

# The Current Metamorphosis of Instrumental Rationality

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In the first part, the concept of instrumental reason is defended. Although we live in the age of pluralism, in which a tendency prevails to put all types of rationality on the same plane, there is a rationality that has a unique position: the instrumental rationality. The article then examines Lukács's roots of this concept and its elaboration by Adorno and Horkheimer. The second part refers to the current transformation of instrumental reason that these authors could not register. Instrumental reason changes so that it can connect several seemingly incoherent elements: postmodern non-objectivity, social and ecological normativity, and reified imperatives of capitalism. This formation is here called over-instrumental instrumental reason. In conclusion, the article deals with the question of how its non-instrumental component to exempt from its instrumental ones.

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## 1. Plurality as an Epistemological Obstacle

In our time of multiplicity and plurality, it is not commonplace to say that some kind of rationality enjoys a privileged position and dominates over the others. Habermas has already sought a pluralisation of rationality. There's no one dominating rationality, which Adorno and Horkheimer call instrumental rationality, but several types of rationality. Besides instrumental rationality, it is necessary to speak of communicative rationality, which contains three moments, three other types of rationality associated with the various "validity claims:" truth, rightness, and truthfulness (Habermas 1984, 329).

Adorno and the first generation of critical theory insist that there are different types of rationality (for Adorno, it is nonviolent rationality present in modern art), but one of them sets itself apart being the dominating one. Opponents of this view often argue that the concept is flawed, because it prefers explanatory monism to pluralism. One type of rationality gets priority over the others in the interpretation of social reality, and it is considered to be a manifestation of reductionism which converts plurality of rationality to the only one instance.

Password of plurality can manifest itself as a certain epistemological obstacle (a term coined by Gaston Bachelard), which prevents knowledge process from getting into a state where it is able to conceive an object without projecting in it some prejudices or schemes of perception taken over from the immediately given world (Bachelard 1999, 23). Plurality acts as an epistemological obstacle by multiplying our knowledge object in advance so that we always arrive at the fact that there is not only one instance, but still a few instances. It could be described as a priori pluralism. If we proclaim that there is one dominating rationality (instrumental), one dominating power (the one that is linked to the capital), one dominating power (e.g., "libido" for individuals),

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then we can hear an inner voice: It can't be truth! Might you be a reductionist, who transfers the multiplicity of phenomena to any central category? Knowledge finding out that there is only one instance, albeit scattered and inconsistent in its effects, is de facto precluded. And it is not precluded with respect to the knowledge object, but with regard to the explanatory principle of plurality, which has priority to the very knowledge of object. So some kind of knowledge is made impossible or suppressed in advance even though it could capture the character of object.

As soon as, however, we realize this obstacle, it can lead us to a different epistemological position, in which we admit the possibility that a particular instance plays a dominating role. The concept of instrumental rationality, as interpreted by the first generation of critical theory, as well as other "reductionist" concepts created by authors such as Marx or Freud, can be understood differently from usually today. If we attempt to get over the notion of plurality as epistemological obstacle, we may ask to what extent these "reductionist" terms are valid even in our time of plurality.

## 2. Lukácsian Roots of Instrumental Reason

Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of instrumental reason has one key inspiration: Lukács's book *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>1</sup> Which points of it influenced the elaboration of Horkheimer's and Adorno's instrumental reason?

Lukács writes about modern capitalism, in which "commodity intercourse" affects on the life of the whole society. Commodity intercourse is a basic form of social "metabolism." Relationships between people thus acquire the reified character: The individual relates to others so that this relationship takes the form of the relationship between commodities. We can object that it may be right between seller and buyer, but does it generally hold for all spheres of human activity? Lukács thinks it so that the reified relationship touches human consciousness and moulds it. The commodity is characterized by the fact that it is exchangeable and is tied with the "calculability." These two features then belong to the reified form of consciousness as well. Why has this form of consciousness become universal? This is because it's not about only the production process itself in modern capitalism, the accumulation, or the immediate exploitation, but also about the expansion of the "principle of rationalization oriented by calculability" (Lukács 1968, 262). Each factor entering the production process is increasingly subjected to calculation which decomposes it into the components and cancels its "organic and irrational unity."

There are various systems of calculability that attach to different aspects of production. They differ in content or focus and seem to be random to each other, but their common feature uniting them is calculability. These systems of calculability begin to appear as independent and autonomous, but they have something in common: It is a form, by which they approach things and people. A "disruption" of things occurs which is caused by the fact that their individual aspects belong to different systems, and this leads to "the disruption of human subject." Man no longer appears as the subject or bearer of the work process, as a unique set of certain properties and activities, but as a set of elements in different systems of calculability. This rationalization process is independent of his consciousness and will, and transforms his immediate relationship to the world around him (Umwelt). By this mechanism, his concrete being (Dasein) is ripped out from the fabric of ties to the surroundings and becomes an isolated part of the foreign system. It is just the transformation of a particular human being what is the reason why the form of human consciousness changes. Man as an element of external systems shifts his relationship to himself and subjects himself to a similar rationalization process that takes

place in the society. Human being refers to himself or herself as to an object, and his or her “self-objectivation” comes on. Lukács then says that the more capitalism proceeds, the deeper the reified structure falls into human consciousness (Lukács 1968, 268).

Lukács states different systems of rationalization, and therefore different types of rationality such as economic, bureaucratic, legal, ethical rationality, but this plurality is conceived as a part of a process taking place in the whole society. The reified structure of consciousness is what connects different types of rationality to each other. This is the basic category of the whole society. The society, however, is not a unified whole because incoherence and irrationality appear with increasing rationalization. Lukács explains it so that this rationalization is of formal character. It relates to isolated elements and leaves out of account the links to other elements as given by their concrete being. Individual systems of rationalization are then mutually inconsistent and relatively independent. They have a “random relationality” to each other, which manifests itself particularly in times of crisis where the randomness enters the consciousness of people (Lukács 1968, 276, cf. Mészáros 1995, 60). Capitalist rationalization, we would say modernization today, as its unintended effect produces randomness and irrationality, which seem to be fatal.

### **3. Adorno and Horkheimer: Instrumental Reason and Nature**

Adorno and Horkheimer take over from Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* following motives. At first, it is the focus on the problem of rationality as a phenomenon that is not autonomous, but has being formed as a result of an external process. Rationality shifts its form in relation to socio-economic reality. Its universality follows from this tie. It embeds in consciousness and the embedding takes place unconsciously. Some rationality as a form of consciousness then creates a basic relation to the world. At the same time, its universality does not occur as monopolization because there are various rational systems, which are independent of each other, and even in random relations.

The concept of instrumental reason formed against this background, however, has a much wider application than Lukács’s “reification.” Lukács confines himself to modern capitalist society, but Adorno and Horkheimer apply their conception to the whole human history. They speak about a history of enlightenment, which they do not identify with the social and cultural movement of the 18th century. It’s emancipatory effort to overcome all forms of domination which shackle human being one way or another. The first form of the enlightenment is an effort to relieve the pressure of nature on human being. As early as the first stages of human development, we find elements of the enlightenment. However, the enlightenment produces a power. It is a power that opposes the power of nature, but also creates basic structure of human thought from the very beginning. Reason is never pure; a power factor operates in it. This power has a paradoxical character. It arises in response to power that nature has over man, but then this power takes an advantage over nature (internal and partially external). It is the power that subjects nature, yet it is derived from it, from the natural principle of self-preservation, which operates in man and puts him in opposition to nature.

A basic relationship of human being to surroundings arises from this power constellation between man and nature. Because of operating a natural principle of self-preservation in him or her, human being is forced to form his relationship to surroundings, but also to himself, according to the question how to ensure his or her physical reproduction, especially the reproduction of tribe or community in the early stages of history. Here is the beginning of instrumental reason. It is such kind of relation to objects in which objects act as reproduction instruments of tribal or individual survival.

Power that works here, however, is blind, as well as power of nature, in which has its origin. As a means for the reproduction of life is increasing, the power does not diminish, but rather transforms: Mastery of nature does not lead to liberation of man, but to new forms of domination. There is a civilization, class society and domination of man over man. But some kind of domination has been internalized in the ruled as well as in the rulers and it forces them to suppress inner nature. An example, to which a whole chapter in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is devoted, is Odysseus as an archetype of modern subject existing to the extent to which he can suppress inner nature. Its suppression is a condition under which Odysseus escapes from mythic powers and gains freedom and power (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, 56).

Adorno and Horkheimer diverge from the current popular image of Cartesian subject as a subduing one who strives for domination over nature. Adorno and Horkheimer show that this domination is a response to the domination of nature over human being and is conditioned by violence carried out on him or her. The basis of Cartesian subject is not hybris, but self-suppression. From the psychoanalytic point of view, one could say that Cartesian hybris is the psychic formation created as a compensation of the basic suppression of spontaneous effects and desires that keep up an individual in a network of ties with immediate surroundings.

However, suppression of inner nature, which increases with the progress of civilization, causes that the instrumental reason is being separated from its purpose, from ensuring the reproduction of society and individuals, from alleviating and overcoming all kinds of domination. The instrumental reason is paradoxical because of ceasing to be instrumental: It does not focus on the means of emancipation, but becomes an end in itself. That's the eclipse and overturning of enlightenment reason which Adorno and Horkheimer speak about. There are new and new technological achievements, scientific progress, GDP growth, but the instrumental reason precludes question what's its use, what or whom it serves.

In late capitalism, in a highly industrialized or post-industrial class society, instrumental reason has become irrational and self-referential: It refers to itself and precludes its self-reflection. And this is a way by which "it serves lords of this world." This is rationality that does not self-reflection, and yet holds rule.

#### **4. In defense of Instrumental Reason**

Instrumental reason thus has other character than what is normally meant by rationality, i.e., one of many kinds of thinking. This notion is bound to Adorno's and Horkheimer's conception of enlightenment that permeates the whole human history. Instrumental reason is connected with man from the beginning of his existence.

Adorno and Horkheimer, however, tend to conceive instrumental reason as a fate that has blinded modern society. They state that there may be turning points, at which the curse is broken, but these points were missed in the 20th century. Instrumental reason is needed to understand in another way, which is not in conflict with the core of Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory. Instrumental reason is not necessarily linked up with the class domination because it exists in pre-class society. And some instrumental reason would be necessary to ensure social reproduction in a post-capitalist society. Instrumental rationality in the sense of thinking focused on the means to achieve certain goals is also the rationality of every political struggle.

Adorno and Horkheimer underestimate these aspects of instrumental reason, and therefore they lack a bridge between theory and political practice. Effective political practice always includes an instrumental element even when it tries to establish a post-capitalist social form in which today's instrumental reason wouldn't no longer dominate. If the theory remains only a critique of instrumental reason, then it cannot accept

any political practice and takes a position of constantly prolonged waiting. This is close to Martin Heidegger, to the position expressed by the famous sentence: "Only a god can save us." In this respect, instrumental reason may be used too little and not too much.

### **5. Over-instrumental Reason**

But the question is whether the instrumental reason has gotten to the next stage. Its history can be schematically divided so that at first there was the instrumental reason focused on reproducing tribe or community and connected with animism and myth, and then the instrumental reason in state of its eclipse and overturning (self-referential means of domination of man over man). But did not its character shift once more? In the previous stage, which Adorno and Horkheimer describe, there are certain boundaries of instrumental reason: Its colonization of individuality, nature, art is not entirely complete. Adorno shows that something else than instrumental rationality acts in the modern art, such as Schoenberg's music. Or see university. Although they have been losing their real autonomy, the principle of exchange has been permeating them and has been creating half-education, an ideal of education still survives in them. Instrumental reason has an exteriority, albeit residual one. The exteriority is made possible by the fact that instrumental reason is associated with Keynesian mode of production, which is characterized by mass industrial production, government regulation, measures against the complete commodification. The exteriority provides a perspective from which one can distinguish between instrumental rationality and other types of rationality. It is still possible to determine limits of instrumental rationality.

During the last 40 years, this situation has changed. As described by Jameson, production has absorbed its exteriority. Aesthetics, individuality, and nature have become part of it (Jameson 1991, 4). Economic production has connected with aesthetic production and has focused on individuality. Commodity is to evoke a feeling of uniqueness at the consumers and to express their originality. Production has associated with the world of art: The products are being designed in order to act as aesthetic objects. Directors shoot advertisements where the center is not a product but a certain ideal of freedom or protest against "rigid morality," and even occasionally revolutionary symbols like an advertising spot on Dacia shows Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg. Computers, mobile phones, I-phones, and online social networks have such a character that increases the feeling of freedom, giving a choice of countless possibilities (from computer games, through movies to books in ancient Greek). They contain huge amount of functions and act as something intrinsically so rich that no one is able to use it fully. The surplus of functions causes that there is much more than the immediate use value.

Some companies like Starbucks present their commodities so that its consumption is a form of humanitarian or environmental aid. Part of the advertising strategy is that the company talks about its social responsibility for the poor coffee growers, even in Chiapas. Advertisements thus work with a certain normativity: Potential customers acknowledge certain normative principles (solidarity with the poorest), which can be used instead of conventional advertising. Normativity becomes a new type of advertisement. It becomes usual that commodity has eco-friendly odour. It is made of natural substances, equipped with natural symbols (trees, leaves, animals), or there is a new type of advertising, which is used by car industry: We will plant one tree for every car sold.

These new types of advertisement are a sign that the commodity is being mixed with many various contexts and meanings, aesthetic, dreamlike, ethical, environmental, and even revolutionary. The very

commodity body and its use value recede into the background and its “soul,” formed by these contexts and meanings, come to the fore. The commodity is being dematerialized.

What relationship arises to the dematerialized commodities? Is it the relationship that modern instrumental reason has to objects? This can be described so that objects are conceived as precisely defined and calculable and their meaning is confined to the number or quantum. But in today’s postmodern production, their meaning becomes qualitative. If the commodity is to realize its quantitative value and turn into money, it must have qualitative, non-commodity meaning. The commodity is connected with meanings that are not indebted to the principle of exchange, but rather they express stories, ideals, or involvement.

Prevailing relationship to objects is such that de-objectification occurs in it owing to the non-commodity cluster of meanings: Object loses its firm boundaries and presents itself as something sensual-oversensual, if we put it in Marx’s term expressing commodity fetishism. This fetishism, however, is not about the very commodity as a masked social product, but about the form of its presence. It’s a new shape of postmodern fetishism, in which the commodity seems to be a non-commodity, a non-objective circuit of meanings.

Postmodern production is, however, still linked with instrumental reason, which has absorbed its exteriority, i.e., different types of rationality. By some ironic way, it restores what Czech philosopher Karel Kosík (2004, 158) called “founding epoch-making trinity,” in which the instrumental reason combines with poetic and moral one. In this effect, the instrumental reason no longer rules, but a reason dominates that could be described as over-instrumental. However, it has a layer that has remained instrumental. It is the layer in which this postmodern, over-instrumental reason continues to be regulated by the principle of exchange and calculability. Production of dematerialized commodities is subject to the imperatives of capitalist economy: to increase the rate of profit, and therefore to pursue exact calculation of all elements of production and exchange process. From this perspective, these elements remain mere objects of calculation, and reason, which pursues these calculations, is still reified and it corresponds to Lukács’s “reified consciousness.”

Postmodern over-instrumental reason is then the form of reason which is established by the instrumental reason pursuing imperatives of the capitalist economy. From the perspective of instrumental reason, the dematerialization of commodities is newly invented method about how to increase the rate of profit. Therefore, we can say that the over-instrumental instrumental reason dominates in our time. It is a connection of reified imperatives of capitalism with postmodern non-objectivity. This reason makes up a today’s main form of commodity fetishism: It induces semblance that the commodity is nothing but a non-objectivity formed by ether of meanings surrounding a commodity body.

How then to disrupt this postmodern commodity fetishism, and which is one of the key elements of today’s ideology? Traditional methods of critical theory are failing. Critical theory is still opposing art, poetic reason, normativity to instrumental reason. But all these have become its part. The exteriority has been incorporated into instrumental reason and forms its fetishist layer. The only starting point remains for critique of over-instrumental instrumental reason: It’s just this reason.

In this situation, we can proceed similarly to Marx as he was analyzing the commodity fetishism. Our first task is not to be looking for an alternative to the commodity and its fetishism but to be demystifying it by the way of analyzing its character. We should firstly reveal its mystery and describe the conditions under which the commodity fetishism disappears. It means to critique of postmodern instrumental reason that the point of departure is its instrumental layer formed by the principle of exchange and calculability. In other words, we confront it with an inverted image of its own. Over-instrumentality and non-objectivity have here being shaped

instrumentally and objectively in relation to imperatives of the capitalist economy.

By this operation, it can be achieved that the circuit of aesthetic, normative, ecological meanings, which creates postmodern commodity fetishism, begins to separate from the commodity as its bearer, and it gets into a different position. These meanings will again act as what is external and in opposition to the commodity and instrumental reason. So a doubling might occur: On the one hand, meanings bound to commodity and commodity fetishism, on the other hand, nearly identical meanings, but detachable and detached from today's capitalist commodity production.

These meanings, however, will probably be very unstable and fragile because today's world has been colonized by over-instrumental instrumental reason. If they ought to keep up as an alternative, they need some bearer: a practice, whether political or economical, that will manage to escape from imperatives of capital. But it will be a practice intending to transform a given situation through certain steps and instruments. On account of its effectiveness, the practice cannot avoid containing an instrumental element. It is associated with rationality which is different from the both versions of instrumental rationality, modern, and postmodern. It would be an instrumental rationality aware of its purpose: an enlightened instrumental rationality.

According to Adorno (2001, 295), one can say about this purpose only what is elementary: Nobody shall starve. Just by this way, we could break the ideology of "human needs" that justifies the production being an end in itself and its infinite growth. Instrumental reason would commence to serve reason and non-instrumental life only in a society emancipated from the pressure of inner nature.

## Notes

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1. About Lukács's influence on forming critical theory, see Feenberg (1981); Anderson (1985).

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