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Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics

Stefano Petrucciani

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Praise for *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*

"In this terse, concise reconstruction of Adorno's philosophy, Petrucciani unravels with remarkable clarity Adorno's interrelated notions of philosophy, dialectics of enlightenment, negative dialectics and metaphysics, his theory of society (with special reference to domination, Marxism, the end of the individual), and approach to aesthetics and culture criticism. Eschewing the esoteric and at times obscure jargon of many exegetical monographs, in the final chapter Adorno's understanding of modernity is insightfully contrasted with Habermas's theory of modernity as an unfinished project... An indispensable tool for grasping Adorno's philosophy."

—Alessandro Ferrara, *Professor of Political Philosophy, University of Rome Tor Vergata, Italy*

Contents

Introduction

Theodor W. Adorno. Profile of an Intellectual

1 Education in Weimar Germany

The biographical and intellectual history of Theodor W. Adorno, like that of many other German thinkers of his generation, is deeply marked by the trauma brought by the advent of Nazism and the extermination of the Jewish people. After a serene and comfortable childhood and youth, Adorno was forced to come to terms with persecution, exile and his own guilt complex, which he would speak of often in the postwar period, having escaped a tragedy in which even his dearest friends, such as Walter Benjamin, had found death. All of this would indelibly mark the entire course of his reflections, which cannot be explained without reference to the catastrophes of the twentieth century and his own efforts to understand them, so as to measure himself against them, through the instruments of reason.

The son of a well-to-do wine merchant and assimilated Jew, Oscar Wiesengrund, and of a mother of French origins, Maria Calvelli-Adorno, who had been a singer in her youth, Adorno (who in his maturity would adopt his mother's surname) was born on September 11, 1903 in Frankfurt-am-Main, where he passed the serene childhood of a pampered and privileged bourgeois, with excellent marks in school. He was an intellectually precocious youth, extraordinarily gifted in music. In his school-leaving exams, which he took a year early, he received the highest marks possible, and so he applied to the Faculty of Philosophy, Psychology

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and Sociology of the Goethe University of Frankfurt. The experiences which most affected Adorno's intellectual development were for the most part extra-curricular: as he himself wrote, they were his reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which, as a superior-school student, he read together with his older friend Siegfried Krakauer,[1] and above all his friendship with Benjamin. Adorno's experience of university philosophy under the guidance of his professor Hans Cornelius was also of some importance.[2] Cornelius was a neo-Kantian whose focus was on psychology, and he had contributed to the development of Gestalt psychology; his influence on Adorno's thought can be seen not only in this interest in Gestalt psychology, to which Adorno sometimes refers, but above all in what regards his reading and interpretation of Kant. The best of Cornelius' philosophical production indeed revolves around the often subtle and keen analysis of the problems of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: this is true not only for his *Kommentar zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which Cornelius published in 1926, but also for his most wide-ranging theoretical work, *Transzendentale Systematik*, which was issued in two editions, the first in 1916, the second in 1929.

After his 1924 thesis, entitled *The Transcendence of the Material and Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Adorno wrote his 1927 Habilitation dissertation, which bore the title *The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Theory of Mind*. This extensive work by the young twenty-four-year-old scholar was intended to stand essentially within the horizon delineated by Cornelius—which is to say, the horizon of a markedly psychological theory of consciousness, which Husserl had strongly argued against in his *Logical Investigations*, at a certain point taking as his target Cornelius himself.[3]

Although Cornelius' teaching left permanent traces on Adorno's philosophy, there is no doubt that our author soon distanced himself from the theory of consciousness that Cornelius had developed, with its psychological and subjectivistic vein. His faithfulness to his teacher in his Habilitation thesis should perhaps be seen more as a concession to academic rules than as an authentic intellectual commitment.

[1] See Adorno's essay on Krakauer: "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer", in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 58–75, 58.

[2] Cf. S. Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 71–109.

[3] E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2001), 303 ff.

There are various reasons for supposing that this was effectively the case. In the first place, it should be recalled that Cornelius did not accept Adorno's Habilitation thesis: the official reason was that the text too closely imitated his own point of view, and so was lacking in originality; but it might be suspected that the professor was perhaps hurt by the fact that he perceived the inauthenticity of Adorno's loyalty in his thesis and understood that the work did not really express Adorno's philosophical point of view.

On the philosophical level, moreover, the texts and the thinkers who stimulated Adorno stood very far indeed from Cornelius' arid, if rigorous, theory of consciousness. Adorno was close friends with Walter Benjamin, whose writings he read and unconditionally admired; he was passionate about the texts of Georg Lukács (whom he had personally met in Vienna), such as *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*; he was in contact with Ernst Bloch and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, as well as with his old friend Krakauer. In short, he lived intensely immersed in an intellectual world where love for avant-garde music (whose highest representative—Adorno held—was Schoenberg), the critique of bourgeois society, and revolutionary and utopian passions made for a fascinating and explosive combination—and one which had little enough to do with Cornelius' academic philosophy.

Adorno was soon able to overcome the feeling of dejection he felt when his Habilitation thesis was rejected: in 1929, he made contact with the politically engaged theologian Paul Tillich, who had just become a professor at the University of Frankfurt, and together they agreed that Adorno would write a Habilitation thesis on Kierkegaard. With this, Adorno attained his teaching qualification in 1931. Though this thesis was written just a few years after the first, it had nothing in common with its precursor: it was indeed an absolutely personal and creative work, very complex and difficult in its conceptual weave and writing, and strongly inspired, in its basic philosophical motifs, by the writings of Walter Benjamin—above all, his work on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (a text, moreover, with which Benjamin, too, proved unable to obtain the Habilitation that he had hoped for). The text on Kierkegaard was published, after having been reworked, in 1933—«on the very day that Hitler seized dictatorial powers»,[4] as Adorno bitterly recalled.

[4] Th. W. Adorno, "Kierkegaard", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 261.

Certain texts, which stand chronologically very near to the book on Kierkegaard, pertain to the same intellectual climate: the two lectures *The Actuality of Philosophy* and *The Idea of Natural History* (1932) and the short text, which remains undated and which Adorno did not publish in his lifetime, *Thesis on the Language of the Philosopher*, which we can suppose dates back to the first part of the 1930s. These texts, which Adorno wrote in a very short period of time, represent a real thematic constellation, which in its entirety defines what we might call the first period of Adornian philosophy.

These writings were characterized by a strong attempt at theoretical originality, by a very complex style which recalls Benjamin's and Lukács' (prior to *History and Class Consciousness*), and by an extremely evident Benjaminian inspiration in the philosophical motifs that they deal with. Another circumstance which bears emphasis is this: following these texts, Adorno's production slowed down (there were certainly historical reasons for this, such as the rise of Nazism, Adorno's exile and his subsequent difficulties), and during this period Adorno would develop a more transparent philosophical style, close to his youthful style but at the same time distant from it (not least thanks to his ever closer bond with Horkheimer and that thinker's authoritative influence). However, Adorno always maintained that his original intuitions (namely, those he had in the early 1930s) were not in the least abandoned, but were indeed preserved and realized in his mature production.

Adorno would always, up to the time of his *Negative Dialectics*, attribute a special significance to the theses he developed in the lecture on "The Idea of Natural History": history as it has been given so far, and still more in the modernity of capitalism and of commodity fetishism (a theme which Adorno borrowed above all from the young Lukács) is "second nature" insofar as it is upheld by the law of heteronomy and repetition (which is the secret structure of every mythical history); but, on the other hand, nature must in turn be read as history, because the insurmountability of a repetitious and blind destiny is only a mythical appearance, one which critical thought reveals by opening the doorway to the hope that something new, some reconciliation, might burst forth. In that moment, history would properly begin.

2 The 1930s and Exile

For the young Adorno, a messianic Marxist and the son of a Jewish merchant, the 1930s surely could not have been an easy period. In September of 1933, his authorization to teach as a lecturer at the University of Frankfurt, was officially revoked[5]; his house was searched and, though he was initially convinced that Nazism would be short-lived, he began to seek an academic position abroad, successfully applying to the University of Vienna and then to Oxford. The good relations that his father had had in England (he knew, among others, John Maynard Keynes) were of no great help to Adorno; in Oxford he was accepted (to his regret) only as an advanced student, and he did not burn his bridges to Germany, where he continued periodically to return even in the first years of the dictatorship. In the meantime, his relations with the Institute of Social Research directed by Horkheimer, who was preoccupied with his own exile, were also troubled. One of the reasons for this was that, in the interdisciplinary group lead by Horkheimer, the role of philosopher was already played by Herbert Marcuse; so Adorno's collaboration with the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* was essentially limited to the sphere of sociology of music. In these dramatic 1930s, however, Adorno outlined and developed the essential features of his philosophical and social conception of music, the first but already mature sketch of which came in the important essay which he published in 1932, in two installments, in Horkheimer's periodical, under the title "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik" ("The Social Situation of Music"). Whoever reads this essay together with his coeval book on *Kierkegaard* might have the impression that he finds himself standing before two different authors: in his contribution to Horkheimer's periodical, Adorno adopted a less personal and idiosyncratic style, clearer and more communicative, rich with reference to the concepts of historical materialism—in a word, a style better suited to a social science periodical.

During his sojourn in Oxford, Adorno drafted a text of some four-hundred type-written pages offering a thorough presentation of Husserl's thought. He entitled it *Zur Philosophie Husserls* and submitted it to Horkheimer for publication, again in various installments, in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. But the project, on account of resistance

[5] For more on this, along with more detailed information on this period, see the above-cited volume by S. Müller-Doohm, 170 ff.

from Horkheimer, who found the Adornian essay long and obscure, was not published, and only later, in 1940, would Adorno publish a brief but important article of thirteen pages, entitled "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism", in the *Journal of Philosophy*. The book *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique; Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* would have to await 1956 before it was issued (by Kohlhammer, Stuttgart), with three chapters published beforehand in the periodical *Archiv für Philosophie* (one in 1949, two in 1953).

Adorno's situation became clearer and began to improve as his contacts with the Horkheimeran Institute grew stronger: in June of 1937, Adorno came to New York on Horkheimer's invitation and decided to move there as soon as conditions would permit. In autumn of the same year, through Horkheimer, he was invited to collaborate with the Office of Radio Research, directed by Paul Lazarsfeld; Adorno accepted the proposition, and in February of 1938 he moved to New York. In November of the same year, he became an official member of the Institute for Social Research and intensified his intellectual collaboration with Horkheimer, which would bear its most important fruit with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in California between 1942 and 1944. His New York, and subsequently Californian, sojourn brought to an end a troubled and uncertain period, one filled with existential difficulties, during which Adorno did not publish a single book, but which was nonetheless important for his philosophical maturation. In his arduous engagement with Husserl, Adorno developed the first version of his peculiar approach to dialectics. In his intense, and often also unpleasant, epistolary dialogue with Walter Benjamin, he came to terms with that friend who, more than anyone else, had influenced his first theoretical phase. He sought to strike a difficult balance between the dazzling intuitions of the author of *German Drama* and the historical, dialectic, and interdisciplinary materialism of Max Horkheimer.

3 The American Period

With the end of the 1930s, and with Adorno's American period, there began a phase of intense and wide-ranging intellectual creativity. His reflections on music and society, which he had already established in his 1932 essay "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik", were brought to ripeness, some ten years later, with Adorno's most famous musicological work, the *Philosophy of Modern Music*. The first part of this text, on

Schoenberg—as Adorno himself recounts in his Preface—was concluded in 1940–1941, while the part on Stravinksy was written seven years later. The volume was published in Germany in 1949 and immediately became the center of many discussions and arguments. The manuscript of Adorno's work on Schoenberg, moreover, was read by Thomas Mann in his Californian exile while he worked on his *Doktor Faustus*, and struck the writer, who not only had a close friendship with Adorno, but employed Adorno as a "secret adviser" for those parts of his novel in which he described the musical compositions of Adrian Leverkühn, the novel's protagonist, who makes a pact with the devil. As Mann himself recounted in his book on *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doktor Faustus*, he very much appreciated the way in which Adorno recreated the dialectic through which the extreme rationalization of music, typical of the technique of dodecaphony, ended up turning into a mythology, and he made use of this in his portrait of the "general crisis of civilisation and of music" from which Leverkühn's pact with the devil emerges. The artistic collaboration between Mann and Adorno, however, was also a source of controversy: Schoenberg was upset by the "demonic" significance that was bestowed on his twelve-tone compositional technique in the novel, while Mann's daughters sought to downplay Adorno's contribution to their father's masterpiece—a contribution which was nonetheless indisputable, particularly in relation to certain passages.[6]

While Schoenberg always remained a key figure for Adorno (particularly from the 1920s up to the early 1940s, but also in the following years), the other great musician to engage his interest in the late 1930s was Wagner: his essay on Wagner, as can be read in the preface to the first German edition of 1952, was composed between the autumn of 1937 and the beginning of 1938; four chapters of it were published beforehand, under the title "Fragmente über Wagner", in the 1939 edition of the *Zeitschrif für Sozialforschung*.

In his extremely brief "Notiz über Wagner", which he published in the *Europäische Revue* in 1933,[7] Adorno sought to accurately distinguish Wagnerian music from the use that was made of it by the Nazis—demonstrating at the same time that he was not deaf to this music's fascination

[6] For more on this, see, in the text already cited by S. Müller-Doohm, the section "*The Privy Councillor*: Adorno and Thomas Mann", 311 ff.

[7] This note can be read in Th. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18 (*Musikalische Schriften V*) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 204–209.

and its greatness. However, his next lengthy essay took the form of an extremely sharp attack on the author of the *Mastersingers*, which sets out on the warpath from the first chapter, only to soften its tones a bit near the end. Nothing is left untouched: Wagner is the anarchical rebel who, after having taken part in the revolt of Dresden headed by Bakunin, begs Liszt to procure a stipend for him through some noblewoman; he is the man for whom a critique of the structures governing property transformed itself into resentment against pleasure; he is a man characterized by «envy, sentimentalism and destructiveness»,[8] by a cult of grandiosity and of self-celebration that are «features of Wagner's entire output and the emblems of fascism»[9]; he is as acquiescent to power as he is ready to humiliate its victims. And he is, above all, an anti-Semite, a man who greets the death of four hundred Jews in the burning of the Viennese Ringtheater with witticisms; his anti-Semitism «assembles all the ingredients of subsequent varieties», to such an extent that «he had even conceived the notion of the annihilation of the Jews» that the Nazis were to put into practice, with the single difference that he «equates annihilation with salvation».[10]

A more properly sociological attitude found expression in other essays that Adorno published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in the latter half of the 1930s. In 1936, there appeared, under the pseudonym Hektor Rottweiler, the work "On Jazz", which constituted one of the first elaborations of what would become the Adornian critique of the culture industry. The critique of consumer society began to mature in Adorno precisely through the study of those musical experiences that he further pursued and deepened after moving to the United States, in his work as the director of the musical section of the Princeton Project of Radio Research. In 1938, he wrote a detailed essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening", which was published that same year in the seventh volume of the *Zeitschift für Sozialforschung*. In this text, to which Adorno rightly ascribed much importance (he would indeed republish it as the first essay of the collection *Dissonanzen*, which was issued in Germany in 1958), the author concentrated above all on the dimension of musical *consumption*, in a series of considerations that

[8] Th. W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: Verso, 2005), 7.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Ibid., 16.

would remain paradigmatic for the reflections that he would later dedicate to consumer society. It would be difficult to deny the extraordinary foresight of these thoughts, their capacity to decipher in a precocious way phenomena which would "burst upon the scene" only much later. The essay was read, above all in its last part, as a critique of the theses proposed by Benjamin in his writing on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

From the time of Adorno's move to the United States in 1938, his collaboration with Horkheimer became ever closer, as we have seen. In that year, Horkheimer already entertained the intention of writing a book on «dialectic philosophy»,[11] which assumed great importance for him, insofar as it was to represent in some way the crown jewel of his entire intellectual trajectory. The project's realization, however, was not particularly smooth: Horkheimer intended it, at least in its preparatory phase, to be a work that would gather together, in an interdisciplinary way, the results of the research conducted by his closest collaborators (Marcuse, Adorno, and Pollock). He was moreover aware that the book could be written only if he was able to detach himself from the work of directing the Institute, so as to be able to devote himself to theoretical reflection without too many interruptions. These conditions only arose in 1941, when Horkheimer, partly for health reasons, decided to leave New York and to move to the pleasanter climes of California, to Pacific Palisades near Santa Monica; Adorno followed him there, since it had become clear in the meantime that Adorno was to be his closest collaborator. Indeed, Horkheimer would write the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* together with Adorno in the period between 1942 and 1944. Although Horkheimer was undoubtedly the man responsible for this project (he was presented as its first author, even though he should have come second in alphabetical order), it was from Adorno's pen that the title sprung: in one of his letters to Horkheimer, dated November 10, 1941, he stated that, while reading Gorer's book on Sade, many ideas had come to mind that «essentially concern the dialectics of enlightenment or the dialectics between culture and barbarism».[12]

[11] R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 323.

[12] Cf. ibid., 310. The book to which Adorno refers here is Geoffrey Gorer, *The Revolutionary Ideas of the Marquis De Sade*, published in 1934.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was the fruit of the joint labor that Adorno and Horkheimer undertook in California between 1942 and 1944, was published by Querido Verlag in Amsterdam in 1947. In this book, the two authors address the question of how the rational tradition of the West could have transformed itself into Nazism, in the most fearfully regressive catastrophe; the thesis of the authors is that, in the tradition of the West, beginning with the Greeks, and even Odysseus, enlightened reason posited for itself the objective of destroying myth and superstition, liberating men from fear, through the domination and control of nature. A single guiding thread thus joins the cunning of Odysseus, who deceives and annihilates the mythical and archaic monsters he comes up against in his journeys, to modern scientific rationality and ultimately positivistic philosophy, which destroys religion, metaphysics, and also the idea that there might be certain ethically rational ends, and which recognizes truth only in scientific knowledge aimed at the control of nature. The unstoppable path of a demythologizing and dominating reason, however, has not brought men that liberation from fear and that rational autonomy which the Enlightenment had pursued; on the contrary, it has incubated a relapse into barbarism, into brutal dominion, into myth. But if the ends of liberty, autonomy, and happiness which the Enlightenment posited have not been reached, this must be credited precisely to the perversion that Western reason has suffered since its very beginnings: the price paid for freedom from myth, from subjection to natural powers, has been the reduction of reason to an instrument of domination and self-preservation; and the progress made in the domination of nature has been possible only at the price of the establishment of the domination of men over other men, and of each man over his own inner nature, his own Self. From the experience that the Western spirit had until the catastrophes of the twentieth century, we must therefore learn the lesson that freedom from fear, from myth and from the condition of subjugation is not achieved through a domination over nature which is sympathetic to the domination of man over man, or the domination of each man over his own nature and his own impulses. Rather, this freedom can only be achieved through a perspective of conciliation: of a humanity, that is to say, that is capable of reconciling itself both with nature, no longer seen merely as something to be dominated, and with itself, in the name of a reason which is no longer merely a technique of self-preservation, but which becomes the organ of universality, liberty, and solidarity.

Adorno's American period and his close collaboration with Horkheimer generated a noteworthy widening of his interests in the fields of social theory and also of sociology in the strict sense: Adorno would deeply involve himself in these fields even after his return to Germany, and would, after the reconstruction of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, come to be a focal point of German and international sociological debate and the recognized founder of a school. He thus came to exercise an influence which was to become particularly pervasive in the 1960s.

The first works on social theory that Adorno published after his move to the United States were closely connected to his participation in the Princeton project of research on the radio; it is to this sphere that his essays "On Popular Music" and "The Radio Symphony", as well as his 1945 "A Social Critique of Radio Music", belong. His research on consumer music had direct connections to what was obviously the most relevant contribution Adorno made to sociological theory in the 1940s, a contribution whose enormous influence cannot be underestimated; that is, the chapter on "The Culture Industry" in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The volume on music in film, which Adorno worked on in 1944 in collaboration with the musician Hanns Eisler,[13] could also be seen to reflect the same intellectual concerns. This book was published in 1947 under Eisler's name alone, since Adorno, as he himself declared, did not want his name to appear beside that of a musician whose political views were those of a philo-Soviet Marxist, and who had been moreover summoned in 1947 before the McCarthy Committee on Un-American Activities, which hunted out communist intellectuals in Hollywood and in literary professions.

Another very significant aspect of Adorno's American activity was his research on prejudice and anti-Semitism, whose most important result was the publication of the volume *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950. Adorno worked on this together with a research group that was headquartered in Berkeley and directed by the social psychologist R. Nevitt Sanford; Daniel Levinson and Else Frenkel-Brunswik were also a part of it. Setting out from a psychoanalytical approach to research on anti-Semitism, around the mid-1940s Adorno further produced a number

[13] Cf. H. Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947). The German version can be read, under the title *Komposition für den Film*, in vol. 15 of Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften*.

of studies on fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda, and on the "aspiring Hitlers", agitators and demagogues who operated on the Californian coast. Among the most important results of this research, we should recall the essays "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda" and, above all, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda".[14]

There is another facet of Adorno's intellectual activity in the first part of the 1940s which, though it cannot be inscribed directly within the sphere of social theory, nonetheless closely touches upon it: that is, the aphorisms which would make up the volume *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, Adorno's true literary masterpiece. Part of this work was ready so soon as 14 February 1945, when Adorno gave it as a gift to Horkheimer on the occasion of the latter's fiftieth birthday; the second part was completed by Christmas of the same year, while the third was written between 1946 and 1947. The volume only appeared in Germany in 1951. In the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*, the author develops his philosophy and his interpretation of the epoch, beginning from subtle considerations dedicated to even the most banal and apparently negligible phenomena of daily life. The experience of being an emigrant in the United States constituted the background against which the philosopher could develop the most radical and merciless critique of the "American way of life", and more generally of capitalistic consumer society, the society of Hollywood and of the motorcar, of the culture industry and of programmed entertainment, of advertisements and of mass media. For Adorno, even the most glittering forms of hyper-developed capitalism conceal regression, insofar as they strip the individual of every vestige of autonomy and invade even his intimate spaces, with a soft but omnipresent totalitarianism from which no dimension of life is able to escape. This decadence of the autonomous individual has its roots, moreover, in the transformation of economic forms, where the great monopolistic company has come to dominate, establishing itself at the close of the old liberal and competitive capitalism, which still offered a margin of autonomy to the individual economic actor.

[14] These writings can be read in vol. 8 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, on pages 397–407 and 408–433, respectively. They have also been published in Th. W. Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth* (London: Routledge, 2002), ed. by S. Crook, 162–171, and in A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 118–137.

4 Return to Germany

After his return to Germany, social theory was one of numerous fields (along with philosophy, musical theory, literary and aesthetic criticism) in which Adorno would develop his activities as a scholar and academic: in 1953, he would take over the teaching of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Frankfurt, and in 1957 would go on to become full professor of both disciplines. In 1958, following in Horkheimer's footsteps, he would become head of the Institute for Social Research, thus emerging as one of the most influential German sociologists of the postwar period. In 1961, at the congress of German sociologists in Tübingen, he would spark off the dispute with Popper and his school on the method of the social sciences, and in 1963 he would be elected president of the German Society of Sociology. In the 1970s, he would find himself in the middle of many influential debates, such as that featured at the sociology congress held in Frankfurt in 1968 on the question: "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" In 1968, Adorno's thought would become a focal point for the student movement; but the relationship between him and his radical students would end rather badly, when Adorno called the police to drive out the students of the Institute of Social Research.

In his final years, Adorno, though worn out by his labors, also devoted himself to the preparation of two works that were to be the *summa* of his thought: one on dialectics and the other on aesthetics. Adorno's development of his mature philosophical perspective, which—surprisingly for an intellectual who was not lacking in brilliancy and precocity—made for a very long and complicated process, reached its goal only in the *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1966. An important intermediate step is represented by the publication in 1956 of the book *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique; Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*; in this volume, through the critique brought against the author of the *Logical Investigations*, Adorno's theoretical horizons began to find a mature and complete formulation. After the publication of *Three Studies of Hegel* in 1963, Adorno published *Negative Dialectics* in 1966, to which he would subsequently add several important clarifications, above all in the essays on "Progress" and on "Subject and Object"; both appeared in the volume *Stichworte* (*Catchwords*), published in 1969, after the death of the philosopher in August of that year.

But in Adorno's postwar output, besides his sociological and philosophical work, there are very many writings dedicated to music, literature, and poetry. As part of this vast corpus, we should at least mention, besides his monographs on *Mahler* (1960) and *Berg* (1968), the various collections of musical writings (*Dissonanzen*, 1956; *Klangfiguren. Musikalische Schriften I*, 1959; *Der getreue Korrepetitor. Lehrschriften zur musikalischen Praxis* and *Quasi una fantasia. Musikalische Schriften II*, 1963; *Moments musicaux*, 1964), the three volumes of the *Noten zur Literatur* (1957, 1961, and 1965), to which a fourth would be added posthumously, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, as well as the essays gathered in *Prisms* (1955) and in *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica* (1967), not to speak of all the scattered writings which were included in the complete edition of his works only after his death.

Adorno's considerable interest in artistic works of the most various kinds, however, did not translate—at early stage of his career—into the systematization of an aesthetic, of which his writings contain many elements. Adorno began to devote himself to the volume *Aesthetic Theory* in October of 1966, after finally completing the laborious work *Negative Dialectics*, which was published in November of that same year. The book on aesthetics had already been written, in its broad outline, by August of 1968, but Adorno was not satisfied with its form; he continued to work on it until his death of a heart attack in August 1969 and thus was unable to authorize the book's publication. The text, unfinished, was published posthumously in 1970, under the supervision of his wife Gretel and of Rolf Tiedemann.

We will consider certain aspects of Adorno's aesthetic thought in the third part of this volume, while the first part will be dedicated to his philosophical theory, and the second to his social thought.

Philosophy

An Idea of Philosophy

1 In Search of Dialectics

A good way to approach Adorno's theoretical perspective is to read the lectures on the concept of philosophy he gave in Frankfurt in the early 1950s.[1] Dating from the period following his exile in America and just after his return to Germany, these lectures belong to an important and fruitful phase of Adorno's philosophical career. The philosopher had just concluded his highly significant collaboration with Horkheimer to produce the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and was now beginning to develop his own concept of philosophy in an increasingly resolute and original way. The provisional outcome of this effort was to be his book on Husserl,[2] which arguably represents—particularly in its first chapter—one of the most mature expressions of Adorno's philosophy. In one respect, therefore, the lectures on the concept of philosophy belong to a decisive period; but in another respect, they are especially significant insofar as they tackle what Adorno regarded as the very heart of the problem at

[1] See Th. W. Adorno, "Der Begriff der Philosophie. Vorlesung 1951/52" [Mitschrift von K. Bretschneider], in R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter 2* (München: Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, 1993), 9–91.

[2] See Th. W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* (Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71991-3_2

the time, namely the need to define his own concept of philosophy and, more specifically, of "dialectic" philosophy.

A brief digression is in order here. One of Adorno's distinctive features within the so-called Frankfurt School—which is to say within the group of scholars gathered around Horkheimer and his Institute for Social Research—is no doubt his attitude toward "philosophy". As Habermas noted,[3] whereas Horkheimer tended to resolve philosophy into an «interdisciplinary social theory» capable of drawing upon contributions from psychology, economics, and the sociology of culture, Adorno was more determined to keep the focus on the strictly philosophical moment of critical theory, although he certainly shared his friend's eagerness not to cut philosophy off from "concrete" research on society. One source that helps bring out this point of divergence is the transcriptions of some seminars held by the Frankfurt group in the 1930s and 1940s, and published in Horkheimer's posthumous writings.

By engaging particularly with Horkheimer, Adorno stresses the need to «search for a new concept of dialectics»,[4] by which he essentially means the need to reconstruct critical theory and to establish it on new philosophical foundations. By contrast, Horkheimer is far more skeptical with regard to this point and with regard to the value of purely philosophical research of the sort Adorno is interested in. He objects: «You always point to the x you call dialectics, whereas I am referring to the development of scientific research, which at least is not so indeterminate». He continues: «[…] You understand dialectics as a means ultimately to ensure a sort of coherent construction, in which it would be necessary to outline the destiny of the relation of reciprocity between transcendence and immanence, subject and object, ideality and reality. From my point of view, however, when it comes to these concepts and their relations, various analyses branch off in different directions, and I admit that I am incapable of unifying everything that results from these analyses: for example, your desire for a dialectics mediating between realism and idealism seems to me impossible to realise. I am one of those philosophers who have

[3] See J. Habermas, "Notes on the Developmental History of Horkheimer's Work", in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 10 (2), 1993, 61–77.

[4] M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, "Diskussion über Dialektik", in M. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 12 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 526–541: 534.

no points of view or, rather, as already mentioned, who do not have the strength to construct a system».[5]

The salient points of the debate within the innermost group of the Frankfurt School thus seem quite clear: whereas Horkheimer essentially believes that it is impossible to restore the constructive power of a purely philosophical kind of research, Adorno strives precisely in this direction, as his writings and lectures from the 1950s clearly reveal. Naturally, Horkheimer's doubts are far from unfounded, and the objection he raises against Adorno is a simple yet sharp one. He basically tells his young friend that he ought to clarify once and for all this concept of dialectics which he constantly refers to, but which invariably seems to escape anyone wishing to lay his hands on it, and to constitute a sort of perennial question mark, an "x" or unknown—as Horkheimer notes, acutely grasping the weakness in Adorno's position.

2 The Concept of "Determinate Negation"

The lectures on the concept of philosophy prove most useful to clarify Adorno's concept of dialectics, given their everyday language and readability. Adorno primarily understands dialectics in negative terms: a dialectic philosophy is one which does not proceed by rattling off a series of truths starting from a firm point of departure, from a First, from a Foundation. On the contrary, it is characterized by the awareness that each determination of thought is always intertwined with all others. Thus, for instance, we never find a Foundation, or an Essential, standing in contrast to a Founded or Apparent, because—as Adorno infers from what he regards as one of the finest pages in Hegel's *Logic*—the Foundation owes its nature as a Foundation to the Founded which makes it such; therefore, upon closer scrutiny, it is precisely the founded which is the foundation of the foundation. Hence, by refusing to start from a First or a Foundation, which is to say to absolutize a particular conceptual determination above all others, dialectics rejects *reductio ad unum*, which is to say the reduction of the multiplicity of differences to a single principle. Indeed, for Adorno, this operation of reduction is precisely what makes a philosophy idealistic: in his view, even those who uphold the apparently anti-idealistic thesis that reality is nothing but matter are making

[5] Ibid., 540–541.

an unwitting profession of idealism, insofar as they ultimately reduce the totality to a single conceptual determination, thereby unconsciously reaffirming precisely that primacy of the spirit which they seek materialistically to deny.

But if dialectics is not a philosophy built from a foundation, from a First, from a point of departure, how then does the philosophy which Adorno wishes to define as dialectics articulate its discourse? As it lacks an unshakable foundation on which to build its philosophy, dialectics can only unfold as a critique. It can set out from any point in the universe of established knowledge in order to examine it, dissect it, and place it under the lens of its spirit of contradiction. Therefore, according to Adorno, the archetype of the dialectical operation is Socrates (whereas he is somewhat harsh on Plato—quite unjustly, in my view). This Socrates roams the streets of Athens, questioning his fellow citizens and demolishing their limited and partial viewpoints for a totally different purpose than merely affirming a skeptical perspective: «With Socrates for the first time everything that is singular, limited, and partial is criticised and negated; not only that, but in the negation a distinction is drawn between what is true and what is false; and through the completion of the negativity, positivity is sought».[6]

From this interpretation of Socrates, a smooth transition can be made to Hegelian dialectics, which according to Adorno reaches its apex with the conceptual image of "determinate negation". It would not be an exaggeration to regard this as the highest point reached by Adorno in his lectures on the concept of philosophy. Leaving aside the rather conventional reservations he expresses, and his suggestion to bear in mind the difficulties entailed by dialectical philosophy, it is clear that Adorno views the Hegelian thesis of "determinate negation" as enabling dialectics to constitute itself (positively, we might add) as critical thought and to master the dichotomy between "absolutism" and "relativism", instead of being dominated by it.

What does "determinate negation" mean? It means that the critical, negative operation of the individual knowledge to which dialectics gives rise does not simply lead to an outcome that is null, to skepticism, or to mere negation. On the contrary, the negation of a given kind of knowledge, of a specific philosophical position, makes manifest that which

[6] See Th. W. Adorno, "Der Begriff der Philosophie", 20.

within it cannot be preserved and must be jettisoned, so as to construct a new and more advanced position. «Individual knowledge is shattered. But the Hegelian method does not say 'To the devil with all knowledge!', but rather 'I have in any case possessed this individual knowledge and established the point where it fails; I must push it towards the knowledge directly above it».[7] Adorno also clearly explains this point in his important lectures entitled *Introduction to Dialectics*: «[…] dialectical negation is not a simple correction, or counter-claim, to a false thought but, rather, if you want to put it this way, the further extension, or, as Hegel rightly describes it, the development of the initial thought, and thus the remedying of its defective character. In this sense it is a genuine correction, and not something which simply eliminates the thought itself».[8]

3 Philosophy as Critique

Upon closer scrutiny, however, it could be argued—perhaps by slightly stretching the letter of Adorno's philosophy, and certainly in agreement with Hegel—that *all* successful philosophical arguments are determinate negations. This would mean that the very alternative between a systematic, logical-deductive kind of thought and a dialectical-critical one actually dissolves, for even those kinds of thought which present themselves as logical-deductive systems actually find their moment of truth in the critical overcoming or determinate negation of tradition.

This concept is perfectly expressed in Adorno's essay "Wozu noch Philosophie", included in the *Eingriffe* collection.[9] So as not to burden the present account with literal citations, I will provide a summary of the essay's content in my own words. Adorno's thesis is that all great philosophers, starting from the pre-Socratics, have been critics. Xenophanes criticizes false representations of the gods; Aristotle criticizes the Platonic hypostasis of the concept of Idea. In the Modern Age, Descartes is critical of Scholasticism, Leibniz of empiricism; Kant's thought is at once a criticism of Leibniz and of Hume; Hegel criticizes Kant; Marx criticizes Hegel. The truth in the theses of each of these philosophers lies

[7] Ibid., 125.

[8] See Th. W. Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), Lesson 4.

[9] Th. W. Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy", in Id., *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5–18.

in their criticism of what came before them.[10] Every thesis finds its truth in the determinate negation of the thesis it opposes.

Hence, nothing is farther from Adorno than the kind of philosophical relativism which in the past would often go together with a form of historicism, and which more recently has taken the shape of postmodernism, deconstruction, and the reduction of philosophy to a non-binding conversation—according to Richard Rorty's model, for instance. «On the contrary», Adorno argues in his splendid lectures on *Philosophical Terminology*, «– and I am here once again touching upon what distinguishes philosophy from a *Weltanschauung* – a philosophical problem is in principle decidable. This decidability, which exists at least in principle, despite the revocability and fallibility of each individual philosophical decision, is properly the medium by which one must understand philosophy».[11] «The peculiar structure of philosophy – Adorno continues – is determined by the fact that in all its individual moments philosophical argumentation is indeed decidable, yet the problems of philosophy as a whole have not been settled. […] Philosophy is neither a structure whose moments are necessarily founded on one another, as Hegel envisaged it, nor something chaotic» .[12]

So let us try to clarify the theoretical point which emerges from Adorno's reflection, as outlined so far. We have seen how, in its so-to-speak constructive and anti-relativistic side, it revolves around the concept of determinate negation. According to Adorno, this conceptual image is precisely what makes it possible to find a way out of the false contrast, or rather pitfall, of the opposition between absolutism and relativism. «The essential point» —the philosopher argues, bringing his course on the "Concept of Philosophy" to a close— «is the dissolution of the problematic horizon within which the rigid contrast between absolute and relative is affirmed. This is the idea of dialectics in its genuine sense».[13] «To intervene by criticizing relativism is the paradigm of determinate negation» , as he will write in the *Negative Dialectics*.[14]

[10] Ibid., 7–8.

[11] Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), Band 1, 97.

[12] Ibid., 116.

[13] Th. W. Adorno, "Der Begriff der Philosophie", 77.

[14] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York & London: Continuum, 2007), 37.

But how does the paradigm of determinate negation work, if indeed it works at all? How can a detection of the difficulties and contradictions of a given knowledge engender a superior knowledge? Here it would be most fitting to quote an old saying dear to philosophers, and particularly to Hegel and Marx: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* Let's grab the bull by the horns.

What is determinate negation? We might get the impression that Adorno here is slipping into the idea of philosophy as a credit system,[15] an idea he often mentions: as we have seen, to solve the problem of how thought might be neither absolutist nor relativistic, Adorno resorts to the concept of determinate negation. We must now verify whether or not this concept gives rise to more problems than it is meant to solve. Literally, "determinate negation" means that the negation of a given thesis—as we read in the classic passage expounding this concept, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*—does not merely give rise to nothing, as skepticism suggests; on the contrary, because this nothing is «the nothing of that from which it results», it is something positive, with a definite content. If the result is understood «as a definite negation» —we read in the *Phenomenology*— «a new form has thereby immediately arisen […]».[16] However, this very Hegelian passage has long struck interpreters as one of his most critical or aporetic moments. For example, Jean Hyppolite, one of the leading interpreters of the *Phenomenology*, raises the following question: «If we assume a term A, can its negation, not-A, engender a truly new term, B? It seems not».[17] Unless, that is—Hyppolite argues—we grant that the All is already immanent in the unfolding of consciousness. But, I would add, since according to Adorno this assumption clearly does not hold, how can the mechanism of determinate negation work in a philosophical context such as Adorno's?

Adorno repeatedly dwells on this issue, particularly in *Hegel: Three Studies*: «The central nerve of the dialectic as a method» —he writes— «is determinate negation».[18] And what does this consist in? The philosopher

[15] See, e.g., Th. W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 47.

[16] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 53.

[17] J. Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 15.

[18] Th. W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 80.

explains it a few lines later: «Only the critical idea that unleashes the force stored up in its own object is fruitful; fruitful both for the object, by helping it to come into its own, and against it, reminding it that it is not yet itself».[19] In other words, the concept of determinate negation means that what stems from the negation of a given thesis is neither the trivial, logical-formal consequence that all infinite theses other than the negated one can be true, nor a new thesis which is completely unrelated to the one negated. Rather, what must stem from the concept is a thesis which is certainly different from the negated one, but which is somehow related to it, somehow derives from it, or—to put it in Hegelian terms (although this is precisely what must be clarified)—constitutes its overcoming. But how is this possible? Hegel's detractors, starting from Adolf Trendelenburg,[20] have always criticized him by noting that in his philosophy the new does not spring in a transparent and convincing way from the old, but is introduced in an arbitrary fashion. But how can one respond to this criticism? In particular, how can one respond to it, if one wishes to employ the concept of determinate negation outside of the Hegelian system, as Adorno does?

In my view—and here I agree with the basic assumption behind Lucio Cortella's interpretation of Adorno's thought[21]—the mechanism of determinate negation is only compelling if, beyond the letter of Adorno's text, we clearly understand dialectics as a dialogic. To quote Cortella, «the unveiling of the dialogical structure of dialectics has been Gadamer's great contribution to the history of dialectics. He has shown how Hegelian dialectics itself moves according to the rhythm of dialogue: "The task Hegel sets himself of making abstract ideal determinations fluid, and of bringing them to life, is tantamount to re-immersing logic into the real process of discourse, [to re-immersing] concepts into the signifying power of speech that asks and answers"».[22]

[19] Ibid.

[20] See A. Trendelenburg, *Logische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1870^3), ch. III.

[21] See L. Cortella, "La teoria critica dalla dialettica alla dialogica", in *Fenomenologia e società*, 19 (1996), 1–2, 210–230; see also Id., *Una dialettica della finitezza. Adorno e il programma di una dialettica negativa* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006).

[22] L. Cortella, "La teoria critica dalla dialettica alla dialogica", 220. It is worth recalling that Adorno criticises Hegel for his alleged lack of awareness of the centrality of language for his dialectics: «Hegelian dialectics was a dialectics without language, while the most literal sense of the word "dialectics" postulates language; to this extent, Hegel remained

Indeed: what is that situation in which the refutation of a thesis does not lead to nothing, except the formulation of a new possibility, which improves the previous hypothesis and overcomes its difficulties? This is precisely the situation of dialogue, understood as the cooperative search for the truth. As Gadamer writes, «as the art of conducting a conversation, dialectic is also the art of seeing things in the unity of an aspect (*sunoran eis hen eidos*) — i.e., it is the art of forming concepts through working out the common meaning».[23]

We can better understand determinate negation if we see it as the discursive criticism of the thesis upheld by a certain speaker, showing him how the claim to truth found in his speech can only be fulfilled by turning it into something different. A paradigm for this in Adorno's philosophy is provided by the determinate negation of the Enlightenment thesis according to which domination over nature is the key to human emancipation, a negation which he develops precisely in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno perfectly clarifies this point, to some extent distancing himself from Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, in the crucial letter to Leo Lowenthal of June 3, 1945, the importance of which Rolf Wiggershaus has emphasized: «[…] the critique of subjective reason is only possible on a dialectical basis, i.e. by demonstrating the contradictions in its own course of development and transcending it through its own determinate negation».[24] The Enlightenment thesis, of Baconian origin, is that the only true means to human liberation is techno-scientific control over the environment-world. The refutation of this thesis shows that even the fulfillment of this dream of domination has not led to any form of emancipation, but rather has gone hand in hand with a descent into the worst forms of savagery. Therefore, if an Enlightenment thinker is to remain true to himself, he must transform his concept of reason and open up to the criticism of domination and to the idea of reconciling human beings with one another and with nature. The critique of a certain philosophical position thus proves that it must negate and transform itself, if it wishes to remain true to itself and hence to realize itself. Determinate

an adept of current science. He did not need language in an emphatic sense, since everything, even the speechless and opaque, was to him to be spirit, and the spirit would be the context. That supposition is past salvaging» (*Negative Dialectics*, 163).

[23] H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London-New York: Continuum, 2004), 361.

[24] R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 332.

negation, therefore, draws upon a dialogical truth; the new is what results from the encounter between a thesis and its critique, and which is valid and cogent with respect to the starting thesis.

4 An Open and Fallible Thinking

But it is precisely this discursive character of philosophical truth that makes it always revisable, as Adorno contends, in such a way that it can never attain a definite status.[25] Any truth stemming from a dialogue can always be challenged by new encounters with reality or by the emergence of new critiques. Philosophy is «the movement of the spirit whose proper and peculiar intention is the truth, without it being able to suppose that it possesses this truth as something ready and definitive […]».[26] Philosophy is «always a sort of rational process of revision against rationality […]».[27] Indeed, «in every single judgement we formulate, a claim to the whole truth is contained. […] This can only be realised if, from this judgement, I proceed to endless other judgements, but it is already contained in the simplest judgement. Because the idea of the absolute is already contained in the 'this is so', I am forced to proceed further and, strictly speaking, without this concept of the absolute I cannot think at all».[28]

[25] Cortella offers an interesting interpretation of this point: «*The dialogue, in other words, is the true setting for the experience of the non-identical*: within it we are constantly dealing with misunderstandings, misconceptions, disagreements, conflicts, and the multiplicity of interpretations. Certainly, a tendency towards agreement is present in dialogue, as Habermas says, yet it coexists with a non-transparent structure such as that of language, so what we experience is the very opposite from the consensus we all desire. Dialogue, therefore, undermines precisely those agreements that seemed obvious and unquestionable prior to discussion». In this respect, the root of the critical-dialectical movement is the structural *disclosure* of linguistic meanings: «If language did not carry within itself this structural openness of the meanings it expresses, this density which resists all simplification, any genuine form of questioning would be impossible and hence, ultimately, no dialogue and no dialectic would be possible» (Lucio Cortella, *La teoria critica dalla dialettica alla dialogica*, 214; my translation). From my perspective, Cortella's no doubt noteworthy analysis runs the risk of tracing the movement of critique back to just a single, intralinguistic root, whereas there may be other roots too, such as for instance the failure which a certain way of looking at the world may experience.

[26] Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Band 1, 88.

[27] Ibid., 87.

[28] Ibid., 113–114.

In this sense, therefore, according to Adorno the task «of critical-dialectical thought is to constantly remain *open* to the overcoming of the very concepts on which it is necessarily based».[29] Yet the openness of thought is not different from the contradictory, unstable, and open character of social reality itself. Thought does not occur in the neutral space of an ideal dialogue because, from Adorno's perspective, theoretical stances are a moment in the relations that hold within the social domain as a whole, and cannot even be understood without referring to this element from which they spring. Antagonistic society, conceived in Adorno's distinctive way, is also distinguished by its having a "false awareness of itself", by the fact of constantly reproducing a "socially necessary appearance" (for Adorno, this is the only rigorous concept of ideology). It is therefore in this conceptual space that critique must establish itself, according to Adorno: the contradictions it identifies in philosophers' concepts ultimately stem from the antagonistic core of social relations, and the critic can therefore throw light on society's contradictions through the philosophers' aporias, and vice versa. In this respect, according to Adorno, the hallmark of philosophy ought to be its «power to resist», its capacity «not to let itself be stultified by anything – neither by the affirmation of profundity, nor by the cult of facts».[30]

[29] S. Muscolino, "Tra Nietzsche e Auschwitz", in *InTrasformazione, Rivista di Storia delle Idee*, 8:2 (2019), 16–21: 17.

[30] Th. W. Adorno, "Der Begriff der Philosophie", 87.

What is the Meaning of 'Negative Dialectics'?

1 Understanding Negative Dialectics

With *Negative Dialectics*, the last great work that Adorno published during his lifetime, he attempted finally to complete that research into a new dialectic philosophy that had always characterized his thinking. However, not a few difficulties confront anyone who sets out to understand this work, and this is certainly one of the reasons why many of the interpretations that were given of it seem rather unsatisfactory. It is not only the extremely complicated writing of the text which puts the reader and the interpreter into a difficult position, but also its theoretical thread, which can only be deciphered with difficulty. Nor is it easy to understand how the *Negative Dialectics* should be placed within the whole Adornian oeuvre. The *Negative Dialectics*, published in the final years of Adorno's life, is indeed the only text where his philosophy presents itself in a purely theoretical form: certainly, in his books on Kierkegaard, Hegel, and most of all in that on Husserl, he develops the theoretical motifs of his reflections both amply and deeply. However, I believe that the careful reader of the Adornian texts cannot help but perceive the difficulty that Adorno himself encounters in delineating his own theoretical perspective. His book on Husserl, which, at least in its early parts, gives a fairly wide and organic vision of Adornian philosophy, had—as is known—a long and tormented gestation; in continuity with that text, the *Negative Dialectics* appears to reflect the will to honor a debt that can no longer be put off:

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71991-3_3

it is not enough to philosophize about specific contents (society, music, literature); one has a duty, which cannot be indefinitely postponed, of making clear the fundamental lines of one's philosophic perspective. While the elaboration of the *Negative Dialectics* was extremely wearying and stressful for Adorno, as demonstrated by letters and available witnesses, for instance in the biography of Muller-Doohm,[1] this was certainly no accident: it was rather because, as should be evident to every attentive reader of Adorno's intellectual trajectory, the problems to be solved were extremely intricate, and these difficulties have an impact on the system and the complexity with which the *Negative Dialectics* envelops the reader who wants to measure himself against it.

The difficulty, moreover, can be brought into light also from another perspective: "negative dialectics" is in the first place a dialectic, and so preserves some fundamental aspects, not only of the Platonic dialectic, but above all of the Hegelian and Marxian: it adopts the theme of mediation, of the whole, and of contradiction. And since it is already difficult to understand in what sense this happens, it is almost desperately complicated to decipher what innovation *negative* dialectics contributes, as compared to traditional dialectics. This is extremely complicated already from the start, because classical dialectic presented a tangle of problems which were never *fully* resolved (to mention only one among many, the nature of the so-called dialectical contradiction) and the reformed dialectic certainly does not seem to tend to smooth out difficulties, but rather appears to entangle them further.

It is precisely for this reason, however, that whoever approaches the *Negative Dialectics* should, in my opinion, adopt as his own an essential methodological imperative—namely, to concede nothing to "suggestive" and "allusive" thoughts, not to allow oneself to be captured by the charm of the Adornian formulations, but to submit his reflection to ruthless analysis: whatever cannot be reconstructed in a transparent way should not charitably be accepted "as it is"; only those theses are valid that can be reconstructed into a horizon of limpid rationality, even if one must sometimes pay the price of finding oneself clutching nothing but a fistful of rather trivial truths.

So, what is negative dialectics? In the introduction, which seems to have been written, as is appropriate for any introduction, after the

[1] S. Müller-Doohm, *Theodor W. Adorno. A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

work itself was completed, Adorno immediately clarifies what must be understood by "negative dialectics": «Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity», and this can be translated also into the statement that «no object is wholly known».[2] In the first place, therefore, negative dialectics posits itself as an invitation to humility, an awareness that knowledge does not fully draw the object, does not entirely possess it; a simply fallibilist awareness, we might say, that is certainly incompatible with the pretenses toward absoluteness of philosophic idealism, but which is on the other hand perfectly compatible with the problematic, dubious, and fallibilist ethos that pervades contemporary science and philosophy. And so, much ado about nothing?

In reality, things are more complicated: to understand the Adornian affirmation in full, we must on the one hand question its reflexive truth postulate (does this observation about knowledge capture its nature and, if so, to what extent?); on the other we must call it into question, not so much in terms of its plausibility (which is difficult to contest), but rather in terms of its logical bearing and the implications that this entails.

2 The Dialectic of Subject and Object

Whether we like it or not, a definition of dialectics such as that by which we have taken our bearings is located in the *epistemological* space of a thought that is articulated through the subject-object dichotomy. «To think means to think something».[3] «In truth, all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature».[4] In the brief text on "Subject and Object", in which Adorno felt it necessary to return to the issues that he had discussed in the *Negative Dialectics*, his thought on the subject is fairly clear. On the one hand, all knowledge is shackled in a categorical structure which we cannot do without, because it marks the borders of what is thinkable for us, and so preforms every object that can be given to us. But on the other hand, this categorical structure cannot be hypostatized or absolutized: it is in fact unthinkable without reference to the living man, of

[2] Ibid., 14.

[3] Ibid., 34.

[4] Ibid., 11.

whom it is an aspect. The subject-object dialectic therefore takes the form of a kind of circle: the categorical structures are constitutive of every thinkable objectivity, while they are themselves a *something* constituted through the processes of the objective world, of which they are only an instance. «Their dependence as cognitive subjects upon space, time, and forms of thought marks their dependence on the species. The species finds its expression in these constituents, which are no less valid for that reason. The a priori and society interpenetrate. The universality and necessity of those forms, their Kantian fame, is none other than what unites human beings. They needed this unity for *survival*».[5] The singularity of the dialectic of subject and object that Adorno attempts to elaborate lies in this: it wants to be dialectic, insofar as it reveals how a necessary path of thought forces us to pass through both transcendentalism and materialism: the categorical apparatuses are a product of natural history, thanks to which the human species was able to survive and dominate nature; but the construction of an objective world is the work of a categorical apparatus, which on the one hand constitutes the objective world, and on the other is constituted by it. This point, namely the idea that a «mediating dialectic between realism and idealism» should be built (to use Horkheimer's words, who, however, disagreed with this project[6]), had been clear to Adorno since the thirties, and it is expressed in an unequivocal way already in his 1940 article, "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism"[7]: every theory that seeks to posit the primacy of the fact or of the concept, of ideal or of matter, is condemned to the circularity of Baron Münchausen, because there is no fact that is not categorically mediated, and there is no category that is not objectively mediated.

Moreover, this is an excellent case study for seeing how Adornian dialectics concretely works: from the immanent critique of two opposites and one-sided points of view, Adorno develops, certainly not a synthesis, but rather a cogent philosophical path. From his basic idea, according to which it is not given to philosophy to attain an Archimedean point, be it

[5] Th. W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object", in Id., *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 252.

[6] M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, "Diskussion über Dialektik", in Id., M. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 12, (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988), 540.

[7] Th. W. Adorno, "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism", in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 37 (1) (Jan. 1940), 5–18.

the spirit or matter, he branches out into a series of reflections that come to constitute some of the essential nodes of his thought.

To begin with, the rejection of the position of a first principle, or of an Archimedean point, is joined in Adorno to the thought, which seems at first glance to contradict it, of the object's primacy (*Vorrang*). Indeed, the mutual mediation of subject and object, if we observe it more closely, does not have a symmetrical nature: «An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well. Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not an object; but we can conceive an object that is not a subject. To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject».[8] «Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity; mediation of the subject means that without the moment of objectivity it would be literally nil».[9] This is what Adorno calls the "primacy of the object", traces of which can be seen already in the obstinate Kantian defense of the thing-in-itself; it means that the mediation of the two poles is not perfectly balanced, but that, so to speak, it tends to one side, because the subject is ontologically also object, while the object is subject only insofar as it is determined, known: «The word "object", on the other hand, is not related to subjectivity until we reflect upon the possibility of its definition».[10] On the other hand, as is obvious, the primacy of the object is in its turn «attainable only for subjective reflection», and so it represents a step on the dialectic path, not a new, non-dialectical invariable as it was in vulgar materialism. Asymmetrical mediation is thus the sense that the old word materialism must have in Adorno: his attempt is to mediate idealism and materialism. However, the two terms are shown to differ in their respective weight.[11]

[8] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 183.

[9] Ibid., 186.

[10] Ibid., 166.

[11] This point is taken from an essay of Carl Braun, who speaks, with regard to Adorno, of one of the attempts at mediation between idealism and ontology; see C. Braun, "Zentrale philosophiegeschichtliche Voraussetzungen der Philosophie Theodor W. Adornos", in Id., J. Naeher (ed.), *Die negative Dialektik Adornos* (Opladen: Leske Verlag, 1984), 31–58: 55.

The fact that the two terms do not have the same weight is reflected in the way in which we must understand knowing and thinking. In one of the last pages of the introduction to the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno defines thought as an «intratemporal, motivated, progressive motion».[12] On the one hand, the primacy of the object implies that same humility of which we spoke above: concepts are not thinkable without language, nor language without society, but society exists within history and history exists in turn within natural history: therefore the categorical apparatus, which in one sense constitutes the objective world, in another sense is itself constituted by something else, it is something that came to be in history. At this point a circumstance appears that might seem rather paradoxical: Adorno comes, through the close examination of the theory of knowledge in German idealism, to elaborate a perspective which, being characterized by a sort of circularity, can be brought closer to that arrived at, by an entirely different route, by the post-positivistic epistemology of complexity. The structures of knowledge that categorically constitute the objective world must at the same time be thought of as a conditioned part of this objective world: mind and reality, man and world constitute themselves reciprocally.[13] Knowledge moves ever within this circular process, and precisely for this reason, it is never given the possibility of attaining an absolutely firm Archimedean point, nor an absolutely indisputable endpoint.

For example, the reconstruction of the web of objective mediations that constitutes subjectivity (what Adorno calls the *Urgeschichte der Subjektivität*, which was the theme of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) is possible in its turn only by taking advantage of the categories themselves, from which the constitutive mediations are to be constructed. It therefore has no recourse to a point of view external to the process, a view from nowhere from which to gaze upon it. On the contrary, it is a moment of the process that analyzes, and for this very reason cannot be a complete and exhaustive construction, one transparent to itself. To speak in the language of the theories of complexity, the observer who, with his theoretical tools, builds for himself a world is in its turn part of the world;

[12] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 54.

[13] See Th. W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1982), 87.

his constitution, his tools, and thus also the vision that he constructs all depend on it.[14]

But the same concept can be expressed equally well in the language of hermeneutics (nor is this a coincidence, because the most refined epistemologies succeed in abolishing barriers that even in Adorno's time seemed fairly solid): the language by which we talk of the world is in turn a piece of the world, constituted and having come to be; but the reflection on the process of language's constitution cannot be fulfilled if not through the medium of language itself, and for this reason is not objectifiable like something that can be known from an external point of view, but is something that always lurks behind the back of theory—a "something" which theory itself cannot grasp, and which in this way forces it to become aware of its own limits.

But this conceptual situation of circularity is connected to a series of further themes that are intertwined with it, and on which we must touch, be it ever so briefly: the study of the process of the constitution of subjectivity and of its categories; the link between the dominance structure of society and the hypostasis of the categories; the theory of the social contradiction expressed by idealism; the negative theory of the truth as determinate negation; the thesis, which at first glance stands in contradiction to the last, of the unattainability of truth within the false whole; research into a knowledge that goes beyond identifying thought; art as a piece of this knowledge; the "metaphysical" perspective of redemption and utopia. We will therefore dedicate the next paragraphs to a brief illustration of the questions that we have here summarily outlined.

3 Thinking and Society

If, along a stringent path of thought, we arrive, as has been seen, at the point of affirming that the structures of subjectivity are in turn mediated through objective processes, both natural and social, during which they constitute themselves, we cannot stop here, but we must enter into

[14] As Francesca di Lorenzo Ajello has clearly noted in the volume *Conoscenza e immaginazione nel pensiero di Theodor W. Adorno* (Rome: Carocci, 2001), Adornian thought is therefore a thought that, far from being the enemy of science, shows rather noticeable affinities with the most sophisticated epistemologies, and above all those which have elaborated the theme of complexity; cf., in particular, pp. 107–110 in Ajello's book, along with the relevant notes.

the concrete articulation of these mediations. We have to ask ourselves therefore which society, which nature-society relationship, constitutes the categories with which we think nature and society. Now, the thesis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is reprised and developed also in the *Negative Dialectics*, is that the categorical apparatuses (identity and difference, concept and classifications, the principle of causality, etc.) have developed as fitting tools for satisfying the essential need of allowing human beings to dominate nature in order to survive within it; if they did not function in this way, the species itself would not exist, nor would we be here to talk about it.

Unlike animals, however, human beings stay alive thanks to processes of social work; their organic exchange with nature is mediated by the context of cooperation governed less by instinctive regulation than by rules. On this point, the thesis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, taken up again in the *Negative Dialectics*, as well as in all of the most important of Adorno's works, is that, however far back into the innermost roots of human history one might wish to throw one's gaze, social cooperation has always been given in the forms of domination and antagonism: the domination over nature has been made possible by the domination of human beings over other human beings and by the rule of individuals over their interior nature. In modern society, this domination is perpetuated in the shadows of the rule of an abstract principle of exchange, whose impersonal lordship is yet firmly intertwined with the privilege of those who derive benefit from it: namely, those who enter into the exchange process with advantages that others lack and who precisely for this reason constitute the politico-social force that insures that the validity of this *apparently* impersonal principle is not affected by those for whom it appears only as an alien destiny.

The need to dominate nature and the imperative of social domination and of a hierarchical vision of the world and society (in an inextricably linked way) have settled within the conceptual apparatuses that have emerged through the historical process of the species' self-constitution. They are therefore valid, both to the extent that they have functioned and have allowed the reproduction of the species and to the extent that they are mediated and conditioned by a context of domination. The aspect of validity is thus intertwined with that of ideology and inseparable from it.

But this awareness (the consciousness, that is, of having become and of being mediated of the spiritual categories) is exactly what idealist thought and scientific thought have tried at all costs to remove (ultimately, without

success). Idealism, which from this point of view is for Adorno the easiest and, so to speak, the most habitual target, is centered precisely on the hypostasis of the spiritual categories as something primary, stable, unmediated, super-historical, and super-temporal. Yet Adorno is not satisfied with showing the interior logical inconsistency of this claim (the First refers in its very concept to what is derivative, and so it is conditioned and "posited" by the derivative, and for this reason cannot be the First), but wishes also to provide an explanation from the point of view of the critique of ideology. He has excellent reasons here, moreover, because if one does not understand error in its peculiar "necessity", it remains something irrational, inexplicable, and arbitrary. For Adorno, therefore, the hypostasis of the logos, which is to say the hypostasis of the categorical structures, the forcible abstract separation of the "categories of the intellect" from the genetic-historical process of their constitution, basically refers to the coercive and not rationally transparent character of social cooperation, and at the same time to the fact that in its hierarchical structure intellectual work is separate from and dominant over material work, which directly ensures the reproduction of society. The first example of this hypostasis, for Adorno, who often insists on this point, is the Kantian transcendental subject: this could be deciphered as a «society unaware of itself», and the roots of this unawareness should at this point be clear. «Ever since mental and physical labor were separated in the sign of the dominant mind, the sign of justified privilege, the separated mind has been obliged, with the exaggeration due to a bad conscience, to vindicate the very claim to dominate which it derives from the thesis that it is primary and original—and to make every effort to forget the source of its claim, lest the claim lapse».[15] Moreover, a force of gravity, a dialectic of appearance from which it is difficult to escape, presses one toward the primacy of the spirit: the fact that everything is mediated by it, that it is impossible to get away from its magic circle, leads one to transfigure it into something superior and original.

It would be worthwhile to dwell on this conceptual situation a bit longer in order to clarify it. Reason is born socially in the relation between human beings, and it is hypostatized because this relation is contradictory: society is the ground of reason, but is also the ground of its negation. The idealistic exaltation of the primacy of the spirit and of the concept

[15] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 177.

falls into the contradiction that we have seen, because it does not recognize, in its abstract operations, that the spirit and the concept are only a moment mediated by human praxis, without which they would not even be thinkable. By separating them from human praxis and elevating them to an absolute state, idealism celebrates the precedence of the spirit over material work, which is highly supportive of the current social order and its hierarchies; it is, moreover, an instance of the philosopher praising himself. But, albeit in this clearly ideological sense, the hypostasis of the categorical system also demonstrates in its way a truth—the truth through which society keeps itself alive through a rationality that is transcendent to the subject and that in a certain sense is more real, because it weighs more, than every empirical individual. «The ideology of the idea's being-in-itself is so powerful because it is the truth, but it is the negative truth; what makes it ideology is its affirmative reversal».[16]

As a "moment" of Adornian dialectic, however, idealistic thought is not solely the necessitated but illusory affirmation of the idea of primacy of the spirit, which in turn fits well with real privilege. While it is true that idealistic philosophy, by reducing reality to the spirit or to reason, in some way celebrates the given social order, it is also true that, with this same move, it comes into a collision route with it—albeit ambiguously and without having the theoretical boldness to challenge this social order openly. If we push to its limit the claim that reason can be identified with reality, which is already nascent within Kant's historical providentialism and becomes explicit in Hegel, it unwittingly ends up highlighting the unsustainability of this identification, and thus betraying the hidden truth—namely, that reason does not permeate reality and that reality is not reason. By identifying reason with reality, one affirms things should be like this, even if they are not. The hypostasis of the logos, separated from real human beings, betrays the truth that the life of real human beings does not yet conform to reason, that the universal and the particular are not reconciled—which is to say, in other words, that the history of human beings is still a "second nature", upheld by the "eat or be eaten" rule, and thus that it is not in the least that spiritualized reality which idealism likes to claim it is. Through the immanent critique of idealism, the truth of reality is therefore revealed, and this is nothing more than the contradiction that tears it to pieces. This "contradiction"

[16] Ibid., 315–316.

can in my opinion be expressed in this way: modern bourgeois society is co-structured by a pretense toward rationality and freedom (the supreme concepts celebrated precisely in idealism, in its highest form in Kantian and Hegelian idealism), which is to say the overcoming of blind naturalness, which rationality can neither uproot nor satisfy. The immanent critique of modern reason (and here we find the motivation for remaining attached to this reason, albeit critically) thus allows us to focus on the contradiction in society—reason/unreason, freedom/unfreedom.

At this point we can start to give an answer to the question that heads this chapter: what is the meaning of "negative dialectics"? Adorno's thought is *dialectic*, following the entire tradition, and in particular the Hegelian reading of dialectics, insofar as it shows both how the separate determination (in this case identity, categorical structures, the subject) runs up against a contradiction to the extent it wants to maintain its separateness—its presumed ontological self-subsistence—and how it cannot be comprehended save by following the entire arc of its mediations. This path, however, shows us that reason is constituted as a moment in an antagonistic social whole; this whole is therefore not the endpoint, but is once more the whole torn apart by contradiction, insofar as the reason which is constituted together with it, is constituted in the form of separation and abstraction: reason remains limited and partial because it is not actuated in the social world, and society remains inadequate to its concept because it will not allow reason to penetrate it, even though it contains in itself the claims of a rational society.

This dialectic is *negative*, therefore, because it is aware that even the whole that it develops, passing through the determinate negation of the self-sufficiency of particular determinations, is still the non-true: it is still marked by contradiction; «[…] the force of the entirety that works in every single definition is not simply its negation; that force itself is the negative, the untrue».[17] Taking up the Kantian theme of the Idea, understood as a «negative sign»,[18] Adornian dialectics refuses to posit reconciliation as something already attained and comes to formulate a negative conclusion: the world of human beings is not (yet) a world according to reason. «If the whole is the spell, if it is the negative, a negation of particularities – epitomized in that whole – remains negative.

[17] Ibid., 142.

[18] Ibid., 150.

Its only positive side would be criticism, determinate negation; it would not be a circumventing result with a happy grasp on affirmation».[19]

It thus seems that, so far, we can find the endpoint of Adorno's reflection in the centrality of "determinate negation". When we say that reality is reason and unreason we are not pronouncing an absurdity (a logical contradiction whose result would be nothing), but we are saying rather that reason is not at peace with itself so long as it does not eliminate its non-coincidence with the reality of man: we are saying that the (yet) unrealized purpose of reason is to free the world of human beings from heteronomy, from domination, from the perpetuation of a blind nature. Understood in this way, moreover, negative dialectic remains bound to its ancient dialogical roots: it is the critique, fulfilled through the medium of language, of those determinate interpretations of the world which tradition gives to it: it does not trespass into metaphysics or into ontology, but remains a critical-discursive operation. The Hegelian theme of determinate negation, in my opinion, as I have tried to show in the first chapter, can be validly taken up only if one understands it in critical-discoursive terms.

4 Self-Criticism of the Concept

There is, however, another side of the Adornian reflection which requires close attention: the way in which Adorno's critical philosophy understands itself, its manner of proceeding; we are required here to come to terms with the difficulties and the paradoxes that philosophical thought ever finds standing before it. There is a layer of Adornian thought in which the Frankfurter philosopher attempts to illustrate how anti-hierarchical and anti-identitarian thought should be placed in front of the object, which is to say the "method" with which it itself proceeds, in developing those critical contents that we have thus far delineated in their principal aspects.

That thinking which has become aware of the constrictive character of the categories with which it finds itself operating, of their being mediated by the antagonistic society and by social domination, is thereby pushed to search for an approach to content that does not reduce it in advance to its pre-packaged form so as to be able to manipulate it: it would like to

[19] Ibid., 159.

proceed directly to the object without placing it into pre-structured categories, for the practical purposes of dominating and schematizing reality, but at the same time sees the paradox of this requirement, because it is only thanks to those categorical structures that the object is constituted as something thinkable. According to Adorno, philosophy cannot help but run up against this paradox; it would like to free itself of its armor and have direct contact with content which is not preformed, but it knows at the same time that it cannot do without this armor. It would like to go directly "to the things", without subjective pre-structuring, but it cannot help but recognize at the same time the impracticability of this undertaking. In short, that which cannot be said, must be said. «The plain contradictoriness of this challenge is that of philosophy itself, which is thereby qualified as dialectics before getting entangled in its individual contradictions. The work of philosophical self-reflection consists in unraveling that paradox. […]. Though doubtful as ever, a confidence that philosophy can make it after all—that the concept can transcend the concept, the preparatory and concluding element, and can thus reach the nonconceptual—is one of philosophy's inalienable features and part of the *naiveté* that ails it. […] The cognitive Utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts, without making it their equal»,[20] «to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories»,[21] to «strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept».[22]

When he tries to articulate this paradox, Adorno recalls us to the theme of language: «To utter what is, properly speaking, unutterable. Now, this is only possible through the medium of language, which is capable of preserving concepts, while at the same time transforming them, by assigning them new values. If philosophy is truly such, and does not amount to philology or to a purely mechanistic game, then it must crucially rely on language, which is to say the form in which concepts are presented».[23] To quote the *Negative Dialectics*, the «integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment» of philosophy «is objectified only by presentation

[20] Ibid., 9–10.

[21] Ibid., 13.

[22] Ibid., 15.

[23] Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), Band 1, 56.

in language».[24] To articulate the paradox means then, from this point of view, trying to get around it by importing into philosophic theorizing, through the language and the form of the exposition, that mimetic-expressive element that is usually attributed to fantasy or art: «If we set out from the assumption that consciousness has split into mimesis or the expressive capacity, on the one hand, which is usually assigned to art […], and into philosophical conceptuality, on the other, then we might say that philosophy – precisely by virtue of this moment of *eros* or enthusiasm – is, properly speaking, an attempt to save or conceptually reproduce that moment of expression, that mimetic moment, which is actually connected to love in the profoundest way. Perhaps, the philosopher is not searching for the truth in the usual sense, as something objective, but is rather seeking to express his own experience by conceptual means; perhaps, he is seeking to create an objectification through the expression of the concept in language. In such a way, the philosophical concept of truth too would certainly be distinguished in a most rigorous manner».[25]

But Adorno's reflections on the paradoxical task of knowledge do not stop here. In a central paragraph of the *Negative Dialectics*, the one dedicated to constellations, Adorno addresses from another point of view the question of what a non-deforming knowledge is, i.e., one really open to the non-identical:

> Language offers no mere system of signs for cognitive functions. Where it appears essentially as a language, where it becomes a form of representation, it will not define its concepts. It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts, centred about a thing. Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means. By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the 'more' which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.
>
> The Hegelian usage of the term 'concrete' – according to which the thing itself is its context, not its pure selfhood – takes note of this; and yet, for all the criticism of discursive logic, that logic is not ignored. But Hegelian dialectics was a dialectics without language, while the most literal

[24] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

[25] Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Band 1, 81.

> sense of the word 'dialectics' postulates language; to this extent, Hegel remained an adept of current science. […] Whatever part of nonidentity defies definition in its concept goes beyond its individual existence; it is only in polarity with the concept, in staring at the concept, that it will contract into that existence. The inside of nonidentity is its relation to that which it is not, and which its managed, frozen self-identity withholds from it.[26]

Critical knowledge, therefore, inverts the direction in which our "current science" is marching—our science which identifies the non-identical with pre-packaged, and socially pre-structured, categories. It does not aim to schematize, order, or dominate, as canonic scientific knowledge does, but only to interpret reality in its historicity, mobility, instability, and inconsistency; and to do this, it activates all the potential connections and polysemy that are enclosed within the language,[27] which always says more than it seems to say, when one seeks to reduce it to a mere "system of signs", just as it mobilizes the subject's entire ability to experience, the subject's sensibility and its vulnerability to pain and injustice. Philosophy as a linguistic interpretation and a critique of reality and of the (painful) experience that the subject has of this reality is a vector proceeding in the contrary direction to that of a schematizing and ordering science, which on the other hand takes reality for granted in its given shape and clarifies its explicative internal connections. In this sense, negative dialectics is also an epistemology of its own, insofar as it is a form of knowledge attempting to free itself from the bluntly reductive character of "normal" science, which erases the non-identical. Does this mean that it is able to achieve what Adorno posited as its aim, namely to open up concepts to the non-conceptual without conforming them to it? Obviously not; in no way can this be said to be its positive achievement. It is not that critical thought solves the paradox concealed within philosophy, but at least it does not remove it; it measures itself against it; and it uses it as a spur to go beyond every closed vision of the world and all given knowledge. Critical philosophy in its way does justice to the non-identical, not because it possesses some mysterious key to access this non-identical, but because it

[26] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 162–163.

[27] L. Cortella, in his *Dopo il sapere assoluto. L'eredità hegeliana nell'epoca post-metafisica* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 1995), 419 ff., insists on the «structural opening of language» as the true foundation for «negative dialectics».

is the antithesis or—if we prefer—the determinate negation of all reductionism, because it overturns the traditional intention of knowing and gives voice to an intellectual experience which is strongly defined in a linguistic-interpretive sense, in which reality is revealed as negativity but also as an opening to the Different, and thus is not reduced to a schema (which is in the last analysis always a subjective schema). Knowledge thus becomes, not the construction of a pretty picture of how things are, but a work of resistance and of interpretative excavation that is not satisfied in itself, but which is guided precisely by the perspective that reality could be different from what it is, and that tensions brood in it that can be released only with the transcendence of the reality given to us.

The critical work in which negative dialectics consists nonetheless remains tied to the unreconciled reality that it submits to critique. The critique that negative dialectics develops with respect to reality as it is given relies on the very claim to logic and rationality which reality makes, only to turn this claim against it: it therefore works with the same categorical apparatus of identitarian thought, even if it does not rest quietly within it and tries to build a philosophic experience that in some way surpasses it. In this sense, Adorno can define "negative dialectics" as «the ontology of the wrong state of things»,[28] which is to say, as «the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion», that as such is included within it.[29] Negative dialectics, Adorno writes, remains «tied to the supreme categories of identitarian philosophy as its point of departure. Thus, too, it remains false according to identitarian logic: it remains the thing against which it is conceived».[30] But what then of its status of truth? In other words: if it is true that Adorno, given the logic of his speech, cannot avoid the conclusion of affirming the truth of negative dialectics, is he not then incoherent when he says, as he indeed does, that dialectics is not a positive, but simply the logic of the state of falsehood, which would be overcome along with it?[31]

[28] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11. E. Tavani, in his *L'apparenza da salvare. Saggio su Theodor W. Adorno*, (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 1994), 26, sees in this the risk that Adornian dialectic might fall into a form of duplication or conceptual realism. I do not think this is a problem, as I attempt to demonstrate later on.

[29] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

[30] Ibid., 147.

[31] This is the line taken by the rather pertinent critical reading developed in L. Cortella, *Dopo il sapere assoluto*; see especially pp. 362–368.

It seems to me that, if we are to avoid giving a misleading answer to this problem, we have to be careful not to assume, extrinsically, a concept of static or non-historical truth that has nothing to do with the concept of truth within Adornian philosophy. To Adorno, the truth, or rather the philosophic truth, has a temporal core and a critical meaning: there is no truth outside the stringent fulfillment of every definite dialectic passage; there is no truth that is not a determinate negation. Only in the sense of determinate negation is it possible to settle the dispute between absolutism and relativism, as we have seen in the first chapter. Philosophy—as we read in a beautiful passage of *Philosophical Terminology*—could be defined as «the movement of the spirit whose proper and peculiar intention is the truth, without it being able to suppose that it possesses this truth as something ready and definitive».[32] It is true that every endpoint of the dialectic procedure necessarily raises an unconditional claim to truth,[33] but it is also true that this claim is not immune to critique, and thus, its truth is to be found only in its function as a critical spur for thought, which never proves adequate to that concept of the unconditional (unconditional truth) that flashes before it through a sort of transcendental appearance. In short, it can neither be said of philosophy, affirmatively, that it possesses the truth nor, nihilistically, that it lacks it; it is rather a unity of restriction and opening, where every single dialectic passage can be decided, while «the problems of philosophy as a whole have not been settled».[34] "Negative dialectics" is precisely a procedure of determinate negation: its truth lies in criticism, but, precisely insofar as it is bound to the practices of that criticism, it cannot absolutize itself as the final endpoint, but must preserve the awareness of its limits, which derive precisely from its operating with the very same set of tools that it submits to critique. Negative dialectics is bound to the antagonist society (and to the identitarian and hierarchical thought which supports that society) insofar as it represents precisely their negation; it is not, on the other hand, thinking free of contradiction and antagonism, it is not *some other* positive, nor does it believe that a positive is possible in the universal nexus of domination. In this sense, negative dialectics, far from moving in the direction of "postmodern" thought, constitutes its precise

[32] Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Band 1, 88.

[33] Ibid., Band 1, 113–114.

[34] Ibid., Band 1, 116.

antithesis: the emancipation of difference is not possible within the system of domination, but only beyond it: the task of thought is therefore that of articulating criticism, not painting a positive that is not (yet) given.

Continuing along these same lines, Adorno does not spare himself from the reflection about what knowledge could be in a world no longer marked by antagonism. The conceptual apparatus interwoven with self-preservation and domination is not absolutizable, nor is domination itself; indeed, the contradictions that thought brings to light in the false, lacerated whole, teach us that this whole does not at all possess the granitic stability that is attributed to it on the one hand by the apologists of the existent order, and on the other by those who tragically contemplate a world without redemption (and who therefore, in the last analysis, produce an apologia for that world). Critical thought teaches instead that the world is not compactly closed but is shot through by many cracks and so is open to the possibilities of the different—and also to the possibility of overcoming antagonism in a reality of reconciled men.

If, as dialectic teaches us, no positive determination can be fixed and absolutized, then it certainly follows from this, not only that one must avoid giving too much credit to the granitic persistence of existing social relations and of the forms of thought that accompany them, but also that not even the lack of sense, the painfulness and the brevity of human life which we experience day to day, and the impossibility to overcome death—not even these things can be absolutized, on a "metaphysical" level, so to speak. The metaphysical affirmation of a world "full of meaning", which became a blasphemy after Auschwitz, cannot be posited as absolute; but neither can the nihilistic affirmation of nonsense, of the non-transcendability of the natural cycle without hope and without redemption. To posit sense as already positively given is blasphemy or idolatry: but the positing of death as absolute is opposed not only by the modesty of a thought that no longer recognizes absolutes, but also by a kind of strength of almost "logical" resistance, which unexpectedly converges with hope itself: «[…] it is impossible to think of death as the last thing pure and simple. […] If death were that absolute which philosophy tried in vain to conjure positively, everything is nothing; all that we think, too, is thought into the void; none of it is truly thinkable. For it is a feature of truth that it will last, along with its temporal core. Without

any duration at all there would be no truth, and the last trace of it would be engulfed in death, the absolute».[35]

The thought that also thinks contrary to itself thus (and this seems to us the real endpoint of the Adornian reflection) is the same that, opposing itself to an almost irresistible gravitational force, avoids despairing of its capabilities, but at the same time also succeeds in not absolutizing them, and so keeps itself *open*: only in this way does the path toward an imperceptible opening to hope remain accessible—a path which is on the other hand negated by the thought that arrogates to itself the positive possession of sense and which fails for precisely this reason.

But the New and the Different which now appears as possible would change not only interpersonal relationships, but the subject-object relation itself (which was conditioned precisely by antagonism): «Were speculation concerning the state of reconciliation allowed», Adorno writes in his last attempt to elucidate the issue, "Subject and Object", published posthumously, «then it would be impossible to conceive that state as either the undifferentiated unity of subject and object or their hostile antithesis: rather it would be the communication of what is differentiated. […] In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other».[36] Reconcilement, which thought cannot positively determine (here we find the rational center of the famous prohibition against making images of the divine), and of which art can give but glimpses, «would release the nonidentical, […] would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them».[37]

The reflection on the themes of the non-identical, therefore, takes two differing directions in Adorno, which are connected but distinct: on the one hand it is the *telos* at which critical philosophy aims without being able positively to attain it, though it preserves at least the consciousness of this intention and of its own limitation. On the other hand, it is that whose attainment would mark the realization of the utopia of knowledge

[35] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 371.

[36] Th. W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object", in Id., *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247.

[37] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

and which perhaps might be given for the first time in a world freed from antagonism.

So the Adornian non-identical, preserving the truth content of the thing-in-itself of Kantian theory (as Adorno states explicitly, for instance, in the eighth paragraph of the brief essay "On Subject and Object"), is that truth which is never positively possessed, but is willed by a thought that posits itself as a third possibility beyond the alternative between absolutism and relativism, or metaphysics and nihilism—a thought whose characteristic signs are modesty and self-criticism on the one hand, since it does not absolutize its own categories, and on the other hand the critique of the given, since it thinks of this given as contradictory, unstable, open, despite everything, to the different and the new.

But, precisely insofar as it possesses these traits, that thought which turns upon the non-identical, while it knows it cannot positively attain it, cannot do without representing that limit point in which its Sisyphean fatigue would attain consummation; at that point, it could finally understand the Other without deforming it and smashing it with a categorical apparatus which is irredeemably given over to domination.

While thought reflects on itself as that activity (which is supremely practical, as Adorno would say) which aspires at the truth without ever fully possessing it, it must consequently posit the idea of this full achievement of truth, of this access to a different which is no longer deformed, as something which is not given but which is the limit case toward which thought aims, toward which it orients itself with fatigue and passion. It is therefore in its own awareness of the limit that the reference to utopia is placed, as its antipode. «To want substance in cognition is to want a Utopia».[38] Utopia is therefore that tension toward otherness that springs from the immanent logic of critical thought, which is in no way teleologically guaranteed, but which is preserved by a philosophy that keeps the passageway to the possible open for it.

[38] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 56.

Dialectics and Metaphysics

1 The Lectures on Metaphysics

The possibility we now have of reading the lectures from Adorno's university courses certainly provides privileged access to his thought. Particularly noteworthy are the four volumes of lectures exploring issues and concepts related to the *Negative Dialectics*.[1] As Rolf Tiedemann writes when discussing the philosopher's lecture course on "Metaphysics",[2] Adorno was never in the habit of strictly connecting the contents of his lectures to the texts he was writing. However, there are some exceptions to this general rule: in 1932, after completing his Habilitation thesis on Kierkegaard, which had yet to be published, Adorno held some lectures on the Danish thinker; after their years as emigrants abroad, in the period

[1] The courses which Adorno devoted to topics later included in the *Negative Dialectics* are: R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Ontologie und Dialektik* (1960–61) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), Eng. transl. *Ontology and Dialectics: 1960–61* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit* (1964–65) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), Eng. transl. *History and Freedom: 1964–65* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Metaphysik. Begriff und Probleme* (1965) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), Eng. transl. *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Vorlesung über negative Dialektik* (1965–66) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), Eng. transl. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

[2] R. Tiedemann, "Nachbemerkung des Herausgebers", in Th. W. Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 295.

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
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between 1956 and 1958 Adorno and Horkheimer discussed topics related to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* in their Hauptseminar. Finally, in the 1960s Adorno devoted four courses to issues strictly related to the *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1966. These courses matched the different sections of the 1966 text quite closely and may be read in parallel to it. The 1960–1961 course on "Ontology and Dialectics" addresses questions later touched upon in the first section of the *Negative Dialectics*, pertaining to Adorno's engagement with Heidegger; the 1964–1965 one tackles the problems of history and freedom, and hence explores topics that are the focus of the first two "Models" and which occur in the third section of the *Negative Dialectics*: they concern, respectively, the Hegelian philosophy of history and the problem of freedom in Kant's moral philosophy. In the summer term of 1965, Adorno held a course on "Metaphysics" which, in its final stage, touched upon the topics of the third "Model", which in the 1966 book bears the title "Meditations on Metaphysics". The last course within this series, the 1965–1966 one on *Negative Dialectics*, discusses issues that also feature prominently in the extensive introduction to the work. Of all the courses, this one is preserved in the least complete form and therefore—at least in my view—does not add much to our understanding of Adorno's reflection.

But let us return to the course on "Metaphysics", which will be the focus of this chapter. As I have already mentioned, the last part foreshadows what we read in the corresponding chapter of the *Negative Dialectics*; to be more exact, it is connected to the first four "Meditations on Metaphysics" with which the 1966 book ends. As the editor Rolf Tiedemann informs us, for this section of the course Adorno resorted to a "blueprint" that represented a sort of index of the topics later brought together in the last part of the *Negative Dialectics*. The first two-thirds of the course, on the other hand, introduce topics that are less familiar to Adorno's readers, since—after three introductory lectures—the philosopher discusses Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in detail. The course, therefore, provides one of the very few texts in which Adorno engages with a canonical work of ancient philosophy in an extensive and detailed way (which makes it highly significant in itself).

2 The Two Senses of Metaphysics

First of all, it is very significant that in these lectures Adorno provides a definition of the concept of "metaphysics" (which is all the more noteworthy given that, like any self-respecting Hegelian, he was quite skeptical about the philosophical usefulness of exact definitions). The first properly "metaphysical" thinker, according to Adorno, is neither Parmenides nor Plato, but Aristotle. Adorno emphasizes the rather unique and "eccentric" nature of this thesis, which he nonetheless takes as his starting point to illustrate and clarify the first sense in which the concept of "metaphysics" must be defined in his view. "Metaphysics" is not identified—as in Plato—with the postulating of an unchanging realm, one not subject to becoming and located beyond the corruptible world of sense experience. Rather, the peculiar and specific character of metaphysical thought, which largely coincides with the great tradition of Western philosophy, consists in the attempt to conceptualize in an organic way the connection, or *mediation*, between two spheres that in Plato were still radically separate, namely: on the one hand, the sphere of unchanging, a priori structures not subject to becoming and, on the other, the sphere of changing and corruptible experience. Western metaphysics thus begins with Aristotle because he no longer regards multiplicity and becoming as a kind of "non-being", but establishes the issue of the relation between the permanent and the becoming, between the unchanging and the changing, as the central question in his philosophy.

In a second sense, metaphysics—or, rather, "metaphysical experience"—denotes a layer of Adorno's negative-dialectical thought: the moment in which thought reaches its very limits, glimpses the "ultimate questions", and thus approaches the "metaphysical" problem in what Adorno would describe as a "non-affirmative" way that is irreducible and in a sense even opposed to that of the tradition. If this is the case, we must infer that, strictly speaking, Adorno's philosophy is not *post-metaphysical* (like that of Habermas, who explicitly defined his thinking as *nachmetaphysisches Denken*[3]); rather, as Adorno himself puts it, it is a philosophy aligned with metaphysics at the very moment of its downfall. In other words, it is a philosophy that retrieves the question of metaphysics at the very moment in which it can no longer be addressed in the ways that were once typical of the dominant tradition within Western philosophy.

[3] J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994).

To sum up, we might say that in his course devoted to the topic, Adorno defines "metaphysics" in two different ways: in a first sense, it describes the great tradition of Western philosophy, with its attempt to conceptualize the mediation between eternity and time, the unchanging and the changing, the structure and the event. In a second sense, "metaphysical experience" for Adorno instead means the limit point where experience or thought sends its probes beyond given and positively definable reality: it represents the borderline where this breaks down or is suspended. Furthermore, there is a clear link between these two senses, if only in terms of discontinuity. Whereas metaphysics is an affirmative construction that bestows meaning on the world and "saves" it, precisely insofar as it sets the becoming and corruptible in relation to what is stable and changeless, metaphysical experience is located almost at the opposite pole: for it assumes the *non*-existence of any positively given meaning of the world; yet from this very *non*, from this negativity and deficiency, it paradoxically derives a reason to leave the door open to hope and utopia.

3 The Engagement with Aristotelian Metaphysics

As far as the first sense of metaphysics is concerned, Aristotle's philosophy—as we have seen—acquires an inaugural and paradigmatic role. Adorno thus devotes the first two-thirds of his course to an analysis of the speculative issues that distinguish Aristotelian metaphysics. In this enquiry, Adorno explicitly takes the considerations on Aristotle featured in Eduard Zeller's classic history of Greek thought as his guiding thread.[4] Adorno writes: «I shall base my exposition mainly on the account given by Eduard Zeller, although I am well aware that, with regard to philological details, scholarship on Aristotle has made extraordinary progress since the time of Zeller's work. […] However, […] much of this detailed progress seems to me to have been at the expense of philosophical vision, which was available to Zeller as a member of the Hegelian school to a degree which has subsequently been entirely lost. I therefore prefer the overview and insight he gives us in his book to a possibly greater

[4] E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Leipzig: G. R. Reisland, 1892).

accuracy of detail, as I am more concerned to throw light on the problems and history of metaphysics through Aristotle than to give you an irreproachably punctilious account of that philosopher's work».[5]

In view of this goal, Adorno—like Zeller before him—begins his exposition of the main concepts in Aristotle's metaphysics by bringing into focus the problem of the relationship between the particular and the universal, as «around this relationship the whole of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* revolves».[6] Adorno leaves logical issues aside—especially the crucial topic of the principle of non-contradiction—in order to focus on more strictly metaphysical or ontological questions. His aim is precisely to bring out what he sees as Aristotle's unique position within the history of Western thought.

Before succinctly outlining the perspective which Adorno adopts in his interpretation of Aristotelian thought, it may be useful to spend a few more words on his general methodological premises, so to speak. For Adorno, understanding a philosophical text means retracing its philosophemes and argumentative steps while assessing its rigor, and thus putting its claim to validity, or truthfulness, to the test. Therefore, understanding cannot be cut off from critique; less still can it be conceived as an initial hermeneutical stage, to be followed by the moment of critique. On the contrary, understanding and critique are a single whole; hence, in the case of philosophical texts, understanding means bringing their contradictions to light, without striving to solve them through excessive hermeneutical "charitableness".

In accordance with this methodological orientation, the reading of Aristotle suggested by Adorno is chiefly aimed at highlighting how his thought is essentially pervaded by two different, if not opposite, driving forces. On the one hand, as someone critical of Plato and of his doctrine of separate ideas, Aristotle is firmly grounded in the thesis that «one cannot think of the universal independently of that in which it is concretized»; on the other hand, one cannot regard it as «a mere abstraction in relation to the particulars subsumed under it».[7] Aristotle's anti-Platonic tendencies lead him to embrace the thesis that the true

[5] Th. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics. Concept and Problems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 24.

[6] Ibid., 36.

[7] Ibid., 25.

substance (i.e., that which is and is thought without the need to refer to anything else) must be found in each individual reality; universals, genera, and species, then, are secondary substances, which do not exist separately, but only in an immanent way with respect to each individual being.

However, the Platonic moment is just as prominent in Aristotle, and this engenders a tension which already Zeller had brought into focus as a genuine contradiction: «the universal or the form (they are the same thing in Aristotle) is, just as it was for his teacher Plato, the higher reality». «Whereas, as it seems to me, the particular thing, or, as it is called in Aristotle, the τόδε τι, was first regarded as the only reality or true being, now, on the contrary, the form is the higher reality».[8] «The central contradiction […] is that, on the one hand, the idea is supposed to be only immanent, only mediated […]; yet, on the other, it is made into something which has being in itself. Expressed in these bald terms, this is a contradiction which is very difficult to resolve».[9]

Aristotle's peculiar position thus emerges all the more clearly, the more we bring the way in which he envisages the relationship between form and matter into focus. The aspect which Adorno is most keen to highlight, as the very significance of his own philosophical investigations depends on it, is that for Aristotle form does not exist independently of matter, but is rather conceived as the form *of something*—it is referred to matter as its opposite pole. According to Adorno, this mutual referencing between matter and form characterizes Aristotelian philosophy as a theory of mediation: «while he recognized that neither moment could exist without the other, he saw this interrelatedness almost as a quantitative agglomeration; he saw it additively, as a conjunction of these two moments, which could not be kept apart in chemical purity».[10]

Aristotle did not emphasize only mediation, the mutual relationship between form and matter; according to Adorno, he went beyond this, insofar as he made the «outstanding discovery»[11] that matter itself, *qua* potentiality, requires form. In other words, «form […] can only be the form of a reality if there is something corresponding to it in reality

[8] Ibid., 35.

[9] Ibid., 46.

[10] Ibid., 46.

[11] Ibid., 66.

itself»[12]: matter—and this is the one aspect of Aristotelian thought to which Adorno feels most attuned—is not only essential for form, which is the form of a given matter, but is also far from coinciding with pure passivity, since it only receives that form which is suited to it.

In one respect, therefore, Adorno emphasizes that aspect of Aristotelian thought which makes it a philosophy of mediation. On the other hand, he highlights the fact that this mediation is yet envisaged by Aristotle in what is still an inadequate, non-dialectic, form, and is therefore in some way revoked through the affirmation of the primacy of form. Let us dwell for a moment on these two aspects of Adorno's critical discourse. As regards the issue of mediation, Aristotle does not develop it fully because—Adorno argues—he envisages it as a compound, an agglomeration: it is a non-dialectical mediation because the two realities are what they are even independently of their being reciprocally mediated. Aristotle sees the two principles of matter and form as «belonging together in some way but nevertheless believes that they can be grasped as essences independent of each other, which, though interrelated, are not so interrelated that one is constituted by the other through its own nature».[13] In other words, the two principles are not mediated *in themselves*: mediation-centered thought does not rise up to the level of dialectic.

But Adorno's critique even more directly concerns the other aspect, which is to say the primacy of form: while he acknowledges that form needs matter, without thereby reducing matter to non-being in Platonic fashion, Aristotle still remains Platonic insofar as he establishes form as reality in the most proper and fullest sense. For Adorno, this is the "idealist" element in Aristotle, although clearly it is an idealism «*malgré lui-même*»,[14] insofar as form is neither subject nor thought according to Aristotle. Be that as it may, through the thesis of the ontological primacy and self-subsistence of form as substance Aristotle ultimately depicts it as a kind of being in itself and hence even, according to Adorno, as something immediately given. The Aristotelian primacy of form finds its crowning in the doctrine of the unmoved mover: here, at the apex of Aristotelian ontology, form severs its bonds with matter. The prime mover is

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 49–50.

[14] Ibid., 49.

pure, incorruptible form, devoid of matter and potentiality, the thought of thought which governs and grounds the whole sensible and manifold world in which matter and form are mixed.

The doctrine of the thought of thought reveals what Adorno regards as the ill-concealed secret of all traditional metaphysical perspectives: the fact that the primacy of form, of concepts, of what is permanent, over what is material and changeable always entails a more or less explicit idealistic outcome, because it posits the intellectual, spiritual element as the only true reality. The primacy of the spirit or of subjectivity that German idealism was to proclaim in full is already implicit in the primacy of form or concepts. However, according to Adorno, the "thought of thought" already reveals the risk which all subsequent forms of idealism will run: if thought is not the thought of something that is other than itself, it inevitably amounts to a tautology. In the thesis that thought and what is thought are the same «there is manifested a paradox or an absurdity which disappears in the more sophisticated presentation of these ideas at the height of German idealism. […] For in this case we are obliged to ask the question which must be addressed to all idealism: what does mind, or thinking, or knowledge really amount to, if it only thinks itself? Does this not make thought itself, and thus the absolute which thought is supposed to be, one single, immense tautology?»[15]

4 The Critique of Idealism and Asymmetrical Mediation

The tendency that pushes thought in the direction of idealism is far from arbitrary, which is why it is necessary to understand it and indeed to subject it to critical scrutiny, which is to say to a critique of ideology. In the idealistic outcome of great philosophy, the critic ultimately detects both a justification of the world as it is (because, in its foundation, reality is spirit, thought, and reason) and an apology of the intellect and the intellectual. The latter affirms his primacy, his higher rank, and his right to stand aloof of material labor and the mere reproduction of life. The tendency toward idealism, however, has equally deep roots that are immanent to thought itself, and hence difficult to oppose: just as matter—insofar as we think it—is nothing but a concept, and can be reduced to a

[15] Ibid., 93–94.

concept, so everything that we can comprehend is mediated by language and thought. These tend—spontaneously, so to speak—to be hypostatized or fetishized. The task of a critical or dialectical philosophy of the sort Adorno wishes to develop is precisely to reverse this tendency, by stressing the limits of concepts and their incapacity to exhaust reality, which exceeds or does not coincide with the theories, schemes, and apparatuses by which we seek to harness it.

To clarify this point, it is necessary to fully develop dialectical mediation on both sides. Just as every reality we can understand is mediated by language, i.e., by concepts or—in Aristotelian terms—by form, so according to Adorno it is crucial to emphasize the other side of the question: while on the one hand concepts constitute reality, on the other hand they are constituted by it, they are a temporally and historically accomplished moment of reality, not a *prius* but a *posterius*. Indeed, Adorno's thesis is that, if we fully work out the issue of the mediation of subject and object, language and thing, concept and reality, form and matter, we reach the conclusion that it is not a symmetrical form of mediation, but rather a relation in which the second element carries a greater weight or even a sort of "primacy" (*Vorrang des Objekts*). To put this difficult point in somewhat blunt terms, the second element is internal to the first and is required by it more than the first element is required by the second one. In other words, while it is true that there cannot be any subject without an object, or any object without a subject, according to Adorno something more can be said, namely: that the subject must amount to objecthood in its very constitution, i.e., it must itself be an object, whereas it is not the case that the object must in turn be a subject. So the mediation is not symmetrical, but rather asymmetrical or unbalanced.

Therefore, the critique of inadequate ways of conceiving mediation, and particularly the critical overturning of idealism, in which mediation ultimately translates into the primacy of the conceptual or spiritual side, leads Adorno to endorse the thesis of the superiority of the object and what follows from this thesis, i.e., an awareness of the limits of thought and hence of the irreducibility and openness of reality.

These themes are expressed quite clearly in one of the key passages of the *Metaphysics* course. While it is true that we «can only speak in a way which is mediated through language», it is equally true that language is «one phenomenon among others, becomes a part of reality as a whole, a moment of reality, and should not be hypostatized over against it». Therefore, we certainly find ourselves «in the prison of language», but

are «able to recognize it as a prison»: «It is in the nature of language that we can speak of an absolutely formless matter, even though speaking of formless matter is itself a form».[16] In the concluding section of a lecture held in June 1965, Adorno continues: «philosophy has the curious characteristic that, although itself entrapped, locked inside the glasshouse of our constitution and our language, it is nevertheless able constantly to think beyond itself and its limits, to think itself through the walls of its glasshouse. And this thinking beyond itself, into openness – that, precisely, is metaphysics».[17]

5 Metaphysics After Auschwitz

It is by setting out from reflections of this sort that we can address the issue of that "metaphysical experience" which constitutes the focus of the last part of Adorno's 1965 course. Whereas idealistic metaphysics led to a representation of the world as a meaningful cosmos, after Auschwitz any view of this sort became untenable.

In the section of his lectures in which he introduces the issue of metaphysical experience, Adorno sets out by stressing the *relevance of the temporal* even for philosophical speculation: «Those who continue to engage in old-style metaphysics, without concerning themselves with what has happened, keeping it at arm's length and regarding it as beneath metaphysics, like everything merely earthly and human, thereby prove themselves inhuman».[18] «It is therefore impossible, I would say, to insist after Auschwitz on the presence of a positive meaning or purpose in being. […] The affirmative character which metaphysics has in Aristotle, and which it first took on in Plato's teaching, has become impossible. To assert that existence or being has a positive meaning constituted within itself and orientated towards the divine principle (if one is to put it like that), would be, like all the principles of truth, beauty and goodness which philosophers have concocted, a pure mockery in face of the victims and the infinitude of their torment».[19]

[16] Ibid., 68.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 101.

[19] Ibid., 101–102.

Obviously, Adorno is far from naive: he knows full well that philosophical consciousness—as in the case of his student audience—will resist the idea that an empirical fact may crucially condition reflection on the ultimate questions of philosophy, on truth and meaning. However, he objects that what the twentieth century has experienced (Nazi mass extermination, the atomic bomb—a reference found in the lectures but, if I am not mistaken, absent from the *Negative Dialectics*—and the systematic use of torture) marks a transformation of quantity into quality. While metaphysics and theology have always faced the problem of having to explain evil and negative events (down to the debate on the Lisbon earthquake and Voltaire's *Candide*), with the qualitative leap of the twentieth century the already inadequate answers have become something different: they have become insulting and ridiculous. Certainly—Adorno states in his lectures—the path apparently remains open to a theology of the utterly other, of an indeterminable and incomprehensible God; but, upon closer scrutiny, this would merely confirm the thesis which Adorno upholds, namely the impossibility of accounting for historical phenomena within any meaningful metaphysical horizon we can conceive of.

Thought must therefore come to terms with the impossibility of identifying a meaningful plan in a historical horizon where all possible limits to evil, horror, and the insignificance of human life would appear to have been lost. Unless I am mistaken, this is precisely the central theme of the "Meditations on Metaphysics", namely: the issue of whether any form of redemption or release from suffering and death is possible, whether—and to what extent—these constitute an ultimate and irredeemable fact, or whether instead it is possible somehow to envisage things differently and open up some kind of prospect of salvation and hope, or even of transcendence, with respect to the natural condition of human existence.

The issue of Auschwitz, which clears the field of any straightforward recovery of meaningfulness, thus leads to the issue of death. Adorno addresses it first of all by polemically engaging with Heidegger, whose reflection—according to the author of the *Negative Dialectics*—fallaciously attempts to lend meaning to death by overcoming its non-integrable and non-thinkable nature, and absorbing it into an overall being-there that is somehow meaningful. In such a way, the rebellion of consciousness against death is only apparently overcome. Ultimately, according to Adorno, Heidegger's theses turn out to be acquiescent, in anti-humanistic fashion, to the possibility of still finding some meaning

in death. Against Heidegger, Adorno stresses two points: the non-assimilability of death to the living experience of human beings and the fallacy of instead treating death as though it were a non-historical and permanent element of the human condition. For Adorno, by contrast, dying—like any other human aspect—is something historically and socially mediated: significantly, the third meditation on metaphysics is given the polemical title "Dying Today". In his lectures, Adorno jointly discusses the historicity of dying and its non-assimilability, two issues which in the *Negative Dialectics* are discussed, respectively, in the third and the ninth "Meditation on Metaphysics". Let us briefly focus, then, on these two aspects of his reflection.

In what sense is death non-assimilable? In the sense, it seems, that consciousness is in itself incapable of truly processing the fact of having to die and must therefore attempt in some way to "neutralise" it. In a no doubt polemical spirit, Adorno recalls that in *Being and Time* Heidegger has grasped this point, yet said nothing new or original about it, because already Schopenhauer, a hundred years earlier, had stated everything there was to say about the topic in *The World as Will and Representation*: «nobody has a truly living conviction of the certainty of his death, since there could otherwise be no particularly great difference between his state of mind and that of condemned criminals. Rather, everyone indeed acknowledges that certainty *in abstracto* and theoretically, but puts it aside like other theoretical truths that have no practical application, without ever taking it up into his living consciousness».[20]

Notwithstanding the remarkable lucidity of Schopenhauer's observation, Adorno makes a comment that regards both Schopenhauer and Heidegger: both see the neutralization, or rather removal, of death, as a feature of man as such, instead of attributing it to human beings «as products of history».[21] It is quite difficult to grasp Adorno's precise stance on the matter. On the one hand, in the pages we are discussing, he states that the "open consciousness" which distinguishes man from animals implies that, unlike animals, man is painfully or anxiously aware of his own necessary death. On the other hand, Adorno puts forward the hypothesis that

[20] A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), vol. I, 333; quoted in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), 396.

[21] Ibid.

the persistence of the animal heritage and the power of the impulse of self-preservation force man to weaken or neutralize this awareness. Therefore, Adorno would appear to have a wavering position on the matter, as he himself admits. In his lectures, where the need for clarity is paramount, he speaks in the following terms: «But what I mean is […] that human consciousness clearly is not capable of withstanding the experience of death. I am unsure whether we are dealing here with a kind of biological fact which extends back beyond our human and conscious history, or whether it is something historical».[22] He continues: «it seems to me – and I suspect that for reasons connected with the social arrangements our mental organization is not equal to this knowledge – that although, with this knowledge, we have, if you like, elevated ourselves so far above nature that on this crucial point we can reflect on our natural origin, on the other hand, we are still so governed by nature on this same point, so attached to our interest of self-preservation, of self-perpetuation, that we can only have this experience in a curiously abstract form».[23] He concludes: «Our consciousness has clearly remained too weak to withstand the experience of death»,[24] but this experience can perhaps be explained historically.

With regard to this point, Adorno goes further in his lectures than he does in his published work. The difficulty of gaining awareness of one's own mortality is connected to the way in which, even in philosophy, consciousness conceives itself: «Because consciousness imagines itself, in its forms, in the forms of pure thought, to be something eternal, it fortifies itself against anything which might remind it of its own unsteady floor, its own frailty».[25] Equally significant is another reflection that Adorno introduces at this point, and which is not found in his published work: setting out from an observation made by Ernst Bloch, Adorno draws upon what he regards as one of the most important themes in Bloch's thought (alongside that of utopia): «in the world in which we exist there is not a single human life which remotely matches what each of us could be. It is, incidentally, an old thought, conceived in the Enlightenment by Helvétius, although in him it was still accompanied by the illusion that education was all that was needed to change this and to make us, if

[22] Th. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 131.

[23] Ibid, 132.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

I might put it like this, equal to our own possibility, to attain an identity between our potentiality and our actuality».[26] Adorno draws upon this concept by developing it beyond what he regards as Enlightenment naivety: «if we were truly ourselves, only if the infinite possibility which is radically contained in every human life […] only if such a state were reached, in which we were really identical to that which we are not but which we deeply know we could become, though we may want to believe the contrary – only then might we have the possibility of being reconciled to death. Only then, probably, would we be equal to the experience of death».[27]

Let us try to sum up the reflections outlined so far: according to Adorno, the impossibility of fully integrating the condition of mortality into our consciousness is ultimately—beyond all the doubts he himself raises—a historical situation. This point is clearly expressed in a passage from the third meditation: «In the socialized society, however, in the inescapably dense web of immanence, death is felt exclusively as external and strange. Men have lost the illusion that it is commensurable with their lives. They cannot absorb the fact that they must die».[28] In order to explain this impossibility, it is not enough to contend that the Ego, *qua* principle of self-preservation, is constitutively incapable of integrating its own negation: it is necessary to enter into the concrete historical constellation and to see what has happened to human life within it. «As the subjects live less, death grows more precipitous, more terrifying. […] Death and history, particularly the collective history of the individual category, form a constellation». With the downfall of the individual in contemporary post-bourgeois society, death too acquires a different and historically specific significance: «What is destroyed is a nonentity, in itself and perhaps even for itself. Hence the constant panic in view of death, a panic not to be quelled any more except by repressing the thought of death».[29] Mortality is not a primal phenomenon or an unchanging condition, but is inseparable from the web of history. If life were different—as Adorno explains in his lectures—we might perhaps even conceive of the possibility of «being reconciled to death», and a different consciousness,

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 132–133.

[28] *Negative Dialectics*, 369.

[29] Ibid., 370–371.

perhaps, would not have as much need to protect itself against the awareness of its own mortality, a goal which has instead always been pursued through the removal of death (as highlighted first by Schopenhauer and then by Heidegger) and through mythical-religious systems of protection. These—Adorno writes— «had pledged to rid it [viz. death] of its sting»,[30] but have in the meantime lost much of their credibility. However, if death always exists within a historical constellation, the idea that consciousness still needs to remove or conceal it through systems of protection does not have an absolute value: it reflects more a historical experience than an anthropological condition.

This point is further stressed in the ninth meditation of the *Negative Dialectics*: «We might be tempted to speculate anthropologically whether the turn in evolutionary history that gave the human species its open consciousness and thus an awareness of death – whether this turn does not contradict a continuing animal constitution which prohibits men to bear that consciousness. […] It is a hopeless perspective that biologically, so to speak, the obtuseness of all ideologues might be due to a necessity of self-preservation, and that the right arrangement of society would by no means have to make it disappear – although, of course, it is only in the right society that chances for the right life will arise».[31] The Enlightenment-minded critical theorist Adorno cannot accept the idea that human consciousness has been condemned to a sort of state of minority which cannot be transcended. Not least because, if this were the case, ideology would have the last say on things, and the blind need for removal and reassurance would prevail over lucid consciousness, possibly to the point of compromising its arduous progress along the path to self-emancipation.

However, it seems to me that in consciousness' refusal to integrate death there is also something which cannot be jettisoned. «Attached to this – Adorno writes – is a perverse, dislocated bit of hope».[32] There is a certain, feeble «resistant strength of the idea of immortality»,[33] which not even negative dialectic wishes to fully abandon.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 395–396.

[32] Ibid., 369.

[33] Ibid.

This side of Adorno's reflection, which is not developed in the lectures, is outlined through some very clear formulations in the final section of the third meditation. In this passage, Adorno expresses himself as follows:

> Even so, it is impossible to think of death as the last thing pure and simple. Attempts to express death in language are futile, all the way into logic, for who should be the subject of which we predicate that it is dead, here and now? Lust—which wants eternity, according to a luminous word of Nietzsche's—is not the only one to balk at passing. If death were that absolute which philosophy tried in vain to conjure positively, everything is nothing; all that we think, too, is thought into the void; none of it is truly thinkable. For it is a feature of truth that it will last, along with its temporal core. Without any duration at all there would be no truth, and the last trace of it would be engulfed in death, the absolute. The idea of absolute death is hardly less unthinkable than that of immortality. But for all its being unthinkable, the thought of death is not proof against the unreliability of any kind of metaphysical experience.[34]

These reflections, which would deserve an extensive commentary, are worth reading alongside a passage from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (which Adorno mentions in his course and in the *Negative Dialectics*, and which he also discusses in a short text featured in *Notes to Literature*). Here Proust reflects on the death of the novelist Bergotte, a character inspired by Anatole France: «there is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be kind and thoughtful, even to be polite […]. All these obligations, which have no sanction in our present life, seem to belong to a different world, a world based on kindness, scrupulousness, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this one and which we leave in order to be born on this earth, before perhaps returning there to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws which we obeyed because we bore their precepts in our hearts, not knowing whose hand had traced them there – those laws to which every profound work of the intellect brings us nearer and which are invisible only – if then! – to fools. So that the idea that Bergotte was not permanently dead is by no

[34] Ibid., 371–372.

means improbable».[35] Adorno remarks: «The idea that leads to this statement is the idea that the moral force of the writer whose epitaph Proust is writing belongs to an order other than the order of nature, and for this reason it holds out the promise that the order of nature is not the ultimate order».[36] Before referring to the Proust passage, in the *Negative Dialectics* Adorno offers an observation much to the same effect: «The talk of the fullness of life – a *lucus a non lucendo* even where it radiates – is rendered idle by its immeasurable discrepancy with death. Since death is irrevocable, it is ideological to assert that a meaning might rise in the light of fragmentary, albeit genuine, experience».[37]

It is difficult to tell what the final outcome of these reflections might be (if indeed one may speak of a final outcome here, which is far from certain). However, a possible direction is suggested by the frank words that bring Adorno's metaphysics course to a close: «nothing can be even experienced as living if it does not contain a promise of something transcending life. This transcendence therefore *is*, and at the same time *is not* – and beyond that contradiction it is no doubt very difficult, and probably impossible, for thought to go».[38]

Let us try to somewhat expand this terse statement, which also occurs in the fourth meditation of the *Negative Dialectics*. What does it mean to say, as Adorno does in his 1966 book, that «The transcendent is, and it is not»?[39] This paradoxical statement essentially means that neither the nihilistic negation of the transcendent, nor its metaphysical affirmation hold. The former fails because it runs up against its own logical unthinkability: the idea of truth would be meaningless if—as Adorno writes—it did not imply permanence; therefore, it transcends time and transience. And just as it is self-contradictory to deny the truth, so it is pragmatically meaningless to state that life is meaningless. One would object: «And

[35] M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (New York: Random House, 1993), vol. 5, 245–246.

[36] Th. W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), vol. 1, 183.

[37] *Negative Dialectics*, 378.

[38] Th. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 145.

[39] *Negative Dialectics*, 375.

what are you living for?»[40] The transcendent thus seems like a necessary semblance—somewhat as in Kant's "Transcendental Dialectics".[41] Besides, any attempt to positively take possession of the transcendent, to define it conceptually and positively, in turn will become caught up in contradictions. Therefore, «the concept of the intelligible realm would be the concept of something which is not, and yet it is not a pure nonbeing».[42] Finite thought, not least in order to think itself as such, is bound to think what would not be finite. Therefore, it is as difficult to positively posit transcendence as it is to positively rule it out.

For Adorno, then, it is essentially a matter of finding a path to understanding other than the path of metaphysics and that of nihilism: the former is closed, but so is the latter, which is even more patently self-contradictory. If a way out exists, it must be sought by further developing and radicalizing thought in terms of its dialectical nature.

What dialectics, as conceived by Adorno, teaches us is that no positive determination can be blocked or absolutized, that none is exempt from the process of development of its multiple mediations. Therefore—and this seems to me to be the real outcome of Adorno's reflection—thought remains faithful to dialectics when, by opposing an almost irresistible gravitational pull, it is able not to despair of its own performances, yet without absolutizing them; when it is able to dwell on the unresolved, the paradoxical, and the contradictory, and thereby to remain *open*: «Wo Sinn ist, ist er beim Offenen, nicht in sich Verschlossenen» («Where there is meaning, it is in the open, not in what is closed in on itself»).[43] Only here does the view remain open to an imperceptible glimmer of hope, which is instead denied by the kind of thought that naively lays claim to the positive possession of meaning, yet fails to attain it. Adorno follows the opposite path: a path that without foregoing stringent and rigorous reasoning remains aware of the conditioned and limited nature of thought. But it is precisely in this weakness that thought finds its greatest strength: by remaining negative, by becoming aware of its transience, thought leaves open the utopian perspective that this transience may itself be transient, and that the datum may not have the last word.

[40] Ibid., 377.

[41] Ibid., 393.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Th. W. Adorno, *Metaphysik*, 291; Eng. transl., 189.

Society

An Outdated Philosophy? Adorno's Social Critique

Any discussion of Adorno's social critique today ought to pursue at least two objectives. The first is to provide a reliable reconstruction of the basic ideas or underlying principles of that social critique; this is a far from straightforward endeavor, since Adorno has frequently been misunderstood—and he himself is partly to blame for this. Second, one ought to provide a critical assessment of Adorno's critique of society, not least by taking account of the objections raised by the new generations of Frankfurt intellectuals, particularly Habermas and those who have carried on the critical theory tradition after him.

This task is far from easy, because Adorno's social critique eludes detailed analytical scrutiny, given the very complex way in which it is formulated. Indeed, it seems to me that, for the most part, a genuine critical examination of Adorno has yet to be conducted. With the following reflections, I wish to provide a small contribution in this direction.

1 The Peculiarity of Adorno's Social Theory

The first point to be highlighted is a peculiar feature of Adorno's approach to social theory: the fact that it does not focus directly on society-as-object, but rather approaches its subject by seeking to apply what has unwittingly been revealed about it by the methodological antinomies that have been established and pitted against one another in the debate first

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
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raised by great classical thinkers in the field of sociology such as Durkheim and Weber—a debate which has never been settled. Essentially, and briefly, we might say that in the history of social thought we encounter two basic methodological approaches to society-as-object. The first is the objectifying approach which, in accordance with Durkheim's precept, treats social facts as "things" or, rather, as processes devoid of intentionality and governed by their own laws; the second approach instead aims to grasp the meaning of social action, in keeping with Weber's teaching. In a very broad sense, a contrast may be drawn between the scientific objectification approach and that based on hermeneutic understanding. For Adorno, however, it is not a matter of picking sides—of resolving the dispute over which method to adopt in the social sciences. The contradiction between the two theories cannot be resolved, but must fruitfully be applied, because it tells us something about the object: it reveals a duplicity, a tension, a contradiction within society itself (and this contradiction, as Hegel might say, does not concern the theories, but the thing itself).

The underlying contradiction faced by any intellectual system seeking to address the issue of society may be formulated as follows: on the one hand, social processes and institutions are merely the outcome of actions performed by individuals in the pursuit of their aims; on the other hand, the outcomes of these actions give rise to complex dynamics that follow certain patterns and can be studied almost as though they were natural laws, thereby acquiring a degree of autonomy that makes them irreducible to individuals' understanding and actions. This peculiar nature of the social nexus is already perfectly enunciated, after Mandeville and Smith, in the opening page of Kant's *Idea for a Universal History* (a text that Adorno never fails to take into account). Kant writes that although marriages are unquestionably the result of individuals' free will, «the annual tables of them in large countries prove that they happen just as much in accordance with constant laws of nature»,[1] or rather—one might add with Adorno—in keeping with the laws of that "second nature" which is society.

On the one hand, social processes are the outcome of individual actions, but on the other—as Adorno also notes in his (posthumously

[1] I. Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

published) lectures on history and freedom[2]—they represent a blind, incomprehensible, heteronomous, and potentially destructive force for individuals. This fact, however, cannot be taken as a mere given, nor as an ontological characteristic intrinsic to the very constitution of society. The autonomy of social processes and institutions with respect to the individuals that bring them into being through their actions is not a given: on the contrary, it is *the problem* which social theory must engage with. To put this in methodological terms, it is not simply a matter of explaining or understanding society; rather, according to Adorno, it is a matter of comprehending its incomprehensibleness,[3] that is to say of understanding why processes become so autonomous from the intentions and desires of men that they come to be perceived by them as a natural law (a "second nature") which dominates, or even threatens and overwhelms, their existence.

But what does it mean to explain incomprehensibleness? For Adorno—who here draws upon the whole line of theoretical thinking about reification, from Marx's idea of commodity fetishism[4] to Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*—social processes acquire the character of a second nature because their relations are not shaped by human beings according to their will and consciousness, but are mediated by the unintentional mechanism of exchange. The domination of the universal over the particular, of social law over subjects that have been turned into objects, becomes manifest in the circumstance whereby, within a society governed by the principle of exchange, the individual's life is led by anonymous social mechanisms that obey their own laws, and on which individuals depend, just as they depend on the objective necessity of natural laws. The domination of the social law over individuals and over their spontaneity and freedom is most evident in the fact that individuals are forced to reproduce their lives through the exchange of labor and goods. According to Adorno, this is not a socially neutral law at all. On the contrary, he argues that «the domination of men over men is realized through

[2] Th. W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 43.

[3] Th. W. Adorno, "Society", in S. E. Bronner and D. M. Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 267–275: 270.

[4] More extensive reflections on Adorno and the theory of fetishism may be found in my essay "II mitico nel moderno. Figure del feticismo in Adorno", in Id., S. Mistura (ed)., *Figure del feticismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), 197–224.

the reduction of man to agents and bearers of commodity exchange».[5] Exchange accomplishes the extended reproduction of social privileges for the obvious (albeit all too often forgotten) reason that the equal subjects of this exchange—who are equally free and equally in control of their own goods—never enter the market arena in conditions of equality. Adorno quite rightly emphasizes that all the problems with Marxian political economy and its theory of value and surplus value in no way compromise this basic assumption, namely the fact that exchange always occurs starting from unequal endowments, and hence reproduces and increases the privileges of those who possess capital or means of production compared to those who do not.[6]

The autonomization acquired by socio-economic dynamics with respect to human beings, who ought to be the subjects of society, is not a natural given, then, but rather reflects the heteronomous character and the domination intrinsic to the very constitution of society. This is true not only in relation to the domination mediated and reproduced through the law of exchange, but it is also true—and indeed all the more so—for more archaic forms of direct domination, cloaked in a magical, mythical, religious, or sacred veil.

It is precisely insofar as it constitutes a structure of domination that society presents itself as a "second nature", governed by laws that dominate men, instead of being dominated by them. Therefore, it is only in a critical sense that the social process can be studied—as Marx puts it—as a process of "natural history".

2 Difficulties with Adorno's Theory

An approach such as the one outlined so far—clearly influenced, to a significant degree, by the Marxian and post-Marxian theory of reification and fetishism—can be subjected to two initial criticisms, the first more theoretical in nature, the other more political.

First of all, it may be objected that in his criticism of reification, Adorno remains somehow caught up in a metaphysics of the subject and of transparency, insofar as his denunciation of reification only makes sense if we

[5] Th. W. Adorno, "Introduction", in Id., Th. W. Adormo et al. (eds.), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 14.

[6] Th. W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory", in Id., R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–110.

assume, as its counterpart, the highly problematic idea of society as a macro-subject capable of governing itself in a transparent and rational way.

From a different perspective, it may be argued that Adorno fails to realize that the subjects of this (unequal) exchange are also politically sovereign citizens who have the (at least theoretical) power to revoke the logic of exchange and to replace it, for instance, with a planned economy.

We can combine these two observations and use them as prongs, so to speak, to neutralize the radically critical potential of Adorno's theory. We may thus conclude by stating that, on the one hand, it is absurd to expect to soften the *contrainte sociale* beyond a certain point, since no collective process can transcend individuals' intentions and actions, and must therefore reify itself to some extent; but, on the other hand, democratic society is precisely the kind of society in which the institutions at the basis of human coexistence can be reduced—as far as this is at all possible—to an expression of citizens' sovereignty, in forms that ensure that this society is as rational and as respectful of each individual as possible.

Ultimately, and very simply put, this is also the theoretical perspective adopted by Habermas (who must be credited with an immanent—as opposed to extrinsic—yet also staunch polemical engagement with Adorno's critical theory). The metaphysics of the subject (i.e., the fact of having failed to move beyond the categories of the philosophy of consciousness) and the devaluation of democracy would be the most serious limit of Adorno's thought, which would make it essentially outdated (whereas on the more strictly theoretical-foundational level—which I will here leave aside—the charge is that of performative contradiction, which is to say of having formulated an all-round critique of reason which would ultimately destroy even itself).

3 Anticritique, or: Adorno's Legacy

How would Adorno have responded to this criticism? How would he have defended his point of view? A number of things can be said about this.

It seems to me that when Adorno stresses the character of the alien and threatening fate which social dynamics acquire in individuals' eyes, he is not postulating, as a possible alternative, a perfectly transparent world, with no points of friction. Rather, I believe that he is emphasizing the fact that what has been the dominant form of social relations until now ought to be understood for what it is, and not eternalized as an ineluctable

destiny: what we have experienced until now is a mode of social relations based on antagonism rather than solidarity, on competition for profit and power rather than on shared responsibility for each person's life. Adorno's thesis is ultimately that the destiny of individuals in bourgeois society is all too similar to that of the exemplary castaways (Robinson and Odysseus) whom bourgeois *ratio* celebrates as its archetypes: «Delivered up to the mercy of the waves, helplessly isolated, their very isolation forces them recklessly to pursue an atomistic interest.»[7] Certainly, as Adorno acknowledges with Kant, antagonism, competition, and rivalry have been the powerful springboard of all progress. Certainly, society has developed not despite antagonism, but *precisely thanks to it*.[8] Yet it is equally true that insofar as society is constituted in such a way, it continues to miss those objectives to which progress ought to have led it. As Adorno never tires of repeating, as long as there are still starving human beings, there is something wrong with the kind of progress achieved through domination and antagonism. There is something wrong, some original sin, in the dominant form of socialization. And this original sin is but the primacy of instrumental reason, a principle of which Adorno finds traces already in the Homeric Odysseus, who has shaped the constitution of Western civilization and is responsible for its paradoxical features. The path toward freedom from scarcity and fear has been traced by a reason which has been mistaken for a tool of self-preservation, for a tool to dominate nature, other human beings, and one's own Self; yet the boundless growth of tools to control the environment and other human beings has failed to free individuals from their subjection to an alien law. However, while the principle of domination and antagonism has marked the whole development of society down to the present day, this does not mean that it has been a necessary curse, or that society cannot be governed by any other principle. In his lectures on history,[9] where he presents the topics addressed in the chapter "World Spirit and Natural History" of the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that whether the reproduction of society through antagonism has been an absolute historical necessity

[7] M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London & New York: Verso, 1997), 61.

[8] Cf. e.g. Th. W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, 74–76.

[9] Ibid., 77–78. But on this point see also Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York & London: Continuum, 2007), 321–322 and "Introduction" in Id., Th. W. Adormo et al. (eds.), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 64.

or not, is a question that must remain open. Marx derived antagonism from economic necessity in order to overcome the former through the latter (and in doing so he constructed—in an all too idealistic manner—a history entirely governed by necessity). According to Adorno, by contrast, other hypotheses must also be taken into account, namely the possibility that social domination could be the result of a contingent development, which might also have been different, or even that it could be a kind of legacy of natural history which has endured in human history. Many hypotheses can be formulated about this issue; but what is not hypothetical, according to Adorno, is the fact that domination and antagonism have marked human history so far. The experiential path that consciousness has followed until now—the path which has shown that the increase in potential ways of dominating nature, other human beings, and one's own Self does not free humans from angst, submission, and the ever-looming risk of savagery—ought to help us understand that a society governed by a principle other than antagonism is possible and is indeed the prerequisite for a fuller kind of freedom: the principle of solidarity and of the responsibility of each person toward everyone's destiny.

But if this is so, why do human beings stubbornly cling to the kind of relations that force them to reproduce within society the struggle for life which takes place in the natural world, the cruel law of the survival of the fittest? Why do these relations incessantly reproduce themselves and resurface even within attempts to develop a different society? Why do individuals not democratically give shape to a more humane order? This leads us to the question of consensus, of social preferences, and of democracy.

With respect to this point, too, Adorno's thought is more complex than simplistic interpretations would suggest. Modern society, which is characterized by instrumental individualism and the law of exchange, by technology, and by business and bureaucratic apparatuses, is not a totalitarian monolith—even though it constantly threatens to turn into one. The modernity embodied by technology and capitalism is also one of free and rights-bearing individuals. In this respect, it is rather surprising to find a largely positive assessment of the political tradition of contractualism in Adorno: «The concept of society, which is specifically bourgeois and anti-feudal, implies the notion of an association of free and independent human subjects for the sake of the possibility of a better life and, consequently, the critique of natural societal relations. The hardening of bourgeois society into something impenetrably and inevitably

natural is its immanent regression. Something of the opposing intention was expressed in the social contract theories. No matter how little these theories were historically correct, they penetratingly remind society of the concept of the unity of individuals, whose conscious ultimately postulates their reason, freedom and equality».[10] The modernity embodied by exchange is inseparable from the modernity embodied by democracy, which in his lectures on history and freedom Adorno describes as the "constitution of a society in which subjects are subjects and not the objects of society", which is to say as the «social and political constitution of human beings' self-determination».[11]

But why, then, do forms of democracy confirm—just as much as forms of totalitarianism—an order that, as Adorno unhesitatingly suggests, continues to condemn men to the lack of freedom, crippling their spontaneity and humaneness? Why does society continue to reproduce itself as a "second nature"?

Adorno returns to this topic again and again, yet the general outline of his answer always remains the same. The more powerless individuals are in the face of mechanisms that by now completely escape their rational control, the more they end up identifying with such mechanisms, through a sort of fatal vicious circle. The more that subjects are deprived, the less they are capable of gaining awareness of their powerlessness and crippled condition, because this would be too painful a blow to their narcissism. Therefore, the only course of action that remains open to them is to identify with the imperatives of which they are the victims, thereby enacting the kind of defense mechanism which Adorno—in the footsteps of Anna Freud—calls identification with the aggressor. Such, then, is the fateful vicious circle: individuals, in whose *objective interest* it would be to change the world's course and without whose activity this change is impossible, are influenced by this mechanism to the point of losing all capacity for spontaneity and autonomous action. The more they are victims of the existing order, the more they neurotically confirm their attachment to it. It is worth noting that after illustrating this point to the audience of one of his lectures, Adorno concludes: «And this, I would say, is the truth about human beings' position in

[10] Th. W. Adorno, "Introduction", in Id., Th. W. Adorno et al. (eds.), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 25.

[11] Th. W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*…, 113.

history».[12] Certainly, this identification is also possible because it is fuelled by many subsidiary distractions and gratifications: from an emotionally charged relationship with the latest technological discoveries and devices to the fetishizing of consumer goods, from the cultural industry to the dumbing-down induced by sports[13]—these are well-known and in many respects unsurpassed analyses, so it I will not be dwelling on them here.

Even the most massive form of integration cannot blot out the antagonistic and conflictual character of society—a point that readers of Adorno often seem to have missed.[14] However, this potential for conflict almost invariably manifests itself in the wrong place, and can give rise to outbursts of social resentment toward those who are "different", just as it can migrate into the private sphere, masquerading as anxiety and neurosis.

Critical theory consists precisely in lending voice to this rift, to this potential alterity that modern and bourgeois society—the society of free individuals and exchange—carries within itself, even when it seems to be more or less monolithically integrated. As Adorno confirms in a great lecture of April 1968, critical theory is a kind of thought that compares what social reality is with what it claims to be, and which at the same time finds in this contradiction the potential or possibility to change the overall constitution of society.[15]

As is widely known, Adorno is always very reluctant to talk about the nature of this change. However, there is at least one aspect of his thought that I would like to highlight, as it seems worthy of consideration today. In a lecture of December 1964,[16] Adorno states that there is a global tendency today toward the convergence between forms of production and forms of living, compared to which national formations are merely *Rudimente*, residues. The question to be addressed today is that of the rational constitution (*vernünftige Einrichtung*) of the «Gesamtgesellschaft als Menschheit»,[17] what we might call global

[12] Ibid.

[13] Th. W. Adorno, "Society", 275.

[14] Th. W. Adorno, *Anmerkungen zum sozialen Konflikt heute. Nach zwei Seminaren*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8, *Soziologische Schriften* I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 176–195.

[15] Th. W. Adorno, *Vorlesung zur Einleitung in die Soziologie* (Frankfurt: Junius-Drucke, 1973), 16. This is a transcription not authorized by the author.

[16] Th. W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte*…, 160.

[17] Ibid., 203.

society as humanity. This society ought to conceive itself, beyond nation-State models, in decentralized terms, which is to say as the iteration of many small and peaceful units[18] ensured by the remarkable possibilities provided by technology and communication. I am mentioning this point not only because it is one of the very few moments in which Adorno indulges—orally—in the kind of utopian representations that he avoids in all other cases, but also—and especially—because it reveals that Adorno is one of those great thinkers who have always preserved the difference between the factual and the possible, even when the latter seemed to have been reduced to the faintest glimmer. He has shown us how this theoretical point can be preserved even in the absence of any perspective of near or immediate change, where others have succumbed to the illusion that such changes are within reach; and this strikes me as proof of the enduring relevance of his teaching.

[18] Ibid., 162.

The Concept of Domination

In Adorno's thought, and more generally in the Frankfurt School, the concept of domination (*Herrschaft*) plays a central role between the late 1930s and the early 1940s, the period in which Horkheimer and Adorno wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The reason for renewing this fundamental category of political philosophy was evident: both Nazi totalitarianism and the Soviet authoritarian State had invalidated the Marxist attempt to approach the topic of domination in terms of "class". It was impossible to understand both occurrences of domination—and especially the Soviet one—as forms of class domination, nor could it be detected which class was exerting domination over the other. According to Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock's reading, moreover, both the Nazi and the Soviet case showed that forms of immediate and direct domination were once again replacing the capitalistic-liberal domination mediated by exchange relations, thereby contradicting Marx's predictions. If domination could survive even a planned economy (the form which, according to the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, was to characterize the "rational society" to come), the Marxist interpretation had to be called into question. The topic of domination needed to be investigated more in depth: it was no longer possible to generalize the capitalist phase of

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class domination, as Marx had done in the *Manifesto* with his thesis that all history is a history of class struggles. Rather, the liberal-capitalist form of domination had to be inserted within a broader framework as just an episode, one of the many possible forms of domination in a continuum marking the whole history of humankind, from primitive tribes to the overt barbarity of Nazism.

Three main writings can be considered in order to outline Adorno's reflection on the topic of domination: first of all, the most important text, namely the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; then an article dating back to 1942, the posthumous "Reflections on Class Theory" and finally, Adorno's last thoughts on this theme, which can be found in two writings: the *Negative Dialectics* (and the lecture courses in which Adorno illustrated it for his students) and the long introduction he wrote in 1968 for the essays regarding the dispute between dialectical theorists and the followers of Popper's philosophy (*Der Positivismusstreit in der deuschen Sociologie*).

1 The Concept of Domination in the Dialectic of Enlightenment

The inquiry that Adorno and Horkheimer conduct in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* is led by an underlying assumption: domination, up to now, has been a constant feature of human history. However, the two authors never clearly and univocally define the concept of domination of which they make use. In order to find a—albeit approximate—definition, we have to go back in time and resort to Horkheimer's part of the *Studies on Authority and the Family*, the great collective work of the Institute for Social Research published in 1936. There, the concept of domination is summed up in these terms: «The majority of men have always worked under the leadership and command of a minority, and this dependence has always found expression in a more wretched kind of material existence for them».[1] Adorno expresses this idea in similar terms in "Reflections on Class Theory": «Hierarchy had always been a coercive organization designed for the appropriation of the labour of others».[2]

[1] M. Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family", in Id., M. Horkheimer (ed.), *Critical Theory. Selected Essays* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 68.

[2] Th. W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory", in Id., R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 94.

From a perspective strongly influenced by Marxism, Adorno and Horkheimer understand social domination as the material and symbolic privilege enjoyed by a minority through the appropriation of the vast majority of the population's surplus labor. Such an appropriation is maintained both through immediate coercion, which is an indispensable element of it, and through the acceptance enjoyed in society by domination itself: the latter is seen as an ordinary feature of the social order for a number of reasons, ranging from the effective social function that it performs, to the way it is legitimized and justified through forms of false consciousness and ideology.

What are the roots of this structure that characterizes, as a bitter *Leitmotiv*, the whole history of human society? In what terms do Adorno and Horkheimer answer the old question about the origin of inequality among human beings?

If we follow the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we find a rather clear answer. For Adorno and Horkheimer, who strongly rely on Marx's and Freud's teachings, human beings constitute themselves as such through domination over nature mediated by work; but the organization of work, even in its most elementary forms, presupposes obedience to social norms. These, in turn, as Freud showed in *Civilization and its Discontents*, imply the repression of the strongest human drives: the erotic, as well as the aggressive and regressive ones (i.e., the drives that in Freud are gathered under the concept of the "death drive"). Adaptation to social norms presupposes that all acquire the ability to dominate their internal nature, their instinctual drives; and this is possible only because society is built from the beginning as an order of domination. The dominant groups, who occupy hierarchically superior positions, force the subordinate ones to adapt themselves to work and discipline.

Hence, civilization is constituted through a circular process of domination: social domination, namely the domination of a privileged minority over a majority, prescribes to everyone instinctual renunciation and work, by which humanity learns to dominate nature and bend it to its own purposes. Social domination, domination over external nature and domination over internal nature, constitute a fatal circle where each moment depends on the others and, at the same time, supports and strengthens them.

This general framework can be enriched with other considerations:

a. A deep connection unites domination understood as privilege and power to give orders, to the division of work in society, and more precisely to the separation of intellectual and material work. Domination exists also because, within the overall organization of social labor that ensures the material reproduction of society, the organizational, intellectual, and hierarchical functions are separated from the manual, executive, and directly productive ones. The division between intellectual work and material work or, as one might say using Bourdieu's language, the monopolization of cultural capital, is an aspect of the social process that, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, cannot be separated from domination, as it is one of its necessary preconditions.
b. There is also another aspect of domination that Horkheimer and Adorno constantly highlight: if in history there have always been relations of social domination, their persistence and stability can only be explained by referring to their dual function: on the one hand, they ensure the continuation of privilege and, on the other, the survival and reproduction of the social totality. Using the categories of Hegelian philosophy, one could say that, in relations of social domination, the moment of universality and that of particularity are inextricably intertwined. As Horkheimer writes, «through whole ages of history, subordination was in the interests of those who were ruled, as is the subordination of a child who receives a good education. It was a condition for the development of mankind's capabilities. But even at such times as dependence was doubtless suitable in view of the state of human powers and of the instruments at men's disposal, it has up to now brought renunciations with it for those who were dependent».[3]

This issue emerges just as clearly in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and in some of Adorno's later writings. Domination, one could say, is both a necessary moment in the self-preservation of the social whole and the privilege of a minority, sustained by coercion. It represents, at the same time, universality and particularity; it is, simultaneously, what preserves the totality and an imposition of privilege. The two aspects appear closely intertwined: it is not easy

[3] M. Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family", 70.

to say where socially necessary authority ends and usurpation and privilege begin.[4]

c. The two aspects outlined above, namely the link between domination and the separation of intellectual work from material work on the one hand and the interweaving of the necessary social function of domination and the privilege it implies on the other, are the basis for ideologies celebrating the sacrality, necessity, naturalness, and eternity of social hierarchies; these ideologies are indispensable for preserving domination. The dominant groups elaborate and inculcate them in the subordinate ones thanks to the link between social hierarchy and the monopolization of intellectual functions.

But why are these ideologies adhered to? Why are social norms not understood as such (i.e., as historically determined and contingent functional rules), but become instead divine commandments, natural arrangements that cannot be questioned, and taboos that instill terror? Why is power sacralized, while the forms by which it reigns in society are dehistoricized and naturalized?

The theory of domination developed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is closely linked to the theory of ideology that Adorno and Horkheimer elaborate using Marxian, Durkheimian, and Freudian elements. The Marxian moment resides in the thesis according to which the ideological way in which human beings represent their social life depends on how this same social life is constituted: as we can read in the chapter "Society" of the book *Aspects of Sociology*, edited by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, the social structure produces, by virtue of the way in which it is constituted, an ideological reversal of great importance: «in the minds of men what is secondary, the institutions under which they live, becomes the primary, while that which is primary, the actual process of their lives, is once more displaced to a great extent in their consciousness by these

[4] See, on this point, Adorno's "Introduction" to the *Positivismusstreit*: «Perhaps, in primitive societies, the lack of food necessitates organizational modes of constraint which recur in situations of scarcity in supposedly mature societies where such situations are caused by the relations of production and are consequently unnecessary. The question which comes first, the socially necessary separation of physical and mental labour or the usurpatory privilege of the medicine man resembles the debate over the chicken and the egg. In any case, the shaman requires ideology and without him it would not be possible» (Th. W. Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London: Heinemann, 1976, 64).

institutions. That the material labor, to which mankind owes its subsistence, was forced onto the backs of slaves during the entire ancient period, may have played a part in this».[5] The «forms of sociation […] had the character of something that existed for itself, something substantial and unproblematic, something predominating in relation to their contents, the life process of mankind; and they had this character to such an extent that speculation about society practically coincided with speculation about its objectified institutions. The veil that hides the social is as old as political philosophy».[6]

What Adorno and Horkheimer mean is that the social forms and institutions of domination, which in reality are kept in place only thanks to the work of human beings, appear to the latter as the primary and hierarchically superordinate moment; as the moment which guarantees the survival of the whole, and to which, therefore, one must necessarily bow down. To the individual, the institutions of domination (from the most archaic up to the newer ones, such as the State, property, and class inequality) do not appear as what they really are, that is, as moments of a determined social nexus; rather, they are reified and fetishized, assumed as intranscendible facts removed from human control.

In this way, the Durkheimian perspective is also revisited and transformed: while Durkheim saw the origin of religion in the human dependence on the social totality, for Horkheimer and Adorno this same dependence is, in a social totality, organized according to hierarchy and domination: «It is this unity of collectivity and power, and not the immediate social universal, solidarity, which is precipitated in intellectual forms».[7] The power of the ideological representations of social reality, however, cannot be understood unless we refer to Freud and his theory of civilization as based on the repression of drives: under the pressure

[5] Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, *Aspects of Sociology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 20.

[6] Ibid., 17. Cf. also what Adorno writes in his essay "Society", in Id., S. E. Bronner and D. MacKey Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society* (New York-London: Routledge 1989), 274: «Inasmuch as these massive social forces and institutions were once human ones, are essentially the reified work of living human beings, this appearance of self-sufficiency and independence in them would seem to be something ideological, a socially necessary mirage which one ought to be able to break through, to change. Yet such pure appearance is the *ens realissimum* in the immediate life of men».

[7] M. Horkheimer, Th. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 16.

of an authority that on the one hand embodies a repressive instance while on the other ensures sustenance and protection, individuals develop an ambivalent affective attitude; repressed impulses, destructiveness, and rebellion against authority are projected out of the ego, and attributed, in a paranoid way, to hostile powers. A threatening Other is created which takes on the guise of evil spirits, of the devil, of witches, and of the Jews. Freed from their hostile part, subjects can then identify themselves, in a passive-masochistic way, with the superior and powerful authority they are confronted with. They thereby obtain a compensatory satisfaction, all the greater the more they are allowed to manifest their hostility in socially accepted forms: that is, by directing it not against the repressive authority, but against the Other, explicitly hated but secretly loved and envied. Only through a sophisticated psychological analysis such as the one inaugurated by Freud is it possible to understand and explain the paradox for which repression by a powerful and threatening authority does not usually generate rebellion but, on the contrary, passive (sado-masochistic) identification with power and hostility toward anyone and anything that appears to challenge it.

2 The Problem of Domination in "Reflections on Class Theory"

Adorno's 1942 essay "Reflections on Class Theory" expresses a point of view not dissimilar from the one presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Marx had extended the concept of class to the whole of history (performing an operation "philologically" dubious, but polemically effective). For Adorno, the historical crisis of liberal capitalism makes it necessary to overcome the Marxian vision of domination, or at least to transform it substantially. In Marx's analysis, which refers to a model of liberal and competitive capitalism, class domination seems to reproduce itself as a sort of unintentional effect, continuously regenerated by the exchange between capital and labor. But the problem—for Adorno—is that society has never fully functioned according to this model; moreover, it has completely outgrown that paradigm in the age of authoritarian or interventionist States established after the great crisis of 1929. The new primacy of politics over economics sheds light on the past and leads to the abandonment of all "economisms"; economic dynamics must be read in terms of power struggles between groups, elites, or rather, as Adorno would say, between gangs and rackets.

The success of specific groups in the capitalistic competition, for example, depends largely on extra-economic factors: «their success depends on the power of their capital outside the competitive process, a power they already possess on entering the marketplace. It depends further on the political and social power they represent, on old and new conquistador spoils, on their affiliation with feudal property that a competitive economy has never entirely liquidated, and on their relations with the direct governing apparatus of the military».[8] It is therefore, in essence, a matter of reversing the perspective often assumed by Marxism: it is neither true that class domination can be explained simply by the exchange between capital and labor (which Marx had studied in its dual nature of *equal exchang*e and *exploitation*), nor that the ruling class is merely an agent of the mechanism, subject to it and its laws (as Marx emphatically stated in the *Capital*). Rather, it is true that the relations of property, and therefore of domination, *pre-exist* capitalism; these relations are perpetuated through the mechanisms of capitalism, but they can also overcome the latter when these no longer serve their purpose: «The laws of exchange have not led to a form of rule that can be regarded as historically adequate for the reproduction of society as a whole at its present stage. Instead, it was the old form of rule that had joined the economic apparatus so that, once in possession, it might smash it and thus make its own life easier. […] In the image of the latest economic phase, history is the history of monopolies. In the image of the manifest act of usurpation that is practiced nowadays by the leaders of capital and labour acting in consort, it is the history of gang wars and rackets».[9] The extra-economic factors, which in Marx's theory appear as mere external variables that modify the laws of the movement of capital, «lie outside the system of political economy, but are central to the history of domination»[10]; «[…] the ruling-class is not just governed by the system; it rules through the system and ultimately dominates it».[11]

Reflecting on the totalitarian experience and on the usurpation of power by criminal cliques or elites, Adorno therefore proposes an anti-economistic and anti-deterministic reading of the relations of power; this

[8] Th. W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory", 98.

[9] Ibid., 100.

[10] Ibid., 104.

[11] Ibid.

interpretation departs from the traditional Marxist view, as it emphasizes the role of the dominant groups as political-strategic subjectivities, as well as the aleatory contingency of the relations of power that are imposed each time. This substantial correction of the Marxist tradition is in my opinion very consonant with the ideas sustained, many years later, by one of the most acute analysts of global capitalism, Immanuel Wallerstein; Wallerstein takes «historical capitalism» as his object of reflection, also to highlight the differences between his model and that of Marx. He supports the suggestive thesis that historical capitalism is the instrument through which the old pre-capitalist ruling classes were able to overcome the crisis that threatened the social hierarchies at the end of the medieval age, thus rebuilding a stable domination: «it certainly seems to have been the case that the creation of historical capitalism as a social system dramatically reversed a trend that the upper strata feared, and established in its place one that served their interests even better».[12]

3 The Theme of Domination in Adorno's Later Works

Only in the *Negative Dialectic*, and in the lectures devoted to it, does Adorno's anti-determinist and anti-economistic perspective lead to an explicit critique of Marx's thought. If in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the relations of domination were still thought of as "necessary" (and, at the same time, as a condition for the possibility of civilization and a burden that weighed on it), in the reflections that Adorno devotes to this issue in the 1960s he instead radically questions this thesis, together with the explanatory perspective that Marxism aimed at providing. Whether domination was a historical necessity or not—argues Adorno in the lectures on the chapter "World Spirit and Natural History" of the *Negative Dialectics*—is a question that must be left open. Marx had derived antagonism from economic necessity, thinking therefore that the first could be overcome by overcoming the latter; for Adorno, however, we must also contemplate other hypotheses. Social domination could be the result of a contingent development, or even a sort of legacy of natural history that humankind has continued to reproduce by inertia: «It is

[12] I. Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization* (London: Verso, 1995), 43.

not idle to speculate whether antagonism was inherited in the origin of the human society as a principle of a *homo homini lupus*, a piece of a prolonged natural history, or it is evolved *thesei*—and whether, even if evolved, it followed from the necessities of the survival of the species and not contingently, as it were, from archaic arbitrary acts of seizing power».[13]

In his lectures, Adorno dwells on these problems even more explicitly: to the thesis that domination was born as a necessary response to scarcity, the idea can be opposed that economic relations and economic antagonism are the product of an original domination. Instead of material scarcity, which would motivate an oppressive and hierarchical organization as the only one suitable to ensure the survival of humankind, there would be, according to Adorno, an original will to dominate. Marx's stance on the primacy of economy over domination, and not vice versa, would also be politically motivated by his conflict with the anarchists: in fact, Adorno explains, all those who attributed primacy to the relations of domination, and saw these as what first needed to be changed, were automatically on the side of the anarchists. For the Adorno of the 1960s, however, the question of primacy must remain open; even the hypothesis that domination is the result of an «irrational catastrophe» at the beginning of history, something similar to the "original sin" of which the mythical-religious narratives speak, cannot be excluded. Of course, a theory that places a catastrophe as a principle of historical explanation cannot even be a theory in the proper sense: explaining something by resorting to an «irrational catastrophe» is equivalent to not explaining anything. But beyond this paradox, which is an ever-present figure in Adorno's thought, what matters most are the insights and questions that Adorno's reflections contain, and above all a basic conviction: that hierarchy and domination are not an obvious fact, but the most difficult problem to unravel for a theory that wants to be critical.

[13] Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 321.

Is Marx Obsolete?

Theodor W. Adorno's engagement with Marx's thought forms a constant element of his reflections. One of the very interesting consequences of this "close quarter engagement" is a text that Adorno wrote in 1968; it was first presented by the Frankfurt philosopher as the introductory remarks to the fourteenth congress of the German Society of Sociology, which, in remembrance of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Marx's birth, had decided to field the question: "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?".[1] Later, the text was read at the great symposium on Marx, held in Paris from 8 to 10 May 1968 (while the student revolt was in full swing) and subsequently published in the proceedings of the above congress under the title, "Is Marx Obsolete?".[2]

The question that the congress of the German Society of Sociology wished to take as its theme, and which Adorno attempted to answer with his remarks, is very clear: is the concept of capitalism, as it was delineated by Marx, still useful for understanding the contemporary world and critiquing it? Or would it be better to employ different conceptualizations, as for example that of an "age of technology", which would

[1] Th. W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?", in Id., R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 111–125.

[2] The text, almost identical to "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?", appeared in *Colloque Marx* (Paris: Editions Mouthon, 1969).

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resonate with those following Heidegger's philosophy or the tradition of *Kulturkritik?*

The reasoning that Adorno uses to answer the congress' question is very cogent and complex, because it implies reflection on at least two levels: in the first place, Adorno asks whether the society of the late twentieth century has changed to such a degree as to render inapplicable the Marxian categories, which were able to decipher the social dynamics of the late 1800 s. But this is not enough: it is also necessary to ask if there are no underlying limits in Marx's theory—if it was not already inadequate, in some ways, so soon as it was formulated. Adorno focuses above all on the first question, but does not ignore the second. It would be best therefore to ask first of all what are, from his point of view, the great social transformations that have rendered certain Marxian categories inadequate to furnishing an orientation, within the horizon of contemporary times.

1 The "Predictions" of Marxian Theory

To get his reflections underway, Adorno first briefly touches upon a question much discussed in twentieth-century Marxism, namely: if predictions about historical trends could be garnered from Marx's theory, and if they have been borne by the actual course of events. In point of fact, Adorno believes that "predictive" theses like the law governing the tendency of the profit rate to fall, the increasing misery of the working class, and the presence of tendencies leading toward the collapse of the system, really constitute a relevant part of the Marxian vision: if they did not come to pass, this throws a sizeable shadow over the validity of the theory as a whole.

In line with the analyses carried out by various representatives of the Frankfurt School from the 1930s to the 1960s, however, Adorno's considerations lead neither to the rejection nor to the acceptance of this kind of prediction. If we understand him rightly, Adorno's thesis is that the things Marx had identified as being the (destructive, catastrophic, or socially unsustainable) consequences of capitalistic development rigorously derive from the theoretical model that he develops in his critique of political economy. For Adorno, it is undoubtedly true that these predictions did not come to pass, but this is not a result of internal problems within the model itself, so much as of the fact that the concreteness of

socio-political dynamics has generated so many innovations and transformations of socio-economic assets that the model is pressed ever farther from reality. To say it in Adorno's words:

> [Marx] needed only to inquire whether capitalism fit into this system in order to produce a quasi-systematic theory of his own, in determinate negation of the system he found before him. In the meantime, the market economy has become so full of holes as to rule out any such confrontation. The irrational nature of contemporary society inhibits a rational account of it in the realm of theory.[3]

I believe that Adorno's thesis can be translated here in these terms: if capitalism had functioned according to its pure dynamics, located strictly within the coordinates of the liberal economy, it would have generated socially catastrophic results; but that is not what happened, because certain changes arose that completely transformed this picture.

The most evident mutation (not only as compared to historical reality, but most of all compared to the theoretical schema of the liberal economy) is the interweaving of politics with the economy, the presence of the State as investor, consumer, stabilizer of economic dynamics, and as provider of subsidies, services and social aid, without which, we might predict, we would experience a much worse impoverishment of the working classes than that hypothesized by Marx; and we could also add that in recent years we have actually witnessed this, in the sense that unemployment and misery grow the more, the less States, caught in the midst of debt crises, offer aid.

The theme of political intervention in the economy thus becomes essential; on the one hand, this intervention is external to pure economic dynamics, while on the other hand it is required by those dynamics. «Economic intervention is not, as the older liberal school believed, an alien element grafted on from outside, but an intrinsic part of the system, the epitome of self-defense».[4] «With the trend toward intervention, the system's resilience has been confirmed, but so, indirectly, has the theory of its collapse».[5] Moreover, as Adorno also reminds us, and as we mentioned

[3] Th.W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism", 115–116.

[4] Ibid., 122.

[5] Ibid., 123.

earlier, «the fact is that the model according to which capitalism operated was never as pure as liberal apologias supposed. As early as Marx, the model took the form of ideological critique; that is to say, it was supposed to show how little the conception that bourgeois society had of itself corresponded to the reality».[6] Adorno stated these theses even more clearly in the unpublished essay of 1942 entitled "Reflections on Class Theory", where he explained that the success of the winners in the market competition—which liberalism and neoliberalism talk about ceaselessly—does not depend exclusively, or even much at all, on their competitive efficiency, but can be traced back to mainly extra-economic factors: «[i]t depends further on the power of their capital outside the competitive process, a power they already possess on entering the marketplace. It depends further on the political and social power they represent, on old and new conquistador spoils, on their affiliation with feudal property that a competitive economy has never entirely liquidated, and on their relations with the direct governing apparatus of the military».[7]

In short, if its true that the economy has never functioned as liberalism claimed it should, this is even more evident in the contemporary world, where we seem to be led on by the «possibility that the steering of economic processes might be transferred to the political powers does indeed follow from the dynamics of the deductive system, but also tends toward an objective irrationality»,[8] in the sense that it renders the construction of a coherent and almost systematic theory, like the Marxian, more difficult.

2 The Primacy of Economy or the Primacy of Politics

What is not quite clear, however, is if these transformations modify the Marxian vision in any essential way, which is to say, if they imply the transition to a form of society in which the primacy of the political replaces the primacy of the economy (or in which the political is restored to its prior primacy). This was the direction of thought that some members

[6] Ibid.

[7] Th. W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory" in Id., *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 98.

[8] Th. W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism", 116.

of the Frankfurt School took between the end of the 1930s and the early part of the 1940s, on the basis of the Pollockian theory of "State capitalism"; Horkheimer, too, embraced this theory. The perspective that these thinkers began to outline was of a society where the key to power and domination no longer resided—as Marxian theory suggested—in the monopoly over the means of production,[9] but had rather become directly political: in the place of domination mediated through the control of productive resources, there arose the direct power of command which the leaders exerted over the economic, bureaucratic, and party political apparatuses. This represented a theoretical turn which, to be sure, was quite justified, insofar as the development of the Soviet regime, not to speak of the Nazi and Fascist ones, had demonstrated that domination could coexist with the planned economy, and therefore that its exercise, mediated by the market and by capital, could also be considered a phase destined to end with the advent of total administration.

Toward the end of Adorno's life (he was to die in 1969), he appeared to distance himself from this line of thought, which he had adopted in the aforementioned essay of 1942 on class theory. It is true that, in a passage of the 1968 text, Adorno once again mentions the perspective that «the steering of economic processes might be transferred to the political powers».[10] However, this is decidedly not the prevalent option presented in the essay of 1968. In some places, an outline of the dualistic theory of the source of power is delineated, as for example when Adorno writes that relations of production «have ceased to be just property relations; they now also include relations ranging from those of the administration on up to those of the state, which functions now as an all-inclusive capitalist organization».[11] We might therefore speak of a dominant class composed of two poles (owners and administrators) proceeding in a direction similar to that recently taken by the neo-Marxism of Jacques Bidet.[12] But Adorno is not particularly interested in deepening this strand of thought.

[9] On this and other questions regarding Adorno's interpretation of Marx, see S. Jarvis, "Adorno, Marx, Materialism", in Id., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79–100.

[10] Th. W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism", 116.

[11] Ibid., 119.

[12] See, e.g., J. Bidet, *Explication et reconstruction du Capital* (Paris: PUF, 2004).

Instead, the thesis that is developed in the 1968 text, and in many other places, is that the Marxian vision of social domination linked to the concept of capitalism also remains a decisive reference point for understanding the dynamics of contemporary society: «Human beings continue to be subject to domination by the economic process. Its objects have long since ceased to be just the masses; they now include those in charge and their agents. The latter, in accordance with the older theory, have largely been reduced to functions of their own apparatus of production».[13] It is precisely for this reason, he adds, that the much discussed problem of the so-called managerial revolution (from the title of James Burnham's famous book[14]) is of completely secondary importance: owners and managers actually both act as mere functions of the abstract logic of capitalistic accumulation.

In Adorno's reflection, two strands of thought are to be found which are not easily merged. On the one hand, if we follow the originally Horkheimerian thesis of the primacy of politics, relations of domination come to the fore, where domination is understood non-economically, in the sense of recognizing all due space to the subjectivity of cliques and of the dominant oligarchies, which make use of the economic mechanism to a far greater extent than it makes use of them. And this, as we have seen, is also the line of thought that can be found in the unpublished 1942 Adornian essay about class theory.

This perspective stands in contrast to another that we could define as being orthodox Marxian, according to which the law of development of the whole, which has its seed in the principle of exchange that is developed in capital and in accumulation, dominates the social process as an iron and non-intentional mechanism; compared to it, subjectivities have only an apparent consistency.

People are still what they were in Marx's analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century: appendages of machines, not just literally workers who have to adapt themselves to the nature of the machines they use, but far beyond that, figuratively, workers who are compelled right down to their most intimate impulses to subordinate themselves to the mechanisms

[13] Th. W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism", 116.

[14] See J. Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World* (New York: John Day Co., 1941).

of society and to adopt specific social roles without reservation. Production takes place today, as then, for the sake of profit. And far exceeding what was foreseeable in Marx's day, human needs that were potentially functions of the production apparatus have now become such functions in fact, rather than the production apparatus becoming a function of human needs.[15]

Against those who, basing themselves on the existence of State interventions and tendencies toward economic planning, claim that capitalism might escape from the anarchy of production, and so it now has become something other than capitalism, Adorno objects that «the social fate that befalls the individual is as arbitrary as it ever was» and that, although it is true that we are moving toward a «unified society»,[16] we have not entered into a completely new historical period, that of State capitalism and of the primacy of politics over economics, as discussed by Horkheimer's texts (and Adorno's as well) in the 1940 s. Indeed, we are still standing within the determinate horizon of capitalism, even though its domination has since become that of a mechanism proceeding according to its own independent law, and which could well be summed up in one of Nietzsche's formulations: «one flock, but no shepherd». «However, the formula conceals something he did not want to see, namely, the ancient social oppression. Only now that oppression has become anonymous».[17]

As we will shortly see with greater clarity, the break with the old, more or less liberal capitalism is caused by the prevalence of the relations of production over productive forces; by social integration through consumption and by the consequent end of class consciousness; by the fact that production has directly become the generator of corresponding needs (rather than orienting itself according to largely pre-existent needs); and by the control and the stabilization of the economic cycle through State intervention. But continuity is granted by the more-than-ever-unassailable persistence of the processes of social *alienation* that characterizes capitalism: precisely in the sense intended by Marx, social relations are opposed to the very men that generate them as an alien destiny—a destiny which dominates these men rather than being dominated by them. In short, we can say that this theory of late capitalism, which remains

[15] Ibid., 117.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 116.

quite uncertain in the definition of its characteristics, is accompanied by a decidedly unambiguous conclusion, one which reiterates the predominance of an autonomous logic governing the whole, imposing itself above the heads of its subjects.

3 The Eclipse of Marxian Contradictions

Within the picture outlined so far, we can quite easily insert a reflection on the eclipse of what were for Marx the great contradictions that undermined the stability of the capitalistic order, which is to say, on the one hand, the conflict between classes and, on the other, the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production: two dimensions that for Marx are, naturally, absolutely intertwined, because conflict is nothing other than the subjective expression of a contradiction that has its own well-defined objective consistency. Adorno's thesis is not that in late capitalism the classes have disappeared, but rather that we have seen the total evaporation of that class consciousness of the proletariat which, in Marx's vision and still more in Lukács', constitutes an essential hub for the organization of such conflict as might surpass the capitalistic order of society. For Adorno, the empirical finding holds good, according to which «in the countries that are prototypical for class relations, such as North America, class consciousness did not exist for long periods of time»; «the workers were not becoming pauperized but were increasingly being integrated into bourgeois society and its view, a development that was not foreseen during and immediately after the Industrial Revolution, when the industrial proletariat was recruited from the ranks of the paupers».[18] At bottom, Adorno's thesis, which was clearly expressed in this matter already in the *Minima Moralia*, is that no capacity to organize as a force antagonistic to the dominant social relations can be attributed to the industrial workers nor to workers more generally; for Adorno, the workers «not only have lost any sense of class solidarity but also fail to grasp fully that they are the objects and not the subjects of the social process that as subjects they nevertheless sustain».[19]

It is quite remarkable that these theses were reiterated in the very same year, 1968, that would see an extraordinary resurgence of the protest

[18] Ibid., 114–115.

[19] Ibid., 115.

movements, not only on the part of students, but also on the part of workers, in important European countries such as France and Italy. The fact remains, however, that in the fifty years that separate us from the Adornian essay, these theses seem to have been borne out, thus attesting to how profoundly the pessimistic lucidity of the Frankfurt academic had penetrated.

There are obviously many reasons for this "integration" of the workers, and Adorno in his writing does not fail to bring them repeatedly into the foreground. Essentially, the process of assimilation of the working class has two faces which are so evident that it is not worth our while to dwell on them at length. There is a material side, consisting of concrete improvements in the conditions of life for the working classes of the most advanced capitalistic societies: access to quality goods in larger quantities (food, clothing, housing, means of transport), and in many cases even the services furnished by the welfare State. Equally important, however, is symbolic assimilation, which comes to pass fundamentally through the culture industry, consumer ideology, the colonization of the imaginary, those sophisticated mechanisms (which have their origin in the world of advertising, but then spread everywhere) which generate, in those they target, attachment to such models of life as are necessary to the continuance of the economic mechanism. We would however do well to recall (as Adorno does) that this second aspect works because it finds confirmation in the ground of the effective growth of material wealth, so much so that workers nowadays (fortunately) have much more to lose than their chains.

But what are the consequences that must be drawn from this kind of reasoning? Can we unhesitatingly limit ourselves to affirming that the workers of industrialized countries still constitute an exploited class, but a class which lacks awareness of its exploitation? Adorno's answer to this question, which was already difficult to answer for anyone seeking to take their bearings by Marxism in the late twentieth century, has several facets. In the first place, it must be observed that we do not find in Adorno's thought what would be necessary in this regard: namely, a detailed questioning of the theoretical framework behind the Marxian theory of surplus value and of exploitation—though none of this passed unscathed through the century's economic debates. Here too, as elsewhere, Adorno seems divided between a certain loyalty to Marxian dictates on the one hand and his awareness of the fragility of certain aspects of that theory on the other. It was precisely the doctrine of surplus value, as he rightly

claims, that «was supposed to provide an objective economic explanation of class relations and the growth of class antagonism».[20] But if this doctrine has objectively entered into crisis, because—as Adorno himself observes—it has been expelled from the academic economy and feebly defended even by the attempts of the neo-Marxists, this means that there is something wrong at bottom, that reality escapes the grasp of this theory. And this happens above all, according to Adorno's swift observations, because what it was based on, namely the contribution of living labor to the production of goods, became increasingly marginal following the exponential growth of technological progress. Although Adorno does not cite Marx's *Grundrisse* in this context, it might be said that he goes in the same direction as Marx does in that work. In the *Grundrisse* Marx hypothesized an obsolescence of the doctrine of value in the epoch of automatized production. Therefore, it is not enough to say that the exploited are still being exploited, but without any awareness of this fact. The situation seems more complicated than this, and presses Adorno to write, rather cryptically, that «in the countries that are prototypical for class relations, such as North America, class consciousness did not exist for long periods of time, if indeed it ever existed at all. But if that is the case, and if the question of the proletariat just becomes a puzzle, then quantity changes into quality, and the suspicion that conceptual myths are being created can be suppressed only by decree».[21] This is an honestly problematic conclusion, I would say, and one which in the last analysis inclines its reader neither toward a radical critique of the concept of exploitation, nor toward the salvaging of the same.

4 Productive Forces and Relations of Production

Apart from the class conflict, Adorno also eliminates the contradiction which should exist, according both to Marx's thought and to the conventional view, between productive forces and relations of production. For Adorno, this dialectic tool has reached its conclusion, because the productive forces, rather than tending through their development to break the

[20] Ibid., 115.

[21] Ibid.

cage of the relations of production,[22] have in fact become perfectly serviceable to the same. «The sheer instinct for survival enabled the relations of production to remain in control of the liberated forces of production through a series of ad hoc deviances and stratagems. The signature of the age is the predominance of the relations of production over the forces of production, even though in the eyes of the latter the relations of production were no more than a laughingstock».[23]

In this respect, however, Adornian analysis seems to proceed a bit too quickly, retreating from what was effectively the Marxian problem. The knot that Marx focuses on, against the grain of the times, already beginning from the pages of the *Manifesto*, was very simple: capitalistic relations hamper the development of the same productive forces to which they earlier had given such an exceptional boost. Rationally, this means that within this relation it is not possible to produce and distribute everything which could physically be produced: for where there is no possibility of production with profit, the workers will remain unemployed and the production capacity will remain underused; and so there will be a great quantity of potential energy that will not be used for the benefit of the human community. But the problem of this underuse is that on the one hand it is cyclical, bound to crisis dynamics (as we have very clearly seen also in recent times), while on the other hand it develops over a long period of time. It thus happens that, after an initial glorious phase, capitalism tends toward stagnation or low growth, meaning that these things can only be opposed by the growth of the non-capitalistic sector. If one can speak sensibly of a contradiction here, therefore, it is in the sense that capitalism develops productive forces while at the same time also limiting them, both cyclically and in trends over longer periods of time. While this first aspect has been confirmed even recently, there is still no sign on the horizon that there might be a verification of the Marxian hypothesis of a breaking point, at which the limitations imposed by capitalism would become so severe that the entire system becomes unsustainable. Or rather, we have approached this breaking point in great crises that were subsequently overcome through a series of political and economic mechanisms, obviously at a high human cost.

[22] Ibid., 119.

[23] Ibid.

As Adorno interprets it, however, the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is principally seen in terms of the question of technology. Productive forces do not enter into contradiction with relations of production because the development of technology is determined by those capitalistic relations within which that development is contained, and therefore cannot constitute a menace to such relations. Already Marx, in his *Capital*, observed how the development of new methods of production led not only to a greater efficiency, but still more to control over work. And Adorno observes that «the invention of weapons of destruction has become the prototype of a new type of technology. And, by contrast, those technologies that turn their backs on domination, centralism, and violence against nature, and that would doubtless help to heal much of what is damaged literally and figuratively by the technology we have, are allowed to wither away».[24] In Adorno we find neither Luddism nor a general critique of technology. Indeed, he clearly stands in contrast to Heidegger in his conviction that it is not technology which rules, but the social-economic relations within which technology appears, and which condition the lines of technological development.

It remains a fact that, for the Frankfurt thinker, social dialectics as Marx had envisaged it is closed off on both fronts—that of class contradiction between workers and capitalists on the one hand and that of the structural contradiction between productive forces and relations of production on the other. That is to say, the proletarians are still exploited and the relations of production have effectively become obsolete, but Marx's conclusions do not follow from this, because the proletarians are integrated as consumers and the relations of production (which govern productive forces) are kept alive through remedies and various patchwork solutions.

5 But the Contradiction Remains

Despite all of this, other devastating social contradictions remain. Indeed, in the first place, according to Adorno, one must raise the question «[w]hether and to what extent class relations between the leading industrial states, on the one hand, and the vigorously courted underdeveloped

[24] Ibid., 118.

nations, on the other».[25] The philosopher rightly underlines how one of the great unresolved contradictions of contemporary capitalism is that standing between the opulence of the most advanced industrial countries on the one hand and the misery and hunger which still affect enormous swaths of the world population on the other. But this contradiction ultimately brings us back to the another, which indicates a structural characteristic of capitalistic production: because production is not aimed at satisfying social needs, but at achieving profits, this implies—as Hegel had already explained in his pages on the pauper class in *Philosophy of Right*—that the most spectacular increase of wealth can coexist with the inability to satisfy fundamental social needs, though these could be met, without any difficulty, through the available forces of production. The fact that entire populations still suffer famine outside the West, and that even wealthy countries are not able to satisfy essential needs (Adorno gives the example of housing),[26] is precisely one of the great contradictions of a system of production where the satisfaction of social needs is an accidental by-product of the desire for profit. This system of production is basically able to ensure necessities (but not for all) only so long as these march in step with the production, not only of the superfluous, but also of the means of destruction meant for war purposes, whose demand is fundamental to ensure that the mechanism hums on without ever jamming up. Limiting itself to these brief considerations, Adorno's reflection stops, however, at that point from which he perhaps should have commenced. He leaves many questions unanswered. For example: to what extent does the well-being of wealthy countries rest (and to what extent was it historically founded) on the dispossession of poor ones? And to what extent can this well-being (as the current globalization seems to attest) expand and generate positive dynamics even beyond the West? Moreover: if it is true that the system of industrial market capitalism has given the people of this planet an extraordinary multiplication of the resources at their disposal (albeit at the price of many great unsolved problems), does it make sense to seek a different order, or is it not rather more reasonable to regulate, transform, and manage this present system, which possesses, after all, indisputable virtues? Or, on the other hand, must we reason on the fact that the virtues that characterized this socio-economic order in

[25] Ibid., 117.

[26] Ibid.

the past (inextricably connected, as we have repeated many times, with its vices) lose their "virtuous" character given that, on the one hand, the conditions to ensure important goods at a low cost for everyone have been realized, and, on the other hand, robust economic growth seems difficult to sustain on this exhausted and by now "small" planet which we inhabit?

Adorno does not address these questions; he prefers steadfastly to insist on a topic which may be more limited, but is certainly more ambitious. The contradiction that remains absolutely unsolved, and the stigma which characterizes nineteenth-century capitalism every bit as much as contemporary capitalism, is the domination that the relations of these systems, transformed into an external law, exercise over concrete individuals—the submission of these individuals, even when they are fortunate enough to dwell in the privileged parts of the world, to the compulsions of an economic and bureaucratic apparatus that they themselves keep alive through their actions, but that restricts the space for free spontaneity and self-realization. In a word, we are speaking of social alienation: «If the old pauperization theory has turned out not to be literally true, it has done so in the no less alarming sense that unfreedom, dependency upon an apparatus that has escaped the control of those who use it, has spread out universally over mankind».[27]

It is for this reason that contemporary society, even if it has become an inhospitable soil for the blossoming of proletarian class consciousness, is yet characterized by an antagonistic and conflict-generating character; and while conflicts are no longer manifested as class conflicts, they nonetheless migrate into other spheres, for example into that of the private life of individuals.[28] «It is possible», Adorno writes in his "Remarks on Social Conflict Today",«that in certain crisis situations social conflict emerges in the form of class conflict; whether this will newly occur in the forms of the administered world is yet to be seen. In the meantime, social conflict must be researched and examined elsewhere, as well»[29]: it will be rediscovered, dislocated, and redirected in the many explosions of rage and resentment that mark our society, every bit as much in the private dimension as in

[27] Ibid, 116.

[28] Th. W. Adorno, "Anmerkungen zum sozialen Konflikt heute", in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8, *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 177–195.

[29] Ibid., 186–87.

the public one. As the Frankfurt thinker observes, these «constitute a potential danger, not only for order, but every bit as much for unpopular minorities or for those who will not conform politically; the energy of class struggle, deprived of its primary goal, can be turned against these groups in times of crisis».[30]

Compared to Marxian critical theory, therefore, Adorno's theory is characterized by a substantial change of perspective. Capitalistic society remains characterized by contradiction and antagonism, and precisely for this reason remains in principle a contingent and surpassable form of human relations: «History will not come to rest, as long as there will be antagonism in the social order, and as long as men are not 'subjects' of society, but remain its agents – whose low status is sometimes disguised by speaking of their 'role' instead. […] The chances of total destruction are greater than the chances of stagnation on the Ancient Egyptian scale»[31] namely the establishment of some sort of new totalitarian nightmare. But, at the same time, it is not possible to indicate some visible or concretely viable direction by which the existent social order might be overcome. It is true that the earliest manifestations of student and youth movements seemed to spark a glimmer of hope even in Adorno. In April 1968, he observed that «only in more recent times, have traces of a countervailing trend become visible among various sections of the younger generation: resistance to blind conformism, the freedom to choose rational goals, revulsion from the world's deceptions and illusions, the recollection of the possibility of change».[32] But even this cautious optimism was to disappear in the following months when the engagement with the students became severely confrontational, and Adorno's views returned to their initial pessimism. The situation was such—as he argued for example in the epistolary polemic that he set before Herbert Marcuse in 1969—that any kind of praxis was out of the question, and every attempt in that direction could do nothing but deteriorate the current state of affairs.[33]

[30] Ibid., 188.

[31] Th.W. Adorno, "'Static' and 'Dynamic' as Sociological Categories", in *Diogenes*, 33, Spring 1961, 28–49: 48.

[32] Th. W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?", 123–124.

[33] See Th. W. Adorno, H. Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement", *New Left Review*, 233, January–February 1999, 123–136.

6 A Paradoxical Orthodoxy

Adorno's position therefore takes on some rather paradoxical qualities. On the one hand, he remains faithful to the Marxian critique of capitalism and the social alienation that it brings, preserving a certain Marxian "orthodoxy" that leads him, for example, to devise (without however realizing it) a critique of the social-democratic program of Bad Godesberg—whereby the Social Democratic Party confirmed its abandonment of Marxism.[34] On the other hand, however, he separates criticism from any reference to any concrete action of social transformation, reducing it to a pure theoretical principle from which, in the present historical phase, no political or practical indications can be drawn. Obviously, this position runs the risk of becoming paradoxical or contradictory: any critique of an immutable situation would indeed be no less meaningless than a critique of the law of gravity. Adorno is certainly aware of this, and in fact he never says that the situation is immutable; he continues to consider it transformable and contingent, crippled by contradictions that could make it collapse; but he also holds that, in the present epoch, no transformative action is practicable; and this further weakens, or altogether negates, the thesis according to which society is in principle transformable toward human emancipation—a thesis without which, however, the very idea of critical theory would completely lose its sense.

These are the problems which Adorno's thought encounters whenever it establishes, through a series of decisive points, its proximity or distance to Marx thought. In my opinion, the other side of his reflections—that is to say, when Adorno maintains Marxian orthodoxy—is also not without its problems. The critique of alienation, which is to say of that situation in which men, through their relations, create a social process that renders itself, against their will, autonomous, and dominates them as an alien destiny, is perfectly in line with Marx, and most of all with the Marx of the *Grundrisse* or of the chapter of *Capital* dedicated to fetishism;[35] but it tends to remain loyal to Marx's thought also in the

[34] See Adorno's letter to Horkheimer of 8 December 1966, in Th. W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel 1927–1969* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), vol. IV, 782–784.

[35] In his essay "Oggettività sociale e critica dell'economia politica: Adorno e Marx," in Id., L. Pastore and Th. Gebur (eds.), *Theodor W. Adorno. Il maestro ritrovato* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2008), 223–241, H. Reichelt underlines and emphasizes precisely this aspect of Adorno's thought. On the dialectic Frankfurt interpretation of Marx, and its connections to Adorno's theory of criticism, see also Tommaso Redolfi Riva, "Teoria

more problematic aspects of that thought. The autonomy and the overarching power that social relations take on with respect to those individuals subject to them on the one hand certainly constitute a specific characteristic of mercantile and anarchic society, a society ungoverned by any conscious plan; but on the other hand, as Durkheim would have said, they are an effect of the social relation as such. As it seems to me, we might say that the limits of Marx, and of Adorno who followed him to the letter, are to be found in their failure to realize that the processes of autonomization and reification are not limited exclusively to market capitalism. A social critique which narrowly pursues the road opened by Lukács in 1923, and which is concentrated mainly on the theme of alienation, is helpless before the objection that the effect of alienation is already introduced by the simple relationship between intentional individual acts and the global consequences of the interaction of these acts, and therefore might become more or less acute, while not being related exclusively to some specific modality of social relations.

At bottom, Adorno seems to maintain an "orthodox" position with regard to the background philosophic Marxian framework, while he questions everything regarding the concrete contradictions and the conflict within capitalism. Thus, he ends up giving form to a vision of society where the alienating domination of economic process, which unfolds according to a logic of its own over the heads of its subjects, is matched by the most complete absence of the political dimension, of social conflict and the struggle for hegemony; indeed, from his perspective, as we have seen, tensions and antagonisms do not translate into a struggle between those forces that promote the process of emancipation on the one hand and those that obstruct it on the other, but are "discharged" into non-political forms, if not into forms which are actually psychopathological. Ultimately, it could be said that, in Adorno, the underestimation of the political dimension and of the struggle for hegemony, which already characterized the Marxian "system" in its critique of economics, but not

critica della società? Critica dell'economia politica. Adorno, Backhaus, Marx", in *Consecutio temporum*, III, no. 5, October 2013. Roberto Finelli also observes how Adorno (preceded here by Lukács and followed by Reichelt and Backhaus) can be placed in the circle of what Finelli defines as the «Marxism of fetishism and of reification»; but at the same time, Finelli develops a complex critique of this «extenuated» form of Marxism. His critique would merit serious discussion, but this extends beyond the purview of the present work (cf. Roberto Finelli, *Un parricidio compiuto. Il confronto finale di Marx con Hegel* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2014, 313–325)).

Marx's work as a whole, is further radicalized. And this fact should probably be understood in connection to the philosopher's life, which was deeply marked both by the trauma of his emigration to the United States (the only advanced capitalistic country where socialism does not exist—a problem which Werner Sombart considered in a famous essay[36]), and by his return to a divided Germany, where the *political* Marxist or communist positions were rendered essentially mute by the accusation leveled at them to the effect that they were grist to the mill of the Eastern dictatorship. In short, he experienced two countries (the United States and the German Federal Republic) where a political praxis of radical emancipation appeared totally excluded from the roster of the possible.

It is probably also for this reason that Adorno's engagement with Marx remains in many ways unresolved. Adorno is decidedly acute and prescient when he firmly insists on those novelties (above all, mass consumerism and the cultural industry) which deeply modify the social structures analyzed by Marx, generating integration effects that far surpass what the author of the *Manifesto* could have ever imagined. Taking up the letter of the Marxian thesis according to which the alienated economical process dominates those men who ought to be its subjects, Adorno adopts an aspect of Marx's thought without seeing the problems and the aporias that it entails. Indeed, Adorno radicalizes it to such an extent that the dimension of conflict and the struggle for hegemony vanishes—matters which remained central in Marx, even if they are not to be found within the Marxian "system" of the critique of political economy. In this way, it might be ironically said that Adorno's is almost an "ultra-orthodox" thesis, through which even the limits of the Marxian position come to light. The confrontation between Adorno and Marx is full of tensions; it is characterized by aspects of fruitful overcoming and by others in which the Frankfurt thinker remains entirely within a conceptual framework whose problematic nature he ought to have perceived.

[36] See W. Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains, NY: International Arts & Sciences Press, Inc., 2006).

The Decay of the Individual

The question of the decay of the individual, or even of his liquidation in mass society, is one of the central themes in Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory of society. It is developed not just in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but in many other texts by Adorno, including important notes that have been posthumously published in recent years. In my view, with regard to these texts the following problem emerges: whereas Adorno's theory stresses the theme of the decadence of the individual, contemporary social theory apparently seems to be going in the opposite direction. Today many social scientists, such as Zygmunt Bauman, describe contemporary society as one increasingly characterized by processes of individualization. Hence, the question I would like to address is: who is right? The theorists of the obsolescence of the individual or those of increasing individualization? Once again setting out from Adorno, I will provide a few reflections on this topic.

1 The Concept of the Individual in Critical Theory

For starters, it is necessary to recall the fundamental coordinates within which the problem of the individual should be approached according to critical theory. With Hegel and Marx, critical theory affirms that what we call "the individual" is a historically defined mode of the human being,

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71991-3_8

which would never have emerged without the development of what is properly called "society" (as opposed to "community", for example), which is to say bourgeois society. The reference to Marx's reflection is very evident here. Indeed, in a well-known page of the 1857 "Introduction" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx states: «The further back we trace the course of history, the more does the individual [...] appear to be dependent and to belong to a larger whole». First of all, he is the member of a family, a tribe, a community, within which he enjoys a very limited degree of autonomy. Marx continues: «It is not until the eighteenth century that in bourgeois society the various forms of the social texture confront the individual as merely means towards his private ends, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, namely that of the solitary individual, is precisely the epoch of the (as yet) most highly developed social [...] relations».[1] This underlying approach—which Marx developed in order to criticize the "Robinsonades" of economists and philosophers who posit the isolated individual as the beginning of history—is essentially taken up by Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory. Under the entry for "Individual" in *Aspects of Sociology* by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, we read that «The form of the individual itself is one proper to a society which maintains its life by means of the free market, where free and independent economic subjects come together».[2] Horkheimer and Adorno agree with Marx, and with Georg Simmel, that the development of the individual is proportional to the breadth of his social relations. The individual is the product of a wider, open society mediated by exchanges, the result of the breakdown of the old orders, which have come to be replaced by more flexible bonds (and thus norms and obediences), open to a larger number of options.

Therefore, the individual in a way coincides with the bourgeois, who inhabits a market society that «forces the individual economic subject to pursue his financial interests ruthlessly and without consideration for the welfare of the generality».[3] Of course, as a rational and autonomous actor, the individual is not merely an economic subject, although he is largely

[1] K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 189.

[2] Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, *Aspects of Sociology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 45.

[3] Ibid., 48.

modeled on this role. More generally, the individual is someone who pursues his aims independently, establishes rational life plans for himself, and also lays claim to his right to happiness, self-realization, and authenticity. On the cultural level, in *Aspects of Sociology* the modern awareness of individuality is traced back to Petrarch's poetry and the early Renaissance, even though—according to Adorno—the first glimmer of bourgeois individuality is already to be found in Homer's Odysseus, as analyzed in the chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the *Odyssey*.

In one respect, then, the individual is essentially the product of mercantile, bourgeois society, and would never have existed without it. But in another respect, the individual found in bourgeois society is not the fully developed individual: he is a half-individual, reduced to the selfishness of self-conservation. The individual in the full sense can exist «only within a just and humane society».[4] Faithful to its Marxian inspiration, critical theory thus ultimately upholds three main theses with regard to the question of the individual: (a) man only becomes "the individual" through a certain broadening of his social relations, and in particular through the development of bourgeois society and the market; (b) the development of individuality is a value which critical theory adopts (following Marx—for example, in his polemical exchange with Max Stirner); (c) in bourgeois society this value does not really find concrete expression, because the individual does not develop fully, but only in the defective form of the selfish individual who pursues his own self-interest in opposition to other individuals.

2 The Thesis of the Decline of the Individual

Setting out from this perspective, Adorno and Horkheimer address the following problem: what happens to this figure of the individual (as transmitted, for instance, by the great tradition of bourgeois novels) when bourgeois society turns into mass society, the society of organized economy, consumption, advertising, the cultural industry, and the manipulation of people's consciousness? Roughly put, Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis is that such developments ultimately erase the conditions on which individual autonomy is based (most notably, the liberal and competitive market economy, but also solid patrimonies, individual

[4] Ibid., 46.

enterprise, and the passing down of inheritances from one generation to the next). This is followed by the establishment of a fully heteronomous, post-individualist society: «In the system of liberalism, individuation of a sector of the population belonged to the process of adaptation of society as a whole to technological development, but today the operation of the economic apparatus demands that the masses be directed without any intervention from individuation».[5] «Decisions for men as active workers are taken by the hierarchy ranging from the trade associations to the national administration, and in the private sphere by the system of mass culture which takes over the last inward impulses of individuals, who are forced to consume what is offered to them. The committees and stars serve as the ego and super-ego, and the masses, who have lost the last semblance of personality, shape themselves more easily according to the models presented to them than the instincts ever could by the mechanism of inner censorship».[6] The individual thus appears to succumb with the end of the liberal economy and the rise of organized capitalism, the rule of monopolies, and the kind of pervasive and interiorized manipulation achieved through the cultural industry.

Even before *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno discussed this eclipsing of the individual in the notes he took in 1941 within the Princeton Radio Research Project, which he had joined in 1938. Adorno finds striking evidence of the end of the individual in the so-called «radio-generation» that was then taking shape. Horrified, he observed that a new type of man was dawning whose essence is defined by the incapacity to have personal experiences, «a man who lets his experiences be laid out for him by the social apparatus, which has become all-powerful and impenetrable, and who for this very reason is incapable of reaching the status of the formation of the ego, the 'person'».[7] The very concept of "selfishness"—Adorno further writes—is no longer applicable to this new type of man, for the simple reason that he lacks even an «Ego».[8] Therefore, in both its totalitarian and consumerist forms, post-liberal society strikes

[5] M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London & New York: Verso, 1997), 204.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Th. W. Adorno, "Individuum und Gesellschaft. Entwürfe und Skizzen", in Id., R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, VIII (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2003), 65–66.

[8] Ibid., 71.

Adorno as being characterized by a tendency toward the disappearance of the individual: a typical figure of the bourgeois-liberal world which is erased in mass society.

This thesis of the disappearance of the individual, which—as already noted—seems to conflict with other analytical perspectives on contemporary society, can certainly be challenged. However, before tackling the issue from this angle, I believe it is useful to enquire how the thesis in question first emerged within the group of scholars gathered around Horkheimer, and by whom it was first conceived. Who should be credited with the formulation of the thesis of the disappearance of the individual in post-liberal society—Adorno, Horkheimer, or both?

It is far from easy to answer such questions.[9] However, what can safely be stated is that the topic occurs in the reflections which both scholars developed in the late 1930s. As far as Horkheimer is concerned, the radical formulation of the thesis of the decline of the individual fits within the turn (almost a change of paradigm) brought about in the development of critical theory by the texts he wrote between 1939 and 1942 ("The Jews and Europe", "The Authoritarian State", and "Reason and Self-Preservation"). As Habermas noted,[10] these texts at once marked a turn toward a negative philosophy of history centered on the issue of domination, and the establishment of a very close collaboration with Adorno, which began with the essay "Reason and Self-Preservation" and eventually led to the drafting of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The thesis of the decline of the individual is presented in full in "Reason and Self-Preservation". However, the issue is already addressed, albeit in more complicated and problematic ways, in the 1939 discussions between Horkheimer and Adorno. These were transcribed by Gretel Adorno and may now be found in volume 12 of Horkheimer's works.[11] Already outlined in the 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Theory",[12] the thesis

[9] Interesting reflections on the topic may be found in L. Scafoglio, *La merce e il mito. Su Adorno e la teoria critica* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2013), 103 ff.

[10] See J. Habermas, "Notes on the Developmental History of Horkheimer's Work", in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 10 (2), 1993, 61–77.

[11] M. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 12, *Nachgelassene Schriften 1931–1949* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 439 ff.

[12] Eng. transl. in M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 188–243.

of the decline of the individual sprung from a reflection on Nazi totalitarianism, but was immediately generalized. In Horkheimer's view, the end of the solidity of individual property and of the bourgeois family,[13] combined with the decline of the social figure of the entrepreneur, which is typical of liberal, competitive capitalism, has undermined the very foundations of the individual, significantly eroding this figure.

As regards Adorno's theoretical reflection, it may instead be argued that it introduces the theme of the decay of the individual starting from a different perspective, namely from an analysis of the social significance of the cultural industry and its consumers. For example, in his important 1938 essay "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening", Adorno reflects on the regression undergone by contemporary listeners, their childishness: «contemporary listening […] has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage».[14] The essay ends with a pessimistic and paradoxical reflection that is nonetheless highly revealing of Adorno's way of thinking: «collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of consciously representing the aims of collectivity».[15]

Setting out from his own studies on mass cultural consumption,[16] and further stimulated by his engagement with Horkheimer, Adorno develops a complex reflection on the individual in the age of his liquidation,[17] which arguably reaches its high point in some of the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*. Deprived of what certainties he may still have possessed in the old bourgeois society (family, property, predictable market relations),[18] the individual has lost his substantiality: «It is the signature of our age

[13] See M. Horkheimer, "The Jews and Europe", in S. E. Bronner and D. M. Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, New York and London: Routledge, 1989, 77–94 and Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 12, 451 ff.

[14] Th. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 46.

[15] Ibid., 60.

[16] See Th. W. Adorno (with the assistance of Georg Simpson), "On Popular Music", in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 9, 1941, 17–48.

[17] On this topic, see H. Schweppenhäuser, *Das Individuum im Zeitalter seiner Liquidation*, now in Id., *Vergegenwärtigungen zur Unzeit* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1986), 42–69.

[18] Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2006), 34 (§14): «For while bourgeois forms of existence are truculently conserved, their economic pre-condition has fallen away».

that no-one, without exception, can now determine his own life within even a moderately comprehensible framework, as was possible earlier in the assessment of market relationships. In principle everyone, however powerful, is an object».[19] The individual must therefore greatly expand his capacity to adapt to the changing circumstances; he is less and less an autonomous subject, and increasingly a center of reaction to inputs coming from the outside. Here we come across what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Adorno's reflection, namely the idea that, just as Marx identified a tendency toward an increase in the organic composition of capital (the growth of constant capital compared to variable capital, of dead labor compared to living labor), so it is possible today to identify an increase in the «organic composition of man».

This means that «which determines subjects as means of production and not as living purposes, increases with the proportion of machines to variable capital».[20] «The ego consciously takes the whole man into its service as a piece of apparatus».[21] In other words, there is a constant increase in the productive rationalization and finalization of individual existence. In these reflections, Adorno seems to foreshadow the idea of the complete forced exploitation of one's own qualities for the sake of profit: the indistinctness between work and life which scholars of post-Fordist economics speak of.

Another point worth emphasizing, particularly because it brings out the dialectical character of Adorno's reflection, is that the negation of the individual is balanced, so to speak, by processes of pseudo-individualization that find their privileged channel in consumption. As Adorno extensively explains in his essay on "popular music", the standardization of consumer products must always be balanced by the «halo of free choice»[22]: the more individuals obey heteronomous stimuli, the more their behavior must seem like a personal, individual choice—rather than as a mass-choice that has been «wholly intended for them or predigested».[23] The option of consumption must come across as something

[19] Ibid., 37.

[20] Ibid., 229.

[21] Ibid., 230.

[22] Th. W. Adorno, *On Popular Music*, 25.

[23] Ibid.

which individualizes the purchaser and attests to the originality of their life project.[24]

3 Problems and Limits of the Frankfurt School's Reflection on the Individual

While Adorno's theses about the individual grasp many important aspects of the transformations marking contemporary society, they cannot simply be accepted at face value. In my view, they present a number of problems, which I will now attempt to briefly outline.

a. The first difficulty I wish to point to is the fact that the thesis of the decline of the individual, while very complex and dialectical in Adorno, is open to a simplistic, non-dialectical interpretation. A tendency of this sort may be found not so much in Adorno himself, as (for example) in some of Horkheimer's writings, such as *Eclipse of Reason*.[25] Here Horkheimer devotes a whole chapter to the topic: "Rise and Decline of the Individual". The ideal model of the individual, in this text, is the independent entrepreneur of the liberal age, equipped with a «strong yet sober ego, maintaining interests that transcended his immediate needs».[26] The moment this type of individuality is deprived of its economic basis, the subject loses his «spontaneous action»,[27] «tends to become a shrunken ego, captive of an evanescent present, forgetting the use of the intellectual functions by which he was once able to transcend his actual position in reality. These functions are now taken over by the great economic and social forces of the era».[28]

   This version of the thesis of the decline of the individual strikes me as highly problematic. On the one hand, it is exposed to the accusation of harboring a "nostalgic attitude", an accusation which has often been leveled against the Frankfurt School. On

[24] A. Honneth, "Organized Self-realization. Some Paradoxes of Individualization", in *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7 (4), 2004, 463–478.

[25] M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

[26] Ibid., 140.

[27] Ibid., 143.

[28] Ibid., 140–141.

the other hand, it greatly overestimates the autonomy and spontaneity of the "liberal" bourgeois and entrepreneurial class (to which Horkheimer's and Adorno's fathers belonged). In Marxist terms, it might be argued that actually the capitalist entrepreneur is merely the embodiment (the character mask) of the law of profit, which controls him in the same way as the norms of social conformism govern the bourgeois family based on marriage, adultery, and inheritance. Therefore, if critical theory displays any longing for the "liberal" figure of the individual, this is a misdirected nostalgia: certainly, the entrepreneur is an individual, insofar as he is expected to make rational evaluations, to choose between possible alternatives, and to exercise his responsibility, yet this always occurs within the strict laws of the game, which he must simply obey. Hence, the thesis of a slippery slope—according to which the well-rounded ego of the bourgeois progressively weakens, until it becomes completely lost with the passive consumers of the cultural industry—does not hold (not least because it appears to be vitiated by a kind of unexpressed elitism).

b. Secondly, it seems equally unconvincing to me to regard all the forms of individualization characterizing contemporary society as forms of *pseudo*-individualization. The remarkable power of new kinds of conformism, the irresistible allure of the models which society offers individuals today, is combined with tendencies that go in the opposite direction. If it is true, as Marx and Adorno contend, that the broader and more developed social relations are, the more individualization there is, then we must acknowledge that, through the multiplication of possible relations, global society leads to two consequences: from a negative perspective, the possibility of escaping the conformism of community-based forms of social control (which become weaker and weaker when the transition occurs from the anonymity of the metropolis—already strongly liberating in itself—to the boundlessness of planetary relations), and hence the possibility of giving rise to heterodox behaviors, i.e., ones in contrast with dominant norms.

From a positive perspective, global society ensures—at least for many individuals—the possibility of activating a higher number of combinations, with at least a quantitative growth of possible options. This increase is certainly more evident as far as options of consumption are

concerned (meaning pseudo-options, according to the analysis of the Frankfurt School), but it also extends to other dimensions of individual life. Stressing this aspect, Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the contemporary age is marked by a process of individualization which «brings to the ever growing number of men and women an unprecedented freedom of experimenting – but […] it also brings an unprecedented task of coping with the consequences». Bauman too, however, emphasizes how, in the «second modernity», a manifest contradiction remains between individuals' «right of self-assertion», on the one hand, and, on the other, their limited capacity to «control the social settings» in which this self-realization ought to take place.[29] From Adorno's point of view, it may be argued, then, that while the contemporary individual presents himself as the subject of a free and fluctuating combinatory art, he is at the same time carrying out someone else's orders—orders which may not agree with his own innermost calling or deepest, most reflexive desires.

Precisely insofar as it drifts away from actual reality, where it no longer finds room, the figure of the individual can acquire a critical and utopian character in Adorno: if the collective is evil, the individual can express the potential for resistance; nothing good can be accomplished without the individual rejection of forced homogenization. With Adorno, individuality thus also becomes the locus of utopia, insofar as there is no better way to envisage an emancipated society, if not as one in which individuals can develop spontaneously, faithful to the «individual law» (Simmel) of their own nature and determination.

[29] Z. Bauman, "Foreword: Individually, Together", in Id., U. Beck & E. Beck-Gernsheim (eds.), *Individualization*: *Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), xviii–xix.

The Role of the Media and the Manipulated Democracy

One of the most interesting peculiarities of Adorno as a social theorist (along with the other academics that, like him, gravitated around the Frankfurt School) is that he was among the first to shed light, with incomparable lucidity, on those new forms of conformism, depersonalization and manipulation of consciousness, which were destined to characterize and to mark the mass societies of the twentieth century. Within this critical perspective there lies a peculiarity in Adorno's approach that deserves to be underlined: he is one of the few theorists with a broadly Marxist orientation (if not the only one) to very seriously consider the critique of mass society which was developed, throughout the whole first half of the twentieth century, by intellectuals of liberal, conservative, and even reactionary stamp. Demonstrating his ability to interpret reality without undue prejudice, Adorno takes over the analysis of the limits and the pitfalls of mass democracy that were then being elaborated by "irregular" and eccentric scholars like Oswald Spengler (the author of the famous *Decline of the West*) or writers like Aldous Huxley (the inventor of the negative utopia of *Brave New World*), deriving therefrom (despite the distance that separates him from them) a series of deadly critical weapons that he would use, not only against the authoritarian massification of the European dictatorships, but even more against the mild and seductive depersonalization of American society—the society of Hollywood and mass consumption, which he rightly noted would blaze the trail for Europe after the war.

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
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The most original aspect of Adorno's thesis, which makes it significant even today, is in the fact that, from his point of view, the totalitarian nightmare that took shape in the twentieth-century dictatorships was not at all dismantled together with them, but remains a risk and a threat even in contemporary democratic mass society. The ground from which new, more or less mild forms of totalitarianism can develop, is indeed provided by the important social transformations that have brought an end to the age of liberal and competitive capitalism: from the development of monopolistic megacompanies to that of large-scale mass production; from the unlimited growth of consumer society to the consequent spread of commercial advertisements, up to the absolutely decisive innovation of the development of modern means of mass communication. The new media that arise in the twentieth century, from the radio—so expertly used by Mussolini and Hitler—to Hollywood films, from illustrated magazines to television, involve transformations both of the economy (which becomes ever more an economy of spectacle) and of that politics against which the reflection of the Frankfurt School early measured itself.

Taken in their overall unity, all these innovations change, according to Adorno, not only the position and the role of the individual in the whole of society, but also, more particularly, his function as a possible political actor in the context of democratic society. The basic thesis of the Frankfurt thinker, which is somewhat reminiscent of Tocqueville, is that in contemporary mass society, individuals become the object of new and effective practices of communication and of pressures that are widely able to shape their ways of life, their mental attitudes, and even their very needs and desires. The peculiarity of these new kinds of control, as compared to traditional ones connected with authority or religion, lies in the miracle that they paradoxically bring about: standardization through consumption is felt to bring individual self-realization. According to Adorno, the risk that arises here is a real annihilation of individual autonomy: behind the apparent triumph of a pervasive narcissistic individualism is hidden a generalized weakness of the Ego, which loses its consistency and solidity and becomes an easy target for manipulative messages. Adorno shows this very effectively, for example, in his article "Television as Ideology", the result of a research he carried out in 1952 in the United States, before his definitive return to Europe, where he reflects on how this medium can be used to bring about «the stultification, psychological

crippling, and ideological disorientation of the public».[1] This does not mean only that the Frankfurt thinker ends up subscribing to the view (which the less dialectical Horkheimer sometimes espouses) of a totally other-directed society, in which there is no room for processes of disputation and critique. On the contrary, even when he reflects about the way in which the listeners or the audience transpose the messages of the radio-televised media, Adorno underlines that, however seductive these messages might appear to be, they are not always assimilated uncritically. Indeed, certain skeptical attitudes, such as distrust and incredulity, can be found in listeners—clear signs of a more or less aware "resistance" to the practices of the "persuaders".

A further aspect worth underlining is that which regards the political fallout of these reflections: from this point of view, the question of public opinion becomes central. Adorno considers it in the text "Opinion Research and Publicness"[2] (written in 1964 and clearly connected to the 1963 book that Habermas had dedicated to the same topics, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*). If, within the framework of an idealized liberal society, the public sphere is supposed to be the place in which informed citizens, through of discussion and discursive exchanges, form their autonomous opinion and criticize the public authorities, now, in the society of communication which is mediatized and modeled on advertisement, public opinion in the authentic sense of the term runs the risk of becoming a distant memory. And the consumers of politics are reduced to objects of conflicting propaganda—objects which acquire, in bulk, pre-packaged sets of opinions. As far as this specific point is concerned, the reflections that Adorno developed in the (up to now little known and little quoted) essay on "Democratic Leadership and Mass Manipulation"[3] seem to me to contain two decisive statements. In the

[1] Th. W. Adorno, "Television as Ideology", in Id., *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 69.

[2] The essay "Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit" is part of a group of texts which Adorno, shortly before his death, intended to publish, in a volume entitled *Integration-Desintegration*, which never saw the light of day (cf. "Editorische Nachbemerkung", in Th. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9.2, *Soziologische Schriften II*, Zweite Hälfte (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), 404 and 409). It is reproduced from the manuscript which Adorno left behind, which can be read in original version in Th. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 532–537.

[3] Cf. "Democratic Leadership and Mass Manipulation", originally published in A. W. Gouldner (ed.), *Studies in Leadership. Leadership and Democratic Action* (New York:

first place, there is a very clear critique of that democracy which has been reduced to a mere numeric expression of the majority will: «To apply the idea of democracy in a merely formalistic way, to accept the will of the majority per se, without consideration for the *content* of democratic decisions, may lead to complete perversion of democracy itself and, ultimately, to its abolition».[4] In the second place—and this is perhaps the most important point—Adorno's pages about democratic leadership contain a very precise political statement, which, in my opinion, is relevant to this day: whoever enters the political arena with the intention of promoting the ends of freedom, equality and individual autonomy, cannot articulate his speech according to the standards of propaganda (as many voices that consider themselves to belong to the opposition constantly do nowadays), but has to follow, with the utmost scrupulousness, rigorous reasoning and truth. Indeed, even when propaganda is brought into play with the best intentions, it treats those it addresses as objects to be manipulated, and not as the subjects of autonomous thought. And so it works, without wanting to and without knowing it, precisely in favor of the very same manipulative powers that it seeks to fight.

Though Adorno is in some respect an "apolitical" thinker, when he reasons about democratic leadership, he does not fail to address, in quite a surprising way, an exhortation to politicians that appears very worthwhile even today: «A truly democratic leader, who is more than a mere exponent of political interests embracing a liberal ideology, would necessarily have to abstain from any 'psychotechnical' calculation, from every attempt to influence masses or groups of people by irrational means. Under no circumstances should he treat the subjects of political and social action as mere objects to whom an idea is to be sold. This attitude would bring about an inconsistency between ends and means which would impair the sincerity of the whole approach and destroy its inherent conviction. Even on a purely pragmatic level, such an attempt would inevitably fall short of the skill of those who think and act only in terms of power, who are largely indifferent to the objective validity of an idea, and who, unhampered by 'humanitarian illusions', subscribe to the altogether cynical attitude of considering human beings as mere raw material to be

Harper & Brothers, 1950), 418–438. It is available also in Th. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 20.1, *Vermischte Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 267–286.

[4] Th. W. Adorno, "Democratic Leadership and Mass Manipulation", in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 20.1, 268.

molded at will».[5] Read today, Adorno's statement goes decidedly against the grain: the cohesion between means and aims begins from the rejection of a persuasive or manipulative kind of communication; any message of truth is already betrayed if it is transformed into an item to be sold through a clever marketing scheme.

[5] Ibid., 270.

Aesthetics and Modernity

Aesthetic Theory and Critical Praxis

1 Characteristics of Adorno's Criticism

In Adorno, there is a close, even intrinsic link between critical thought—more precisely, his critical theory of society—and criticism, as in his engaged and unflagging interest in the music, literature, and art of the past and especially of the present. But, before putting forward some reflections on this link, it is worth recalling a few general features of Adorno's criticism. First of all, it must be noted that, as far as his work in this field in concerned, Adorno was primarily a musical critic. It is in this role that he exercised what has been described as a militant form of criticism, which is to say—to draw upon the definition provided in the interesting volume *Dizionario della critica militante*[1]—«criticism focusing on contemporary artists and exercised particularly in newspapers and non-academic magazines». As a militant critic in the musical field, Adorno was especially active in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He defended dodecaphony in Viennese music magazines ("Musikblätter des Anbruchs", later simply entitled "Anbruch"), while at the same time developing his own work as a composer. Adorno was therefore both a critic and a composer, or artist. Furthermore, it was at this early stage of his career that he wrote some of the texts that best give a sense of his

[1] F. La Porta and G. Leonelli, *Dizionario della critica militante* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007).

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71991-3_10

critical output, such as the short 1930 essay "Reaktion und Fortschritt" ("Reaction and Progress"). Adorno was an *enfant prodige* and a very precocious writer: he was born in 1903, which made him twenty-seven at the time. Throughout his militant intellectual engagement, which only ended with his death in 1969, he never ceased engaging with contemporary and past composers and tendencies. But he was also active, albeit to a lesser degree, as a literary critic, as witnessed particularly by the four volumes of his *Noten zur Literatur* (the fourth volume, already planned by Adorno, was edited by Rolf Tiedemann and published posthumously, in 1974). We should add that, being the good German philosopher he was, Adorno sought to crown his critical activity with the drafting of a large volume on *Aesthetic Theory*. This was the last work of his career: he started writing it after the completion of his philosophical summa, *Negative Dialectics*, yet never finished it. The book, already at a fair stage of development, was posthumously published in 1970.

Adorno's reflection thus unfolds across a series of interconnected levels: aesthetics, criticism, and the critical theory of society. Within this vast archipelago, I will highlight some specific points that strike me as being particularly noteworthy.

For starters, it is undoubtedly the case that, in Adorno's reflection, literary criticism (and aesthetic criticism more generally) and critical thought are closely connected by what seems to me to be an inextricable link. The primary reason for this is that, from Adorno's perspective, literary creation—and, in my view, this holds in general, which is to say even prior to the historical determinations that have enriched and further defined this form of creation—necessarily entails a critical attitude to what simply exists. Besides, a tension is to be found between the latter and other dimensions it comprises, namely the dimensions of utopia and of what Adorno calls "conciliation". Adorno first of all understands the "critical" element as meaning that literary or artistic creation suspends the validity of the productive praxis which continually regenerates the world as it is and engenders a separate universe that stands in contrast to that which is merely given. This theme, which is recurrent in Adorno's reflection, finds its sharpest formulation in *Aesthetic Theory*: even before it adopts any position, art—simply by virtue of its existence—puts the purely subsistent on trial. «All artworks, even the affirmative, are a priori polemical. The idea of a conservative artwork is inherently absurd. By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are

the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation».[2] «The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible».[3]

Creation suspends the blind praxis of self-conservation; it embodies something like «freedom in the midst of unfreedom»,[4] and by this simple shift, it levels an accusation against the continuation of habitual praxis. «It gives the lie to production for production's sake and opts for a form of praxis beyond the spell of labor».[5] For Adorno, the archetype of this negation of false praxis is poetry, particularly lyric poetry. «The work's distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different. The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life».[6]

If literary creation is intrinsically critical, for Adorno criticism in turn becomes a way of relating to works that approaches them in order to squeeze out the knowledge they contain, so to speak. Criticism thus essentially treats each work as a historical seismograph; it measures it against its capacity to interpret the terrain of the epoch on whose rifts and contradictions the work has been able to throw some light—a light both painful and reconciling. «Each time music echoes today, it portrays the contours and fractures marking contemporary society with the clearest lines»,[7] we read in the extensive 1932 essay that provides an outline of what was later to become *The Philosophy of Modern Music*. However, for Adorno, treating creation as a historical seismograph does not at all mean engaging with it according to a content-based approach. On the contrary, creation encounters history in its own specific element, which is to say—to use a key term in Adorno's language—in the "material" on which

[2] Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 177.

[3] Ibid., 132.

[4] Th. W. Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" in Id., *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 247–256: 248.

[5] Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 12.

[6] Th. W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society", in Id., *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37–54: 40.

[7] Th. W. Adorno, "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik", in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, *Musikalische Schriften* V (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 729–727: 729.

it operates (as though this were a process of transformation of nature) and which, properly speaking, is nothing but sedimented history. Material «is what artists work with: it is the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colors, sounds»,[8] as well as the connections and formal structures inherited from tradition. It is therefore primarily on this terrain that, according to Adorno, each work engages with history. As he further clarifies, «material is not natural material even if it appears so to artists; rather, it is thoroughly historical».[9]

Adorno's criticism, then, unfolds on a double register, immanent and transcendent, as is required by one of the fundamental categories underlying his interpretations, namely the category of "monad". According to Adorno, a work—be it literary, musical, or pictorial—must be conceived of as a monad, in the sense which this concept has acquired in Leibniz's thought: on the one hand, the monad is a closed universe, «without doors and windows»—entirely concentrated on itself and on its engagement with the primarily formal problems posed by the condition historically attained by its material; on the other hand, the monad mirrors the whole universe, which the work represents according to its language and immanent codes. This leads to a method of interpretation which in one respect focuses on formal procedures but, in another respect, identifies in them—in their specific configurations—the truth about society that the work enables it to grasp.

This orientation is what guides Adorno in his analysis of modern art or, rather, in his reflections on the major breaks connected, in particular, to the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century. In them, the shattering of transmitted conventions and communication codes—an aspect of the process of *Aufklärung* or demythification/enlightenment marking the overall historical dynamic of the West—is at the same time an indicator of what the new form of domination characterized by the commercialization and technicization of all existence has inflicted on subjectivities. A literary work is suited to its historical epoch and acts as a reliable seismograph, only if it, through its modes of expression, registers the earthquake that has struck the alleged substantiality of the bourgeois individual in the age of the masses and of the cultural industry, of unbridled technology and of

[8] Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148. On Adorno's concept of "material", see the fine volume by S. Zurletti, *Il concetto di materiale musicale in Th. W. Adorno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

[9] Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148.

totalitarianism—ultimately, the age of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Hence Adorno's polemic against all realistic theories focusing on content and engagement, and his attacks on Lukács and Sartre: «Art does not come to know reality by depicting it photographically or 'perspectivally' but by expressing, through its autonomous constitution, what is concealed by the empirical form reality takes. Even the assertion that the world is unknowable, which Lukács never tires of faulting in authors like Eliot or Joyce, can become a moment of knowledge, knowledge of the gulf between the overwhelming and unassimilatable world of objects, on the one hand, and experience, which glances helplessly off that world, on the other».[10]

Therefore, Adorno's criticism—which primarily stems from his personal artistic experience and direct involvement in the debate on musical avant-gardes—is characterized by an attitude that is more than the mere exercising of *judgment*. Essentially, it is a highly *prescriptive* attitude (albeit in a chiefly negative form): it judges current outputs in light of a well-defined criterion regarding *what can no longer be done*. Any work which does not carry within itself, in its immanent structures, the mark of the catastrophe that has occurred with Auschwitz and Hiroshima, is an inadequate work.

At this point, the situation becomes complicated. On the one hand, according to Adorno's inflexible "modernism", if a work wishes to be faithful to the imperative dictated by its age, it must remain wholly within the process of negation, through a ceaseless dynamic of *Aufklärung* which leads it to dismiss all the "faiths" that the catastrophic trajectory of the world spirit has shown to be false. Music foregoes the recomposition of dissonance, novels do away with the superiority of the narrator and any all-round subjective individuality, and poetry breaks with all claims to immediate intelligibility.

On the other hand, though, the process of critical dissolution (outside of which all that remains, according to Adorno, are sickly falsehoods and apologies) apparently engenders an unsolvable dilemma: criticism will either fold in on itself in a hyper-destructive process that no longer seems to make any sense, or lead to silence as its only outcome—for destruction can only be performed once, it cannot be endlessly repeated. Therefore, we are left with the question: is it still possible to produce music after Schönberg (without slipping into the kind of rigid and barren «ageing of

[10] Th. W. Adorno, "Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács' Realism in Our Time", in Id., *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, 216–240: 227.

new music» of which Adorno spoke in the 1950s)? Is it still possible to compose theatrical works after the accomplished catastrophe of meaning testified to by Beckett? Most importantly—to ask a question that Adorno himself repeatedly addressed, at different terms—is it still possible to write poetry after Auschwitz?

2 Reading Adorno Today

At this point, perhaps, we can try to bring into focus the question of how we can read Adorno today, of what place—and what usefulness—we can assign to his critical figure in our present time. The problem is that Adorno falls squarely within what we might call—with a somewhat strained juxtaposition of concepts that is nonetheless necessary in order to provide a clear picture—a sort of modernist and messianic hyper-historicism. What does this mean? It means, first of all, a hyper-assessment of the historical dimension (not least by contrast to those critics who instead stress the existential dimension): as Fredric Jameson has rightly noted, «If everything in Adorno leads into the aesthetic, everything in Adorno's aesthetics leads out again in the direction of history».[11] Yet in Adorno's case, what history—or, rather, the history of the West—means most crucially is the dialectic of *Aufklärung*: a work is valuable in terms of knowledge insofar as it is part of this process of disillusionment and, at the same time, is a means to decipher its destructiveness. Having reached its apex, which in a certain respect coincides with fully realized nihilism, the process reveals itself for what it is: not a process of emancipation, but a catastrophe. On the other hand—and this is where the utopian and messianic leap occurs—full awareness of the catastrophe is the only precondition for possible emancipation. From Adorno's perspective, then, a work must be judged on the basis of its capacity to deal with historical catastrophes, to engage with the aporetic quality of the *Aufklärung*. And works are only adequate if they inflexibly carry the *Aufklärung* further, thereby showing its reverse side. After Auschwitz, the only adequate aesthetic choice, which does not betray the victims' suffering but rather somehow lends it a voice, is the «intransigent radicalism» of avant-garde works. What is dismissed as their formalism is precisely what «endows

[11] F. Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 239.

them with a frightening power that impotent poems about the victims lack»,[12] Adorno writes in his essay criticizing the category of engagement.

While some of Adorno's aesthetic stances concern a more general level, his criticism is therefore strongly connected to some key experiences of the twentieth century and inspired by a markedly tendentious and prescriptive attitude. Although he sometimes seems to take liberties with respect to his own canon (for instance, in his assessment of Mahler's music, which—as others have noted—opens up a breach in his theory of progress[13]), overall he tends to favor a radical kind of modernism, associated with his interpretation of twentieth-century catastrophes.

But what, then, are we to make of Adorno in the so-called post-modern age, an age which appears to present itself, if not as the end of history, certainly as the decline not just of progressive historicism, but also of the utopian and messianic one put forward by thinkers the likes of Adorno and Benjamin? In my view, Adorno's limits not only stem from the fact that he is so strongly situated in a time that is no longer our own, but are implicit in his interpretation of the twentieth century as the age in which enlightenment is reversed into totalitarianism. This can take the ruthless form of Nazism but also the far "softer" one of the society of consumption and spectacle. Very briefly, one major limit of this interpretation is that, not least for obvious historical and biographical reasons, it completely leaves out—both in general and in relation to literary creation—the dimensions of social conflict, ideological struggle, politics, and hegemony: all those aspects that would force it to move beyond its static view of modern totalitarianism and to embrace a far more open, conflictual, and dynamic perspective. A second major limit of Adorno's interpretation is that his thought is wholly Western. As such, it does not draw upon the (also absolutely contradictory and conflictual) dimension of a global world which is visibly unfolding under everyone's eyes today, and which implies the "provincialization" of Europe described by post-colonial authors.

The tendentious, a times even brilliant, one-sided views of Adorno (which were already highly questionable during his lifetime as a critic and philosopher) thus certainly force us to distance ourselves from him. This distancing becomes even greater if we consider the way

[12] Th. W. Adorno, "Commitment", in Id., *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, 76–94: 88.

[13] S. Zurletti, *Il concetto di materiale musicale in Th. W. Adorno*, 173.

in which the cultural and ideological landscape has changed since his death in the late 1970s. Adorno's modernism would appear to have been completely undermined by the triumph of postmodernism; often groundbreaking avant-garde operations have become exhausted with the prevailing of markedly restorative cultural tendencies, which have also revived old literary forms previously believed to be exhausted. Obviously, one concrete reason for this is that the book and cultural market has become not just far more pervasive, but also—and especially—far more reluctant to accept works which do not conform to its rules and resist easy modes of consumption. Not least, we should add, because the written word and printed paper must struggle to survive, as the new media that have spread like wildfire in the digital era are progressively eroding their place.

If all this is true, it seems to me that the post-modern age requires a far more nuanced capacity to interpret things than Adorno's brilliant (and somewhat Manichaean) intransigence. His suggestion to constantly emphasise the negative, critical and utopian potential that all literary creation carries within it should be preserved; but at the same time, it could be followed by highlighting different dimensions which are essentially foreign to Adorno: for example, literary creation as an exercise in memory, based on the intertwining of autobiography and history; or as what lends voice to the lack of acknowledgment experienced by subordinate groups, ethnicities, races, and classes; or, again, texts and narratives as a means of exchange between cultures now that the West has lost its claim to primacy, as a seismograph of the transformations of individual experience at the crossroads between identitarian roots and the sense of loss marking the new global contexts. Reading and drawing upon Adorno today, then, might mean preserving the critical and utopian tension that lies at the center of his thought, while moving beyond his apocalyptic radicalism, toward a more humble and modest kind of thought, one more faithful to things and more nuanced. This would be a critical kind of thought that goes beyond Adorno's messianic link between catastrophe and redemption and is rather envisaged from the perspective of what I would call the endless task of democracy—the only utopia in which we can still believe.

Adorno's Engagement with Cultural Criticism

1 Spengler After the Decline

Adorno's most in-depth discussion of the great critics of mass society, as is known, takes place in the collection *Prisms*, and in particular in the essays he devotes to the thought of Spengler and Huxley. These essays date back, respectively, to 1938 and 1942; their themes are very close to those considered in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written almost in the same period. The peculiarity of the reflections that Adorno carries out in *Prisms*, which are undoubtedly in the same vein as those expounded in the *Dialectic*, results from a particular trait: Adorno represents the quite unique case of an intellectual who, notwithstanding its Marxist approach and convictions, takes very seriously the criticisms that conservative and even reactionary thinkers address to modern mass society. He tries, without prejudice, to make the most of the elements that, in Spengler's writings, can contribute toward a better comprehension of the problems scarcely considered by Marxists or progressive thinkers. Obviously, this does not imply, as maintained by a non-sympathetic commentator such as Galvano della Volpe, that Adorno and Horkheimer can be equated «with

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the group of those spiritualist critics of the "crisis" of (bourgeois) civilization, including Huizinga, Ortega y Gasset, and Jaspers».[1] The truth is that, from Adorno's point of view, we have to take seriously the reactionary critiques of civilization in order to point out their limitations, but also their historical and diagnostic value.

Among the reactionary cultural critics considered by Adorno, the most radical and controversial is Oswald Spengler, the author of *The Decline of the West*; Adorno analyzes Spengler's work not only in the essay included in *Prisms*, but also, showing thereby a durable interest in his thought, in a radio lecture, the transcription of which was published in 1955 in the *Frankfurter Hefte*.[2] The essay included in *Prisms* is provocatively entitled "Spengler after the Decline," as if to signify that the present reality has exceeded, by far, the catastrophic previsions that Spengler traced in his famous and weighty book, published right after the First World War (the first volume in 1918, the second in 1922). Although received with great acclaim from the general public, *The Decline of the West* was harshly criticized by the majority of intellectuals, who accused it of superficiality and charlatanism; quite rapidly it disappeared from the scene. Those who dismissed Spengler as an amateur and fanciful folk philosopher,[3] with his depiction of civilizations that are born and then die as if they were living beings, were certainly more academically rigorous than he was, but he proved himself superior to all of them in deciphering the disturbing tendencies of an era which was heading toward disaster. According to Adorno, Spengler managed to recognize, through his analysis of the destinies of civilizations in the era of Caesarism, the totalitarian potentialities of modern mass societies, even in their supposedly democratic traits; his progressive contemporaries were not nearly as clearheaded as him in noticing these tendencies. «Spengler is one of the theoreticians of extreme reaction whose critique of liberalism proved itself superior in many respects to the progressive one»,[4] writes Adorno in "Spengler

[1] Galvano della Volpe, *Critica dell'ideologia contemporanea* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1967), 64.

[2] See Th. W. Adorno, "Wird Spengler rechtbehalten?", *Frankfurter Hefte*, 10 (1955), 841–846. In English, "Was Spengler Right?", *Encounter*, 26 (1966), 25–29.

[3] These disputes were recounted by Manfred Schroeter, *Der Streit um Spengler* (Munich: Beck, 1922).

[4] Th. W. Adorno, "Spengler after the Decline", in *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 64.

after the Decline". Spengler's analysis of modern civilization resembles the one devised by the Frankfurt critical theorists, especially in terms of diagnosing the crisis of the individual: it holds that the personality and the most inner impulses of the subject are shaped and colonized, as never before, on the basis of the needs of mass industrialized society. The atomized inhabitants of modern metropolises, who Spengler calls the new «nomads», as they cannot feel at home anywhere and eventually lose even their sense of temporal continuity, live in a frenetic quest for distractions. These are abundantly provided to them (from sport to eroticism, from entertainment to art for the masses) by a culture industry whose power is still growing. Today's social theory has to measure itself by the consequences of this process, which Adorno terms «the expropriation of human consciousness by the centralized media of public communication».[5] Spengler is so prophetic that, already in his analysis of the press, he manages to recognize aspects that have become evident only with the development of radio and, later, of television. «Through the newspapers», writes Spengler, «*democracy has utterly excluded the book from the intellectual life of the people*». «The world of books, with its variety of standpoints which encouraged thought to select and criticise, is now truly possessed only by the few. The people read only one paper, "their" paper, which thrusts its way daily into every house by the millions and spellbinds the mind from early morning on».[6] Newspapers, with their power of shaping people's minds and personal identifications, pave the way for the domination of the world by those who Spengler calls the «coming Caesars», the leaders who, by directing the mass media, will be able to influence the formation of public opinion: «Those who have learned to read will succumb to their power, and the anticipated self-determination of late democracy will turn into the radical determination of the people by the powers behind the printed word».[7] In the age of modern journalism, whose tight ranks march like armies in which journalists are the officers and readers the troops, «the reader neither knows nor is supposed to know the purposes for which he is used and the role he is to play. There is no more appalling caricature of freedom of thought. Formerly, no one was allowed to think

[5] Ibid., 55.

[6] O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. 2 (New York: Knopf, 1926), 461; Spengler's italics. Quoted by Adorno in *Prisms*, 55–56.

[7] O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 462–463. Quoted by Adorno in *Prisms*, 56–57.

freely; now it is permitted, but no one is capable of it any more. Now people want to think only what they are supposed to want to think, and this they consider freedom».[8] Therefore, Spengler can consistently draw the conclusion that today, a democrat should demand not freedom of, but freedom from the press.

Another pillar of modern democratic society, namely political participation by the citizens, fares no better than freedom of the press in Spengler's view. If at first the members of a social movement participate themselves in the growth of a movement and are capable of democratically organising themselves to promote their ideas and struggles, soon this organization turns into an end in itself for which the members are but instruments. Remembering Robert Michels' diagnosis of modern parties' oligarchic character, Spengler writes: «In the beginning the leadership and the apparatus come into being for the sake of the programme; then they are defended by the officials for the sake of power and profit, as is already generally the case today, when thousands of people in all countries make their living through the party and the offices and functions it bestows; finally the programme vanishes from memory and the organisation functions for its own sake».[9]

It is certainly true that behind reflections such as Spengler's there is an anthropological vision that, with Nietzsche, sees the will to power everywhere and, with Machiavelli, adheres to the thesis of an «an unchangeable human nature which need only be perceived—namely, as the worthless thing it is—to be controlled once and for all, since it must always be the same».[10] And, it will certainly be the case, as Adorno as a Marxist does not fail to point out, that Spengler is not very interested in economic dynamics such as the concentration of capital, which are behind the contemporary forms of the centralization of social power. But these remarks take nothing away from the visionary lucidity of Spengler's analysis of the forms of manipulation that characterize contemporary mass society, according to Adorno.

Far too many theoretical limitations can be pointed out in Spengler's reflections, without running the risk of being too strict. Adorno does not in fact hesitate to criticize the «metaphysics of a collective soul» that

[8] Ibid.

[9] O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 452. Quoted by Adorno in *Prisms*, 59.

[10] Ibid., 60.

underpins Spengler's destinal vision of world history. However, we must not forget the main point at issue: Spengler belongs to those reactionary critics of civilization who, by means of their antiprogressive radicalism, prove themselves more capable than others of recognizing the elements of regression that the modern, progressive civilization nurtures in its womb.

2 Huxley's Brave New World

The essay "Aldous Huxley and Utopia", which Adorno devotes to the successful novel *Brave New World* that was published in London in 1932, is in the same vein. In comparison with other "dystopian" novels, such as George Orwell's *1984* (actually written in 1948—the title was produced by inverting the last two digits), Huxley's book has a peculiar characteristic: it does not depict a tyrannical and all-controlling dictatorship, such as the Orwellian Big Brother, but instead a perfectly pacified and conciliated society whose mechanisms work smoothly: all strong and painful emotions are banned, the inconveniences of old age are but a pale memory, death is managed in a tranquil way (everyone is conditioned from an early age toward this end), and, when needed, you can ingest a pill of Soma, a drug that makes you undergo wonderful experiences. The "new world" is the world of perfect integration, because it mass-produces and homologates not only the objects of consumption, but also the very subjects. Natural conception has been abolished and is now seen as a relic of barbaric times that citizens remember with horror; individuals are generated in vitro, and from that stage they are conditioned and differentiated according to the various classes they belong to such that everyone will be perfectly suited to his or her social station and be perfectly satisfied with it. In this way, writes Adorno, a state of «complete preformation of human beings through social intervention»[11] can be reached; but he adds that mass-produced individuals are not merely part of a nightmarish future imagined in 1932, when it would have seemed much more distant than it does today. They rather represent an actual tendency of our present society, which, «in the grooves cut by the communications industry», imposes the same standards upon everyone to the point that, today, TV showgirls' facial features are mass-produced by plastic surgeons. Adorno comments despairingly: «spontaneous experience, long corroded,

[11] Th. W. Adorno, "Aldous Huxley and Utopia", in *Prisms*, 99.

is stripped of its power; men are no longer merely purchasers of mass-produced consumption goods, but rather appear themselves to be the de-individualised products of the corporations' absolute power».[12]

Hence, although not too keen on Huxley as an intellectual and still less as a philosopher, Adorno recognizes that the author of *Brave New World* perfectly portrays a civilization whose primary traits do not belong to a distant future, but to the here and now: «Huxley is free from the foolhardy sobriety which emerges from even the worst situations with a temporizing "It's not all that bad"».[13] The cult of mass-produced goods pervades a society in which Ford has been substituted for the Lord; instead of a cross-shaped pendant, everyone wears a T necklace after the letter which had given its name to the first mass-produced car model in Henry Ford's factories. In this consumerist horizon, even love, sex, and pleasure are totally reshaped: Huxley aptly shows how consumerism does not imply an affirmation of the individual (as its supporters even today would like to make everyone believe); rather, it induces conformism and homogeneization and therefore represents a menace to autonomous individuality and freedom. It is no coincidence that, instead of the principles of 1789, in this brave new world the holy trinity of *Community, Identity, and Stability* is affirmed. Love for a unique, irreplaceable person is banned and sexual intercourse assumes the features of a dutiful promiscuity—pleasing, healthy, and undemanding: an anticipation of the post-repressive society that will soon affirm itself in the richest countries of the West. Adorno's reaction to this Huxleyan theme is ambivalent. On the one hand, he agrees with Huxley: «Huxley has recognised the contradiction that in a society where sexual taboos have lost their intrinsic force […], pleasure itself degenerates to the misery of "fun" and to an occasion for the narcissistic satisfaction of having "had" this or that person. Through the institutionalisation of promiscuity, sex becomes a matter of indifference».[14] Adorno, however, cannot accept the conclusion that Huxely draws from these reflections: for the author of *Brave New World*, erotic pleasure would lose much of its appeal without taboos and repression. In this case, the left-Freudian Adorno and the anti-Freudian Huxley take

[12] Ibid., 97.

[13] Ibid., 98.

[14] Ibid., 102.

very different paths: Adorno views the overcoming of taboos in a positive way as well while Huxley's stance is represented by the behavior of the Savage, the novel's main character, who indignantly refuses Lenina's spontaneous and direct sexual offers.

In the final instance, therefore, according to Adorno, Huxley is guilty of spiritualism and, just like many other critics of culture, he places the blame for today's homogeneization on consumer goods, the decadence of customs, and the excesses of materialism and technology rather than on the powers that confirm and strengthen the masses' millennial submission via these means.

It is worth stressing this point also because, contrary to what has been stated by many unsympathetic critics, the issue for Adorno is not technology as such, but rather the social relations within which it develops. Adorno therefore criticizes Huxley from a Marxist point of view: the author of *Brave New World* «indicts technology for something which does not, as he believes (and in this he follows the tradition of romantic philistinism), lie in its essential nature […], but, rather, is a result of the involvement of technology in the social relations of production».[15] The Brechtian exhortation to talk about the relations of production certainly always makes sense. But in his essays devoted to critics of civilization such as Huxley, Adorno appears at his best when he takes advantage of the corrosive ideas of these anti-conformist intellectuals, and not when he counter-poses to these perspectives his paradoxical Marxist orthodoxy. It is paradoxical because Adorno, while renewing previous models of social criticism, firmly holds onto certain elements of its Marxist approach that would have benefited from a general reassessment.

3 The Critique of Mass Society

There is no doubt that in Adorno's discussion of Spengler and Huxley some elements of the Adornian critique of mass-society emerge with particular clarity. As we have seen, in commenting on the writings of these intellectuals, Adorno depicts a disquieting scenario: an economy more and more characterized by oligopolies and mass-production brings the individual to a sort of regression; the subject can no longer escape the

[15] Ibid., 112.

process that Huxley calls the «conditioning». This amounts to a manipulation endowed with an unprecedented pervasive character owing to a pair of deeply interconnected factors: on the one hand, the new mass media of the twentieth century, and on the other, the availability of a variety of gratifying consumer goods that the masses can acquire in a measure unknown in previous times.

Many have dismissed the Adornian critique of mass-society as the reaction of an old European bourgeois toward the more perfunctory and uncultured, but also much more democratic, American society; a critique reminiscent of Toqueville's. Many have also stated that Adorno's perspective does not adequately take into account the innovative and antagonistic plurality that, in the twentieth century, has been nourished by forms of popular and mass-consumption culture as well.

And one could also argue, perhaps with good reason, that the mass society which tramautized Adorno was that of 1940s America, which was already prone to McCarthyism; the society where, in countless identical suburban houses, millions of perfect housewives centered their lives upon their modern kitchens that were all equipped with the same furniture, while being moved to tears when watching their favorite soap opera. The intellectuals who emigrated from Europe could not help but be shocked by this society; its forms of popular culture (Hollywood cinema, radio and television, illustrated magazines) were marked by a conformism that, in other times and at other latitudes, would have been much less intense, as demonstrated for example by the great achievements of European cinema after the Second World War. We could therefore easily conclude that, at the very least, Adorno exaggerates (he would acknowledge this himself), or rather generalizes, by shifting experiences almost to the level of a philosophy of history that in reality have a much more specific, contingent, and determined meaning. This may not necessarily be the case, however.

Adorno's depiction of mass-society is in fact not as one dimensional as it may appear at first sight: in some writings, he admittedly effectively inclines to quite a narrow view, as for example when, again at the juncture of the 1940s, he expounded on the theme of the decline of the individual, almost as if the homogeneized subjects of modern mass society had even lost their egos.

In other essays, however, his perspective becomes much more nuanced, free from excessive totalizing and simplifying considerations. For example, if we consider his 1969 conference paper on "Free Time", a text that

Adorno wrote in the later phase of his philosophical itinerary, he maintains that every form of manipulation must encounter some limits: «whatever the culture industry sets before people in their free time, is indeed consumed and accepted, but with a kind of reservation. […] The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, up to a point, their total appropriation».[16] We cannot say, therefore, that the Adornian critique of mass-society, considered as a whole, leads to the image of a completely anesthetized world in which no room is left for criticism or resistance. This kind of vision would be proven wrong, in the first place, by the very existence of forms of critical thought in society such as those expressed by Adorno himself: if there is still someone capable of developing a critique of society, the nightmare of a totally manipulated world is not yet a reality. Secondly, in his later writings, Adorno always held onto a specific idea: that even the power of the modern mechanisms of mass integration cannot suppress the antagonistic character of contemporary society. This, however, does not deny that conflicts and antagonisms remain stuck in a latent state more and more frequently; they turn into neuroses and distress in the individual's everyday life, or are expressed in the wrong places against the wrong subjects: innocent people, scapegoats, or other targets shrewdly suggested by those who hold social power.

Nonetheless, once all necessary clarifications have been made, an aspect of Adorno's reflections strikes us in a deep way: he analyzed the compactness of a society that he perceived as more and more devoid of alternatives, being almost completely impenetrable to critique and to normative transformation. In reading Adorno's writings today, it is difficult to deny that the processes that he denounced in the Forties have progressed in such a rapid way that his previsions are very close to becoming reality. In a world still pervaded by contradictions and dramatic tensions, the space of the normatively possible seems to have shrunk almost to the point of disappearing. The task of critical theory becomes now desperately difficult, and at the same time absolutely necessary. Critical theory is pressed between two choices: on the one hand, the extremely hard and perhaps unattainable task of devising a global alternative to the present social system, and on the other hand, the "Habermasian" consideration of

[16] Th. W. Adorno, "Free Time", in Id., *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 175.

modest possibilities for democratic action and critical participation that, in spite of everything, are still available today. It is up to the new generations of critical theorists to face these challenges in a creative way.

Myth and Civilization: Adorno's Reading of Goethe's *Iphigenia*

1 Myth and Civilization in Adorno

Beginning with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Adorno wrote together with Max Horkheimer and published in 1947, Adorno's critique of a culturally disillusioned and economically capitalistic Western civilization revolves around the crux of the dialectics of myth and enlightenment. Starting with the Homeric Odysseus, whom Adorno considered the prototype of Western man, the vocation of the West has been precisely to emancipate individuals from subjugation to myth, to make them free masters of themselves, liberated from the domination of all irrational powers: myths, religions, and superstitions. The vocation of the West could be summed up in the concept of enlightenment, if we understand this word in a broad sense; and the concept of myth, in turn, is to be understood as containing all the archaic and irrational elements from which enlightenment sought to emancipate the Western individual.

According to Adorno's interpretation, Odysseus is the first modern individual—indeed, Odysseus' modernity and rationalism had already been splendidly sung by Dante Alighieri—because, in the wanderings he undergoes after the war of Troy, he defeats traditional mythical monsters through the use of a lucid and astute reason, which is both unprejudiced and technically developed. Thanks to this reason, Odysseus, after having invented the ruse of the Trojan horse, extricates himself from innumerable misadventures, fleeing both the brute force of mythical-primordial

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
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monsters like Polyphemus or Skylla and Charybdis, and the enchanting and lethal seductions of fabulous creatures like Circe and the Sirens. Odysseus defeats the figures of myth and superstition on the field of battle. For this reason, he is the archetype of Western enlightenment.

But Adorno's thesis is that Western enlightenment, far from constituting an authentic emancipation from myth, catastrophically slips back into it once again.

Interpreting Odysseus' adventure, Adorno maintains that freedom from the mythical-archaic institutions of sacrifice, which once served to ingratiate higher powers (as the myth of Iphigenia, for instance, tells us), can be attained by the rational subject only at the price of self-sacrifice. We free ourselves from sacrifice as an archaic institution that represents the cornerstone of social life only at the price of performing a sacrifice within the Self. This Self must sacrifice everything to the supreme end of its own self-preservation and self-affirmation: impulses, affects, "superstitious" weaknesses and the inclination to yield to solidarity with other people and other creatures. If for a moment it yields to any of these, it is lost; the iron law of "civilized" society will not permit it. Enlightenment, in its turn, is revealed to be mythical because, in the emancipation from archaic myth and from sacrifice, the principle of equivalence that they enshrine continues to reign supreme: self-affirmation is paid for by self-sacrifice, domination over nature by the domination over men, the emancipation from nature by the constitution of society itself as a "second nature". Essentially, liberation transforms itself into a new form of enslavement.

In thus delineating the dialectics of civilization (where myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment in turn reverts into myth) Adorno is doubtless thinking of an important and dense 1922 essay by Walter Benjamin—the author of *German Drama*—dedicated to Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. At the center of this Goethean masterpiece, we do indeed find, as Benjamin's interpretation emphasises, the dialectic between the institutions of civil society (marriage) and the inexorable return of mythical destiny. As in myth, the guilt that hovers over the novel's characters is expiated by the death of an innocent being (the child who drowns in the lake). In Benjamin's reading, the novel is designed to bring to light a theme that Adorno would amply elaborate upon, namely, the fact that a civilization built on the domination and the repression of nature cannot produce a true emancipation and a real departure from myth, but will only

reproduce myth as a fateful connection between guilt and expiation which prevents the attainment of any authentic and peaceful reconciliation.

The reflection on the theme of the "mythical" constitutes a guiding thread running throughout Adorno's speculation and accompanies his reflections from his earliest writings up to those of his full maturity. From Adorno's perspective, which is strongly connected to Benjamin's, the "mythical", in its primary meaning, designates the reproduction of a fateful connection between guilt and punishment, which endlessly expands in a cycle admitting of no redemption, because the punishment by which guilt is expiated constitutes in its turn a new guilt which must be expiated (as in the Atreidai cycle), without providing the possibility of escaping from this vicious circle. The redemptionless cycle of the "mythical" reproduces, in the guise of the historical life of human beings, the hopeless succession of birth and death, of generation and corruption, which characterises merely natural life. The mythical is the stigma which marks history, so long as history remains a prisoner of the "second nature". Adorno reflected on this reciprocal transformation of history into nature and of nature into history early on, in his lecture entitled "The Idea of Natural History" (which he always regarded as a kind of 'incunable' in relation to all his other works). In this youthful text, Adorno wrote that he understood the mythical as something dazzling and highly obscure, «das, was von je da ist, was als schicksalhaft gefügtes, vorgegebenes Sein die menschliche Geschichte trägt, in ihr erscheint, was substantiell ist in ihr» («By it is meant was has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history»).[1]

As a form of subjection to powers of a higher order, whose totalitarian immanence seems to leave no means of escape, the concept of the mythical is strictly intertwined, and indeed is almost synonymous with, the concept of "destiny", which seems to indicate precisely blind submission to something fatal and hope-destroying; and every attempt

[1] Th. W. Adorno, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 346. Engl. transl. "The Idea of Natural History", in *Telos*, 20, June 1984,111–124: 111. For further insights into the concepts of myth and destiny in the exchange between Benjamin and Adorno, see the present author's *Ragione e dominio. L'autocritica della razionalità occidentale in Adorno e Horkheimer* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1984), 216–34 (the chapter "Il pensiero mitico"). On this same topic, see also my contribution "Il mitico nel moderno: figure del feticismo in Adorno", in S. Mistura (ed.), *Figure del feticismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), 197–224.

at avoiding this ultimately ends in painful submission to it. Here, once again, Adorno's direct source of inspiration is obviously Benjamin—not only Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and the volume on *German Drama*, but above all his 1921 text "Fate and Character", where destiny is defined as «an order the sole concepts of which are misfortune and guilt and within which there is no conceivable path of liberation».[2]

Myth and destiny "signify" history's entrapment in a blind and quasi-natural dynamic, which still dominates men, just as the mythical and monstrous powers dominated and terrorized the weak souls of primitive human beings. But though myth is nothing but an image that reveals of the entrapment of social history in a frozen "second nature", Adorno—as can be seen very clearly in his lecture on "The Idea of Natural History"—does not fail to underline the dialectic aspect of myth itself: insofar as it betrays the truth of a hopeless order, the mythical is also in itself a dialectic element, which negatively recalls the moment of reconciliation precisely by expelling it, by absolutizing the cycle of the eternal return of the same in the cycle of guilt and expiation. Adorno writes that this intrinsic dialectical quality of the mythical moment manifests itself in classical tragedy: «The dialectical element here is that the tragic myth contain at one and the same time subjection to guilt and nature and the element of reconciliation that transcends the realm of nature».[3]

2 Adorno's Reading of Iphigenia

Bearing in mind Benjamin's essay, which he much admired, in a 1967 text Adorno engages with another decisive piece of writing showcasing the Goethean treatment of myth: *Iphigenia in Tauris*,[4] in which the author of *Faust* recapitulates the Euripedean tragedy. The crux of the matter is always the same: is it possible to break the chain of guilt (which, for example, marks the Atreidai's destiny), the equivalency of guilt and punishment (which for Adorno shows forth again in the principle of the equivalence that dominates modern exchange society with an iron hand)

[2] W. Benjamin, "Fate and Character", in Id., *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by P. Demetz (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 305–311: 307.

[3] Th. W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History", 123.

[4] Th. W. Adorno, "On the Classicism of Goethe's *Iphigenie*", in Id., *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 153–170.

and reach a dimension which might be called that of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of redemption, of peaceful relations with others and with nature?

This is precisely the theme of Goethe's tragedy. The plot unfolds under the sway of mythical repetition. The background is the confrontation between the advanced Greeks (Iphigenia, her brother Orestes, and her friend Pylades), and the Tauri barbarians, led by their king Thoas. But both must come to terms with the domination of the mythical repetition. On the island of the Tauri, there has reigned, from time immemorial, the barbaric custom whereby every stranger who lands on the island's coasts must be sacrificed to the goddess Diana—a custom which is fortunately thwarted by the priestess Iphigenia, who falls into the barbarians' hands after she is miraculously rescued from the sacrifice to which she had been destined.

But while the Tauri are tied to their barbarous ritual of human sacrifice, the Greeks also labor under the mythical curse: Orestes will be freed from the guilt of his matricide—which in turn was punishment for his mother Clytemnestra's guilt—only if he is able to bring his sister Iphigenia back to their homeland. Meanwhile, King Thoas wants to take Iphigenia as his bride. When she refuses to wed him, Thoas responds by deciding to bring human sacrifices back into practice; the first victims are to be Orestes and Pylades, who have also landed on the island. The only solution, advocated by the astute and "Odyssean" character Pylades, is that Iphigenia, slyly deceiving Thoas, should organize her escape together with the two youths. But this would mean perpetuating the mythical chain of evil: the price for saving Orestes would be Iphigenia's wicked deed, and she would be constrained, out of love for her brother, to take on the guilt of having deceived the barbarous but honest Thoas.

But Iphigenia does not accept the perennial nature of the chain of guilt and punishment: «Shall then this curse forever hover o'er us?» she asks. «All else doth fade and wane! / The highest bliss, the fairest strength of life, / Grows faint at last! Wherefore then not the curse?»[5] Thus she decides (in contrast to Euripides' Iphigenia) not to deceive Thoas, but to confess her plans to escape, and to put herself into his hands, asking him to allow the departure, not only of the two youths, but of Iphigenia as well, this woman whom the king loves without being loved by her

[5] J. W. Goethe, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Eng. transl. F. Butler (Reading, PA: Press of Albright & Shenton, 1898), 58 (verses 1694–1698).

in return. And by offering herself up as a helpless victim, Iphigenia—whom Goethe, in an 1802 letter to Schiller, called «diabolically human», as Adorno notes—obtains what she desires, and leaves the good Thoas alone with his generosity.

But is this really, as many interpreters have maintained, an overcoming of the mythical curse through the recognition of that humanity which the Greeks and the barbarians share? In Adorno's view, this is not at all the case. Precisely through her disarming sincerity, the «diabolically human» Iphigenia induces the "barbarian" Thoas to do what she wants him to do, and to resign himself even to accepting abandonment by the woman he loves. But in light of this, it is legitimate to wonder whether the rude and primitive Thoas might not actually be more human than the advanced Greeks: for Thoas protests that the Greek, like the Western imperialists who would descend from him, «doth often turn his eager eyes/To treasures of barbarians far remote,/The golden fleece, their steeds and fairest daughters»[6]—in short, the Greek "barbarically" practices the art of plunder and rapine that is supposed to be characteristic of primitive humans, rather than of progressed humanity. The moral of the tale which Adorno draws from Goethe's drama, therefore, brings us emphatically back to Adorno's theses on the limits of a civilization which is built on the capacity to dominate other human beings and nature, and which precisely for this reason reverts to myth. Even the "anti-mythical" reconciliation effected by the sublime Iphigenia is not ultimately free of manipulation and self-affirmation at the expense of the ingenuous and the underdeveloped. There can be no true humanity, and therefore, there can be no emancipation from myth, without an authentic reconciliation, one which is capable of truly moving beyond he profound Western impulse toward exclusion and domination.

[6] Ibid., 73 (verses 2102–2104).

Adorno, Habermas, and the Self-Criticism of Modernity

1 Modernity Between Criticism and Self-Criticism

In the philosophical reflection of what, for brevity's sake, we usually refer to as the Frankfurt School, the topic of the interpretation of modernity acquired genuine centrality from the late 1930s onward. But before we approach the way in which the Frankfurt thinkers (particularly Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas) interpret the question of modernity, it is best to bring the object of our enquiry into focus, if only in a provisional way: how is the notion of modernity to be conceived from a historical-sociological perspective?

It is possible to draw a plausible outline of what is meant by *modernity*, not least by taking account of the many reflections about this topic offered by Habermas. As we first broach this topic, we could define modernity as an age characterized by a series of intertwining crucial innovations, giving rise to a new social horizon.

On the level of social structures, the great evolutional innovations of modernity essentially consist (following Weber and Habermas) in the development of subsystems of goal oriented rational action in the economic and political-governmental sphere. The following aspects can be identified: the development of industries based on technology and machines, which hugely increased the capacity to manufacture goods; the progressive formation of a global capitalist system; the affirmation of

S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's Philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Marx, Engels, and Marxisms,
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secular nation-states with an extensive and bureaucratized public administration; an increase in the political mobilization of the masses through movements and parties; and the development of democratic political systems.

On the cultural level, modernity essentially appears to entail: the development of science and technology as the primary source of economic growth and social change; secularization as the emancipation of civil society, science, and forms of culture (morality, art, and philosophy) from religious control; the rationalization and individualization of lifestyles, the affirmation of an individualistic life conduct, and the privatization of family life; the development of means of communication and media; and the transformation of women's condition.

As far as the Frankfurt School is concerned, its consideration of the major transformations of modernity is marked by two underlying approaches, which distinguish Adorno and Horkheimer's position, and which seem to me to shape their overall discourse. First of all, it may be said that the topic of modernity is approached from the point of view of catastrophes, i.e., starting not from its undeniable successes, but rather from its catastrophic failures. The problem which Adorno and Horkheimer address from the late 1930s onward thus emerges as follows: if modernity takes the form of a process of *rationalization* of social life, and if it coincides with the secular, emancipatory, scientific, and progressive trajectory of the Enlightenment, then how are we to explain the catastrophes of the twentieth century—the extermination of millions of people, Auschwitz, gulags, the atomic bomb? How are we to explain the reduction of man to an object of planned, scientific, and bureaucratized mass destruction? How are we to envisage the relationship between these radically barbaric outcomes and the emancipatory dynamics which seemed to characterize modernity and the Enlightenment?

In the twentieth century, we have witnessed the degradation of man to a pure object of manipulation, the loss of even the most basic forms of respect for the sanctity not just of life, but also of the human body. What has made the reduction of the human subject to a mere object of exploitation possible? And—on the cultural level, so to speak—what has made the return of the pagan myth of blood and race possible, with the Nazis, when it seemed as though modern rationalism was destined to do away with all myths, superstitions, and possibly even religions (at any rate according to the theorists of progressive secularization)?

The first distinguishing feature of the Frankfurt School's approach, then, lies in the way in which the problem is posed. But there is also a second aspect worth underlying, as it proves crucial in order to define the Frankfurt School's place within a hypothetical classification of the possible interpretations of modernity. The point is that, from the Frankfurt thinkers' perspective, the above-mentioned catastrophic outcomes certainly call modernity into question, yet not in terms of what may be defined as a somehow antimodern critique. Hence, in my view—and certain differences notwithstanding—both Adorno's and Habermas' theses must be understood as a *self-criticism of modernity*. In short, the indictment brought against modernity is not that it has abjured and abandoned tradition, thereby yielding to nihilism and to all the catastrophes that follow from this. Rather, modernity is accused of not having been sufficiently and consistently modern, i.e., of not having drawn upon the kind of emancipation to which it appeared to be committed as its own *telos* (precisely because it preserved too many archaic traces within itself). That this is the case according to Habermas is all too clear, given that one of his most famous lectures is entitled precisely "Modernity: An Unfinished Project".[1] However, it seems to me that this is also the main line of reasoning in Adorno—and here I disagree with those who emphasize the antimodern elements in his thought. If we read his texts carefully, we can see that they are quite clear on this point; besides, it strikes me as really paradoxical to label as antimodern a scholar who, among other things, has devoted many of his most compelling pages to an intransigent and uncompromising defense of modernism in art. The problem, for the Hegelian Adorno, rather lies in the fact, first of all that modernity has not lived up to the concept it embodies, and secondly that it could only conform to it through a radically critical, or rather self-critical, purification. It is certainly true that, in this process of self-reflection, the contribution provided by reactionary critics of modernity should also be taken seriously: as we have seen, the pages which Adorno repeatedly devotes to Oswald Spengler, the author of the famous book *The Decline of the West*, bear witness to this.[2] Yet it is one thing to acknowledge that,

[1] J. Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project", in M. Passerin d'Entrèves and S. Benhabib (eds.), *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 38–55.

[2] See Th. W. Adorno, "Spengler After the Decline", in Id., *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1982), 53–63.

with regard to many issues, reactionary critics are right, and quite another to embrace their perspective. Great affinities may be found when it comes to bringing the ills of modernity into focus; yet these thinkers' perspectives diverge completely as concerns the possible treatment of such ills. For example, it is possible to agree about the risks of mass democracy based on different perspectives: some people will infer antidemocratic and openly "Caesaristic" consequences from this, while others will strive to determine how these ills can be corrected through the injection of more deep-rooted and robust forms of democracy.

2 Modernity and Catastrophes

Let us return, then, to the first point we must bring into focus, namely the way in which Adorno and Horkheimer's reflection addresses the crux of modernity and catastrophes. The highly provocative thesis they set out from is that modern barbarism cannot simply be ascribed to anti-Enlightenment and antimodern tendencies: it is not the violent and desperate backlash of the archaic forces whose basis modernity had undermined (hierarchy, inequality by nature, theocracy, mere and brutal domination); nor is it the comeback of the dark and mythical substratum of the German soul (this might be Thomas Mann's thesis). The Frankfurt School's thesis is that the triumph of regression is rather connected to a dynamic within the Enlightenment itself; in other words, the return of barbarism and myth is also—if not especially—rooted in the limits and inadequacies of modernity itself, as we have experienced it in the West.

Let us see in what sense this is the case. There is one initial point which needs to be clarified: according to the Frankfurt School's perspective (I am thinking particularly of the landmark text published by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in 1947, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*[3]) the concept of modernity largely coincides with that of Enlightenment. It would be possible to state without any fear of being disproved that the Enlightenment is *the philosophy of modernity*. It shares, enunciates, and qualifies its essential features: first of all, secularization, emancipation from religious rules as the pillar and ultimate point of reference of social life and even of political sovereignty. Secondly, the Enlightenment coincides with an exaltation of the scientific revolution: the criticism of

[3] Engl. transl. London and New York: Verso, 2016.

religion and the birth of a new science make up a single movement, which has shaped the cultural revolution of modernity. What follows from this is a critique of metaphysics and, with it, of any kind of morality resting on an ontological, theological, or transcendent point of reference. For radical Enlightenment philosophers, from Hobbes to Helvétius, all morality coincides with self-interest, correctly understood, and is ultimately rooted in self-conservation (as is the case precisely with Hobbes' natural law). Likewise, on the political level, all legitimate power stems from free consent and an agreement among those individuals who must be subjected to such power. The Enlightenment is therefore the philosophy of modernity, of secularization, of the scientific revolution, and of political liberalism.

However, in the even broader version proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment indicates—in a more general and all-round sense—the emancipatory movement of thought which overcomes all myths, religions, superstitions, and metaphysics. In other words, the concept of Enlightenment does not merely apply to the eighteenth-century currents usually described by this term (Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert, the *Encyclopédie*), but indicates a *fundamental line of thought within modernity*: in particular, the nominalistic, empiricist, and anti-metaphysical one which dissolves the general concepts of transmitted metaphysics and which *reduces reason to a reckoning tool*. Particularly revealing, from this perspective, is Hobbes' thought, and even more so Locke's. In Part I, Ch. V of *Leviathan*, Hobbes sets out to define what is meant by the «word reason when we reckon it among the faculties of the mind». The answer he gives is unambiguous: «reason, in this sense, is nothing but reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts».[4] The modern concept of reason is most notably interpreted in such terms by Horkheimer, starting in particular from his 1941–1942 essay (already written in collaboration with Adorno), which bears the title "The End of Reason". What begins to emerge here is the Frankfurt School's "mature" perspective, its "second half", so to speak, which will reach its most striking outcome with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In his essay, Horkheimer explains that the defining feature of

[4] Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 26.

modern reason lies in the fact that it does away with all the transcendent concepts of metaphysics, thereby reducing itself "to its pragmatic significance": «Its features can be summarized as the optimum adaptation of means to ends, thinking as an energy-conserving operation. It is a pragmatic instrument oriented to expediency».[5]

Ultimately, according to the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno addressed the issue in those years, modern reason coincides with what Max Weber has defined as formal rationality, understood as the capacity to reckon and to choose suitable means to attain the goals we have set ourselves. Indeed, according to Max Weber, whose teaching left an enduring trace on the Frankfurt School, as it already had on Lukács' thought in the 1920s, modernity is precisely the age of rationalization, although this rationalization can be understood in many different ways. In Weberian terms, it may be argued that modernity is the realm of rationalization in its formal aspects, as reason pervades a wide range of social fields: from the methodical life conduct of individuals (studied in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) to the rigorous economic calculations of capitalist enterprises; from the use of science and technology in all life spheres to the detailed juridical regulation of bureaucratic administration in the form of administrative law. In this case, then, rationalization means the use of rigorous methods, calculation, predictability, analytical precision, and the use of means suited to one's ends.

However, concerning the issue of what ends are worth pursuing, this instrumental reason has absolutely nothing to say. To quote Max Horkheimer once more, «It is regarded as a matter of subjective preference whether one decides for liberty or obedience, democracy or Fascism, enlightenment or authority, mass culture or truth».[6] Reason becomes a means of individual or collective self-affirmation: it is no longer, as in the Classical tradition (Horkheimer also speaks of «objective reason» in this regard), a means to identify just ends or what the good life consists in for man.

The point we need to bring into focus, then, is that—if we at least partly accept the interpretation provided by the Frankfurt School—modern reason carries a fundamental ambivalence within itself: on the

[5] M. Horkheimer, "The End of Reason", in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences,* IX, 1941, 316–389: 368.

[6] Ibid., 371.

one hand, it is liberating and emancipatory. It frees all men from religious commandments and metaphysical transcendence, from superstition and myths; and it offers them means to control the world and to act successfully (Bacon), thereby turning them into subjects who are their own masters. Yet precisely insofar as it reduces reality to a tool which can be used and manipulated, it does not hesitate to reduce man too to an object of manipulation and instrumental use. This perverse dialectic of an emancipation that turns into its opposite had already been brought into focus by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the pages devoted to the critique of *Aufklärung* and especially of one of its central categories, that of usefulness: «As everything is useful for man, man is likewise useful, and his determination consists in making himself a universally usable member of the troop and being of use for the common interest».[7] Hobbes had already stated as much with the utmost clarity in Leviathan: «The value or worth of a man is, as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power, and therefore is not absolute, but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another».[8]

Hence, the ambivalence of modern reason according to the Frankfurt School's interpretation: freed from transcendent goals, inhabiting a disenchanted world, and finally his own master, man can himself be reduced to an object of use; as Marquis de Sade had realized at the time of the French Revolution, man's enlightened reason *has no decisive argument* by which to oppose the reduction of man to a means—be it a means of pleasure, of torture, or of exploitation.

In order to try and provide an overview of the interpretation of modernity and its ills from Adorno and Horkheimer's perspective, it is necessary to underline the following interconnected aspects. Firstly, the barbaric regression of modernity cannot simply be ascribed to the re-emergence of dark, anti-Enlightenment, pro-mythological, and antimodern forces; rather, this is rooted in the limits and ambiguities of modern reason itself, which accompanies the development of industrial, market, and capitalistic society. But if this is the case, a further consequence which may be inferred is that the "exterminist" totalitarianism of Hitler or Stalin is, in a way, part of the same historical plexus as hyper-technological capitalism, which

[7] G.F.W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 327.

[8] Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 54–55.

generates both consumerist glee, with its untrammeled promises of satisfaction, and atomic bombs, with their vast potential for destruction. From the point of view of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the significant differences between them notwithstanding, we in any case find ourselves within the horizon of instrumental reason, of reason as an operative reckoning tool and means of domination. In other words, we are dealing with a form of reason that constitutes, in a way, the coherent outcome of the whole demythicizing trajectory of the Western spirit (with its ambivalent fluctuation between exhilarating emancipation and ruthless domination). According to Adorno, this *forma mentis*, if we may call it so, already took shape in Homeric Greece and found its original symbolic embodiment in the figure of cunning Odysseus. Cunning (*metis*) is precisely a prefiguration of instrumental reason, insofar as it represents a means of self-preservation and power acquisition that no longer relies on brute force, but is rather capable of wisely exercising deceit to the detriment of nature, of mythical and archaic powers (such as the giant Polyphemus or the Sirens), and of other men (as in the case of Odysseus' ruse of the horse, by which the siege of Troy is finally broken) to ensure the supremacy of its disenchanted possessor.

But while it is true that Adorno's theory cannot be reduced to a romantic and regressive critique of science and technology («It is not technology that is the catastrophe but its imbrication with the social relations that embrace it»[9]), which after all would be quite out of keeping with a philosopher who took such a keen interest in the technical rationalization of dodecaphonic music, it is equally true that the critique of modernity developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is open to the charge of one-sidedness. Indeed, it brings into focus the modernity of capitalism and planned production, of the unlimited expansion of technological power and consumer goods, but appears to completely overlook the other side of modernity, that by which (precisely from Hobbes onward) it coincides with the at least theoretical affirmation of a fundamental equality among men, and hence as the age of human rights and, later, of democracy. It may be argued that the Frankfurt School's treatment of modernity is one-sided insofar as it emphasizes the fact that the individual who, from an Enlightenment perspective, is conceived as his own master, is

[9] Th. W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society", in Id., *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 118.

also—consistently with this perspective—someone who refuses to submit to any authority unless he has given his consent to it in view of his own benefit. The modernity of science and the market economy must be integrated with that of political contractualism, which can be interpreted as the political side of instrumental and reckoning rationality (once again, Hobbes comes to mind here), but which at the same time also clearly takes as its point of departure the equality among men in terms of rights and the negation of any authority that cannot be rationally justified before others. From this perspective, then, it may be argued that the modernity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is almost a half-modernity, reduced to the exaltation of empirical science and the domination of nature, and deprived of its radical content in terms of the criticism of authority and the affirmation of equal rights for all men.

But if such a "dark" reading of modernity may be justified with reference to the terrible period in which it was conceived (between 1941 and 1944), the fact remains that it is largely confirmed even by Adorno's subsequent writings, down to the 1960s. Certainly, Adorno acknowledges that the global development of industrial capitalism has freed increasing segments of the human race from poverty and misery. However, he does not refrain from stressing that, even though it has laid the foundations for a liberated and pacified world, «it is the concern for profit and domination that has canalized technological development: on occasion it coincides in a disastrous way with the need to exercise control.»[10] «Human beings continue to be subject to domination by the economic process. Its objects have long since ceased to be just the masses: they now include those in charge and their agents.»[11] However, this critical gaze on enduring and pervasive forms of domination risks concealing the ambiguity which, upon closer scrutiny, has marked the development of industrial (and later post-industrial) capitalism in the twentieth century: in other words, it risks overlooking the fact that material growth and the availability of consumer goods do not constitute merely the condition for a possible future freedom (a point Adorno frequently underlines), but also the opening up of avenues for freedom in the present; and while these certainly coexist with both old and new forms of domination, they cannot be wholly erased or removed by theorists. The analysis of economic

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 116.

and technological development thus risks being one-sided, as does—as already noted—any theory of modernity which focuses exclusively on this aspect, while overlooking the other side of the question, namely the difficult process of development of equality, rights, and democracy. Precisely insofar as it fails to examine this topic in detail, the Frankfurt School's interpretation of modernity tends to neglect the issue of conflict: mesmerized by the frightful appearance of domination, it fails to grasp the pervasiveness of processes of resistance, of struggles for emancipation; in other words, from the very outset it gives up on the possibility of understanding modernity also as a field of conflict, and thereby falls squarely within the context of pessimism and complete "political desperation" (which, in 1968–1969, became precisely the cause of the bitter disagreement between Adorno and Marcuse[12]).

3 Habermas and Unfinished Modernity

Aside from all content-related problems, I have sought to highlight so far, critical theory, as formulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, risks leaving an underlying philosophical question open: ultimately, what is the criticism of the instrumentality of modern reason based on? This is the key theoretical issue. According to Adorno, it is necessary to show dialectically (through an operation which can be described as determinate negation) that from the failure of instrumental reason, the need for a different kind of reason emerges, a different way of understanding reason, and a different kind of social rationality. But the dialectic in question does not attain full theoretical transparency, and this is precisely the starting point of the *reform of critical theory* proposed by Habermas. If we wish to firmly establish a critique of modernity, we must show in a theoretically unassailable way what the inadequacy of instrumental reason consists in. And Habermas offers a suggestion. I would argue, following what strikes me as the crucial point in his reasoning, that instrumental reason can be seen as the victim of a fallacy of abstraction, insofar as it believes that it can stand on its own feet and does not realize that it actually rests on another dimension of reason (communicative reason, the bond of solidarity), which is the (removed and concealed) condition of possibility for

[12] See Th. W. Adorno, H. Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement", in *New Left Review*, 233 (January/February 1999): 123–136.

instrumental reason itself—just as bonds of social solidarity are the condition of possibility (removed and concealed by individualistic liberalism) for the selfish individual alleged to be his own master, according to the Lockean idea of self-sufficiency.

The cornerstone of Habermas' position, in my view, must be understood or, if we prefer, interpreted as follows: instrumental (monological) reason conceals its completion, which is also its condition of possibility, namely dialogical reason. The rationality of understanding one another through dialog (with its implicit value content or, to put it in a more clear-cut way, with its implicit moral assumptions) cannot be eluded by scientific rationality; indeed, the two are complementary, in the sense that the rationality of scientific research would not even be possible outside the horizon of the discursive rationality of dialog and of understanding based on sound arguments. Science exists because, in addition to carrying out research and experiments on an objective reality that can be manipulated and controlled, scientists reach a mutual understanding with regard to what can be considered a proof, what criteria a theory must meet in order to be accepted, and what the requirements are for sound research. But if it is true that no science can exist without free dialogical engagement leading to mutual understanding, it follows that *this is precisely the deepest and most fundamental rational-normative dimension*, outside of which neither the cooperative search for the truth in scientific endeavors nor the development of legitimate social balances, liable to be argumentatively justified, would be possible. In brief, dialogical-moral reason is the hidden condition of possibility for monological-instrumental reason.

This philosophical thesis (first outlined by Habermas in his writings from the early 1960s,[13] particularly those connected with the so-called *Positivismusstreit*) goes hand in hand with the "sociological" analysis of modernity and its ills. In the 1960s, Habermas addressed the following question: as far as the development of modern society is concerned, how are we to envisage the relationship between the development of scientific and technological knowledge, on the one hand, and the processes of emancipation, liberalization, and democratization of society, on the other? The author of *Knowledge and Human Interests* rejects the idea (which he would describe as "Positivistic") that material progress is the only real factor of social progress. But nor does he accept the opposite thesis,

[13] See J. Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

according to which—at least in the mature stage of modernity—science and technology constitute genuine mechanisms for the stabilization of domination and oppression (this could be Marcuse's view, if we push his perspective to its radical extreme). As he almost invariably does, Habermas rejects both alternatives, which represent opposite poles (i.e., the exaltation and the demonization of techno-science), and attempts to develop an intermediate position, a kind of "third way".

To put it briefly, the advances made by modern natural and social sciences do not directly translate into «the practical certainty of citizens endowed with political insight»[14]; they do not simply give rise (as a "naive" Enlightenment might have hoped) to social reforms designed to bring well-being and justice to all. Such virtuous outcomes can only emerge through the mediation provided by dialog with an emancipated public opinion, which in turn is only conceivable if we possess a concept of rationality which differs from the scientific one: being rational here does not mean acting on the basis of theories that enable the formulation of forecasts with regard to objective processes and make it possible to alter their development to suit our aims; rather, it means acting according to norms that can be justified before each person through discursive and argumentative processes.

First clearly framed in the early 1960s, Habermas' reflection on modernity was more extensively developed in the 1985 book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.[15] One stage of this intellectual itinerary that is no doubt worth recalling—even in a summary reconstruction such as the one I am providing—is the well-known lecture of 1980 "Modernity: An Unfinished Project". Habermas here sets himself the ambitious task of reconstructing what appears to be the original core of the "project of modernity". In his view, at the center of this "project", first formulated by Enlightenment thinkers in the eighhteenth century, is the belief that the development of knowledge—articulated into its three distinct value spheres[16] (objectifying sciences, the universality of law and of rational morality, and autonomous art)—could come to pervade all areas of society and life with its potential for rationality, and hence be

[14] Ibid., 76.

[15] J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

[16] J. Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project", 45.

used to ensure rational forms of life. Enlightenment philosophers such as Condorcet (the author of the famous *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*) expected the development of the arts and sciences to ensure not just control over natural forces, but also «the progress of morality, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness»[17]. Diverse and critically elaborated forms of knowledge were expected to pervade the "worlds of life", leading to the development of an autonomous and enlightened public opinion that would act as a driving force for social progress, promoting a more just and peaceful way of organizing civil life, one directed toward everyone's well-being. But—Habermas notes, quite in keeping with his teachers' views—the twentieth century has shattered these hopes and hence forced us to rethink the concepts of modernity and enlightenment with a more critical and aware attitude.

However, as is clear from *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas is keen to distinguish his own critique from that developed by his old Frankfurt teachers Horkheimer and Adorno. According to Habermas, their mistake lies in having simply equated modern reason with a means of domination, concealing the emancipatory content which is bound to be found within it. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas asks: «How can these two men of the Enlightenment (which they both remain) be so unappreciative of the rational content of cultural modernity that all they perceive everywhere is a binding of reason and domination, of power and validity?»[18]

If taken literally, Habermas' criticism of Adorno is certainly uncharitable: his teacher's aim, after all, was precisely to save the emancipatory *telos* of the Enlightenment from the catastrophe that had overwhelmed it. Through his criticism, however, Habermas chiefly sought to voice his dissatisfaction at the way in which Adorno had unraveled the problem, and hence to provide a different solution.

According to the perspective which Habermas started outlining, the critique of modernity ought to avoid overgeneralization, in order to establish itself in a more defined and circumscribed way. He therefore identifies two crucial limits which modern rationalism has run up against:

[17] Ibid.

[18] J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 121.

first, as argued in "Modernity: An Unfinished Project", the differentiated cultural rationalization of modernity has certainly produced expert cultures, yet it has done so at the cost of separating itself from the worlds of life, which have failed to draw upon all the potential for rationality disclosed in the meantime. Secondly—although this is actually but another facet of the same question—the potentialities of modernity have not developed in a balanced way, because the rational procedures incorporated into the autonomized subsystems of the capitalist market economy and the administrative bureaucratic State have ultimately colonized, through their "invasive" power, spheres of the world of life which ought to have been governed by different modes of communicative rationality. This means that Habermas is indicting, not modern rationality—which (to draw upon Weber's diagnosis) would have simply turned into a steel cage and the loss of meaning—but rather an *unbalanced rationalization*, whereby the subsystems excluded from discursive agreement (the capitalist market economy and bureaucratic State administration) spill into those spheres of the world of life where the logic of communicative action ought to have been predominant.

According to Habermas, therefore, the contradiction of modernity does not lie in the perverse dynamics of a techno-scientific control over nature that turns into the domination of human beings. Rather, on the philosophical level, it is to be found in the theoretical hegemony of an abstractive and only half-complete view of rationality; on the strictly sociological level, the "incompleteness" of modernity instead consists in the contemporary and consubstantial social hegemony (or colonizing power) of rational-instrumental subsystems. This implies that a cure ought to be found both—philosophically—in the restoration of the cognitive character of practical reason, redefined as dialogical reason, and—sociologically—in a new balance of powers, centered on the relaunching of the communicative power of a creative and non-manipulated democratic public sphere, which ought to be capable of counterbalancing the faceless power of subsystems. This faith in the centrality of the public sphere (a recurrent feature in Habermas' thought, from his Habilitation dissertation[19] to his most recent writings) may seem excessive or overly optimistic to some people, particularly in an age such as the present one, marked by a vast expansion of media powers of manipulation. However, the critical

[19] See J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

diagnosis which precedes it, and which is centered on the idea of a lack of balance in modernity, seems far from unfounded. In any case, in my view, it is worth considering this diagnosis carefully, as it constitutes a critique, as well as a development, of the line of thought outlined by the first generation of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) and an attempt to solve certain problems its thinkers had left open.

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