

# THE REIFICATION OF DESIRE

*Toward a Queer Marxism*

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ON CAPITAL, SEXUALITY, AND THE  
SITUATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

One evening in December 1996, Judith Butler delivered a plenary presentation that would appear the following year as an essay called “Merely Cultural.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Butler posits a certain conservative Marxist reinforcement of schisms within the Left: a representation of “new social movements” as “merely” cultural, a reactionary dismissal of these movements as insufficiently engaged with questions of material production. The plenary itself quickly took on a certain notoriety, for understandable reasons: it was delivered at a conference in Amherst, Massachusetts, sponsored by the journal *Rethinking Marxism*—to an audience, that is, about which we can reasonably assume some significant level of interest in Marxism, and some other significant level of allegiance to it. The highly charged character of the presentation was certainly in part a product of the skeptical response of many Marxist intellectuals to efforts to “rethink” the tradition to which they are committed, a skepticism vocalized even—or especially—at the conferences *Rethinking Marxism* periodically sponsors. Although I attended the conference, I missed Butler’s presentation. Others who were there are likely to remember the snowstorm that hit western Massachusetts that evening. I was not the only one who found it impossible to avoid missing the plenary, after dinner in Northampton and given the time it would take to negotiate the roads leading back to Amherst. Secondhand accounts of Butler’s presentation and the audience’s response did not keep me, in the following weeks and months, from wondering now and then what kind of storm I would have experienced in that room, and how it would have compared to the one outside.

Butler's critique, like her work generally, proceeds from an explicitly antiheteronormative point of view, and her controversial presentation and subsequently published essay marked a schism between Marxism and queer theory. Even her essay's unusual conditions of publication seemed to perform the assumption that these two fields of inquiry were of interest to distinct, even polarized audiences: after appearing initially in the second in a series of special issues of *Social Text* devoted to the current state of queer studies, the essay appeared the following year in *New Left Review*.<sup>2</sup> In the early to mid-nineties especially, a schism between Marxism and queer theory was impossible not to notice if you were reading in both at the same time. Doing this meant, for example, coming to terms with Foucault's, not Marx's, formative influence on queer theory. This was also the period in which queer theory began offering sustained and formidable interventions in social theory, a shift that could even be said to mark the emergence of queer theory proper. This shift was announced by a number of influential publications that appeared in the early nineties, notably Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, which combined literary analysis with far from exclusively literary claims, indeed with a genuinely paradigm-shifting analysis of the most basic structuring of Western knowledge itself by the hetero/homo divide; Butler's *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, two texts that should have made it impossible any longer to account for gender without also accounting for the normalization of heterosexuality; and a collection of essays explicitly identifying itself as a queer intervention in social theory, appearing initially as the first special issue of *Social Text* devoted to queer studies and soon thereafter as the volume *Fear of a Queer Planet*. A number of different contributors to this collection discussed the ways in which certain blindnesses to sexuality and its politics characterize Marxism in particular.<sup>3</sup>

It is all the more striking, then, that in the last decade or so, a trend has developed in queer thought that one wouldn't necessarily have had much reason to expect: a greater openness to the kind of direct engagement with Marxism that emphasizes its explanatory power as much as its epistemological limitations, and a distinct though by no means unrelated development, a widespread critical consideration of the dynamics of capital in its current, global, neoliberal phase.<sup>4</sup> A strong sense of Marxism's limits, of its tendency to elide questions of sexuality, was central to and even constitutive of what we might call queer theory's early stage. This field has since

developed new ways of thinking sexuality's relation to capital, and especially heteronormativity's relation to capital, a development marked especially by a rich consideration of the ways in which this relation is mediated by a range of normalizing regimes and forms of social hierarchy, including those that operate along axes of gender, race, and nation. A great deal of recent work in queer studies that takes the contemporary United States as its focus, for example, has been either tacitly or explicitly informed by the restriction, in that same time and place, of the very horizon of mainstream lesbian and gay "political" imagination to the terrain of rights as rights have themselves been articulated within a neoliberal moment.<sup>5</sup> This antiheteronormative critique of capital, then, needs to be understood in relation to at least two potentially contradictory horizons: the impact on queer social life of contemporary regimes of capital accumulation, and the abiding sense of Marxism's blind spots that informed queer thought from the beginning.

With this general understanding of its context, this book revisits certain arguments that have been formative for Marxism or formative for queer theory, arguments we might even call canonical, bringing those arguments together to suggest some of the ways in which they can be read in relation to each other, simultaneously with and against each other. The chapters that follow bring both of these perspectives to bear on a series of historically and nationally specific conjunctures to theorize these conjunctures in their terms, but also, and more importantly, to think through the explanatory capacities as well as the limitations of these same terms. This book understands Marxism and queer theory as forms of critical knowledge, as critical perspectives on social relations that operate from a subordinated situation within those relations. Marxism and queer theory will refer here to ways of knowing the social which are ultimately inseparable from specific histories of collective praxis. This book is primarily concerned with these distinct forms of knowledge themselves, with epistemological categories and presuppositions. It is about what this introduction's title calls the situations of knowledge, about the determinacy of these categories and presuppositions, their historical embeddedness, as well as their situations relative to other forms of knowledge, the way in which they are defined in relation to what they exclude.

This book's basic methodological orientation is drawn from Marxism. I forthrightly frame key insights from queer thought in Marxian terms.

But far from representing just another effort, at this late date, to trump a queer form of critique with a Marxian one, the implications of bringing Marxism and queer theory together in such a fashion turn out to be rather more complicated. Centrally motivating this book's focus on the epistemological is a wish to nudge Marxism into developing a greater capacity to speak to certain dimensions of social and historical reality powerfully illuminated in queer theory's relatively brief history, dimensions that Marxism has little history of acknowledging, much less examining—or at least to suggest ways in which some of Marxism's fundamental terms have tended to keep this from happening. In explicitly approaching the insights of queer critical practice from a Marxian perspective, my central objective is to indicate some of the ways in which this very move requires a fundamental rethinking of that perspective itself. To examine queer critical practice from the vantage of Marxian critical practice will in this way also mean doing the reverse, simultaneously and inseparably. It will mean considering the way in which, when certain insights from queer thought are brought to bear, certain Marxian terms retain an explanatory power, but only with significant revision. This book critically appropriates—both employs and rethinks—two categories that have been central to a specific but influential strand of Marxist thought as it has taken shape over the last century, categories that could use, it seems to me, some queer invigoration. These categories are *totality* and *reification*. My introduction explains how this book rethinks these categories, and highlights some of the implications of this rethinking.

#### TOTALITY

I want to begin moving toward a more detailed elaboration of this book's objectives by revisiting some potentially familiar ground and by suggesting some of the ways in which this ground may not be so familiar after all. Perhaps the most basic way of understanding the impasse between Marxism and queer theory that persisted through the nineties, and to a lesser extent still does, is in terms of Marxism's traditional emphasis on thinking a totality of social relations. Skeptical dispositions toward Marxism, in the domain of queer thought and elsewhere, have long been articulated with reference to Marxism's totalizing theoretical practices. While reference to "totalization" sometimes seems to involve little more than the

easy reiteration of a pejorative buzzword, queer skepticism about Marxian efforts to think totality has also been more than justified in the face of a persistent Marxian tendency to deprioritize questions of sexuality when those questions were acknowledged at all, to subordinate these questions to other, more "total" concerns—to represent sexuality, in other words, not only as "merely cultural" but as always already localized and particularized.<sup>6</sup> I don't think it is too much to say that this tendency within social theory generally, and in Marxism especially, centrally conditioned queer thought as it emerged in the early nineties.

The critique of what was eventually called heteronormativity emerged as a critique of discourses localizing and particularizing sexuality and its politics, as an insistence that the normalization of heterosexuality can be understood only in terms of its operation across a broad social field. In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, an introduction that can now be seen to have anticipated many of the field's subsequent developments, Michael Warner pointed out not only that "materialist thinking about society" had especially been characterized by a tendency to elide questions of sexuality from its understanding of the social, but that this very elision only served to reinforce an objectively totalized heteronormativity.<sup>7</sup> And *Epistemology of the Closet* had famously opened with an invigorating challenge, the assertion that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition."<sup>8</sup> Developing some of the implications of Sedgwick's argument, Warner's introduction announced that queer critique was "at the point of having to force a thorough revision within social-theoretical traditions." Warner insisted that the normalization of heterosexuality is "deeply embedded" not only in "an indescribably wide range of social institutions" but also in "the most standard accounts of the world."<sup>9</sup> These accounts included not only dominant ideologies about democracy, nationalism, and the so-called market but also a range of critical knowledges that fall under the heading of social theory, knowledges that did not simply, innocuously exclude any account of sexuality but excluded it in such a way that a widespread social tendency to universalize heterosexuality by particularizing homosexuality was reinforced.

To this representation of a totalizing Marxism's symptomatic sexual blindnesses, it is important to offer an initial response, now from a Marxian

vantage, that the effort to think totality is itself a critique of ontological and epistemological particularization. Marxian practices of totality thinking critique capital's systemic, privatizing fragmentation of social production especially and of social life more generally. This privatization takes on a dizzying range of forms in the ongoing historical development of capitalist social relations. Capital's enforcement of a strong differentiation of public from private, for instance, is based on its naturalization of private property but is also ultimately inseparable from an ongoing differentiation of social labor, including a gendered division of labor, a division between manual and intellectual labor, and an atomizing, disciplinary specialization of knowledge itself. The Marxian critique of capital then endeavors to comprehend what this ontological and epistemological atomization makes it impossible to apprehend: capital as the systemic, global source of this enforced social dispersal. If Marxism has long been criticized for a tendency to emphasize sameness rather than difference, for imposing a form of epistemological "totalitarianism," it is more accurate to say that it refutes epistemological fetishizations of difference. If Marxism aspires to understand the mediations that articulate different horizons of social reality, if it tends to emphasize connection rather than differentiation, this is because a social and epistemological severing of connections is precisely one of capital's most consequential objective effects. In this respect, totality thinking is a rigorously *negative* practice, a practice opposed to the kind of positive imposition of totality of which Marxism has long been accused—an imposition referring, from a Marxian perspective, not to thinking at all but to the objective, enforced social atomization that is capital itself. Preemptive rejections of this kind of critical practice have too easily led to what Steven Best called, in a critique of poststructuralism written twenty years ago, an epistemological "dictatorship of the fragments."<sup>10</sup>

Qualifications of this general way of understanding Marxian efforts to think totality will soon be necessary here, but I want first to suggest that this very practice of totality thinking provides, at the same time, a way of understanding a certain *convergence* between Marxian and queer accounts of the social. As the last three paragraphs may well have already begun to imply, a critical disposition toward particularizing knowledges is one of the characteristics queer thought and Marxism most saliently share in common. I would even propose that queer thought can be understood as a distinct variation on the effort to think totality. To the extent that the

boundaries of queer thought are defined in relation to its own versions of excluded, *unembraceable* forms of epistemological perversity—and in spite of queer thought's distinctive and unusual capacity for epistemological perversity—perhaps this proposal is perverse indeed. But queer studies' constitutive refusal of any facile localizing or particularizing of sexuality and its politics persistently gives the lie, I think, to any easy assumption that this form of critique consistently and rigorously sidesteps totality thinking. To the contrary, a refusal of sexual particularization, a refusal of sexuality's routine epistemological dissociation from other horizons of social reality, has given rise here again to particularization's dialectical opposite. As Warner put it in what would become one of queer theory's most widely cited assertions, "the preference for [the term] 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political-interest representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal."<sup>11</sup> A constantly expanding focus on the way heteronormativity is thoroughly entangled with a host of social horizons that appear at first to have nothing to do with sexuality has been a recurring feature of some of the most trenchant work in the field. How else are we to understand Sedgwick's early, formative challenge, her insistence on the centrality of homosexual/heterosexual definition to "virtually any aspect of Western culture"? How else to understand the implications of a title like *Fear of a Queer Planet* (with its insurgent echo of Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*)? Even Lee Edelman's more recent provocation, in his reading of the psychoanalytic death drive, to the effect that *any* political emphasis on futurity already operates within a heteronormative logic, elaborates its own Lacanian logic of the social as such.<sup>12</sup> And one can understand in a similar fashion the recent flourishing of work on queer temporalities, work that critiques heteronormative logics that operate even in the way time itself is experienced and understood.<sup>13</sup> I hasten to add that this tendency is hardly exhaustive of a field in which some of the most prominent work has indeed scrupulously avoided anything that smacks of totality thinking. Important examples here include the work of Butler and Leo Bersani, for instance, work that in different ways suggests that scrutinizing the discursive complexities of the sexual body is at least as important as the sustained examination of that body's concrete social location.<sup>14</sup> And few specific interventions in queer studies have aspired toward an analysis

of totality as forthrightly as does Warner's introduction. But queer elaborations of heteronormativity's varied social demands have also consistently maintained that any representation of sexuality in isolation from these other dimensions of the social, any representation of sexuality as always already localized, particularized, or privatized, is a misrepresentation of the social as well as the sexual.

Any such "impulse of generalization" is likely to call forth differentiation as a critical response, and the queer form of generalization that Warner's essay anticipated has hardly evolved smoothly. It has given rise to important critiques of the gendered, racial, and indeed global blindneses persistently risked by the abstraction "queer," to an increasingly rich attention to other axes of hierarchized social differentiation that the term has a well-established capacity to exclude. But the aspect of this ever-growing body of work I would highlight is the way in which it has expanded and internally differentiated, rather than constricted, the domain of queer thought. A critique of various forms of heteronormative assumption within other critical knowledges—knowledges of race, ethnicity, gender, and diaspora among them—has within the very domain of queer studies been joined with an immanent critique of its own blindneses, a critique facilitated by these same knowledges. The two more recent introductions to special issues of *Social Text* devoted to the state of queer studies, in 1997 and in 2005, are revealing here. They articulate just as strongly as Warner's earlier introduction this constitutive queer refusal of the analytic isolation of sexuality from a broad range of social and historical horizons. These texts introduce the new work their respective volumes collect, and gloss the recent work that constitutes their ground, by emphasizing the importance of analysis in which sexuality is understood to be, as the introduction to the 2005 issue put it, "intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference." They underscore the indispensability of a dynamic critical movement "across, between, among various social domains and political experiences," which is simultaneously an exercise in "traversing and creatively transforming conceptual boundaries," a movement the 1997 issue called "transexion."<sup>15</sup> These discussions perform a critique of ontological and epistemological dispersal and segregation, emphasizing intersections between instances of social hierarchy that, while operating in qualitatively different ways, are also constitutive of each other. Queer studies continues in this respect to be informed by a critique of epistemological

particularization, by a genuinely dialectical refusal to isolate sexuality from other horizons of knowledge. Its ongoing development appears here to operate in terms of a consistent pursuit of connections with other fields of critical knowledge and an equally consistent critique of the elisions of difference those same connections risk. These conjoined, multidirectional forms of critique create a dynamic within queer studies of simultaneous expansion and internal complexification, even as this interaction between queer studies and a range of other knowledges constantly raises the question of the extent to which they are in fact "other." These more recent developments in queer studies can to this degree be understood not in terms of a persistent rejection of generalizing impulses but in terms of a critique immanent to this generalizing impulse itself, a critical dynamic in which analytic intersection and differentiation, at the level of the field and sometimes at the level of specific interventions in the field, tend to operate in tandem.

I would propose, then, an initial reading of the relation between Marxian and queer forms of critical knowledge in terms of simultaneous divergence and convergence, convergence here taking the form of a common critique of epistemological particularization, a common "impulse of generalization," a common emphasis on totality thinking. I underscore this commonality not to understate the persistent and obvious ways in which Marxism and queer theory diverge but because this very commonality will ultimately make it possible to see this divergence in a different light. What are some of the ways in which the limitations of Marxian categories are thrown into relief by competing efforts to think totality? What might Marxian versions of totality thinking look like if they really did incorporate a rigorous account of the complex heteronormative dimensions of the social totality they aspire to map? What if they tried to account for insights produced within queer theory rather than, say, always framing sexual questions in classically Marxian terms, assuming that capital mediates sexuality in relatively consistent, predictable ways, in terms of traditional understandings of privatization and commodification, for example?

Though Marx's work explicitly critiques a totality of capitalist social relations, Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* played a key role in making the epistemological category of totality central to Marxian analysis. What Lukács pivotally introduces is a representation of totality thinking as *totalitätsintention*, a totalizing intention or *aspiration* to totality, an aspiration that for Lukács is a practical rather than a purely theoretical

matter, an aspiration that cannot be separated, finally, from a specific history of collective praxis. "The plenitude of the totality," he writes, "does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action. What is crucial is that there should be an aspiration toward totality."<sup>16</sup> I want to propose not just that totality thinking has been central to the development of queer forms of critique but that queer critique has tended to take the form of this kind of aspiration, especially inasmuch as the limitations of this aspiration have been registered, again, immanently, as a scrutiny of the exclusions risked by the abstraction "queer," for example. Though an examination of the terms in which Lukács theorizes this aspiration will be important in the following section, for the moment I want to emphasize that the term *aspiration* underscores the epistemological potential as well as the social and historical embeddedness and limitations, the necessary abstraction, of any such critical effort. This implication is highlighted in one of the most richly suggestive examples of Fredric Jameson's ongoing (even career-defining) defense of Lukács. Jameson has insisted on the continuing importance of the category of totality as tenaciously as any contemporary critic, and here he characterizes the aspiration to totality elaborated by *History and Class Consciousness* as an "unfinished project." Defending this text from the persistent charge that it elides difference, that it operates according to a naive logic of identity and posits a simple teleology of alienation and reconciliation, Jameson contends that its emphasis on totality is the most crucial component of its analysis. Here, he argues, is where the text opens up a way of accounting for difference rather than identity. Jameson's essay represents an effort to account for competing critical perspectives, to think these perspectives in terms that exceed the "merely cultural"; he highlights the importance of the "new social movements," but the way in which he understands Marxism in relation to these movements is radically different from the way in which Butler's essay understands it. Jameson emphasizes especially the capacity of *History and Class Consciousness* to facilitate a certain dialectical understanding of the distinct forms of critical knowledge immanent to each of these movements. Lukács opens a way of thinking about "the epistemological priority of the experience of various groups or collectivities," as Jameson puts it.<sup>17</sup> Jameson stresses the social and historical conditions under which new forms of critical knowledge develop from within a socially subordinated position, taking his cue from what was, when the essay was

published, the relatively recent theoretical elaboration of a feminist critical standpoint (which itself drew explicitly on what Lukács called a proletarian standpoint).<sup>18</sup> He raises the question of the specific epistemological capacities of these various knowledges "from below," critical capacities that both emerge from and inform a determinate, socially situated history of praxis, which result from what Jameson calls a specific "social phenomenology," a distinctive "group experience":

Owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups.<sup>19</sup>

Jameson underscores the qualitative, irreducible differences between "various negative experiences of constraint," between, for instance, "the *exploitation* suffered by workers and the *oppression* suffered by women and continuing on through the distinct structural forms of exclusion and alienation characteristic of other kinds of group experience." This way of thinking totality, he adds, can account for socially and historically differentiated "epistemological potentialities" as well as "blocks and limits to knowledge."<sup>20</sup> This reading of Lukács frames differences internal to a social totality in terms of the divergent social situations from which the critical practice of totality thinking itself emerges. In the face of a Marxian tendency to localize sexuality, this reading begins to suggest ways of understanding Marxian and queer aspirations to totality as both analogous and irreducibly distinct. Indeed, this reading implicitly extrapolates from *History and Class Consciousness* an understanding of totality one would hardly have expected this text to provide, a positioning of divergent social movements not as subordinate to Lukács's proletarian subject but as operating on the same level as that subject, with the same degree of social and political consequence. Highlighting the need to account for the objective situation that distinguishes specific movements, as well as the potential and the limitations of the specific critical aspirations to totality they develop, Jameson proposes that Lukács's text "has yet to be written," that it "lies ahead of us in historical time."<sup>21</sup>

Central to this reading of *History and Class Consciousness* is an insistence that no critical effort in totality thinking can ever be innocent, can ever proceed from a position outside the totality that effort aspires to know. The implications of this proposition, which I now want to emphasize, are both structural and historical. In structural terms, first of all, all such efforts are limited simply by virtue of being socially situated and determinate. With reference to Sartre, Jameson has elsewhere distinguished between two different versions of the effort to think totality, one that “sometimes seems to suggest that some privileged bird’s-eye view of the whole is available, which is also the Truth,” while the other “implies exactly the opposite and takes as its premise the impossibility for individual and biological human subjects to conceive of such a position, let alone to adopt or achieve it”—an experiential, cognitive impossibility that is itself the product of capital’s fragmentation of social relations.<sup>22</sup> Aspirations to totality approach the universal, rather, from the vantage of a specific location within that web of relations, a vantage that necessarily abstracts that totality in coloring everything it sees, but also makes possible broad understandings of social reality unavailable to other perspectives. This is the undeniable difficulty of which the various forms of skepticism about totality thinking are a necessary symptom: any given instance of this properly critical, negative practice will necessarily also omit an infinite range of other mediations, other forms of social differentiation. Efforts to think totality will necessarily posit an internally as well as externally bounded totality, a totality operating at some inevitable level of analytic abstraction, a level evident in the very exclusions that mark from the beginning the limits of that effort. This book’s own version of this aspiration will hardly be an exception, for example, prioritizing as it does an analysis of the capacities and limits of two specific forms of critical knowledge.

A useful illustration of this defining characteristic of totality thinking, of the way in which such efforts are necessarily immanent rather than transcendent, is the logic by which Marx leads the reader through the first volume of *Capital*. The text moves through a range of specific vantages on the totality of capitalist social relations, a movement underscoring the way in which each of these limited perspectives conditions everything that can be comprehended from within it. The text gradually moves, for example, from the sphere of commodity exchange, where capital appears one way, to that of production, where it appears another way. But even within exchange, the

text moves through the different vantages of buyers and sellers of commodities, for instance. The opposing vantages of capital and labor, meanwhile—opposing vantages on the set of social relations that contains both of them—are introduced in Marx’s discussion of the sphere of exchange, even as the very distinction between these perspectives ultimately leads that discussion from the sphere of exchange into that of production. Even the crucial contradiction between value and use value introduced in the first chapter implies the opposing perspectives on capital represented, respectively, by capitalists on the one hand and laborers on the other.<sup>23</sup> The totality of capital, Marx suggests, can be accounted for only through this movement through a range of particular, immanent points of view. *Capital* in this respect avoids the “bird’s-eye view” moment, the moment of direct, transcendent omniscience. If it unambiguously prioritizes certain perspectives over others—its “critique of political economy” takes the form of a clear prioritizing of the perspective of production over that of exchange, for example—it just as rigorously underscores the immanence of the vantages it prioritizes. What we might call *Capital*’s narrative temporality consists of this recurring articulation and subsequent displacement of what Marx repeatedly calls “our present standpoint.” Any pretension to a bird’s-eye view is revealed here to be the effect of a failure to account, within the very effort to think totality, for the specific social location of that same effort.

But Marx’s rigorous emphasis on capital’s internal differentiation brings us also to the historical implications of Jameson’s rereading of Lukács. If capital’s internal differentiation only becomes more complex as it develops, this implies that new forms of social differentiation—and new perspectives immanent to that set of relations—emerge in the course of that development. While the early and to some extent persistent polarization of Marxian and queer forms of critical knowledge is certainly indicative of competing intellectual lineages, undeniable methodological divergences between Marxian and Foucauldian modes of analysis, for example (however much some of us want to insist, as this book will insist, that Marx’s and Foucault’s respective bodies of work are hardly as incommensurate as is sometimes suggested), these intellectual divergences cannot alone explain this polarization, which needs instead to be understood in terms of broader historical developments.

Marxism emerges, for example, from within capital’s ongoing imposition of new forms of social differentiation, specifically from within the broad

social consolidation of an opposition between two distinct classes—in contrast with earlier stages in capitalism's development, when the production and exchange of commodities overlapped with unevenly persistent aspects of feudal social relations, when the class opposition between capital and labor was not yet broadly dominant. A distinctly queer critical vantage on social relations also emerges from within capital's ongoing internal differentiation. In a North American context, for example, John D'Emilio pointed out long ago that a homosexual form of subjectivity emerges in relation to developments in the division of labor, especially in relation to a growing system of wage labor.<sup>24</sup> Familiar aspects of this trend include industrialization's displacement of ever larger numbers of people from rural areas into urban ones, a displacement that opens up the relatively new possibility that a large portion of the nation's population can survive economically outside the family unit, a unit gradually becoming much more central to consumption than to production.

The increasingly varied forms of social differentiation that capital imposes in its development in the United States open up, in other words, a broad social distinction between heterosexual and homosexual forms of subjectivity. And the implications of this pivotal instance of social differentiation are, within the confines of the United States, both as total and as uneven as the differentiation of capital from labor. Heterosexual identification begins, however gradually and unevenly, to turn into a social norm from the early twentieth century. The ongoing requirements of sexual normativity compel this new form of identification as a means of minoritizing homosexuality. From the late nineteenth century, as historians have long argued, sexual subcultures in the United States articulated a hugely varied range of new forms of minority sexual identity.<sup>25</sup> But this range of identities is also conditioned by broader social forms of minoritization, by this more abstract, more broadly social differentiation between two opposing forms of sexual subjectivity. The meaning of subjectivity I would emphasize here is not personal or collective identification but an immanent perspective on social relations, a way of seeing and knowing those relations. Heterosexual and homosexual subjectivities refer in the present context to binarized, oppositional social locations, to social—not individual—subject positions, perspectives from which potentially divergent and indeed opposed forms of knowledge emerge. Homosexual subjectivity here signifies a socially and historically subordinated location within this specific

horizon of social differentiation. This is a location that some unpredictable set of specific persons will wholly or partially, permanently or temporarily or intermittently inhabit, or through which they will pass, a location mediated by “entrances” and “exits,” as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have put it.<sup>26</sup> If to speak of a queer vantage or aspiration is once again to risk the abstractions imposed by the term “queer,” to risk eliding the ways in which sexuality is constitutively interfered with by other axes of social difference and hierarchy, that is because “queer” is not merely a terminological abstraction; it also refers to a form of social abstraction. If the term emerges as a slur, from within a history of heterosexist hatred and violence, and then begins gradually to be redirected in the service of a critique of the sexual normativity that legitimates such hatred and violence, it to this extent presupposes the earlier social differentiation of heterosexual from homosexual subjectivity. This is the case even, or especially, given the way in which the term has been brought to bear in critiques of this very distinction. A new form by which capitalist social relations are categorically differentiated, a form of differentiation compounding and complexly interacting with a host of other forms, is in this respect a condition of possibility for a queer form of critical knowledge.

In the next section, I specify further capital's differentiation of the social into heterosexual and homosexual forms of subjectivity, the socially abstract character of this differentiation, and the epistemological capacities this form of differentiation facilitates. But first it is worth pointing out that Jameson's term “group experience” is an imprecise way to refer to the kind of critical knowledge I am trying to suggest here, insofar as the term “group” implies some relatively stable set of identitarian or communitarian boundaries. “Group experience” might instead be taken to refer to a specific kind of collective, practical experience that develops from within increasingly complex forms of social differentiation. The queer vantage to which I am referring should indeed be understood as irreducibly collective. Mediating the relation between this subordinated social position within capitalist social relations, on the one hand, and the forms of critical knowledge that emerge from within this position, on the other, is the complex history of social and political practice, the panoply of specific articulations of lesbian, gay, antihomophobic and queer struggle, which emerge from within certain “experiences of constraint.” This is a history of struggles that take a range of relatively radical or liberal forms, from early lesbian

and gay activism's communist roots, to the more conservative homophile movements of the fifties, to gay liberation and ACT UP, among a host of other organized efforts. The generation of what I am calling queer critical knowledge has as its ground this history, which presupposes and is conditioned by a distinction between heterosexual and homosexual subjectivity, however justifiably critical queer practice has been of much of this history. Queer thought in this way operates in the context of a history of competing forms of critical knowledge production, competing critiques of compulsory heterosexuality, which cannot be separated from practice, which both emerge from and feed back into practice. And the queer critique of sexuality's epistemological particularization is again itself as dynamic as it is limited; these limitations are elastic rather than given. This form of critique carries a capacity to open out into broader epistemological horizons, to account for unpredictably variable dimensions of social reality. This queer vantage on a social totality is in these ways a highly mediated product of social differentiation.

For all of Marxism's self-representation as a critique that speaks for the human race as such, its particularity is disclosed precisely in its inability to grasp horizons of social reality that forms of critical practice like queer practice endeavor to grasp, endeavors that are conditioned, facilitated, even provoked by this same inability. The claim I have made, that an aspiration to totality is shared in common by Marxian and queer forms of critical practice, will in this way lead necessarily—according to the very logic by which totality thinking has been practiced in a prominent version of Marxist theory—to the blind spots imposed by that same logic. How, then, might we characterize, from a queer point of view, the epistemological “blocks and limits,” as Jameson puts it, that mark the boundaries of this influential form of Marxist thought?

#### REIFICATION

In the version of totality thinking closely identified with the work not only of Lukács and Jameson but also of prominent members of the Frankfurt school, including Adorno and Marcuse, totality's dialectical other is reification. Lukács's introduction of totality's centrality is ultimately inseparable from his introduction of reification's centrality; what he introduces is in fact a dialectic in which reification and totality are methodologically

bound together. In its effort to mediate these competing critical aspirations to totality, this book insists on the importance of a critical movement *through* the concept of reification, a concept that, as we shall see, has a distinct relevance to the queer form of critical knowledge under consideration here. Reification refers to a certain misapprehension of capitalist social relations; it identifies the very process of social differentiation within capital as fundamentally and objectively mystifying, as preempting any critical comprehension of the social. No mere subjective illusion, this misapprehension is as socially and historically determinate as capital itself. *History and Class Consciousness* extrapolates this concept from the opening chapter of *Capital*, where we find the famous theory of commodity fetishism: the way in which capital, even as the social division of labor grows in complexity, represents varied, qualitatively different use values as quantitatively commensurate exchange values. Dynamic, productive social relations between people take the form of (exchange value) relations between static, autonomous things, things that appear to be independent of people. In this way, social differentiation is the contradictory other side of formal equivalence. Reification compels an experience of privatization and isolation, an experience of exchange relations as impermeable to human intervention. The aspiration to totality then refers to historically determinate knowledge that is also praxis capable of negating reification, a critical stance vis-à-vis this dispersal and compartmentalization of social life. This dialectic binding together the categories of reification and totality, I will argue, in providing the tools for a critical account of mediation, of capital's simultaneous unity and internal differentiation, also provides the tools for situating sexual normalization, as well as queer critique and the history of praxis it presupposes, within the broader social processes of capital.

A queer reading of this dialectic will require a critique of the concept of reification. The capacity of this term, which has been so central to so much of Marxist thought, to lend itself nonetheless to highly abstract employments, to conflict with some of Marxism's key methodological priorities—social and historical specificity, for example—is relatively familiar. If Marxist intellectuals have repeatedly examined the category of totality, even if only in the effort to defend it in the face of broad skepticism—Jameson's work is again perhaps the most prominent example here—Marxism has more consistently presupposed than scrutinized the meanings of reification. Edward Said warned of the ease with which the concept can

become a “reductionist implement,” emphasizing especially that any representation of reification as “total” has a tendency to lead to the category’s greater and greater abstraction, so that reification is said to be so pervasive that it determines everything. The category can encourage, as Said puts it, a kind of bad infinity whereby it becomes a way to explain ever broader horizons of human experience, turning into “too inclusive, too ceaselessly active and expanding a habit of mind,” the result being an inevitable attenuation of whatever explanatory power it might have had. Said adds, rightly, I think, that this ceaseless expansion was finally the direction intended by Lukács himself with his emphasis on the total character of the process to which this term refers.<sup>27</sup>

Reification’s capacity for metaphysical explanation especially is inseparable from its radically dehistoricizing capacity. This concept has been used to explain all kinds of imaginable human experience, up to and including religious experience. It has lent itself to epistemological encroachments that exceed not merely the boundaries of the capitalist mode of production but also the boundaries of the social and historical as such. The concept of reification typically grasps capitalist development as a narrative of decline, for example. Lukács’s formative use of it has appropriately been accused of presuming some prior, harmonious integration of subject with object, some earlier moment of unproblematic, organic social unification. Capital’s subsequent differentiation of the social thereby becomes a kind of brutally dehumanizing interregnum between the idealized periods of organic social wholeness and harmony that presumably both precede and follow it. Here *History and Class Consciousness* is read not as an unfinished project but as a conservative project, having fundamentally failed to disentangle itself from the metaphysical reading of history characterizing Lukács’s pre-Marxist work. *The Theory of the Novel*, with its explicit longing for what it retrospectively posits as an earlier historical period marked, as the title of its opening chapter puts it, by “integrated civilizations,” is often exhibit A in such accounts.<sup>28</sup> Does the concept of reification then necessarily presuppose this kind of fall from organic unity, a Fall less historical than romantic and ultimately religious, less socially specific than lapsarian? Is this category as inherently metaphysical as the narrative of social decline that so frequently frames its uses might suggest?

Timothy Bewes’s book-length reconsideration of reification thoroughly rehearses the well-established contemporary intellectual skepticism about

it, a skepticism fueled precisely by this capacity for seemingly endless abstraction, by the way in which the concept, according to some accounts, “approximates everything to a single narrative,” as Bewes puts it. Bewes underscores the concept’s capacity especially for metaphysical and religious explanation, rightly emphasizing that reification is among the most easily reified concepts, that the term is “all too susceptible to the process it denotes.” His study begins with a discussion of reification’s potential “obsolescence” in light of its abstraction in general and its metaphysical generalization in particular, remarking, for instance, that the concept could be used, given the narrative of decline it so often presupposes, to refer to the fall from grace, from organic wholeness, elaborated in the Eden myth. Then, within a page, Bewes also suggests that reification’s reference to the objective, material isolation of broad processes—the “thingification” of those processes, as he puts it—could just as easily explain Christ’s incarnation of the divine.<sup>29</sup> If these examples seem extreme, they are extreme examples only of a metaphysicalizing tendency that has haunted this ostensibly Marxian category ever since Lukács established its importance.

How could such a term contribute to analysis that calls itself historical and materialist if its capacity for metaphysical analysis is so elastic that it can accommodate a dialectic of sin and redemption? Bewes’s thorough consideration of the way in which the term has lent itself to religious forms of explanation unfolds, as it turns out, in a volume that forthrightly endorses this tendency. In the face of the term’s potential obsolescence, as he sees it, for precisely this reason, Bewes’s response is to advocate the term’s religious expansion. Contending that the relation between Lukács’s Marxist work and his earlier, explicitly metaphysical work is best understood in terms of continuity rather than discontinuity, and contending that this is a strength, not a weakness, he develops a sustained consideration of reification as a form of religious anxiety, finding the concept at work in the writings of religious thinkers from Søren Kierkegaard to Flannery O’Connor. “Rather than discard the concept of reification on the grounds of its covert religiosity,” Bewes endorses a religious transcendence of mere historical periodization, seeking to “discard the prohibition on ‘religiosity’ within critical thinking—or rather, to *mediate* the opposition between secularism and religion,” and in this way “to rehabilitate the concept of reification.” It is not simply, for Bewes, that the concept is implicitly religious or idealistic;

the concept itself, he contends, ultimately attests to “the *innate religiosity* of mankind and the world.”<sup>30</sup>

My rethinking of reification moves in precisely the opposite direction. I argue that it remains an indispensable concept despite its traditional limitations, that those limitations are indeed traditional, not definitive. Though theorizing sexuality in terms of reification may at first seem like yet another expansion of the concept beyond useful limitations, this effort in fact emphasizes reification’s historically and socially specific operation. A critical vantage on the social we can call queer emerges, as I have suggested, from within a century-long history of struggle against compulsory heterosexuality, a history that itself is conditioned by capital’s internal differentiation of social relations. We could put this another way by saying that a queer aspiration to totality emerges from within the process of reification. But to the extent that this is the case, an understanding of reification in terms of ever greater social mystification itself mystifies the determinate relation between capitalist development and this history of struggle. In this context, one rises from the abstract to the concrete, as Marx puts it, by accounting for capital’s complex dispersal of social life as an aspect of a reifying dynamic with potentially surprising consequences. To think sexuality in reification’s terms is to begin to see the way in which reification refers to a social dynamic that opens up critical vantages on the totality of capital as much as it closes them down.

I want to begin to flesh out this critique in the same way I began to flesh out what I meant by totality thinking, by referring again to the work of the most prominent contemporary critic whose work is organized centrally around a dialectic of reification and totality. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson employs this dialectic, while also drawing on a Freudian hermeneutic, to elaborate what he calls the “ideological limits” of certain discourses that operate within the horizon of capitalist development, the fundamental repression by these discourses, he claims, of “History” as such. At one of its more startlingly dialectical moments, his analysis makes reference in turn to the ideological limits of Freudianism itself, positing reification as a condition of possibility for a certain abstraction of sexuality characteristic of psychoanalytic discourse:

The psychoanalytic demonstration of the sexual dimensions of overtly non-sexual conscious experience is possible only when the sexual “dispositif” or

apparatus has by a process of isolation, autonomization, specialization, developed into an independent sign system or symbolic dimension in its own right; as long as sexuality remains as integrated into social life in general as, say, eating, its possibilities of symbolic extension are to that degree limited, and the sexual retains its status as a banal inner-worldly event and bodily function.

Recall the familiar opening words of this text’s preface: “Always historicize!”<sup>31</sup> What kind of historicizing practice does the concept of reification enable Jameson to perform here? What kind of future and what kind of past does this way of historicizing sexuality presuppose? We could find ourselves asking, for example: What historically precedes this reification of sexuality? What kind of prior social integration does this formulation posit? When, for example, was sexuality ever as integrated into social life as eating (leaving aside the question of the social and historical integration of the practice of eating itself)? Jameson appears to recapitulate the Lukácsian narrative of reification as a movement away from some prior, retrospectively posited moment of organic social unity, though here that movement does not necessarily imply decline. We could also ask questions about the objective social and historical effects of reification this passage presupposes, about what some of the historical consequences of this reification of sexuality might be. In at least one important sense, *The Political Unconscious* employs the concept of reification in a way that is more historical than metaphysical; Jameson’s critique insists on the explanatory power of the Freudian hermeneutic even while positing reification as one of Freudianism’s conditions of possibility. But his study also explicitly separates that hermeneutic from its basis in sexuality, from what Jameson calls its historically specific content, and in this way suspends the question of the broader historical repercussions of this specific instance of reification.<sup>32</sup> How, for example, might we think about this reification of sexuality in relation to the critique of Freud that was foundational for queer studies—Foucault’s—a critique that makes Freudianism’s normalizing historical impact *inseparable* from its content? One of the lessons of Foucault and queer studies generally is that sexual knowledges like psychoanalysis have their own social effectivity. A Foucauldian perspective would, for example, insist on the way in which the clinical institutionalization of psychoanalysis produces qualitatively new ways in which sexuality is disciplinarily normalized,

including the production of new forms of sexual subjectivity. What historically subsequent chains of determination can result from the dynamic of reification, and can these be adequately understood in terms of the possible outcomes the concept of reification typically presupposes, total mystification or total negation?

One of the crucial innovations of *History and Class Consciousness* was its reestablishment of the importance of subjectivity in the face of a deterministic, mechanistic fetishizing of the objective within the contemporaneous official Marxism of the Second International.<sup>33</sup> Lukács cogently locates a dialectical alternative both to objective determinism and to subjective voluntarism by emphasizing how subjectivity is everywhere conditioned by—though by no means a simple function of—objective historical developments. Reification here unfolds objectively and as part of this unfolding also compels a passive, “contemplative” subjectivity even as it provides at the same time for the objective potential for class consciousness, for a collective proletarian subject’s active, practical breaking of reification’s spell. But it is not enough to say that Lukács reestablishes the importance of subjectivity: for entirely understandable reasons, perhaps, given the fetishizing of the objective to which *History and Class Consciousness* responds, Lukács methodologically *prioritizes* reification’s subjective over its objective moment, ultimately and radically abstracting the objective. Lukács on the one hand proposes that Marxism is, first and foremost, a critical method. *History and Class Consciousness* is one of the twentieth century’s most influential defenses of dialectical method, a text that famously opens with the claim that Marxian “orthodoxy” refers “exclusively” to method. Lukács insists on the historical specificity of concepts and the constant correction of concepts by history, arguing that historical change compels conceptual change. He refers to the “delusion of confusing the intellectual reproduction of reality with the actual structure of reality itself.”<sup>34</sup>

But simultaneously and inconsistently, Lukács takes issue with the separation of method from reality, thought from being, and in this respect insinuates their ultimate coincidence and identity: the privileged moment of this identity is his insistence on the proletariat’s distinct capacity for a knowledge of society adequate to its object. This identity results from the contention that for the proletariat, self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the social totality. Lukács specifies reification’s objective moment in terms of the proletariat’s capacity to understand itself as both subject

and object of the process that is capital: as soon as the proletarian subject knows itself, it also knows the truth of this process. The method he employs in this respect recapitulates Hegel’s prioritizing of subject over object, as opposed to the prioritizing of objective reality over subjective negotiations of it on which Marx’s foundational critique of Hegel insists—and as Lukács ultimately admits in his 1967 preface.<sup>35</sup> If the subject is the more crucial moment for Lukács precisely because he wants to underscore the importance of class consciousness, his analysis of the reified object is by contrast highly elliptical. He argues, for example, that reification’s objective result is to “freeze” the social appearance of what he calls false immediacy. The reified object is to this extent delineated entirely in terms of the subject’s experience of that object as radically ahistorical and beyond that subject’s control. The dynamic of reification can in these terms only become quantitatively more intense or be negated absolutely by proletarian praxis. Here the object is ultimately folded back into the subject—we might even say folded back prematurely—before objective mediations of that subject are adequately registered. And in this respect, Jameson’s defense of *History and Class Consciousness* as an unfinished project, his contention that it provides a way to account for the internal differentiation of capitalist social relations into a range of irreducibly distinct ways of encountering and understanding those relations, is a reading that is as generous as it is suggestive and would ultimately require a more thorough critique of the text than he provides. Reification itself needs to be rethought if this aspiration to totality is to be rethought; the discourse of reification introduced by Lukács is, again, a discourse in which each of these categories implies the other.

How, then, might we further specify reification’s objective moment? This moment, first of all, has two contradictory aspects, as Lukács insists: social labor is atomized into the competitive, individuated labor of private persons, obscuring its fundamentally social character, even as the products of these dispersed labors are placed in a relation of formal equivalence. Social differentiation, again, has equivalence, sameness, as its constitutive other side. Second, however, reification is a more general concept than commodification, a concept referring to a broader, more complexly mediated social dynamic: no longer confined to the abstraction of social labor and commodity exchange per se, reification refers to an objective normalizing of formal abstraction throughout the totality of social life. Lukács’s

argument that reification is objectively total unfolds in largely epistemological terms; it is based primarily in his discussion of the reification of *knowledge*. He elaborates reification's objectivity almost exclusively in terms of an increasing pervasiveness of epistemological formalisms that dominate the subject, knowledges that are themselves abstract, equivalent products of a deepening division of labor. We can then begin to specify reification's objective moment by underscoring the way in which, for Lukács, ever greater degrees of reification mean ever greater degrees of epistemological differentiation. These formal knowledges eliminate any larger sense of what Lukács calls the "ontological totality," any sense of knowledge's material and historical substratum, and give themselves over instead to their own isolated, internal protocols. His primary concerns are the deactivating impact that these knowledges have on the subject, and the proletarian potential for a critical, practical knowledge of totality that can negate this negation. These knowledges do not then merely "reflect" the formal abstraction of commodity; they actively mediate capital and have their own objective social effects. But Lukács elides whatever effects these knowledges may have beyond this induction of a passive, "contemplative" subjectivity.

To more thoroughly specify this concept would thus entail a more thorough historicizing of the objective determinations and repercussions of these formal knowledges that emerge in relation to new forms of social differentiation. And if a generation's worth, now, of queer critical practice has highlighted any single social phenomenon, it is the normalizing effectivity of sexual knowledge. As I argue in detail in chapter 1, what Foucault identifies as the twentieth-century sexual knowledge regime exemplified by the psychoanalytic culmination, around the beginning of the twentieth century, of a longer-term historical "deployment of sexuality" should be understood as a product of reification. Lukács emphasizes, for example, the way in which specialized knowledges reify bodily attributes: the scientifically managed factory, in his analysis, reifies not only the body's capacity for labor but skill itself. The factory expropriates, disembodies, and reifies the very technical knowledge of the production process. With the emergence of this regime of sexual knowledge, sexual desire is also reified: a bodily capacity is epistemologically abstracted in the form, for example, of qualitatively new heterosexual and homosexual subjectivities. This is an instance of objective social abstraction with historical repercussions far beyond the specific history of Freudianism. The following chapters propose that

this reification of sexual desire is a condition of possibility for the development of queer forms of critical knowledge.

The term "queer," I have suggested, refers to an abstract form of subjectivity, a vantage on social relations opened up by capital's ongoing differentiation of those relations. It is now necessary to be more precise: this is a *reified* form of subjectivity, a subjectivity that begins to disclose the limitations of the standard Marxian account of reification. Where Lukács's method prioritizes subjectivity, Foucault's method famously prioritizes objectivity. This, of course, means not that he neglects subjectivity but that he underscores the capacity of these knowledges to discipline not consciousness but bodies themselves and to produce new forms of subjectivity in the process. What this book identifies as a reifying abstraction of sexual desire then regulates bodies in turn, in a normalizing attribution of sexual subjectivity; I will in this way take issue with Lukács's contention that reification produces only two different kinds of subjectivity, passive contemplation and the potentially critical, negative standpoint of the proletariat. While Foucault represents history in terms that posit a narrative of decline even more unwaveringly, perhaps, than the narrative of reification we encounter in Lukács, his work also facilitates an understanding of the way in which regimes of sexual knowledge have complex social effects. Reification in this respect seems to have a radically unfreezing social impact: far beyond the two different kinds of subjectivity Lukács allows, reification is a condition of possibility for a new form of critical, antiheteronormative knowledge, which may not make Lukács's "ontological totality" less legible so much as provide a new critical perspective on it. To begin to move away from this concept's capacity for theoretical bad infinity, we might begin to examine the divergent significations of reification rather than taking its meaning as established. We might begin to understand the social differentiation this concept seeks to grasp in terms of an opening as well as a closing of horizons of critical and, yes, political possibility.

Subsequent Marxian employments of the concept—by no means only Lukács's—tend to recapitulate this prioritizing of subject over object, representing reification's objective moment more or less exclusively in terms of increasingly damaging degrees of social abstraction. The very aspiration to totality that underpins the Marxian discourse of reification is thereby compromised by its own fundamental terms. This tendency is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than in precisely those revisions of the concept

that represent critical subjectivity as all but liquidated, as in the narrative of reification one encounters in the work of the Frankfurt school, where reification morphs into an instrumental reason that has saturated and neutralized the very psyche of Lukács's proletarian protagonist. In certain respects, the Frankfurt school's divergence from the account of reification in Lukács could hardly be more apparent. Whereas Lukács elaborates the dynamic of reification in terms of the loss of an organic social wholeness, a less and less accessible "ontological totality," Adorno, for example, revises this concept by emphasizing, to the contrary, reification as a pervasive and all but inscrutable social logic not of difference but of sameness, a logic not of differentiation but of commodity equivalence. Adorno's elaboration of nonidentity thinking emerges from an understanding of reification as operating according to a social logic of identity.<sup>36</sup> But these accounts of reification, which emphasize opposing sides of the dynamic of differentiation and sameness to which I have referred, also share in common the narrative of decline they articulate—or presuppose. Whether a social identification of subject and object is (for Lukács) lost or (for Adorno) violently enforced, what reification can hardly be seen to do is open up potential new horizons of critical leverage. While the discourse of reification tends in some respects to recognize both sides of a dialectic of quality and quantity, it also typically posits a largely quantitative narrative whereby critical capacities suffer greater and greater degrees of paralysis, a narrative that closes down opportunities for any account of reification's more complex social and historical results.<sup>37</sup> This prioritizing of reification's subjective moment becomes extreme in Bewes's study, where the emphasis is far less on reification's objective, historically specific social impact—the division of social labor receives scant attention in this account, for example—and critical possibilities are displaced by a kind of Kierkegaardian anxiety toward reification that Bewes reads as somehow constitutive of the process of reification itself. My study recasts the concept of reification in such a way that the dynamic to which it refers is revealed to do much more than, as *The Political Unconscious* suggests, ideologically repress history.

#### FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE CONCRETE

I began this discussion by highlighting a certain convergence between Marxian and queer forms of critical knowledge, a convergence that itself

led inevitably, as I suggested, toward an examination of reification, an examination that underscored instead the way in which these respective forms of critique diverge. I want now to suggest the way in which this emphasis on divergence itself begins to lead us back in the other direction, the way it can bring us to a different understanding of how these forms of critical knowledge can operate together. This book will maintain that to specify reification's objective moment in this queer fashion is also to concretize this concept in Marx's sense of the term, and to discern a certain inconsistency between the typical practice of the dialectic of reification and totality and the methodological priorities evident in Marx's work. I argue, in fact, that this queer reading of reification and totality exemplifies, simultaneously, Marxian as well as queer forms of critical practice.

Marx's method of theorizing a totality of social relations turns fundamentally on the practice of concretizing the very abstractions that theory requires. His work performs this method, but he rarely steps back to offer sustained elaborations of it, more often articulating it in relatively brief comments scattered throughout his corpus. One of these rare exceptions, a notoriously elliptical one, is found in the section of his introduction to the *Grundrisse* called "The Method of Political Economy." Here he frames his method in terms of an ongoing movement between the concrete (objective, determinate social totalities) and the abstract (categories the thinking subject must necessarily employ to grasp the concrete). The concrete is not, he makes clear, the empirically given; to comprehend the concrete in its complexity, the thinking subject has to engage in a certain practice of abstraction. This subject has to distill in thought, in conceptual form, the concrete's constitutive determinations, and only through this process can the concrete be theoretically reconstructed with anything resembling validity.

This reconstruction does, however, necessarily *begin* with the empirically given, with what Marx calls the "imagined concrete." In a key passage, Marx considers the extent to which the category "population," for example, can account for the totality to which it refers. This concept, he argues, leads necessarily to a series of "more simple concepts," "thinner abstractions" that internally differentiate this totality by identifying its multiple determinations:

The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not

familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labor, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labor, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labor, without value, money, price, etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as a chaotic conception of the whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.<sup>38</sup>

In this conceptual movement from an abstract unity to an internally differentiated one, the "imagined concrete" itself, first of all, turns out to be an abstraction: a chaotic abstraction, one that requires specification. Marx delineates a double movement: first, a movement through a series of these increasingly simpler abstractions, concepts that identify various determinations within a social totality, which internally differentiate what began as a chaotic conception of totality. In a second movement, unity is reestablished, but here an internally differentiated unity replaces a chaotic one. These simple abstractions are themselves concretized by establishing the simultaneous differentiation and connection between the various determinations to which they refer—by establishing, for example, the social process of capital of which social class, wage labor, and value are all defining moments. "Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought."<sup>39</sup>

Theoretical abstractions, in this account, can be more or less chaotic, more or less concrete. In the two movements Marx describes here, movements leading to the establishment in thought of an internally differentiated whole, theoretical abstractions are concretized: a chaotic conception of totality is concretized by way of ever simpler abstractions, and then these simple abstractions are themselves concretized in turn through an establishment of their determinate interconnections, through a more complex reconstruction of the totality with which the process began, now understood "as a rich totality of many determinations and relations." The specification of concepts and the specification of totality are here inseparable.

Even concepts that are not chaotic, as Marx emphasizes, vary in their level of complexity; they operate at different levels of abstraction. Capital is a more complex, abstract concept than price, for instance. Reification is a highly complex abstraction referring to a broad set of social phenomena—even in Lukács's account, before one approaches subsequent elaborations and expansions of the term. Reification is also a chaotic abstraction to the extent that it fails to account for key aspects of this complexity—to the extent, for example, that it excludes any rigorous understanding of the objective moment of the social dynamic it seeks to grasp. It is chaotic to the extent that it accounts for social differentiation in the abstract terms of a quantitatively deepening mystification of social relations, for example. And as soon as Eden and Christ's resurrection begin to appear within reification's purview, we have arrived at a vertiginously chaotic conception of the whole.

In a crucial turn, Marx then underscores the ways in which the thinking subject who aspires to move beyond a chaotic conception of the whole is already embedded within the very totality for which thought would account. He emphasizes that the concrete "appears in the process of thinking . . . as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception." Social reality remains ontologically prior to its conceptual reconstruction. One of the implications here is that this reconstruction operates at *some* level of analytic abstraction, if only because the thinking subject is already socially conditioned, limited, situated within a determinate position within the social totality, a position that defines, as I suggested earlier, both the extent and the limitations of what it can know. I have emphasized the way in which the social situatedness and determinacy of the subject who aspires to grasp totality are underscored in *Capital* by the text's avoidance of direct omniscience, its restriction of its own perspective on capital to a movement through a series of specific, limited vantages internal to capital. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx similarly underscores this situatedness and determinacy by identifying this thinking subject in explicitly social rather than individual terms, by insisting on the knowing subject's determinate situation. "The subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition."<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, then, the concrete is the object that thought seeks to grasp; on the other hand, thought also "plays" object, as it were,

to the concrete's subject: the concrete for which thought seeks to account is also thought's material situation, what Stuart Hall calls in his reading of this passage "a privileged and undissolved 'moment' within a theoretical analysis."<sup>41</sup>

This objective, determinate social situation of thought is further complicated by the fact that social reality is also historically dynamic. The determinate situation of the thinking subject is conditioned both socially and historically; this subject is itself a product of a specific historical juncture within capital's ongoing internal differentiation. Marx articulates a dynamic method that is determinate in relation to the dynamism of history itself: just as concrete social totalities change qualitatively in their historical development—capital is expansive, dynamic, it has opened conditions of possibility for a history of queer critical practice, for example—that totality's reconstruction in thought is itself always historically conditioned. If thought by definition proceeds at some level of abstraction, necessarily requiring exclusions, all thought is also historically determinate, and the limitations of any specific critical effort will be dictated not only by the abstract character of thinking as such but also by the historically conditioned character of the effort itself. If concepts produced within a specific, historically determinate situation remain open to historically subsequent deployment, they also require examination of the extent to which this historical relocation itself affects their meaning. Concepts as they are deployed within subsequent situations require critical, historically situated scrutiny. To evade this scrutiny is to fail to account for the concept's historical determinacy, and the result is likely to be a more chaotic, less concrete concept. The aspiration to totality elaborated within the dialectic of reification and totality that I consider in the subsequent chapters falls short of its objectives to the extent that the theoretical abstractions it brings to bear are insufficiently concretized—to the extent, for example, that the complex historical repercussions of reification's objective moment are erased.

Marx's method insists in this way on a movement in two opposing but equally important directions, a development of categories adequate to the complexity of historically determinate social relations, and an ongoing examination, as those relations continue to develop, of the explanatory capacity and limitations of those same categories. Just as historical development is conceptualized, so concepts are themselves historicized; conceptual abstraction and an insistent emphasis on social and historical specificity here

operate in tandem, each accounted for from the vantage of the other. "Viewed apart from real history," Marx writes in *The German Ideology*, "these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever."<sup>42</sup> The divorcing of concepts from their historical determinations, a habit Derek Sayer has called the "violence of abstraction," is by no means limited to nondialectical forms of analysis.<sup>43</sup> This dehistoricization of concepts is sometimes referred to as a reification of concepts, but, as Bewes points out—and as his study, in my view, ultimately demonstrates—there is perhaps no Marxian concept as vulnerable to reification as the concept of reification itself.

This book takes the position that the interpretive horizon of Marxism is open rather than closed. But this will not mean that Marxism represents some ultimate interpretive horizon, as, for example, *The Political Unconscious* maintains (famously or infamously, depending on your point of view). It will mean, more modestly, that Marxism is open to the extent that it recognizes the historical specificity of even its most basic categories and the way in which those categories are subject to forms of scrutiny every bit as specific. Marxism is open to the extent that it retains a capacity for immanent critique of its own determinate limitations and demands that such a critique be ongoing—just as queer critique, as I indicated earlier, has been characterized centrally by an immanent critique of the blindnesses imposed by its own operative categories. An effort from within Marxism's terms to account for the horizons of social reality that Marxism has tended to erase needs to be joined with an immanent scrutiny of those same terms. When these two imperatives fail to operate together, what can result, for example, is the endlessly expansive use of a category like reification, reification as bad infinity, shorn of any attention to the way in which its meaning will have to change if it is to retain its ability to account for constantly changing social relations. Marxism itself is in this respect an always unfinished project, constitutively open to rereadings of its terms. Even Foucault, that supposed theoretical opponent of Marx, took the position that this openness was not only characteristic of Marxism but one of its strengths.<sup>44</sup> Marxism's epistemological limits, its finitude, are not static and never given in advance. These limits should be understood instead in terms of the way Marxism is practiced within specific social and historical situations.

As I indicated earlier, for example, Lukács's privileging of reification's subjective moment is in part a response to the privileging, in the official

Marxism of his time, of capital's objective development over the forms of subjectivity it produces. That same methodological privileging can now be viewed, from a queer perspective, in a substantially different light. Reification, to the extent that it defines capital's ever greater internal differentiation in terms of mystification, will hardly be able to account for new perspectives on the social that this internal differentiation makes possible. One way to account more concretely for reification's inherent logic of differentiation, then, is to critique the concept from a perspective that itself emerges from within this ongoing differentiation. To scrutinize this Marxian category from a queer vantage is to scrutinize it from a historically situated vantage and to discern the way in which the social dynamic of reification, far from only preempting critical understandings of capitalist social relations, has also opened up new critical understandings of those relations.

In the indispensable discussion of reification to which I referred earlier, Said emphasizes that "theory is a response to a specific social and historical situation of which an intellectual occasion is a part," and that concepts are transformed whenever they are employed within a different situation. Concepts are transformed to the extent that they travel, as he puts it.<sup>45</sup> In suggesting the ways in which reification is a condition of possibility for the queer aspiration to totality to which I referred at the beginning of this introduction, this book sketches what we might call a queer variation on the dialectic of reification and totality. Theoretically framing queer critical practice and some of its conditions of possibility in terms of this dialectic, this study also accounts for ways in which this practice and these conditions diverge from some of this dialectic's traditional assumptions. This book contends that this queer aspiration to totality now makes it possible to see the ways in which reification was a condition of possibility for a new form of social differentiation that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, an opposition between heterosexual and homosexual forms of subjectivity, and thus also for this same queer aspiration itself. Marxian aspirations to totality need to be understood in relation to what they tend to elide, elisions that include heteronormativity's multiform and invisible horizons, horizons it has taken this same queer vantage on totality to elucidate. What the vantage of queer critical practice can propose is a critique of fundamental Marxian categories that is also entirely consistent with Marx's method. Indeed, a queer critique of the reification/totality

dialectic that is also a Marxian concretizing of this dialectic is my most basic objective, an objective that insists throughout on the simultaneous convergence and divergence of these open, unfinished forms of critical knowledge.

## REGULATION

This book emphasizes the way in which this queer variation on reification and totality is mediated by stages in the relatively specific history of capital accumulation in the twentieth-century United States. The discourse of reification, moving as it does from the specifics of commodification and the division of labor out toward the kind of epistemological forms and capacities these dynamics tend to produce, hardly in itself provides an adequate basis for understanding capital's operation at this historically and nationally specific horizon. Such a basis is, however, provided by the discourse of regulation theory, a discourse that has also focused much of its attention on the twentieth-century United States.<sup>46</sup> Regulation theory emphasizes that the accumulation of capital, if it is to be sustained over long periods, must always be institutionally secured at a range of different levels, from corporate and governmental forms of regulation to a normalization of everyday social practices. Perhaps the only characteristic that regulation theory and the discourse of reification share is their common effort to grasp capital's historical development in conceptual terms. While both discourses are simultaneously theoretical and historical in emphasis, while both endeavor to conceptualize capital's historical logic, regulation theory operates at a different level of abstraction. It represents an effort to establish a set of historically grounded concepts that can negotiate the distance, as it were, between highly theoretical accounts of capital, on the one hand, and historically detailed elaborations of socioeconomic development, on the other.<sup>47</sup> Regulation theory focuses not on capital's general laws of motion but on the historical and institutional specifics of accumulation in a relatively well-defined period and location. It emphasizes that the history of capitalism cannot be understood without accounting for broad and recurrent corporate and governmental efforts to forestall accumulation crisis, strategies that have punctuated capital's history, which indeed have had to be as persistent as the threat of crisis itself. Though the character of specific efforts to mitigate crisis can never be predicted in advance, these

efforts typically implicate, in one way or another, capital and labor as well as government. Though they operate at the level of class struggle and are in this way relevant to questions of class consciousness, the respective emphases of regulation theory and the discourse of reification are in the main quite divergent. In highlighting capital's constant tendency to undermine the very institutional preconditions that ensure the prospects for additional accumulation, regulation theory emphasizes not what the discourse of reification emphasizes—capital's potent capacity to misrepresent its constitutive relations and processes—but the fundamental social volatility that capital's objective contradictions consistently produce, and the socially broad, historically conditioned strategies necessary to keep crisis at bay.

Central to this discourse is the relation between two key concepts. The first is the *regime of accumulation*, which refers to a macro-level, relatively cohesive coordination of production, distribution, and consumption sustained over an extended period. Fordism, regulation theory's primary example of such a regime, identifies an unusually (even anomalously) coherent consolidation of the production-distribution-consumption circuit that resulted in strong levels of accumulation in the United States from, very roughly, the early fifties to the late sixties. The second concept identifies the institutional and practical foundation that secures any functional regime of accumulation: the *mode of regulation*. A mode of regulation is a complex ensemble combining official political structures, practices, and policies with a network of broadly defined social norms and habits, an ensemble that ensures consent, at the level of everyday practical life, to the reproduction of the conditions of accumulation. Relationships between a regime of accumulation and a mode of regulation are never entirely stable; these relationships are "temporary institutional 'fixes.'"<sup>48</sup> The development of Fordism, for instance, as David Harvey puts it, "depended on myriad individual, corporate, institutional, and state decisions, many of them unwitting political choices or knee-jerk responses to the crisis tendencies of capitalism, particularly as manifest in the great depression of the 1930s."<sup>49</sup> Regulation theory emphasizes in this respect that any successful harmonizing of a regime of accumulation and a mode of regulation is only ever a hegemonic process, which is to say a potentially unstable one, and in this respect the work of Gramsci is one of regulation theory's more obvious touchstones.<sup>50</sup> But my study will place special emphasis on

the ways in which macrosocial forms of regulation have to be supplemented with microsial forms of normativity and discipline not unlike those highlighted by Foucault especially, and by queer critical practice generally. Regulation theory is anything but an explicitly Foucauldian means of theorizing the ways in which accumulation is normalized at the level of everyday social practices.<sup>51</sup> But I argue that it is precisely the more micro-level components of the mode of regulation, especially as this mode operates at the level of the body, which provide a way of understanding the relation between the dynamics of capital accumulation as they develop in the United States and the way in which a reification of sexual desire attributes to bodies certain new, normalized forms of sexual, and potentially critical, subjectivity. Social norms and practices that from a certain perspective appear cultural or "superstructural" are instead treated from this point of view as "potentially *infrastructural*," as Leerom Medovoi has put it, "as genuine conditions of possibility for the reproduction of any particular historical form of capitalism."<sup>52</sup> The queer variation on reification and totality that I argue unfolds in the United States during the past century is mediated by these efforts to forestall accumulation crisis. In this way, the following chapters contend that reification's objective effects must be understood not only in terms of the tenacious resilience of capital typically emphasized by the discourse of reification. They also need to be understood in terms of capital's persistent instability, in terms of its fundamental opposition to itself, and the way in which this instability is negotiated historically through a range of forms of social regulation, forms that in this respect are misrecognized insofar as they are identified as "merely" cultural or superstructural.

In addition to this emphasis on capital's persistent instability, my analysis highlights one other, major theme from regulation theory: the way in which unprecedented corporate and governmental efforts to manage social demand—to socialize a national population into a consumption norm—have been one of the defining characteristics of capitalism as it has developed in the United States since the early twentieth century. What I identify as a disciplinary social consumption has been constitutive of the reification of heterosexual and homosexual forms of subjectivity and of the gradual emergence of a queer critical knowledge of the social. Beginning in the early twentieth century, I argue, bodies are increasingly, if quite unevenly, normalized not only as heterosexual and homosexual subjects but also,

and inseparably, as consuming subjects. The following chapters highlight the way in which sexually disciplined, regulated bodies, simultaneously deployed as strategies of capital accumulation, are defining aspects of the mode of regulation that begins to emerge in the United States in the early twentieth century.

While at the level of individual chapters the book develops specific Marxian critiques of certain influential arguments closely identified with queer studies, its overarching concern is to bring a queer vantage to bear on the dialectic of reification and totality, a dialectic exemplified in these pages by the work of three figures: Lukács, who made this dialectic central to an entire Marxist tradition, and Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson, both of whom give sexuality a central place in their respective reformulations of this dialectic. Though the categories of reification and totality are ultimately inseparable, this book's sequence of chapters, emphasizing reification as a condition of possibility for a queer, critical vantage on the social, gradually shifts emphasis from discussions that emphasize reification to discussions that emphasize totality. The first two chapters approach the same, early-twentieth-century conjuncture from distinct vantages. In chapter 1, I develop in greater detail the claim made earlier that both Lukács and Foucault elaborate a turn-of-the-century epistemological shift defined by a reification of bodily qualities and capacities. Rejecting any assumption that *History and Class Consciousness* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* are simply incommensurate texts, I suggest ways in which each enables a productive rereading of the other. Chapter 2 then further considers the way in which sexual knowledges discipline bodies, and the mediation of this corporeal discipline by capital, by reconsidering one of queer theory's formative early interventions, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. Here I try to concretize the performative normalization of masculinity, elaborating that norm not in Butler's relatively abstract, formal register but as a socially and historically specific phenomenon mediated by capital. This discussion will require some consideration of the historical limits of Butler's terms, limits that are anything but explicit in her work. But this chapter also responds to a persistent Marxian complaint about Butler's erasure of the horizon of capital from her analysis by proposing ways in which her theory of gender in fact presupposes that horizon and is ultimately well suited to the task of thinking gender, sexuality, and reification together.

Chapters 3 and 4 also approach a specific historical period from different perspectives. Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, which was a major influence on the gay liberation movement, is my central concern in chapter 3. Marcuse's influence on gay liberation, I argue, should be understood in terms of a relation between the objective and the subjective—in terms of a collective political subject's negotiation of his influence, especially his conceptualization of the objectified, revolutionarily sexual body, which was inseparable from his profound pessimism, during the period of *Eros and Civilization's* production, about revolutionary subjectivity as such. *Eros and Civilization*, that is, leaves the struggle to articulate sexual subjectivity with revolutionary subjectivity—programmatically to bridge the gap between abstract Freudian speculation and historically conditioned practice—to this pivotal political movement. Chapter 3 begins to sketch the way in which reification's objective moment opens opportunities for the formation of new forms of critical, antiheteronormative subjectivity, beginning the book's shift from an emphasis on reification to an emphasis on totality. Chapter 4 then moves to a more direct consideration of Fordism's characteristic mode of regulation by resuming the historical analysis, begun in chapter 2, of the performative normalization of masculinity. Here I frame the relation between two developments of the sixties—a national gay male formation's increasingly visible, collective working of what Butler would call the homosexual weakness in a heteronormalizing masculinity, and the development and crisis of a Fordist regime of accumulation—in terms of the way a specific narrative, the film *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), allegorizes both of them. This allegorical reading sets the stage for the chapter's final objective, a critical engagement with the work of Jameson. Here I ask how one might account for the unpredictable, objective historical repercussions of the reification of sexual desire within the terms of Jameson's rethinking of allegory. The book's final chapter returns to the topic with which this introduction began, a queer form of critical practice that has taken shape, I argue, as an aspiration to totality. Chapter 5 delineates a distinctly queer vantage on totality from within the determinate social and historical conditions that obtain in the United States after Fordism, a regulatory conjuncture most precisely characterized, I argue, as neoliberal. I conclude by considering the aspiration to totality performed by that indispensable memoir of the eighties—the opening stage of neoliberalism in the United States, and the opening stage

