creations rear up over us as natural – the market being a good example - it is reification that conceals our authorship and so removes our agency. We here gaze upon a supremely political phenomenon, yet one with a clear psychological element.

The Psychology of Reification

It is one thing to recognise the function of a psychological ‘reflex’ and quite another to explain it. When, in the 1930’s, the Frankfurt School for Social Research first sought to articulate a political psychology and thereby to account for the European fall into Fascism,
they used the most sophisticated psychological tools available, all deriving from Freud. Since then, we have seen the splintering of psychoanalysis and profound critiques of its methodology (Ref); had a behavioural revolution and then debunked it (Ref); a cognitive revolution which rapidly deepened into another in social cognition and the burgeoning of neuro science (Ref). These developments in psychology provide new explanatory tools with which to study political phenomena and enable the identification of the actual psychological mechanisms by which reification occurs. Intriguingly, they confirm, in retrospect, Marx’s assertion of a human tendency to experience their own creations as real.

Perhaps the most common explanations of reification see it as habitual (Schutz; Berger & Luckmann; Bourdieu). The object is externalised, after which repetition of its evident objectivity gradually builds up the assumption of reality. Through a process of ‘sedimentation’ (Ref), we generate a ‘nature’ that becomes ‘common sense’ or a new normal (Gramsc). To habituate is to save time and energy and so to provide the many benefits of ontological stability and naïve realism (Bewes, p. 68). Yet such savings only become available when thinking drops below consciousness to become, indeed, a thoughtless ‘reflex’, a habit that leaves the mind free for other tasks. One cannot, after all, question everything all the time.

Though habit is a powerful element in the process of social construction, it remains ‘merely functional’ as an explanatory concept. It tells us nothing about the way habituation works and does not identify the psychological mechanisms by which it occurs. Reification is more than repetition, but if habit - and its descent below consciousness - plays a part in causing reification, we should acknowledge the clarity and methodological validity with which social cognition illuminates the benefits of automated cognition (Augoustinos & Walker, 1996, p. 67). Automation takes conscious learning beneath consciousness. We learn to drive one clumsy function at a time; never believing all these actions could ever flow naturally. Indeed, those who drive appear almost magical in their abilities. Yet as an experienced driver in a rush, it is quite possible to navigate a complex junction without thinking. Automation beneath awareness provides measurable reductions in cognitive activity. When it comes to how reification works, it may be that we learn and then automate certain ‘selection criteria’, the social origins of which are then forgotten and the products of which subsequently appear in consciousness as common sense (Augoustinos & Walker, 1996, p. 52, 166-168, 178). By the end, we are surprised by the inability of the novice driver and, with our own learning process forgotten, we rather suspect them of malingering.

With the mind constantly processing information, reification becomes a cognitive-saving habit that uses ‘selection criteria’ absorbed from social contexts. These criteria are variously theorised in terms of ‘schema’ or chunks of information that carry with them ways of making meaning in the world (Ref from HPC). Together, these learned criteria and bundles of automated knowledge constitute the social context itself, are internalised and so re-created.
If a pigeon in a box is offered various levers to peck for a food pellet, they will quickly develop and repeat a specific sequence of pecks, despite the release of the food pellet being entirely random and unrelated to their actions (refs). Humans do this too, proudly enacting ornate, imaginative and useless sequences of lever pulls in order to unlock - in triumph - the reward (refs). Our minds seek patterns, schemas, selection criteria and cognitive short cuts. On occasion, we find patterns that are not there. Or, more precisely in the case of reification, we see patterns that express not the external world but our own prior knowledge. Cognitive psychology is particularly helpful in its identification of a mental apparatus that uses prior knowledge to ‘cook’ information coming at us in a ‘raw’, ‘buzzing and blooming confusion’ (James). We are as much facing back into ourselves as we are into the world, and so are prone to solipsistic mistakes. Reification here appears as a certain kind of cognitive error, one that usually assists but occasionally - perhaps particularly in politics - turns into something out there and nasty.

A common false pattern recognition is to mistake correlation for cause (Mill; Gould, p. 239, 242). We see two things together and, encouraged by our internal and structural bias towards pattern recognition, tend to overreach. The study of cognitive bias shows the mind to be an efficient epistemological unit tumbling through the world, processing like crazy and deploying a wide variety of heuristic rules to do so (Kahneman & Tversky). These include confirmation and attributional biases that are, again, usually helpful but sometimes cause errors (Refs). Honneth calls reification a ‘mistake’ (Honneth, p. 26) and Marx described it as ‘false consciousness’ – a charge much debated since (Ref). But the process becomes more visible: reification is an automated processing error. It is a structural cognitive bias towards seeing what is... as natural. What brought about the status quo is gone; its authorship lost. As Adorno said, ‘reification is a forgetting’ (Adorno), and we can now see that this failure of memory is a loss of awareness that functions to support existing social structures.

Psychologists have subsequently asked how cognitive biases evolve, returning again to the conception of a ‘cognitive miser’ (Ref) to show the evident savings in time and energy that arise from structuring our cognitive apparatus in this way. The evolutionary explanation is also used by Social Justification theory (lost), where the endless historical experience of social inequality at last bequeaths a human mind that expects it. We seem to have evolved cognitive mechanisms that encourage us to believe that extant power structures – no matter what their source - are natural, necessary and just.

Our seemingly innate tendency to believe social constructions to be real enables us to interact with others, make relationships, learn, create and care. Freud called this psychological engagement with the world ‘cathexis’, which he defined as the investment of libidinal energy in the external object. As Winnicott put it after watching children play, we just do ‘fall in love with the world’ (Winnicott). We readily reify in-groups into identities, stereotype, hate and emulate out-groups and create and maintain our cultures. Just this capacity to uphold ‘positive illusions’ informs our understanding of an inbuilt ‘affirmative bias’ (Ref) with which we buttress our sense of self, and it may also play a role in generating
the somewhat unrealistic ‘warm glow’ necessary for psychological survival in the human condition (Ref).

Here we see the role played by reification in the construction and maintenance of the self. Berger and Luckmann stressed the moment in the process of social construction in which the externalised - and now objectified - entity is at last brought deep into the self. Internalisation powers our self-perceptions (Honneth p. 23, Morgan, p. 383) and our sense of self is itself a reification. A world of meaning cannot be merely false (Gramsci) and Social Categorisation Theory shows collective identities as reifications carefully internalised (Refs).

Psychology can now identify internal cognitive mechanisms by which reification works. It can test them in experimentation and observe them in social interaction. Automation, pattern imagination, cognitive bias and internalisation are robust explanatory concepts. Together, they constitute a powerful retrospective vindication of early Marxist studies of the ‘religious reflex’. What were then mere stirrings in the black box of the mind are now illuminated by psychology for the improved study of politics.

When we ask psychology to help understand how reification works, we receive an explanation in the form of a series of psychological causal mechanisms. Yet reification also occurs in social constructions, among object domains that shift and buck with power – a far cry from stable biologically evolved psychological structures. Reification is, again, both psychological and political and when we ask political theory how reification works, we get a very different answer and an important set of translation problems. This is why the concept of reification makes so valuable a case study of psychological explanations of politics. For while the psychological examination of reification shows just how much of what takes place in our minds occurs beneath awareness, political analysis reveals how much is put there by power.

**The Politics of Reification**

Psychology identifies our use of cognitive short cuts and their automation beneath awareness. One such short cut, that of reification, is a particularly tempting way to save processing time and energy. This is usually beneficial and we are very good at it. It allows us to name, contemplate and interact with cultural entities and to breeze through our social world without worrying about its ontology. It’s why ventriloquism works, and we reify when we use words like ‘reputation’, ‘character’ and ‘legal’ - and when we speak of ‘psychology’ and ‘politics’ and ‘disciplinary methodologies’. All are ‘nouns that cannot be held,’ (Whitehead) and they add complexity to our social world. Sometimes, however - and particularly when it comes to power and inequality in human relations - the attribution of objectivity to our social constructions has notably deleterious effects, among them, assuming existing social structures and power inequalities to be natural. Those who hold power thereby benefit from subordinate psychological tendencies to reify existing
asymmetrical social relations. Reification plays an important role in providing ideological support for the political status quo and in securing the complicity of subordinates (Eagleton, p. 30). Reification is an element of ideology.

The emerging multidiscipline of political psychology for the most part treats ‘ideology’ as as a set of beliefs about how society should be run, as a totalised world-view or ‘ism’ (see 2014 ISPP conference & Journal contents). This draws on the tradition in political science that sees ideologies like liberalism, conservatism and Marxism as bundles of social and political preferences variously constituted by a particular vision of the future, an identified mode of political change and a designated political agent (Schwarzmantel). Psychological examinations of these world-views reveal shared ‘mental models’, ‘frames’, ‘schema’ and ‘normative registers’ that are variously internalised from social environments. Ideology here is a bottom/up process whereby individuals adopt world-views that, together, constitute political groupings and collective identities. With ideology so conceived, psychology and politics have worked together well, producing valuable studies of preference bundles, demonstrations of ‘motivated cognition’ (Converse) and psychological critiques of conservatism (SDO).

However, this was not the conception of ideology that informed the founding of political psychology (Refs). Members of the Frankfurt School sought explanations for the horrors of wayward authority and blind obedience. For them, following Marx (1978, pp. 154) and Lukács (Ref), ideology was nothing less than a social invasion of the mind; a manipulation of meaning that twisted truth and served the interests of dominant power. What delivered mass compliance and preserved the tyranny that surrounded them was nothing short of ideological deception. This is a decidedly top/down view of ideology, in which powerholders seek to legitimate and preserve their domination, while also concealing their invalid claim to superiority. Ideology here is systematic epistemological distortion; a demon manipulator, a psychic prison. It is a set of false assertions, an elaborate disguise, a lie that - when internalised by the individual - produces not a ‘free vote’ but an obedient and manipulated ‘false consciousness.’ Like fish in water, we are mostly oblivious of the ideology that surrounds us (Eagleton, p. 46), so the ‘final alienation... is not to know we are alienated’ (Eagleton, p. 47).

The many problems with this second view of ideology include its attribution of falsity to the consciousness of another person, the inevitable evocation of a notion of ‘true’ consciousness that went on to haunt its political history, its apparent closing of the psychic prison and its eventual loss of a political project (Refs). Even where Marxism succeeded in revealing ideological distortions as false, the truth did not set us free.

But this notion of ideology - of individual cognition that serves power - was animated by Lukács’s reconstruction of the early Marx. Lukács took the insight that, under capitalist regimes, labour power becomes a commodity, workers are alienated from the product of their work and their creation is returned to them in the crystallised form of the capitalist’s
profit and privilege. Lukács showed that reification was a psychological reflex that actively helped to mystify capitalism’s commodity form (Chapter 1 of Capital). The fetishisation of commodities was, according to Marx, progressively dominant in capitalism’s advance, reducing everything to exchange value and thus ‘throw(ing) a blanket of equivalence over everything’ (Kolakowski, 1978, pp. 334). As Honneth (p. 22) puts it:

As soon as social agents begin to relate to each other primarily via the exchange of equivalent commodities, they will be compelled to place themselves in a reifying relationship to their surroundings.

The reification of the commodity form not only ‘affects relations among men’, as Marx had sought to demonstrate; it also seeps into every crevice of the self and the social world. Lukács saw reification as both psychological and political, but also as rampant and total. He claimed that capitalism systematically reduced human relations to relations between things and thereby renders other people as mere instrumental objects of our own self-interest. In this, Lukács both extends early Marxist insights on alienation and draws on Weber’s thesis on the ‘rationalisation’ of modernity (Economy & Society).

Weber described the steady increase in administration and bureaucracy that greeted modernity, the quantification of social life and the deracination of communities. This process of rationalisation was precisely that – a spreading of calculation, technocratisation and ‘disenchantment’. What Lukács did was to combine the diagnostic concepts of alienation and rationalisation in order to render visible the totally reified society. In such a world, we live among a swirl of figments. We strive for status symbols (consumerism), see others as objects (racism, sexism), kill for a phantom (nationalism) and reify appearances (brand value). Here also we quantify human suffering (welfare) and measure all human activity according to the bottom-line. So too do we pretend, deep in ourselves, to be quantifiable. We aspire to hit targets, to achieve, to appear valuable and - living as we do among social constructions and believing them objectively real – our humanity is reduced to task completion. By a process of reification, this pretence, this world of symbols that we created and that now acts back against us, becomes ‘second nature’. Slipping beneath consciousness, such figments make us different people, atomised, separated and impoverished of human contact, blind to what we have lost and unable to imagine anything other than the status quo. Human authored institutions and social forces then ‘dominate human existence as a quasi-natural force’ (Eagleton, p. 98). As Adorno so helpfully remarked, ‘all reification is a forgetting’ (DofE). It comes back at you, now dressed up as objective.

In Lukács’ hands, our ‘forgetfulness’ means we live in a false world, one hollowed out, alienated and dehumanised by capitalism and characterised by a ‘cold calculating purposefulness’ (Honneth p.17). Such a state of affairs is then seen to require self-realisation, solidarity and political action to overcome. When this political change did not occur, the Frankfurt School tried to say why. Here again, we confront the extraordinary
durability of capitalism’s ideological deceptions. These are illusions that explanation does not dispel. Even when you know the relative refractive index of water and air, you still see the stick in water as bent.

This is because reification is not only a psychological tendency with discernable cognitive mechanisms; it also interacts with a political environment inevitably shot through with power. The illusion lies - not only in the eye of the beholder, but also, in the material structures of the world itself. Reification is no mere cognitive mistake (Honneth, p. 22,25,30; Eagleton, p. 30). The ‘second nature it brings into being is solid, empirically verifiable, independent of belief and it keeps happening. Reification cannot be corrected merely by positive thinking and psychology should never imagine that political phenomena are due, in any simple way, to psychological processes. Instead, we face a bi-directional process in which the distorted perceptions emanating from a power-saturated world ‘fit’ - are taken up; are ‘parasitic’ upon – the cognitive structures of the human mind (Mackintosh). The process mixes the individual cognitive bias to reify with socially constructed ideological deceptions that support dominant interests. Reification as automated cognitive bias here meets incoming ideological deception (HPC p. 70 refs).

**The Reification of Psychology**

We can readily see, and perhaps should expect, that psychology struggles to break out of its individualist paradigm to pay the political dimension - or what Douglas calls ‘the social pole of cognition’ - the attention it deserves (Douglas). Nor should we feign surprise that psychology has not followed advances in politics urging researchers to extend their understanding of ‘the political’ beyond the elite institutions of government to include civil society, social capital, new social movements, identity politics, everyday life, marginalised voices and collective identities. There is, therefore, a certain ‘fifties’ feel to the new discipline of political psychology, where the ‘scope of the political’ seems quaintly restricted, mostly to studying mainstream political institutions and powerholding elites (Refs).

The somewhat arrested political development of psychology is also evident in its conceptions of power. Originally seen as a direct capacity to make someone do things he/she would not otherwise do, power has received considerable clarification in recent political thought and is now regarded as multidimensional, (Bachrach & Baratz; Lukes, Gaventa). Notions of a simple capacity, or force, have thus been augmented by indirect forms (‘faces’) of power; particularly as they shades into influence over what is decided upon and become invisibly woven into the very fabric of what claim to be ‘impartial’ institutions. Foucault adds still greater understanding of the subtleties of power, of its manifestations in the very language we use to describe the world and in its active production of meaning (Foucault). All too often psychology lacks an adequate conception of power, assumptions are made unknowingly, and to paraphrase Heidegger, they at last appear in the method of inquiry itself. Psychology struggles to overcome its methodological individualism, is forever.
tempted to confine itself to psychological processes alone and lacks an appropriate suspicion of possible contamination of its research methods by power. This constrains psychology in its quest to contribute to political understanding and is particularly apparent in the case of reification.

It is, perhaps, the disciplinary urge to explain and cure, and to do so with the surety of science – what Gould calls ‘physics envy,’ (Gould, p. 192, 266) - that has encouraged psychology to regularly and across its history slip into unconscious bias in its experimentation, thereby generating appalling and quite incorrect reifications such as the Intelligence Quotient (IQ). As we have seen, such ‘artefacts of method’ (Gould, p. 185) arise because reification tricks us by making its objects appear real; by being empirically verifiable and by ossifying the status quo (Augoustinos, p. 305) to at last become second nature. Even where psychological research pays explicit attention to hidden power and social inequality, there is little engagement with any critical project and still less to help those who wish to address the global risks and political problems we face today (Exceptions, Lamentations).

Psychology would surely gain from a good dose of the methodological concern so carefully developed in the study of politics (Post, neo, anti). Informed by the blunt horrors of history, destabilised by the linguistic turn in philosophy in the last century and now in possession of fine-grained conceptions of power, political science is studiously unable to offer either normative or practical guidance. Yet their understanding of the many dimensions of power has bequeathed a hard-won ‘ethic of suspicion’. Power, as the Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School knew, can hide in experimental procedure, a lesson learned in the long social scientific study of ideological deception in which common sense ideas and everyday representations are revealed, not as neutral as they claim, but as serving the vested interests of powerholders. This methodological reflexivity tempts political analysis towards relativism, political inaction and overstatement (Barnes & Bloor; Baudrillard), but its critical stance has much to offer the bullish experimental behaviourism that currently dominates psychological explanations of politics.

One particularly revealing occurrence of reification in psychology is Steven Jay Gould’s work on the development of IQ. The Mismeasure of Man describes the research and main characters that contributed to the distortion of experimental findings, false claims, bias, self-interest, bad mathematics, invented research assistants and the fabrication of evidence that resulted in the institutionalisation of a single digit to capture human capacity. One mass-marketed scientific test; one innate and inherited faculty and one scale covering all individuals - often determined education and employment, immigration and reproductive opportunities that dominated people’s entire lives, (Gould, p. 177, 181, 194, 232, 233, 293). IQ was made up by psychologists and reified, rearing up against us like a wrathful God. Such mistakes and such impact surely counsel greater methodological suspicion than is today afforded by simplistic mappings of emotions onto neurological activity, the evolutionary basis for morality and the genetic basis of homosexuality (sic). Such methodological suspicion would encourage greater care and responsibility in advising ‘choice architects’
Using reification as a case study, we have explored the gains and limits of psychological explanations of political phenomena. The psychological and political mix encapsulated by
the concept of reification serves to highlight the bi-directionality of the social world, the dangers of determinism and the domination of method by practical need. Standard social and political theory, at this point, often reaches for the epistemological DNA of the Enlightenment. The mechanistic dualism of Judeo-Christian culture is here seen to leads us, inexorably, to the manipulative control of nature, the rationalisation of society and the commodification of social relations. The suggestion here is that we reify to increase our control.

We should note the functional character of such accounts, as they say nothing about how reification occurs and instead confine themselves to studying its effects. We may indeed gain ontological control because we reify, but while the effects are many, they are decidedly mixed, for among them is the political psychological tendency to ossify oppressive social relations. Something lies behind the function and we have seen that psychology can help identify what that is. If we dig again and ask of a more methodologically transparent political psychology why reification occurs, we can see how often the moment of control is also one of quantification (Gould). To paraphrase Lukács, late capitalism seems to stimulate the reification of our metrics. As we busily calibrate our illusions – building ever more complex markets and bureaucracies – our measurements seem to evoke reality in much the same way as for our primitive ancestors. Accenture, the organisational consultants, claim that ‘whatever can me measured can be managed.’ In this they are correct, for, as we have seen, reifications are empirically verifiable. What they have ‘forgotten’ is that one can measure anything, even if badly. Attempted quantifications of qualitative data and the necessity of interpretation leave much room for both manipulation (e.g. research underlying the use of Electroconvulsive Therapy) and absurdity (e.g. the meaning of life is 42). Measurements are attempts to explain, and so are constructed by, and shot through with, power. They are not, and cannot be, neutral. We see this in structurally impossible attempts to calculate the collective will (Arrow), the measurement of employee wellbeing and the assessment of needs for the disabled.

Gould suggests that this fallacy of reason amounts to the assumption that ‘whatever can be measured must exist’, (Gould p. 311). The automated attribution of objectivity to these measurements derives from the duel nature of quantification: it both attends to, and abstracts away from, its object (Gould, p. 318). This generates a symbolic representation that, even if clumsy and inaccurate, achieves a stability of cognition and is externalised. Now the metric ranks and compares individuals and groups (here covered by another ‘blanket of equivalence’) and helps evaluate and control them.

The simulacra presents as real because the psychological tendency interacts with the simulacra in such a way as to shed the latter’s human invention. Adorno’s ‘reification is a forgetting’ is not quite accurate, as what is actually occurring is the hollowing out and destruction of the old and the instigation of the new. It may have been Adorno’s experiences of loss and social dislocation (Los Angeles in 1941) that caused him to highlight the nostalgic element of reification, the tragedy of extinct ways of life and the inability to recover
innocence. He saw reification as Weberian disenchantment, a ‘vanishing of meaning’ and an exchange of reality for representation. Instead of ‘forgetting’, Morgan - provocatively and more accurately - uses the word ‘obliteration’ (p. 377) to capture the sense of utter loss involved.

Reification is a dangerous partner for quantification, as together they make new worlds of dizzying complexity. Many of us now busy ourselves with complex layers of illusory quantifications and ornate ‘rituals of verification’ (Power, Graeber) and digital Taylorism (ref). It is a short step to indulging a fantasy of control that urges us to measure everything, no matter how badly, and to lose ourselves in a world of reified metrics, algorithms and administrative froth that attends only to appearances and squeezes the humanity out of everything.

In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno attributes capitalism’s reifications to the fundamental requirement of ‘self-preservation’. It is this drive, he suggests, that encourages us to dominate nature, quantify and commodify and thereby to deaden ourselves. Reification here becomes the process by which the Enlightenment’s destruction of myth at last makes capitalism itself a religion (ref). In this sense, Morgan’s word ‘obliteration’ is too strong, as it suggests an outrage that subsequent generations do not experience. Reification is actually a replacement. There may be no conception of loss or regret. When reification makes a second nature and the new normal, we are again immersed in the unnoticed water of ideology.

If the Enlightenment was somehow guilty of ‘epistemological violence’ as it sought to replace superstition with science and more effectively control nature and politics, then the critical theoretic concept of instrumental reason lies at the heart of modern reificatory forms. Political economic processes such as commodification, financialisation, digitisation and workplace bureaucratisation – and new global risks (Beck) – act back upon us as alien forces, taking over our thinking and constructing our identities. Habermas - now the fourth generation of the Frankfurt School (Jay) - in his account of ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’ (TCA Vol. II), sees instrumental reason surging into everyday communicative life, replacing trust and informality, destroying moral resources and distorting human interactions. ‘Internal colonisation’ then follows, with its atomisation of the individual, fragmentation of consciousness and loss of meaning.

We have seen that reification has one eye forever looking over its shoulder. It makes a nostalgic appeal to something other – perhaps the residue of an idealised past, an unreified counterfactual world or a state of innocence (Morgan, p. 379) – and uses this as a standard with which to issue its critiques. Similarly, Habermas’s analysis of reification asserts a primacy (developmental and normative) of communicative reason that is subsequently colonised, a lifeworld that is rationalised and a community to be destroyed. It is this appeal to an ‘essentialist’ point of view that tempts his post structural critics to charge him (often without looking) with ‘epistemological authoritarianism’ (refs). While their suspicion is to be
applauded, we must acknowledge that this counterfactual ‘other’, this utopian element, is both the source of reification’s critical power and of its diagnostic ability to reveal rapidly changing interactions between politics and psychology. In attempting to address the global problems we face, we do need truth where we can get it, but also heuristics, robust concepts and ways to proceed. Our attempts to ‘explain’ reification are, in this sense, wide of the mark. What we really need to know is how to identify it and whether ‘de-reification’ is possible as an orientation to the future.

Recently, the concept of reification has received another provocative iteration, again positing a primacy beyond the status quo. Here, ‘recognition’ or ‘empathetic engagement’ (Honneth, p. 35) is seen as that which reification destroys. Honneth develops Adorno’s epigram about forgetting to show that the human will to win, dominate and thrive has been thoroughly reified by capitalism so that we now we ‘quantify the soul’ (Honneth, p. 277). What peeps out from the heavy machinery of reification is here the human capacity to relate, and to do so in ways that are not merely instrumental and commodified. This may be a particularly valuable contribution, over and above its philosophical defensibility. Students of current social trends in reputational markets (ref), the ‘quantified self’ movement (ref), the politics of attention (ref) and rapid growth of digital surveillance (ref) and ‘audit culture’ (Power), might benefit from the diagnostic acuity afforded by the concept of reification. We still seek a political psychology that can help us understand the durability of inequality and the mystery of obedience. We still need to do something other than merely submit to our reifications as we mobilise – both politically and psychologically - to cope with new forms of rationalisation.

Reification works as a critical concept most valuable to contemplate. It blurs the institutional separation of psychology and politics to reveal new rationalisations and ideological deceptions and it makes visible the power politics of mind. As such, the concept is variously designed, but always as a critique of obedient realism and militant ignorance. Reification contributes to understanding our arrested political development, the growth of worthless administration and the way meaning leaks from the world. It goes some way to showing why we fail to mobilise against the global risks that threaten us and strongly suggests we will have little difficulty in inhabiting the virtual realities to come.

Reification is an automated cognitive bias that ‘fits’ with, and stabilises, the ideological deceptions used to justify power. When fully grasped, we see it everywhere. It drives all human culture and the self and religion and the nation and... at last, the concept comes apart in our hands. Like Heidegger’s ‘Being’ and Foucault’s ‘Power’, reification explains everything and nothing. Yet its ability to reveal is at its sharpest wherever quantification and power interests coalesce - and that happens in a lot of places – perhaps more so with the digital revolution. Psychology can now identify how reification works, but politics has long known why it does so. An appropriate suspicion of power reminds us that this is by no means our first or even second nature. Reification makes thousands for us to struggle over.
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