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Enduring Crisis and Critique: Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and Sites for a Critique of  
Political Economy

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Political Economy

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## Abstract

### Enduring Crisis and Critique: Adorno's Negative Dialectics and Sites for a Critique of Political Economy

By Osman Nemli

My dissertation constructs a critique of political economy from the negative dialectical philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno's critique of political economy is a *prismatic* approach to the issue of political economy, and shows the two-way, dialectical relationship between the non-economic sphere and the economic sphere. It is *site-based* and presents the interrelations between those two spheres. The first chapter offers a historical and philosophical account of Marx's critique of political economy; it sees how such a critique functions, what the main concepts and methods used by Marx are, and what thus constitutes the object of inquiry for one critiquing political economy. My second chapter looks at the ways in which 'thinking economically' has changed the conditions for critique. 'Thinking economically', as Adorno calls it, no longer operates as critique, but rather is an apology for the very system that it attempts to show the limits of. The third chapter examines what Adorno calls the 'unconscious of the concept' – that is, assumptions and hidden tendencies operative in thought – that a critique must make conscious. The fourth chapters addresses the differences between Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy and Hegel's dialectical philosophy, responding to problems operating in Adorno's approach. These problems include: Adorno's making conscious what is unconscious in the concept; that his way of thinking not fall prey to being a Hegelian 'unhappy consciousness'; that he not fetishize and hypostatize the priority of the object; and that his negative dialectics not lead to a bad infinity. The fifth chapter examines Adorno's aesthetics. In particular, it looks at the work of art as a particular object scarred by totality. This scarred totality, however, continues society's domination of nature via the idea of the beautiful. Adorno's aesthetics of the sublime offers a corrective to the violence of the idea of the beautiful upon natural beauty. The sixth chapter focuses on Adorno's critique of exchange society, more generally, and how one might change or exchange a society for which exchange is its *raison d'être*.

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## INTRODUCTION

This project has an impossible dual aim: to counter those who read Adorno's negative dialectics as simply polemical, and to expand the notion of a critique of political economy to include Adorno's negative dialectics.<sup>1</sup> What better way to bring non-identicals, negative dialectics and critiques of political economy, together than with a reading of the thinker of non-identity, *par excellence*: Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969). We are beyond specters haunting us, and the present-absence of hauntologies. Adorno's philosophy is read – by critical theorists! – as a dead end, while his aesthetic writings are cheered as the culmination of his philosophical thought. Negative dialectics has, *pace Adorno*, been identified with the eponymous text, and that text is read as an exercise in polemics; a polemics, moreover, that received a better job at the tailors in his *Aesthetic Theory*.<sup>2</sup>

A return to Adorno's work requires a re-reading of his texts. Negative dialectics, I contend, extends beyond the eponymous text, to envelope much of Adorno's writings; indeed, it comprises the non-identical core of his philosophical activities. While critiques of political economy have gone on in a monopolistic manner – to the detriment of the spirit of traditional critiques of political economy – theoretical contributions to alternative critiques of political economy show a different way of advancing the project of a critical social theory that was once the metabolism of traditional critiques of political economy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These readers include Jürgen Habermas and critical theorists who follow him, including Seyla

<sup>2</sup> Habermas' readings of Adorno, in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* are an indication of this interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> George Lukács (and his *History and Class Consciousness*, and *Defense of History of Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*) is but one example of those 'burned' by the traditional critique of political economy. Alternative critiques, that my ongoing research will examine, include but do not exhaust: Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in*

Three imperatives follow the two aims: to expand – or to use a favored expression of Kant’s: *extend* – an understanding of Adorno’s negative dialectics, to expand the concept of a critique of political economy, and to interpret how Adorno’s negative dialectics can be read *as* – and not only *as if* it were – a critique of political economy.<sup>4</sup> That two always becomes three, a reader will argue initiates the dialectical parlor trick, the (Hegelian) machine that recognizes no outside simply because it keeps surging forward and appropriating this outside, thus internalizing it. Many questions present themselves: what is the object of this critique, how does an expansion of this critique expand the object of ‘political economy’, how does Adorno’s negative dialectics operate, and in what forms does his negative dialectics provide a critique of political economy? The aim is to shine a light back towards Adorno’s work in response to the critical theory of communicative action that has occluded Adorno’s insights.

In order to narrow the focus of these questions a number of what I will call ‘axioms’ – or guiding conceptualizations, motifs of thought – of Adorno’s thought must be kept in mind (along with the ‘axiom’ to avoid hypostatization of any concept or category). An axiom should not be read as a definition, a formal law, or simple (self-sufficient and unchanging) principle. Stemming from the Greek *axioma*, that which is worthy of thought while also being self-evident, axiom would seem to be the wrong choice for approaching a reading and understanding of Adorno. My aim is to re-appropriate this term in order to show that the axiom is, when looking at Adorno’s thought, precisely not to be understood along the lines of an ‘unmoved mover.’ It should neither be understood

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*America*, and J.F. Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*. A structural similarity to this situation can be found in Adorno’s own writings, specifically “Bach Defended Against His Devotees,” in *Prisms*.

<sup>4</sup> Kant uses the concept of extend geographically, mathematically, and logically in his essay “What is Orientation in Thinking?” This is found in *Kant: Political Writings*.

as that which is worthy of thought – since Adorno aims to raise to the dignity of thought that which thought had declared unworthy, rubbish, unimportant particulars, or philosophical dregs – nor that which is self-evident. Rather these axioms are moving movers, responding to the demand of the object, while also changing in their relations with one another. Placed within Adorno’s thought, an axiom would thus be a principle that changes in response to the object, and becomes dynamic (as opposed to a static understanding) in relation with other axioms and objects. These axioms form an interpretive constellation allowing us entry into Adorno’s negative dialectics.

An axiom for Adorno would be one of the particular moments of a constellation of thought that can neither be reduced to a simple form, nor harmoniously reconciled in a non-antagonistic way. Rather than building a deductive or inductive argument, the axioms here construct a constellation with which to approach Adorno’s thought. The points themselves will change in response to the other axioms, the object studied, and in response to the constellation’s own antagonistic unity.

One of these axioms is the prevalence of non-identity, of contradiction, antagonism, and tension. This forms, what Adorno calls, ‘the hinge of negative dialectics’:

To refer to nonconceptualities ... is characteristic of the concept, and so is the contrary: that as the abstract unit of the noumena subsumed thereunder it will depart from the noumenal. To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn to toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 12 (‘Disenchantment of the Concept’).

Another axiom is that philosophy must utilize concepts; to think is to conceptualize and any philosophy worthy of the name requires concepts. Avoidance of this demand and need results in a regression behind German Idealism.<sup>6</sup> The third element to connect the concept with non-identity is the object.

This is the third axiom: Priority must be given to the object. The priority given to the object is from both the subject as well as from the concept. The ambiguity of the term ‘priority’ unravels the asymmetrical dialectical relation between subject and object, concept and object: prior here understood both in terms of priority and in terms of (temporal and spatial) succession. A conceptual self-disciplining of the subject provides the conditions for the very priority of the object, both for the object and the subject. That the concept is a prison for the subject does not mean that the concept was itself not formed in response to the object (which was itself prior). This priority means that the subject must impose upon itself the need to respond to the object instead of imposing anything upon the object (including the formalistic imposition to not impose anything).<sup>7</sup> The responsiveness demanded by the subject is itself a departure from historically prior impositions upon the object by both subject and the concept. As a departure, however, it is itself a response to prior historical and philosophical schools, *and* an imposition (demand) made upon the subject from the very historical situations and philosophical texts that preceded it. The priority of the object, then, must rely upon concepts and the subject. To claim, however, equiprimordiality of the two, however, would be

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<sup>6</sup> For Adorno, (German) Idealism itself involves a number of philosophers that are not normally associated with it. The philosophers include: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Kierkegaard, and (at times) Husserl. See later footnote in this introduction for further elaboration on this point.

<sup>7</sup> This very vacillation is Adorno’s indebtedness to both Kant, and Hegel (and Hegel’s critique of Kant).

irresponsible in the face of the very history one claims to be responding to, as well as the priority one ascribes to the object. One must go through the subject, with the aid of the concepts to transcend the concept and arrive at the priority of the object. The threat of beginning with the subject to achieve priority of the object, and utilizing concepts is a fetish of the concept, and a repeated domination of the object (be it nature, the work of art, or the subject itself).

A fourth axiom is insistence on the (Freudian) dregs, particularities, evanescent occurrences, and ephemerality. This is something Adorno had emphasized – among other places – in his inaugural address, *Minima Moralia*, *Prisms*, and *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno's work is a micrological analysis, the analysis of those aspects cast aside in the history of philosophy, which nevertheless persist and continue to haunt philosophy and human history.

A fifth axiom is avoidance of hypostatization. Adorno philosophizes against the threat of hypostatizing hypostatization. Adorno avoids, in other words, what he sees operative in Huxley: Huxley “makes a fetish of the fetishism of commodity.”<sup>8</sup> Adorno's concept of the concept – an attempt to work out the unconscious of the concept while critiquing concept fetishism – is instrumental here.<sup>9</sup> Adorno's criticism of Huxley is that Huxley mimics the exact same false opposition (objective meaning and subjective happiness) found in society that he decries; so instead of questioning the basis of such a false opposition (which would unravel the truth of the falseness) Huxley codifies appearance as appearance without inquiring into the essence of that appearance. Rather than seeing social factors at work in the construction of a commodity, then, Huxley sees only the

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<sup>8</sup> Adorno *Prisms*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 6 in Bernstein's *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* is particularly important with regard to the ‘complex concept’, or the concept of the concept that critiques the identity principle.

commodity and decries it as such. The problem here, then, is that one must not hypostatize the very axioms one is using to examine objects. Such a hypostatization (to only use certain ‘tools of thought’) would itself annul one of the axioms (priority to the object) if not more (hypostatizing axioms when one of the axioms declare the need to not hypostatize).

That these axioms (building blocks for a constellation) reveal contradictions and antagonisms when read together should not make one question the truth of their relationship, or the need to read them together. Contradictions for these axioms respond to the antagonisms of society. While axioms, in mathematics, are the unquestioned building blocks of subsequent truths, they must be questioned in the assumed self-certainty. The Hegelian twist to use axioms is that they are co-constitutive in their irreducibility; in other words, the tautological and formulaic status of the axiom is questioned, as is the claim that definitions could solve problems of philosophy.

Since the object prioritized (axiom 3) is now fragmented, the concept (in keeping with axiom 2) also must assume a form to match this fragmentary nature. Adorno’s point of departure in his *Lectures on ‘Negative Dialectics’* is to speak about the concept of contradiction. He speaks of this in a dual manner: the *concept* of contradiction, as well as the concept of *contradiction*. The concept of contradiction is itself not unified, and is split. This split applies to both the object and the concept itself. Contradiction is thus inherent within a concept – the process of thought; it is also inherent in the object. An example he gives of this is antagonistic society. Society, as an object of (sociological) thought is a concept by virtue of the contradictions that constitute it.<sup>10</sup> The fragmentary nature of object and concept require a fragmentary form. Writing assumes the form of a

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on ‘Negative Dialectics,’* 6-11 (Lecture 1).

fragment (chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), essays (*Notes to Literature*), aphorisms (*Minima Moralia*); all of these are connected in their apparent anti-systematic, or ruin-like, approach. Adorno writes: “Only a philosophy in fragment form would give their proper place to the monads, those illusory idealistic drafts. They would be conceptions, in the particular, of the totality that is inconceivable as such.”<sup>11</sup> The use of axioms is not to mimic an Early Modern *more geometrico*; rather, axioms are utilized in order to provide the parameters for entering Adorno’s philosophy, or what Sam Weber calls, the untranslatability of Adorno.<sup>12</sup> As ‘moments’ of thought, these axioms capture the irreconcilable relation between particularity and universal: that the particular is a particular in virtue of the universal, and also that the particular cannot itself be completely encapsulated within the universal (which would reduce it simply to the status of an example of a general law). As moments, these axioms capture the ‘neither-nor’ of Adorno’s thought. Rather than asserting both in manner that would synthesize the two (the individual axiom as moment, and constellation as whole), Adorno endures, and wishes to stress the resistances of both to the unity they nonetheless establish. An axiom, as moment, then, means recognizing the static and dynamic moments of thought.

There are a number of concepts, forming a constellation, that foreground Adorno’s critique of political economy: identity thinking, exchange society, use and exchange value, and negativity. Adorno’s focus upon the principle of identity forces him to locate within society a principle that situates the parts and constitutes the whole: the exchange principle. Society is total in virtue of the antagonistic relations established within it, and between people. People are dehumanized and rendered as objects by the very society that

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<sup>11</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 28 (‘The Antinomical Character of Systems’).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Translator’s introduction in *Prisms*.

they contribute to *as subjects*. To speak of willful reification provides too much autonomy, or sovereignty, for the subject whose constitutive nature is questioned by *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>13</sup>

The exchange principle totalizes society in virtue of society's internal, or immanent, antagonisms. The principle of domination extends both towards outer nature and one's inner nature. This principle of domination repeats itself at the level of social organization, and while the idealist dream of examining the totality of society must be given up, according to Adorno, the lack of a category to deal completely with totality forces upon philosophy the need to continue thinking about totality.<sup>14</sup> Philosophy has become the

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, see preface.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno's account of idealism changes depending upon the text. There are many idealisms part of the general historico-philosophical movement of idealism. Adorno reads this philosophical history, as he does history: as a sheet of music, where shifts in playing affect the overall movement and mood of the text (see *Quasi Una Fantasia*, and "The Dialectical Composer"). Anti-idealists are themselves, in true dialectical fashion, part of the development of idealism (which cannot be simply a harmonious unity). In his work on Kierkegaard – *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic* – Adorno reads Kierkegaard as completing the idealist project and thus forcing philosophy into a new historical situation. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno sees reactions to the idealism – an idealism that goes from Kant, through Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche, and culminates in Kierkegaard – as either regressing behind idealism (Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger) or dodging the idealist philosophical discoveries (neo-Kantianism, positivism). The anti-idealist Marx is seen as advocating an idealist view of history (see *History and Freedom*, *Negative Dialectics*, and "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?"). There are times when Husserl is himself found to be part of the idealism trajectory ("Husserl and the Problem of Idealism"), while at other times those within the Enlightenment tradition – Marx and Nietzsche – signal the antagonisms constituting and undermining society (Marx) or imply the dialectic of enlightenment (Nietzsche) that Horkheimer and Adorno would examine (see *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Much of what claims to go beyond idealism, according to Adorno's oeuvre, regresses behind it, or, at best, stays level with it. Idealism extends beyond itself, as Wagner's tendencies stretch towards a form of atonality that his work never empirically had ("Wagner's Relevance Today"). This reading is in agreement with Adorno's dialectical reading of the relation between history and prehistory, and the dialectical relation between the old and the new (see, for the former relation *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, while, for the latter, see *Prisms*, and *Aesthetic Theory*). The negation of the negation does not simply result in an affirmation, but the preservation of a negation that will not be silenced and (by returning as repressed) becomes the engine of further development.



beneficiary of a bad society, which assembles its unity from the forced atomization of its members: “Anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated.”<sup>15</sup>

Negativity is the force holding together Adorno’s philosophical writings. When one speaks of Adorno’s philosophical writings it is important to remember their interdisciplinary, or accompanying non-philosophical aspect: sociological, aesthetic, musicological, and historical aspects and interests intersperse his works. Adorno’s philosophy is the force-field of philosophy and non-philosophy. Negativity, the labor of the negative, is what holds it together. Philosophy can only come to an understanding of its object and itself by approaching the non-identical within and without itself. This forces philosophy to abandon the dream of a *philosophia perennis*, opting for an ever-responsive attitude.<sup>16</sup> Adorno inverts Hegelian identity of non-identity and identity, making it: the non-identity of identity and non-identity. A fundamental, or constitutive, gap and lack is at work within philosophy. This gap, the non-identical, arises from the historico-philosophical ruins of the idealist system.

The first chapter introduces the terrain of political economy and its traditional critique. This introduction is by no means comprehensive. Such a comprehensive account, a massive geography of economic reason, of Marx’s traditional critique of political economy can be found elsewhere. The first chapter instead chooses to focus on *moments of critique*, the moments where Marx demonstrates the movement of thought in examining what he calls the ‘metabolism’ of capital. In particular, I chose to focus on moments wherein Marx provides within his traditional critique of political economy an

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<sup>15</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> This is the ‘last philosophy’ that Rolf Tiedemann speaks of in his introduction, “ ‘Not the First Philosophy, but a Last One’: Notes on Adorno’s Thought,” to the edited volume, *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, xi-xxvii.

alternative critique. By focusing on key concepts – labor power, surplus value, fetish – the chapter orients the reader to Marx’s traditional critique, a critique that had read an immanent collapse of the capitalist system at the very inception of the process. Not to be confused with a vitalist, or organic account, of the system, Marx’s structural analysis focuses on the fundamental antagonisms and tensions between the relations of production and the mode of production. This mode of production stamps its products and its producers with its existence such that independent of consciousness – class and individual – one has a development according to the structure’s own conditions. The chapter examines the chapter of Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, in particular, to show how the traditional critique operated *and* how an alternative presents itself. This alternative is in contrast to the idealist thesis of a progressive reading of history. I argue that Marx himself provides an indication of an *alternative* critique within the critique of political economy of *Capital*. This alternative critique is a strictly non-economic critique that examines the theological and metaphysical niceties of the commodity. Adorno contests Marx’s idealist thesis of the progression of history that operates in his critique. History has changed subject, object, and critique. Marx does, however, point to how alternative critiques of political economy can operate. The chapter on commodity fetishism is instructive in this.

The second chapter begins the analysis of Adorno’s alternative critique of political economy by focusing on his reading of the historical transformation that occurred in the transformation of the critique of political economy and its object. Stemming from Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, the chapter examines how the mode of economic thinking that Adorno locates affects all thought. The insight of the critique of commodity

fetishism was such that appearance was taken not simply as pure immediacy but as mediated essence – the essence must appear and appearance is not to be sloughed off as unimportant. While such a view is found in Hegel, Adorno will emphasize that Hegel sides, frequently and against his own intention, with the universal against the particular, with the real as opposed to the possible, and with essence over appearance. Adorno thus emphasizes particular moments in Hegel that get sloughed off by the general trend of Hegel; this particular revolt can itself, however, only be situated within the dialectical relation between particular and universal. Adorno does not advocate a position that cancels the universal in favor of the particular – such language is itself indicative of the universal; rather, Adorno insists on non-identical, negative moments of the dialectical process, whereby the inessential becomes essential by virtue of the fact that mere appearance says more than it is.

The appearance of the commodity hides the essential features of the capitalist mode of production. Immediacy, as Hegel showed, hides mediacy. Adorno's speculative thought aims to show the presence of an economy of thought, an economic mode of thinking, within thought itself. Just as the production of the commodity – the commodity form in capitalism – stamps the commodity, thought too is affected. This mode of economic thinking has been precisely the block towards interpreting the problem of political economy. Furthermore, this logic, presented in the form of alternatives (austerity or spending, for example), pre-figures the very terms of the debates. Eschewing an either-or logic, Adorno roots out the economism of thought, economic thinking. The question facing Adorno's critique of political economy, then, is how thought can undermine

economic thinking (a form of instrumental reason), in order to critique political economy.

What are the means available for thought, and for philosophical practice?

The third chapter examines Adorno's account of concept-fetishism and the unconscious of the concept. Just as there is a fetish of the commodity, so too, for Adorno, there is a fetish of the concept. This fetish erases the historical sedimentation of the activity of conceptualization – response to the object – and takes the responsive work of the concept as a creative force. The relation between concept and object is erased, and instead the creative force of the concept takes center stage. This fetish of the concept is at work in the very mode of conceptualization: to think is to think as if concepts can fully encompass and exhaust their objects, while the particularity of objects is removed in order to fit the universal. The mediation at work in conceptualization is obfuscated by the immediacy of knowledge achieved. The concept is under its own spell, and thus mistakes its activity as an ability to grasp the absolute. Adorno's concern relates to the concept in German Idealism as well as the concept's effect in history. A result of the fetish is a forgetting of the non-identical and non-conceptual core of the concept. Operating in a similar manner to Freud, Adorno wishes to understand and expose the unconscious elements within the concept. An analogous situation to this is the presence of irrationality persisting within reason.<sup>17</sup> The forgetting of the unconscious of the concept is an active forgetting that creates the blind spot of the concept.<sup>18</sup> Adorno's analysis, like Freud's, aims to render consciousness what is unconscious.<sup>19</sup> The examination of the fetish of the

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<sup>17</sup> This was the account of history provided in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Adorno's reading of Kant's reason in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*.

<sup>18</sup> This active forgetting had been examined by Nietzsche, in the *Genealogy of Morality*, and in Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*.

<sup>19</sup> Like Freud's analysis, Adorno's is also interminable – a fact that makes reading negative dialectics, at times, seem like an object lesson in bad infinity.

concept, and making conscious what was unconscious in the concept brings out the moments and movements of Adorno's negative dialectics. Negative dialectics emphasizes non-identity, contradiction, and the priority of the object. The task of philosophy is an unriddling, an interpretation of the puzzle the object presents, and the attempt to understand the violence done to the object via the concept.<sup>20</sup> Philosophy cannot do without the concept so it must, by using the concept, make amends for the mis-use of the concept.

Any discussion about the dialectical concept (of the concept) brings Hegel's philosophy to the fore; Adorno calling his reevaluation of the dialectic, negative dialectics, makes this explicit. The fourth chapter shows how Adorno understands negative dialectics as an immanent critique and re-imagining of (Hegelian) dialectics. Adorno's negative dialectics reveals itself, in fragmentary and essayistic form, from the ruin of the German Idealism.<sup>21</sup> To simplify, negative dialectics emphasizes the antitheses over the possibility of synthesis and reconciliation. Put another way, reconciliation is not yet achieved, reflects upon continued antitheses and contradictions. Rather than harmonious synthesis of opposites – a false identity that operates at the level of subject and object, and universal and particular – incomplete reconciliation for Adorno becomes

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno's inaugural address, the "Actuality of Philosophy," introduces (following Benjamin) the unriddling task of philosophical interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> This is not a cult of the ruin that one can find in Speer's writings, stretching back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romantics (as can also be found in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings). The ruin in *Ruinenwerththeorie* was an inscription of the ruin at the point of departure of imagining a work of art, such as an architectural design. Similar to Heidegger's privileging the Greeks, the Romantic cultish devotion to Greeks privileged the ruin that survived. The ruin was taken not only as the surviving element, but a constitutive ontological principle that persisted throughout the ages. The ruin is the built in kernel that historical development brings out in its full glory. The ruin is not what is left, but age that dignifies the work. Such a reading of architecture is, from a historical point of view, completely anathema to Adorno's approach (the essay, "Valéry-Proust-Museum", from *Prisms* would be an interesting read in this regard), and fetishistic, ontologizing the historical development of the artwork (Adorno criticizes any ontologizing of history, specifically Heideggerian ontologizing, in the *Jargon of Authenticity*).

the persistence of negativity, antitheses and contradictions. This persistence, or dialectical restlessness, is not a conceptually enforced bad infinity, but rather the attempt for philosophy to respond to perpetual mediations and tensions that continue in ‘the world.’<sup>22</sup> The chapter examines the key terms and moves of Adorno’s negative dialectical reading of Hegel – where the negation of negation is not affirmation, but an affirmation at the expense of a continuing negative/negation – and how the negative (within the negation of negation) becomes repressed in Hegel’s discourse. This repressed negative is analyzed in a similar way to the repetition compulsion in Freud. The chapter addresses some of the secondary literature on the relation between Adorno and Hegel. Adorno’s reevaluation of dialectics insists on the particular (instead of particularity), the priority of the object, and a focus on the dregs (micrological studies, as found in the ‘models’ of *Negative Dialectics*).

By focusing on the particular, the priority of the object, and seeing how the object reveals aspects of the individual and society, Adorno’s aesthetic writings come to the fore. The fifth chapter addresses Adorno’s critique of political economy at the level of the particular work of art. The work of art is a particular scarred by totality. This scarring is revealed in the double character of the work of art – as autonomous and heteronomous. Art is, according to Adorno, both autonomous and heteronomous. This reading of the work of art is Kant’s antinomy of the individual. Adorno’s reading of the Kantian antinomy at work within the artwork is a mimetic reading. It is a mimetic reading that performs the priority of the object that negative dialectics requires. The mimetic moves of the artwork (of its relation to society, its violence to nature, its similarity with the

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<sup>22</sup> This ‘world’ is not the world of Heidegger (an ontologized history also found in Schelling), but rather the concept of globe that begins with Kant, persists with Fichte, Hegel(ians), and up to the Marx of the ‘Theses of Feuerbach’ (especially Thesis 11), and *Capital*, volume 3.

individual) reveal a critical point of departure for Adorno's philosophical writings. The heteronomous element in the work of art is society, as well as nature. While society scars the particular work of art, the work of art – through the development of the idea of beauty – repeats conceptual domination of nature: the domination of natural beauty. Adorno's aesthetics of the sublime pinpoint the scarred particularity without hypostatizing it. It similarly aims to present the domination of nature that takes place within the scarred particular work of art. Critics and followers of Adorno find aesthetics to be the culmination of his negative dialectical philosophy and, his critics continue, Adorno's aesthetics cannot get out of the many aporias his philosophy invites: the individual relating to the social, the particular and its relation to the universal, and the concept's fetish, to name a few. I show the extra-, or non-, aesthetic at work within the aesthetic and how exchange comes to play a part in the work of art. In response to this, it must be emphasized that the point is not to hypostatize the work of the work of art, but instead see that the success of the work of art is to realize its failure – this is to be read in contradistinction to the hitherto unacknowledged survival of regressive tendencies, such as fascism in democracy, in a society that continues to claim a (false) identity of individual and society.

Just as there is an exchange society for individuals, there is a commodity society for works of art: the culture industry. The particular must respond to these very socializing and totalizing forms. The sixth chapter examines two models, or forms, of existing communities ruled by the exchange principle: the culture industry (the society for the work of art), and exchange society (the society wherein individuals and the culture industry is found). The antinomial existence of the work of art is a result of historical

circumstances, developments within art history (the alternate temporality and account of history provided by works of art), and the development of society. The culture industry is an aspect of totality that no art – not even the few authentic avant-garde works that Adorno lists – can avoid. The lack of avoidance does not make the culture industry a totality. The culture industry forms the entry into an understanding of what Adorno calls in a number of places, most notably his lectures *Introduction to Sociology*, exchange society. The paradoxical situation one finds is that the only use value society privileges is exchange value, a value which it cannot afford to exchange for anything else, especially the use values of authentic works of art. Marx's surplus value is re-invested and becomes the mean for ever-increasing exchange. While the culture industry is read analogous to exchange society, the individual work of art (works by Beckett, Wagner, Kafka, Schoenberg among others) is seen alongside the particular that exchange society wishes to devalue and eradicate, but cannot fully. While the culture industry always threatens the authentic work of art, the subject is perpetually threatened by the absolute integration of exchange society.

The conclusion examines the *lessons* of Adorno's critique of political economy. These lessons contribute to 'education after Auschwitz,' the negative categorical imperative that Auschwitz not repeat itself. The only corrective to this, according to Adorno, is autonomy. Adorno's lessons contribute to 'education after Auschwitz'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Theory's, and philosophy's, zombie-like existence stems from the historical circumstances, as Nietzsche himself had observed in the 'sickness' of Socrates (see *Twilight of the Idols*). For Adorno, present circumstances – within which history is sedimented – initiate negative dialectics. The real is the point of departure. This real is *both* the rational and the irrational. Adorno writes: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3).



The micrological, site-based critique of political economy that Adorno provides is a critique of an exchange principle that has dominated all aspects of life, and led to scarring particulars. Though totalizing, it is not absolute or total. Its dynamism is its condition of possibility and impossibility. The exchange principle is itself related to the identity principle. The identity principle Adorno responds to is where the concept identifies with object, making the object completely its own, while reducing difference and particularity. The particular becomes, under the eye of the universal, particularity while unlikeness is shrugged off as unimportant, ephemeral, negligible. Adorno's micrological critique shows both how the exchange principle has become hegemonic in all areas and how the particular (the dregs of the universal) can become a site of contestation against the totality that has scarred it. The site-based critiques of each chapter are studies in examining variations of the concrete universal/particular.

Readers expecting a solution to the problem of capital, or Adorno's account of political economy in a strict economic sense, will be disappointed. I hope those who are looking for indications of an alternative critique of political economy, along with an examination of negative dialectics responding to the inexchangeable particular that has been scarred, will be satisfied.

## CHAPTER 1

### Marx's Critique of Political Economy and Its Fetish

#### Introduction

This dissertation has the dual aim of expanding the notion of what constitutes a critique of political economy while situating Adorno's negative dialectics at the core of his philosophy. Additionally, this expanded notion of negative dialectics will be read *as* constructing a critique of political economy.<sup>24</sup> These aims are co-constitutive. An alternative critique of political economy is at work in Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy. Adorno's philosophical practice embodies a social theory constituted by heterogeneous elements working in tension with one another to shed an illuminating ('truthful') light upon their subject matter, whether that subject matter be a monograph on a thinker, an exploration of a concept, a study of the historical nature of artworks, or a work of sociology. In the parlance of today's academia, Adorno's writings exemplify interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary research. One aspect of this interdisciplinary corpus is providing a critique of political economy, albeit a changed one that nonetheless requires us to keep to calling it a 'critique of political economy'.

In order to appreciate Adorno's expanded understanding of 'critique of political economy,' it is necessary to begin with Marx's understanding of a critique of political economy. Before exploring what the alternative is, we must understand the initial practice

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<sup>24</sup> The term 'construction' is used in a specific sense. I am using it in the sense Benjamin and Adorno have used it. In his "Theses on the Concept of History," Benjamin uses 'construction', specifically in Theses 14 and 17, to describe the process of framing and forming history, as well as the task of the historical materialist in studying history. Adorno uses 'construction' in a similar manner in his monograph on Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, writing on the interpretive task facing any reading of Kierkegaard. Construction is a principle of interpretation that is able to synthesize different time periods without seeing history as an empty homogeneous continuum.

of a critique of political economy, Marx's practice. The expanded notion of a critique of political economy will, while complementing the critique of political economy as Marx understood it, also present an *alternative* way of constructing and operating a critique of political economy. In line with this aim, then, it is necessary to show what a traditional critique of political economy has been understood as.

This chapter will examine the practice of Marx's (traditional) critique of political economy, as found in *Capital*. It will examine Marx's (traditional) critique of political economy by examining the concept of critique, the concept of political economy, and the use of history for that critique of political economy. After the initial sections on critique and history, the chapter will move forward to examining the movements of a critique of political economy by focusing on the practices such a critique is engaged in. To accomplish this, key words, or grounding words, will be examined: the commodity, labor-power, and surplus (value).

Additionally, however, what forms an expanded notion of a critique of political economy will itself be part of the structure of Marx's traditional critique of political economy. In other words, an alternative critique of political economy is already operating within the structure of *Capital*, much like the *leitmotif* in a musical piece. In contradistinction to strict economic analyses, which is also at work in much of *Capital*, the alternative critique mixes non-economic and economic variables. Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism is exemplary of this and will serve as a point of departure to examine Adorno's own alternative critique of political economy.

Though the term 'political economy' had existed prior to Marx's writing – in writers such as Antoine de Montchrétien, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill –

the reason for singling out Marx is to focus on the operation Marx conducted, critique: a critique of political economy endeavored to analyze the metabolism of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>25</sup> As such, his text continued to operate as the point of departure for any and all attempts at a critique of political economy.

Marx's particular attempt is the synthesis of three disparate theoretical fields: German Idealism, in particular Kantian (critical) and Hegelian philosophy, British economic theory, and French political theory. Marx takes critique from Kant's critical system. 'Critique' is a philosophical activity that is not simply criticism, but an elucidation of the conditions of the object of inquiry, the limits of that object of inquiry, and how the object of inquiry responds to its limits and weaknesses. Critique thus shines a light upon the implicit assumptions and logic of the object studied, be it reason (pure or practical), judgment, or political economy. In examining the conditions of an activity or practice, critique transforms the implicit into the explicit, including its own conditions for activity. Thus a critique of political economy must address not only the activity and ground of political economy (the movements and limits of the capitalist mode of production), but also its own activity and dependence upon the object of inquiry.

Key elements of *Capital* must be identified, locating the ways in which these elements, the *dramatis personae*, become active, thus inhabiting the characters and giving life to the processes they describe, and then to determine how productive they become in the pursuit of *critique*.<sup>26</sup> What follows will be an examination of the concept of critique

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<sup>25</sup> Montchrétien's *Traicté de l'oeconomie politique*, Smith's *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Ricardo's *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, and Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*.

<sup>26</sup> To speak of *dramatis personae* of a critique of political economy is to assume *dramatis personae* of political economy. In this regard, Marx's critique of political economy can be seen as operating as Hamlet's staging of the play within/during the play *Hamlet*. This chapter will

(of political economy), the historical nature of this critique, and a study of key words in action, forming the practice of critiquing political economy. It is through an examination of the chapter on commodity fetishism that Marx's *own* alternative critique comes to the fore; what will be Adorno's critique of political economy takes Marx's chapter of commodity fetishism as a model for its own activity.

### Critique and/of Political Economy

Marx's critique of political economy is an analysis of what Marx calls the 'metabolism' of the capitalist mode of production. Following Kant, Marx's critical analysis aimed at discovering the limits *and* bounds of the capitalist economy. How does the metabolism of the machine lead, inevitably, to its demise? The critique is an immanent critique and scientific analysis. Marx follows the logic of capital (the production and distribution of commodities, use value, surplus value) to determine the limits of its (limitless) expansion. What is the point at which limitless expansion begins to weaken and cause crises in the system? Will these crises constitute or undermine the system?<sup>27</sup> Marx's *Capital* explores these questions while forsaking the apocalyptic tone or language of inevitability. *Capital* sets out to explore the logic of the capitalist mode of production, by examining its constitutive aspects, and following those to their logical conclusion. Marx was, in this regard, one of the first 'geographers,' or topographers, of the capitalism.<sup>28</sup>

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attempt to present a reading of Marx's staging the play within the play, a 'micrology' like in *Hamlet*, wherein the minor play, the play within the play, undermines, questions, and critiques the play at large.

<sup>27</sup> Here, Joseph Schumpeter's concept of 'creative destruction' comes to mind from his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

<sup>28</sup> I understand 'geographer' in a specific Kantian sense as found in both the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the essay "What is Orientation in Thinking." In both cases, Kant is describing his activity of critiquing pure reason via *analogy* with the sensible world. His 'geography' is thus not physical geography [*Erdkunde or Erdbeschreibung*] but the activity of assessing limits and boundaries of faculties. A geography is thus understood as a topography, an attempt to establish

If one were to take a quick survey of the contemporary literature on Marx's philosophy, one might remark, paraphrasing the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*: Marx's philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to actualize it was missed.<sup>29</sup> The protests and uprisings following the 2008 financial crisis have led to renewed interest in Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production. One is now not only free to declare an allegiance to Marx's work, but there is also a profusion of Marxist analyses. Various theorists present an innocuous Marx – different parts of his theory are picked out as having relevance for today while other parts discarded, said to be superfluous and not the core of his findings, or the mistakes of a philosopher attempting to be an economist.<sup>30</sup> To these attempts of picking and choosing aspects of Marx's critique of political economy, we should respond as Adorno did when introducing his talk commemorating the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary Hegel's death:

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an analogy between spatial thinking and the non-sensuous (and the non-spatial) nature of the object: thought. For Marx, the object of critique, political economy, is spatial and its activities are topographic. We also find an interesting development in contemporary geography and theory referring to both Marx and Kant; see especially: Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and *Critique of Everyday Life*, the geographer David Harvey's *Limits of Capital*, Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*, and the volume *Reading Kant's Geography* (edited by Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta).

<sup>29</sup> An account of the critiques that have followed the crisis attest to the formidable power of Marx's project of critiquing political economy. Some publications since the 2008 financial crisis include: Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right*; David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital', Volume 1 and 2*; Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's 'Capital'*; Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (A collection of essays published and unpublished written between 1956 and 2009); Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life*; Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx*. There has also been a veritable history of (alternative) critiques of political economy, though not always marshaled under that heading. A short list includes: Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America*, Georges Bataille's *Accursed Share*, Baudrillard's work from 1968-1973, Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, Fred Jameson's account of economic activity in Chapter 8 in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and Chapter 5 in Slavoj Zizek's *The Parallax View*.

<sup>30</sup> These texts can be both for and against Marx. Some publications include: Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*; Jonathan Wolf, *Why Read Marx Today*; Laurence Eubank, *Why Marx Was Wrong*.

This arrogance echoes in the loathsome question of what in Kant, and now in Hegel as well, has any meaning for the present – and even the so called Hegel renaissance began half a century ago with a book by Benedetto Croce that undertook to distinguish between what was living and what was dead in Hegel. The converse question is not even raised: what the present means in the face of Hegel.<sup>31</sup>

So too, here, we should quickly emphasize that an attempt to locate key elements in the critique of political economy are not meant to draw a dividing line between those dead ideas in Marx, and those that are alive – a pilfering of his corpus by scavenging theory. The aim is to discover the key elements of Marx’s critique of political economy, to locate the philosophical ‘force-field’ of Marx’s critique of political economy.<sup>32</sup>

Contradiction forms *and* undermines the unity of the system; contradiction is the *raison d’être* and engine of capital. As Marx (and Engels) claim in the *Manifesto for the Communist Party*, one of the few texts in Marx’s oeuvre that ends in an imminent and utopian fervor: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without continually revolutionizing the instruments of production, hence the relations of production, and therefore social relations as a whole.”<sup>33</sup> Theory too is called on to revolutionize itself constantly in order

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<sup>31</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> I take this notion of force-field from Adorno, who in his lectures on *Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’* employs such a notion when reading a text from the history of philosophy, and the works of any philosopher: “What I should like to do is to make this book speak to us. I should like to show you what interest the matters that are discussed in it can still hold for us today. And I should like to rehearse the experiences that underlie this work as objective realities, as experiences forming an essential part of the history of philosophy. I attempted something of the sort in my memorial lecture on Hegel that some of you have heard. So what I would like to do is to retranslate this philosophy from a codified, ossified system back into the kind of picture that results from a sustained X-ray examination. That is to say, I should like to urge you to conceive of this philosophy as a force field, as something in which the abstract concepts that come into conflict with one another and constantly modify one another really stand in for actual living forces” (Adorno, *Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’*, Lecture 1, page 4).

<sup>33</sup> Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 4.

to keep up with the object of its enquiry, a revolutionary theory to match its revolutionary object.

Marx's (anti-)system does not present itself in the same way as philosophy once had. As Balibar writes: "Having broken with a certain form of philosophy, Marx was not led by his theoretical activity toward a unified system, but to an at least potential *plurality* of doctrines which has left his readers and successors in something of a quandary."<sup>34</sup> This quandary is about how to write about Marx, but also how to write philosophically after Marx. The plurality of doctrines recognizes the division of theoretical labor, wherein philosophy may no longer be the master synthesizing all the others in the pursuit of the emancipation of spirit, or the realization of freedom. This is not to say that a grand narrative is entirely absent from Marxism, if possibly absent from Marx.<sup>35</sup> The very analysis that his critique of political economy undertakes, however, changes the form of that narrative.

There are three revolutionary and constitutive elements to Marx's critique of political economy: (1) the historical axis, particularly the French Revolution, (2) the philosophical axes, particularly Kant's Copernican Revolution and Hegel's dialectical revolution, and (3) the economic axis, particularly the capitalist revolution. It is in the interaction between these three elements that Marx's critique takes place. They are revolutionary moments since each moment on its own formed a transformation in the way that their disciplines were practiced. Marx utilizes all the revolutionary developments in science,

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<sup>34</sup> Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, 12-13. Marxism (and Critical Theory) is seen as encapsulating the view of society that is fundamentally antagonistic; the other view of society, the sociology of Talcott Parsons, views the social body as a unified whole. Lyotard's 'postmodern condition' reports on a social body (of knowledge) now as *unified hole*, the collapse of grand narratives, though not narrative itself.



philosophy, history, and politics in order to understand the most radical form of economic production the world has seen.<sup>36</sup> Marx is a thinker of revolutions, and as such uses revolutionary means to approach the object.

In addition to the material, socio-economic conditions resulting in the development of the capitalist mode of production, Marx is responding to the newly developing science of economics, or as he calls it – political economy.<sup>37</sup> In the preface to the first volume of *Capital*, Marx writes: “What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of productions and forms of intercourse that correspond to it.”<sup>38</sup> Marx’s critique of political economy takes as its object the object of political economists. Not only does Marx reflect on the limitations of the systems of classical political economists, but also he draws the limits and boundaries of the capitalist system. This system is itself not universally present when Marx is writing, but is rapidly expanding.<sup>39</sup> The very concept of capital – the valorization of itself, capital [*Kapitalverwertung*] – necessitates its expansion: “the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly

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<sup>36</sup> As he says in the “Manifesto”: “So we see how the modern bourgeois is itself the product of a long process of development, a series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange... The bourgeois has played a highly revolutionary role in history.” (Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 3).

<sup>37</sup> Though the term political economy finds its first usage in the work of Antoine de Montchrestian, Marx uses political economy to refer to the classical economists, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Jean-Baptiste Say, and Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi. In his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes: “The analysis of commodities according to their twofold aspect of use-value and exchange value, by which the former is reduced to work or deliberative productive activity; and the latter, to labor time or homogeneous social labor, is the result of a century and a half of critical study by the classical school of political economy which dates from William Petty in England and Boisguillebert in France and closes with Ricordo in the former country and Sismondi in the latter” (*Contribution*, 56).

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future” (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 91).

renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless.”<sup>40</sup> How, then, can one speak of limits when it comes to the limitless, or ever-expanding? Unlike the mercantilist system, a closed system that had considered the wealth of the world to be stable and limited (much like any natural resource), the capitalist system can only exist by not being self-identical, by constant change, preferably expansion. The limitless expansion of capital, that value must valorize itself, relies upon the mystery of surplus value:

The increment or excess over the original value I call ‘surplus value’ [*Mehrwert*].

The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value, or is valorized [*verwertet sich*]. And this movement converts it into capital.<sup>41</sup>

Marx introduces the concept of surplus value when discussing the two different formulas he discovers in the circulation of commodities. The first formula (C-M-C) shows the conversion of a commodity (e.g. linen), in the act of exchange, into money, which is then re-converted, via a second act of exchange, into another commodity (e.g. a table). It is via the second formula (M-C-M), which seems to be an inversion of the first (and changing the position from buyer to seller), that Marx attempts to formulate the differences between the two and how capital (a profit, surplus value) is produced and continues to produce itself. While in the first formula the analysis shows how one begins and ends with a commodity, the second formula focuses on the money form (which is itself a value of commodities, and not, as Marx continually emphasizes, an imaginary form imposed on the commodity, one that gains its life from circulation). The second formula, furthermore,

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<sup>40</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 253.

<sup>41</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 251-252.

shows how it is possible for a commodity that was bought for £100 could be sold for £110. Marx calls this additional £10 surplus-value. Where did the additional £10 come from?<sup>42</sup>

Surplus-value is the difference between the two values of a commodity in the general formula of capital. Marx's critique of political economy aims to understand this logic of valorization, how the metabolic rate of capital necessitates expansion, and how surplus-value, as the excess value over the original value, further expands previous surplus value. The answer to the mystery of surplus-value is located, for Marx, both in and outside the circulation process.<sup>43</sup> The answer to the mystery of surplus-value is located in the mystery of the commodity. It is via an analysis of the commodity form, its fetishism, and its tandem, labor power, that Marx is able to explain surplus-value and the continuing valorization of value. The transformation in labor has caused labor itself to become not simply the skill set of individuals, but universal abstract labor. This transformation is, along with the change in the form of the commodity, a historical and revolutionary one.

### The Historical

Alongside the ahistorical, or transhistorical demand of a science, however, Marx locates his scientific findings on a historical-materialist base.<sup>44</sup> Critique – what has become immanent analysis of the logic of capital – is taken to be the scientific approach requisite to understanding the object. Critique is composed of an analysis of capital into its constitutive parts, and a synthesis of those parts to show the 'labor-power' of capital. To

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<sup>42</sup> "Circulation sweats money from every pore" (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 208).

<sup>43</sup> Marx writes: "Capital cannot therefore arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation. It must have its origin both in circulation and not in circulation" (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 268).

<sup>44</sup> As David Harvey remarks, "This gives rise to an interesting interpretive question, one that crops up a number of times in *Capital*: is Marx making a historical argument or a logical argument?" (Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital'*, 31).

show the movements of capital requires an examination of its historical conditions. Marx sees the historical as being part of a science. This understanding of history is history as science, a Hegelian understanding of world history.<sup>45</sup> Every rule and formula that Marx arrives at in his analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the relations of production is based upon his historical and materialistic research.<sup>46</sup> In fact, it is via his historical grounding that he is able to mount a scientific attack on the ahistorical ‘science’ of bourgeois political economy:

The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades...[the eighteenth-century individual] appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history’s point of departure. As the Natural Individual appropriate to their notion of human nature, not arising historically, but posited by nature.<sup>47</sup>

For Marx, the classical political economists that he responds to are both right and wrong: they were right in their discovery and explication (which was oftentimes also an apology) of the fundamental workings and movements of an economic system that had arisen during the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> Their analyses – Smith’s focus on ‘labor’ as creating wealth and Ricardo’s analyses on ‘ground rent’ as a generative principle of

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<sup>45</sup> Adorno critiques the Hegelian understanding of universal history, and Marx’s idealist understanding of history (as universal science) in his lectures *History and Freedom*, 171. Another critic of universal history, of history as science is, of course, Nietzsche (see, in particular, “Use and Abuse of History for Life”).

<sup>46</sup> In a similar manner to how Freud would later be (cf. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*), Marx is at pains, as early as his *1844 Paris Manuscripts*, its Preface in particular, to assert the empirical foundation of his science, and for history itself to be viewed as science.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> Marx explicitly highlights the tension of both responding to a historically specific mode of production as well as trying to naturalize that historical mode in the work of Adam Smith in *Grundrisse*, 104.

wealth – highlighted the fundamental principles *at work* and of importance in the production of profit in capitalist nations.

They were wrong in that they took their object of study to be not a historical outcome, but the culmination of what was already present in pre-capitalist societies: classical political economists took their object of study, the bourgeois mode of production, and used the present mode of production to analyze economic systems of the past. Past economic systems (barter, commodity exchange, money economy, and mercantilist economies) containing ‘capitalist’ principles at heart. The capitalist mode of production and bourgeois individual is seen as the culmination of a universal process.<sup>49</sup> Such a view not only makes classical economy an anachronistic science when looking at the past (in the manner of a fanaticist as Kant would say, since they overstepped their bounds), but also naturalizes and forgets the very history of historical development.<sup>50</sup>

Marx’s analyses of commodities, abstract labor, and the transformation of use value into exchange value highlight a relation that Immanuel Kant’s theoretical analyses had also focused on: temporality, and history. Kant’s problem was to answer how eternal, universal truth can appear in a particular time (though the truth may have been active before, as in the case of gravity; gravity is not produced in its discovery). Marx’s historical analysis of commodities shows how a historical product can assume dimensions of eternal truth. Marx’s attempt to de-naturalize commodities along with the

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<sup>49</sup> It is relevant, in this context, to bring up Adorno’s insight that Smith’s principle of the ‘invisible hand’ has a structurally analogous role to Hegel’s *Geist*, as does Comte’s teleological development of the positivist science (independent of Comte’s allergy towards any and all ‘metaphysical’ (read Hegelian) systems) (Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*)

<sup>50</sup> It is not the place here to discuss the dialectical relation between nature and history in Marx’s work. Such a project would need to look at Adorno’s essay, “Natural History and Historical Nature,” and Alfred Schmidt’s *Marx’s Philosophy of Nature*. The notion of fanaticism in Kant appears in *Critique of Practical Reason*, 172 [136].

bourgeois market is an attempt to show the myth at work in the bourgeois mode of (intellectual) production.<sup>51</sup> Truth, like any commodity, is thus a product of time.<sup>52</sup>

Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism brings the relation of myth and history, nature and history to the fore. His critique of political economy shows both how surplus-value arises and how its production is itself immanent to the laws of the capitalist mode of production and circulation of commodities. That which is seen as natural by bourgeois economists is rendered historical, and the historical itself is seen as being part of the logic of capital. History and science are brought together.

Reading the bourgeois classical economists as apologists of a system that they treat naturally, Marx exposes the socio-historic manifestation of the capitalist mode of production. Marx's analysis of both bourgeois economists and the capitalist world they reflect on operates on multiple levels of abstraction (in a Hegelian sense), sometimes an analysis of a direct exchange, while other times surveying the most elemental circulation of products independent of history. Marx often discusses his project as the beginning of a science, and he compares himself to a chemist of political economy, one who can analyze

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<sup>51</sup> Can we not find an unlikely ally to Marx's critique here the Nietzsche of "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense": "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins" (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 146). The bourgeois truth is a fiction that has forgotten itself as fiction, naturalized itself, and sold it to the world, thus creating the world in its own image.

<sup>52</sup> This is not to introduce a relativism in Marx's texts. Marx, a good child of the Enlightenment, is part of the search for truth, the production of science. His work is an attempt to produce such a science. He recognizes, in Hegelian fashion, the thoroughly historical nature of the actualization of a truth.

the object into its most elementary parts.<sup>53</sup> These elementary parts are his key concepts. They come together in a constellation to show the labor-power of capital, and show the metabolism of the capitalist mode of production. The key concepts Marx examines and operates with are: the commodity, labor-power, and surplus.

#### Key Concepts: The Commodity, Labor-Power, and Surplus

Marx's critique, in order to be immanent, needs to begin with the simplest element, the most general, *and* what will be, in addition to surplus value, the product of the capitalist mode of production: the commodity.

Following Smith and Ricardo, Marx highlights two values of the commodity; use and exchange. Though the commodity has existed in all economic systems, the nature of the commodity changes in the capitalist mode of production. A commodity in capitalism is not the same as a commodity in pre-capitalist societies. This is owing to the commodity form, the production of a commodity in the capitalist mode of production. This change is the particular historical difference that Marx highlights in opposition to the classical economists. Abstract labor, and labor power – that is, the *ability* to produce, instead of simply being the *activity* of production – are used against the classical economists' habit of focusing on particular labor, and the individual laborer. The commodity form within capitalism produces a fundamentally different commodity. The historical light that Marx shines on the presuppositions of classical economic categories bursts asunder the reading of a commodity as a windowless, ahistorical monad.

The commodity is not only a window to the soul of the social, but also a historical product that operates on a fundamentally different level in the capitalist mode of

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<sup>53</sup> For references to founding a science, one should read the first two prefaces of *Capital, Volume 1*. Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 141, 167, 177.

production. The laws of the capitalist mode of production are historical outcomes. The historically developed categories of Marx's critique of political economy are: the commodity, labor, capital, and surplus value.

We have in *Capital* the commodity as point of departure and endpoint, as both the most "elementary form" but also the product of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>54</sup> The elementary form of the capitalist mode of production is not independent of the historical vicissitudes to which capitalism itself was and still is at the mercy of. The commodity form preceding the capitalist mode of production is not identical to the commodity that capital continues to produce.<sup>55</sup> A metamorphosis happens in the life of a commodity with capitalism; such a change, however, affects the character of all concepts of political economy. The capitalist mode of production produces a change in all categories of political economy, transforming its constitutive parts (use value, exchange value, labor, labor-power, commodity, (relative) wealth, money, capital, rent, machinery, and surplus value) in the process of its development: nothing is left stable, and all, before with melting into air, bathe in a Protean furnace of production.

The production of the commodity leads to a valorization of capital, the surplus accumulation of capital. For Marx, production is already sale and distribution,

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<sup>54</sup> I take Marx to begin his critique of political economy after the failures of 1848, and when he must in 1852, begin from the beginning again. As such, the texts that contain his critique of political economy are: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Grundrisse*, and *Capital*, *Volumes 1-3*. Though one could see a nascent form of the critique of political economy in his *1844 Paris Manuscripts*, it is not at the level at which he later conducts such a critique. A historical manner in which to read the relationship, à la Nietzsche: it is not the *1844 Paris Manuscripts* that are the dress-rehearsal for the later critique of political economy, but rather the critique of political economy (post 1852) that situate the *1844 Paris Manuscripts* as a dress rehearsal (Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 125).

<sup>55</sup> Such a condition – that is, the analysis that capitalism not only produces itself, but also produces the conditions for its reproduction – was analyzed by Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological States Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation."



consumption and production, since the production of a commodity already has in embryo form all social relations. An example to clarify: take the factory that houses all the workers, and that creates the economic livelihood of a town. The factory requires raw materials in order to create its commodities, thus requiring trade to provide those raw materials, which are themselves commodities. Both relations and means of production then process these raw materials in the factory. Trade requires routes and roads, the ability to travel to and from various locations to bring together all raw materials, to produce a product, and then distribute this product. At work in, or behind, the commodity is a whole social network.

Production, which relies upon both the relations (different kinds of labor) and means of production (different machinery), is to be understood as employment of labor. The production of a commodity in the capitalist mode of production involves different levels of abstraction that had not existed during pre-capitalist times. The dominant form of the commodity is no longer determined by skilled laborer and then passed on to apprentices. The workshops and guilds of the feudal ages give birth to the modern factory. This factory breaks the commodity down into its constitutive parts. The transformation of the production of the commodity requires, and is matched by, a transformation in the relations and forms of production. Labor under the capitalist mode of production enters a phase that it had not been in before. Labor is not transhistorical practice; that human activity had, for Hegel, constituted the individual and made the person a self-consciousness able to join civil society no longer occurs in the same manner, or with the same ease. Conditions for subjective formation and deformation are altered during the industrial revolution.

Labor, under capitalism, becomes for the first time, abstract labor, labor-power. Labor can be quantified and rendered exchangeable with all other kinds of labor. The production process breaks down both the laborer into individual parts and movements (as in a Muybridge stop-motion film, or the famous zoopraxiscope), and the labor-process into its constitutive elements. The reduction in qualitative differences between different types of labor occurs by measuring the amount of time required to produce a particular commodity. The tandem concept to the commodity for Marx is labor-power [*Arbeitskraft*].<sup>56</sup> Labor power for Marx is the capacity for labor, its potential for further labor:

We mean by labor-power, or labor-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind.<sup>57</sup>

Abstract and universal labor-power realizes itself in individual labor. Labor-power is the only commodity owned by the laborer. Contrary to classical economists, Marx asserts that laborers do not sell their labor, but their labor-power. Labor is productive activity, the actual work that one does. Labor-power is the *ability* of doing work. While it is true that individuals are laborers, and that the commodity is product of their individual labor, even before being laborers they need to sell themselves on the (free) market. In order to join a workforce, they sell not their particular activity, but the ability of work, an ability of work in general. While skilled laborers continue to exist alongside the abstract labor-

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<sup>56</sup> Just as for Kant, the tandem concept to the thing-in-itself is the transcendental unity of apperception, so too for Marx, we have the commodity find its tandem in the category of labor power. One major difference between Kant and Marx, however, is that what for Kant is ahistorical or transhistorical is for Marx thoroughly historical. The vanishing mediator, here, that introduces to historical development to the concept is Hegel.

<sup>57</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 270.

power, labor-power comes to increasingly determine the labor of those skilled laborers as well.

The ability to work, moreover, must simplify skilled labor in order for a large workforce, independent of its individual skills, to be able to contribute to production. The division of labor contributes to an arena in which the entire production process (of a single product and the various motions a producer would go through) is analyzed and broken down into elementary parts. These parts form an abstract principle of labor. It matters not what one's individual skill is, or what their labor can do, unless that labor can be generalized in order to maximize productivity and profit. Skills are seen as skills insofar as they can be repeated and multiplied. The skill is a valuable commodity insofar as it generates surplus value, and can be generalized and applied all throughout the workforce.

The abstract principle of labor power necessitates individuals to sell their labor-power, their ability to do work, since abstract labor does not recognize the particular act of labor until labor-power has been sold. So while an individual laborer does indeed labor, what they sell is an ability to work that is not theirs as skill, but theirs as a property to be sold, and a property that can only be sold in order to maximize the surplus value produced.<sup>58</sup>

The only commodity that the laborer has is their ability to labor, and it is precisely this power that the capitalist purchases. Labor-power is the blind spot to the mystery of

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<sup>58</sup> This bears a structural analogy to Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, the retroactivity at work in shocks to the unconscious-preconscious-conscious psychical system: the shock that one feels is never an originary shock, but the second one that reproduces, or mimics, an 'original' though unfelt shock (Freud, *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*). Similarly, in Marx's account of labor-power, one does not know that one has sold their labor power, until after their particular labor in the capitalist mode of production has commenced. An individual does not have labor power *to sell*, but labor-power that *will have been sold*.

surplus value. By avoiding the question of labor-power classical economists were blind to the question of surplus value, according to Marx.<sup>59</sup> Laborers are able to sell their labor-power due to a number of historical circumstances that separate the epoch of capitalism from all previous epochs: (1) The sale of labor-power is a transaction in which all parties enter freely, (2) the sale of labor-power renders all qualitative differences of labor from the perspective of the production of commodities null and instead focuses on the quantitative aspect, that is, exchange value, and (3) the sale of labor-power and its exchange value (as a commodity) is evaluated as the bare minimum required for labor-power to subsist and for labor-power to reproduce itself.

Already with the commodity of labor-power, we begin to have the process in which production necessitates at the same time the reproduction of the conditions of its own possibility. Furthermore, the bare subsistence (food, clothing, housing) required in order for labor(-power) to reproduce itself is determined by a particular abstraction that makes all particular concrete labor at the same time exchangeable, thus quantitatively similar, by the same measure: time. Marx writes:

Commodities which contain equal quantities of labor, or which can be produced in the same time, have therefore the same value. The value of a commodity is related to the value of any other commodity as the labor-time necessary for the production of the one is related to the labor-time necessary for the production of the other. [And quoting himself, from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx concludes:] ‘As exchange-values, all commodities are merely definite quantities of *congealed labor-time*’.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Ricardo never concerns himself with the origin of surplus-value” (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 651).

<sup>60</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 130.

The production of a commodity under capitalism relies upon the abstraction of a particular form of labor to universal abstract labor (power). Labor necessarily becomes alienated from its particular form in the process of commodity production. Time becomes the measure of the value of labor. This labor is structured in such a way, however, that laborers are impoverished instead of enriching and realizing themselves, as Hegel has hoped.<sup>61</sup>

As congealed labor in the capitalist mode of production, the commodity is reliant upon the social division of labor.<sup>62</sup> What allows for the exchange of commodities is the common factor of value.<sup>63</sup> Just as the concept of a commodity changes in the capitalist mode of production, so too does the nature of labor. Labor is no longer to be understood as a concrete or particular form of labor; though qualitative differences continue to exist, a necessary outcome of the division of labor and the further production of commodities, these qualitative differences are reduced precisely since exchange depends only upon the quantitative aspect of labor. In order for the commodity, as congealed labor, to be exchanged, it is necessary for labor to become abstract labor. The abstraction from particular to universal labor is accomplished via the measuring of labor by time:

While, therefore, with reference to use-value, the labor contained in a commodity counts only qualitatively, with reference to value it counts only quantitatively, once it has been reduced to human labor pure and simple. In the former case it was a matter of the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of labor, in the latter of the ‘how much’, of the temporal duration of labor. Since the magnitude of the value of the

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<sup>61</sup> The work of self-consciousness is provided in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the role of the citizen in the development of the state is found in *Philosophy of Right*.

<sup>62</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 128.

commodity represents nothing but the quantity of labor embodied in it, it follows that all commodities, when taken in certain proportions, must be equal in value.<sup>64</sup>

After discussing the various transformations that the production of a commodity goes through and how it becomes exchangeable, Marx moves on to examine the “metaphysical subtleties and the theological niceties” of the commodity, its fetishism.<sup>65</sup> It is here that Marx provides an alternative critique of political economy – one that examines the theological and metaphysical aspects, departing from a strict economic analysis – within the major, or traditional, critique of capitalism.

A commodity first appears as a brute fact: it is a sum of the parts that went into the production process; these parts may include the spontaneous resources provided by nature (e.g. the land, the river, etc.), particular raw materials that had been processed by labor (e.g., a mine where coal – a spontaneous resource in nature – must be extracted by an act of labor), means of production (e.g. tools, or industrial machinery), and the laborer(s). Already the analysis of the commodity into the sum of its parts reveals the mediations at work in its production. The mediations at work in the commodity reveal both its sensuous and non-sensuous elements. Marx shows the mediations at work in the commodity, and reveals the social character of the labor process contained in it.

The fetish, which Marx likens to a metaphysical or religious property, cannot be *seen* by economic eyes. The fetish is not an observable fact, an analyzable chemical element, or be compared by the scientific community in the way the other observations about the commodity, such as value, can. Marx’s recourse to metaphysical and religious motifs in order to expose the fetish of the commodity shows that the very means used by previous

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<sup>64</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 136.

<sup>65</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 163.

economists miss the distinctive nature of the commodity when looked at strictly economically.

The fetishism discussed by Marx reveals itself as an effect of the particular social character of the capitalist mode of production, the form of production: “The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.”<sup>66</sup> Marx continues, “the products of labor become commodities, sensuous things, which are at the same time suprasensible or social.”<sup>67</sup> The fetishism of commodities that Marx highlights involves the presence of the sensible and the suprasensible. One should not think that this suprasensible is simply an imposition upon the commodity from without; rather, the social element is what makes the sensuous commodity appear in the first place. Just as labor has a dual nature (as both particular, concrete labor, as well as universal abstract labor), so too does the commodity have a dual nature. This dual nature, however, presents itself in the sensuous realm to be only sensuous and independent of the social realm and the production process from which it results.

Incidentally, it is precisely with the question of commodity fetishism that the seemingly clear distinction between idealism and materialism is further complicated.<sup>68</sup> Marx’s analysis shows how the sensuous obfuscates, if not clearly erases, the suprasensuous. The dialectical twist in Marx’s reading of the oppositions, however, is to assert that it is in fact the social that is the material, and that the sensuous appearance of the commodity – as brute fact – is itself an idealist trick. In a manner similar to Hegel, Marx

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<sup>66</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 164-165.

<sup>67</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 165.

<sup>68</sup> See also, David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s ‘Capital’*, 17.

shows how the abstract social relations have a greater import in how the commodity appears sensuously and melt into the air, disappearing, in the process of the commodity's production: the production process hides the constitutive role played by social relations from the sensuous appearance of the commodity.

Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism shows how relations between people assume the quality of relations between things (reification will come to assume central importance in Adorno's critique). We no longer see objectified, congealed, social labor, and the commodity as a product and point of departure for a network of relations, but rather the particular commodity that interacts in the market with other commodities:

It is however precisely this form of the world of commodities – the money form – which conceals the social character of private labor and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.<sup>69</sup>

This would hold, moreover, even if the entire labor process was run by one person (e.g. the tramp in *Modern Times*), and Marx indeed analyzes that as a possibility, resulting from new technological developments, in his chapter on variable and constant capital: the social relations would in this case become congealed in the very means of production used by the one worker. These means of production, moreover, would transform the worker into an appendage of the labor process.<sup>70</sup>

Labor alienates and objectifies itself in its activities. The fetish of the commodity shows the reification of labor as if it were a spontaneous creation of nature. The fetish presents the dynamic processes of society in a crystallized unchangeable form. The very

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<sup>69</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 168-169.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Marx, *Grundrisse* on machines: 690-704, 764-771, 818-836.



production of the commodity in the capitalist mode of production, thus, stamps the commodity with a fetish that advertises and peddles itself off as if it were independent of the social realm that fashioned it. Harmonies brush over antinomies, contradictions are claimed to be external and not immanent to the process, and reification (the becoming object of a person) is presented as the autonomous choice of an individual that sells their labor-power. We have the noble lie of spontaneous natural production that obfuscates the socio-economic conditions that allowed such a production to occur. The fetishism that Marx locates in the commodity is not one that is imposed upon the commodity from without, but is immanent to the production of the commodity. One cannot expect a commodity in capitalism that is produced without fetishism:

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labor into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labor. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labor as human labor. They do this without being aware of it. Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyph...The belated scientific discovery that the products of labor, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expression of the human labor expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labor.<sup>71</sup>

Marx explicates how the capitalist mode of production is a revolution that changes all previously stable categories of economic thought. As a historic event, the capitalist mode

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<sup>71</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 166-167.

of production changes (qualitatively and quantitatively) the nature of labor, the commodity, and for the first time presents an economic system that necessarily must expand in order to function, that must valorize, or increase, its value, that must utilize and re-invest surplus-value in the pursuit of more surplus-value.

The production of a commodity, its exchange with other commodities (whether in the form of barter, or, as in its final form, money) has its correlative in the transformation of particular labor into a universal abstract labor, capable of being exchanged. The fetishism of a commodity, in obfuscating the very social mechanisms that produce it, presents it as a brute fact, the wet dream of naïve positivists. Marx's analysis of the circulation of commodities and the capitalist mode of production shows: (1) the contradictions that are covered over by the apologists of classical economists, (2) the historical development that has become naturalized, and (3) the mystery of surplus-value.

Surplus value arises both within and without circulation, and is dependent upon the free sale of labor-power by the laborer. The value of this labor-power is the minimum required for labor to reproduce itself in order to re-sell its labor-power. By minimizing the amount that must be paid to labor, and maximizing the time of labor, the capitalist arrives at surplus-value. Marx's critique of political economy is no total or finished system but an attempt to show the motion and limits of the capitalist mode of production. Rather than providing a blue-print of the future, he shows the perennial violence of the capitalist mode of production, not dependent upon the ethical or non-ethical actions of individuals, but as immanent to the mode of production itself.

## Conclusion

A reading of Marx's *Capital* presents its readers with non-identical critique of political economy. This non-identical critique encompasses both strictly economic analyses (Marx's in-depth statistical and economic tables, from which he builds up to general trends and laws of the capitalist mode of production) and non-economic aspects (the paradigmatic model, in *Volume I*, in the chapter on commodity fetishism). The analysis of commodity fetishism shows how operating within the apparent commodity are non-apparent social realities that function like theological or metaphysical elements. Such elements are not welcome in a strictly economic analysis. The fetishism of the commodity, however, reveals two things that, once missed from economic view, threaten to render the critique of political economy if not an apology for the existent social reality, then supporting a progressive and necessitated view of history. The first thing revealed is the transformation of individuals into objects (reification); the second thing revealed is precisely the presence of abstract social labor within a concrete particular object (concrete universal). These are precisely the two aspects that Adorno's critique of political economy will focus on.

The economic and non-economic in Marx's thought assume an asymmetrical and one-sided relation, however. The economic and non-economic variables come to determine, in the historical development of Marx's philosophical thought and practical Marxist philosophies (e.g. Soviet-style DIAMAT dogma), the famous economic base-ideological superstructure model.<sup>72</sup> This *economism* of thought obfuscates the non-economic activities that affect the economic, and forces a forgetting of precisely the

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<sup>72</sup> This model is already at work as early as the "Communist Manifesto," and certainly at work, at least in Marx's own lifetime, in Engels' important text *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.

lessons of the chapter of commodity fetishism. This economism of thought makes a fetish of the very critique of political economy it was meant to accomplish because it forgets the chapter of commodity fetishism. The fetishization of a critique of political economy makes conducting a critique of political economy only possible via an analysis of the economic determinants.

By returning to the chapter on commodity fetishism we see how Marx's own critique provides a non-identical account of what constitutes a critique of political economy. An analysis of seemingly non-economic variables – theological and metaphysical niceties that cannot be appreciated by a strictly economic analysis – reveals the presence of a social network, the antagonistic nature of society, within a concrete particular, the commodity. By missing the lesson of the chapter on the commodity fetishism we risk missing the truly (negative) dialectical relation between the economic and non-economic realms. This forgetting is an aspect that Marx's own writings and focus can fall prey to.

When we now look to Adorno's philosophical and critical work we see a very different picture from the critique that emphasizes a reading of the economic sphere. Far from even seeming to present a critique of political economy, Adorno, from the perspective of Marx's critique of political economy, seems at best to present a critique of ideology, a critique of the modes of domination within contemporary society, an analysis of reifying processes in contemporary society, and a negative dialectical examination of the contradictions that riddle society and the individual, including the contradictions between society and the individual. There is no talk of labor in a Marxist sense, very little written about the critique of political economy other than a reference within another

context or an occasional essay at best, little to no attention paid to capital as such, and certainly no likeness to the analyses offered by Marx.

The judgment seems unequivocal: Adorno provides no critique of political economy that examines the strictly economic sphere (production, distribution, consumption, etc.). If Adorno provides any sort of critique of political economy we will have to show how it is in line with the spirit of Marx's non-economic critique of political economy found in the critique of concept fetishism. A number of questions present themselves: What are the political economic conditions for such a critique of political economy? What happens to science when its own conditions of production (i.e., discovery) are situated within the conditions of all forms of production? How does Adorno's negative dialectics provide a critique of political economy? How does Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy relate to Marx's critique of political economy; in what ways is it similar and in what ways does it differ?

## CHAPTER 2

### The Critique of ‘Thinking Economically’

*The text which philosophy has to read is incomplete, contradictory and fragmentary, and much in it may be delivered up to blind demons; in fact perhaps the reading of it is our task precisely so we, by reading, can better learn to recognize the demonic forces and to banish them.*

– Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, we observed the general economy of Marx’s critique of political economy. Its *dramatis personae* included the commodity, labor(-power), surplus-value, and capital. Adorno, I provisionally concluded, provided none of the requisite concepts necessary for such a critique, and what critique he did provide never entered the political *economic* territory. The appearance of those terms in Adorno’s work does not display an ‘economic’ use of them as Marx had come to read them. Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism shows, however, the blind spot of looking strictly economically at a commodity. Additionally, the presence of metaphysical or theological factors is important in revealing the elements that do not *appear* from a strictly economic standpoint. So, Marx’s strictly economic analysis itself contains non-economic analyses that inform a critique of political economy, adding a dimension that undermines any strict economic critique of political economy.

A brief survey of Adorno’s oeuvre indeed shows that a critique of political economy could only take place at the level of *political* economy, ideology critique, the analysis of particular sites belonging to the ideological superstructure (art, politics, culture, subjectivity), an analysis of exchange value (in the form of ‘exchange society’), the reification of the subject, the contradictions between individual and society, and the

dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy (freedom and barbarism). From the perspective of a classical/orthodox Marxist, Adorno's critique is conducted at the ideological level, or superstructure. While helpful, such a critique would never get below the surface level of the capitalist system, an unhappy consciousness that would analyze only the symptoms of the metabolism of capital, never the underlying and determining economic factors. While helpful to think about the manifestation of ideology in society, how subjects are made object-like and their objectified labor alienated, Adorno's critique of ideology does not pierce the economic realm and is not a critique of political economy in a classical Marxist sense. This should not, however, be how Adorno's critique is framed. Rather, Adorno's negative dialectical approach explodes the economic base-ideological superstructure asymmetrical and determinist relation. The economic base-ideological superstructure model is itself an ideological model mimicking a strict economic analysis. By situating the economic as the prime mover of every other aspect of reality, such a model privileges a strictly economic analysis that Adorno critiques.

Adorno's critique of political economy is a site-based critique. This site-based critique is opposed to a generalizing or universalizing approach as is found, for example, in the integrated social theory of Habermas.<sup>73</sup> Habermas utilizes a universalizing function, going back to Kantian practical philosophy, to approximate the theory of communicative action. The blind-spot located in Kantian theory – empty, or abstract, formalism blind to particular content – is made up, according to this theory, precisely within its amended universalizing function:

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<sup>73</sup> This is found in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, and the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas' aim is to oppose both relativism (cultural and ethical), as well as material ethics. Habermas reads the assault upon universalism as an assault upon the Enlightenment, and in order to resuscitate the 'good' aspects of the Enlightenment, he will have an amended universalism, a universalism that takes into account particularity.

First, a principle of universalization (U) is introduced. It serves as a rule of argumentation in practical discourses. Second, this rule is justified in terms of the substance of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation as such in connection with an explication of the meaning of normative claims to validity.<sup>74</sup>

Habermas claims that the very principle of universalization need not be grounded, as it was for Kant, in an *a priori* manner. Instead, the principle of universalization is a hypothetical starting point that is corroborated (or not) by transcendental-pragmatic considerations. At stake here, separating Habermas from Adorno is an understanding of the relation between the universal and the particular. Adorno focuses on the particular, a particular scarred by the universal, in order to present the relation between particular and universal. Thus, Adorno's focus will neither aim to 'universalize,' nor will it provide a general rule for universalization. His critique will proceed according to the particular object under study, and will be site-based.

Adorno's critique of *political* economy shows how the *socio-economic* manifests itself within certain sites. The sites it looks at involve philosophical concepts, the philosophical act of conceptualization, works of art in the culture industry, and exchange society. The cumulative effort of Adorno's site-based critiques constructs a critique of political economy that questions and critiques the underlying idealist assumptions of a traditional critique of political economy. One idealist assumption questioned by Adorno is the progressive conception of history, that the development of human history is one of progress.

There are two sides to this argument: 1. Adorno's site-based critique of political economy examines the details (micrological study, as he calls it in *Negative Dialectics*),

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<sup>74</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 116.



dregs, and particulars, that have been manipulated, mutilated, and cast aside by the universal. And 2. Traditional means of critiquing political economy, or critiques as they had existed prior to Adorno, embrace the very logic of the whole that has to be, according to Adorno, resisted. As Adorno will emphasize in *History and Freedom*, philosophy and the intellect must:

[F]ace up to the task of directing its constructive energies towards the details of history; and it must go on to mobilize the forces required to construct the totality in the details itself. For if those forces remain unable to engage with the details of history, they are all likely to remain vapid, vacuous and lacking in authority....Something of this desire can be seen in Benjamin's so-called defense of induction and also in my own tendency to immerse myself in highly specific individual texts or other intellectual products, instead of seeking out broader contexts, and then to look for the broader interconnections in those specific texts or products.<sup>75</sup>

Attention to detail allows both the manipulation of the universal to come through, via the violence that it has done to the particular (non-identical), while also reading the particular's conformity (identity) with that universal.

Adorno's thought avoids collapsing the non-identical into the general equivalence or harmonious whole that traditional critiques of political economy effect. This is the error he had seen in the history of philosophy, in its attempt to brush aside contradiction as an error on the part of the particular, or read contradiction as contributing to an affirmative change (and thus progress). He will thus hold the particular and the universal side by

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<sup>75</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 82-83 (Lecture 9).

side. His critique of political economy begins with a critique of ‘thinking economically’, a particular form of identity thinking that flourishes in exchange society.

This chapter details Adorno’s criticism of a particular form of thinking that he identifies as ‘thinking economically’. This form of thinking has come to assume general proportions and has imposed its logic upon other forms of thinking, such as the form of thinking that would provide the object priority. By focusing on ‘thinking economically,’ Adorno reveals a symptom of the general problem he sees at work within identity thinking. After going into the problem of ‘thinking economically,’ I will address the status of the intellectual, and how (as an intellectual) Adorno sees his role within the bad society that he is the beneficiary of. An objection that will present itself to Adorno is the problem of ‘unhappy consciousness,’ a resigned and guilty consciousness. After going into the role and place of the intellectual (as a social category), the practice of philosophy will be examined. The examination of philosophical practice will show how ‘thinking economically’, and identity thinking more generally, are reifying tendencies within philosophy. In order to begin a critique of political economy, a critique of philosophical practice is required.

‘Thinking economically’ is a subset of identity thinking, a particular form identity thinking assumes within exchange society that situates problems in the form of an ‘either-or.’ This either-or does not allow thought to question the status of the either-or, demanding instead a response and choice between seemingly unquestionable alternatives. Rather than answer the demand of the alternatives (for example, the modern one of austerity or spending), Adorno questions the demand itself, that choosing between alternatives will solve the problem. Adorno’s critique of ‘thinking economically’

questions the implicit assumption by which thought claims to do away with antagonisms in an ‘either-or’ manner. In other words, ‘either/or’ thinking reproduces the very base-superstructure format of a Marxist economism that had privileged the economic over other spheres.

### Thinking Economically Alongside the Critique of Political Economy

If there is to be any sort of critique of political economy, Adorno provides us with insight as to what it might not look like, or be effective as:

The intellectual, particularly when philosophically inclined, is cut off from practical life: revulsion from it has driven him to concern himself with so-called things of the mind. But material practice is not only the pre-condition of his existence, it is basic to the world which he criticizes in his work. If he knows nothings of this basis, he shoots into thin air. He is confronted with the choice of informing himself or turning his back on what he hates. If he chooses the former, he does violence to himself, thinks against his impulses and in addition runs the risk of sinking to the level of what he is dealing with, for economics is no joke, and merely to understand it one has to ‘think economically’. If, however, he has no truck with it, he hypostatizes as an absolute his intellect, which was only formed through contact with economic reality and abstract exchange relations, and which can become intellect solely by reflecting on its conditions.<sup>76</sup>

The very either-or described here (between philosophical thought and economic thought) is itself a result of a form of economic thinking that demands the mind to choose. A meta-critique is at work here, and Adorno avoids not only choosing a side, but also the conditions for choosing a side. The intellectual that Adorno describes is a socio-economic category stuck between two alternatives, neither of which can lead to happy

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<sup>76</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 132 (“Little Hans”).

consciousness. The alternatives situate a modern antinomy: to address the economic ills of the bad society requires one to ‘think economically’, while opposing thinking economically immediately places one outside the sphere of economics.

The point is not to combine, or synthesize, the two ways of operating into a higher order. The issue is to see how such ‘opposing’ views operate, are constitutive of, and integral to the reproduction of the given order. Žižek’s concept of ‘parallax’ here becomes relevant. Žižek writes of:

[A]n insurmountable *parallax gap*, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible...It is the wager of this book that, far from posing an irreducible obstacle to dialectics [as in Kantian antinomies], the notion of the parallax gap provides the key which enables us to discern its subversive core. To theorize this parallax gap properly is the necessary first step in a rehabilitation of the philosophy of dialectical materialism.<sup>77</sup>

Žižek examines the parallax in three different areas: philosophical, scientific, and political.<sup>78</sup> Adorno’s negative dialectics, similarly, vacillates between Kant (antinomies) and Hegel (dialectical interpenetration of those antinomies). The vacillation is between an insistence on an insurmountable gap between the concept and its object, on the one hand, and the synthesis and reconciliation of the gaps, on the other. Negative dialectics thus

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<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> He reads these three modes along the lines of Hegel’s triad in the *Logic*: “This triad, of course, is that of the Universal-Particular-Singular: *universal* philosophy, *particular* science, the *singularity* of the political” (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 10). For Adorno, philosophy can only approach the universal through the particular, via the violence done to the particular. Hence Adorno’s insistence on ephemera, the dregs, the seemingly ‘idle chatter’, and individual objects (work of art, phrase, individuality in society). Adorno does not prefer the particular to the universal, but shows the particular through the universal, a universal that is itself not universal enough, that has become too particular and is not open to the difference of a *nonidentical* particular.

highlights a gap between Kant and Hegel's philosophies – on the relation between subject and object, concept and object – and reads each against the other. Adorno's presentation of the insurmountable gap between subject and object, however, unlike Kant, cannot be hypostatized and presented in an ahistorical, unchangeable manner. The gap is itself dialectical, a gap that persists along with either side penetrating one another. It is a gap constituted through the very relation between the two. The gap is thus not to be substantialized, or ontologized.

The gap is a constitutive one within the concept, on the one hand, and the object, on the other. The lack of unity, or correspondence, between the two keeps open the dialectical mediations between them without flattening them. This is how one must see the either-or presented in Adorno's aphorism. To choose one of them already condemns one to playing the 'either-or' economic game. To abstain from choosing is itself already a choice, as Sartre himself had shown with the example of the soldier.<sup>79</sup> The dialectical choice is thus a third one: to question the status of such an either-or.

For Adorno, the intellectual's (and philosopher's) work must reflect and respond to the socio-economic conditions in the world. These conditions are part and parcel of the conditions for the possibility of intellectual themselves. Just as intellectuals cannot separate themselves from the socio-economic conditions of their possibility and actuality, so too they become apologists for the hegemonic order should they choose to merely 'think economically'. Either side is a hypostatization; one either hypostatizes the intellect, claiming it to be an absolute in the manner that Adorno criticizes German idealism after Kant, in particular Hegel, for. By focusing on the choice of an intellectual (specifically against thinking economically), Adorno shows how social antagonism is at

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<sup>79</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 24-31.

work in the very practice of the individual. This individual, the intellectual, is a social category living a social question.

‘Thinking economically’ becomes one of the central categories – or theoretical blocks – by which Adorno examines the antinomy afflicting modern intellectuals. Intellectuals, according to Adorno, are required, if their work is not to become simple apology, to reflect upon the material conditions for their intellectual labor. Adorno continues to examine the category of the intellectual in ‘Little Hans.’ ‘Little Hans,’ a German children’s song, describes the child’s growth and maturation: the child, having matured, leaves his home to grasp and tame the wild world around him. Such a song provides Adorno with an allegory for the domination of nature. On the problem of intellectuals, he continues:

That intellectuals are at once beneficiaries of a bad society, and yet those on whose socially useless work it largely depends whether a society emancipated from utility is achieved – this is not a contradiction acceptable once and for all and therefore irrelevant. It gnaws incessantly at the objective quality of their work. Whatever the intellectual does, is wrong. He experiences drastically and vitally the ignominious choice that late capitalism secretly presents to all its dependents: to become one more grown-up, or to remain a child.<sup>80</sup>

Adorno’s reference to a folk song in the aphorism’s entry is important. The story told by the song is a version of enlightenment: child leaves home, explores the world, returns home as a grown up. Such a story is a perversion of what the actuality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is both historically and for the intellectual in exile (Adorno). The enlightenment, or pedagogic, aspect of children’s rhymes at work in the song should also not go

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<sup>80</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 133 (‘Little Hans’).

unmentioned: the rhymes of the folk song, like children's nursery rhymes, are used as a formula for moral education. Along with the dissolution of experience we find in Benjamin's (and Adorno's) texts, we have the dissolution of a particular enlightenment, or culture-providing habit. *Bildung* becomes an impossibility; or, its condition for possibility is built upon the elimination of difference, the brushing aside of non-identical particulars. Those who leave their homes are either colonizers and conquerors, or those forced into exile in order to avoid death, but for whom survivor's guilt remains.<sup>81</sup>

A reflection on the material conditions is a reflection upon the violence done to matter *in the interest* of thinking. The history of the intellect's emancipation from material existence has been forgotten, and this forgotten history itself is presented as first nature. Thought owes a certain debt towards the material conditions it relies upon; this comprises the individual's (as intellectual, or philosopher within society) debt to society (the division of labor, intellectual and material), as well as society's own interest in intellectual property. Reason, rational development, and *Spirit* realizing itself come at the expense of the matter it needs to domesticate (the bodies of individuals, the passions, animality, or nature).

The trap to avoid is providing an alternative choice from within the 'either-or' logic of economic thinking, since it is forever in danger of reproducing thinking economically. Adorno's alternative is, thus, an alternative both to the choices offered (economic thinking, or having no truck with economism), and also an alternative to the logic of alternatives of economic thinking (economic thinking presenting itself as a one choice among many). Adorno does not avoid thinking economically, but rather reads economic

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<sup>81</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 364 ('After Auschwitz'). In the context of one leaving their home and then returning, one can go further and highlight the difference between Adorno and Heidegger's understanding of what is home and foreign via their respective readings of Hölderlin.

thinking against itself and against the options it offers. It is an instance not of avoidance, but of immanent critique of thinking economically.

Adorno's worry is to avoid the tendencies at work within thought that reify thought in its very form. These tendencies include conformity to the general trend, the lack of reflection upon one's own conditions (the conditioned nature of thought), and the social principle of individualization that requires individuals be strong autonomous egos. Conformity, and the conformity of thought in particular, comes across in Adorno's essay, "The Essay as Form":

[A]n intellect irrevocably modeled on the domination of nature and material production abandons the recollection of the stage it has overcome, a stage that promises a future one, the transcendence of rigidified relations of production; and this cripples its specialist's approach precisely when it comes to its specific objects.<sup>82</sup>

The specialist is required to not forget the historical conditions of their emergence. The work required by the intellect and intellectual is a remembering and working through of the conditions of the intellect's becoming, along with the domination of nature. The domination of (internal and external) nature is the 'original' and ever-present sin. Rather than seeing this original sin at a non-existent point in the past, however, Adorno sees this sin immanent to and at work in each moment and continuing to condition the future. It is in this way one can understand Adorno's constant return to Karl Kraus' motto 'origin is the goal'. The intellect's remembrance is not towards a past that has to be reclaimed, but towards the silent past operating in the present. It is the pre-history at work and used as raw material for history. An inability to appreciate the (pre-)historic violence that

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<sup>82</sup> Adorno, "The Essay as Form." *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, 9.



universal history requires – whether that history be a history written by the victors, or a progressive account of history – rigidifies the individual as atomized unit in a social whole that is unified by virtue of its antagonisms.

Philosophical activity, conceptual labor (or labor of the concept) operates by identification: unlike is made into like. Analysis – the breaking down of an object into its identifiable parts – makes of the object a unity of replaceable and identifiable parts. These parts can be completely conceptualized by thought, thus reducing the otherness of the object to meaningless trivialities, unimportant dregs. The question becomes: how can one identify a form of thought that does not fall prey to the hegemonic demands of identity thinking, of having the non-identical and difference annulled? The aporia Adorno's thought wrestles with is thinking the non-identical within thought, the object, in the language of the concept. This is the demand – an impossible yet necessary one – to transcend the concept.<sup>83</sup> The object, the other of the concept, is both the internal other constituting the concept as well as the external stumbling block to conceptualization.

'Thinking economically' is a subset, or aspect, of identity thinking wherein the exchange principle – the principle of identity asserting similarity over difference when it comes to exchange – determines the value of the object. The exchange principle in society is analogous to identity thinking for the subject; the exchange principle is the judge of what appears as relevant or important. A similar logic determines the processes of thought, the behavior of individuals, and the functioning and administration of society. The analogy between identity thinking and thinking economically goes further than

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<sup>83</sup> The formula 'impossible and necessary' is also at work in Lacan (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) and Sartre (*Saint Genet*).

simple analogy, or similarity. What presents itself as an analogy hides a deeper social relationship and antagonism.

One possible objection to this picture, or this model of analogical reason, is that it obscures the different levels of abstraction, or layers, of social reality and their importance in human lives. Such an objection would cite *Capital, volumes 1-3* in order to show how the variegated life-forms can be addressed. To cite this objection another way: an integrated social theory dealing with different social forms and life-worlds would be the only way of taking cognizance of the varieties of difference. The first form of the objection calls for a return to Marx's critical project, and the varied focuses provided in the volumes of *Capital*.

The second objection comes from the subsequent member of the so-called 'Frankfurt School,' the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>84</sup> This form of the objection holds that Adorno's analogical thinking flattens the very difference it would like to address and retreats into a self-consuming critique of reason, a nihilistic implosion of Enlightenment values: the regressive elements of society are assumed to have a dominance that foreclose resistance.

Both objections, however, miss the distinctive feature of Adorno's analogical thinking, and the particular aspect of seeing the social reality and antagonism that comes to the fore in thinking economically. This social reality is the imprint of a reifying and coercive logic left upon the particular thinker. Individualism becomes formulaic, and the reality of individual lives are lost. Adorno focuses on 'thinking economically' since it is

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<sup>84</sup> See especially Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

within a particular example, brushed aside from other forms of social theory, that provides the key to understanding social antagonism.

The most particular, a monad, is thus a way of interpreting the whole. The particular, and not only particular form, is true to the spirit of Marx, when he declares it to be a social hieroglyph. Adorno reads in the violated particular – in this case, thought itself – a network of social antagonisms and tensions at work. Adorno prefaces *Minima Moralia* with an interpretive key to reading each of its parts. He writes that, “the starting-point is the narrowest private sphere, that of the intellectual in emigration. From this follow consideration of broader social and anthropological scope; they concern psychology, aesthetics, science in its relation to the subject.”<sup>85</sup> To begin with the narrow private sphere presupposes – as Adorno is fully aware – an (immediate) experience of immediacy, that which is closest to one and one's own. Yet, when looking at that which is closest and most private, Adorno's readings reveal inconsistencies, gaps, and lapses in intellect. That which is supposed to be closest is affected by the seemingly most distant; the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia* show the levels of abstraction at work in that which is closest to the intellectual. The intellectual's exile is the social and political correlate to the intellect being alienated. The intellect and the intellectual become social hieroglyphs through which Adorno moves on to broader implications.<sup>86</sup> The ‘public’ sphere as such shows its violence and activities precisely in that which we consider most separate and closest to us. Nowhere near Kant's vision of the public sphere, the social sphere is an aggregated private sphere binding its members through their shared isolation.

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<sup>85</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Adorno's observations always thus begin with the ‘seemingly’ immediate. This is seen in his inaugural lecture, the essays in *Prisms*, *Negative Dialectics*, and *Aesthetic Theory*.

In his lectures on sociology, Adorno highlights the need to show the analogy between the economic and the non-economic, an analogy that looks dubious from the perspective of economic reason:

As for economics itself [in contrast to sociology], however, it will have no truck with anything – whether it be history, sociology or even philosophy – which does not take place strictly within the context of the developed market economy and which cannot be calculated, mathematized, according to the schemata of current market relationships; those disciplines are accused, for example, of presenting a purely sociological theory of classes. Because this material is rejected by both disciplines, the decisive fact is expelled from economics as well: the fact that the economic relationships between people, though ostensibly of a purely economic, calculable nature, are in reality nothing but congealed interpersonal relationships.<sup>87</sup>

Adorno's criticism is presented in a manner reminiscent of Marx. He stresses the relation between the social, the economic, and the activities of individuals (as both social categories and as realizing their potential), and highlights the necessity to hold categories together *and* separate all at once. The individual and thought, while seeking autonomy, must still bow down to the demands of economic thought. Difference is eliminated in the interest of getting a conceptual grasp on that which one can identify and render identical. To abandon the demand of economic reason entirely would be an act of resignation.

On the one hand, the antinomy between the economic and non-economic is not real, since the parameters and conditions for the antinomy are provided by the very either-or thinking that dominates 'economic thought', an economic corrective to recurring socio-

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<sup>87</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 142.

economic crises. On the other hand, however, the antinomy is real insofar as the intellectual is not allowed to take part in the situation without doing a certain violence to the practice of critique, of autonomous thought; the survival of critique for the individual is purchased at the expense of being able to contribute in any substantial way outside of one's 'field'. Critique abandons the possibility of a public use of reason substituted by the 'acting out' of private reason.

Philosophy is presented with a false dichotomy, an either-or logic that cannot do justice to the problem.<sup>88</sup> That the alternatives are false, however, is telling, as a symptom of the very problem it is supposed to solve. Either-or thinking thus convicts one to avoiding the problem, at a formal level; but beyond that, the alternatives provided at the level of content by either-or thinking are themselves symptoms of the problem that either-or thinking was meant to solve. What we have is a return of the repressed played out at the level of problem-solving in economic crises today: the very solutions offered as viable are themselves part of the problem of crises, and further entrench us into crises.

It would, however, be a mistake to simply claim Adorno avoids this logic altogether; he approaches the problem by emphasizing the contradiction-riddled relation between subject and object. Negative dialectics focuses on contradiction, tensions, and abandons the 'reconciliation' of antagonisms (which is not to be found, but is usually imposed by the intellect upon the matter), instead opting for seeing the antitheses to their logical extremes.<sup>89</sup> The condition for his analyses are thus both (1) the position the subject and the concept find themselves in (whether it be the situation of the intellectual, or the state of philosophy), and (2) the demands of the object (whether this be society, a work of art,

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<sup>88</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 212 ('Pseudoproblems').

<sup>89</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on 'Negative Dialectics'*, 8-9 (Lecture 1).

or the objective situations that a concept purports to respond to). Rather than simply focus on the contradiction *between* concepts, concept and object, or subject and object, Adorno focuses on the contradictions *within* them.

Both subject and object are marked by internal contradictions. The concept has, within it, a non-conceptual element that it can neither completely absorb nor do without. Generalities are formed, however, when the concept, in the interest of seeking to identify an object, casts the non-identified, or tension-riddled, aspects of the object aside. This violent act of ‘subtracting’ from each individual case what does not apply to all known examples is the work of a universalizing concept. The particular only serves to construct this general, while that which does not fit the general is cast aside as unimportant. A result is that the case for inquiry, the object, is relegated, after this process, to the status of an impoverished effect of intellectual activity: the work of art becomes an example of society, the artist a psychological case-study measured against the concept of genius. This impoverishment of the object affects the intellect as well, however. It misses the object it meant to do justice to.

The object is itself tension-ridden and reveals itself not through the reconciliation of all its elements but through the contradictions at work.<sup>90</sup> For example, the work of art’s double character is that it is both autonomous and heteronomous. This itself a social tension that appears in and through the work, however. Society is thus not external to the object that would like to separate itself from it. By situating contradictions within subject and object, Adorno’s critique risks presenting a resigned standpoint, valid from the

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<sup>90</sup> Adorno’s distinguishing Kafka (in *Prisms*), and Beckett (in ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’) from existentialism is an example of this. Existentialism avoids, according to Adorno, thinking those elements within the works that do not fit ready made existential categories. The elements that cannot be integrated marks the point of departure for interpretation.

perspective of the subject, invalid from the perspective of the whole. The charge against him is that his position seems to be unhappy consciousness satisfied and conscious of its unhappiness.

The metric of validity for such a critique is drastically different from the validity that economic thought strives for. Adorno's critique is open-ended and dependent upon the object that it submits itself to. This submission, however, requires the subject to change its engrained habits, theoretical and practical. Adorno's critical attitude trusts in its findings precisely since it gives itself over to and embeds itself within the object at hand. Thought cannot solve antithesis where no solution is offered, while to insist that a formal principle can achieve success is the ideological height of thoughtful panacea. Validity, thus, for Adorno, changes depending upon the critique, the aphorism, and the object. An unhappy consciousness thus can be seen reflecting the realities of a particularly unhappy society.

One can neither remain at the level of a formal critique, or simply a critique of the content, the material elements: "If art opposes the empirical through the element of form – and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped by their differentiation – the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content."<sup>91</sup> Adorno's thought returns to the aesthetic constantly not because, as many critics claim, of Adorno's elitism and aesthetic proclivities. The aesthetic is a nexus for individual and general, form and content, and offers an analogy with the bind that the individual is trapped in. The work of art is both autonomous and it is not; this situation, however, is itself a result of the antagonisms produced by the capitalist mode of production.

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<sup>91</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5 ("Art, Society, Aesthetics").

The relation between art and the empirical requires, for Adorno, philosophical interpretation. Adorno's negative dialectical thinking shows, formally and materially, the problem posed by critiquing political economy. Adorno cannot leave the alternatives behind, but shows that they necessarily are false (one-sided and myopic) ways of looking at the problem. As he says in *Negative Dialectics*, speaking on the either-or logic of (neo-)ontology concerning a choice between relativism and absolutism: "Dialectics is as strictly opposed to that [relativism] as to absolutism, but it does not seek a middle ground between the two; it opposes them through the extremes themselves, convicts them of untruth by their own ideas."<sup>92</sup>

The necessity to 'think economically' concerning economic matters that affect one in the supposedly non-economic sphere places upon one an unusual demand: to think both economically and uneconomically if one is to conduct research in the discipline. Economic reason is necessary in order to reflect on the economic conditions which relate the non-economic discipline to other disciplines along with overriding economic interests; and yet, in order to conduct the very research that is a beneficiary of the economic sphere, a strictly non-economic reason is required. The intellectual must show the extremes of economic thinking and non-economic reason, and how they expose a reality that produces both intellect and intellectual.

#### The Role and Place of the Intellectual

The intellectual is a social product and commodity like any other. It is threatened by reification brought about by the economic conditions that grant particular autonomy to the individual. This autonomy is at the expense of a heteronomy that marks the whole. To return to 'Little Hans':

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<sup>92</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 35 ("Against Relativism").



That intellectuals are at once beneficiaries of a bad society, and yet those on whose socially useless work it largely depends whether a society emancipated from utility is achieved – this is not a contradiction acceptable once and for all and therefore irrelevant. It gnaws incessantly at the objective quality of their work. Whatever the intellectual does, is wrong. He experiences drastically and vitally the ignominious choice that late capitalism secretly presents to all its dependents: to become one more grown-up, or to remain a child.<sup>93</sup>

Left to its own sphere, the intellectual's particular autonomy is purchased so long as that intellectual does not overstep his or her bounds. Not unlike Kant's need to draw boundaries that separate the realm of knowledge from the realm of illusion, so too the autonomy of the individual is established in a particular way such that his or her research can only affect their own sphere without affecting the whole situation. The intellectual both points to a tension as well as marshaling a resistance against the very order they are beneficiaries off; they occupy not an external Archimedean point, but rather, in the words of Foucault, a 'sagittal point'.<sup>94</sup> The tension the intellectual points to returns to the last thesis on Feuerbach that Marx had written, and aims to address the relation between theory and practice. To repeat this dilemma in the form of a question, Bernstein writes: "How is theoretical apperception to be distinguished from practical apperception?"<sup>95</sup>

The intellectual is itself a particular concept that contains social antagonisms of the macrocosm within it. The intellectual no more supplies an Archimedean point from without from which to provide a critique of society, than an anchoring point from within ("the island of truth") the whole to provide a critique that would not be unaffected by the

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<sup>93</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 133 ("Little Hans").

<sup>94</sup> Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, 30 ('Political Consciousness').

<sup>95</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 25.

whole of which it is a part and to which it responds. The intellectual expresses the negative dialectical untruth of the whole with the aim of revealing, negatively, the truth of the particular. That the universal is necessarily implicit in discussing the particular is evident. The intellectual, as a particular that attempts to dialectically navigate between the particular and the universal, the object and the concept, both impedes and makes possible its aim of offering a critique of political economy:

The subjugation of life to the process of production imposes as a humiliation on everyone something of the isolation and solitude that we are tempted to regard as resulting from our own superior choice. It is as old a component of bourgeois ideology that each individual, in his particular interest, considers himself better than all the others, as that he values the others, as the community of all customers, more highly than himself. Since the demise of the old bourgeois class, both ideas have led an after-life in the minds of intellectuals, who are at once the last enemies of the bourgeois and the last bourgeois...There is no way out of entanglement. The only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence, and for the rest to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell.<sup>96</sup>

Negative dialectics, however, holds that the universal, or the concept, can never exhaust the particular, the object.

It is important to focus on the reasons why Adorno does not accept either alternative (thinking economically, or removing oneself from the sphere). Neither possibility can be followed. As a possible alternative to the false dichotomy presented, negative dialectics

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<sup>96</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 27-28 ("Antithesis").

(thought that attempts to avoid its own reifying possibility) is presented.<sup>97</sup> In the final instance, Adorno's concern is of what he calls in his lectures on Kant, "the philosophical problem *par excellence*, namely the problem of the relation of consciousness to its objects, of the subject to the object."<sup>98</sup> The critique of political economy, as Marx had offered it, is precisely about this problem: the reification of people, and the personification of things. The dialectical relationship between subject and object is at the core of Marx's critique of political economy. The commodity, in this sense, is the center of gravity for such a critique, as it forms the tandem, or counter-point, to the subject. For Adorno, this subject-object relation finds a hypostatized model in the relation between thing-in-itself and the transcendental unity of apperception, in Kantian philosophy.<sup>99</sup> The transcendental unity of apperception is as occluded and 'given' as the thing-in-itself: the mysterious workings of the soul find their counter-point in the object itself.

Adorno's negative dialectical thinking begins with an *aporia* concerning philosophy's relationship to the socio-economic conditions of its possibility. Philosophy is both autonomous and it is not. Rather than an end-point, however, this *aporia* should be read as a point of departure and an imperative for thought. One must philosophize about the world without thinking in a manner that is identical with the world, and would thus repeat it. Thinking, furthermore, can also not – as in some utopian socialists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – remove itself from the socio-economic conditions of the world. As Hegel showed, philosophy cannot simply criticize from above, a position that would remove it from the matter at hand; rather, it must be ready to enter the stage of its opponent and

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<sup>97</sup> A similar expression is found in Hegel's attack on the understanding: "The battle of reason is the struggle to break up the rigidity to which the understanding has reduced everything" (Hegel, *Logic*, §32, page 53).

<sup>98</sup> Adorno, *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Adorno, *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, 94.

proceed according the logic of that opponent.<sup>100</sup> Adorno follows this Hegelian insight when responding to the ‘alternatives’ presented to the intellectual, its double character. Here the alternatives are placed on the order of ideology: individuals are presented with a ‘choice’ on how to approach the economic level that they are nonetheless, according to the Marxist reading, produced by. Adorno attempts to show the intertwinement of base and superstructure while holding on to the very terms that are contested. The truth of the ‘base and superstructure model’ is also its falsehood: the (re)presentation of it is at the level of ideology, or the superstructural level. Adorno’s answer to the dichotomy deals with dialectical philosophy’s own entrenchment in society.

The very fiber of thought is affected by the object it aims to critique, so that, in an interesting dialectical reversal: the priority of the object transforms into the objective non-priority of subjective thought. Adorno’s formulations on (negative) dialectics is important: “Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means. But since it must use these means, it is at every moment in danger of itself acquiring a coercive character: the ruse of reason would like to hold sway over the dialectic too.”<sup>101</sup> This mode of thinking is in agreement with his pronouncement on thinking with the concept, an imperative marked by a ‘neither-nor’:

What the philosophical will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfillment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept – the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought – negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither

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<sup>100</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, paragraph 3.

<sup>101</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 150 (“Bequest”).

circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.<sup>102</sup>

Critical self-reflection is the site that creates its own distance from itself. In this regard, one might locate an unlikely ally in the concept of alienation; thought's alienation from the world is repeated by thoughts own self-alienation. This alienation is a distance that mimics the distance imposed upon individuals by society in the very act of individuation. The tool of immanent critique in philosophy, the concept, strives necessarily by its own logic to transcend its limitations. The very limitations it imposes upon itself necessitate a further expansion, an unending restless activity. Whether or not such activity, on its own, is a bad infinite, cannot be decided, especially since the restlessness responds to the "world, which is faulty to the core."<sup>103</sup>

In its interpretation of the riddle of the socio-economic conditions, negative dialectical thought aims to avoid 'thinking economically'.<sup>104</sup> Such an avoidance aims to thus critique economic reason.<sup>105</sup> The aim to avoid the two alternatives (thinking economically and removing oneself) is itself an opposition internal to economic thought. The division is itself a manifestation of 'Thinking Economically'. There is thus not only a problem with thinking either side of the alternative, but the logic of having to choose alternatives, either-or thinking, is itself the problem. In its critique of either-or thinking, negative dialectics must not become 'a false alternative choice', and in this sense obey

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<sup>102</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15 ('Infinity').

<sup>103</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, 31 ('Argument and Experience').

<sup>104</sup> The language of interpretation and riddles first appears in Adorno's Inaugural Address, "The Actuality of Philosophy". It is between the actuality and possibility of philosophy that Adorno's philosophy revolves.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*. This is a Marxist-Arendtian critical theoretical attempt to show the logic of economic reason, its limits, and how it must not be hypostatized and identified with Reason itself. In a similar manner to Kant, then, Gorz claims that economic reason is a use of reason, but not the only use (just as theoretical and practical reason applied to different objects in Kant's critical system).

the logic of what it critiques, but must show that any presentation of alternative options is itself the narcissism of small difference. Thinking economically – a form of thought that cannot but be an apologist for the object of its thought – is itself a form of identity thinking, where all roads lead to Rome.<sup>106</sup>

If economic thinking is a form of identity thinking, this means that economic thinking operates via a coercion and compulsion of thought. Negative dialectics offers a way out of the coercive logic of thought, without abandoning thought, by immersing itself in the object, by neither dictating what the object is, nor allowing the object to reify thought's (free) activity. The possibility of the intellectual's thought relates directly to the possibility and actuality of philosophical practice.

#### Fragmentary Philosophical Practice

For Adorno, a critique of political economy cannot be written in the way that it had been written for Marx. This is due to the very possibility and actuality of philosophy, the (socio-economic and political-economic) conditions of philosophy, and the schema for a critique of political economy. The reason Adorno's critique of political economy cannot be written in a traditional manner is because of the dissolution of idealist (i.e. Hegelian) philosophy, the shattering of the illusion of totality, and the only a focus on the particular, fragmentary and ephemeral/transient will be the material of this critique.<sup>107</sup> The dissolution of totality first appears in Adorno's inaugural address: "Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the

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<sup>106</sup> One can here find an extensive discussion in both Bernstein and Sherratt. They follow Adorno's worries of identity-thinking as ideology.

<sup>107</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, chapter 8 ('Theodor W. Adorno and the Collapse of the Lukácsian Concept of Totality').

real.”<sup>108</sup> After beginning with the thesis that philosophy cannot conceptualize totality, Adorno moves on to survey the recent philosophies, revealing how all of them necessarily fail to solve the problem posed by idealism. These philosophies (Heideggerian neo-ontology, neo-Kantian thought, and positivism) attempt to solve the problem of idealism by being claiming to be a beyond of idealism yet regressing behind idealism, by hypostatizing either one of the poles of the subject-object dichotomy. Adorno addresses the problem by *constructing* a (negative) dialectical philosophy.

Philosophy is no longer able to grasp totality. Such an inability does not mean that philosophy cannot provide a concept of totality (albeit negatively).<sup>109</sup> Philosophy can no longer present totality. Philosophy assumes a form no longer of the system, as such. Philosophical systems are unjust towards the very particularities they aim to understand. Adorno’s inaugural lecture is a judgment on the crisis of philosophy; more specifically, it is a judgment on the crisis of a particular way of philosophizing, and a crisis on the concept of totality: the collapse of the Hegelian edifice. Philosophy is not only charged with the task of reflecting the reified structure of reality, but it bears the reified and antinomical structure of the society it is both free and not free of. Adorno writes:

The crisis of idealism comes at the same time as a crisis in philosophy’s pretensions to totality. The *autonomie ratio* - this was the thesis of every idealistic system – was supposed to be capable of developing the concept of reality, and in fact all reality, from out of itself. This thesis has disintegrated.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 120.

<sup>109</sup> Žižek thinks totality is a concept that has to be rehabilitated (cf. *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*).

<sup>110</sup> Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos*, 120-121.

Adorno's claim that the concept of totality has disintegrated is not simply a brute fact, descending from the (Platonic) heavens of philosophy as a judgment and interpretation of the world.<sup>111</sup> Adorno's judgment on the crisis of totality is made in light of the disintegration of the idealistic system, the development of the capitalist mode of production. Adorno examines the neo-Kantian schools, the positivist and scientist schools, Husserl and Scheler's versions of phenomenology, Heidegger's ontological project, and the possibility of a (negative) dialectical philosophy that can interpret the actuality of the world without hypostatizing itself or absolutizing its interpretation and claiming to have grasped totality.

According to Adorno's inaugural lecture, the landscape of philosophy is acting out a fundamentally idealist question. The disintegration of the concept of totality leaves philosophy itself in a fragmented state. Any philosophy, according to Adorno, that could present totality, after the disintegration of the idealist thesis, hypostatizes itself while obfuscating the very reality that it was supposed to change, if not interpret. Adorno's attempt to dialectically analyze the relationship between subject and object (the synthesis of which is the absolute) cannot be reconciled at the level of the subject. Compared to what philosophy thought it could previously accomplish, it now lies in ruins.

The ruin is the stuff of Adorno's critique of political economy, and this ruin is the cipher to understanding reifying processes that thought undergoes. In the language of (Benjamin-inspired) Richter, we can say that the ruin becomes a thought-image for

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<sup>111</sup> One inspiration behind the thesis of a disintegrated idealist thesis is Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*. In this text, Lukacs attempts to show the aesthetic and political landscape in which the novel emerges, the fall of the epic, and the direction the novel is going.



Adorno.<sup>112</sup> This thought-image itself, however, is not a complete image; the fact that it is not complete does not mean that it seeks completion, like a modern day archaeological trick to fix ruins with modern day plaster casts. The need is to understand the ruin as ruin. The ruin is a fragmented and ruined thought-image. It is something that is ever-present in Adorno's inaugural lecture: "only in traces and ruins is it [philosophy] prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality."<sup>113</sup> Adorno follows the disintegration of the idealist system through to its last great thinker according to him, Kierkegaard:

Kierkegaard's plan is irreparably shattered. No firmly grounded being has been able to reach Kierkegaard's restless, inner-subjective dialectic; the last depth which opened up to it was that of the despair into which subjectivity disintegrated, an objective despair which transformed the design of being within subjectivity into a design of hell.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Richter writes: "For Adorno, a Denkbild, which works to say in words what cannot be said in words, launches an impossibility, indeed, wishes to take that very impossibility as its principle. While Wittgenstein famously insists that one must remain silent about that of which one cannot speak, the Denkbild seeks to speak only of that about which one cannot speak. The Denkbild therefore works to create an image (*Bild*) in words of the ways in which it says what cannot be said. It is a snapshot of the impossibility of its own rhetorical gestures. What it gives us to think (*denken*) is precisely the ways in which it delivers an image (*Bild*) not only of this or that particular content, but always also of its own folding back upon itself, its most successful failure" (Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life*, 13).

<sup>113</sup> Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, 120.

<sup>114</sup> Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, 123. It is here that another parallel between Adorno and Heidegger appear, concerning their reading of the history of philosophy and relating it to their own philosophy, or thought. Adorno's historical framework for assessing philosophical development is the perennial relation between the insights of German Idealism and where those insights were betrayed by those very philosophers or subsequent thinkers. So too, Heidegger's framework is the relation of the history (and forgetting of) Being, and how this forgetting of Being is precisely the history of metaphysical thought. Nietzsche's attempt to break out of metaphysics via his own metaphysical concept of 'will to power' proves Nietzsche to be, according to Heidegger, the last great metaphysical thinker; Kierkegaard's attempt to think the individual as the blind spot of Hegelian philosophy via Hegelian means (alternating between the singular, particular, general, and universal) makes Kierkegaard, in Adorno's view, the last great Idealist thinker. To spend some time on Adorno's historical reading: though Kant and Hegel are the peaks of dialectical thought (Kant for both situating the problems of subject and object, systematic thinking, critical thinking, and having, as Adorno makes clear in his lectures on *Kant's*

That there is still air to breathe in this hell, a reflection on damaged life offered by Adorno, is one reason that philosophy can neither abandon the task of interpreting the world, nor can it transform the world by claiming to have grasped the totality. The impasse is where a critique begins, examining the object of ‘political economy’.

The object ‘political economy’ is a reifying-reified object, while the subject that must yield to it is fragmentary, has lost the possibility of experience, and is itself in constant danger of being completely reified. The task of philosophy according to Adorno’s inaugural lecture is to interpret. This concept of interpretation has a sedimented philosophical and non-philosophical history, on the one hand from Marx (“Theses on Feuerbach”), on the other from Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams*). Adorno claims that should the intellectual, that is he-Adorno, remove himself entirely from the socio-economic conditions of his own possibility, then he “shoots into thin air”. Such a thought echoes Marx’s oft-cited claim that: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in

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*‘Critique of Pure Reason’*, founded the dialectic in his section on the amphibolies; Hegel’s for having provided the clearest account of dialectical thinking with the account of consciousness in his *Phenomenology*, the relation between thought and its object in the *Logic*, and for showing the historical nature of thought and philosophical activity), Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard are anti-Idealist thinkers that are nonetheless part of the greater Idealist horizon; this antinomy of figures, moreover, is the philosophical situation the 20<sup>th</sup> century is responding to, according to Adorno and is instantly barred from three possibilities of ‘reconciling’ the dilemma: 1. A positive Hegelian synthesis of the antitheses, 2. Determining that one side of the antinomy is correct, regardless of whether it be a critique of political economy contra the bourgeois state, the individual against the social body and system, or flux disrupting teleological progressive history, and 3. Attempting to reconcile philosophical, that is, conceptual problems using non-conceptual methods (e.g., Husserl, Bergson, Heidegger). Adorno’s philosophical commitment is to a fourth way: a non-compromising (anti-Kierkegaardian) *neither-nor*, that *neither* settles for one side or the other, *nor* attempts to sketch a middle way. Adorno’s fourth possibility deals with locating traces of both sides in one another, thus pushing their thought to the extremes. The model of thought *approaching* its extreme is the model of negative dialectics: subject responding to the priority of the object, the concept thinking the non-conceptual via the concept, the non-identity of the identical and non-identical. This is also the X-ray, so close to Benjamin’s readings, at work in Adorno’s philosophy.

various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”<sup>115</sup> As Adorno points out, however, this thesis on Feuerbach is as much an interpretation as an attempt to change the world.<sup>116</sup>

What is interpretation? Adorno states:

In this remains the great, perhaps everlasting paradox: philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figure of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings. Thus it reaches so few ‘results,’<sup>117</sup>

The site where fragmentation begins is two-fold. On the one hand we have a disintegration of the idealist thesis concerning the possibility of conceptualizing totality.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, this disintegration, and the fragmentation of the philosophical landscape is a reflection of social antagonisms. Adorno first shows that the alternatives mask the underlying contradictions and are symptoms of the very thing they claim to be a solution for. He then shows that the form of an either-or thinking constantly avoids the very frame in which alternatives appear. Such alternatives exhibit a similar characteristic to the narcissism of small difference that Freud had articulated. As a symptom of identity thinking this false opposition attempts to mask the fragmentary and antagonistic nature of society. Only by examining the relationship between the subject and object can philosophy attempt to critique political economy.

That these two options are themselves an alternative within identity thinking, that thinking-economically itself presents this distinction, and that identity thinking is an

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<sup>115</sup> Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, *The German Ideology*, 574.

<sup>116</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 244-245 (“Contemplation”).

<sup>117</sup> Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 126.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Martin Jay’s “The Concept of Totality in Lukács and Adorno”.

ideological product and symptom of the contradiction-riddled reality means that philosophy is charged with the task of interpreting and attempting to understand life-(de)forming processes in the capitalist mode of production. This analysis can only be approached prismatically, in a fragmentary manner, at particular points, and by consistent attempt to understand the relationship between subject and object.

Only as oblique, fragmentary, prismatic, and systematically un-systematic could a critique of political economy be written. This critique begins with the mode of philosophizing, conceptualization, and philosophy's fetish of the concept.

### CHAPTER 3

#### The Critique of Concept-Fetishism and the Unconscious of the Concept

##### Introduction

The traditional critique of political economy prompts one to think economically, according to Adorno. The last chapter presented the truth and falsity of the either-or alternative offered by ‘thinking economically.’ Thinking economically requires one to think in a manner that would support the existing state of affairs; a form of thought that supports the summary judgment that the real is actual and that one need not change things. If one does not support economic thinking, so the argument continues, then one is abandoning any possibility of dealing with it. The alternatives presented, however, are within the logic of economic thinking, an either-or that wishes to distinguish absolutely those aspects that are inextricably related to one another. Those that have ‘no truck’ with economics, or economic thinking suffer from the vicissitudes of an economic mode of production that makes such a life possible (or not). Thus, having ‘no truck’ with economics and turning ones back is a life purchased at the expense of examining its conditions of possibility. Such a mode of life – the intellectual’s, for example – is shot through and through with socio-economic mediations.

To turn a blind eye to those mediations is to resign oneself to the what Horkheimer had called traditional theory, and to abort the responsibility and need of what Kant had called the public use of one’s reason. One must neither fall prey to the demand to ‘think economically,’ nor in avoiding that demand slip into the position of ‘having no truck with it.’ Such an alternative does, however, reveal the truth of an antinomy within society. It is from here that the Adorno’s critique begins.

Economic thinking relies upon the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity (that the subject has constituted the world in his or her image). The priority of the object Adorno insists upon, then, must not yield power over an absent subject; priority of the object requires a different kind of subjectivity: “to use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.”<sup>119</sup> Thinking economically – that it is a subset of identity thinking threatening to reify thought in its mode of operations – leaves Adorno with the need to critique the critique of political economy as it had traditionally been understood. This critique started with the either-or alternative offered by thinking economically, specifically with the concept of philosophy. Analysis of the concept reveals a fetish. Adorno writes:

What conceptualization appears to be from within – to one engaged in it – the predominance of its sphere, without which nothing is known – must not be mistaken for what it is in itself. Such a semblance of being-in-itself is conferred upon it by the motion that exempts it from reality, to which it is harnessed in turn.<sup>120</sup>

Adorno examines the appearance of the concept and explodes its self-satisfied standing. The concept, not unlike the commodity for Marx was viewed by individuals, is viewed by philosophy as being a product of subjective activity, a *creatio ex nihilo*. Adorno explodes this fetish to reveal the non-conceptuality immanent to the concept and to which the concept must respond. The process of conceptualization, then, falls prey – in its very activity – to forgetting its constitutive elements. Within the fissures of a semblance of conceptual substantiality are objective relations.

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<sup>119</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx (Preface). As will be clear later on in this chapter, this aim is close to Kant and Hegel’s aim. Their philosophies both, according to Adorno, reveal a blind spot that Adorno’s negative dialectics explores.

<sup>120</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11 (‘Disenchantment of the Concept’).

Philosophy has attempted to transfer its activities to the practical realm and forsake pure academicism, however. Adorno writes: “The most recent attempt to break out of conceptual fetishism – out of academic philosophy, without relinquishing the demand for commitment – is existentialism.”<sup>121</sup> Concept fetishism is identified with academic philosophy, philosophy that has no truck with economics. Here Adorno follows his insight into the concept, extending it to philosophical activity, and from there to a philosophical activity that does not shirk away from its responsibility of addressing social and political injustices. Escaping from academicism, however, does not save existentialism from concept fetishism, however, since in order to ground its observations, it relies upon the fallacy of the constitutive subject: the I that chooses and is free to decide in each and every instant. Adorno writes: “The notion of an absolute freedom of choice is as illusory as that of the absolute I as the world’s source has ever been.”<sup>122</sup> By cracking the surface of the false alternatives presented by ‘thinking economically’ Adorno begins a critique of conceptualization.

Concept-fetishism presents the totality of concept-formation as a harmonious, contradiction-free, unified process. Adorno’s critique of the fetish aims to show the antinomies and contradictions immanent to the concept and that are at work in the very formation of the concept. One of the tasks of philosophy is a disenchantment of the concept:

Philosophy, Hegel’s included, invites the general objection that by inevitably having concepts for its material it anticipates an idealistic decision. In fact no philosophy, not even extreme empiricism, can drag in the *facta bruta* and present

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<sup>121</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 49 (‘Existentialism’).

<sup>122</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 50 (‘Existentialism’).

them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics; no philosophy can paste the particulars into the text, as seductive paintings would hoodwink it into believing. But the argument in its formality and generality takes as fetishistic a view of the concept as the concept does in interpreting itself naively in its own domain: in either case it is regarded as a self-sufficient totality over which philosophical thought has no power. 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.<sup>123</sup>

For Adorno, thought's imperative is to move beyond that which facilitates its movement: the concept. The moment that conceptualization stops reflecting upon the means at its disposal it threatens to become instrumental reason. The discussion of means and ends alone does not result in instrumental reason alone; however, the continued unreflective attitude towards means and ends can result in subjecting those very means and one's own activities to instrumental reason. Heteronomy constantly threatens the development and actuality of autonomy.

Adorno's critique of concept fetishism reveals the dialectical relationship between traditional and critical theory, and the trace of traditional theory within critical theory itself.<sup>124</sup> As Sherratt claims: "However, whereas critical theory [i.e. Horkheimer] was a

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<sup>123</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11 ("Disenchantment of the Concept").

<sup>124</sup> The two terms, 'traditional theory' and 'critical theory', are taken from Horkheimer's essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory." It is at this point that we must mention Habermas' worry concerning Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy, and the fact that Adorno's critique will/can never provide a positive figure following the incessant critique of the concept. The worry would be that we are left with a constant critique of substantive subjectivity, a socio-political order that we cannot replace, and that, finally, with Adorno we have the self-immolation of reason by reason. These thoughts are offered in a number of works by Habermas, including *Philosophical-Political Profiles* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Further criticism of Adorno occurs in fellow-travelers of Habermas, including Seyla Benhabib in *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*; and Maeve Cooke in *Re-Presenting the Good Society*. While this chapter will concern itself with formulating Adorno's



critical and self-reflective alternative to traditional theories, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* was an attempt to negate many of the traditional features of theorizing within the very mode of reasoning itself."<sup>125</sup> According to Adorno, philosophy cannot operate without concepts; concepts are "the organon of thought".<sup>126</sup> Materialism and idealism share the same means of philosophizing, that is, concepts, though view the production of the concept differently. That concept-fetishism relies upon the compulsion of identity-thinking forces one to critique the processes of thought, as well as its 'raw materials'. The concept, under identity-thinking, is not unlike a general equivalence, substituting like for unlike.<sup>127</sup> Not unlike Marx's account of commodity fetishism, Adorno's critique of concept fetishism shows how concepts bear the stamp of a fetishism that results in their very formation.<sup>128</sup> Just as philosophy cannot do without its need of the concept, so too, the concept cannot do without its own needs. The *need* of the concept is to form in a certain way and in response to an object.

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worry of concept fetishism and what a critique of concept fetishism entails, the following chapter will address questions and worries that have been building up to now and whether Adorno can respond to those worries, Habermasian, or otherwise.

<sup>125</sup> Sherratt, *Adorno's Positive Dialectic*, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15 ('Infinity')

<sup>127</sup> In order to consider how one can think the fetish of the concept in an epistemological manner along the lines of what the general equivalent is economically, one can see the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, in particular *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*. There, Sohn-Rethel articulates the insight he had that is the main idea his text examines: "And finally, with an effort of concentration bordering on madness, it came upon me that in the innermost core of the commodity structure there was to be found the 'transcendental subject'" (Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, xiii).

<sup>128</sup> "In order, therefore, to find an analogy [describing the sensuous and non-sensuous side of commodities] we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities." Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 165.

This chapter follows Adorno's twofold aim: a critique of the means by which philosophy operates, and rendering conscious what is unconscious in the concept. Conceptualization leads to a fetish of itself, and this fetish stems from the very unconscious processes that go on 'behind the back of the concept.' In order to not let this critique of concept fetishism, however, itself become a fetish Adorno will have to render conscious those processes left unconscious in the concept. After examining the fetish of the concept, the unconscious of the concept will be examined by tracing its Freudian (i.e., seemingly non-philosophical) import and will be rendered conscious. A critique of concept fetishism is one of the sites where Adorno undermines the economic base-ideological superstructure model.

### Concept Fetishism

Adorno's critique of concept fetishism examines the means by which philosophy thinks its object. Philosophy cannot do without conceptual thinking, according to Adorno:

Necessity compels philosophy to operate with concepts, but this necessity must not be turned into the virtue of their priority – no more than, conversely, criticism of that virtue can be turned into a summary verdict against philosophy. On the other hand, the insight that philosophy's conceptual knowledge is not the absolute of philosophy – this insight, for all its inescapability, is again due to the nature of the concept.<sup>129</sup>

Adorno's aims to unveil the very process of reification at work in the production of the concept. There are a number of moments at work, and not all of them working in an harmonious or unified manner with a goal in mind: (1) a concept is always in response to a non-concept, an object; (2) conceptualization, or concept-formation, is the process by

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<sup>129</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11-12 ('Disenchantment of the Concept').

which the subject encounters and attempts to think through the object, (3) the concept, in dealing with the object, hypostatizes (i.e. makes the object a static thing, no longer the result of a dynamic process) the very process and mediations at work in the history of the object; (4) the concept identifies itself with the object, granting itself the freedom that it denies the object (the freedom of thought is contrasted with the heteronomy of things); and (5) the freedom granted to thought is both more and less than the object (thought can point beyond what is actual in the object, and gesture towards the possible). Adorno's emphasis will be that the object can never be completely tamed by the concept.

The object is the non-identical core of the concept, the condition of the possibility for, and the limit to the concept's completion, or final realization. The concept and object thus necessarily meet without leading to the cancellation of the other; the concept must reveal social and objective variables at work, while the object itself (which is never a simple in-itself, separated from everything else) will, via the labor of the concept, reveal social relations embedded within but seemingly absent.

Concept fetishism results from the very formation of concepts. In the act of forming a concept of an object, the resulting concept does not reveal all the mediating aspects involved in its relations to the object. One of the first problems that arises is that the concept treats the object as if it were exhausting the object without residue. The concept claims, in naming the object, to describe and identify the object in its entirety. A veritable tyranny of the concept thus threatens any philosophy that stresses the need of the concept. One can neither abandon the concept, nor abandon oneself entirely to the concept. Negative dialectics pushes against these two extremes to show the entwinement of concepts and their others (be those concepts themselves – as in the Hegelian concept of

the concept – or objects). These non-conceptual others are both a constitutive part of the concept, and the limit to its goal of being self-subsistent, complete and self-identical.

There is, however, an irreducible difference between the concept and what it refers to; such a difference is removed, and cast aside, by identity thinking. Adorno's thought explores how though the concept and the object are never identical, one can still only use concepts to describe what is other than concepts, the objects. Adorno's philosophy is charged with the task of explaining how concepts can achieve what concepts prevent. Another way of phrasing the problem is: how can one conduct a critique of concept fetishism by using concepts, without such a critique itself falling prey to the very fetishism it had meant to critique? Is such a critique not itself another form of fetishism?

Concerning the question of a fetish being part of a product, and the analysis of that product, Marx had observed that locating the fetish at the level of the commodity form neither altered the form of the commodity, nor brought about the exorcism of its fetish. As he writes in *Capital*:

The belated scientific discovery that the products of labor, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labor expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labor. Something which is only valid for this particular form of production, the production of commodities, namely the fact that the specific social character of private labors carried on independently of each other consists in their equality as human labor, and, in the product, assumes the form of the existence of value, appears to those caught up in the relations of commodity production (and this is true both before and after the above-mentioned scientific

discovery) to be just as ultimately valid as the fact that the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration.<sup>130</sup>

Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism located non-apparent social relations embedded in a produced object that, in its appearance, hid those social relations. When turning from Marx's analysis to Adorno, we must ask: How can we compare the selling of one's labor time, the private laboring of individuals that assumes a social character when it enters the market, exploitation (that for the Marx of *Capital* was not a moral, but rather an economic category) requisite to procure a profit, and the antagonisms/tensions between the relations of production and the means of production, with Adorno's account of the contradiction of the concept, the violence at work in identity thinking, and his attempt to provide a critique of concept fetishism (the concept must transcend itself)?

Adorno's critique of concept fetishism proceeds to use the concept against the concept. The vigilance of thought turns against its own coercion and aims to shed light on the traces of traditional theory within critical theory itself. Rather than abandon the concept, Adorno's use of the concept is similar to how he and Horkheimer examine (the concept of) enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer provide an immanent critique of the Enlightenment. This immanent critique, however, is in order to ensure that the intention of the Enlightenment does not result in its self-abdication, but is "intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination. The critical part of the first essay can be broadly summed up in two theses: Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."<sup>131</sup> It would be a

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<sup>130</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 167.

<sup>131</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

mistake to read this as a simple identification, followed by its repetition, making it a tautology. Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to show the sedimented mediation and movement at work in the concept (of enlightenment) and its other, the object (of inner and outer nature): “Concepts in face of enlightenment are like those living on unearned income in face of industrial trusts: none can feel secure.”<sup>132</sup>

Much of Adorno’s critique of his intellectual and philosophical contemporaries and predecessors – including Heidegger, Husserl, and Bergson – focuses on their attempts to achieve by other means what can only be achieved by the concept. These thinkers’ supposed anti-, or non-conceptual way of philosophizing, whether it be by categories / concepts called ‘existentials’ or the imprint of sense-experience in the temporal field of duration, were attempts to avoid antinomies located imminently in concepts. While they do not discount the concept, they abandon it due to problems they see at work in the concept. One problem (i.e., the Heideggerian) can be the baggage of metaphysical thinking that condemns that form of thinking from the outset to avoiding, or forgetting, certain questions (i.e., the question of Being). Another problem (found in Husserl) is that the concept misses the very intentional structure of consciousness that reveals itself following a phenomenological reduction. The third problem (for Bergson) associated with the concept is that the concept misses the material and living nature of reality. The concept cannot deal with life, or the temporality of lived experience. These problems cause the various thinkers to seek alternatives. The issue is not to decide whether they were right or wrong, but the problem Adorno sees in their avoiding the concept. By avoiding the concept, they turn a blind eye to a problem that German Idealism had formulated but could not solve: the problem of thought approaching its other. By

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<sup>132</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 17.

avoiding this problem, other philosophical schools brush over an antagonism in thought and attempt, according to Adorno, to solve the antagonism. That antagonism, however, is not solved, merely avoided.

One must not rely too much, however, on the concept. Philosophy must use the concept to avoid an over-reliance on, or tyranny of, the concept. The tyranny of the concept is evident, according to Adorno, in positivism, which uses concepts to define and correspond to brute facts, the hard-given realities of empirical life. This approach, though popular in scientific research and philosophy of science, misses the particularity of the object, what Husserl would call the 'other side' of the object, what lies beyond the horizon of conceptual thought. Concepts are the materials of philosophy. Denial of concept involves a denial of the very modes of thought. There is no other way for philosophers to interpret and change the world than by means of the concept. An overreliance upon the concept, however, is also problematic. It leads to a tyranny of the concept wherein thought is blind the very objects it aimed to see.

Concepts, in short, are not all that there are; for Adorno, there is a dialectical, that is, non-identical, relationship between concepts and what they refer to. Rather than simply taking refuge in the sanctuary of windowless concepts, Adorno's thought aims to relate concepts to what are other than them, objects. In a Kantian manner, we could say, Adorno's thought takes place in the realm between concepts of the understanding and sensibilities of the intuition on the one hand, and the thing-in-itself, on the other.

The reason why Adorno's thought takes place between Kantian phenomena and noumena, between what Kant demarcated as the island of truth and the land of illusion, is that while Adorno recognizes the importance of Kant's reticence to exhaust the object,

and have the concept define what the object is in itself, he at the same time does not want to hypostatize the relationship between concepts and their objects. It is important to remember that Kant had himself warned against both the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity *and* hypostatizing its activity. Has Adorno forgotten this? In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

Hence we can say about the thinking *I* (the soul) – which thinks itself as substance, as simple, as numerically identical in all time, and as the correlate of all existence from which all other existence must be inferred – that it cognizes *not so much itself through the categories*, but cognizes the categories, and through them all objects, in the absolute unity of apperception and hence *through itself*. Now it is, indeed, very evident that what I must presuppose in order to cognize an object at all cannot be cognized as an object by me, and that the determining self (the thinking) is distinct from the determinable self (the thinking subject) as cognition is distinct from the object [cognized]. Nonetheless, nothing is more natural and tempting than the illusion of regarding the unity in the synthesis of thoughts as a perceived unity in the subject of these thoughts. One might call this illusion the subreption of the hypostatized self-consciousness (*apperceptionis substantiatae*).<sup>133</sup>

Kant here warns of hypostatizing the subject's activity, of mistaking thinking for the thinking subject. The *Critique of Pure Reason* draws a boundary line between the objects thought can conceptualize about, and what it cannot. It continues by emphasizing the need to not mistake the activity of thinking with the thinking subject. Adorno's charge against Kant is that the *Critique of Pure Reason* did not go far enough. It did not go far enough, precisely because it assumed that reason could reflect on its own faculties in a

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<sup>133</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A401-402.



way that avoided falling into the realm of illusion; reason, for Kant, can critique itself and this critique does not fall prey to the illusion of reason. It is important to make clear the distinction between reification and hypostatization. While reification would make the subject like an object, thus making an autonomous agent into a heteronomous one, hypostatization would solidify and render static the very dynamic elements found in the subject, object and their relation. Kant is, according to Adorno, guilty of a number of interrelated aspects: he structures the subject to be like the object (the transcendental unity of apperception is the counter-point to the thing-in-itself), he hypostatizes *the relation* between subject and object, and by doing both of those he *reifies* the subject. Though Kant warns against hypostatizing the act of apperception and confusing the thinking with the thinking subject – a warning similar to Adorno’s critique of concept fetishism – Kant nonetheless hypostatizes the *relation* between subject and object. This misses a key aspect of the very fetishism of the concept, that the concept is penetrated by the nonconceptual, harboring this nonconceptual within it. Kant’s attempt to separate the phenomena from noumena, and transcendental subject from empirical content hypostatizes the relation, according to Adorno, between concept and object, opening the door for the fetish of the concept.

We should continue inquiring into reason’s self-criticism – since it is a central concern for Adorno – and ask: what assurances one has that one’s self-criticism is not, as it were, the height of self-delusion, therefore making the critique of reason itself a product of reason’s having fallen prey to dialectical illusion and claiming to have produced an object for the understanding when in fact there is no object? In a lecture, Adorno states:

The difficulty is that we can enquire, how can reason criticize itself? Does not the fact that it criticizes itself mean that it is always caught up in a prejudice? ... Perhaps the crucial distinction between Kant and his successors is that in Kant the reflexivity of reason is conceived in a quite straightforward way, much as with the English empiricists who similarly dissect the mechanisms of reason.<sup>134</sup>

What for Kant was the realm of illusion becomes from Adorno the region from which concepts receive their information and relate it back to them. Concepts are both more and less than what the object is.<sup>135</sup> What inhibits the aim of the concept, however, is the concept itself. Conceptualization is the process by which concepts relate to objects. While discussing the relation between art works and philosophy, and how both treat concepts and the non-conceptual in their own ways, Adorno writes: “What the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfillment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept – the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought – negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation or submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.”<sup>136</sup> How can it accomplish this?

Concept-fetishism is an effect of conceptual thinking, a spell weaved by the cognitive process which could be seen as an inverse of those thinkers that attempt to avoid working with concepts. Adorno opposes negative dialectics (a dialectics without reconciliation) to

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<sup>134</sup> Adorno, *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, 7 (lecture one).

<sup>135</sup> As Adorno says in his lectures from 1965: “in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to. This situation, that the concept is always both more and less than the elements included in it, is not irrational or random; it is a situation that philosophical theory or philosophical critique can and must define in detail.” Adorno, *Lectures on 'Negative Dialectics'*, 7-8 (Lecture 1, The Concept of Contradiction).

<sup>136</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15 (“Infinity”).

the hegemony of identity thinking, reconciliation, and a form of systematizing that would iron out or reduce the importance of inner contradictions and immanent antinomies. He writes:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.<sup>137</sup>

Emphasis should be placed on the last sentence and the claim that the concept does not exhaust the object. Adorno's negative dialectics marshals an anti-systematic system insisting on the non-identity of subject and object, of concept and object. Not everything can be an object for the understanding. The idea(l)s of Reason are precisely those things Reason would like to claim it has access towards. Kant was responding to rationalism's attempt at claiming access to the Absolute, whether proving the existence of God, immortality of the soul, or freedom of the will. Hegel's response to Kant is that such a limiting of Reason, its faculties, and drawing a line between what can be known and what cannot presupposes what it wishes to block: a knowledge of the ideas of Reason. The minute one draws a boundary line around the understanding and limits Reason, one already goes beyond that line; this was the positive aspect of drawing a boundary line. Adorno's critique of concept fetishism vacillates between Hegel's claim to the Absolute, as well as Kant's avoidance of exhausting the object, or thing-in-itself. As Tom Huhn observes:

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<sup>137</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5 ("Dialectics Not a Standpoint").

His [Adorno's] complaint against systematic philosophy was of a piece with his sweeping objection to *methodological* thinking: Both suffer an avoidance of the purported object of inquiry by the very constraints that allow them to have a goal or isolate a phenomenon in the first place. Systematic philosophy and methodological thinking share a predilection for reaching conclusions that too often cannot help but confirm whatever presuppositions are embedded in their premises. In this way, thinking becomes not only opaque to itself but also rigid, like a thing, before it has the opportunity to allow things to encounter it or for it to become something else.<sup>138</sup>

Huhn's observation is important: both methodological thinking and systemic philosophy resemble one another in confirming the very predications they make concerning their objects of study. Method and system go hand in hand for Adorno, and both are to be avoided in the interest of the scarred particular.

Method (as in Spinoza's *more geometrico*) is seen as thought imposing a form of itself on the object from outside, and that whatever does not fit the pre-determined form must either change from its particular state or not be welcome as is. In the example of Spinoza, whatever cannot be defined, or built upon from the definition is not welcome in the system. Method implies the coercion of thought upon content that it does not want to recognize and instead transform. Adorno writes: "All philosophy, even that which intends freedom, carries within its inalienable general elements an unfreedom in which society prolongs its existence. Coercion is inherent in philosophy, yet coercion alone prevents it from regressing into license."<sup>139</sup> The moment of unfreedom that remains in philosophy both impedes the realization of freedom and is the catalyst for philosophical free activity.

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<sup>138</sup> Huhn, *Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 48 ('Substantiality and Method').

Philosophy brushes against the grain of methodological thinking: it thinks the limit of method by what method excludes.

The system, meanwhile, is not tenable for Adorno as it deals with particularity in much the same way as methodological thinking does. To systematize is the general method of the system, and methodological thinking, once used, becomes a system in its own right. Both pre-determine the object because of their formal impositions upon the object. As Adorno makes clear: “the slightest remnant of nonidentity sufficed to deny an identity conceived as total.”<sup>140</sup> This false total identity (‘the whole is false’) results from an inability to properly deal with particularity and nonidentity.

A critique of concept fetishism attempts to break the spell of identity thinking wherein truth is identified with the absolute, the particular unites with the universal, and essence and appearance become one. It is important however that such a critique of concept fetishism, and an attempt to transform identity thinking (which, though not the same thing, are inextricably related) does not itself become a fetish and become hypostatized as if it were an eternal truth removed from historical and socio-economic circumstances. Critique, for Adorno, involves a self-critique and a constant attempt to undo thought reifying the very forms of its own mode of behavior. The type of thinking offered by negative dialectics is based around models. Models are constructed from concepts that becomes the hieroglyph to read the antinomy between the particular and universal without resolving them. Adorno’s critique forces a reevaluation of ‘the concept’:

The substance of concepts is to them both immanent, as far as the mind is concerned, and transcendent as far as being is concerned. To be aware of this is

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<sup>140</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 22 (‘Attitude Toward Systems’).

to be able to get rid of concept fetishism. Philosophical reflection makes sure of the nonconceptual in the concept. It would be empty otherwise, according to Kant's dictum; in the end, having ceased to be a concept of anything at all, it would be nothing.<sup>141</sup>

While philosophy cannot do without the concept, the uses of the concept for philosophy undergo a change. How can the concept continue to be utilized even though its very formation attempts to obfuscate the nonconceptual, somatic, and heterogeneous elements? Non-conceptuality is itself immanent to the concept. What, however, is the status of this immanence? Is this immanence an ahistorical immanence, hypostatizing and rendering immediate the very thing Adorno stressed needed to be mediated? Or is immanence of the non-conceptual itself dialectically mediated? The former would not only trouble Adorno's aim to critique the fetishism of the concept, but would also have his thinking be similar to Kant's in hypostatizing noumena, or the non-conceptual. The fetish of the concept attempts to avoid this non-conceptual element that is nonetheless an irreducible element. Yet, the question remains: does the critique of conceptual fetishism fall prey to what it strives to avoid in its attempt at rendering immanent the non-conceptual element? Adorno's critique of concept fetishism must respond to this charge and show the dialectical mediation at work in the non-conceptual that is immanent to the conceptual. He answers this dilemma by making explicit that which is implicit in critiquing concept fetishism: using the concept to transcend the concept means making conscious that which is unconscious in the concept.<sup>142</sup> Adorno writes:

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<sup>141</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 12 ('Disenchantment of the Concept').

<sup>142</sup> As Freud mentions in his 1917 lectures on psychoanalysis: "the task of psycho-analytic treatment can be expressed in this formula: its task is to make conscious everything that is pathogenically unconscious." Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 350 ("Lecture XVIII: Fixation to Traumas – The Unconscious").

The point which thinking aims at its material is not solely a spiritualized control of nature. While doing violence to the objects of its syntheses, our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done. In philosophy, this unconscious tendency becomes conscious. Accompanying irreconcilable thoughts is the hope for reconciliation, because the resistance of thought to mere things in being, the commanding freedom of the subject, intends in the object even that of which the object was deprived by objectification.<sup>143</sup>

A critique of concept-fetishism sheds light on the unconscious of the concept. How does this operate and what does an unconscious of the concept mean? How can one speak of an unconscious when discussing concept-formation? What does an unconscious mean for a concept, and what is the relationship between what psychoanalysis, starting with Freud, named the unconscious and then further specified as id, on the one hand, and the concept, the dialectical process of conceptualization relating a subject and an object, on the other hand?

#### (Pre-)History of the Unconscious of the Concept

The relation between Freud and philosophy offers Adorno an approach to the relation between the object and philosophy, and of critiquing that which condemns the concept to become its own fetish. The concept's narcissistic tendencies result in the concept taking the object it responds to as an object of its own creation. The world is created in the concept's image, and the concept is blind to the very world it finds itself in. By exposing the unconscious of the concept, Adorno shows how a critique of concept fetishism avoids fetishizing its results.

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<sup>143</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 19 ('Presentation').

While agreeing with the fact that there is an unconscious, Freudian psychoanalysis will quickly oppose any misapplication of the unconscious.<sup>144</sup> It is necessary that one not mis-recognize the intended locus for applying the concept of the unconscious, and not assign an unconscious where it does not belong, i.e. the concept. The unconscious is itself a *concept*, and it refers, whether topographically, descriptively, or dynamically, in its expanded view of subjectivity, to the non-conscious conditions that continue to constitute and affect the psyche. Freud writes: “The division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis.”<sup>145</sup> If anything, the unconscious is *the* discovery of psychoanalysis and at the same time what will establish psychoanalysis as a science. The mis-application of the unconscious in either analogical or other non-scientific situations is itself a danger to the scientific status afforded to psychoanalysis as well as the unconscious. The unconscious, with psychoanalysis, ceases to be a metaphor or description applied to the heroes of literature, what Kant negatively called *psychological* as a non-philosophical category, as opposed to the *transcendental*.

For Freud, not every action or thought can be conscious; indeed, not every action or thought is. One need only reflect on the supposed “dregs” – for example, dreams and parapraxes (slips of the tongue) – of human action and thought in order to form a better understanding of what Freud means by the presence of an unconscious, a pre-conscious,

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<sup>144</sup> This chapter is not the place to show the historical evolution of the Freudian concept of the unconscious. The main works where Freud marks the various stages of the transformation of the unconscious include, *Interpretation of Dreams*, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, “The Unconscious”, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *Ego and Id*, and *Civilization and its Discontents*.

<sup>145</sup> Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 3.



an id, and the productive process that goes by the name repression.<sup>146</sup> It is precisely with the concept of the unconscious that Freud attempts to widen what philosophers and psychologists understand as the psychic field. Furthermore, Freud situates his discovery as the complement to the Copernican Revolution undertaken at the level of epistemology by Kant:

In psycho-analysis there is no choice for us but to assert that mental processes are in themselves unconscious, and to liken the perception of them by means of consciousness to the perception of the external world by means of the sense-organs....Just as Kant had warned us not to overlook the fact that our perceptions are subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with what is perceived though unknowable, so psych-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes which are their object.<sup>147</sup>

This passage is important for multiple reasons. The first is Freud's invocation of Kant, by way of similarity (if not analogy), to make more explicit the importance of and reason behind invoking the unconscious. The second is the content of this analogy, the psychoanalytic prospect of the unconscious and how Kant's Copernican Revolution is understood. The stance of the analyst is presented in a manner similar to the critical theorist. Not only is Freud comparing the very presence of the unconscious with Kant's Copernican Revolution, and his critical system's attempt to address the subject-object relation that surpasses both empiricism's and rationalism's limits (whilst acknowledging

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<sup>146</sup> Freud mentions psychoanalysis' focus on the 'dregs' of the phenomenal world and our daily lives in his *Introductory Lectures to Psycho-analysis* (see lecture 2). Adorno will similarly invoke this metaphor in his *Lectures on 'Negative Dialectics'* (see lecture 6).

<sup>147</sup> Freud, "The Unconscious", *Standard Edition, Vol. 14: On the History of the Pscho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metaphyschology, and Other Works*, 171.

their insight), but also the very manner by which one should approach the object under consideration – in the case of Freud, the subject on the couch, and their neuroses.

At the formal level there is a similarity between the discovery of Freud and the discovery of Kant. Just as Kant did not forgo perception but rather used perception to establish objectivity via the categories of the understanding, the pure forms of the intuition, and the transcendental unity of apperception; so too Freud will aim to show that one cannot simply stay with consciousness, nor abandon it entirely, but show the non-conscious elements that are nonetheless irreducibly part of the psyche. Freud focuses on the transformed aspects of the unconscious within consciousness; an example of this is the production of a dream and the transition from latent to manifest dream content. This makes what is consciousness, if anything, assume a great more depth – hence *depth psychology* – than it had previously. There is also a similarity of the content concerning Kant's Copernican Revolution and Freud's discovery of the unconscious. This content is precisely the situation of the analyst with regard to the 'object' under study. The object in this case is the psyche of the patient. The relationship between the unconscious and the ego – what will later, due to the vague determination of the unconscious, become the division between id, ego, and super-ego – is ultimately about the relation between the subject under analysis and an object, the relationship between the patient and an object.

The very difficulty, much as Kant's difficulty of addressing the thing-in-itself, is that the unconscious can never be accessed directly; whether following the transformation of that which is latent in the unconscious (and preconscious) into that which is manifest in consciousness, whether by slips of the tongue, or dreams, or dealing with various resistances at the level of consciousness concerning points of inquiry towards that which

is repressed and found in the unconscious, Freud will maintain that the unconscious cannot be accessed directly. The unconscious-in-itself will not be known, but this does not mean any knowledge of the unconscious is impossible.

Freud is at great pains to define psychoanalysis as a science. He, furthermore, continually downplays the amount of speculative thought at work in his practice, highlighting instead the empirical research that is done. Even when it comes to his meta-psychological papers, one finds Freud continually basing new hypotheses – which are always at the highest and most glorious of speculative altitudes, overburdened as Nietzsche's Zarathustra with wisdom – or attempting to ground them in case studies, or upon psychological types, cases of neuroses. His comparison, whether it be similarity or analogy, is interesting since he is relying upon philosophy in order to show the road undertaken by psychoanalysis. But, beyond simple analogy, at the level of content too we find Freud comparing even the method of understanding the unconscious to the one undertaken by Kant. The analyst provides us with an architectonic and dynamic of the psyche. One need look no further than Freud himself when it comes to discovering the figure that opposes discussion of the unconscious so much. When it comes to the unconscious, Freud writes:

[H]ere we have the first shibboleth of psycho-analysis. To most people who have been educated in philosophy the idea of anything psychical which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic. I believe this is only because they have never studied the relevant phenomena of hypnosis and dreams, which – quite apart from pathological

manifestations – necessitate this view. Their psychology of consciousness is incapable of solving the problems of dreams and hypnosis.<sup>148</sup>

The history of psychoanalysis shows the opposition the concept of the unconscious faced, both from psychoanalysts and philosophers.<sup>149</sup> It is strange, then, that Freud would, in order to situate the scientific import of the unconscious and psychoanalysis, invoke a comparison with a figure (Kant) for whom the unconscious causes discontent. Freud gives the philosophic devil its due in order to grant psychoanalysis the power to analyze the demon on the couch.

The analogy Freud establishes between his discovery of the unconscious and Kant's Copernican Revolution helps us better understand what Adorno means by claiming to make what is unconscious in the concept conscious, and that philosophy (negative dialectics) aims, via its analysis of the dregs (whether as aphorism, the particular, appearance, the negative – multiple figures of dreg and ruin abound in Adorno's writings), to make what is unconscious in the concept conscious. For Adorno, the object has primacy over the subject. This insight guides the claim that one can no longer construct a critique of political economy in the traditionally Marxist way. The attempt to undo concept fetishism, as well as the aim of making conscious what is unconscious in

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<sup>148</sup> Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Is the shibboleth of psycho-analysis not similar to the shibboleth Marx (and Engels) introduce in the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party'? This vehement opposition to the Freudian unconscious persists, perhaps all the more, even after it had been accepted even by some philosophers in the writings of Sartre. Beginning with *Transcendence of the Ego* and continuing into *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre repeatedly brings up his aversion to what he considers the Freudian unconscious, an impersonal agency determining conscious thoughts and action, and opposes his existential psychoanalysis to Freud's. It is with his *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that Sartre begins to introduce Freudian (Lacanian) psychoanalysis into his writings. Along with sociology, Marxism, and existential philosophy, psychoanalysis makes up one of the movements required to present a totalizing view of History. His interest and knowledge of Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes evident, above all, in his psychoanalytic biographies, especially of Jean Genet (*Saint Genet*) and Gustave Flaubert (*Family Idiot*).

the concept is thus to expose and immanently critique the reifying aspects at the heart of concept-production. The way to understand Adorno's critique of concept fetishism as well as *making conscious* what is unconscious in the concept involves Adorno dialectically mediating between the analogy established by Freud, the analogy between the discovery of the unconscious, and Kant's Copernican Revolution.

Adorno's analysis of the unconscious of the concept mediates between Freud's analysis of the unconscious and Kant's Copernican Revolution.<sup>150</sup> Adorno thus dialectically mediates between the internal dynamic of the psyche as established by Freud, and the external relation between subject and object that Kant had established. Adorno's analysis, however, will emphasize the primacy of the object in both cases. What does this mean? How are we to understand Adorno's making conscious what is unconscious *in the concept* as mediating between Freud's analysis of the unconscious and Kant's analysis between the subject of knowledge and the object known?

Adorno's analysis involves highlighting that underlying both relations, the internal (Freudian) and external (Kantian), is itself a subject-object relation. Freud's concept of the unconscious is, at bottom, a relation of the patient under analysis to an object. Similarly, Kant's external relation is itself between the transcendental unity of apperception and the object. Both Freud and Kant locate a limit, a block to the analyst and critical theorist. In the case of Freud this limit is the unconscious. For Kant, the limit is the thing-in-itself. Adorno's unconscious of the concept is nothing more than an attempt to think by way of the concept its own limit. This limit is the object.

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<sup>150</sup> The philosophical predecessor for such a momentous insight was Hegel; in particular, his *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. The difference between Adorno's insight and Hegel's will be the subject of the next chapter. As it turns out, and as Lyotard also knew, the devil will reside in the difference between Hegel's and Adorno's insights, and ultimately their conception of dialectics.

The object is not only external to the concept, but internal and a catalyst to its own production. Kant's mistake, according to Adorno, was to hypostatize the relation between subject and object, such that the limit the thing-in-itself was became superfluous to the subject, to the knower. It mattered not to the transcendental unity of apperception that the thing-in-itself was external to its knowledge. Hegel's insight – that once Kant situated a boundary for reason, reason is already involved in the very dialectical movement that the boundary was meant to inhibit – is used by Adorno and turned around upon consciousness itself: The transcendental unity of apperception becomes just as unknowable to itself, as the thing-in-itself became to it. Both are hypostatized and become the blind spots that form the foci of the ellipse that is the critical system.

Adorno's analysis of the unconscious of the concept mediates dialectically between Freud's analysis of the unconscious and Kant's relation between subject and object. Adorno supplements the movement between subject and object via recourse to Freud's analysis of the unconscious. Such an attempt aims to forestall objections that his vacillation between the subject and object mimics Kant in a way that it, like Kant, hypostatizes the object, or thing-in-itself. One objection is that Adorno reads the object ahistorically and ontologizes the priority of the object.

Adorno's reading of Freud and his concrete attempt to make the unconscious conscious strives towards preserving the object's primacy without reifying, or hypostatizing, such primacy. Hypostatizing the object's primacy, or the limit of the concept, would thus invert the primacy of the object, making the non-conceptual forever an immediate or self-same gap *within* conceptual thinking. The Freudian unconscious provides Adorno with a dynamic and dialectical reading of the relation between subject

and object, without hypostatizing that relation. The conditions within conceptual thought that makes hypostatization possible are examined. Freud had distinguished his discovery of the unconscious from Kant's Copernican revolution. It will be helpful to return to it:

Like the physical, the psychical is not necessarily in reality what it appears to be.

We shall be glad to learn, however, that the correction of internal perception will turn out not to offer such great difficulties as the correction of external perception

– that the internal objects are less unknowable than the external world.<sup>151</sup>

Adorno's attempt to shed light on the unconscious of the concept begins by reflecting philosophically upon Freud's psychoanalytic reflection upon/analogy with Kant's Copernican Revolution. The concept marks a movement between subject(s) and object(s). As a movement that marks the philosophical experience that Adorno wishes to examine, the concept also falls prey to its own coercive logic. Reading the development and movement of the concept along Freud's concept of the unconscious (later id) allows Adorno to reflect upon the presence of the fetish within conceptualization.

Adorno's reveals the coercive elements of conceptual thought that would undermine the primacy of the object through a hypostatization of the object. This reading bears similarities and is influenced by Freud's reflections. Freud had, in the *Ego and the Id*, already noticed a similarity between the id and the super-ego (the moral agency that perpetually makes the ego feel guilty). The id is closer structurally to the super-ego, than either are to the ego. The unconscious of the concept is precisely the place that Adorno aims to locate and critique the fetish of the concept. The unconscious of the concept

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<sup>151</sup> Freud, "The Unconscious," *Standard Edition, Vol. 14: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metaphyschology, and Other Works*, 171.

locates the reifying tendencies at work in the production of the concept, what results in its being an apology for reality without critiquing it.

For Adorno, Kant's *Critique* both critiques and salvages metaphysics and ontology. This 'salvaging' of metaphysics occurs as a result of Kant's neutrality with regard to the idea(l)s of Reason: the freedom of the will, immortality of the soul, and the existence of God. That these three cannot be objects for the understanding, necessitates a suspension of determining them as objects of knowledge, thus a neutrality with regard to the status of whether or not the idea(l)s of Reason are objects for cognition. Though we infinitely approximate these idea(l)s we can never definitively reach them; this movement is similar to a hyperbola's movement towards – infinitely approximating but never reaching – its asymptote. Kant's antinomies, and the fact that he both proves and disproves the three idea(l)s, is the point where Adorno locates both a critique and salvaging of metaphysics:

The chief consequence is that this neutrality points to a critique of metaphysics as a science, on the one hand, while at another level, in a different dimension, it leaves open the possibility of reinstating or salvaging metaphysics. The point I wish to make is that the turn to the subject is a radical shift in the sense that instead of enquiring into the validity of our knowledge, we now look to the root of the matter and reflect on our ability to know. But on the other hand, because of this process of reflection decisions about the essential questions of metaphysics are suspended, at least as far as questions of cognition are concerned.<sup>152</sup>

Post-Kantian thought, with Hegel and Schelling at the forefront, located the prime philosophical problem as the Absolute. For Hegel the Absolute was precisely what had to be thought and grasped. No longer can reason shirk its responsibility of speaking about

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<sup>152</sup> Adorno, *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, 47-48 (Lecture Five).



the Absolute; no longer, for Hegel, can reason draw a boundary around itself to mark an area in which it has no jurisdiction. Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena, between thing-in-itself and an object of perception that results from a synthesis of the categories of the understanding and the pure forms of the intuition is posited by Adorno in a favorable light, as a counterpoint to the gluttony of idealist philosophy which not only devours and exhausts the object, but also has (ontological) priority over the object: "The system is mind [Spirit] turned belly, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism. It disfigures even Kant's humanism and refutes the aura of higher and nobler things in which he knew how to garb it."<sup>153</sup> Kant's insistence on setting up a limit to reason's own insistent activities, his desire to end all endless debates fought on the metaphysical battlefield, and his leaving a portion of the object unreachable by the concept are concerted efforts to forestall immanent problems of reason, without abandoning reason.

Kant nonetheless falls prey to a hypostatization that Adorno wants to avoid. Adorno similarly wishes to avoid the Hegelian position of concept swallowing the object. Negative dialectics vacillates endlessly between these two positions. Adorno, in critiquing the fetish of the concept, warns against this critique itself becoming a fetish and in thus hypostatizing the very priority of the object reifying thought once again:

In criticizing ontology we do not aim at another ontology, not even at one of being nonontological. If that were our purpose we would be merely positing another 'first' – not absolute identity, this time, not the concept, not Being, but

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<sup>153</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 23 ('Idealism as Rage'), trans. mod. Žižek provides a brilliant counter to the reading of Hegel, Hegelian philosophy, and the gluttony of Absolute Knowledge in his "Hegel and Shitting: the Idea's Constipation" in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*.

nonidentity, facticity, entity. We would be hypostatizing the concept of nonconceptuality and thus acting counter to its meaning.<sup>154</sup>

Identity thinking has provided modern philosophy with the ground upon which all philosophizing occurs. Whether in its rationalist or empiricist forms, philosophy's reliance upon identity thinking has come to assume the form of the very idols that it once marshaled identity thinking against. That Spinoza's parallelism separated theory and practice, mind and body, thought and extension by an unbridgeable gap does not undo the fact that they are but two, of an infinite amount of, attributes that like parallel lines unite in the horizon of the one Substance. Kant's greatness was to draw a boundary line between phenomenon and noumenon; though, depending upon interpretation, noumena may or may not *cause* the phenomena, the latter is certainly not reducible to the former. The price paid for, however, was that Kant hypostatized what Adorno takes to be historically mediated.

Post-Kantian philosophy, in particular Hegel, sought to think the Absolute. Such an attempt was commensurate with the thought that concepts grasp the content of the world. For Adorno, philosophy could no longer claim to grasp and conceptualize the whole: "Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises begin with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real."<sup>155</sup> That philosophy and the various philosophical movements fall prey, as it were, to identity-thinking does not stem from only a weakness or lack in that philosophical system; rather, such traces of identity-thinking reflect the

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<sup>154</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 136 ('The Indissoluble "Something"').

<sup>155</sup> Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," 120.

strength and compulsion of identity-thinking. Not to be read as an external hindrance or block of philosophy, identity-thinking is immanent to philosophical systems.

The problem, then, facing philosophy, according to Adorno is not unlike the problem faced by Kant.

To be worthy of thought, philosophy must rid itself of such naivete. But its critical self-reflection must not halt before the highest peaks of its history. Its task would be to inquire whether and how there can still be philosophy at all, now that Hegel's has fallen, just as Kant inquired into the possibility of metaphysics after the critique of rationalism. If Hegel's dialectics constituted the unsuccessful attempt to use philosophical concepts for coping with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts, the relationship to dialectics is due for an accounting insofar as his attempt failed.<sup>156</sup>

While Adorno cannot follow Kant's solution, he also will have problems following the Hegelian solution. Rendering conscious what was unconscious of the concept leads us to the problem of the concept of the concept, and how to read the relation between subject and object in a more dynamic manner. The following chapter will formulate problems and questions that Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy must respond to if it is to provide a critique of political economy. In particular, the following chapter examines possible Hegelian objections to Adorno's philosophy.

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<sup>156</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 4 ("The Possibility of Philosophy").

## CHAPTER 4

### Irreconcilable Hegel Amidst the Ruins of Negative Dialectics

#### Introduction

Philosophy – Adorno's included – is caught within an either/or political economic bind. Whether critical or not, it must either think economically when dealing with political economy, or avoid economic thinking in order to address values and practices not caught within an economic web. Avoiding economic thinking imprisons intellectuals in their own socio-economically determined social role separating them from their condition of possibility. Thinking economically, even in the form of critique, reduces mind to apologetics for the object of critique.

Adorno's thinking moves from the economically-motivated critique of political economy to the social and political critique of political-economy. Adorno critiques political economy by locating and interrogating the failure of philosophy in the historical development of both political economy and its critiques. The system of philosophy – which had reached its greatest form in Hegel's thought for Adorno – has failed its task (comprehending the unfolding of reality), and continues to survive. This survival, however, is an incomplete or ruined survival, and must be thought as such. It is due to this that Adorno returns, without regressing, to Hegel and Hegel's concept (of the concept) in an effort to keep alive a social and political critique of political economy.

Adorno's philosophical practice raises a fundamental problem and question for anyone attempting to philosophize: conceptualizing results in a fetish. The formation of the concept causes the conditions of the concept's possibility to be, if not forgotten, rendered secondary to the concept itself. By prioritizing itself the concept reverses the

order of knowing (the development of knowledge) and sees itself as forming the object in its image. This story naturalizes the historical formation of the concept and erases the socio-historical and material conditions for philosophical conceptualization. In other words, thinking about what one would like to think about reveals (as Hegel and Kant already knew) subjective preference and the preponderance of conceptualization to situate its responses to the object independent of its dependence upon the object. Conceptualization thus justifies its own condition for being without acknowledging its condition for possibility. Concept fetishism says this and nothing more: conceptualization erases its own condition of possibility and replaces its own activity for the creation of the object it is supposed to respond to.

Critiquing concept fetishism invites a counter-critique: that such a critique reproduces the very fetishism it was supposed to negate. In order to forestall that criticism, Adorno's critique extends to exposing what remains unconscious in the concept. This exposure aims for conscious self-critical reflection. By rendering conscious what had remained unconscious Adorno's critique reveals not only the processes conceptualization has to go through in order to arrive at its end-point, but also the unacknowledged non-conceptual (i.e., objective) condition for possibility. Due to the inexhaustibility of the object by the concept there remains a possibility of an unfinished, or perpetually open, interpretive process.

Whether or not that perennial activity, however, is a bad infinite or a good is determined by the activities of the concept and the way in which it responds to the object. Though he does not address explicitly the danger of an infinite regress (Aristotle's so-called third man argument), Adorno stresses the non-harmonious and, therefore, restless

relation between the concept and the object. A way of conceptualizing this interminable relation can be shown in Adorno's own situating the absence of Hegel from philosophical discourse, yet the necessity of Hegel:

At the present time Hegelian philosophy, and all dialectical thought, is subject to the paradox that it has been rendered obsolete by science and scholarship while at the same time more timely than ever in its opposition to them. This paradox must be endured and not concealed under a cry of 'back to...' or an effort to divide the sheep from the goats in Hegel's philosophy. Whether we have only an academic renaissance of Hegel that it is itself long outdated or whether contemporary consciousness finds in Hegel a truth content whose time is due depends on whether that paradox is endured or not.<sup>157</sup>

So too, the paradox concerning the relation between subject and object must be *endured*. The possibility of one's open interpretation resulting in an infinite regress is always there for Adorno and his philosophical comportment is one of enduring the paradox. As Adorno makes clear, "rescuing Hegel – and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him – means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from where its untruth is obvious."<sup>158</sup> Adorno's contesting position refers to the concept (of the concept), dialectic, and the status of the object. Negative dialectics moves from the fractured totality to the question/possibility of an appropriate response to a previously scorned object. Adorno's critique of Hegelian dialectics and the concept will be twofold: the system forces a totality where it does not exist (philosophy and system are identical in Hegel), and the universality the system strives for is at the expense of the particular object that it neglects. Adorno's critique emphasizes negativity, antitheses (non-

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<sup>157</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 55-56 ("The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy").

<sup>158</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 83 ("The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy").

reconciliation), and the particular (which neither avoids nor is fully encapsulated by the universal).

Adorno's negative dialectics are condemned to conceptual thinking, whilst also wanting to surpass concepts, particularly in the direction of deforming socio-economic forces. We only have concepts available to us; conceptual thinking is the only possibility between the subject and its other, be that the object, or the non-conceptual. The concept must achieve what the concept alone bars. Such a formulation of conceptual thinking harkens back to a Kantianism that Hegel had surpassed. Is negative dialectical thinking *crippled* by the concept, and if so, what promise or hope does it offer to critiquing political economy, arguably the source of and force for impoverishment and crippling? Concept fetishism itself only operates with concepts and examples; how does Adorno's use of models accomplish his aim of avoiding the danger of examples? Adorno writes:

Part Three [of *Negative Dialectics*] elaborates models of negative dialectics. They are not examples; they do not simply elucidate general reflections. Guiding into the substantive realm, they seek simultaneously to do justice to the topical intention of what has initially, of necessity, been generally treated – as opposed to the use of examples which Plato introduced and philosophy repeated ever since: as matters of indifference in themselves. The models are to make plain what negative dialectics is and to bring it into the realm of reality, in line with its own concept.<sup>159</sup>

Models, therefore, create a constellation wherein concepts do not erase the object they responded to. The responsibility of the concept, after Adorno, is to reject the conceptual temptation to exhaust its object. Besides a temptation, however, such exhaustion is also

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<sup>159</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx (Preface).

impossible. It is important, however, that in claiming it is impossible, one should not hypostatize this impossibility. The impossibility of exhausting definitively and absolutely the object, or the non-conceptual is not itself a bad infinity.

Adorno's negative dialectics are an immanent critique of Hegelian dialectics. Adorno's negative dialectics and return to Hegel signal how thought, which cannot grasp totality, holds onto a concept of totality that reveals itself in scarred particularities, which manifest the totalizing violence of political-economic forces. Philosophy cannot do without a concept of totality, whose object has deformed philosophical thinking. The imperative for philosophy to continue, then, must begin with the thinker of totality and dialectics *par excellence*: Hegel.

#### The Economy of Negative Dialectics

The distinguishing feature of Adorno's thought from Hegel's concerns identity. In contrast to the Hegelian identity of subject and object, and of identity and nonidentity, Adorno stresses their non-identity. This, indeed, is Adorno's rule concerning (negative) dialectics:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.<sup>160</sup>

And, again, in the same section:

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<sup>160</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5 ("Dialectics Not a Standpoint").



Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself. Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.<sup>161</sup>

The guilt of thought is based upon thought's unacknowledged debt to what it is thinking: the object. Thought achieves its purpose at the expense of the particular (that cannot be thought without the universal that nonetheless is violent towards it) and the object (that cannot be conceptualized independent of the concept that seeks to exhaust it).

Adorno's anti-system should not be read as being an anti-Hegelianism. Rather than being an antithesis to Hegel, Adorno emphasizes the antitheses *within* Hegel. The antitheses within Hegel occur at places where Hegel, according to Adorno, forgets himself, or goes against his own intentions. Examples of this, taken from the *Minima Moralia*'s 'Dedication,' include:

"In relation to the subject Hegel does not respect the demand that he otherwise passionately upholds: to be in the matter and not 'always beyond it', to 'penetrate into the immanent content of the matter'.<sup>162</sup>

"They [aphorisms] insist, in opposition to Hegel's practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity."<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5 ("Dialectics Not a Standpoint").

<sup>162</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 16.

<sup>163</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 16.

“The dismissive gesture which Hegel, in contradiction to his own insight, constantly accords the individual, derives paradoxically enough from his necessary entanglement in liberalistic thinking.”<sup>164</sup>

The implicit claim in these qualified statements goes against the universal grain of Hegel’s discourse, while remaining *true* to particularity.<sup>165</sup> Hegel’s forgetting himself, an example of the universal’s *mania* in Hegel, is where the dialectic between universal and particular is decided in favor of the universal. Adorno’s immanent critique of Hegel looks to those moments and instances that Hegel’s philosophy would make examples, or particularities. ‘Auschwitz’, as a phrase and historical period, is not an example. It is not one extreme example of the slaughterbench of history. It testifies to the irrational as real. The economy of negative dialectics aims to understand the incomplete transaction between concepts and objects, and how Adorno’s negative dialectics eschews the adequation-theory of knowledge and critique.

The economy of negative dialectics undermines the affirmation that the negation of negation yields in Hegel’s system and understanding of society: “Civil society is an antagonistic totality. It survives only in and through its antagonisms and is not able to resolve them.”<sup>166</sup> Adorno’s *negative* dialectics will, then, in an effort to emphasize non-identity return to the object. It is the priority of the object that must be revisited.

What does it mean for the object to have priority? And is this priority simply a formal one or one extending itself to particular objects; in other words, do we have a priority of *the* object as opposed to the priority of *any* particular object? Furthermore, how does

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<sup>164</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 16-17.

<sup>165</sup> These do not exhaust examples where Adorno makes similar qualifying statements to clarify his reading of Hegel; *Hegel: Three Studies* can be read as an expansion, and making explicit, of the implicit claims of these statements.

<sup>166</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 28.

negative dialectics facilitate the concept to approach an object that has priority? One cannot escape, in Adorno's philosophy, the use of concepts.<sup>167</sup> One can neither forego concepts, nor rectify what concepts lack. What concepts lack is immanent to and constitutive of them. This is not a reason, however, for concepts to be abandoned like the discarded shell of Spirit in the past:

What the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfillment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept – the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought – negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.<sup>168</sup>

That philosophy must strive by way of the concept to transcend the concept is a task for thinking. Concepts refer to that which is other than thought and to that which thought refers. It is not possible anymore – though it is doubtful that it ever was – for one to provide an adequation model, or correspondence theory, of knowledge, that concepts correspond to their objects. There is a fundamental nonidentity between the two. That such a nonidentity still goes by the name of equality and identity is the fallacy that Adorno's thought exposes, without however giving up using the concept. This is a critique of Husserl, Bergson, and Heideggerian ontology. One can, furthermore, not go to the other side and insist upon the need to find and provide facts for all knowledge claims, as the positivists had done. The first principle of positivism is itself unable to be grounded in facts, and the insistence upon facts reifies the thinker and the object while

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<sup>167</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 sketched how Adorno's 'concept of the concept', his attempt to render conscious the unconscious of the concept, situates and provides a model for his critique of political economy.

<sup>168</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15 ("Infinity").

barring the possibility of experiencing the particular which is supposed to be the object of study.

Adorno does not critique these figures or schools in order to say that negative dialectics goes *beyond* them, or that these thinkers should not be read since they incorrectly attempt to provide an account of knowledge. Such a way of dismissing them would fall prey to the very logic of competition that the market subjects everything between heaven and earth to. Philosophy cannot escape this logic, however:

No theory today escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility among competing opinions' all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no blinders for thought to don against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising.<sup>169</sup>

Just as one could not, for Leibniz, see thought enacted were they to enlarge the mind to step into it as one would a house and see its machinations, so too, is it impossible to enter the marketplace, the trading-floor, and observe the movement of capital and commodities. In this sense, the invisible hand is a fitting metaphor; to ascribe a cunning of reason behind such a hand, however, misses the mark. The invisible hand is the rationalized name irrationality goes by. It is no longer possible – if it ever was – for a philosopher to enter the marketplace and enter into dialogue with others about their practices, unless those practices will yield a profit to one; the practices that one would like to hold others responsible for become a second-nature, for which there is no first, and are stripped from the actors as soon as they are done. One's intentions and actions assume

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<sup>169</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 4 (Dialectics not a Standpoint). This section is, along with Adorno's article "Progress", a re-reading of Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill' from the "Theses on the Concept of History".

extra-intentional and extra-subjective effects, and one is forced to toe the line if one is to continue acting.

The self-advertising that thought within the marketplace deteriorates into is an instance of the pseudo-schematism of the culture industry which reduces cultural products to advertisements for themselves (for that which they do not deliver). The effect upon thought is that thought becomes the opposite of what it aims for, a product. The fetishism of the commodity extends to the concept closing the vicious circle, and Aristotle's account of god, as 'thought thinking thought', is the provincialism of a thinking that would like to claim it stayed away from the cities and, thus, the market. That no thought today can escape the marketplace presents thought with a task, a task to think the coercion external to it that makes thought act a particular way. Adorno's claim should not be read as a universal claim that thought can never escape the marketplace – such a claim would end up becoming an apology for the very thing it critiqued. It is rather an attempt to show thought its extra-theoretical propensities, the irrationalism that can dominate reason.

This is the theoretical imperative of negative dialectics:

Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means. But since it must use these means, it is at every moment in danger of itself acquiring a coercive character. The ruse of reason would like to hold sway over the dialectic too.<sup>170</sup>

The coercion of logic is the (un-/mis-)recognized moment of irrationality at work in reason. Such coercion is the force of heteronomy dominating the intention of autonomy. The catch is precisely that heteronomy can survive even after the domination of nature;

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<sup>170</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 150 ('Bequest').

the analogous political concern is to have barbarism survive its fascist form and exist in democracy. Dialectical thought must be rigorous in locating and critiquing such forms of coercive logic, or administrative reason, persisting and driving autonomy.

We can summarize Adorno's main points concerning the priority of negative dialectics in the following form of antagonistic theses, or anti-theses:

1. Negative dialectics is the non-identity of identity and non-identity.
2. Negative dialectics means the priority of the object and the inexhaustibility of the object by the concept.
3. Negative dialectics emphasizes thesis and antithesis against synthesis. This is not an external opposition, but one internal to the antagonistic unity of 'synthesis itself'. Adorno's emphasis is upon the forgotten, or repressed, antitheses within syntheses.
4. The negation of negation does not only yield an affirmation. What survives internal to the affirmation is negation, the labor of the negative.
5. Surviving negativity. This can be morally negative as well as structurally, philosophically negative. Examples of surviving 'negativity' – almost in the form of the Freudian death drive – include: discontinuity that survives within the continuity and continuum of history, irrationalism that is internal to rationalism, fascism that survives within democracy (thus surviving its demise at the level of the warring nation states), unreason that survives and becomes a part of reason (this is instrumental, calculative reason which stems from the increasing rationalization of society)

The purpose of negative dialectics is to return to a certain kind of subjectivity, a subjectivity that would no longer contribute to the bad, or false, whole of which it is nonetheless a part. The violence of the whole coerces subjectivity to adapt. The adaptation required inflicts a violence upon subjectivity that subjectivity then inflicts upon other subjectivities. Adorno's philosophical practice is accused of performing an unhappy consciousness. While this critique is trenchant it does not assess the historical conditions and possibilities for that unhappy consciousness. If Adorno's philosophy performs the moves of unhappy consciousness we need to see in what way and opposed to what.

#### Adorno and/as Unhappy Consciousness

Adorno's negative dialectics immanently critique Hegelian dialectics. This claim invites a number of criticisms. Three particular criticisms, formulated in a Hegelian manner, are:

1. Adorno's account of, and understanding of subjectivity is the subjectivity that Hegel describes as unhappy consciousness.
2. Adorno's negative dialectics is a model of what Hegel called a bad infinity.
3. Adorno engages in an indeterminate negation, not determinate negation.

The three moments that I will focus on thus shows negative dialectics at work, because negative dialectics arises *as a problem* within dialectics – one that cannot be sublated without a remainder, never to be fully integrated. In this regard, it is incorrect to call negative dialectics a method. It is the anti-method that survives the dialectic being made into method by 20<sup>th</sup> century spokesmen of DIAMAT. I use site and moment interchangeably, and will replace their use with the word constellation, in an effort to show the static and dynamic aspects of negative dialectics. Negative dialectics is no more ephemeral than everlasting. The three sites and moments are: Adorno's insistence that

negative dialectics aims for a priority of the object, that the negation of a negation does not simply become an affirmation, and that the concept of totality must be critiqued. As Mauro Bozzetti writes: “Adorno’s move beyond Hegel’s system must be situated not outside of but within its logical-metaphysical structure.”<sup>171</sup> Negative dialectics is a problem within dialectics, the return of the repressed particular that was not sublated into a harmonious totality. In this sense, negative dialectics is the detritus haunting the labor of the negative.

In his essay, “The ‘Unhappy Consciousness’ and Conscious Unhappiness: On Adorno’s critique of Hegel and the idea of an Hegelian critique of Adorno,” Simon Jarvis accuses Adorno’s philosophy of being the philosophy of unhappy consciousness:<sup>172</sup>

For Adorno the truth-moment of Hegel’s emphasis on totality has been falsified by the self-totalizing society for which, he believes, this category has since come to apologize. Adorno’s understanding of Hegel’s category of totality, it will be clear, requires constant reference to his own social thought. One of the most striking discontinuities in Adorno’s social theory - because it concerns such a pivotal moment in Adorno’s thought - is its dual thesis about society. On the one hand we are told that society is now a closed totality and that a true thinking and good action would only be possible on the condition of a breakout, on the other that society is not yet, but is rapidly approaching, the condition of a closed totality, a condition which the remain specific qualitative difference of thinking must resist. The contradiction is not merely contingent. It reflects the thesis that society is not an example which can be subsumed under thinking, but is rather

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<sup>171</sup> Bozzetti, “Hegel on Trial: Adorno’s Critique of Philosophical Systems”. *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, 298.

<sup>172</sup> This essay is found in *Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’: A Reappraisal*. Jarvis’ essay is followed by a response by J.M. Bernstein whose tone is polemical, apologetic of Adorno, and at times implicitly accuses Jarvis of not having read Adorno.



indissociable from the framework for subsumption. Society is said to be known in the collapse of misrecognition of it.<sup>173</sup>

The ‘discontinuity’ that Jarvis locates in Adorno’s thoughts on society is informative. Society is on the one hand object, and on the other hand not yet a complete object. This dual aspect of society was emphasized time and again in Adorno’s aesthetic, philosophical, and sociological writings – it is not so much a discontinuity as a continual contradiction existing within the concept of society. Thought would like to approach society as total, and indeed has the concept of society. This concept, however, is never an adequate one to its object of society. Society, as a concept, is not identical, for Adorno, with its object. The concept, furthermore, is a piece of the very object that it is examining. One cannot, however, abandon the use of the concept to deal with its object since it mimics the very contradictions and non-identities found between concepts and other objects.

Unhappy consciousness is, as Hegel had observed, a moment in the development of self-consciousness that remains stuck in its misrecognition. It does not receive mutual recognition with another consciousness, and hypostatizes its singular position. It is the failed project of individuation in bourgeois society, an individual that is pigeonholed in their very position without being recognized by others, nor recognizing others. This mal-formed individuality – mal-formed from the standpoint of the direction individuality should have progressed towards – is left with no other option but to relentlessly and restlessly negate its own position; faced with the obduracy of its world, this consciousness negates its own position in the hope of reconciling its outside. Such determinate negation of itself becomes indeterminate negation in that it negates whatever

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<sup>173</sup> Jarvis, *Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’: A Reappraisal*, 63-64.

will come forth afterwards, regardless of content. The indeterminate negation continues endlessly so long as there is something to negate, something against which the unhappy consciousness can pitch itself against.

It seems that one has all three moments – bad infinity, indeterminate negation, and unhappy consciousness – in one perverted form of the dialectic. It mimics the totally reified society that is its home: a unity of antagonistic particulars. To accuse Adorno of personifying unhappy consciousness thus also leads to the other two accusations. The claim, however, of Adorno personifying unhappy consciousness has both true and false aspects. Adorno's own insights and reflections constantly refer to the conditions that concepts, individuals, objects, and particular works of art are located. This relation accounts for their double character, of being autonomous and heteronomous.

Unhappy consciousness is a period of self-consciousness' development. Following the struggle to the death, and the dialectic of lord and bondsmen, consciousness in its particularity considers itself to be more than, or a surplus of, its material circumstances. Consciousness, then, substantializes itself and hypostatizes its position. This was precisely what Hegel (and Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*) shows as being an incomplete and insufficient development of consciousness. Consciousness becomes myopic, alienated from others, and therefore also itself. Every instance that not-yet fully formed self-consciousness then reflects upon itself shows itself to be lacking. This realization results in consciousness perpetually negating, precisely in order to sublimate its heteronomy. Consciousness' very activity of negativity, however, becomes an impediment to its aim. Its mode of being, abstract negativity, gives it the illusion of development while it remains in place. Becoming trapped, consciousness constructs its

prison from the materials of its so-called resistance. Negativity unleashed indeterminately renders determinate negation helpless and the individual non-autonomous.

Historical conditions, however, have changed the dynamic of the development of self-consciousness. The development of capitalist society has changed the status of unhappy consciousness. The total society produced by capitalism requires individuals to adapt to it, independent of the very autonomy that was meant to produce that society. Society becomes autonomous at the expense of individual freedom. Individuals are granted entry to society to the extent that they 'toe the line.' The historical toll upon the concept of individuality makes the position of unhappy consciousness seem desirable, if not entirely impossible to reach. The marketplace, where individuals now go 'freely' to sell their labor power, is where we find a socially sanctioned 'battle to the death,' and those who achieve 'mastery' are those who succeed. No longer does consciousness even get to develop according to Hegel's dialectic; the possibility of experience in that manner has itself become suspect: this is Adorno's insight.

To suggest that Adorno performs the actions of an unhappy consciousness additionally grants too much to the notion of individuality. In his lecture *History and Freedom* Adorno approached the question of the liquidation of the subject. His question asked whether there was a capacity for the individual to do absolute good (related to the notion of unconditional good will, in Kant), or radical evil (tied, again, to the question of evil in Kant's moral philosophy). After examining the historical development of the categorical imperative, through Hegel up to Auschwitz, Adorno highlights that the individual is not in a developed enough form to be capable of radical evil or absolute good. Society, or the whole, has become capable of absolute good or radical evil, while

the individual either affirms or denies the society, of which it is inevitably a part. In other words, while Adorno certainly has moments resembling unhappy consciousness, his negativity is not abstract or indeterminate. However, the possibility of even reading, or achieving, unhappy consciousness is also put into question, since the development of consciousness has itself regressed in contrast to the technological progress of the forces of production. That is, the development of the forces of production have – much like Hegel's insight into the creation of antagonism in civil society – produced regressive subjectivities whose productive capacities are put into the service of reproducing a false whole:

We should include the philosophy of history here, since we are talking about the theory of history and freedom – but in all probability, and especially where the social trend, that is to say, the total process of societalization, is furthest advanced, we should say that one of the relevant factors here is that wicked people of the kind you meet in literature no longer exist, Iago, say, or Richard III, to name only the most famous literary prototypes. Such radically evil people are no longer to be found, for the radical evil of the kind postulated by Kant presupposes a strength of character, energy, and a substantiality of the self that is made impossible by a world that calls for more or less dissociated achievements that are separated from the self. It is a world in which I almost wish to say that not even a wicked man can survive. It may seem a consolation that utterly evil people are perhaps no longer to be found, any more than I would suppose that

there are any misers left. But any such consoling thought will be cancelled out by the corollary that it has also become impossible to imagine really good people.<sup>174</sup>

Historical events lead to a foreclosing, in a certain sense, of the possibility of autonomy. Autonomy is permitted to the extent that it furthers the interests of the bad whole (the whole that is false). The regression of individuality has been matched by the progression of society. The impossibility of radical good and evil for the individual has resulted in the possibility of a radical social good or evil. The form this can take is anonymous, or faceless, bureaucratized evil. Unhappy consciousness, which has changed, no longer occupies the same position as it once had in Hegel's system. If the unhappy consciousness survives, however, it testifies to the tension immanent to integrating, to a situation between the individual and the social whole. The difficulty of achieving autonomy translates into the situation wherein the individual can only resist the integration of the whole by being a constantly negating particular. The purpose of such negation is to preserve precisely that which the whole has deformed and cast aside: the nonidentical.

#### Nonidentity, Resisting Affirmation

That the negation of a negation does not only yield a positive is a perplexing claim if Hegel's 'labor of the negative' is not kept in mind. What is the labor of the negative that Hegel identified? And what is the negative that remains ever-present after the negation of the negation? The labor of the negative is what drives the dialectic. This labor is the means by which consciousness, spirit, and the concept all become what they are, and are what they become. The lesson of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and *Logic* was to

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<sup>174</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 206 (lecture 22). On the production of regressive antagonisms in civil society (which calls for the state's incomplete intervention), see Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble*.

identify that non-identity was the road traveled towards identity. That such a road was identified, however, subjugated and reduced the non-identical to a means of identity. In his “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” Adorno writes: “If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the nonidentical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time.”<sup>175</sup> Adorno’s reflection upon the coercion of logic within dialectical thought extends to his reflections upon non-identity. The fetish of the concept makes it seem as if thought had created that which it responds to and is involved in a reciprocal, though unequal, relationship. In a similar reversal of cause-and-effect to what Nietzsche describes in *Genealogy of Morals* concerning the doer-and-the-deed, and Marx describes with regards to the fetishism of the commodity, Adorno attempts to show how the irrationality at work in reason makes the concept forget its non-conceptual origins. Such a forgetting is made a discipline for the concept if it is to continue to approach the object.

One should be careful, that any attempt to approach the object not *exhaust* the object. In other words, the once common philosophical predisposition, since Descartes, to enumerate, classify, and specify an object that could correspond to clear and distinct ideas must be problematized, if not completely abandoned. Adorno writes: “Contradiction is not what Hegel’s absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.”<sup>176</sup> This is not to privilege and hypostatize, as Kant had done, an ineffable in the object, a beyond which thought cannot go. Adorno’s thought places no borders or boundaries on what is possible for theory.

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<sup>175</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 101-102.

<sup>176</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5 (‘Dialectics not a Standpoint’).

Quite the contrary; in opposition to the early Wittgenstein – yet in keeping with the writings of the later Wittgenstein – Adorno wishes to expose the fringes, antinomies, and stumbling blocks *within* thought, “to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable.”<sup>177</sup>

Adorno’s negative dialectics are an immanent critique of Hegelian dialectics that aim to keep open an alternate understanding of totality, an incomplete totality, without recourse to closed and violent totality; this aim, for which negative dialectics is the moment of non-identity of Hegelian dialectics, locates a wickedness in Hegelian dialectics concerning the particular (as particular). This particular is scarred by a universal that declares it as wickedness, chatter, and debris. Adorno’s aim is, in this case, an impossibility from an Hegelian standpoint: it is to think the particular as particular, without relapsing into a Kierkegaardian hypostatized singularity no different structurally than a universal.<sup>178</sup> Adorno’s philosophical insight is to examine the question that all his philosophical precursors had asked (which is partly the reason for people reading Adorno as a Kantian, Fichtean, Hegelian, Marxist, Nietzschean, or Kierkegaardian): the conditions for the (im)possibility of experience.

Adorno’s claim that “The whole is the false [untrue]” is not only a negation and reversal of Hegel’s claim that the whole was the true. If a simple reversal were the case Adorno could just as easily have said the particular is the true. The whole has become

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<sup>177</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 9 (‘The Concern of Philosophy’). There is an echo of this Adornian moment in Badiou’s *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Badiou writes: “It is quite simply false that whereof one cannot speak (in the sense of ‘there is nothing to say about it that specifies it and grants it separating properties’), thereof one must be silent. It must on the contrary be named. It must be discerned as indiscernible... For the indiscernible, even though it reaks down the separating powers of language, is nonetheless proposed to the concept, which can demonstratively pass legislation on its existence” (Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 95).

<sup>178</sup> By emphasizing the singular (for example, in *Fear and Trembling*, or the essay “The Single Individual”) Kierkegaard forms an (Hegelian) anti-thesis to Hegel. Adorno’s philosophy emphasizes both extremes as being part of the constellation of dialectics.

untrue; falsity is part and parcel of the whole's becoming. And whereas the unhappy consciousness could declare that the particular is true – and thus hypostatize particularity – that declaration, were it to have any consistency, would need the very universal whose falsity it rails against in order to recognize its truth. The particular, as particular, can only exist by virtue of the whole that it rebels against. Hence Adorno's sentence should be read: "the whole (that is true) is false." This is Adorno's lesson in (Hegelian) dialectics.

The system, the Hegelian and Marxist system, lies in ruins. More specifically, the total system, the system that attempted to provide an account of the whole, of totality, lies in ruins. Fragments and traces persist of that ruined edifice and present subsequent thought with the task of philosophizing without a complete concept of totality. The ruination of the system, that the total system, or a system that aimed for totality, cannot be completed requires of one to examine what such a system discarded as detritus, abject, and unimportant. One cannot simply abandon philosophizing *tout court*, so much as re-conceptualize and reevaluate the very categories that avail themselves to philosophy: the universal, the particular, the general, the singular, and totality. It is against totality that Adorno's insistence on the particular hinges. The particular indicts the totality, without, however, foregoing the concept of totality or universality. It would make no sense to speak of the particular, as a singular – à la Kierkegaard – than it would to rely upon the universal. To emphasize the particular instead of the universal, without dialectically mediating the two, would be to hypostatize the particular, making it a singular, thus repeating the coercive logic of the universal. Adorno's insistence on the particular, on fragments, and traces is to emphasize and shed light on a ruined system, an incomplete



totality, and the possibility that the whole is not all that there is. One sees this negative dialectical impulse as early as Adorno's inaugural address:

Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real...Philosophy which presents reality as such [i.e. total reason] today only veils reality and eternalizes its present condition.<sup>179</sup>

Any philosophy that still presents itself in the way Hegel's philosophy had presented itself misses the historical lesson. History is sedimented in philosophical concepts, and to act *as if* philosophy could carry on as before would hypostatize not only philosophy but it would also mean turning a blind eye to the situation to which it responds. No philosophical concept, or truth, is separable from the cunning of history. Spinoza's identifying reality with perfection becomes imperfect, Leibniz's pre-established harmony becomes pre-established dis-harmony, Hegel's equation of the true with the whole (a paradigmatic Spinozist claim) becomes itself a particular part of an untrue whole, Marx's claim that philosophers should change world itself becomes an interpretation into what philosophy ought to do, thus giving philosophy a zombie-like existence – not unlike the description Marx had given capital: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."<sup>180</sup> Adorno's philosophy thus vacillates back and forth between the actuality and the possibility of philosophy; this question is itself the point of departure for re-thinking a dialectics, for which reconciliation cannot be emphasized, since philosophy itself is not reconciled, or irreconcilable, with itself.

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<sup>179</sup> Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, 120.

<sup>180</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3 ('The Possibility of Philosophy').

Adorno's *oeuvre* is a *model* of negative dialectical philosophy, and one would be at pains and go to great lengths to show a definite, or particular example, as well as invoke a universally valid example of what negative dialectics is. Negative dialectics, while flouting tradition, does not abandon it. The content of negative dialectical thinking is the very tradition it flouts and shows not to be already decided but already changing within the content that aspires to be form: form is sedimented content; in this, Adorno is being at one and the same moment the greatest Hegelian as well as its greatest transgressor. It flouts the tradition of universal and particular without, however, abandoning the relation between particular and universal.

The question is as much about the economy differentiating Adorno's negative dialectics as from Hegel's (positive) dialectics, and thus about the economies of dialectics, as well as about the relation between dialectics and the socio-economic condition that it is a beneficiary of and is responding to. Adorno's thought presents itself as an irreducible moment within the Hegelian apparatus that will not be sublated, will not be reconciled. This irreconcilable moment is irreducible. Negative dialectics endures this moment.

#### Absolute Negativity and Philosophy 'after Auschwitz'

Among the most insightful critical and dialectical readings of Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy is Nigel Gibson's important essay, "Rethinking an Old Saw: Dialectical Negativity, Utopia, and *Negative Dialectic* in Adorno's Hegelian Marxism."<sup>181</sup> Not only does Gibson offering penetrating analyses, highlighting Adorno's theoretical shortcomings, he does so in a way that locates him within the Hegelian

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<sup>181</sup> Gibson's article is found in the volume he edited along with Andrew Rubin, *Adorno: A Critical Reader*.

Marxist tradition. Of the number of claims Gibson takes Adorno to task for, one particular claim is important for the present discussion: For Gibson, Adorno reads Hegel's 'positive' dialectic as attempting to reconcile what he, Adorno, sees as antagonistic society, instead of reconciliation being (as Marx had seen it) a transcendence of reality.<sup>182</sup>

This criticism implies both that Adorno mistakes the transcendent(al) import of Hegel's positive dialectic – that reconciliation does not refer to reality but transcends the given reality – but also that Adorno mistakes the persistence of the negative in Hegel's dialectics, that the negative continues to operate as the engine of dialectics. Most importantly, Gibson focuses on the concept of 'absolute negativity' in Hegel and Adorno in order to expose Adorno's mis-readings of Hegel. Gibson writes: "The problem is not that Adorno makes Auschwitz into a philosophic category but that he makes it synonymous with absolute negativity, thus the long march of the dialectic of enlightenment toward horror...Despite all qualifications to the contrary, Adorno's negative dialectic is a flattening, all-consuming one that allows no place for an alternative to emerge."<sup>183</sup> Adorno's approach to Auschwitz and what follows it, however, do not render Auschwitz as singularity, which is what absolute negativity would demand. The concretion of absolute negativity that Hegel found following abstract negativity will always be negated itself. History continues following Auschwitz, and Adorno attempts to think of history as continuing following the account of universal history as 'permanent

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<sup>182</sup> Among the numerous claims against Adorno, Gibson accuses Adorno of being a neo-Ricardian, a Fichtean, a neo-Kantian, and of sounding like an existentialist and deconstructionist. Adorno is also compared to a left-Hegelian. Whichever figure one chooses, Adorno is always the neo-regressive figure in contrast to Hegel and Marx.

<sup>183</sup> Gibson, "Rethinking an Old Saw." *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, 282.

catastrophe'. What happens when the catastrophe devours the account of universal history, when universal history exhausts itself?

The hope expressed in Adorno's negative, historically-informed categorical imperative – "A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen" – is that the catastrophe may never repeat itself.<sup>184</sup> To say such a non-repetition is not an alternative suggests that an alternative needs to contain particular content. But such particularity is itself always already devoured by the universal. 'Auschwitz, never again' aims to think a historical event while history necessarily continues. If there is an absolute negativity, for Adorno, in Auschwitz, then philosophy is required to respond and it bears the guilt of not having questioned the conditions that led to its occurrence. For Adorno, philosophical content has changed. Death no longer presents itself to individuals as their own. Auschwitz is not only identical to the eponymous camp, or even National Socialism. It encompasses genocidal civilization that had, historically, predated Auschwitz and continues after the fall of National Socialism. The danger of fascism surviving its national socialist form is the danger of genocide continuing in the world. In the interest of individual and species self-preservation the new categorical imperative ('never again Auschwitz') is forgotten, thus allowing the possibility of Auschwitz to recur. The possibility of death becoming one's own again, of having the meaningful or beautiful death the Greeks had discussed and romantic poets championed, can only be raised in a world living according to the new categorical imperative. The being-towards-death has become species-towards-death and

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<sup>184</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365 ('Metaphysics and Culture').

whatever sliver of individuality remains is because of the survival of the species.<sup>185</sup> According to this picture, self-preservation goes hand-in-hand with genocide. This is why Adorno locates the possibility of nuclear annihilation and torture within the parameters of Auschwitz, which is itself neither only a geographical location, nor entirely reducible to the Nazi death camps.<sup>186</sup>

Gibson's criticism – which owes much to the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya – operates at times in a similar manner to Adorno's reading of Hegel, from the standpoint of forgetting oneself: "Despite Adorno's own maxim that 'intolerance of ambiguity is the mark of an authoritarian personality,' Adorno seemingly could not hold on to the ambiguity, instead becoming intolerant of the seemingly endless stages of narration."<sup>187</sup> The dynamism of Adorno's writings is precisely where the problem is to be found for Gibson. In the priorities of the object and non-identity, Adorno's negative dialectics willfully mis-read certain aspects of Hegel's philosophy that are more than capable of responding to the criticism. Gibson writes: "In the name of non-identity, the logic of Adorno's negative dialectic flattens and politicizes Hegel's dialectic."<sup>188</sup> Reading Adorno's analogical reasoning (reading the development of society alongside the development of the individual, and to see the development of logic historically) as a flattening goes against both Hegel's system (that all parts are intimately connected, with the center of the circle being logic) and Adorno's demand that one unpack what is implicit in particular (the violence of the universal that micrological studies aim for).

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<sup>185</sup> A variant of this is found in Nietzsche's critique of Darwin in *The Gay Science*.

<sup>186</sup> See Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, and *Negative Dialectics*, pages 361-408 ('Meditations on Metaphysics').

<sup>187</sup> Gibson, "Rethinking an Old Saw." *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, 262. Gibson refers to Dunayevskaya's *The Marxist-Humanist Theory of State Capitalism* in his text.

<sup>188</sup> Gibson, "Rethinking an Old Saw." *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, 259

Accusing Adorno of mis-reading (or misrecognizing) Hegel is both true and false. It is true in that Adorno will emphasize a renewed concept of dialectics, negative dialectics, that goes against the grain of Hegel's work. It is true in Adorno's emphasis on the particular that cannot be ultimately subsumed under the machinations of the universal that it is nonetheless inextricably a part of. It is true in avoiding the moment of synthesis and reconciliation, were one to cling to the schematic triadic reading of the dialectic. Such a blanket statement – that Adorno misreads Hegel – is false in that it assumes that Adorno had the same standpoint toward Hegel, all throughout his writings. Even with all that was mentioned as true above, at bottom Adorno's reading of Hegel does not aim to be consistent in the sense of a Hegelian scholar. His intentions are vastly different. One would, in particular, go to great lengths to show – in order to prove that Adorno's mis-read negativity and positivity in Hegel – that there is even a unified and total reading of Hegel's dialectic in Adorno.

Adorno's reading of Hegel changes at times, depending upon textual circumstance, philosophical interest, and intensity. His use of Hegel changes depending upon the particular question at hand, whether it be aesthetic, epistemological, political, economic, or historical. He defends Hegel at times, while at others engages in critiques. This critique and defense themselves operate at different levels. Adorno sometimes will critique Hegel from the standpoint of historical development, the barbaric march of history. This is after all, the ruinous landscape that *Negative Dialectics* finds itself in. This ruinous landscape, however, does not mean that one can abandon Hegelian concepts, such as world spirit or totality. Concepts, including dialectics itself, undergo changes, and Adorno's reading proceeds according to these historical changes. At times,

similar to his reading in *Prisms* of Bach against Bach's defenders, Adorno will read Hegel against those who claim to be Hegelian. This reading will offer two things: critique the defender of Hegel, Lukács for example, from a Hegelian standpoint, while also critiquing the conservative tendency in Hegel himself. Though not sticking to the letter, Adorno's (ab)use of Hegel stems from the spirit of Hegel. One must not forget that, above all, Adorno's reading of Hegel, as expressed in his reading of experience in *Hegel: Three Studies*, is meant to *rescue* and not revive. Revival of Hegel is anachronistic, while rescuing Hegel means precisely reading the dialectic even when it goes against Hegel's text, but agrees with Hegel's intention.

It is with Adorno's own equivocal use of negativity that one can begin to respond to Gibson's challenge that Adorno misunderstands, or misreads, the notion of positivity in Hegel's dialectic. Adorno claims in *Negative Dialectics* and his *Lectures on 'Negative Dialectics'* that the renewed conception of the dialectic begins with the standpoint that the negation of the negation is not an affirmation. We should emphasize that it is *not only* an affirmation. That an affirmation can result is not Adorno's concern so much as the negativity that is lost in asserting affirmation. Negativity, as Hegel knew, was the engine of the dialectic, the labor that carried on to yield the profit of the positive. Negativity – the strength of skepticism and the unhappy consciousness – remains the engine of critique.

### Conclusion

The 20<sup>th</sup> century presents philosophy with a burden for thought that it cannot avoid thinking. The capitalist mode of production and the genocidal world of Auschwitz has changed the status of philosophy and the subject. Philosophy and subjectivity find

themselves having suffered from the violence of the whole: philosophy as being required to think the whole that it cannot formulate a total concept for, and the subject as being stripped of possibilities for the development of self-consciousness. Philosophy has a responsibility to think through the position it finds itself in, without imposing a false reconciliation where there is none. Negative dialectics opposes a society that reproduces itself by virtue of the constant supply of individuals (the reserve army of labor) that sell their labor-power. The 'free' sale of one's labor power on the free market is where the reserve army constantly restages the battle for the death. The possibility of achieving autonomy, then, is tied to purchasing that autonomy at the expense of others. The 'economy,' or metabolism of negative dialectics rebels against a form of totality that imprisons individuals and renders them as individuals belonging to 'species'. The movement is to return to the concept of totality, that while unable to think its object cannot abandon this object. Philosophy must reflect upon the whole in particular instances wherein the whole has wronged the particular. This necessitates a return to Hegel's dialectic, and Adorno's imminent critique of that dialectic. The 'regressive' stage of unhappy consciousness forms a hinge from where Adorno can critique the whole. The historical conditions affecting philosophy and the thinking of totality (Hegel's system) also extend to the dialectical development of self-consciousness. Consciousness cannot be happy simply because that would belie the unhappiness of the whole. Consciousness, thus, in Adorno's writings performs an unhappy consciousness that rebels against the false society that requires the individual to adapt. Unhappy consciousness does not necessarily lead to an infinite regress, or a particular bad infinite. It is the unceasing attempt of the intellect to think against the coercion of its own hypostatizing logic.



Adorno's critique thus reveals the persistence of unhappy consciousness even after the development of self-consciousness. As the consistent self-critical reflection, Adorno's negative dialectics places a ban on the negation of the negation yielding affirmation. The purpose of this is to salvage the scorned particular, nonidentity, and restore the priority of the object. The next chapter examines how this three play a factor in the particular field of art and Adorno's aesthetic theory.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Scarred Particular (as Domination of Nature) Seen in Art's Double Character

“Totality is the grotesque heir of mana.” – Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 84.

#### Introduction

Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy emphasizes the non-identity between conceptualization and totality; an exhaustive treatment of totality has become, as early as Adorno's inaugural lecture, impossible. This impossibility, however, is matched by negative dialectics' compulsion to think totality. Totality as concept is, thus, both impossible *and* necessary. No particular stands alone but must be thought in relation. In these relations, a particular reveals itself as scarred, and remains the non-identical phenomenon to which the concept responds. Totality thus partially appears in the particular that is cast aside by a universalizing thinking. Totality becomes manifest for conceptualization precisely through the scarred particular object. Scarred particularity should here be understood as the domination of nature, the eradication of non-identity.

Adorno's critique of political economy focuses on the priority of the object, and the non-identical, or contradictory, core within both subject and the object. This critique requires a double move. On the one hand, the subject must recognize the priority of the object, and, on the other hand, this prioritizing of the object must recognize the object's non-identical nature. This double move follows upon Adorno's fashioning of negative dialectics in contrast to what he calls Hegel's 'affirmative' dialectics.

Adorno considers multiple forms of the scarred particular: newspaper articles dealing with the occult, historical changes particular concepts undergo, the changes that language undergoes within fascism and in the culture industry, and his studies upon individual

works of art – including his extensive work on modernist aesthetics and pre-modernist works of art. Adorno's aesthetic theory, perhaps, is a particularly important site wherein scarred particular objects reveal dominating (i.e., violent) tendencies of totality.

Adorno's aesthetic theory reflects the non-identity of particular and universal, and the in-exhaustibility of the object by the concept. This applies to the concept 'art,' even as the concept has become immanent to artworks and necessary for their interpretation. Adorno's aesthetic theory obeys the negative dialectical categorical imperative to grant priority to the object. In doing so, it accomplishes a critique of political economy by highlighting the non-identical particularity that totality – whether as 'art,' 'economy,' or 'society' – cannot encompass.

Adorno approaches this non-identical particularity via the priority it gives its object, the work of art, and by interpreting the non-identical core of the works of art. This non-identical core comes to the fore in Adorno's claim that art has a double character, that it is both autonomous and heteronomous. Art's double character also reveals an alternative to civilization's domination of nature. Art reveals a non-violent relation towards nature (not simply to be read in terms of its content, but its law of form); the hope of art is for a productive, non-violent relation with nature. This aesthetic non-violent relation with nature, however, is problematized by a totality that dominates particularity and non-identity. As Adorno writes in "Trying to Understand *Endgame*": "Nonidentity is both the historical disintegration of the unity of subject and the emergence of something that is not itself subject."<sup>189</sup> Beckett's play, for Adorno, realizes the very antinomies central to the work of art, without reconciling them. This staging of a failed dialectic, a failure to reconcile antitheses, sustains the work of art, while also registering its failure.

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<sup>189</sup> Adorno, "Trying to Understanding *Endgame*," *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, 252.

To become autonomous, art is required to acknowledge that which it extricates itself from: the empirical world. This acknowledgment, however, reveals its heteronomous aspect. Art is inextricably social since it is a social object. That it cannot be reduced to simply an object, like any other object, in the social world, marks the work of art's autonomy. Adorno writes: "Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the non-identical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity."<sup>190</sup> The work of art is a particular opposed to the whole and to the whole's compulsion to identity. Art, as both autonomous and not, shows the non-identical by virtue of its separation from the whole. This separation reveals, however, the incompleteness of its identity. To become purely autonomous is as unfavorable and impossible as it is for the work of art to be an object just like any other in the world.

In order to show how Adorno's aesthetic theory acknowledges the priority of the object his philosophy demands, a priority that recognizes the scarred particular, this chapter will present the extra-aesthetic concerns immanent to Adorno's aesthetic theory. These extra-aesthetic concerns reveal themselves in art's double character. Art's heteronomy relates to society and nature. How aesthetic theory reflects upon art's dual character (and, within that, upon society and nature) will determine how effective its critique of political economy is. The knot of nature – conceived from the perspective of pure reason as heteronomy, and from the perspective of an aesthetics of the beautiful as something to be sublated– is the site around which the scarred particularity can be assessed. This is evident, *in particular*, in Adorno's reading of Beckett.

The contradiction of economic thinking, on the one hand, and an intellectual thought that avoids the economic game, on the other, is not resolved by Adorno's aesthetic theory

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<sup>190</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 4.

but exacerbated. The exacerbation of the situation is in line with Adorno's contention that society functions and progresses by virtue of its contradictions, not in spite of them.<sup>191</sup>

Adorno's (aesthetic) critique of political economy has conceptual thinking respond to the particular object that it cannot fully exhaust, the particular work of art. This work of art is the scarred particular of totalizing reason. The particular must reveal a scarring totality. Art's double character – as work of art, and social object – reveals the totality that art, while protesting, cannot avoid being a part of. This particular must not, however, be fetishized. Art, in the form of *a particular work of art* does not substitute for thinking totality. Totality shines through the scarred particular. Adorno's aesthetic theory – an aesthetics of the sublime – reveals the scarred particular work of art, without fetishizing it. Opposing the aesthetics of fine art, moreover, the aesthetics of the sublime locates within the scarred particular work of art a repetition of the domination of nature: natural beauty dominated and sublated by the development of the idea of beauty. Beauty, in art, becomes an agent of the domination of nature. Adorno's aesthetics of sublime is thus a site for the critique of political economy. It brings attention to the domination of nature, locating it precisely in the already scarred particular work of art.

#### Antinomies, and Art's Endgame

The fundamental tension articulated by Adorno aesthetic theory relates to art's double character. The work of art is both autonomous as well as a social object (*fait social*). As autonomous and social object (i.e., heteronomous), art registers with varying degrees of determinacy and success its other, a totality that inevitably leaves traces sedimented within it. At either end of this double character are two types of artworks: *l'art pour l'art* and committed, or political, art. While the former, art for art's sake, attempts to situate its

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<sup>191</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, specifically Lectures 6, 7, 9, and 10.

autonomy by enclosing itself in a sphere cut off from all other regions, the latter sees its purpose as explicitly social. Both these forms, inevitably, fail. Art is only art, at the end of the day, and cannot be political or committed, while art for its own sake turns a blind eye to its social reality. These two historical genres of art reflect modern art's reaction to a totality that it can neither avoid, nor change completely.

The work of art is part of the sphere of art, generally, while also being part of social reality. This double character reveals art's inharmoniousness, its restlessness; the particular work of art is not at home in either sphere. Adorno writes: "Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy."<sup>192</sup> This antinomy is the site around which Adorno's aesthetic critique of political economy takes place. It examines the dual nature of the work of art, and how this double character reveals both: totality that does a violence to the particular work of art, and how the particular work of art expresses the non-identical scarred by totality. Works of art are never purely autonomous. Art is both of the empirical world and negates that world. Adorno writes:

[S]ocially, the situation of art is today aporetic. If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for-itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5. Adorno reflects upon this double character via an ambiguity, or equivocation, at work in his text. This is between the concept of art, on the one hand, and the particular work of art, on the other. Often times, Adorno will reflect upon the idea of art, then move to the idea of a work of art, before moving on to explore this idea in a particular work of art (by, for example, Schoenberg or Baudelaire). This equivocation finds its complement in the absence of any extended discussion on particular works of art in *Aesthetic Theory*, while his aesthetic writings will often times deal with particular works of art.

<sup>193</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 237.

The particular work of art is required to respond to art's double character. Its response is, at once, social and aesthetic. Art reveals its autonomy in particular works of art, while those works of art do not cease to be social objects. The history immanent in the work of art finds its clear and contradictory formulation in the initial pages of *Aesthetic Theory*: "Art is autonomous and it is not."<sup>194</sup> That which appears to be an example of what logicians call the principle of contradiction, becomes, for artworks, their immanent logic, the possibility of their intelligibility, and the condition by which their truth content can be expressed. It would be a mistake for one to point out that a contradictory summation of the situation is logically impossible and therefore unintelligible. Analytic attempts to *catch* and define art become sites of their own failure: "The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition."<sup>195</sup>

Historically, according to Adorno, artworks have not always sought autonomy; once in the service of cultic rituals, followed by theological services, art extricated itself from this role at the precise moment civilization abandoned its project of enlightenment: "As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered. Drawn from the ideal of humanity, art's constituent elements withered by art's own law of movement. Yet art's autonomy remains irrevocable."<sup>196</sup> That art continues to strive towards an impossible autonomy (independent of all heteronomy) demands a response. Art's autonomy is related to, though not determined by, historical developments. Striving for

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<sup>194</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.

<sup>195</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2. When I speak of '*their failure*,' I mean both the failure of art and of thought. Were art to strive to be identical to itself, an itself that resisted socio-historical conditions that allow it to age and ripen, it would be a brute fact, an object of the culture industry. Similarly, those who strive for definitions of art are already too late, since the idea of art develops by particular works of art opposing the definition of art.

<sup>196</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

an impossible (purely) autonomous nature relates to whether or not the work of art is successful, or not, in terms of its expression.

Autonomy should be understood as giving oneself the law and self-determination. Having inherited the aesthetic category of autonomy from Kant, Adorno emphasizes that the autonomy of a work of art is immanent to the logic of the work of art. The work of art's formal law, as integrating principle, provides the work of art intelligibility and the possibility of its truth content to be expressed eloquently. Each work of art, whether it be a work of theater, a novel, lyric poetry, classical music, has its own language of intelligibility, its formal logic. As formal logic, it is not only formal: its formal aspect is constructed from sedimented (aesthetic, historical, empirical, social) content.

*Aesthetic Theory* attempts to discursively articulate the truth expressed non-discursively in autonomous works of art. That the historic situation resulting in the autonomy of artworks has at the same time resulted in questions concerning the death of art is what aesthetic theory responds to. The moment art extricated itself from being the handmaiden to society (and religion) was the moment society doubted art's right to exist. This is the terrain where Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* locates itself: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."<sup>197</sup> This lack of self-evidence is the condition for the possibility for and the requirement of philosophical interpretation. The work of art, in other words, requires aesthetic interpretation. Aesthetic interpretation aims to understand art's fundamental double character. In response to Beckett's *Endgame*, Adorno writes:

An unreconciled reality tolerates no reconciliation with the object of art. Realism, which does not grasp subjective experience, to say nothing of going beyond it,

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<sup>197</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.



only mimics reconciliation. Today the dignity of art is measured not according to whether or not it evades this antinomy through luck or skill, but in terms of how it bears it.<sup>198</sup>

That art is both autonomous and not reflects the fact that art is both an object of society and an object unlike any other. The work of art is composed of heterogeneous elements and is something that cannot be reduced to those elements. The double character of art is itself part of its autonomy: “Art possesses its other immanently because, like the subject, immanence is socially mediated in itself. It must make its latent social content eloquent: It must go within in order to go beyond itself.”<sup>199</sup> To the degree that the artwork recognizes its double character, that it recognizes its own failure to be purely autonomous, reflects its success. Like the two-faced god Janus, art turns one face towards society, the other towards itself, thus turning its back to us. It is important not to efface one of the two characteristics of the double character that defines art, just as it is important not to forcefully reconcile the aporia. Adorno endures this aporia.

The dual nature of the artwork is not simply a super-imposition of Kant’s antinomy of Autonomy and Heteronomy onto the work of art.<sup>200</sup> While that is an immediate feature of Adorno’s insistence on the duality of the work of art, there are a number of (philosophical, aesthetic, and historical) implications at play in specifying the function of such an approach to autonomy and art in Adorno’s aesthetic theory. It is important to return to Kant’s Third Conflict in the “Antinomy of Pure Reason” – here Kant provides

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<sup>198</sup> Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, 250.

<sup>199</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 260.

<sup>200</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, specifically the ‘Third Conflict of Transcendental Ideas’, A444/B472 – A451/B479.

the thesis (autonomy/freedom) and the antithesis (heteronomy/nature). The thesis goes as follows:

The causality according to the laws of nature is not the only causality, from which the appearances of the world can thus one and all be derived. In order to explain these appearances, it is necessary to assume also a causality through freedom.<sup>201</sup>

Like a shadow, Kant's antithesis follows: "There is no freedom, but everything in the world occurs solely according to the laws of nature."<sup>202</sup>

What immediately strikes the reader is the strangeness to ascribe the "Third Conflict of the Transcendental Ideas" to the work of art. The strangeness resides in the superimposition of two forms of causality onto the one and same sensible object.<sup>203</sup> How does one ascribe both a causality (of nature) and a secondary causality (through freedom) upon the same object, the work of art? How to apprehend the two antinomial – which as Fred Jameson showed is not a simple contradiction that can be resolved – laws of causality within the same sensible object?<sup>204</sup> How can one locate the non-sensible aspect of human freedom within the purely sensible aesthetic object? Further, even assuming one could find a form of causality within artworks, how are we to apprehend this causality in the finished product, how does causality (of the free or non-free order) reveal its sedimented

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<sup>201</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A444/B472.

<sup>202</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A445/B473

<sup>203</sup> The account of causality is mentioned in the latter half of Adorno's lecture, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Deleuze's *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, J.F. Lyotard's *Just Gaming*, and essays in J.F. Lyotard's *The Inhuman*.

<sup>204</sup> Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. See especially the essay, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," page 51.

nature in the work of art?<sup>205</sup> What is the status of art's heteronomous character (as society and nature)? How does art reflect upon nature – as heteronomy, as raw material, and as the unconscious realm of the development of the idea of beauty? Here a clue arrives from *Endgame*, whose importance stretches beyond what the content says. Following the impossibility of and necessity for rain, Hamm begins:

*Hamm*: Nature has forgotten us.

*Clov*: There's no more nature.

*Hamm*: No more nature! You exaggerate.

*Clov*: In the vicinity.

*Hamm*: But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!

*Clov*: Then she hasn't forgotten us.

*Hamm*: But you say there is none.

*Clov (sadly)*: No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we.

*Hamm*: We do what we can.

*Clov*: We shouldn't. (*Pause*).<sup>206</sup>

Here, nature is said to have expired. Yet the characters' persistence is a sign that not all of nature has been extinguished, that life continues (that it blooms, and that individuals age). The life that continues, however, is imprisoned in a space outside of which all is death. The fact that life can continue after nature no longer existing signals that what follows the destruction of nature is to be feared more than the destruction of nature itself. There is a fate worse than the "no more nature." This fate is where the characters find

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<sup>205</sup> When Adorno sees works of art as being beyond the play of images he is gesturing towards this. Art both shows and does not show; its appearance is literally its illusion. *Aesthetic Theory*, "Parilipomena," in particular page 307.

<sup>206</sup> Beckett, *Endgame*, 11.

themselves. Only being in the vicinity of exaggeration captures the exaggeration of the situation. An unimaginable consequence of a change in nature – nature has itself aged, has lost its teeth, but not its bite. The ideals of nature return in the form of a sublime (as imageless image). Nature persists in the ramblings of these characters, in the zero point that remains outside the stage (and the theater-house) prophesying a world wherein the domination of nature has succeeded as has the domination of humanity by nature.<sup>207</sup>

Only by examining the precise nature of art's antinomy can the scarred particular reveal itself. A structural change occurs, however, in the moving the antinomy from transcendental subject to art object. While autonomy and heteronomy referred to freedom and nature for the transcendental subject, with a work of art autonomy and heteronomy refer to sensuous freedom and sensuous unfreedom (the social *and* nature). Sensuous unfreedom reveals itself in how a particular work of art reflects upon totality that is social and natural. The status of nature, however, is also equivocal. Nature, from the perspective of totality, is dominated nature, while from the perspective of the work of art, nature becomes a site for something new. It is both a new relation towards nature (one that does not dominate nature like civilization), while this new relation results in the production of 'the new.' On the new, and its abstract nature, Adorno provides a modern aesthetic concept:

Yet something decisive, with regard to its content, is encapsulated in the abstractness of the new. Toward the end of his life Victor Hugo touched on it in his comment that Rimbaud bestowed a *frisson nouveau* on poetry. The shudder is a reaction to the cryptically shut, which is a function of that element of

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<sup>207</sup> This could be Beckett's prophecy: in the world that has destroyed nature, individuals will re-enact Beckett's plays and the words of his characters without having any knowledge of Beckett or his plays.

indeterminacy. At the same time, however, the shudder is a mimetic comportment reacting mimetically to abstractness. Only in the new does mimesis unite with rationality without regression.<sup>208</sup>

As aesthetic category, the shudder reacts to the return of repressed nature that arrives as new: the sublime. The sublime, furthermore, reveals the non-identical aspect of the status of nature in the work of art: nature and natural beauty. Art's dual character also refers back upon heteronomous nature, and the autonomy of art working through natural beauty.

Reification takes its toll on the subject, reducing it to object, while the scarred particularity of the object (the work of art) expresses the sufferings of a subject that no longer has the ears to hear it.<sup>209</sup> Adorno's claim about art's double character antinomy transposes Kant's antinomy of the autonomy of the subject onto the work of art. This mimetic transposition can be read via the modern aesthetic concept of shudder. Adorno mimetically transposes Kant's antinomy onto the work of art in order to read the violence done by the subject on the object, *from the perspective of the object*. Additionally, however, Adorno also locates the violence done by this object (the particular work of art) upon nature. 'Violence' here can be substituted with a power-relation, domination, or the domination of (inner and outer) nature. The domination of nature refers both to the domination of nature by the concept, as well as the domination of nature in art. The latter refers to the domination of natural beauty by art beauty, or the idea of the beautiful. While the concept dominates nature by making nature raw material for thought, it is precisely *in beauty* that the work of art dominates nature. This aesthetic domination of nature – the idea of the beautiful dominating natural beauty – is opposed by Adorno's

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<sup>208</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 20.

<sup>209</sup> Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 29-60.

own aesthetics of the sublime.<sup>210</sup> Adorno's aesthetic of the sublime reveals the scarred particularity in the work of art by avoiding fetishizing the work of art as simply scarred particularity and showing the idea of beauty's own violence upon natural beauty. Totality scars the particular work of art, which repeats the conceptual domination of nature – via the idea of beauty – upon natural beauty. This furthers our understanding of Adorno's critique of political economy, since Adorno does not rest simply with the scarred particular. This scarred particular itself repeats the violence done to it, though in a different manner.

#### The Work of Art, Nature, Beauty, and the Sublime

Examining the dual character of the work of art reveals the scarred particularity of the work of art. The work of art is both free and not free. Its un-free aspect refers to the society of which it is nonetheless a part. Alongside society, natural beauty and nature also play a part in the dual character of the work of art: both as idea and as object. The work of art reflects upon these aspects. The scarred particularity comes to the fore in Adorno's aesthetics of the sublime.<sup>211</sup> Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* critiques Hegel's aesthetics of fine art via an aesthetics of the sublime. Adorno writes: “The transition from natural beauty to art beauty is dialectical as a transition in the form of domination.”<sup>212</sup> The critique of an aesthetics of fine art critiques the totalizing violence of Spirit (Spirit as creative force that makes conscious the unconscious beauty of nature), while also

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<sup>210</sup> Adorno's criticism is of Hegelian aesthetics, aesthetics of fine art, for which the object of study is the (idea of the) beautiful. Nature beauty, rightly for Hegel, had been unconscious matter that Spirit needed to work on; Spirit's imaginative and creative capacity is a higher plane than nature's beauty, since nature's beauty is not an in-itself, but for-us. Natural beauty is sublated in the sphere of fine art by particular (beautiful) works of art.

<sup>211</sup> This is, later on, picked up by J.F. Lyotard in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, and in essays from *The Inhuman* (in particular, chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11). The differences between Lyotard's and Adorno's aesthetics (of the sublime) cannot be addressed here.

<sup>212</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 77.

reflecting upon the return of repressed nature as sublime force. The aesthetics of the sublime points towards conceptual domination of nature, as well as the object's domination of nature in the province of fine art. The section on natural beauty in *Aesthetic Theory* begins:

Natural beauty, which was still the occasion of the most penetrating insights in the *Critique of Judgment*, is now scarcely even a topic of theory. The reason for this is not that natural beauty was dialectically transcended, both negated and maintained on a higher plane, as Hegel's theory had propounded, but, rather, that it was repressed.<sup>213</sup>

Nature returns as repressed in the work of art: in an aesthetics of the sublime. The scarred particularity, art object, reveals: the domination of nature by totality, the domination of natural beauty by the idea of the beautiful, and the return of the repressed nature in the form of the aesthetic sublime in modern art.

The domination of nature has the dual meaning of the violence done to (internal and external) nature by civilization (human progress), and also the sublime domination of humanity by nature, rendering heteronomous the previously self-assured autonomy of the rational being. For Adorno, the domination of nature is not only carried out according to the mission of civilization, but is also at work in the historical development of art's autonomy. Adorno's philosophy and aesthetic theory returns to what was repressed in the artwork. This return is not a forced return, but one that Adorno recognizes in art itself (an act of remembrance), and results from him submitting his aesthetic reflections to the aesthetic object, a mimetic comportment to an earlier mimetic comportment that art had shown towards nature. Adorno explicates this comportment in a number of places:

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<sup>213</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61.

...nature, as something beautiful, cannot be copied.<sup>214</sup>

...natural beauty cannot be copied.<sup>215</sup>

What is beautiful in nature is what appears to be more than what is literally there.

Without receptivity there would be no such objective expression, but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience. Natural beauty is perceived both as authoritatively binding and as something incomprehensible that questioningly awaits its solution. Above all else it is this double character of natural beauty that has been conferred on art. Under its optic, art is not the imitation of nature but the imitation of natural beauty.<sup>216</sup>

Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity.<sup>217</sup>

Before moving on to Adorno's understanding of natural beauty, Hegel's account must be addressed. Natural beauty is beauty for a subject. Spirit sublates the beauty of nature, however, in the necessary development and unfolding of the *idea* of beauty. Nature is, from the standpoint of the Idea of beauty, necessarily deficient, or imperfect.<sup>218</sup> The necessity and origin of this deficiency and imperfection result from nature being unconscious and heteronomous. Natural beauty is imperfection because it is restricted (finite) and unfree (determined).<sup>219</sup> Thus, Spirit achieves reflectively and self-consciously what nature could not. Spirit works upon nature, and the idea of beauty sublates the finitude and restrictedness of natural beauty in the beauty of fine art.

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<sup>214</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 70-71.

<sup>217</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 73.

<sup>218</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics of Fine Art, Volume 1*, 1-3, 143.

<sup>219</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics of Fine Art, Volume 1*, 150-152.



An interesting temporal shift is at play in Adorno's return to natural beauty, which should not be read as resuscitation. Artworks aim to copy that which cannot be copied (natural beauty). Artworks, according to Adorno, aim to copy not nature, but natural beauty. The beauty they copy is the 'more' within nature itself, that which is 'more' for the observing subject. Thus, natural beauty becomes the interpreted 'more' within nature. The natural beauty that art aimed to copy is never *simply* a brute fact of nature. The 'more' Adorno locates, a surplus of nature, relies upon receptivity, a receptivity in works of art, as well as in subjects. Natural beauty is a surplus of nature. This surplus is thus imitated by art. This *more* is itself a 'fiction' of the work of art, which cannot do without nature, or natural beauty. Art beauty constructs the very object (natural beauty) it claims to be imitating, but which cannot be imitated.<sup>220</sup> Furthermore, art does not simply copy reality. The image of art is an 'imageless image,' an image that is never simply depiction of reality (nature), but an attempt to copy that which cannot be copied, natural beauty.<sup>221</sup>

The history of cultural accomplishments of aesthetic theory is at the same time the barbaric repression of natural beauty. The repression of natural beauty is the price paid for art beauty to assume dominance, a dominance whose own historical contingency is fragile and non-absolute.<sup>222</sup> Art would like to forget its mimetic comportment towards nature but it cannot. Adorno reads this out of artworks themselves, a result of aesthetic interpretation. Much like the psychoanalyst's reliance on free association, Adorno allows

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<sup>220</sup> This relation bears a similarity to Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*. Additionally, it must be kept in mind that Adorno's aesthetics does not aim for a return to an aesthetics of the beautiful. He aesthetic theory sketches what Jean-François Lyotard will later famously lecture on as an Aesthetics of the Sublime.

<sup>221</sup> The concept of art as 'imageless image' is found in the 'Parilipomena' section of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, specifically pages 283, 286, 287,

<sup>222</sup> Here Adorno critiques Hegel's aesthetics for being unable to realize that the truth of (art) beauty resides in its ephemeral – and we would like to add aphoristic – nature (*Aesthetic Theory*, 74).

the immanent laws of the aesthetic object to provide the free play necessary in order to interpret the allegory and riddle of the work of art. Such an interpretation – an interpretation forcing the concept to respond to the artwork, a response to natural beauty – discovers a repetition-compulsion at work in the artwork. Art’s immanent logic points towards that which it wishes to forget but cannot: the surplus of natural beauty repressed by the idea of beauty. This surplus of natural beauty points to the fact that nature is non-identical with itself, or to be more precise, its expression:

Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from that more’s contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art.<sup>223</sup>

Nature expresses itself as beautiful to an imagining, or creative, subjectivity. The appearance of nature as beautiful can only take place before a subject for which the idea of beauty has developed. The ‘more’ Adorno sees in nature is thus a more that has been interpreted out by an aesthetic consciousness. This aesthetic consciousness, moreover, belongs to the sphere of fine arts.

Though non-identical with its expression, nature still aims to be identical with it, just as the subject aims (in idealist theory) to be identical with the object. The repetition compulsion within art points to the wound in nature, and the wound of nature within it. What allows such an appropriation from psychoanalytic theory onto the interpretation of the work of art – without making an interpretation of an artwork a reduction to artistic intentionality, or psychologizing of the artist – is the non-teleological telos Adorno locates in the interrelation between art and nature, subject, and object: “The identity of

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<sup>223</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 78. The expression of nature – harkening to Benjamin’s essay on the mimetic faculty of man – goes by many names in Adorno: mute language, the silence of nature, deformed nature, eloquence misunderstood, and as being seen only by the blind.

the artwork with the subject is as complete as the identity with nature should some day be.”<sup>224</sup> Nature is both the repressed wound of art, and also what is repressed in the development of human history. This wound is the trauma located within art, scarred particular work of art. The violence done upon nature conceptually is repeated upon natural beauty by art beauty. Adorno writes: “The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound, and a little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the artwork – a pure artifact – inflicts on nature.”<sup>225</sup>

Art’s wresting itself free from its former religious obligations forces upon it an autonomy free from nonspiritual content, where nature becomes the plenipotentiary of both immediacy *and* heteronomy.<sup>226</sup> While Kant’s aesthetics allowed a place for natural beauty, Hegel’s no longer does. Hegel’s aesthetics moves to the development of the idea of beauty. Within the development of the idea of the beautiful, the aesthetic unity of spiritual content and form becomes, in Hegel’s philosophy, impossible to reconcile within nature.<sup>227</sup> Nature’s beauty is unreflective and thus unconscious. Hegel criticizes the Kantian system’s locating beauty and knowledge in the mind. What is missing from Kant’s system is precisely the truth as Absolute (what Kant located as the realm of dialectical illusion). Hegel extends the philosophical system beyond the provincial contest of mental faculties to the development of the idea, of the Absolute. It is from

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<sup>224</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63. A note on the danger of psychologizing the artist: This sort of interpretation, eschewed by Adorno, would relate the late work of Beethoven to his deafness, or Wagner’s individual intentions as overpowering the aesthetic formal laws (or demands) of the artwork itself. Such interpretation, according to Adorno, is deafness itself, deafness to the particularity of the object which both undermines and constitutes the harmony/disunity of an *oeuvre*.

<sup>225</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61-62.

<sup>226</sup> Here Adorno goes to Hegel’s rational deduction of beauty’s eschewing its historical nature (*Aesthetic Theory*, 75-76).

<sup>227</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74.

within the absolute that the idea of beauty develops and natural beauty is seen as imperfect. Natural beauty is deficient due to the fact that, in comparison with Spirit, it is indeterminate, unconscious, and heteronomous. Adorno's aesthetics of the sublime opposes the picture of natural beauty's deficiency, since the development of the idea of beauty represses an aspect of nature that will not go away, and returns with a vengeance upon free Spirit. Adorno writes:

In the sphere of natural beauty, Kant's theory of the sublime anticipates the spiritualization that art alone is able to achieve. For Kant, what is sublime in nature is nothing but the autonomy of spirit in the face of the superior power of sensuous existence, and this autonomy is achieved only in the spiritualized artwork. Admittedly, the spiritualization of art is not a pristine process.<sup>228</sup>

The triumph of spirit over art, in the form of art beauty over natural beauty, represses the very aspect of nature that spirit assumes in its autonomy: the sublime. The sublime returns with a vengeance upon a total Spirit that has scarred the particular. This is the wound of nature appearing in art. Adorno's critique of political economy extends into the scarred particular work of art, and examines the domination of nature repeated within the beautiful work of art. Nature is as much a resource for human domination as natural beauty is for fine art. The scarred particularity thus refers as much to (1) the scarred object (work of art) by the social, and (2) how the *Idea* of fine art scars the beauty of nature. Both of these are reflected upon in the particular work of art, via an aesthetics of the sublime.

The aesthetic sublime refers to the return of repressed nature: repressed nature refers to both the 'more of nature,' the surplus of nature, that cannot be copied by the work of

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<sup>228</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 92.

art, as well as a particularity (in the form of the *shudder* in Adorno) that forever escapes and invades totality. Adorno writes: “Artworks remain enlightenment because they would like to make commensurable to human beings the remembered shudder, which was incommensurable in the magical primordial world.”<sup>229</sup> By taking part in Enlightenment, however, artworks also take place in the dialectic of enlightenment. Art registers the violence of society upon nature, yet inflicts upon nature (as the idea of beauty) a second violence. This becomes *apparent* in the double character of the work of art, a scarred non-identical particular object.

The problem facing Adorno’s aesthetics, however, is to reveal the non-aesthetic that scars the aesthetic. At this point, then, we must turn to readings of Adorno’s aesthetics that simultaneously interpret his aesthetics as the culmination of negative dialectics *and* as aesthetics not pointing to anything beyond itself, thus simply repeating the resignation of Adorno’s philosophy.

#### Extra-Aesthetic Concerns within Aesthetics

Critics of Adorno, communicators and disseminators of communicative action, ideologists advocating that we inhabit a post-ideological terrain, and even defenders of the Adorno all locate his aesthetics as the most powerful and important of Adorno’s philosophical insights. A ‘progressive’ historical reading thus frames the philosophical interpretations of Adorno, placing aesthetics at the culmination of his negative dialectical philosophy.<sup>230</sup> While sympathetic readers and critics focus on Adorno’s aesthetic theory

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<sup>229</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 80.

<sup>230</sup> Though not presented as a historicist reading, it is interesting to note that even Alain Badiou’s *Lessons on Wagner* reads Adorno’s extra-aesthetic text, *Negative Dialectics* as providing the site to think Wagner. So, even where we do not look at Adorno’s strictly aesthetic writings, we find aesthetic claims: “This approach, which involves trying to determine how a philosophical condition is actually at work in its absence, or in this case, how music and Wagner can occupy a

as the culmination of his (negative dialectical) philosophy, they miss the extra-aesthetic dimension immanent to his aesthetics. The claim that Adorno's flight to the aesthetic realm results in resignation is blind to this extra-aesthetic dimension.<sup>231</sup>

Whether it be from the camp of communicative action, (post)modern or (post)structural theory, the various hermeneutic and ontological schools, or the positivists, there is a double critique of Adorno's aesthetics: (1) Adorno's greatest insights reside in his aesthetic theory and that while his other philosophical and sociological writings are either themselves historically outdated or inevitably lead to cul-de-sacs of thought (i.e., resignation), his most important thought is to be sought in his writings on aesthetics; and (2) the concept of mimesis, the culmination and end product of his negative dialectical philosophy on the relation between the work of art and society, is itself the greatest cul-de-sac of thought. This is due to the fact that its logic of bad infinity cannot lead to any sort of reconciliation or satisfactory result, even according to its own logic. Benhabib writes:

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certain place without Wagner's needing to be mentioned as such, is of great interest to me. Wagner will quite naturally come to occupy this place because in the final analysis it is his own and, more broadly speaking, music's. So we will examine certain aspects of Adorno's philosophy in terms of how they set up the possibility for this function of Wagner as I have just gone over it" (Badiou, *Lessons on Wagner*, 27). It should be mentioned in passing that Badiou's reading echoes Adorno's philosophical reading of Kant and Hegel; see, in particular, *Lectures on Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, Lectures 1 and 2; and "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy" in *Hegel: Three Studies*. An exception to the historical/historicist reading of Adorno is J.F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman* and Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the jews'*. Lyotard's position results, however, in prioritizing the aesthetic over the political, moral, and theoretical.

<sup>231</sup> This is a common criticism of Habermas and Habermasians. While Habermas focuses on Adorno's performative contradictions, Adorno's nihilism (Nietzscheanism), and aporias of subjectivity that lead to a conceptual dead-end, Habermasians (Seyla Benhabib and Maeve Cooke, in particular) see Adorno's aesthetics as merely furthering the problem without offering a solution. Their approach, as will be shown in this chapter, sees Habermas' theory of communicative action as providing a way out. What Habermas and his communicating conspirators do not address is Adorno's extra-aesthetic concern, and the reflexive role played by the (aesthetic) object in Adorno's theories.

Repeatedly, Adorno destroys the myth of a collective, singular subject of history, and of a logic of the historical process. Yet this search for the non-identical leads Adorno away from the discursive realm altogether. By focusing on the concept of mimesis, which is intended to anticipate a new, non-determining mode of relation to inner and external nature, I show that the work of art cannot fulfill what Adorno searches for through this concept.<sup>232</sup>

For Maeve Cooke, the concerns of Adorno's philosophy, including what she sees as his reliance upon necessary false consciousness (which had been addressed by the work of art), are anachronistic. The concerns are dialectically overcome by Habermas' theory of communicative action:

[T]he notion of ideology as necessary false consciousness raises the questions of who is in a position to engage in ideology critique and from what vantage point it is possible for them to do so...A further reason for rejecting the thesis of necessary false consciousness is that it is anachronistic; it no longer seems to fit the reality of complex modern societies.<sup>233</sup>

The perhaps even more dangerous claim made about Adorno's philosophy – which would today go under the banner of interdisciplinary activity, whereas philosophy was (to use an alternate jargon) *always already* interdisciplinary – is that not only does it see its culmination in aesthetic, but that this aesthetic theory is a departure from regular traditional *and* critical theory. Rüdiger Bubner writes: “Nothing else, however, pervades Adorno's philosophy so thoroughly as his unremitting refusal to meet theory's traditional demands...Adorno's thought,

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<sup>232</sup> Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 11.

<sup>233</sup> Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society*, 11.

however, finds its definitive expression in the title *Aesthetic Theory*.”<sup>234</sup> Following Horkheimer’s essay, according to this analysis, critical theory rechristens itself in Adorno as aesthetic theory. Bubner continues: “The question I pursue here aims at discovering the reason that, for Adorno, theory must give way to aesthetics.”<sup>235</sup> Aesthetic theory, the story goes on this account, is not a dual attempt to be a theory that is aesthetic while also a theory on the aesthetic (thus giving priority to the object and having theory and the concept respond to its demands), but to make theory into an aesthetics, a theory of the sensible (of sensation), and of art.<sup>236</sup> Bubner must not have paid much credence to the following statement by Adorno, or simply misperceived it: “Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived.”<sup>237</sup> We can add, Philosophy

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<sup>234</sup> Bubner, “The Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy.” *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 148. There is an alternative reading possible: one could simply remark that critical theory opposes the demands of traditional theory; Adorno’s philosophical and critical work finds its greatest account in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Even this, however, would fall prey to – following Bubner’s title – the mistake of finding a ‘central’ idea of Adorno’s thought. The *central* idea is non-identity, that there can be no central idea, including the idea of nonidentity. A more nuanced approach to Adorno’s main concern for the aesthetic – precisely, in order to show its dual aesthetic and extra-aesthetic concerns – is Hullot-Kentor’s *Things Beyond Resemblance*, specifically “Critique of the Organic: Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic,” pages 77-93.

<sup>235</sup> Bubner, “The Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy.” *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 148.

<sup>236</sup> Bubner here finds an ally in the reading of Habermas, specifically, “Excurses on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature,” in *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. In that particular chapter, Habermas connects Adorno with Derrida, situating both as sharing a flattening of cognitive theory, normative theory, and aesthetics (literary writing). In the text, in general, Habermas lectures post-Nietzschean German and post-structural French philosophy as having attempted the destruction of reason, thus allowing neo-conservatism, neo-liberals, and other nihilistic positions to infiltrate academic and political discourse. One can expect as much consensus between the parties here as hoping to find an evaluation for philosophical significance other than passing the (Apellian) test of *performative contradiction*. On an alternative reading comparing and contrasting Adornian and Derridean aesthetic theories in a more philosophically fruitful manner, see Christoph Menke’s *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*.

<sup>237</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.



perceived strictly (non-)theoretically is philosophy (non-)theoretically misperceived.

What comes to the fore in Adorno's aesthetic theory is the antinomial aspect of the work of art, the dual character of artworks, and the importance of non-identity for Adorno's negative dialectics. These issues, along with the priority and inexhaustibility he locates in the object show the site of the critique of political economy in the aesthetic realm. Philosophy's (aesthetic theory's) response to the work of art's dual nature – as autonomous and non-autonomous – points us on to the path of seeing how this critique of political economy takes place at the aesthetic level, within the work of art. This scarred particularity is precisely the dual scarred particularity of (1) the work of art, and (2) the return of repressed nature as sublime. Adorno's aesthetics of the sublime provides critiques political economy by reading the double character of scarred particular in the work of art.

#### Mimesis in Response to Contradictions within (Subject and) Object

Adorno's aesthetic theory (of sublime) interprets the work of art's repetition-compulsion in the repressed object of natural beauty. The return of repressed nature as sublimity is the particularity aimed for, yet missed by the individual work of art. Art is both *responsive* and *demanding*. It is responsive to the 'something more' in the expression of nature, while demands philosophical-aesthetic response. At stake is the relation between mediatedness and immediacy, an attempt for art to make amends to the violence it has done (repeating the violence of civilization upon internal and external nature) to natural beauty. A response to the particular work of art, and to the natural beauty imitated by art beauty aims to undermine the mythic cycle of enlightenment's

violence upon nature. Philosophy, in this pursuit, cannot simply become identical to art. Aesthetic theory must maintain a distance from its object even when submitting itself to art (thus avoiding the Kantian need to be disinterested).

Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing.<sup>238</sup>

Adorno avoids flattening the distinction between art and philosophy, and avoids synthesizing them together. What the poem ‘thinks’ non-conceptually becomes conceptual following the interpretive process of philosophy, of aesthetic theory.<sup>239</sup> This activity of the concept is in this response not the same as the concept in pure reason; the work of art is a separate object. Art is the realm of the purely non-conceptual that aesthetic theory translates into conceptual thought. This relation between art and philosophy, the gap that aesthetic theory enters is not an in-between. Aesthetic theory mediates the extremes of art and philosophy, without being the middle ground.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15 (‘Infinity’).

<sup>239</sup> Here, Alain Badiou is correct in recognizing in Heidegger (following Nietzsche, we might add), and his thoughtful followers, a ‘suturing’ of philosophy to art, a flattening of the two such that philosophy takes up the mantle of discussing the truth of art as Truth. Art does not have an immanent truth, but its truth is Truth for philosophy, according to Badiou’s reading of this historical suturing. Philosophy, for Badiou, today means a de-suturing of philosophy from all the previous suturing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: politics by Marxism, science by Anglo-American philosophy or mathematical philosophy, and art by Heidegger’s philosophy. We should emphasize, however, a difference between Badiou’s inaesthetics and Adorno’s aesthetic theory (if the name did not emphasize this difference already). Quite simply put, Badiou’s approach to art is to understand the truth of art simply as a truth of art. Art’s truth is recognized (in a Platonic fashion) and it is, at the same moment, quarantined within art. The truth of art can only be art’s truth, and not refer to anything else. Similar to the relation of body and soul in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, then, Badiou finds the Idea of (artistic) Truth imprisoned in particular works of art that philosophy must interpret without identifying or removing from the sphere of art. In Adornian fashion: Art strictly perceived inaesthetically is art inaesthetically misperceived.

<sup>240</sup> Mediation is not to be interpreted as akin to an Aristotelian mean. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 326-329 (‘Hegel Siding with the Universal’).

Aesthetics provides an alternative way of imagining the relation between subject and object. In his essay, “On Subject and Object,” Adorno writes:

What is known through consciousness must be a something; mediation applies to something mediated. But subject, the epitome of mediation, is the ‘How’, and never, as contrasted to the object, the ‘What’ that is postulated by every conceivable idea for a concept of the subject. Potentially, though not actually, objectivity can be conceived without a subject; but not likewise object without subjectivity.<sup>241</sup>

While the essay otherwise points towards the equivocations within the epistemological binary of subject-object, it also raises interesting questions for an aesthetic theory. These questions hinge on Adorno’s insistence to provide priority for the object (not necessarily priority for objectivity). To provide priority for the object requires a subject, whereas a supposed priority for objectivity (not to be confused with the object) owes its priority to evacuating any traces of subjectivity. Adorno’s recourse to priority for the object is a priority that goes through the subject, and through the concept: “Because entity is not immediate, because it is only through the concept, we should begin with the concept, not with the mere datum. The concept’s own concept has become a problem.”<sup>242</sup> The concept’s own concept has become a problem to the extent that a concept fetishism results. In an effort to provide priority for the object (be it aesthetic, or cognitive), thought must go through the work of the concept. The priority of the object requires the concept as a point of departure. This point of departure, however, is a response to the object external to the concept as well as the non-identical object that remains immanent to the concept itself. The concept houses within it that which is non-identical to it.

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<sup>241</sup> Adorno, “On Subject and Object.” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 249.

<sup>242</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 153 (‘Starting Out From the Concept’).

Avoiding both the non-identical within the concept, as well as prioritizing the point of departure from the concept, creates the problematic concept of the concept, concept fetishism.<sup>243</sup>

The work of art in Adorno's aesthetics of the sublime undermines the supremacy of the subject (i.e., the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity). The work of art encapsulates a relation between subject and object that the subject must respond to. Thus, the Kantian antinomy between autonomy and heteronomy that had been located in the subject (transcendental/empirical) is now re-located into the object. The object becomes the locus of autonomy and heteronomy, an antinomy that cannot make sense within Kant's critical system. What is the purpose of this transposition? Two questions and possible problems result: (1) in an effort claim priority for the object, does Adorno not hypostatize this object, regardless of whether he particularizes the object as the work of art, the object of the concept, or exchange society? (2) In super-imposing the antinomy of human freedom onto the artwork, does Adorno not simply make the object into a subject? Does this reversal of Kant not reproduce the very problems of Kant's theories that Adorno himself had located, a hypostatization of subject and object?

An answer lies, I think, in situating Adorno's reading of the Kantian antinomy as a historical and mimetic transposition. Adorno does not simply superimpose the Kantian antinomy onto the artwork, but shows how the artwork mimes the Kantian antinomy of pure reason. The particular aspect of this Kantian antinomy of pure reason is further developed by an aesthetics of the sublime opposing beauty, which represses irrecoverable

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<sup>243</sup> See chapters 2 and 3 of the dissertation for a more detailed analysis, independent of the aesthetic realm, for the unconscious and fetish of the concept.

yet persistent natural beauty. The beautiful comes to be the site that repeats the domination of nature *within* the scarred particular work of art, sublating natural beauty.

Adorno's critique of Hegelian affirmative dialectics (leading to a negative dialectics) extends to a critique of Hegel's aesthetics of fine art (leading to an aesthetics of the sublime). By emphasizing a persisting negativity, non-identity, priority of the object, and the scarred particular, Adorno's negative dialectics necessarily goes to art. Art's appearance, as a work of art, reveals the scarring of the particular by totality. This domination of the particular *appears* in the work. The dual character of the work of art – as autonomous and social object – is both a reflection of art's social being, and must be reflected upon autonomously. Art opposes dominating society (and thus the domination of nature) by both reflecting upon its formal status, while also revealing an alternate relation to nature. Art's relation to nature, however, reveals another form of domination: the domination of natural beauty by the idea of the beautiful.

### Conclusion

Adorno's critique of political economy locates a reproduced form of domination: the scarred particular work of art reproduces the conceptual domination of nature. As fine art, the work of art dominates and represses natural beauty under the name of fine art, as a work actualizing the development of the *idea* of the beautiful. The unconscious of the particular work of art reveals the idea of fine art repeating towards nature the conceptual domination of nature. So while a work of art may reveal an alternative appreciation of nature to the domination of nature, the idea of the beautiful shows a domination of natural beauty. Thus Adorno's reading of the double character of art reveals art's aesthetic domination of natural beauty. Repressed natural beauty operates within the unconscious

of an aesthetics of fine art. Only a return of the repressed nature, as aesthetics of sublime, does justice to both: (1) the scarred particularity of the work of art, and (2) the scarring of natural beauty by the idea of the beautiful in fine art. Adorno's aesthetic critique of political economy – his aesthetics of the sublime – focuses on the antinomy central to art (its dual character) to reveal the 'scarred particular.' This scarred particular is as much the scarred work of art, as it is the idea of natural beauty by the idea of beauty. Nature rendered imperfect beauty and deficient by the aesthetics of fine art returns (as the repressed) sublime.

To address the particular scarred by totality, Adorno mimetically assimilates the Kantian antinomy on freedom to the realm of aesthetics. This is art's dual character. Adorno does not strictly superimpose the Kantian antinomy so much as mimetically assimilate it to the work of art. Such a move undoes the hegemony of the subject, while also reflecting the reification of the subject in the object itself. Such a mimetic assimilation is particularly important as this art object can also only be reflected upon by critique without subjective imposition (determination).

There exists within art's antinomy of autonomy/heteronomy an empirical (i.e., historical) and non-empirical dimension. Autonomy – what Kant reserved as not being reducible to the empirical – has arisen empirically and historically, while the success that one could attribute to such autonomy obeys its own causal laws, irreducible to the very historical causality that caused the work of art's autonomy. In other words, what is deniable is whether artworks are successful in their autonomy.<sup>244</sup> The reason for this is because each artwork attempts to prove its success according its own logic, its law of

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<sup>244</sup> This was, of course, the very danger Kant saw (in the moral realm) in allowing the law of experience to determine success for the idea. Experience is prejudicial, and one is never sure whether the 'moral' act one saw was truly moral, or good in itself (i.e., free of inclination).

form. Each artwork is a particular work. At the same time, however, art cannot avoid its other, the universal: “The universal is the stumbling block of art: By becoming what it is, art cannot be what it wants to become.”<sup>245</sup> The artwork is a particular object that aims to negate the social conditions and societal order from which it arose. This negation is, at the same time, a negation of the whole. By negating the whole, that is society, the artwork, as a particular object, becomes a part of that whole. Just as the universal is the stumbling block of art, so too, the work of art becomes the limp of civilization.

The aesthetics of the sublime makes conscious the unconscious at work in this scarred particularity. Adorno’s (extra-)aesthetic critique of political economy has three goals:

1. Critique exposes the violence and damage done to the object. This violence goes by the name of the domination of nature.
2. The priority of the object undermines Kant’s ahistorical-transcendental account of the antinomy of pure reason. Art’s double character aims to break the spell of the identity principle.
3. The aesthetics of the sublime reveals the un(re)presentable aspect of a work of art, the imageless image. The aesthetics of the sublime opposes the development of the idea of beauty, an idea that repeats the domination of nature (natural beauty sublated by fine art beauty). The aesthetic sublime responds to the scarred particularity along with the scarring of natural beauty by art beauty.

By situating the antinomy of the subject onto the work of art, Adorno changes the very antinomial relation between autonomy and heteronomy. The dual nature of the work of art situates aesthetically the relation between art and society, while having this internal aesthetic relation become art’s social character: art is social to the extent that it reflects

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<sup>245</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 351.

aesthetically upon its dual character. ‘Mimesis by artworks’ is key to understanding Adorno’s mimetic appropriation of the Kantian antinomy:

Artworks are self-likeness free from the compulsion of identity. The Aristotelian dictum that only like can know like, which progressive rationality has reduced to a marginal value, divides the knowledge that is art from conceptual knowledge:

What is essentially mimetic awaits mimetic comportment.<sup>246</sup>

Art’s mimetic comportment and the *mimetic* appropriation of the Kantian antinomy allow art to designate a counter-point to the identity principle, that principle which scars the particular and is nature’s wound. The work’s mimetic comportment requires subjectivity to immerse itself into the work. Aesthetic autonomy demands the response of the subject. The work of art, in its uncanny self-likeness, requires that interpretation come from within it and not be superimposed (whether that superimposition be from psychological, aesthetic, or political avenues).

The immanent logic of the work of art makes interpretation a mimesis of the very autonomy located within the work of art. Yet, at the end of the day, this work of art is only this, a work of art. The freedom it purchases comes at the expense of the subject whose mimetic comportment has not yet actualized freedom. The Kantian antinomy of freedom of the will is aesthetically and mimetically appropriated by Adorno to show how mimesis by works of art enact a freedom from the compulsion of identity. This freedom is barred from subjectivity. Opposed to this mimetic comportment, a mimetic comportment towards the scarred particular and the non-identical character of the work of art, is the culture industry. This industry requires cultural products mime one another in an act of perennial sameness.

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<sup>246</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 125.



Adorno's aesthetic theory can only make sense if it responds to the threat of the culture industry. This threat is anti-enlightenment that goes by the name of enlightenment. The threat of the culture industry is not simply that works of art enter a taylorist assembly-line of production; this taylorist model becomes our culture. The erasure of the line separating culture from industry finds its correlate in the erasure of any definite line separating the mind's faculties. In the culture industry the object no longer has priority, and the autonomy it always aims for evaporates as soon as it is integrated into this total system. The next chapter will examine Adorno's critique of the culture industry, and his extension into society identified as exchange society.

## CHAPTER 6

### The Scarred Particular from the Perspective of Totality: The Culture Industry and

#### Exchanging Society

“We are the children of Marx and Coca-Cola” – J.L. Godard, *Masculin, Féminin*.

#### Introduction

What shape does totality take? What particular forms does totality assume when scarring the particular? Since totality *qua* the totality of the real cannot be approached directly, or immediately, how should a critique of political economy approach totality? This chapter addresses these questions.

Adorno’s negative dialectical philosophy pursues the consistent sense of contradiction and non-identity. As Brian O’Connor puts it, Adorno’s philosophy aims to be “a philosophy capable of expressing nonidentity, or the particularity of the object that is not subjected to universalizing concepts or categories.”<sup>247</sup> Non-identity is immanent to concept and the object. Pursuing contradiction questions reifying and hypostatizing tendencies at work within instrumental and economic reason. Critical self-reflection aims to be the antidote to the dangers those latter forms present. The claim is that instrumental (and economic) reason takes hold in even the most unsuspecting areas – aesthetic enjoyment, socialization, historical (and social) development, and technological progress.<sup>248</sup>

Reification and hypostatization affect both subject and object, and the domination of nature extends to scar all particulars that do not comply with universal’s compulsion

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<sup>247</sup> O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*, 48.

<sup>248</sup> While Horkheimer had written on ‘instrumental reason,’ and Adorno and Horkheimer continue that work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, André Gorz writes on ‘economic reason,’ in his *The Critique of Economic Reason*.

toward identity. It is through these scarred particulars that Adorno's critique of political economy takes place. The last chapter examined the scarred particularity of the work of art via art's double character (its autonomy and heteronomy). The aspect of heteronomy examined was the domination of nature that takes its toll on aesthetic objects, and how aesthetic objects themselves repeat a certain form of the domination of nature. Adorno's focus on the heteronomous aspect of the work of art reveals how art itself continues the domination of nature (through the development of the idea of beauty).

Continuing with the theme of totality scarring the particular, this chapter focuses on the other aspect of heteronomy in the artwork, totality in the form of dominating society. Dominating society scars the particular artwork and individuals. The production of the work of art and aesthetic experience both find themselves within the horizon of the culture industry. Though the culture industry does not determine the authentic work of art, as Adorno understands it, it is nonetheless socio-economic sphere that the work of art finds itself in and rebels against. Rebellion from the society the work remains a part of can be read as the work of art seeking an autonomy that is never guaranteed. The work of art's 'rebellion' from the socio-economic sphere that affects it, yet to which it remains part of, is evident even in those particular works striving to express individual experience, independent of market conditions: lyric poetry. The interpretive task, according to Adorno, is to consider, "how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it."<sup>249</sup> The culture industry threatens the very conditions of existence for the authentic work of art.

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<sup>249</sup> Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, 39.

The culture industry, for Adorno, is a totalizing aspect capitalist society assumes towards its cultural products. While not completely liquidating the work of art, the culture industry substitutes itself for it. As a substitute, the culture industry is an aspect of a total society that thrives because of the exchange principle. Society, which had once been the object of study for philosophers and sociologists becomes, according to Adorno, exchange society. Exchange is the hinge concept through which both the culture industry and (exchange) society are interpreted as dominating totality.

I first examine the anti-enlightenment impulses and effects of the culture industry, specifically the manner by which the culture industry stifles the emancipatory potential of all art, aesthetic experience, and imagining consciousness. Next, I will move onto the concept of 'society', the object of sociological enquiry. As object born of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that which Hegel, Comte, Marx, and then the sociologists Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber explored, 'society' is at once the paradigmatic object while also an object unlike any other. The culture industry is Adorno's entry-point to society and, following that, exchange society, which is both a speculative and empirical concept. For Adorno, 'exchange society' designates contemporary capitalist society, which is distinguished by the rule of exchange and the identity principle.

The culture industry opposes the avant-garde work of art. It is also, by virtue of being tied to market conditions, a totalizing horizon within which the avant-garde work of art is found and rejects: aesthetic imagination threatens to become the enjoyment of the consumer, and the work of art into the commodity that produces this enjoyment. This opposition between the avant-garde and the culture industry is one between a stunted individual autonomy and anti-Enlightenment. While not completely determining art, the

culture industry perpetually threatens to liquidate art and its promise of happiness. Domination by the culture industry evacuates art of its use value, reducing it to simple exchangeable commodity. Though not ridding the world of the possibility for a genuine work of art, the culture industry substitutes itself for art, threatening the possibility of art's being recognized. The remaining exchange value of the work of art, however, is grounded in a society within which all are exchangeable, except exchange society itself. To understand the manner by which the particular suffers by totality, one must examine the culture industry and its society, exchange society.

#### The Culture Industry: Anti-Enlightenment

Written against the background of the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer's "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" details the interrelations between the capitalist mode of production, politics, aesthetics (the cultural sphere), and consumer-society. That National Socialism lost the Second World War did not mean that the methods fascism availed itself of ceased to exist. The threat explored in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the culture industry, is that Fascism outlasts its National Socialist form, its methods survive and are further developed in the culture industry. These methods include: absolute integration, a (false) identity, and a sameness infecting all cultural products. Adorno writes: "the miracle of integration, the permanent benevolence of those in command, who admit the unresisting subject while he chokes down his unruliness – all this signifies fascism."<sup>250</sup> The culture industry allows totality to survive and realize itself as a perennially threatening totalitarianism.

The culture industry is a totalizing system organizing the products of capitalism according to the logic of sameness, with the aim of eradicating all difference: "Culture

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<sup>250</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 124.

today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together.”<sup>251</sup> The culture industry is art made business. Eschewing the work of art – as having *both* exchange and use value – the culture industry has particular works become advertisements for the system that produces it and for which every product is replaceable by every other one. Every product of culture is produced and evaluated according to utility and profit, and in the marriage of technical rationality and economic reason everything is made to ‘fit the mold’.<sup>252</sup>

In an early version of the “Culture Industry” chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno wrote: “The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear...On all sides the borderline between culture and empirical reality becomes more and more indistinct.”<sup>253</sup> In order to fully appreciate the flattening out of difference between these two realms, it is important to establish what those realms were and what distinguished them. As the very title of this early version makes clear – “The Schema of Mass Culture” – Kant’s critical philosophy haunts Adorno’s reading of the culture industry. In Kant’s critical system there had been an assumed distinction, or boundary line (a much-favored term for Kant), between culture and practical life (mirroring the boundary line between the faculties of the mind). Culture, *Bildung*, was associated with the education [*Erziehung*] and enlightenment [*Aufklärung*]: critical self-reflection, and the development of autonomy. Alongside

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<sup>251</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.

<sup>252</sup> Adorno does not believe this totalizing aspect of the culture industry has completely eradicated all aspects of autonomy in the subject, since it still requires a minimal amount of autonomy in its subjects, therefore perpetually also allowing a space for alternatives - an antidote to its own activity – as the condition for the possibility of change.

<sup>253</sup> Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 61.

culture (the aesthetic sphere of Kantian philosophy) we have practical life (the moral sphere). The flattening that has occurred – as a result of commercial culture – has led to an irrational dialectical synthesis of all realms.<sup>254</sup>

Culture, as *Bildung*, was a means to educate, to enlighten, and to contribute to the autonomy of individuals. While that was the hope for culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows the lie such hope had become. There exists, according to Adorno, a “...fundamental fracture in bourgeois education.”<sup>255</sup> The fundamental fracture of bourgeois education is that rather than create autonomous individuals, education leads to the formation of a society that tolerated only the existent reality, ripe with its irrationalities. The society of free thinkers that share their thoughts with one another, thus exercising Kant’s public use of reason, finds itself realized as an audience of passive subjects not permitted reflection. The danger the culture industry presents is that individuals forego reflection in the interest of consumption. The culture industry’s production process severely limits the exposure of authentic works of art, while forcing those works to ‘compete’ with commodities. The *particular* work is replaced by particularities of the culture industry: sameness, and absolute integration. An example of perpetuated irrationalities is precisely the fact that the cultural commodities become advertisements for themselves, without providing the subject – now become consumer – what was promised. The culture industry produces the empty calories of thought.

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<sup>254</sup> This perverted synthesis is how we can also interpret Adorno’s claim that the culture industry realizes Wagner’s dream of a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) more efficiently than Wagner himself could have (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 97).

<sup>255</sup> Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 61

At the heart of bourgeois education, Adorno locates a fundamental irrationalism that persists along with education's goal to undo irrationality.<sup>256</sup> Persisting irrationality becomes the engine of the culture industry, and the reason for its allergy towards difference, non-identity, and the new. These factors were all the hope of aesthetic imagination. Adorno writes:

We no longer even approach the much vaunted aesthetic image-consciousness. Any achievement of imagination, any expectation that imagination might of its own accord gather together the discrete elements of the real into its truth, is repudiated as an improper presumption.<sup>257</sup>

The different spheres are evaluated according to the same logic, the logic of identity wherein the self-same must be managed and preserved. The culture industry, ruled according to the identitarian logic of exchange – where everything is good so long as it can be replaced with something else (the unlike becomes like) – eventually annihilates the hoped-for relation between imagination and freedom.<sup>258</sup> This transforms imagination into perception and freedom into the freedom to consume more of the same (a heteronomy advertised by the culture industry as autonomy). Freedom turns from an end(-in-itself) to a means for further cultural consumption, while imagination turns from

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<sup>256</sup> Adorno provides an analogy from the history of philosophy, specifically Kant's moral philosophy. Adorno identifies within Kant's moral philosophy – the drive to *purify* moral philosophy and speak only of reason, independent of examples and empirical situations – an *irrational drive*. Adorno reads Kant together with Freud to show that the very drive to purify reason is an irrationality at the heart of Kantian moral philosophy, similar to the (animal) instinct to separate the rational animal from animality (*Problems of Moral Philosophy*).

<sup>257</sup> Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture." *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 63-64.

<sup>258</sup> This annihilation is never complete; the culture industry does, however, constantly threaten the possibility of something else, thus attacking the possibility (and the future) within the present itself.



a schema realizing freedom in its play into a malleable object. The individual is reified, and the imaginative capacity is deformed.

The gap between aesthetic experience and practical and/or empirical life was the hope for aesthetic experience to rebel and make good on the promise of a better life, of happiness, and of freedom. What results, however, is an apology of the existent, a conservative siding with reality. In the language of Kantian philosophy: determinate judgment replaces the role of reflective judgment in the aesthetic sphere *and* the aesthetic sphere becomes subsumed under the identity principle which flattens out the once distinct spheres of Kant's critical system. The Kantian schema is taken over by the production process. That which was, for the subject, supposed to take the manifold and make sense of the world is now utilized in a formulaic way by the culture industry's army of the technicians in the production of the anti-art work, of culture made business.

The division of public and private reason itself becomes the shrinking of the public sphere by the monopoly of the culture industry. The culture industry is privative, and a private reason for which profit is the only goal. Works of art are no longer produced according to the demands of each particular work, but each particular work is produced and evaluated according to prior (market) successes. The universal is used to produce particulars, which are themselves examples confirming the former. The industry, or schema, appropriates the division between high and low, flattens it and reproduces it for all of culture. Adorno writes:

Even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production. The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of its subjects – that they should, from the first, relate sensuous

multiplicity to fundamental concepts – is denied to the subject of industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer.<sup>259</sup>

The streamlining is an adaptation occurring at the level of individual consciousness (and aesthetic experience) as well as the production of the art object: “All mass culture is fundamentally adaptation...It is baby-food: permanent self-reflection based upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place.”<sup>260</sup>

Though the culture industry obliterates all differences (difference between high and low art, difference between works of art and other commodities, aesthetic difference in the work of art, qualitative difference between works, etc.), Adorno and Horkheimer still attempt to distinguish the trend of the culture industry from the promise offered by works of art. The work of art is either produced by the culture industry (thus a repetition of the already existing), or it attempts to be an alternative to the culture industry that it can only oppose by being integrated, nonetheless. The culture industry thus forms the horizon that every work of art, including the avant-garde and authentic, finds itself in. By withholding what it offers, by cheating consumers of its promise, and by eventually having its identity-ridden ideology become utterly different from the consumers it offers itself to, the culture industry offers a false reconciliation: “That is the secret of aesthetic sublimation: to present fulfillment in brokenness. The culture industry does not sublimate: it suppresses.”<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 98.

<sup>260</sup> Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 67.

<sup>261</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 111. The swindle of the culture industry, and the false promises offered are found on pages 111-114.

Like Enlightenment, so too, the culture industry is totalitarian.<sup>262</sup> In the war between capitalist countries, one thing is bound to survive: the capitalist mode of production. The culture industry requires everything to obey the omnipotence of capital; anything that does not is looked at with suspicion and either cast out or reintegrated into the culture industry: “Anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated.”<sup>263</sup> As in Plato’s *Republic*, artists are either expelled or their services procured to produce the military marching music: “the culture industry has developed formulas which even reach into such non-conceptual areas as light musical entertainment. Here too one gets into a ‘jam’, into rhythmic problems, which can be instantly disentangled by the triumph of the basic beat.”<sup>264</sup> Unlike Plato, however, the culture industry only accepts that which imitates, that which is repetitive, and makes mimicry an absolute form, that which lies beyond the divided line. Fascism, for which enlightenment meant the prolongation of immaturity and went by the name of maturity, makes art obedient to the social hierarchy (“purposelessness for purposes dictated by the market”) or terms it degenerate.<sup>265</sup>

What happens to works of art is analogous to the situation of subjects: “In contrast to the Kantian, the categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom. It proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what...conformity has replaced consciousness.”<sup>266</sup> Everyone is, in this cult of the cheap commercial product, provided with everything. The individual is made species, and the work of art becomes a commodity without use value. The dialectic between the autonomous and non-autonomous nature of the work of art (and the individual) is

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<sup>262</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

<sup>263</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 104.

<sup>264</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 105.

<sup>265</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128.

<sup>266</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 104.

superficially reconciled at the expense of annihilating any chance for autonomy: “Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through.”<sup>267</sup> Though works of art were never independent of the socio-economic situation they arose in, their form was never completely determined by that situation. The role once fulfilled by patrons, providing an enclave in which art could still protest and vacillate between autonomy and non-autonomy, is in the culture industry performed in a patronizing manner by the captains of industry, who are themselves just as replaceable as the works produced:

What might be called use value in the reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value...Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself. For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish – the social valuation which they mistake for the merits of works of art – becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy. In this way the commodity character of art disintegrates just as it is fully realized.<sup>268</sup>

In a similar way to the Kantian categories, the culture industry filters the world through its understanding, obliterating all uniqueness that might belong to the work of art. The disinterestedness required by the Kantian system in order to consume a work of art is hypostatized in the culture industry and signals the deformed and reified faculties of consumers. This is the ideological victory of the culture industry: freedom as the freedom to choose any ideology.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 100.

<sup>268</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128.

<sup>269</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 135-136.

The threats of the culture industry are seen as both immanent to the concept of enlightenment, and part of a process that develops in history; the culture industry is both ahistorical in nature, and also the product of the latest manifestation of the historical development of capitalism. The culture industry is at one and the same time dynamic, yet precludes the possibility of its adaptability, and the realization of freedom (its autonomy) by the subjects whose faculties it cripples while providing crutches.

As an aspect of scarring totality, it also, however, operates *as if* it were totality, that nothing was outside of it, a pseudo-totality that aims at a repetition of the same, while not allowing anything new (in the form of the avant-garde). As an aspect of totality, it scars both individuals and particular works of art. It requires conformity from both, a conformity by individuals to consume, and artworks to be exchangeable like one another. The scarred particularity of the avant-garde work of art, perennially threatened by the culture industry, reveals that industry's dominating tendencies: absolute integration, complete identity, and perpetual sameness. These tendencies are operative in virtue of the contradictions by which society survives.

#### Society: A Total Object Unlike Any Other

The move from the culture industry towards (exchange) society follows, through the concept of exchange, the violence done towards the particular work of art and the individual. What had been a totalizing force with regards to cultural products becomes one aspect of a totalizing society, a society for which 'exchange' becomes its condition for possibility and reproducibility. In one of his last courses on sociology, Adorno writes: "the concept of exchange is, as it were, the hinge connecting the conception of a critical

theory of society to the construction of the concept of society as totality.<sup>270</sup> Exchange provides the means by which society is totalized, and is the site where the critique of that total society begins. Just as thought identifies – ‘to think is to identify’ claims *Negative Dialectics* – thus reducing the mediation of non-identical elements to an immediate identity, so too, exchange society seeks to establish itself as a static unity hiding dynamic elements within it.<sup>271</sup> The static unity only allows its dynamic moments to come to the fore to the extent that the unity, or totality, brings people together by virtue of their being alienated from one another.<sup>272</sup> Adorno addresses society, as an object of inquiry, most explicitly in his sociological writings and lectures, *Introduction to Sociology*. To limit his ‘sociological’ writings to those and some other essays would, however, miss the orienting categories of his negative dialectical philosophy.<sup>273</sup> Society is always, necessarily, in the background of Adorno’s philosophical and aesthetic writings and lectures.<sup>274</sup> Society reveals itself in the artwork while the artwork is fashioned from (and rebels against) a particular form of society. To examine these works of art, concepts, and individuals independent of their social situation, moreover, cannot but be a one-sided view of the problem. The task is not to use individuals or particular works as objects of sociological inquiry, but to see the manner in which society itself reproduces itself and plays a factor in the very constitution of the individual, or work of art.

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<sup>270</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 32.

<sup>271</sup> Adorno, “‘Static’ and ‘Dynamic’ as Sociological Categories,” *Diogenes*, Vol. 9:33, 28-49.

<sup>272</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 43.

<sup>273</sup> This thought is also evident in Axel Honneth’s important essay, “A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno’s Social Theory,” published in *Constellations* (Vol. 12, No. 1).

<sup>274</sup> Three sites from Adorno’s writings include: “Cultural Criticism and Society” in *Prisms*, “Culture and Administration” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, and “Society” in *Aesthetic Theory*.

Society is, for Adorno, like any object and is contradiction-ridden. It is also, however, an object unlike any other. As an object of and for sociology, Society appears monolithic and unified. Its unity, for Adorno, is due not so much to an ‘evening out of contradictions,’ as it is constituted because of its antagonisms and contradictions.<sup>275</sup> Society brings together multiple levels of abstraction, while preserving antitheses without reconciling them: individual and general, particular and universal, the work of art and the art world, spontaneity and facticity, nature and history, foreground and background, form and content. This is not to equate the relation between these tandem-concepts that refer to objects. The ‘general will’ becomes precisely the general will of society. Speaking of Mannheim’s psychologism of social tendencies, and Mannheim’s own tendency to flatten out and remove contradictions, Adorno writes:

“Its [the individualistic façade of society] recourse to a group of organizers, in the case of Mannheim’s ‘law’, to the bearers of culture, is based on the somewhat transcendental presupposition of a harmony between society and the individual. The absence of such harmony forms one of the most urgent objects of critical theory, which is a theory of human relations only to the extent that it is also a theory of the inhumanity of those relations.”<sup>276</sup>

A false unity of individual and society (along with the false unities of particular and universal, and subject and object) make of theory an apology for the existing society. Society is read either as a unity of atomistic individuals, or as a unity of masses, wherein the individual drowns. As an apology of existing society, the false unity of individual and society – as in a progressive account of history – brushes off real and persisting

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<sup>275</sup> Adorno criticizes such an approach – of evening out contradictions – in the sociological (i.e., positivist) writings of Karl Mannheim in “The Sociology of Knowledge and Consciousness,” in *Prisms*, 38.

<sup>276</sup> Adorno, “The Sociology of Knowledge and Consciousness,” *Prisms*, 41.

contradictions in society, social domination, and the domination of nature. Just as one cannot synthesize the two opposites, one must also avoid the tendency to hypostatize the relation to eventually favor one side. Hypostatizing and favoring individuality (as in Kierkegaard or Nietzsche) forgets the social, just as pointing only towards the economically determined class structure and ‘class society’ (found in a certain form of Marxism popularized by Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*) forgets the subject. Critical theory aims to keep intact and reflect upon the real antagonism that exists. In another text, Adorno writes: “Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication. This is how the technological veil and the myth of the positive is woven.”<sup>277</sup> The idea expressed here, and in Adorno’s critique of Mannheim, is that theory must respond to social antagonism without repeating that antagonism in the form of a harmonious theory. To simply claim that the real is rational does an injustice to the surviving forms of irrationality that continue to oppress individuals, while also doing an injustice to existing real situations that contest that irrationality (and ‘apparent’ reality). Such already existing examples would be avant-garde works of art, the works of Schoenberg, Kafka, Beckett, or Proust.

Another example of a surviving irrationality is the threat that fascism may survive *within* democracy, and that the demise of a fascist state does not necessarily end fascism. Adorno reads the survival of fascism through the excluded dregs. The either-or logic found in economic thinking extends to worldwide conflict that sees the victory against fascism as a victory against a particular state, while being blind to the continuing survival of fascist tendencies. The surviving irrational is either cast aside or simply not seen in order to make room for rational real. To say irrationality survives does not mean that one

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<sup>277</sup> Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture.” 63.



should hypostatize irrationality, but that rationality itself has, like the concept, and unconscious, a non-identical irrational element within it. The task of critical theory is to reflect upon this irrationality, without reproducing it. The compulsion towards absolute integration, that no nonidentity should survive and that the principle of identity should brand everything, is one feature of this continuing irrationality.

Adorno's understanding of society, his critique of contemporaneous readings of society, is dual: he critiques both the object made of society by empirical sociology while also critiquing the activities of the sociologist. In his "Sociology and Empirical Research," he writes: "Nowadays, in the train of disappointment with both cultural-scientific and formal sociology, there is a predominant tendency to give primacy to empirical sociology."<sup>278</sup> The preference given to empirical sociology is also a preference upon empirical modes of research, including: questionnaires, interviews, surveys, and a combination of these methods. Such methods, according to Adorno atomize both the individuals, removing their mediating relationships with other individuals and socio-economic institutions, but also the society itself. This hypostatization of society and its individuals renders the dynamic character of both of them static.

A sociology that is only empirical misses precisely the non-empirical dimension of society, that society cannot only be empirically located, but that it permeates everything. Non-empirical dimension of society that permeates society is history, and the historical conditions of that society. That society, in its appearance, appears natural hides the conditioned and historical nature of it. The strictly empirical approach reduces society to a given, without questioning its own status of existence. Empirical sociology, in Adorno's estimate, operates with positivist assumptions – aiming for the *facts* of society

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<sup>278</sup> Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research." *Adorno Reader*, 178

– without examining just what constitute the facts to be facts in the first place. Facts are taken at face value without examining the conditions constituting those facts. Facts are reified, and neither the false nature of their appearance is addressed, nor that this false appearance relates to a true essence. Society is doubly missed: both within the facts, and independent of these facts.

On the relation between contemporary social research empirical sociology, Adorno writes:

Contemporary social research denies this connection [between facts and what they refer to] and thereby also sacrifices the connection between its generalizations and concrete societal determinations of structure. But if such perspectives are pushed aside and considered to be the task of special investigations which must be carried out at some point, then scientific mirroring indeed remains a mere duplications, the reified apperception of the hypostatized, thereby distorting the object through duplication itself. It enchants that which is mediated into something immediate.<sup>279</sup>

Sociology is, according to this estimation, reifying itself and its object in its very practices. The duplication, on the part of the social sciences, of reified society is a result of conditions of existing society. Reified society is both constituted and constituting. It reifies its members and is reified as a result of the habits of those members. Here strictly empirical research is no less guilty than the economic realm it claims to observe objectively.

One might ask, however: does Adorno not hypostatize a positivist aspect of sociology, and substitute that aspect for sociology in general? While Adorno emphasizes

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<sup>279</sup> Adorno, “Sociology and Empirical Research.” *Adorno Reader*, 182.

his critique of empirical research methods and positivism's search for facts, he does not think these fields are useless, unimportant, or that their methods must be discarded. As someone whose work was in constant dialogue with and in practice with empirical research, Adorno recognized the importance of such research methods and of positivism's importance in the development of sociology. His worry, however, was that positivism and empirical research that opposed speculation made a fetish of the objects it was meant to study. Hypnotized and blinded by their own methods, researchers thus naturalized the constructed object, while avoiding the non-identical aspects of those objects. The only object that comes to be prioritized, according to this model then, is an object created by the subject. The objectivity that research strives for rids the subject of critical self-reflection, the very condition for the possibility to grant priority to the object.

Adorno sheds light on the 'object' of society, while critiquing the methods and the practices sociology employs in claiming to understand and extract formal laws from it. Sociology, according to Adorno, appropriates methods suited to the natural sciences, which are themselves not suited to sociology. The objects of natural sciences, lead or air for the chemist, for example, cannot be not a model for how society is to be examined. The primacy that the natural scientist assumes before their objects, the primacy of method as well as the conditions for an experiment, do not work as methods for the sociologist and social scientist. Society is treated as an object by the sociologist, while it contains and constitutes the very subjects and researchers that aim to research it. Sociological practice operates as if researchers could remove themselves from the object they study, like natural scientists observing an object of element in the world.<sup>280</sup> The natural

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<sup>280</sup> Adorno continues here Horkheimer's hypothesis on the difference between critical and traditional theory. An unquestioned assumption that the researcher can remove themselves from

scientific term ‘controlled experiment’ becomes, when appropriated by the social scientist, the pretext for administration by and for an administered world. The dynamic aspects of society are rendered static, while those static qualities are themselves naturalized. Individuals, in turn, are reduced to quantified qualities, metrics, and ahistorical types (whether Jungian archetypes or otherwise). They are read through character types (e.g., introvert or extrovert), while the possibility of having individuals ‘match’ with one another are due to reified images one has of oneself. One can only thus match with another by reducing oneself to an object with preferences.

Adorno’s negative dialectics is the antidote to reifying tendencies in empirical sociology’s practices and solution to the problem and puzzle of society. Critical and dialectical analyses aim at an *interpretation* of society. In “Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music” Adorno writes:

But society is both an umbrella concept that subsumed every more specialized subsystem within itself and something that manifests itself as a totality in each of its branches. It cannot be conceived, therefore, as either a general collection of more or less unconnected facts or a supreme logical category to be arrived at by a progressive process of generalization. Instead it is a process; it produces both itself and its subordinate parts, wielding them together into a totality, in Hegel’s sense of the term. The only knowledge of society worthy of the name is one that would grasp both that totality and its parts through the process of critical analysis.<sup>281</sup>

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the object of research without affecting their object of research or their findings leads to such an inquiry to perpetuate the very facts it was meant to explain.

<sup>281</sup> Adorno, “Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music.” *Sound Figures*, 1.

One should be careful in the assessment of the totality here that Adorno speaks. The totality that he aims for is not a totality that the empirical sociologists claim to offer. Indeed, even totality cannot be examined in full. Adorno, however, will not offer a method to substitute empirical sociology that will somehow bring the truth of society out, since the totality that sociology aims to grasp itself cannot be grasped by its methods: “Isolated social research becomes untrue as soon as it wishes to extirpate totality as a mere crypto-metaphysical prejudice, since totality cannot, in principle, be apprehended by methods.”<sup>282</sup>

The exclusion of certain variables from statistical or empirical research repeats the very exclusion of the particular by totality, while also reading from society only what one puts back in. Adorno’s participation in the Princeton Radio Research Project contributed to his critique of empirical research: the researcher assumed, according to Adorno, that questionnaires (surveys) could apprehend the reality by allowing individuals to respond to their experiences and interests.<sup>283</sup> Rather than eschew experience, Adorno emphasizes the need to critically reflect upon one’s experience, an act rendered impossible by the questionnaire format. Similarly, the positivist demand (itself not a fact) to locate society in an assemblage of facts does not address the non-factual, or how to separate the factual from the non-factual. Negative dialectics opposes the strict distinction found in this practice, which furthers, in its pursuit to understand society, the reification of society. Adorno writes: “Positivism is the conceptless appearance of negative society in the social sciences. In the debate, dialectics induces positivism to become conscious of such

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<sup>282</sup> Adorno, “Sociology and Empirical Research.” *Adorno Reader*, 185.

<sup>283</sup> David Jenemann’s *Adorno in America*, particularly chapters 1 and 2, examine this formative experience.

negativity, of its own negativism.”<sup>284</sup> Adorno challenges positivism, and *strictly* empirical research – a necessary, but not sufficient form of research – to look precisely at what conditions them and their research methods: society. Piecing together a true and total society out of the fragmentary facts that one had reduced society to in the first place cannot, according to Adorno, address its object of study. Furthermore, it exchanges a false image in place of object. This positivist exchange, however, is not simply to be brushed aside. The positivist dispute itself reveals the subject-object dialectic of researcher and society as social phenomena. It concerns the question of the essence of society, and how this society appears.

We get an idea of Adorno’s mediating approach to social phenomena and society, as object, in his essay, written in exile, concerning his experiences as an intellectual in America. Describing his study on Wagner, Adorno writes:

*In Search of Wagner* endeavored to combine sociological, technical-musical, and aesthetic analyses in such a manner that, on the one hand, societal analyses of Wagner’s ‘social character’ and the function of his work would shed light upon its internal composition. On the other hand – and what seemed to me more essential – the internal-technical findings in turn should be brought to societal expression and be read as ciphers of societal conditions (Adorno 1998, 218).

This ‘on the one hand / on the other hand’ locates one concrete operation of Adorno’s negative dialectics. Adorno reads the object through society and sees society embedded in the object in order to expose deforming social forces and the way in which the object nevertheless remains non-identical with regards to conceptual analysis. No individual is separate or separable from the society they in part constitute. Similarly, however, society

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<sup>284</sup> Adorno, et al. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 64.

itself is more than simply the sum of all empirical individuals. To miss this aspect of his philosophy also means to miss his key insight into the structure of society. A key feature of this society is exchange. Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy aims, through the 'on the one hand / on the other hand' mentioned above, to critique exchange society, a society where all is substitutable by everything else. This principle of exchange, moreover, is the means by which the identity principle operates in society. To grasp the scarring potential of totality Adorno moves his focus to a study of the principle of exchange and exchange society.

### Exchange Society

'Exchange society' is both an empirical concept and a speculative one. That is, it is both founded in reality, and transcends the strictly 'given' nature of that reality. Like so many of his other ambiguous, or equivocal concepts, Adorno's concept of 'exchange society' bears many of the advantages and disadvantages of a concept that is not clearly defined and specified.<sup>285</sup> The lack of a clear and distinct idea for exchange society however, and the lack of an adequate object corresponding to the concept of exchange society does not mean that the concept lacks depth, clarity, or distinctness. One should not affirm the opposite and say that the concept of exchange society is unclear and indistinct.

The object of (exchange) society cannot be exhaustively conceptualized.<sup>286</sup> Exchange society in Adorno's *Lectures on Sociology*, as well as his other sociological essays forms a pivot around Adorno's critique of the capitalist mode of production. Rather than examine the totality of such a mode of production – the aim of Marx – Adorno's analysis and ideology critique focuses on the principle of exchange, the principle establishing a

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<sup>285</sup> Charles Rosen mentions a whole laundry list of equivocal and ambiguous concepts in his article on Adorno in his collection of essays, *Freedom and the Arts*.

<sup>286</sup> Here one can refer to the edition, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

false identity between (at least two) unlike objects, which cannot be reduced to the simple general equivalence of money. The exchange principle grounds equivalency. For example, works of art become replaceable for one another, while only the cultural consumer strives to locate a difference between them. This superficial difference, imposed upon the work of art by society, eradicates real possible difference.

Society has become total due to the dominance of the exchange principle. The totalization of society, or the becoming total of socialization, had been developing since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, society is both the same and different to the form of community that had existed prior to the capitalist mode of production becoming dominant. Whereas with Marx there still existed the difference between use value and exchange value, Adorno's claim for twentieth century capitalism, or bourgeois/exchange society is the dissolution of use value:

What might be called use value in the reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value; enjoyment is giving way to being there and being in the now, connoisseurship by enhanced prestige. The consumer becomes the ideology of the amusement industry, whose institutions he or she cannot escape...Everything has values only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself. For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish – the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art – becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy. In this way the commodity character of art disintegrates just as it is fully realized.<sup>287</sup>

The two values commonly associated with the commodity have thus been developing, alongside the historical development of capitalism, asymmetrically. The dominance of

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<sup>287</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128.



exchange value over use value, much like the dominance of quantity over quality, is the mirror image of the reification of the object at the hands of the concept. Axel Honneth writes:

For him [Adorno] reification signifies a ‘recentering of man, who, according to the standard of exchange, unlearns how to perceive the world from the perspective of those intentions [intentions of others who the individual must respect] and wishes whose significance had originally emerged through imitation. To this extent, Adorno is in a certain way right to claim that the spread of commodity exchange at the same time represents a deformation of reason: the pressure to act in ever more spheres of action according to the action schema of exchange requires people to concentrate their capacity for reason on the egocentric calculation of economic utility.’<sup>288</sup>

Exchange, as Adorno had made clear in one of courses on sociology, was the hinge concept connecting critical theory to totality.<sup>289</sup> Exchange provides the means by which society is totalized, and is the site where the critique of that total society begins. Just as thought identifies – ‘to think is to identity’ as Adorno claims in *Negative Dialectics* – so too, exchange society established itself as a static and dynamic totality that brings people together by virtue of their being alienated from one another.<sup>290</sup>

The problem of approaching the concepts of ‘exchange society’ and ‘exchange’ is that these concepts start to be read strictly ‘economically.’ Use and exchange value refer to the sphere of production, and if the only substantial use of commodities is their exchange value – via either the universal equivalent of money or the universalizing

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<sup>288</sup> Honneth, “‘A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno’s Social Theory,” *Constellations* (Vol. 12, No. 1), 55.

<sup>289</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 32.

<sup>290</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 43.

concept – then one must refer to economics in order to examine and change this status. Without detailing what lies beyond ‘exchange society,’ Adorno stressed the importance of looking at the political and sociological aspects of exchange society. This area would be beyond strict economics and contribute to changing the present circumstance. Adorno writes:

As for economics itself, however, it will have no truck with anything – whether it be history, sociology, or even philosophy – which does not take place strictly within the context of the developed market economy and which cannot be calculated, mathematized, according to the schemata of current market relationships; those disciplines are accused, for example, of presenting a purely sociological theory of class.<sup>291</sup>

Economics misses the non-economic that comes to affect the final product studied: the phenomena of exchange. Strict economic calculation misses non-economic realities, such as interpersonal relationships, social and political institutions, as well as the possibility of a work of art that cannot be completely reduced to exchangeable object. Without thinking economically, Adorno stresses the non-economic aspect at work within a seemingly strictly economic category. Exchange, seen through this lens, then becomes an aspect of the identity principle. This principle cannot tolerate any difference and atomizes, under the guise of autonomy, individuals from one another. An autonomy purchased at the expense of general heteronomy hypostatizes the separation of individual from society.

The loss of interpreting society as both subject and object of study, and society as totality have led to distancing the observer from the observed, in this case the sociologist from society. Such a bracketing reifies the object while also the observing subject. Brute

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<sup>291</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 142.

facts of society are purchased at the expense of society, the observing subject is reified in the act of perception. Just as Kant's transcendental unity of apperception formed the tandem to the thing-in-itself, so too attempts to discount the totality of society as the land of illusion render the observing subject the conjuror of another illusion that claims to have captured society in the facts themselves.

### Conclusion

A critique of exchange society can never fully extricate itself from the reifying circumstances of that exchange society, without claiming in the manner of a beautiful soul that it is above such problems. As Adorno claims in the introduction to the *Positive Dispute in German Sociology*:

Within a reified society, nothing has a chance to survive which is not in turn reified. The concrete historical generality of monopolistic capitalism [cf. John Baran] extends into the monopoly of labor, with all its implications. A relevant task for empirical sociology would be to analyze the intermediate members and to show in detail how the adaptation to the changed capitalist relations of production includes those whose objective interests conflict, in the long run, with this adaptation.<sup>292</sup>

What Adorno here says echoes his earlier thoughts on the culture industry. The culture industry is one model of exchange society, where cultural products are subjected to the principle of identity that society subjects subjectivity. The exchange principle – that which establishes quantitative identity and general sameness at the expense of qualitative non-identity and particular difference – determines individuals (labor-power is one example) as well as cultural products (the repetition of the same found in the culture

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<sup>292</sup> Adorno et al, *Positive Dispute in German Sociology*, 7.

industry), concepts (the principle of making unlike into like) and their objects (particulars viewed as examples of the general or universal). The unity underlying all of these spheres creates “a system almost without a gap.”<sup>293</sup> The *almost* is key here. The culture industry and exchange society both liquidate difference whilst, at the same time, claiming a harmonious unity (the absence of contradiction). As Adorno argues, however, contradiction continues, and it is in virtue of contradiction that an antagonistic unity is formed. The presence of contradictions is both what undermines and keeps open the possibility of something different. Adorno marshals philosophical concepts against the historical perversion that has occurred to those very concepts. Such a critical position is facilitated by constitutive contradiction, underlying tension, and perennial antagonisms. He writes:

The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which, as Horkheimer and I have noted, enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and its turned into a means of fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.<sup>294</sup>

Anti-enlightenment is understood to mean regression towards tutelage, the impulse to reproduce a societal and individual self-incurred tutelage. The possibility of thinking anything – so long as one obeyed – is transformed into heteronomy of thought. The culture industry, and (exchange) society perform anti-enlightenment activities. The only corrective to such a situation is thus to emphasize, without favoring and hypostatizing, a scarred particular. This particular is both the object and the subject. Adorno’s critique of

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<sup>293</sup> Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 98.

<sup>294</sup> Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 106.

political economy works to salvage the scarred particular object and subject. Violent totality is seen embedded in this particular which is both autonomous and heteronomous. That the culture industry and exchange society require what they at the same time stifle, autonomy and difference, is the point from which a critique of political economy begins. This critique avoids obeying the demands of 'thinking economically,' without claiming to separate itself completely from it. What results from Adorno's so-called critique is thus a number of practical lessons, none of which can be sure of changing the reality of a situation they nonetheless continue to contest.

CONCLUSION; OR, LESSONS FOR EDUCATION

Adorno never wrote a text explicitly on, or critiquing, political economy. He also did not write a monograph on Marx, as he had with Hegel, Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger. The individual essays Adorno wrote on class conflict and the character of industrial society provide a helpful negative dialectical reading of certain issues, but they do not refer back explicitly to Adorno's greater philosophical concerns.<sup>295</sup> These essays require readers to un-riddle the problem of political economy in Adorno's writings. Such an activity, then, reveals Adorno approaching the problem of critiquing political economy in oblique ways.

Adorno's negative dialectical practice reads the object, the priority of which is emphasized, within society, while also reading society through objects.<sup>296</sup> While dialectics has aimed at this since Hegel, practice has, according to Adorno, sided with the power of the universal at the expense of particulars that do not fit. The history of dialectics has shown an affinity, if not complete and uncritical allegiance, with a progressive account of history.<sup>297</sup> That which does not fit and cannot be silenced – like the idea of natural beauty that has been sublated, and returns transformed into the aesthetic sublime – returns with a vengeance to expose the violence of the whole, while

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<sup>295</sup> Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory," and "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?: The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*.

<sup>296</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, and the essay "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Though Adorno indicates that negative dialectics is, strictly speaking, against the domination of the content by method, there are moments of an anti-method method at work in Adorno's thought (Adorno, Introduction, especially the section "'Infinity,'" and "The Antinomial Character of Systems"). These moments were indicated as 'axioms' in the Introduction with the purpose of orienting the reader to a theory of negative dialectics.

<sup>297</sup> Lectures 1-3 of Adorno's *History and Freedom*, the model on Hegel's World Spirit in *Negative Dialectics*, and the article "Progress" emphasize this point.

retaining the trace of the particular as wound.<sup>298</sup> This vengeance inadvertently can also lead the particular to repeat the violence of totality, though this time in a particular form. Totality does not, as totality, violate the particular. It is through the particular transformed into a particularity, an example of the whole, that the whole is violent. The particular is marked by complicity with the universal that it rebels against.

Adorno's critique of political economy begins with a critique of the economic thinking required by political economy. The difficulty of approaching the possibility of whether Adorno's negative dialectics provides a critique of political economy, and whether political economy (like philosophy) is possible at all, finds one answer in the essay on Beckett, "Trying to Understand Endgame." He writes:

Beckett shrugs his shoulders at the possibility of philosophy today, at the very possibility of theory. The irrationality of bourgeois society in its late phase rebels at letting itself be understood; those were the gold old days, when a critique of the political economy of this society could be written that judged it in terms of its own *ratio*. For since then the society has thrown its own *ratio* on the scrap heap and replaced it with virtually unmediated control.<sup>299</sup>

What is theory's role, possibility, and actuality when "no theory today escape the marketplace", as Adorno mentioned in *Negative Dialectics*, and when theorists, or intellectuals, are "at once the last enemies of the bourgeois and the last bourgeois," as was claimed in *Minima Moralia*?<sup>300</sup> Adorno's writing tried to provide an account of particularity scarred by a totality that it was nonetheless a part of and contributed to. This was his philosophical, or intellectual, experience. Making sense of his experience, an

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<sup>298</sup> Adorno, "Heine as Wound," *Notes to Literature Volume 1*, 80-85.

<sup>299</sup> Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame", *Notes to Literature: Volume II*, 244.

<sup>300</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 4; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 27.

experience connected with the socio-political history of the intellect (and philosophy), is evident in his texts. His philosophical attitude – critical self-reflection, and the consistent attempt to break the “coercion of logic using its own means” – is reflected in the ‘point of departure’ his writings would have, while also acknowledging philosophy, as first philosophy with absolute beginnings, has changed.<sup>301</sup> For example, each of the three parts of *Minima Moralia*, subtitled ‘Reflections on Damaged Life’, start from the most particular instance, or experience, of the intellectual *and* the intellect: Proust, the writer’s relation to language, and personal enlightenment (the maturity of the individual). From these, socio-historical circumstances and events are located and reflected upon.

For Adorno, both individual life and life in general are damaged. The intellect and intellectual, moreover, are in exile within social conditions hostile to their very existence. Adorno’s historic return to Germany is not necessarily the end of the intellect(ual)’s exile, however. Totality – what had gone by the name of spirit – which had scarred the particular, leaves its trace all over the world. Adorno writes: “The world spirit, a worthy object of definition, would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe.”<sup>302</sup> Spirit as the conscious working out of what had been unconscious, in nature as well as in society, has revealed itself as monstrous. Adorno writes in the wake of philosophical and historical catastrophe. Thus, his philosophy is a theoretical-practical attempt to educate. Education takes place for Adorno ‘after Auschwitz’. It has two distinct features:

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<sup>301</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 150 (‘Bequest’).

<sup>302</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320 (“Universal History”).



“The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again...Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz.”<sup>303</sup>

“The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating.”<sup>304</sup>

‘Auschwitz’ is not only the eponymous camp name, or the genocidal practices of the National Socialists. ‘Auschwitz’ is a concrete universal – a situation demanding a response from thought – that locates the historical situation of the world for Adorno. As he makes clear in his lectures on *Metaphysics*, “Auschwitz – and by that I mean not only Auschwitz but the world of torture that has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam.”<sup>305</sup> Auschwitz, then, describes the world of genocidal practices, state- and corporate-sponsored torture, the (today forgotten) threat of nuclear annihilation. Eugenicist practices predated the National Socialists; the world of Auschwitz – what made Auschwitz possible – was evident before and continues to exist after the failure of fascism. The claim that world spirit is permanent catastrophe could extend to the history of western civilization, a universal history that goes by the name of progress but is itself nothing except the rubbish bin Hegel had spoken of. Spirit, in the name of progress, uses humanity as raw material for its inhuman goals. Autonomy remains, nonetheless, a goal and power against Auschwitz.

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<sup>303</sup> Adorno, “Education After Auschwitz,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 191.

<sup>304</sup> Adorno, Adorno, “Education After Auschwitz,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 195.

<sup>305</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 101 (Lecture 13).

Meditations 'After Auschwitz' – a model of *Negative Dialectics* – leaves philosophy with a negative categorical imperative ('never again Auschwitz'). To insure that this 'after Auschwitz' not become an *after* 'after Auschwitz' is the premier demand placed on education. The role of the intellectual here assumes a political and practical role: to foster an environment that provides the conditions for the possibility of autonomy, critical self-reflection. Education is required in order not to forget what Adorno speaks of, in order not to forget the conditions that made such practices possible and continue to be possible. Education's role is to contribute to the ban on forgetting, and thus make sure the future does not allow the past to recur.

Adorno's move from an economic critique of political-*economy* – a non-dialectical one-way street that sees the political as ideology *and* determined by economy – to a political critique of *political*-economy reads sedimented violence of the whole in scarred particulars. 'Auschwitz,' for Adorno, is a particular instance wherein totality manifests itself an aims for 'absolute integration,' where the violence of the whole brands what is unlike itself. A strictly economic analysis would not do justice to the condition Adorno describes and fails before the total violence of absolute integration he addresses. 'Auschwitz' continues today because the conditions that made it possible have not changed. Philosophy's response to Auschwitz is an attempt to think the particular that was violated by the universal: this includes the particular body, the possibility of an individual having a personal relation to death, and that individuals become identified with categories and groups that are then liquidated. For Adorno, an education worthy of the name aims to change individual practices and habits that contribute to the anti-enlightenment tendencies of the whole. In this sense, education after Auschwitz works

upon a subjectivity whose possibility of resistance, as particular, has been reduced. Remembering Auschwitz involves remembering a scarred particular, a wound that festers in society. Speaking on Heine, whom he locates as ‘wound’, Adorno writes: “

Now that the destiny which Heine sensed has been fulfilled literally, however, the homelessness has also become everyone’s homelessness; all human beings have been as badly injured in their beings and their language as Heine the outcast was...The wound that is Heine will heal only in a society that has achieved reconciliation.<sup>306</sup>

Lyric poetry – the aesthetic attempt to express individual experience – is affected by society, as much as the individual is. The individual experience the poem expresses is no longer singular, if it ever was, but shared, and this shared experience is one of a shared dislocation. Heine, an outcast in country and in language, shares an individual experience that has become the condition of everyone. This condition is not an existential quality, but precisely what bars the possibility for authentic individual existence. The work of art cannot heal the problem it attests to. The wound of Heine reflects aesthetically (in the poem) on the relation between individual and society. The individual’s situation turns out to be a socially-imposed condition for the everyone; the lyric poem reveals that the individual is a part of society to the extent that society makes him and her a contributing outcast. Education, again, must respond to this.

There is a subjective side and an objective side to education. Education means both education in school, but also general public enlightenment. Philosophy plays a vital role mediating between multiple disciplines – sociology, psychology, history – while also providing a space for reflection upon political and educational institutional practices.

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<sup>306</sup> Adorno, “Heine the Wound,” *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, 85.

Adorno's understanding of education calls for interdisciplinary research that targets subjective and objective situations that lead to the catastrophe. While his individual work cannot change objective conditions directly, philosophy plays a vital role in responding to and affecting subjective conditions. Critical self-reflection, autonomy, and resistance are the aims for education. Autonomy registers the strength of the individual to resist the barbarism of existing totality, objective irrationality.

Adorno's critique of political economy contributes to the demand place on education. The chapters in this book were all attempts to emphasize various points of that education while tracing common features of negative dialectics. We can summarize the points of these chapters in the form of *lessons*. While Adorno does not provide a systematic critique of political economy, each individual chapter focused on a specific manifestation of the problem of political economy, and leaves us with a practical-theoretical lesson. These 'lessons' must be read as being part and parcel of Adorno's practical-theoretical philosophy, a philosophy aiming for education.

Philosophy and education, however, are both scarred. Education had, in virtue of not addressing the world that made Auschwitz possible, already failed. Education – which had pledged to oppose barbarism – failed before the barbarism that occurred and continues to persist. The discrepancy between the ideals of education (to combat barbarism by contributing to autonomy) and what it actually accomplishes (subjectively and objectively) reveals the isolation of education (being reduced to a means directly tied to the interests of global capital, instead of an end in itself) and the isolation of the subject from both object and society. Adorno's reflection upon the difficulty of education's objective and subjective aims acknowledges the difficulty of changing objective

conditions. The aim in turning to the subject is to rid the subject of the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity. Education is not separate from the whole it would aim to change. That it continues in a society wherein the conditions that led to Auschwitz did not change signals its on-going failure. Education bears the guilt of the shrinking public sphere of reason, the sphere wherein one addressed a reading public. The non-identical core that Adorno tries to bring across in education is the necessary education of education. Education must educate itself just as much as it must accomplish its subjective and objective goals. The self-critical reflection of education can be the only corrective to continuing to pay lip service to a critique of domination, which nonetheless continues unabated. Adorno's lessons, then, are as much for the subject's education as they are for a transformation in education's practices.

The first chapter examined Marx's traditional critique of political economy, from *Capital Volume 1*. The chapter focused on key aspects of Marx's critique ('dramatis personae'), the analysis of the metabolism of the capitalist mode of production, and the activity of the critique. The general architectonic of Marx's *Capital* is a strict economic critique of capital, an economic reading later popularized in Engels' text *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Within Marx's general critique, however, an alternative critique of political economy was found. This alternative critique is exemplified in the chapter on the fetishism of the commodity. The first lesson, then, of this project was: Marx's general critique of political economy provides an alternative nonidentical critique within it, operating like the minor motif of a musical piece. This alternative critique becomes a model for Adorno.

The second chapter examined Adorno's critique of 'thinking economically' and the antinomy affecting the intellectual. Intellectuals are required to either 'think economically' and be an apologist for the very economic system that is the object of critique, or avoid thinking economically ('have no truck with it') and separate themselves from the very socio-economic conditions that affect public and private existence. This very 'either-or' was itself, however, an instance of 'thinking economically.' Contra this hegemony, the chapter's lesson was: Adorno provides simultaneously a site-based critique of political economy (in line with his demand for micrological analyses), and a meta-critique of political economy critiquing the possibility of writing a traditional, strictly economic, critique of political economy.

Philosophy's approach to its object requires a critical analysis of concept-formation. Adorno's meta-critique – a critique of the traditional form – of political economy leads to the question of concept formation. Unreflective conceptualization reveals itself as reversing the order of knowledge – the priority of the object is replaced with the priority of the concept. This concept then assumes that it had created the object it is responding to. Much like commodity fetishism, then, the concept has its own fetishism: it hides the non-conceptual dimension at work within concept formation. In this instance, Adorno's site-based critique focused on the concept. Adorno critiques concept fetishism and, so as not to render this critique itself a fetish, then renders conscious what was unconscious in the concept. The lesson of this chapter is: without making conscious what is unconscious in the concept – a non-conceptual dimension – concept fetishism cannot be undone. Critical self-reflection begins with critiquing concept fetishism.

The critique of concept fetishism, and rendering conscious the unconscious of the concept leads to the next site of Adorno's critique of political economy: his reading of Hegel. From his encounter with Hegel's dialectics and changing historical circumstances, Adorno fashions negative dialectics. This is a dialectics emphasizing negativity and contradiction instead of affirmation and reconciliation. Rather than focus on the negation of negation that leads to affirmation, Adorno stays with the negativity at work within the affirmative, a negativity that undoes the story of harmonious reconciliation. What becomes known as the 'economy of negative dialectics' is the consistent and unreconciled thinking of nonidentity. This nonidentity is between and within subject and object, concept and object. Specifically, this nonidentity is a nonidentity that has been scarred by totality. Adorno's negative dialectics becomes the site from which to critique the violence of totality. The fourth lesson is: nonidentity shows itself in the particularity scarred by totality.

The fifth chapter continues this thought on the violence of totality by moving on to the next site: the work of art. As a created object, the work of art entertains a specific relation with regards to totality, society, nature, and the individual. The work of art is a particular that repeats the antinomies of the individual, and like the individual is at the mercy of totality. Art is both autonomous and it is heteronomous. The heteronomous elements of art are both society and nature. The work of art provides a different, non-violent relation, with respect to nature, while also reproducing some of the violent aspects of the society that it rebels against. Art, specifically art beauty, mimics the domination of nature, this time upon natural beauty. This violence is the development of the idea of beauty: beauty sacrifices natural beauty in order to further itself. The sacrifice of natural

beauty returns as nature repressed in the form of the sublime. This fifth lesson is: as a particular, the work of art reveals the scarring totality while also reproducing, within its particularity, a scarring (by the idea of beauty); an aesthetics of the sublime is a corrective to this.

The last chapter moved on to the other aspect of art's heteronomy: society. The society the work of art finds itself in is the culture industry; the subjective correlate to this is exchange society. This chapter's site of focus becomes the tandem concepts of the culture industry and exchange society. The culture industry is the totalizing sphere within which art finds its existence. The culture industry repeats the violence of totality (and totalitarianism) by emphasizing absolute integration, ever-present sameness, and the evisceration of non-identity. While the culture industry rids art of its use-value, emphasizing simply its exchange value, exchange becomes the hinge concept by which Adorno examines and critiques the contemporary form the capitalist mode of production assumes. Exchange becomes the only use-value of society. Resistance to exchange, in the form of critical self-reflection upon the perseverance of nonidentity, becomes the aim. The sixth lesson is: nonidentity becomes the inexchangeable site of resistance within the culture industry and exchange society.

While Adorno's critique does not provide a blueprint, it aims in all of its aspects to provide a corrective to the world that made Auschwitz possible. In his critique of a form of history – progressive universal history – that is at work in Kant, Hegel, and Marx, Adorno is able to show history as permanent catastrophe. Negative dialectics inherits features of the tradition while reworking them to critique the dominant social order. This critique emphasizes nonidentity, the persistence of negativity, and the non-hypostatized



relations between subject and object, and concept and object. As a site-based critique of political economy, Adorno's critique provides sites wherein critical self-reflection can take place. Such critical self-reflection is, for Adorno, the only power against totality's domination of nature, while education in these particular sites fosters the condition for the possibility of autonomy. Adorno's critique of political economy becomes an opportunity for his negative dialectics to impart theoretical-practical lessons on how not to live the wrong life, without giving an image (a fetish) of the good.

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