

1-1-1995

## Theodor Adorno's "political deficit".

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THEODOR ADORNO'S 'POLITICAL DEFICIT'

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHAEL D. PARKHURST

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 1995

Department of Political Science

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THEODOR ADORNO'S 'POLITICAL DEFICIT'

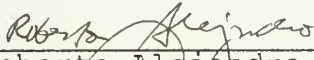
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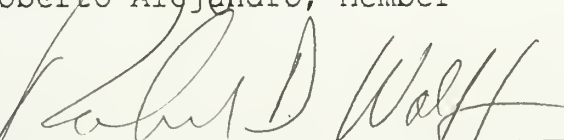
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most heartfelt thanks go to the people who sustained me spiritually and intellectually over the last seven years, especially Marjorie Abel, Mark Reynolds, Bruce Saxon, Martin Courchaine, and Renee Heberle.

I'd like to thank my parents for the support and generosity they've always shown me. I would like to thank my committee, and the teachers who exemplified for me the practice of theory.

Finally, in a most non-Adornian gesture, I would like to dedicate this to two institutions, with whom I had the pleasure and genuine privilege of working: the GEO and UWW.



ABSTRACT

THEODOR ADORNO'S 'POLITICAL DEFICIT'

FEBRUARY 1995

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This dissertation explores what some critics have called the 'political deficit' in the work of Theodor Adorno; his harsh criticism of late capitalist society seems to demand some explicit discussion of oppositional or revolutionary politics, but Adorno refuses any consideration of political strategy or tactics.

I trace Adorno's 'deficit' through his analyses of the economic, psychoanalytic, and cultural dimensions of contemporary society, to show that much of his work can be taken as an implicit argument for the irrelevance of any imaginable form of 'politics,' and for the practical impossibility (in the present) of revolutionary politics in any meaningful sense.

In the middle chapters of the dissertation, I discuss what Adorno sees as the still potentially liberatory moments of art and theory, given that *praxis* has fallen into an indefinite period of hibernation.

The final chapter attempts an immanent critique of Adorno's foreclosure of meaningful politics, arguing that a

renewal of critical theory will depend upon a more thorough commitment to the interdisciplinary program Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues attempted. Specifically, social theory needs to connect the insights of political economy to cultural analysis and attention to the constitution of subjectivity.

Finally, I suggest some non-Adornian avenues for a renewal of critical theory, emphasizing two moments whose political significance has been neglected by both first- and second-generation critical theory. First, I argue we need to rescue the dialectic of desire and recognition from premature Hegelian harmony, to understand the importance of intersubjectivity for any 'progressive' political project. Lastly, I argue that critical theory would do well to incorporate some sustained attention to the meaning and practice of *solidarity*, as the positive cohesion necessary to sustain a political movement.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-three volumes of Theodor Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften*, there is none titled "Politische Schriften"; politics seems not to figure very prominently in his work. At the same time, virtually every paragraph he had a hand in is informed by a sophisticated and critical *partisanship*--in the very best sense: Adorno never allows the reader to forget that even the most recondite topics are bound up in a "damaged" state-of-affairs which must be understood as historical and therefore (potentially) corrigible.

This infamous pessimist asserts over and over again that a post-scarcity Utopia is a technical possibility. The industrial revolution and the advent of a truly global economy have made it possible to dispense with the stick with which humanity has threatened itself from time immemorial:

It cannot be denied...that in the increasing degree of satisfaction of material needs, in spite of their deformation by the social apparatus, the possibility of a life without indigence is incomparably more concretely possible than before. Even in the poorest lands, no one would need to go hungry anymore.<sup>1</sup>

That people starve under capitalism is for Adorno a fully sufficient (if hardly exhaustive) indictment of the irrationality of the disenchanted economy. While he was no enthu-



siast of technical "Progress," he argues (as Marcuse and Murray Bookchin would after him) that exchange relations under mature capitalism bar the way to a qualitative break with the history of material scarcity.

In other words, however much some readers would like to rescue Adorno from what they see as an unfortunate Marxist residue,<sup>2</sup> the utopian ostinato in all his work can not be ignored; the demand for a radical reconfiguration of social relations can not be discreetly excised without doing violence to Adorno. Any such attempt to make Adorno 'respectable' not only does a disservice to the diversity and vitality of Marxist intellectual traditions, but makes it impossible to make sense of Adorno's work.

On the other side of this divide are the leftists who would like to revoke Adorno's socialist credentials. Adorno has been chastised by even his most sympathetic critics for his "political deficit." Fredric Jameson may be the only major commentator who doesn't at some point reach for the *Theses on Feuerbach* to cudgel Adorno. Whether it is put down to pessimism, "mandarinism," obstinance, or simple forgetfulness, Buck-Morss, Jay, and Rose--to say nothing of Habermas and various Marxists and post-marxists--have all found themselves confessing that there is something missing from Adorno: a theory of power, of revolution or resistance:

Although Adorno staunchly rejected the accusation that he was really an apolitical aesthete, it is

hard to avoid the conclusion that there was what many of his German critics liked to call a 'political deficit' in his theory. For when Adorno spoke of power, it was always in terms of a pervasive and diffuse domination that transcended any identifiable political realm.<sup>3</sup>

While the substance of this criticism is an important part of a fair assessment of his legacy, this chorus of rebuke--that Adorno is not Lenin, nor even Marcuse--has shed little light on the theoretical basis for Adorno's "lack," and less on how one might take up the question of "politics" or resistance, knowing what Adorno knows.

It is unlikely that Adorno simply forgot to address politics in his work. If we can also discount the possibility that Adorno felt he had nothing interesting or important to say about political matters, then we are left to consider why he would refrain from any significant work on the state, revolution, organization, etc.

The main thread of this dissertation is an exploration of this 'political deficit' in Adorno's work. I am critical of attempts to dismiss Adorno for this 'failure,' and I make the strongest case I can for a reading that shows the 'political deficit' to be an attribute of contemporary society as much as of Adorno's theoretical standpoint.

At the same time, I argue that there is a kind of 'deficit,' or gap, between his theoretical aspirations and his political conclusions, and I point out the moments where the dialectic stalls in Adorno's work.



In a nutshell, I want to show that there is a logic behind Adorno's refusal to speculate upon political practice, that this logic is flawed, and finally that it is possible to retrace Adorno's analysis in a way that lives up to its highest theoretical intentions without being led into the same political dead-end.

Chapter one explores the dimensions of the various 'political deficits' that have been attributed to Adorno. This chapter begins to reconstruct the hole where politics 'ought' to be, with a recapitulation of his critique of late capitalism, structured around his deployment of economic, psychoanalytic, and philosophical analyses.

Chapter two discusses the powerfully depoliticizing operation of the culture industry, as well as the 'withdrawal' of politics into autonomous art. This completes the description of a 'totally administered' society in which politics has no bearing whatsoever on the basic processes of domination.

Taken together, these first two chapters establish Adorno's own implicit response to the objection he has neglected politics: to put it as starkly as possible, there is nothing left to neglect. Adorno's work deeply problematizes the basic assumptions of both liberal and Marxist political theory.

More than anything else, this is because *the subject is dead*. Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt school

attempt to weave together an analysis of the trajectory of twentieth-century capitalism with a psychoanalytic account of the formation of subjectivity. Adorno becomes convinced early on in his career that the qualities of autonomy and reflection, which any hope for a rational, meaningful politics takes for granted, are being systematically undermined by late capitalism. Industrial modernity kills off both the citizen and the proletariat.

The failure of Marxism's practical challenge to capitalism, symbolized in the most unmistakable terms by the success of Nazism (as well as the perversion of the Soviet experiment), leaves a profound political vacuum in the world. Adorno can take no comfort in the defeat of Fascism (nor would the collapse of official Communism cheer him), because the victorious society has become a mockery of its ideals of freedom and justice.

What remains of the political impulse to praxis, in a world seen as utterly hostile to it, is the focus of chapter three. In this chapter, I elaborate on Adorno's conception of the practical dimension of critical theory. This chapter argues that Adorno's work is best understood in the context of the highest ambitions of the Enlightenment, read through the lens of Marx's critique of capitalism.

It is here, in the gap between the political situation that Adorno describes, and the only practical avenues for

resistance that he is able to endorse, that the 'political deficit' of his analysis is most poignant.

I point out in the first three chapters moments where Adorno's analysis fails to live up to its own standards. In chapter four, I attempt to outline some possible Adornian ways out of Adorno's political dead-end. Ultimately, I want to challenge his narrative of a dramatic, irreversible Fall from (merely really bad) liberal capitalism which he uses to bolster his critique of (catastrophically bad) contemporary capitalism.

Crucial to this project is a re-examination of political economy and psychoanalytic theory. In addition I turn to moments in Hegel (whose work was a major source of inspiration and provocation for Adorno) which point beyond the solipsistic trap Adorno falls into. The role of desire in the Hegelian narrative, I argue, points the way to a theory of solidarity which would move Adorno's analysis beyond its allergic recoil from collective action.

My own critique of Adorno's 'deficit' also includes his failure to take mediating institutions of late capitalist society (everything between the crippled particular and the mad universal) seriously enough. His very sophisticated work on aesthetics allows culture (broadly speaking) to straddle the Marxist divide of base/superstructure. But political action is granted much less leeway in Adorno, and is implicitly assigned a purely epiphenomenal status. I



argue, again turning to Hegel for support, that Adorno fails to recognize (or theorize) the powerful constitutive element of political involvement.

Any attempt to give an account of "Adorno's thought" or "major themes in Adorno" has to contend with the systematizing impulse he criticized relentlessly; like Nietzsche, Adorno makes one aware that the will-to-summarize is a will-to-power.

It is not my intention to offer a compact Michelin guidebook to 'The Philosophy of T. W. Adorno,' nor to produce a "more accessible" digest which would displace the original texts. (Nothing would measure the success of this project better than the degree to which it sharpens the reader's thirst for Adorno's own work).

If we are to take Adorno's invocations of the fragment and the anti-systemic seriously, we must be extremely wary of "reconstructing" Adorno's philosophy. What Max Pensky says of *Aesthetic Theory* applies to any attempt to grapple with Adorno:

A reconstructive approach...risks inflicting on the text precisely the violence that Adorno himself so skilfully deploys against itself: it would reinscribe a will to completeness within the deliberately fragmentary, hence in effect ruining the ruin by rebuilding it, and violently returning *Aesthetic Theory* to the family of idealistic stun-measure-tag-and-release theoretical projects it disowns.<sup>4</sup>

While the discussion of this dissertation does wind through what I take to be the major themes in his work (even "ordering" these themes under three headings), it does so not in a cartographic spirit that registers the lay of the land from on high, but rather in the pursuit of one (rather big) question: what happened to politics? Still, I may arguably be even more tempted than the cartographer to smooth over tensions and contradictions on behalf of narrative momentum.

Alternatively, one could latch onto the seductive metaphor of the constellation, and situate Adorno's various themes and polemics relative to the gravitational fields of "identity," "mimesis," etc. One might in this fashion succeed in maintaining tensions and aporias that would be forcibly reconciled by a "reconstructive" approach.

I have avoided this, perhaps only because the metaphor comes a little too easily to mind, and can only be realized without trying to force the discussion into a constellation. What I have tried to do instead is read and re-read Adorno's text with an ear out for what is said--and much more often not said--about "the political" without any geometrical or astrological template in mind.

The orderliness of my presentation reflects, not so much a systematizing impulse on Adorno's part (nor on mine), but rather the systematic character of the totality he criticized. At the same time, one of the central claims I

make in the first chapter is that one cannot pry Adorno's philosophical insights (which are in some sense certainly the most impressive side of his work) away from his economic, psychological, and cultural analyses (which are not uniformly successful).

Like any project which sports a first and last page, this one would masquerade as an organic, complete project; certainly it is far from that. There are two obvious avenues for extending the reach and significance of the work I have done here.

The first suggests itself in recent readings of Adorno as a kind of proto-postmodernist. Adorno's relation to theorists like Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard, will be one of the major concerns of the next stage of this project. I am particularly wary of is the tendency to show that Adorno is a precursor of, say, Derrida, in a way that suggests that postmodern theory supersedes Adorno. At least as important as his consonance with some 'postmodern' themes, is Adorno's non-identity with postmodernism.

The other project which will play a prominent part in later work is a thorough encounter with Jürgen Habermas. The weight of Habermas' writing hovered over my dissertation from the very outset; in large part, I began this as a contribution to the attempt to remind contemporary theory that Habermas and discourse ethics are not the alpha and

omega of "Critical Theory." Without perhaps intending it, Habermas has (at least in the United States) eclipsed the first generation of critical theorists to the point that it is not uncommon at all to find books published of the variety Critical Theory and Such-and-Such which utterly lack any substantive mention of Horkheimer or Marcuse or Adorno.

This is not a brilliant excuse for ignoring Habermas, who is after all one of the major commentators on the work of his former mentors, and I have tried to include him on precisely those terms. There is still a palpable necessity for someone to directly address the continuities and *discontinuities* between the critical theory pursued by Adorno *et al.* and the project of Habermas. In this context, it made theoretical and practical sense to keep the focus on Adorno's work.

This is why Adorno's colleagues in the Frankfurt School get rather short shrift as well. Horkheimer's name recurs mostly in discussion of collaborative works with Adorno like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and I take their claim to have fully collaborated at face value--I make no attempt to sort out which sentences 'belong' to which thinker). Marcuse and others appear in passing. In truth, the delineation of the differences in emphasis within the Frankfurt School is fairly adequately accomplished in the most notable overviews of critical theory.<sup>5</sup>



This is an opportune moment to mention the extraordinarily fine level of the secondary literature on Adorno, to which I am afraid I have hardly done justice. My work would not have been possible without the trail-blazing scholarship of Gillian Rose, Susan Buck-Morss, Martin Jay, and Fredric Jameson. They hardly exhaust the list of writers whose work was useful to me, and the traces of many others can be found in my footnotes. As solitary as this project has felt sometimes, I would like to think it is really a kind of indirect and obscure collaboration with the discontinuous community of readers who have found it hard to dispense with Adorno.

1. "Is Marx Obsolete?" trans. by Nicolas Slater, *Diogenes*, 64, Winter 1968, p. 8.

2. This trend is most visible among those that want to claim Adorno's critique of identity as a kind of postmodernism *avant la lettre*. See e.g., Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), chs. 1-2.

3. Martin Jay, *Adorno*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 86.

4. Max Pensky, "on Zuidervaat's Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," presented at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Psychology, Boston, 1992.

5. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), and David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

## CHAPTER I

### VALUE, DESIRE, AND REASON: THE EROSION OF SUBJECTIVITY

Adorno's 'political deficit' is no simple thing. His work has been criticized from different quarters for embodying a whole series of distinct political failures, among which we can distinguish two broad strands: a critique of his engagement with politics, and a disappointment with the level of political analysis one can extract from his work. Marxists and other radicals have always been disappointed with Adorno. His focus on abstract philosophical issues, his pessimism, and his lack of interest in concrete political struggles add up, in the minds of more than one critic, to a utopian rhetoric which hardly masks Adorno's fundamental departure from the Marxist project.<sup>1</sup> Adorno's refusal to endorse or encourage the student movement of the 1960s only cemented his reputation in this respect.

Even critics who do not expect Adorno to take up a place on the barricades have found his analysis of society and politics lacking; Gillian Rose is perhaps the most eloquent and trenchant critic to argue that Adorno fails to give us an adequate "theory of socio-political action."<sup>2</sup>

This chapter and the next will demonstrate that Adorno was not ignoring politics, and did not forget 'the Revolution'--his 'pessimism' is not an idiosyncrasy, but the reasoned

conclusion of his analysis of the impact of late capitalism on the psychological roots of resistance to domination. We need to recognize in Adorno a subtle (if not completely satisfying) negative political theory; not 'a theory of socio-political action,' but a theory of socio-political *inaction*.

We assume for the moment then, that the 'political deficit' might lie in the world at least as much as in Adorno. Our task then, is to follow the lines of Adorno's critique of late capitalist modernity, and to retrace the logic that carried him into a blind alley from which revolution became too problematic to speculate upon. I begin with the working hypothesis that Adorno had compelling reasons to decline any discussion of "strategy and tactics" of resistance, even where his own argument most calls out for it. In later chapters I will argue that the momentum of his analysis need not carry us into the same blind alley. For now, we need to know how Adorno got there.

To learn anything from Adorno's 'deficit' we must be able to trace its provenance through the three dimensions of Adorno's radical critique of capitalist modernity: political economy, psychoanalysis, and ideology. Careful attention will show that in each of these spheres Adorno's work is centrally concerned with the erosion of the bases of resistance: civil society, the individual ego, and critical thought all appear as endangered (if not extinct) prerequi-



sites of a just and free society. Taken together, the critique of value, desire, and reason announce the end of both liberal and revolutionary politics, and the obsolescence of political theory attached to a rational, autonomous subject.

#### A. Value: State Capitalism & the End of Liberalism

Marx's critique of capitalism is evoked--if not elaborated--at important junctures in nearly every text Adorno wrote. Adorno clearly held onto several Marxist tenets as indispensable analytic principles: capitalism as a totality of (unequal) exchange; exploitation and class; commodification and commodity fetishism; the tendency toward centralization and monopoly; the pernicious consequences of the division of mental from manual labor; and the notion that relations fetter forces of production. While these concepts are more often cited than developed and critiqued, it would be a mistake to assume that political economy was peripheral to Adorno's project.

As with other traditions that he draws or comments upon, Adorno nearly always presumes a familiarity with the basic arguments of Marxism, and is more interested to "apply" these arguments in his enquiries into philosophy and music than to delve very deeply into economic categories themselves. While Adorno is willing to critique and re-work

certain philosophical categories from Marx (most notably dialectics and materialism), the workings of political economy are more or less taken for granted.

The economic dimension of Adorno's thought is fairly unexplored territory. The few pages that Gillian Rose<sup>3</sup> devotes to Adorno's appropriation of Marxian political economy are unfortunately unusual in their depth; more typically, Adorno's frequent references to exchange are only discussed in reference to the critique of identity theory, and nothing much is made of his scattered, shorthand citations of the market, unequal exchange and the division of labor.

This lack of interest in political economy is no small matter; economic assumptions are not only critical to Adorno's discussions of art and culture (as I'll demonstrate next chapter), but essential to understanding anything of his neglect of politics.

I will discuss Adorno's appropriation of Marxian notions of commodification, exchange, and the division of labor in appropriate contexts below (in relation to the culture industry, the critique of identity, and the status of theory, respectively). At this juncture, I want to delve into Adorno's "political deficit" through a consideration of class and crisis theory in Adorno's political economy.

The capitalist economy figures in Adorno first and foremost as a total system of exchange based on the univer-

sal fungibility of goods. As we will see in a moment, the Marxian analysis of exchange value as the commensurability foisted upon everything in a capitalist economy prefigures Adorno's critique of identity-thinking.

One of the most momentous implications of exchange is the social reduction of human activity to labor power. Adorno indicates that he follows Marx's analysis of unequal exchange and exploitation:

it is through exchange [*Tausch*] that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical....From olden times, the main characteristic of the exchange of equivalents has been that unequal things have been exchanged in its name, that the surplus value of labor would be appropriated.<sup>4</sup>

Nor could he ignore that generalized exploitation entails the division of society into classes.

Adorno is certainly "unorthodox" in his treatment of class. If the theme of class struggle is relatively subdued in Adorno it is not because the objective contradictions analyzed by Marx have melted away; on the contrary:

The process of increasing social rationalization, of universal extension of the market system, is not something that takes place beyond the specific social conflicts and antagonisms, or in spite of them....Society remains class struggle, today just as in the period when that concept originated....Screened from subjectivity, the difference between the classes grows objectively with the increasing concentration of capital.<sup>5</sup>

What makes Adorno hopelessly revisionist with respect to class is not that he challenges the bifurcation of soci-

ety into owners and producers--indeed Adorno at times offers extremely subtle and nuanced "class analysis"--but that he refuses to automatically accord to the proletariat the pre-ordained role of savior of humanity. Nor does Adorno follow Marcuse's lead in looking for a new revolutionary agent in the women's movement, the third world, or the ghetto. Here we have the first indications of Adorno's "political deficit."

The most obvious and doubtless most substantial obstacle to championing the working class as the agent of revolutionary change was its capitulation to--or support for--fascism. Still, no doubt there were Marxists who made the arduous dialectical effort to maintain their faith in the proletariat; and even before 1933 Adorno seemed not to have shared the enthusiasm of some of his colleagues. The easiest (and thus most suspicious) way to account for this would be to put it all down to congenital "Mandarinism" (a diagnosis that is equally applicable to some privileged Marxists who cultivated a romance-from-a-distance with the proletariat).

I am not inclined to reduce Adorno's skepticism toward the identical subject-object of history to autobiography--for one thing, this dissertation would be superfluous if we could be satisfied with a determination that Adorno was simply an elitist who refused to dirty his hands in practical politics. It would be far more interesting and useful



to trace the correspondences between Adorno's refusal to privilege self-conscious class struggle and his diagnosis of the conditions begging for Revolution. Only then would we have an adequate sense of Adorno's attempt to pursue revolutionary theory without a revolutionary subject.

If it is possible to read out of his discussions of ideology in the "totally administered" society a kind of 'declining significance of class' thesis, it is not because there is no proletariat, but that class-consciousness is somehow short-circuited. Clearly Adorno balks at the link Marx supposes between the objective conditions of workers and their consciousness. While Adorno accepted the notion that the proletariat embodies in some sense the universal interest in liberation, he could not share Marx's (or Lukács') confidence that recognition of this interest followed logically from experiential political economy. For these reasons, Adorno argues in the important essay "Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie," that the concept of class must be retained but re-thought:

Retained: since its ground, the division of society into exploiters and exploited, not only survives undiminished but increases in force and solidity. Altered: because the oppressed...cannot experience themselves as a class.<sup>6</sup>

The exact nature of this obstacle to class consciousness is one of our central concerns here, and a thorough account necessarily has to wait on explorations of Adorno's work on psychoanalysis, ideology, and the culture industry.

A close reading of these themes in Adorno will show that he believed that Marx's assumptions about class consciousness have been made obsolete by decisive changes in the economic and the libidinal regimes of late capitalism.

The opaqueness of the proletariat to itself kicks one leg out from under the conceit that revolution is a historical necessity; the other leg is crisis theory: the notion that capitalism will be undone by its own contradictions. Here again Adorno is a peculiar Marxist, not on account of his "Mandarin" love of art and philosophy, but because, in this case, of the analysis of political economy which he takes up from Friedrich Pollock: capitalism has learned to forestall *indefinitely* the collapse Marxists expected it would be brought to.

Pollock's work usually figures in Adorno's writings as the passing of "competitive" or liberal capitalism. The end of the liberal era is an understated theme throughout Adorno's work; in typically Adornian fashion, it is casually cited in various contexts as if its meaning and significance were too obvious to belabor.

Adorno's comments on liberalism have received astonishingly little attention, which helps to explain why discussions of his politics have often been superficial or nonexistent.

Adorno's passing references define liberalism in terms we can relate to value, reason, and desire: the market, the Enlightenment, and individuality. The advent of the "administered world" signals a change in regime in each sphere; as competitive capitalism gives way to monopoly, critical thought loses ground to instrumental reason and positivism, and individuality is eroded at its libidinal roots. The supercession of the liberal "free market" threatens the historical viability of both Reason and the Subject:

The individual has become an obstacle to production.... Economic rationality...is incessantly converting the last units of the economy: firms and men alike.... The risks of competition led to the more productive centralized form of retail trade represented by the department stores. The individual--the psychological corner shop--suffers the same fate.

Reading Adorno's terse elegies for the liberal economy in light of Friedrich Pollock's attempt to define a new stage of "state capitalism" goes far to explain his inability to situate a meaningful approach to politics in the administered world.

Pollock's work is usually cited as an important influence on the economic underpinnings of Adorno, but the full implications of Pollock for Adorno's reading of politics have not been explored. Buck-Morss, Jameson, and Jay (to name only the most prominent commentators) give political economy very short shrift, and do no more than gesture at the importance of Pollock's "state capitalism" thesis.<sup>8</sup>

More than a gesture is necessary if we are to understand Adorno's skepticism toward the orthodox Marxist faith in the proletariat, and his disqualification of every other candidate for political savior.

Pollock's discussion of modern capitalism emphasizes the acceleration of the trend toward monopoly that Marx had identified as intrinsic to the logic of capital. He argues that monopoly capitalism, which was understood as both the logical result and the death-knell of liberal, market-oriented capitalism, is itself giving way to a new configuration of relations of production. Adorno's understanding of the contradiction between forces and relations of production--and of the prospects for revolution--is decisively influenced by Pollock's analysis of state capitalism.

The Great Depression demonstrated in dramatic fashion that capitalism could not contain the contradictions it generated. Like any economic crisis, the Depression accelerated the centralization and amalgamation of capital in an ever-narrower circle of firms; at the same time it marked an important readjustment of the relations of production as it spurred greater intervention on the part of the state.

It is precisely this readjustment of the relations of production *within the framework of capitalism* that concerns Pollock. The configuration Pollock labels "state capitalism" signifies a step beyond monopoly capitalism (and there-



fore beyond the analysis of Marx): a shift toward an integrated, planned economy, whereby mechanisms of centralized control take precedence over the local calculations of individual capitalists:

The market is deposed from its controlling function to coordinate production and distribution. This function has been taken over by a system of direct controls. Freedom of trade, enterprise and labor are subject to governmental interference of such a degree that they are practically abolished. With the autonomous market the so called economic laws disappear.<sup>9</sup>

This does not mean the end of capitalism *per se*, since capital still profits from the exploitation of labor; however, profitable enterprise is constrained by the political directives of central planning.

Pollock's analysis shares with much of the Frankfurt School's work a response to fascism that emphasized the continuity between capitalist business-as-usual and the Nazi seizure of power. For Pollock, and for Adorno and Horkheimer as well, fascism exposed the crisis of liberalism in its collapse of the already eroded separation of public from private spheres. This kind of total mobilization was seen as the prototype for every late capitalist society.<sup>10</sup>

Pollock's discussions of state capitalism are confusing because he fails to distinguish clearly between at least three different aims. The fully developed model that Pollock presents in the "State Capitalism" essay is meant in one sense as an ideal type, which no existing system may

fulfill in every regard; the model is meant to describe trends that can be identified in any capitalist economy (including the Soviet Union). In another sense, Pollock is clearly attempting to come to grips with the economic foundation of Nazism as a distinct social development. Finally, as a socialist, he argues against the conviction that a planned economy is not possible or practical, and seems rather enthusiastic about the supersession of liberal capitalism.

This confusion is illustrated by Pollock's distinction between "democratic" and "totalitarian" versions of state capitalism: democratic state capitalism seems to refer sometimes to a purely descriptive ideal-typical category,<sup>11</sup> sometimes to developments in really existing non-Fascist economies (e.g. the New Deal), and sometimes to the utopian prospect of a planned economy oriented around 'the needs of free men in a harmonious society.'<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, it is difficult to imagine that Adorno shared Pollock's enthusiasm for better living through bureaucracy.

The political implications of state capitalist centralization and rationalization are enormous. The potential for managing crises offered by planning allows capital to forestall indefinitely the destructive contradictions of capitalist accumulation. In this respect, Pollock's work represents a major "strategic withdrawal" from the Marxist certi-

tude in the inevitable and immanent collapse of the capitalist economy.

In addition, the conditions addressed by the "state capitalism" thesis not only made it necessary to recognize the resiliency of the prevailing exploitation, but also establish, through the integration and amalgamation of communications industries, the conditions for a radical expansion of the possibilities of "planning" consciousness; in effect, Pollock anticipates the theses of "The Culture Industry."

Finally, Pollock's analysis forecasts an interweaving of political and economic power along Nazi lines, culminating in essentially state-directed monopolies--or a polity owned and operated by a handful of giant conglomerates. And this was not an invention of the "National Socialists": what both Pollock and Adorno saw as the death of liberalism was well underway before the triumph of fascism, in the erosion of the market under "monopoly capital."

While Adorno indicates that social relations are barring the way to a qualitatively better life, the explosive power implied in Marx's metaphor of 'fetters' has been mysteriously drained away. Adorno is not hopeless; but what hopes he harbors do not spring from the *economic* contradictions of late capitalism. As Giacomo Marramao puts it:

The Marxian laws appear...to have strangely lost their object and with it the medium of their practical verification. With the "freezing" of the real dialectic, critical thought appears damned to

the exile of contemplation for an unforeseeable future. Even as Adorno's theory holds to Marxian orthodoxy, it still cannot allow it to become effective in the new form of the capitalist organization of domination.<sup>13</sup>

Marramao criticizes Adorno for neglecting "the socializing process of labor" in the factory in favor of a fixation with reification which leads him to lose sight of "the real, antagonistic totality." What is required, according to Marramao, is a reconsideration of "the weakness of the link with praxis as the immanent limit of the theory itself," and insight into "the bursting forth of the qualitative dimension."<sup>14</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment the limits of theory--which Adorno was acutely aware of--Marramao's critique of the political economy of Adorno's critical theory is noteworthy for what it gets wrong, what it gets right, and what it misses entirely. The complaint against reification is directed at the image of society, in both Pollock and Adorno, as *totally* integrated and dominated under state capitalism; what Marramao ignores is that Adorno's analysis went well beyond Pollock's schema of a consolidation of economic and political power to consider--as we'll see directly--the psychological ramifications of state capitalism. Adorno's invocations of a totally administered society are grounded more upon the erosion of resistance at the individual, libidinal level than on Pollock's early theory of a power elite. Moreover, Marramao chides Adorno for losing sight of

the proletariat--but it is precisely the integration of unions and the "workers' movement" into the political-economic apparatus that most clearly illustrates Adorno's analysis.

Still, this doesn't exempt Adorno from the criticism that he ignores actual production, and that whatever 'relaxation of the fetters' (Pollock's phrase) the elite can work out, the fundamental antagonism of capitalist accumulation is played out in the production process day after day. One could object on Adorno's behalf that he was not a political economist, and that it is unreasonable to expect him to study everything under the sun. But the pacification of people wounded and warped by late capitalism was one of his central concerns; that people not only live with capitalism, but *reproduce* it, cannot be adequately explained without attention to the site which most directly ought to provoke resistance (and which in some ways is more amenable under state capitalism to resistance)<sup>15</sup>--the workplace.

Finally, the most interesting thing about Marra-mao's discussion of Pollock and Adorno is that he does not examine their historical narrative of the decisive shift from competitive/liberal exchange to monopoly/state capitalism. Adorno attaches a great deal of theoretical freight to the notion that the market glorified by liberal theorists has been superceded under state capitalism. Apparently, no one writing on Adorno has thought to ask (much less document) to



what extent such market relations ever defined an economy, or whether twentieth century capitalism is actually less competitive than liberal capitalism. I suspect that "liberal capitalism" was not generally quite so liberal, and that state capitalism is a bit more complicated than Pollock has it.

If such suspicions could be substantiated--that the economic and political elites were never as distinct as liberal theory would have us believe; that the state has always been deeply involved in the economy and *vice versa*; that monopolies and cartels have always been an important part of capitalism; and that important sub-sectors of the economy are still mediated by competitive exchange relations--we would have to take a hard look at Adorno's radical distinction of liberal from postliberal politics. But this is a question to be taken up once we have a clearer notion what those terms might describe.

A more nuanced analysis of the economy, which would take into account the dynamic and hybrid nature of production and distribution, and would say something meaningful about the impact of industrialization and imperialism on late capitalism, would have served Adorno better than the simple schema he borrowed from Pollock.<sup>16</sup>

The problems with Adorno's deployment of 'liberal' capitalism go far beyond bad economic history. The notion of a historical 'break' between liberal and post-liberal

capitalism is a major problem with his theorization of contemporary capitalism; Adorno (and Horkheimer) are seduced by the oldest political-historical trope known to the West: a lament for Yesterday, the better to throw the shabby reality of today into sharp relief.

Certainly, Adorno knows better than to set up twentieth century capitalism as a Fall from the relatively Edenic 'liberal' capitalism of the nineteenth century; the horrific reality of capitalism's adolescent years is still fresh and vivid enough, not only in the writings of Marx: indeed, the 'satanic' mills and factories of the Industrial Revolution are one of the most important themes in the arts and *Geisteswissenschaften* of the time. And as we will see, at every point where the reality of the previous economic-psychological regime is at issue, Adorno emphasizes the incomplete and deeply compromised character of liberal capitalism's accomplishments.

But a narrative of the Fall from grace is never really interested in historical fidelity to the past; the point is *how much worse* today is than yesterday. Unfortunately, this is precisely the function that the comparison between 'liberal' and 'late' capitalism usually plays in Adorno's writings. This may seem outlandish until we establish in the next section the crucial role this narrative plays in the erosion of subjectivity and agency.

The narrative of the Fall is not a momentary lapse in Adorno's critique of capitalist modernity, unfortunately. Like his friend Walter Benjamin (whose influence may be legible in Adorno here more than anywhere), Adorno's writings are adamantly *backward-looking*. As will become clearer in the following chapters, Adorno is fixated by the hypothesis that a decisive historical moment of possibility was passed, not to be recalled by any human effort. This fixation on the cusp between an exploitative, but still somehow vital, capitalism and the trajectory that carried us past the brass ring of Revolution into 'totally administered society' is one of the decisive fixtures of Adorno's 'deficit.'

All that aside for the moment, we should not casually discard the basic political thrust of Adorno's appropriation of Pollock: that the integration and amalgamation of economic and political elites puts the liberal "public sphere" in serious jeopardy. And while Pollock's forecast for the containment of recurring economic crises has proven much too optimistic, capital has been able to insulate itself fairly successfully against the political aftershocks of crises.<sup>17</sup>

This means, if we are to take Adorno seriously, that the consolidation of state capitalism signals more than a reprieve for Capital: the death of the liberal economy marks the obsolescence of liberal politics--and of revolu-

it's enough to make one nostalgic for Weber's iron cage, which at least had room for "responsibility" and "clarity."

What distinguishes Adorno's jeremiads against 'the end of the individual' from other critics of modern "mass society"<sup>19</sup> is his attempt to theorize the economic and libidinal roots of the "totally administered society" while avoiding blaming the victims--even as he shows how subjects are bound to domination by their own desire.

This section will show how the revolutions in economic integration, centralization, and planning, which tend to eliminate the mediating force of the market, are accompanied by a loss of psychological mediation: the ego is made virtually obsolete. Taken to its logical conclusion, Adorno argues that as exchange and commodification colonize the domain of the ego, the sphere of psychology is made practically inconsequential.

In the essay "Sociology and Psychology," Adorno argues that sociological and psychological analyses deal with two distinct spheres; no 'grand unified theory' can bring them to the same theoretical plane. Thus the logics of exchange and libido cannot be read in terms of simple correspondences, but must be translated from one sphere to another.

This would suggest, and in fact Adorno presents, two distinct narratives of the end of individuality, one from the side of the universal (a sociology of self-interest and

exchange) and one from the side of the particular (the psychology of renunciation and repression). These two narratives are linked, but not in a way which can be represented in the spatial terms of base and superstructure; Adorno describes the 'internal' reality of the individual as a 'monad,' which recapitulates the social forces which constitute it without being reducible to them, and which must be studied 'from the inside.'<sup>20</sup> We will take up Adorno's scandal from the 'outside' first.

The erosion of the nodal point between society and desire--the ego--grounds Adorno's most apocalyptic assessments of modern society. If the ego is the interface between the "inside" and "outside" worlds, then it has to be understood as a historical--i.e. *perishable*--formation. A change in the environment of the psyche which no longer encouraged ego formation around a coherent reality principle would jeopardize the ego's ability to manage the instincts, and conceivably dissolve the ego altogether. A close reading of Adorno demonstrates that 'the end of the individual' springs from just such a change: The shift from liberal, competitive capitalism to state capitalism.

There are indications throughout Adorno's work that the individual as a social project had just begun to flower under liberal capitalism, and that this project has stalled



indefinitely with the triumph of fascism and the "administered world":

Individuation has never really been achieved. Self-preservation in the shape of class has kept everyone at the stage of a mere species being....As it progressed, bourgeois society did also develop the individual. Against the will of its leaders, technology has changed human beings from children into persons.<sup>21</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno take liberal economic theory at its word, arguing that individuals sustained the competitive economy by pursuing their "self-interest" in the marketplace. Again, this is a topic which does not benefit from an extended, definitive treatment by Adorno, but there is no doubt that individuality depends for him on the development of the market:

The individual owes his crystallization to the forms of political economy, particularly to those of the urban market. Even as the opponent of the pressure of socialization he remains the latter's most particular product and its likeness. What enables him to resist, the streak of independence in him, springs from monadological individual interest and its precipitate, character....[H]is decay must itself not be deduced individualistically, but from the social tendency which asserts itself by means of individuation and not merely as its enemy.<sup>22</sup>

This passage evinces, in Adorno's typically compact form, the critical elements of his account of the liberal economic and libidinal regimes. The market fosters *interest* as the modality of the liberal subject: market relations demand a certain capacity for calculation and autonomy, and a particular kind of self-consciousness. Thus, according to Adorno,

the social action that characterizes liberal capitalism lays the groundwork for critique, in the form of reason and conscience. Finally the economic momentum of liberal capitalism which, as we have seen, eventually eradicates markets, threatens to make interest, reason and individuals obsolete at the same time.

Self-interest is effected through and bounded by equivalence. A market presumes and enforces commensurability; while liberal theory wilfully discounts the rebound of market operations--the abstracting force of calculation and assessment--onto human subjects, Marx's translation of liberal self-interest into labor power expresses the fate of individuality that Horkheimer and Adorno recount in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Not only are qualities dissolved in thought, but men are brought to actual conformity. The blessing that the market does not enquire after one's birth is paid for by the barterer [der Tauschende], in that he models the potentialities that are his by birth on the production of the commodities that can be bought in the market. Men were given their individuality as unique in each case, different to all others, so that it might all the more surely be made the same as any other.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the opaqueness of liberal self-consciousness lies not simply in its inability to grasp its own dependence and embeddedness, that self-interest is "pursued only on the terms laid down by society and by the means provided by society--hence an interest tied to the reproduction of those terms and means."<sup>24</sup> The critical point for Adorno is that

self-interest has little to do with the self; self-interest is really nothing but the internalization of universal compulsion, embracing individuals precisely on the side of their uniformity and commensurability (concretized as labor power): "It is only because, to survive, they have to make an alien cause their own that there arises that appearance of reconciliation."<sup>25</sup> Self-interest displaces the self, making individuals ever more commensurable as exchange value colonizes the social totality. The self is sacrificed to interest (to sheer self-preservation), and particularity surrenders to the bad universal of necessity.

This critique of self-interest as the social mode of renunciation is linked by Horkheimer and Adorno to the domination of nature. The self is founded on the suppression of non-identity within and without; it is constituted in opposition to external and internal nature. Self-interest conflates self-preservation with freedom, and the subject is reduced to purely instrumental terms, to a means without an end. Like Odysseus, we must continually deny ourselves to save ourselves.

One striking thing about this account of subjectivity and the market is the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno's own language brings gender to the fore, while their analysis is barely cognizant of the most conspicuous implication of linking subjectivity to gender. The Hegelian link between autonomy and civil society, which Adorno and Horkheimer

appear to endorse, carries some heavy baggage for women. Women are denied--explicitly by Hegel, and implicitly in Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis--even the rudimentary and crippled individuality promised by liberal market society to the extent that they are sequestered in the family.

There are passages in Adorno's work that demonstrate some awareness of 'the woman question' and patriarchal oppression,<sup>26</sup> but these themes are not elevated to the prominence Adorno's own work seems to demand.<sup>27</sup> We will return to Adorno's treatment of gender when we examine the psychoanalytic side of individuation, and the interplay between gender, authority and intersubjectivity.

If self-interest operated on the basis of an impoverished instrumental rationality, at least it allowed (or required) some thought--the conscious side of the ego is nurtured to the extent that liberal capitalism still requires calculation and appraisal. So while the "Culture Industry" essay emphasizes the fragility and pain of individuation--

However, every advance in individuation of this kind took place at the expense of the individuality in whose name it occurred, so that nothing was left but the resolve to pursue one's own particular purpose. The bourgeois whose existence is split into a business and a private life...at odds with himself and everybody else, is already virtually a Nazi....<sup>28</sup>

The rudimentary individuality fostered by liberal capitalism was still no small accomplishment. Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize later in the same book that this compromised and antagonistic individuality fostered a kind of moral and intellectual autonomy which is endangered under state capitalism:

[T]he conscience consisted in the devotion of the ego to the outside world, in the ability to take into account the true interests of others....When the big industrial interests incessantly eliminate the economic basis for moral decision...reflective thought must die out. The soul, as the possibility of self-comprehending guilt, is destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

In their respect for the spiritual and cultural accomplishments of bourgeois Europe and emphasis on what was lost in the transition to industrial modernity, we see the blossom of the narrative of the Fall I criticized above. Adorno and Horkheimer adopt here one of the favorite themes of the great German critics of modernity from the generation before them (Tönnies, Simmel, and Weber, to name three), who saw in the triumph of industrial capitalism the dehumanization and calcification of human relations. Like these writers, Adorno and Horkheimer could mourn the passing of bourgeois society because what they saw replacing it threatened to destroy the limited but real gains of liberal capitalism. The liberal regime organized around the judgments and actions of individuals in civil society involved a measure of freedom, albeit one which was entwined with a capitalist economy, and ultimately "a mockery of true freedom, an



expression of the contingency of every individual's social fate."<sup>30</sup>

The entrepreneurial subject, wedded to self-interest and bound up in the dialectic of enlightenment, falls far short of a subjectivity that would do justice to itself and to objectivity, and in itself would hardly merit pangs of nostalgia. The new libidinal (and ethical and political) regime heralded by the eclipse of the liberal economic regime, however, threatens to efface not just the virtues proper to competitive liberal capitalism, but individuality itself.

Eventually, Adorno argues, the role allotted individual decision-making no longer serves the reproduction and accumulation of capital. The eruption of fascism, far from an inexplicable lapse into barbarism, merely revealed what late capitalism had in store for even this fragile and faulty

liberty: The individual has become an obstacle to production....Economic rationality...is incessantly converting the last units of the economy, firms and men alike....In the era of great business enterprises and world wars the mediation of the social process through innumerable monads proves retrograde. The subjects of the economy are psychologically expropriated, and the economy is more rationally operated by society itself.<sup>31</sup>

The modality of the liberal subject--interest--turns out to be a fetter under the monopolistic conditions of late capitalism. State capitalism makes the ego--and with it thought and individuality *per se*--obsolete.

Ultimately the central question in Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of fascism--how (in Adorno's words) "the children of a liberal, competitive and individualistic society" could be enlisted in a movement which "flagrantly contradict[s] their own rational level and the present stage of enlightened civilization" on behalf of "aims largely incompatible with their own rational self-interest"<sup>32</sup>--thus turns out to be a trick question. We are no longer living in a "liberal, competitive, and individualistic" society; the fact that "the members of contemporary masses are at least *prima facie* individuals" belies the structural transformation of the economy and its psychological repercussions.

It was to trace those repercussions that Critical Theory turned to psychoanalysis. If the "external" narrative of the end of the individual reveals a society in which individuality is increasingly obsolete--a world in which 'real' individuals would simply be out of place--the "internal" narrative is meant to show that, like any other obsolete model, individuals can be discontinued. The same structural changes in the economy that threaten to collapse the division between civil society and the state were seen by Critical Theory to radically undermine the mediating role of the ego--which in turn threatens individuality at its roots and paves the way for the "totally administered society."

The calamity of fascism, along with what one might call the historical refutation of the Lukácsian model of class consciousness, lent a new urgency to the attempt to wed the insights of psychoanalysis to a critical theory of society. As various members of the Frankfurt School recognized, Freud's psychic geography and geology could be indispensable for elaborating the relation of economics to politics. This is because Freud gave Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm--and Adorno--keys which might unlock the black box of the individual psyche, the interface between base and superstructure. Most importantly, Freud's work gave Adorno and the other critical theorists a way to articulate domination as an 'internal' as well as an 'external' phenomenon--to explain how individuals are not merely passively subordinated, but actively engaged in their own domination--without recourse to simplistic accusations of "false consciousness."

Adorno's use of psychoanalytic concepts has received more attention than his appropriation of economics, but not much more. Martin Jay, in a chapter entitled "The Fractured Totality: Society and the Psyche," offers only a handful of pages on Adorno's appropriation of Freud.<sup>33</sup> Gillian Rose similarly devotes about a dozen paragraphs to 'The Theory of the Individual.'<sup>34</sup> No one has really successfully taken up an exhaustive account of Adorno's deployment of psychoanalysis.

Admittedly, Adorno does not make this easy. His treatment of Freud is unfortunately similar to his appropriation of Marx: too often he takes up theses or concepts from their work without any considerable attention to how they fit into the larger conceptual apparatuses of their authors.

This is not generally acknowledged in the most important secondary literature. Gillian Rose, for instance, claims that Adorno defended a "strong, orthodox interpretation" of Freud, on the basis of his critiques of Talcott Parsons, Karen Horney, and Freud's own later works.<sup>35</sup> It is true that Adorno sought to ward off any attempt to develop correlations between psyche and society that substituted a sociologized psychoanalysis (or a 'psychoanalytic' sociology) for the fundamental "clash of psychic forces," viz., "the conflict between id and ego."<sup>36</sup> However, while Adorno deploys several elements of Freudian theory prominently in his discussions of declining individuality, it is hard to attribute to him a "strong, orthodox" appropriation of psychoanalysis when he never mentions the Oedipus complex (nor associated concepts like fear of castration), and exhibits little interest in the early years of childhood, which to Freud were decisive for all that follows.<sup>37</sup>

The appearance of Freudian terminology in Adorno's discussions of consciousness, desire, nature, etc., always operates within a broader framework in which orthodox psy-

choanalytic theory is not the central focus. Thus the account of "projection" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>38</sup> is part of the constellation Horkheimer and Adorno develop between nature, mimesis, and subjectivity, and the critique of the superego is woven into a discussion of Kant, freedom, and conscience.<sup>39</sup>

Adorno's hybrid of Marx and Freud, then, aimed at playing selected insights from each against each other, not at a total synthesis of the two revolutionary thinkers. I would suggest that Freud's work had several attractions for Adorno, which moved him to draw on Freudian concepts without embracing psychoanalysis in all its arcana.

Like Marx, Freud developed a theory aimed at a world defined by antagonisms and contradictions; Freud's refusal to posit any ultimate harmony or relaxation of these contradictions was perhaps the most attractive aspect of his work:

The greatness of Freud consists, like all radical bourgeois thinkers, in letting such contradictions remain unresolved and disdaining to pretend a systematic harmony when the subject itself is torn.<sup>40</sup>

The Freudian turn hinges on the psyche as a social text, open to subtle and suitably devious interpretation. Adorno turned to psychoanalytic concepts to read the individual as the intersection of consciousness and the conditions of production--concepts which might illuminate the success of fascism as well as the evaporation of opposition



under state capitalism. This gave Adorno a way to discuss the psychological ramifications of social and economic dynamics which could avoid the base/superstructure problems which plagued orthodox Marxism.

In addition, Freud's emphasis on the unconscious, and on the central role of sexual drives in mental life, promised a radical break with the Cartesian model of subjectivity, which posits a disembodied rational faculty looking down upon mere objectivity.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Freudian theory allows Adorno, as Gillian Rose has noted,<sup>42</sup> to shift attention from a theory of alienation (from some putative species-being) to individuation as a process--a process which is difficult and uncertain, and vulnerable to interference and even sabotage. Freud displaces the self-sufficient, God-given subject of liberal theory with an emphasis on subjectivity as an achievement, an achievement moreover which is not transparent to consciousness, and is still riven by the antagonisms between nature, desire and consciousness.

Finally, it also gave Adorno a way to approach suffering and renunciation which did not coat them in the syrup of 'necessary evil.' While Freud does, especially in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, practically justify them in terms of social and cultural accomplishments, he never diminishes the reality of pain and sacrifice, nor does he posit a happily-ever-after in which these things will be transfig-

ured or beatified. Moreover, psychoanalytic theory gave Adorno a language which could make socially- and self-inflicted suffering and renunciation legible.

The crux of Adorno's "internal" analysis of the erosion of subjectivity is the subversion of the mediating force of the ego. Under the libidinal regime proper to liberal capitalism, social imperatives are translated onto the psychological dynamic through the ego, which internalizes social standards of necessity and propriety.<sup>43</sup> This subcontracting of domination is replaced under state capitalism by a more direct regime of conformity, which hinges on an end-run around the ego in which regressive traits of the id are enlisted directly on behalf of domination.

For Adorno, as for Freud, successful individuation hinges on the ego, which constrains and transmutes the polymorphous anarchy of desire to conform to the prevailing reality principle. In one of the few attempts to develop a sustained critical commentary on Adorno's appropriation of Freud, Jessica Benjamin has argued that Adorno tied individuation to the *internalization* of authority.<sup>44</sup> According to Benjamin, Adorno assumes a process of ego formation tied to the Oedipus complex, in which the internal authority of the subject--the ego--is modelled on the nearest external authority: the father.

Benjamin's otherwise very fine work is hampered by presuming Adorno relies on an Oedipal model of the ego, and by loosely associating Adorno with Horkheimer's ambitious (but deeply flawed) theory of the family.<sup>45</sup> While Horkheimer developed his account of the family in the period when he was collaborating most intensely with Adorno, and one can find occasional references<sup>46</sup> in Adorno that suggest some sympathy for Horkheimer's theory, the family simply does not figure that prominently in Adorno. Adorno generally focuses more attention on the ways in which the mediating force of the contemporary family is weakened by the larger (economic and cultural) environment.

In this respect, Adorno arguably pushes women farther toward the margins of analysis than either Freud or Horkheimer. At least in the work of the latter two men, the role women are assigned and the essentialist assumptions each makes about gender are relatively out in the open for criticism. And while Horkheimer and Freud may be easy to ridicule for their visions of women and motherhood, their analyses of gender and authority are attempts to grapple with a critical aspect of domination--patriarchy--that Adorno simply undertheorized. Freud and Horkheimer caricature gender relations, but in Adorno--pre-eminent anti-essentialist and champion of non-identity--gender too often simply doesn't register.

While it is not implausible to connect the leitmotif of erosion of individuality with a transition from internalized authority to sheer conformity, Benjamin does not substantiate that connection; nor does she offer a citation from Adorno's own work which directly links individuation with internalization. There are a few passages one might look to in this regard,<sup>47</sup> but it is not the Oedipal father figure, but generalized "social coercion" that is the focus of Adorno's discussions of internalization. While this relation to external authority is important, particularly for the ethical and political dimensions of the eclipse of the liberal regime, internalization does not play the *constitutive* role Benjamin attributes to it.

Benjamin nonetheless does establish the two central moments of Adorno's psychology: that resistance and domination are both tied to the ego, and that the mediation of domination through the ego is replaced by a regime of sheer conformity, under which both resistance and thought atrophy.

What the liberal economy made possible, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, was an environment in which the ego could subdue the explosive, insatiable id on behalf of limited but reliable gratification in an environment defined by scarcity.<sup>48</sup> In a passage which suggests individuation is founded not on internalization, but on its virtual opposite, "projection," it is the demands of this environment, not the

Oedipal conflict, which account for the decisive characteristics of the liberal subject:

By learning to distinguish between his own and extraneous thoughts and feelings under the force of economic necessity, a distinction is made between without and within, the possibility of distancing and identifying, self-awareness and the conscience.<sup>49</sup>

The ego serves as a principle of organization which faces both inward and outward: not only "mastering" desire on behalf of reliable, long-term gratification, but also "testing" reality, honing its cognitive grasp of the world on behalf of the reality principle's regime of gratification.<sup>50</sup> This cognitive side of the ego, which Adorno and Horkheimer seem to presume is the instinctual foothold for resistance to domination, is strengthened by the agency the market requires of individuals, the capacity for calculating and assaying.

The ego faces potential threats then on two fronts: from the "inside," in its own contradictory and opaque relation to the id, and from the outside, in changes in the environment of the subject which undermine the ego's capacity for judgement and agency.

Adorno deftly shows that the boundary Freud meant to define with the distinction between id and ego cannot hold, because of the irrationality of renunciation under prevailing conditions:

The ego is supposed to be both, *qua* consciousness, the opposite of repression, and *qua* unconscious-



ness, the repressive agency itself....To be able to assert itself in reality, the ego has to understand reality and operate consciously. But to enable the individual to effect the often senseless renunciations imposed on him, the ego has to set up unconscious prohibitions and to remain largely confined to the unconscious....The ego's cognitive activity, performed in the interests of self-preservation, has to be constantly reversed, and self-awareness<sup>51</sup> foregone, in the interests of self-preservation.

Thus the ego's "mastery" of desire is founded on renunciations and restraints that are opaque to the self, and it is "constantly taxed beyond its own powers" and vulnerable to falling back into the unconscious as ego-libido.<sup>52</sup>

The "external" threat to the ego comes from what we have already examined as the advent of state capitalism. It is not immediately apparent that state capitalism eliminates the need for calculation and judgement that Adorno and Horkheimer link to the market under liberal capitalism, since post-liberal capitalism retains at least the appearance of markets. Adorno argues, however, that a kind of domestication of the economy takes place under state capitalism which radically pre-structures economic life so that the sphere for individual judgement and decision-making which had nourished the ego contracts until:

In a highly socialized and rationalized society most situations in which decisions are made are pre-determined, and the rationality of the individual ego is restricted to choosing between minute options. It is invariably a question of no more than minimal alternatives...and 'realism' amounts to being good at making this kind of decision.<sup>53</sup>

Thus one of the central themes of "Sociology and Psychology" is the diminution of the domain of psychology in the face of objective social imperatives, until the self becomes at best a wildlife preserve of idiosyncrasy and irrationality, and at worst "no more than an interference and is repeatedly being overruled by the far more powerful imperatives of the rational faculty, the embodiment of objective social processes."<sup>54</sup>

If the total economy governs behavior, psychology has to content itself with misbehavior. Taken to its logical conclusion:

The subject is separated into the inner continuation of the machinery of social reproduction and an undissolved remainder which, as a mere preserve powerless in the face of the wildly expansionist 'rational' component, degenerates into a mere curiosity.<sup>55</sup>

The ego, which under liberal capitalism seemed to represent to Adorno a node of rationality (albeit one-sided and bound up with the dialectic of enlightenment) not reducible to 'the machinery of social reproduction,' finds itself under state capitalism facing an unholy alliance between this machinery and the id:

A brutal, total, standardizing society arrests all differentiation, and to this end it exploits the primitive core of the unconscious. Both conspire to annihilate the mediating ego; the triumphant archaic impulses, the victory of id over ego, harmonize with the triumph of society over the individual.<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin has drawn attention to the critical theorists' acceptance of the Freudian view of the id as inherently and incorrigibly antisocial and, if left to its own devices, destructive. While this is complicated by the fact that the ego is itself in some sense a "quantum" of libido, I think Benjamin's criticism is a valid one, and indicates one of the ways Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) appropriation of Freud is insufficiently critical: by following the traditional interpretation of desire as inherently destructive and selfish--something which must be "tamed" and "socialized"--Adorno and Horkheimer validate the longstanding defamation of gratification as private and infantile. While Freud's naturalization of desire did disrupt and scandalize the Christian discourse of sin and carnality, his own depiction of desire, which Adorno did not challenge in any significant respect, reinforces the discourse of renunciation and discipline which warns us away from gratification with epithets like "barbarism" and "immaturity." In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we receive this message in the starkest and simplest terms: civilization is renunciation; gratification belongs to infants and savages, and we ought to grow up and get with the program.

Adorno in some isolated passages offers hints that this slander of gratification is itself part of the spell. He even implies that pleasure is the standard of rationality

and an essential part of liberation, arguing that Freud, in his "revulsion for pleasure and paradise,"

rejects the end...which alone could prove the means, reason, to be reasonable: pleasure. Once this has been disparagingly consigned to the repertoire of tricks for preserving the species, and so itself exposed as a cunning form of reason, without consideration of that moment in pleasure which transcends subservience to nature, ratio is degraded to rationalization. Truth is abandoned to relativity and people to power. He alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth.<sup>57</sup>

But these testimonials to sensuality and gratification--what Martin Jay calls "the hedonistic impulse in Critical Theory"<sup>58</sup>--are in fact part of the culture of denial: the pleasure Adorno praises in these instances is very clearly situated in the "beyond," in a world "no longer" dominated by exchange. Gratification is set utterly off limits to us here and now, since there can be no gratification that is not complicit and perverted by the totality: "In a false world all *hedone* is false."<sup>59</sup>

Adorno sees pleasure in terms of a lapse into immediacy, a loss of distance, and of sense-of-self; the Christian opposition of flesh and spirit is revived within the Marxian horizon of salvation. Pleasure in *this* world always amounts to a premature reconciliation with the world, a capitulation to unity with the bad totality.<sup>60</sup> In this respect Adorno joins with the Church, the State and the Boss, and with most Marxists, and admonishes us to get back to work--even as he

demonstrates with unrelenting clarity the wounds we inflict on ourselves and on the world through discipline and denial. Even the aesthetic, which plays a critical role in Adorno precisely because it eludes (partially) the demands of productivity and utility, has more to do with work than with pleasure.<sup>61</sup>

The status of pleasure goes to the heart of Adorno's "political deficit." In some ways, Adorno is at his most "radical" and "Marxist" in his refusal to endorse anything less than the total transformation of society, even as his own work seems to deny the likelihood of such a transformation. Any half-measures, any compromises are necessarily complicit with the world as it is, and the unswerving critic will refuse any measure that falls short of the whole. Nothing falls farther short of the whole than short-term gratification. If pleasure is always a lapse into (false) reconciliation, then desire can never be subversive, because *it wants to be bought off*. Adorno's suspicion of gratification runs parallel with Marcuse's analysis of "repressive desublimation," in which a certain amount of socially sanctioned and channelled gratification strengthens the overall regime of renunciation. If gratification is equated with a relaxation of vigilance, a forgetfulness of purpose and ego, then Adorno will always side in spite of his "hedonistic impulse" with Odysseus against the Sirens, the Lotus Eaters, and Circe.



However, there is another side to the problem. As long as society continues to enforce renunciations which cannot be rationally justified, but must be effected 'behind the back' of subjects, desire retains an explosive potential. The scope of repression, almost by definition, is much more socially significant than repressive desublimation. We will take this up in the next chapter as it arises in Adorno's work--under the heading of "spite"--in the context of consumers' response to the culture industry.

It is not hard to see how Adorno came by his reputation as a pessimistic, even defeatist social critic; like Nietzsche, he seems to have set himself up intentionally for ridicule and misinterpretation with breathtakingly broad and unconditional aphorisms.

But we have yet to describe what might be the grimmest side of Adorno's work. If the economy has made individual reckoning and planning obsolete, and "the appropriation of mass psychology by the oppressors" has replaced the dialectical processes described by psychoanalysis with a mode of heteronomy that makes "false consciousness" look almost quaint, the role of critical thought--even its existence--is thrown into the most serious jeopardy. Worse yet, it appears that reason has played a central role in its own extinction.

### C. Reason: The Obsolescence of Ideology

The obsolescence of thought parallels the obsolescence of the subject. There is an "internal" account of the decline of thought, taken *sub specie individuationis*, much of which is anticipated in what we've already seen. There is also an "external" account, which culminates in Adorno's argument that the time of *Ideologiekritik* has passed, that state capitalism has outgrown the legitimating narratives of bourgeois ideology.

As we have seen, Adorno argues that state capitalism simply takes over the planning and reckoning functions that were once left to the individual. It seems a stretch to argue from an atrophy of economic calculation to the abolition of rationality and thought *per se*. But the point of the state capitalism thesis--at least in the hands of Adorno--is that the economic model of (trans)action colonizes every realm of contemporary society; exchange penetrates even the spheres apparently most distant from economic life.

The "totally administered society" is meant to describe a situation in which industrial capitalism reaches in principle across the entire horizon of human activity. Whether spontaneity or thought are *possible* any longer is not the critical question in Adorno's work: his argument is that they have been made obsolete. The obsolescence of the ego signifies the ultimate extension of this--the social *ratio*

operates through and in spite of individuals, not at their behest:

The rationality operative in individual behavior is, in fact, far from being lucidly self-aware; it is largely the blind product of heteronomous forces....<sup>62</sup>

The economic sphere embodies a kind of rationality that opens the way to jettisoning the heavy baggage of subjectivity, insofar as that is possible:

The truly contemporary types are those whose actions are motivated neither by an ego, nor, strictly speaking, unconsciously, but mirror objective trends like an automaton. Together they enact a senseless ritual to the beat of a compulsively repetitive rhythm....<sup>63</sup>

In this context thinking becomes dysfunctional (in more ways than one).

Once thinking becomes subjectively obsolete, its objective function decays as well. In Adorno's closest approach to the domain of political theory, he argues that state capitalism no longer needs to rely on the ideals and putatively universal values with which liberal capitalism always met criticism. While ideology in a kind of local sense has some continuing relevance (as we'll explore further in the next chapter (in delineating a "politics industry" parallel to the culture industry), in the larger sense of society's account of itself, it has been discontinued along with the thought that would ask for such an account. The legitimat-

ing function ascribed to ideology on the classical model no longer depends upon the rickety and always problematic scaffolding of bourgeois ideology, which, if it persists at all, only does so because no one has bothered to tear it down yet.

This, it goes without saying, is not "progress." Adorno's provocative thesis (which has not been given the attention it deserves in the secondary literature) is that the gap between bourgeois ideals and bourgeois reality, from which social and political theory drew better than two hundred years of nourishment, has been abolished: not by realizing those ideals, but by allowing them to expire.

Adorno's account of the end of ideology hinges on the ability of the *status quo* to masquerade as reality *tout court*. In terms which acquire a new resonance with the expiration of Communism, Adorno argues that the legitimating function once played by bourgeois ideals is displaced by the self-evident character of a totality pervasive enough to be invisible, which obviates any questions about the justice or propriety of the whole:

Unfreedom is consummated in its invisible totality that tolerates no "outside" any more from which it might be broken. The world as it is becomes the only ideology, and mankind, its component.<sup>64</sup>

This is what makes positivism tantamount to fascism in Adorno's eyes: positivism is nothing more or less than a prohibition on alternatives, an injunction to content one-

self with the world as it seems to be. Positivism draws Adorno's ire, in fact, because it converges with the larger social tendency to displace old fashioned ideology--because it threatens to transmogrify from a particular school of modern philosophy into modern common sense.

The end of ideology goes hand-in-hand with the extinction of the entrepreneurial subject which Adorno and Horkheimer associate with the liberal economy and, necessarily, the subject of the liberal polity.

While Adorno never carried through the parallel, the individual is not only the psychological equivalent of the corner store, but of the self-legislating citizen. The erosion of individuality can be seen as the merger of two senses of "the private": the "private" sector of production has thoroughly colonized the internal, "private" side of personality. If the liberal economy cultivated a mode of individuality that threw the subject back upon his own resources, it also nourished a sense of individual ends which were not reducible to those of the Church or the State.<sup>65</sup>

What one might see as the greatest political accomplishment of liberalism--the containment and redefinition of politics, such that the human ends of individuals were insulated (to some extent) from the public sphere which was now said to serve them (at the same time it served the ends of the collective in the form of the state)--thus collapses



under the success of the liberal economy and its demonic offspring, state capitalism.

Adorno's narrative of the eclipse of competitive capitalism strongly implies not only the displacement of a subject with some capacity for political life by one which is merely subject to the demands of the system, but also the contraction of the public sphere. It is clear enough that the erosion of mediation Adorno describes in both the economic and psychological realms shatters the liberal model of politics and citizenship.

The one thinker more than any other who stands at the cusp of this disaster is Max Weber. Weber, as several commentators have noted,<sup>66</sup> tries to save the best intentions of liberal political theory for a decidedly post-liberal society. The fundamental political insight of Weberian political thought is one side of precisely the erosion of agency that Adorno rails against: politics becomes virtually a branch of mathematics with the reduction of individuals in modern democracies to the empty identity of the franchise. In modern nation-states, which Weber believed were driven by rationalization toward a more or less universal franchise, electoral politics becomes essentially a question of administered demagogery: modern political parties develop out of the imperatives of electoral victory in mass democracies: the efficient corralling of votes.<sup>67</sup>

While Weber would not have endorsed Adorno's dire pronouncements on the end of individuality, his narrative of rationalization and bureaucratization implies a diminution of the sphere of individual agency with strong echoes in Adorno's work. Once the manipulation of political life becomes an industry, the scope for political action and discourse that would interest Adorno disappears. Moreover, the liberal political project--namely the mediation of individual will and collective policy, of legitimation and consent--also becomes utterly obsolete once the individual which liberalism always took for granted falls under the same strictures of mass production as Fords and Frigidaires.

A forced reconciliation with the collective has become a standard feature, and whatever real tension persists between the individual and society (which liberal theory and practice was founded upon) is contained on all sides by various subsidiaries of the politics industry.

Obviously state capitalism as second nature can only present itself as first nature to the extent that it can occupy the entire social horizon: that is, to the extent that it can render resistance and dissent invisible. In other words, the seamlessness of the whole depends upon the failure of (among other things) Marxism.

This is a failure Adorno takes for granted, and however much his work looks forward to a resuscitation of *praxis*, it

is virtually certain it will not resemble the Lukácsian proletariat's. More than anything else, the debate over Adorno's Marxism/non-Marxism has been fueled by the lack of an extended, explicit treatment of the historical failure of revolution. If there is an autopsy of the revolutionary moment in Adorno, it is not in the notorious first paragraph of *Negative Dialectics*, but in the fiber of Adorno's work all the way through *Aesthetic Theory*. Typically, Adorno offers not a theory of revolution, but a disquieting theory of non-revolution--a negative "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat."

The major theorists of communist revolution, including Lenin, Lukács, and Luxemburg, presume a link between the proletariat's collective experience of exploitation and alienation, and its understanding. The proletariat has a kind of privileged cognitive "standpoint" (one that it pays for dearly) by virtue of its position in production, and in Lukács particularly,<sup>68</sup> it can come to a clearer and deeper understanding of capitalist society than the bourgeoisie because it has an essential interest not in reproducing, but in overturning the prevailing relations of production. In effect, most Marxists see the proletariat as in some sense "outside" bourgeois society (or at least with one foot in and one foot out), and connect its cognitive privilege to this "outsider" status.

Whether it constitutes itself in opposition to capitalist exploitation and oppression, or, as Marx suggests at times, comes to realize the potential for new relations of production through its experience in an increasingly socialized process of production, the proletariat must also come to recognize itself as a class if it is to make anything of this cognitive privilege.

Adorno's work, which is largely conceived as an effort to account for the "miscarriage" of "the attempt to change the world," can not be read as a simple revision of revolutionary Marxist theory. His is not an account of the failures of particular proletarian movements in the West: it is an autopsy of the revolutionary subject. In the course of a tenacious sociological and philosophical genealogy of fascism, the Frankfurt School, and Adorno above all, problematized most of the basic assumptions of revolutionary Marxist theory.

His adoption of Pollock's economic analysis of monopoly, which severs the revolutionary whiplash some Marxists expected from economic crises, is probably the least significant of his heresies. More importantly, his work shows that the proletariat is no longer (if it ever was) "outside" capitalist society; that consciousness *per se*, much less class consciousness, is far from a given; and finally, that "liberation" is itself by no means a transparent or unproblematic concept.

This, a radical questioning of the prerequisites and meaning of "revolution," is what establishes Adorno as a social theorist who cannot be ignored. Or rather, *ought* to establish him as such. If Adorno has gone virtually unnoticed by political theory, at least in the United States, one can attribute this to more than his intentionally demanding and difficult presentation;<sup>69</sup> three distinct aspects of the "political deficit" that has been associated with him help to account for the obstacles his work has encountered in American political discourse.

First of all, a significant part of Adorno's "political deficit" is owed to his critics, whose analyses sometimes fall far short of the thoroughness and nuance required. By far the most common fault is to take some part for the whole of Adorno's thought; most notoriously to read "The Culture Industry" without *Aesthetic Theory*, or even without the rest of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But even writers whom one would like to credit with a more complete acquaintance, Habermas above all, have proven capable of astounding feats of misinterpretation.<sup>70</sup>

However, the "political deficit" is not entirely a figment of the imaginations of unsympathetic critics; in some important respects, Adorno's work does not live up to its own theoretical aspirations. Critics are not completely off the mark to demand of him more properly political analy-



sis than he delivers. Gillian Rose once again offers the most astute summary:

Yet Adorno's emphasis on the formation and deformation of the individual did replace any further definition of the macro-factor, the form of domination. He might at least have detailed the mechanism by which power has become diffuse but omnipotent, and how that change is related to change in the organization of production. Ideology, domination, and reification are simply equated with each other, and the individual is not satisfactorily reinserted into the socio-political context.<sup>71</sup>

It is important to note that the demands Rose makes upon Adorno are meant as an immanent critique: the thrust of Adorno's own analysis seems to require an explicit and nuanced articulation of power, ideology, and resistance. To the extent that Rose's critique is on the mark, it is hard to claim Adorno as a "political theorist."

One of the obstacles to a clear explication of all this is the deep ambiguity of the word 'politics.' No doubt one of the things that complicates a discussion of "Adorno's politics" is the discursive explosion of the meanings of 'politics' since the 1960s. In some senses, critical theory's focus on culture and psychoanalytic concerns anticipated this (and made some of their works 'required reading' then).

Adorno's work is manifestly "political" without having the slightest interest in the strategic topics that animate liberal or Marxist political thought. His work is invaluable

able for showing the political charge that runs through all philosophy; like Nietzsche, Adorno draws our attention to the exclusion and suppression involved in every conceptualization, the no-saying and yes-saying that cannot be disentangled from thinking.

And this is precisely where the controversy over his 'political deficit' crops up: how might a politics that caters to nonidentity be linked to more mundane political concerns like improving the living conditions of women and men? As we will see, Adorno himself shows how the blindness of thought to its own domination of nature (including its own nature) is deeply intertwined with class domination and the institution of property.

In this sense, Adorno and his colleagues were blindsided by the eruptions that punctured the ostensibly pacified and harmonious regimes of the Cold War. Any attempt to embrace Adorno for New Left projects had to stumble over the ways in which 'politics' in his work seems to be stripped of its sociological side and made into a kind of physical medium beyond the intervention of those it envelopes. His analysis of late capitalist society seems to systematically deny any meaningful 'political' action; there are no subjects that appear capable of politics, and no political space in which any such subjects could pursue an end to domination.

One could argue that Adorno's not-inconsiderable accomplishment was precisely to destabilize and problematize the project of political theory. Indeed, the reason I smuggled the rather looser term "social theorist" into a paragraph above was to account for figures like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, who are clearly not doing "political theory" in the sense we ascribe to thinkers like Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Hegel. In trying to bring the legacy of these not-political-theorists to bear on late capitalist society, Adorno implicitly demonstrates that our political concepts, most of which were brought to maturity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are made deeply suspect by the reality of the twentieth century. In this respect, Adorno foregrounds his, and our, political "deficit" in a way which has much more to tell us than the work of political theorists like Rawls and Nozick.

This is not least because much contemporary political theory is still wedded to assumptions about subjectivity that Adorno believes are no longer sustainable. Seen in its full context, Adorno's work deeply problematizes not only contemporary political theory, but contemporary politics.<sup>72</sup>

At this point however, we have only half the story of the suffocation of politics. In the next chapter, I turn to Adorno's account of the culture industry, and of the provocative notion that politics has withdrawn into aesthetics.

1. See, e.g., Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 92-97; Thomas Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment: An Essay on the Frankfurt School*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 109ff; and Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 55, pp. 62-64.
2. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, (London: MacMillan, 1978), p. 141; cf. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 24, Martin Jay, *Adorno*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1984), p. 86.
3. *The Melancholy Science*, pp. 46-48, and pp. 119-121.
4. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146 [translation altered].
5. "Society," translated by F. Jameson, *Salmagundi*, vols. 10-11 (1969-1970), pp. 149-150; cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), vol. 8, pp. 14-15.
6. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, p. 377 ( my translation).
7. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 202-203.
8. Giacomo Marramao's article, "Political Economy and Critical Theory," *Telos*, no. 24 (Summer 1975), is the only attempt I know of to attempt to develop in any detail the parallels between Pollock and Adorno. While Marramao provides a useful discussion of the context of Pollock's work, he devotes only a few pages to Adorno, and these are far from exemplary clarity or insight.
9. "State Capitalism," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1941), p. 201.
10. However, they did draw back from their most provocative expressions of this continuity to acknowledge some important differences between Fascist and formally liberal-democratic regimes. See "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. by A. Arato and E. Gebhardt, (New York: Urizen, 1978), pp. 132-135.
11. "State Capitalism," p. 200.

12. See "State Capitalism," pp. 201f., 215ff.
13. "Political Economy and Critical Theory," p. 76.
14. "Political Economy and Critical Theory," pp. 78-79.
15. State capitalism might be more amenable to resistance to the extent that the centralization and integration of the economy make the strike a potentially crippling political weapon for workers.
16. Such a re-writing of critical theory's political economy is clearly beyond the bounds of this project. One other element that cannot go without comment: Pollock's analysis--and Adorno's-- sorely lack an analysis of the international dimensions of capitalist political economy, which of course have become all the more important since their writings first appeared.
17. See in this regard: Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf, *After the Wasteland: A Democratic Economics for the Year 2000*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), ch. 5, which argues that capital has in fact been increasingly successful since the mid-1960s in its continual quest to *take back* the concessions wrung from it since the Depression.
18. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 28.
19. A term Adorno avoided--see "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," trans. A. G. Rabinach, *New German Critique*, vol. 6 (Fall 1975).
20. See "Sociology and Psychology," trans. I. Wohlfarth, *New Left Review*, no. 46 (1967), p. 77; cf. *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, (London: New Left Books, 1974), pp. 148-150, and his discussions of works of arts as monads in *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. by G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 7, 257ff., *et passim*.
21. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 155.
22. *Minima Moralia*, p. 148; cf. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 262.
23. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 12-13; *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, p. 29.
24. Marx's *Grundrisse*, quoted in *Negative Dialectics*, p. 335



25. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 311.
26. See e.g. *Minima Moralia*, 92f.
27. This also, unfortunately, an aspect of Adorno rather neglected in the secondary literature. The best discussions of Adorno and gender are in Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization," *Telos*, 32 (1977), and Patricia Mills, *Women, Nature, and Psyche*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), part III.
28. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 155.
29. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 198. Cf. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 275ff.
30. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 262.
31. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 202-203.
32. "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. by A. Arato and E. Gebhardt, (New York: Urizen, 1978), p. 121.
33. *Adorno*, pp. 89-94.
34. *The Melancholy Science*, pp. 91-95.
35. *The Melancholy Science*, p. 91.
36. "Sociology and Psychology," trans. I. Wohlfarth, *New Left Review*, 46 (1967), p. 75.
37. *Studies in the Authoritarian Personality* may be Adorno's most "Freudian" work in this respect; see esp. *Gesammelte Schriften* 9(1), pp. 474ff.
38. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 187-192.
39. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 272-274.
40. "Die revidierte Psychoanalyse," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, p. 40; quoted in J. Benjamin, "The End of Internalization," p. 61.
41. However, it is not clear that Adorno has entirely escaped the orbit of the Cartesian model; see pp. 50-53 below.

42. *The Melancholy Science*, p. 92.

43. Adorno does not retain a clear distinction between the functions of the ego and those of the super-ego; the internalization of social sanctions and imperatives is attributed to each at different points. Adorno himself argues that the two agencies can not be clearly distinguished within Freud's own framework (see *Negative Dialectics*, p. 273).

44. "The End of Internalization"; see also Rose, p. 94 and Jay, Adorno, p. 91.

45. J. Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited," pp. 44f. Horkheimer's account of the family has been casually connected to Adorno by others as well; see Jay, Adorno, pp. 91-92; and Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, p. 94.

Horkheimer attempts to link state capitalism to ego weakness through the declining fortunes of the father. The father in the liberal bourgeois family serves the child as a model of "self-control...disposition for work and discipline, the ability to hold firmly to certain ideas, consistency in practical life, application of reason, [and] perseverance and pleasure in constructive activity..." ("Authority and the Family," in *Critical Theory*, (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 101).

With the decline of the competitive economy, the father loses the status Hegel ascribes to him in the *Philosophy of Right*: he becomes just another employee. According to Horkheimer, this undermines the basis of the father's authority over his (male) children, and internalization is superceded by more or less direct socialization by the schools and the culture industry.

For solid and thoughtful critiques of Horkheimer's work on the family, see J. Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited," and P. Mills, *Women, Nature, and Psyche*, chs. 3-4.

46. E.g., *Minima Moralia*, p. 22-23; pp. 92-93.

47. See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 273, and p. 275, and *Minima Moralia*, pp. 197, 22f.

48. See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 203.

49. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 188.

50. See "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 47 (1968) p. 86.

51. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 47 (1968), pp. 86-87. Adorno inexplicably makes no reference to Freud's attempt to solve this very problem with the introduction of the "preconscious" in *The Ego and the Id*.
52. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 47 (1968), p. 87.
53. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 46 (1967), p. 79.
54. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 46 (1967), p. 75.
55. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 46 (1967), p. 80.
56. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 47 (1968), p. 95.
57. *Minima Moralia*, p. 61.
58. *Adorno*, p. 88.
59. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 18
60. See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 144.
61. See *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 21-22.
62. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 46 (1967), p. 79.
63. "Sociology and Psychology," *New Left Review*, 47 (1968), p. 95.
64. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 274.
65. This is another moment in which Adorno's neglect of gender let analysis down: he offers very little on the effect of this collapse of two notions of the private on women, who were bound figuratively (in political theory) and literally (when they were not forced to work for wages--another phenomena that escapes Adorno) to the privacy of the home.
66. The best, in my opinion, is Wolfgang Mommsen's *Max Weber and German Politics*, trans. by M. Steinberg, (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1984). On Weber and liberalism, see esp. pp. 398ff.

67. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, ed. by H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 102f.

68. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 163-166.

69. I discuss Adorno's strategies of presentation in the next chapter. For a lucid discussion of the importance of "style" to Adorno's writing, see Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, ch. 2, and Max Pensky, "On Zuidervaat's Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," presented at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Psychology, Boston, 1992.

70. See especially "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," trans. by T. Levin, *New German Critique*, no. 26 (Spring /Summer 1982), pp. 13-30. While Habermas rather systematically misreads Adorno, this text deserves at least as much infamy as the one it purportedly engages.

71. *The Melancholy Science*, p. 95.

72. To this extent, it is no surprise that the miniature Adorno "revival" that commenced in the 1980s paralleled, and in some cases (perhaps most notably Drucilla Cornell's *The Philosophy of the Limit*) was explicitly linked to, the attempt to grapple with the meaning of postmodern theory for politics and political theorizing.

It is interesting to compare, in this context, the more enthusiastic reception some postmodernists, most especially Foucault, received in social and political theory. Was it simply Foucault's prominent deployment of "power" in analyses which otherwise have strong resonances with Adornian themes that made him more suitable to import? Or was it simply that his work came across the Atlantic at a more propitious historical moment?

CHAPTER II  
AESTHETIC THEORY AND PRAXIS

Adorno saw the collapse of revolutionary praxis in both East and West in the formative years of his career as a missed opportunity which could not be willed to return. That he did not see any credible challenge to capitalism "after the attempt to change the world miscarried" should not mislead one to the conclusion that Adorno had given up hope for practical intervention. It is true that he was pessimistic--or realistic--about the prospects for any serious threat to the encompassing systems of domination in the foreseeable future. This notion of a (temporary) incapacitation of practical struggle is the ground of Adorno's claim that praxis has taken refuge in aesthetics:

The feigning of a true politics here and now, the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt, oblige the mind to go where it need not degrade itself....[I]t is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics....[P]olitics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead.<sup>1</sup>

The riddle of the migration of politics is one of the major themes of Adorno's monumental attempt, in *Aesthetic Theory* and elsewhere, to do justice to the complex dialectic of art and society. That Adorno chose to devote himself to this project with such intensity in the last years of his



life has sometimes been seen as an indicator of his 'political deficit'--as a "strategic withdrawal into aesthetics."<sup>2</sup> But *Aesthetic Theory* is not a retreat or withdrawal; according to Adorno, the project of social transformation has been driven into the realm of autonomous art.

Any account of that exodus also has to grapple with the dialectical poor relation of autonomous art: the "culture industry." Adorno's critique of mass-produced 'popular' culture --a critique which is more subtle and meticulous than a glance at the polemical essay in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests--mirrors at every important point his analysis of autonomous art; the two spheres must be understood together.

The relevance of Adorno's work for contemporary American politics is clearest in his account of the culture industry, which in its emphasis on the predominance of mass-produced culture and on the lapse of opposition is aimed squarely at the United States as the epitome of Western democracy.

Adorno does not offer much to substantiate his argument that politics--in the broader sense of the vital struggles over the power relations that structure society--has withdrawn into the crevices of society. It seems to me that Adorno takes the dormancy of anti-capitalist praxis to be obvious. Two historical developments are critical here: the

manifest failures of the Soviet experiment, and the disaffection of the working classes in the West with revolutionary parties--most dramatically the swing of German workers from socialism to Nazism.

What these dismaying developments share is the gap between theory and praxis, between intellectual and material labor, that is one of the themes of Adorno's work:

There is much to indicate that a knowledge crippled temporarily, at least, in its possible relation to practical change is not a blessing in itself either. Praxis is put off and cannot wait; this is what ails even theory.<sup>3</sup>

So long as theory finds itself "crippled...in its possible relation to practical change," politics verges on one-dimensionality. Under contemporary conditions, Adorno argues, praxis subsists in marginal enterprises like philosophy and modernist art--precisely because these enterprises are so manifestly impractical.

This chapter is meant to demonstrate how and why Adorno's aesthetic theory privileges autonomous art as--alongside critical theory, to which we'll turn in the next chapter--the locus of credible praxis in the wake of the miscarriage of resistance.

I will argue that Adorno's elaboration of the inherently political logic that links capitalist exchange relations and artistic content is a fruitful and impressive attempt to develop a Marxian aesthetic theory on behalf of the project

of freedom. Unfortunately, Adorno's laudable intention to ground aesthetics in political economy did not devote sufficient attention to that foundation: the critical distinction of "autonomous" from heteronomous art, which relies on this (faulty) political economy, is untenable.

This does not invalidate the general direction of Adorno's aesthetics, but it does require some extensive rethinking of his conclusions, and I will offer some thoughts in this direction to conclude the chapter.

#### A. Autonomous Art as Praxis

Adorno's account of autonomous art as praxis hinges on the dialectical relationship between the "autonomous" and the "social" aspects of art. In pitting these moments against each other, Adorno is arguing against both the common bourgeois notion of art as a rarified realm somehow apart from and above society, and against its consignment by vulgar Marxist theory to a "superstructural" reflection of basic economic contradictions.

The social relevance of art is rooted in its autonomy from society, as much as its autonomy is rooted in society. On one level, art's autonomy denotes the historical emancipation of art from the demands of religious and mythic signification; in the bourgeois era art is 'left to itself' to pursue the elaboration of its own immanent laws of devel-

opment. Within each branch of the arts, according to Adorno, there is a dynamic relationship between artists and the tradition they work within and upon. Much like philosophical problems which are taken up, reworked, made obsolete and rediscovered, the development of aesthetic form constitutes the basic project of art.

The concept of form occupies a central place in *Aesthetic Theory*, and it is the crux of Adorno's defense of art as praxis. As one might expect with Adorno, "form" is not a simple determinate concept, but one that needs to be placed in the context of the dialectical character of art works. From the point of view of autonomy, form designates the arrangement of elements within the constitution or composition of the art work. It is the shaping power which mediates the social material art draws upon for its "content."

Obviously this does not take place in some pristine realm uncontaminated by social reality; the very fact that art is allowed to be 'for itself' is prescribed and defined by society. The formal development of art is not some freewheeling and whimsical play of invention, nor does it follow some predetermined logical progression. The aesthetic order imposed by form is not external to or indifferent toward its material. Artistic problems are social problems: as Adorno puts it, "aesthetic form is a sedimentation of content."<sup>4</sup> Artistic production, just as much as industrial

production, is grounded in a specific set of social relations and embodies the contradictions of those relations:

The unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form. This, and not the deliberate injection of objective moments of social content, defines art's relation to society. The aesthetic tensions manifesting themselves in works of art express the essence of reality in and through their emancipation from the factual facade of exteriority.<sup>5</sup>

Adorno's discussion of aesthetic praxis is no less complicated than the dialectical accounts of form and autonomy on which it relies. Without oversimplifying too grossly, one can discern three distinct but closely interdependent claims for autonomous art's praxis, having to do with art works as social texts, the exemplary mediation of subject-object relations by form, and the exemption of autonomous art from economic utility.

Adorno argues that the autonomous work of art embodies an implicit critique of the contradictions of the society from which it draws its material. Works of art are social texts both because they are produced within a specific social and historical situation and because artistic problems (like philosophical ones)--no matter how recondite or obscure they may seem--embody the antagonisms of their society. What Adorno says here about music applies to autonomous art in general:

[Music] fulfills its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws--problems which music contains within itself in



the innermost cells of its technique. The task of music as art thus enters into a parallel relationship to the task of social theory.<sup>6</sup>

Thus non-discursive works by Schönberg, no less than discursive works like those of Kafka and Beckett, articulate the unfreedom and domination at the heart of modernity. The truth content of autonomous art is distinct from critical social theory, but no less valid.

The idea that works of art reflect the social antagonisms of their environment is hardly a new one; however, Adorno's argument does not depend on a simple model of a superstructural reflection of fundamental economic contradictions. The link between the immanent development of artistic technique and the irrational nature of bourgeois society is not some notion that art is an epiphenomenon of prevailing forces of production. To speak of it as "reflecting" social contradictions denies art the autonomy that Adorno so strenuously defends; the word Adorno himself sometimes uses is "refraction" which is quite appropriate to his insistence on the mediating role of form.

This "refraction" and Adorno's alternative to the stale metaphor of base/superstructure are well illustrated by art's relation to the domination of nature and the suppression of the object. Artistic production shares with intellectual and material production the processes of reification that Adorno discusses at great length in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. In philosophy, reifi-

cation appears as identity thinking which forces procrustean concepts onto things and suppresses whatever 'remainder' will not submit to identification; the analogue of identity thinking in bourgeois relations of production is the logic of commodification, the universal exchange of unequal things as equals. While reification privileges constitutive subjectivity at the expense of objects it has disastrous consequences for actual living subjects, who fall prey to the conceptual and material domination of nature as they are reduced to mere instantiations of supposedly universal categories. Thus the suppression of what falls outside of these categories--of the "non-identical"--virtually defines unfreedom.

This process is played out dialectically in aesthetic production in the domain of form. On one hand, since the artist and the art work are part and parcel of a society under the spell of reification, the formal constitution of the art work seems to share in the domination of nature and the imposition characteristic of identity thinking. Form draws its material from society by wrenching it away from that society and subordinating it to the imperatives of aesthetic expression. But Adorno wants to argue that this process of dissociating particular elements from the reified and integrated reality of capitalist society potentially serves as a model for bringing the object to itself, for doing justice to the particular and the marginal:

As the language of both domination and reconciliation, art seeks to revivify the content of what the language of nature was trying to say to man in cryptic, almost unintelligible ways....Works of art expand the area of domination to the extreme, not in a literal sense, but in the sense of positing a sphere unto itself which by its very immance differs from real domination, thus negating the heteronomy of the latter.<sup>7</sup>

The construction of the art work serves as a model for subverting prevailing identity thinking and prefigures the reconciliation of the subject and the object, because it is somehow able to rescue its object from the reified meaning imposed upon it: "Aesthetic identity...is meant to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world."<sup>8</sup> By subordinating its material to its own formal laws, Adorno argues, art is able to articulate the truth of the object without succumbing to the dialectic of enlightenment. The artist uses formal rearrangement and representation to give voice to what is silenced by reification.

This helps to explain why Adorno would prefer to speak of art as a refraction rather than reflection of social reality. To attempt to faithfully mirror social contradictions directly is to maintain and reinforce the silence of oppression and suffering. What Adorno values so much in the aesthetic is its capacity to 'pull apart' and reassemble the congealed and reified reality to bring out the truth of that reality. Because of its autonomy, the truth content of art is able to resist corruption and co-optation.

It is apparent then that 'form' is crucial to art's praxis both as a social text which represents society's unfreedom and domination, and as a prototype for subject-object relations which do not depend on domination. Art's indictment of unreason and suffering is only possible through the refraction or mediation afforded by the principle of form. Form itself performs something very similar to what Adorno calls in *Negative Dialectics* "constellation construction" to emancipate the object from identity. The goal of the philosopher's construction of a constellation is "to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal."<sup>9</sup> Critical theory and autonomous art both aim at an intervention between the object and the structures that define it; this intervention is carried out on behalf of the object, with instruments (concepts and representations) which themselves are important components of those repressive mechanisms. In each case, Adorno argues that the approach to the object must rely on those instruments without reproducing the domination they embody in society at large. In the realm of art, form breaks the object out of the objectivity imposed upon it, and in effect places it in an aesthetic constellation which not only reveals the contradictions of the prevailing objectivity but the possibility of freedom which is suppressed in it.

Art can keep alive the promise of freedom only insofar as it is able to sustain its disengagement from society.

While its autonomy places art 'above' politics, and thus makes it culpable as an ideological support of the status quo, Adorno argues that it is precisely its aloofness from bourgeois society which enables it to serve as an implicit critique of that society. This is not only because truly autonomous art is bound to represent, discursively or non-discursively, the unfreedom and domination at the root of bourgeois society:

Art...is not social only because it is brought about in such a way that it embodies the dialectic of forces and relations of production. Nor is art social only because it derives its material content from society. Rather, it is primarily social because it stands opposed to society. Now this opposition art can mount only when it has become autonomous. By congealing into an entity unto itself--rather than obeying existing social norms and thus proving itself to be 'socially useful'--art criticizes society just by being there. Pure and immanently elaborated art is a tacit critique of the debasement of man by a condition that is moving towards a total-exchange society where everything is for-other. This social deviance of art is the determinate negation of a determinate society.<sup>10</sup>

The social deviance of art--its allegiance to form rather than function--exempts it from the social imperative of usefulness, and at the same time prefigures emancipation from ruthless utility. Autonomous art's impracticality embodies the promise of a rationally ordered society which does not reduce subjects or objects to commodities: "Works of art are plenipotentaries of things beyond the mutilating sway of exchange, profit and false human needs."<sup>11</sup>



Thus art, when it holds fast to its autonomy, embodies a species of praxis that is able to stand just beyond the grasp of integration. This helps to explain why Adorno worked so hard to finish *Aesthetic Theory* in the 60s; autonomous art becomes for him the haven of the project of freedom in the administered world.

### B. The Culture Industry and Praxis

Adorno's defense of art as praxis is ingenious and provocative, but it is bound to appear to some as a virtual redefinition of "praxis." To assess this redefinition and its relation to conventional notions of praxis, it is necessary first to see why the culture industry is disqualified from this praxis, and why Adorno takes a rather dim view of explicitly political art.

Adorno's aesthetic theory hinges on the thesis that the political economy of cultural production affects the aesthetic (and political) content of works. Adorno argues that the structural logic of the culture industry tends toward the promotion of obedience, conformity, and passivity.

The defining distinction between art and the culture industry is clear enough (although it deserves critical attention): the culture industry is an industry, defined by its ability to sustain an acceptable rate of profit. Following Friedrich Pollock, Adorno and Horkheimer situate

contemporary culture in a new stage of capitalism marked by increasingly integrated monopolies throughout the economy.

Not surprisingly, the heteronomous conditions of production within the culture industry have important aesthetic consequences. Unlike autonomous art, producers working in the culture industry are not at liberty to focus on the immanent artistic problems within their field. More precisely, the cultural combines shy away from sponsoring aesthetically "advanced" works, and orient their efforts to promoting and distributing work that will duplicate the success of the last smash hit. This, according to Adorno, accounts for the most striking aesthetic feature of industrial culture: standardization; the task of the managers of cultural capital is to produce a new product just like the old that was snapped up most eagerly. The latest thing must be just different enough to appear "novel" without disrupting the formula of familiarity:

Only if it is the same does it have a chance of being sold automatically, without requiring any effort on the part of the customer, and of presenting itself as a musical institution. And only if it is different can it be distinguished from other songs--a requirement for being remembered and hence for being successful.<sup>12</sup>

The products of the culture industry are not only not-art, they are, measured against Adorno's aesthetic theory, anti-art. Aesthetic praxis, then, is barred to industrial culture at every point. Rather than offering a mediated critique of social relations refracted through form, indus-

trial culture tends toward a hollow, false reconciliation of real contradictions. The individual detail is not recuperated from the false totality on behalf of a world that would do justice to non-identity, but reduced to the gimmick which aims at distinguishing particular products from the din of virtually identical and intentionally fungible competitors. Unlike autonomous art, which Adorno argues maintains and mediates the tension between the universal and the particular on behalf of the unfulfilled promise of reconciliation, the culture industry subordinates the apparently rebellious detail to the demands of the bottom line:

the detail remains openly connected with the underlying scheme so that the listener always feels on safe ground.... Any harmonic boldness, any chord which does not fall strictly within the simplest harmonic scheme demands being apperceived as "false," that is, as a stimulus which carries with it the unambiguous prescription to substitute for it the right detail, or rather the naked scheme.<sup>13</sup>

In this, the fate of the aesthetic detail corresponds to the fate of the individual in industrial culture; the "rebellion" allowed to a particular atom serves to sustain our interest until the inevitable victory of the (false) collective:

The detail has no bearing on the whole, which appears as an extraneous framework. Thus the whole is never altered by the individual event and therefore remains, as it were, aloof, imperturbable, and unnoticed throughout the piece. At the same time the detail is mutilated by a device which it can never influence and alter, so that the detail remains inconsequential.<sup>14</sup>

While Adorno shies away from developing an aesthetics oriented around reception (for reasons discussed below), he does argue that consumption of industrial culture plays an important role in the maintenance of alienated labor. By pre-digesting its material, the familiar and unchallenging character of the culture industry's products offers itself as the antidote to the regimentation and duress of work. The culture industry calls itself entertainment because it requires no effort: "The composition hears for the listener."<sup>15</sup>

This again is a step backward from the autonomous art championed by Adorno, which demands (or fosters) an active and supple engagement. The entertainment industry virtually promises not to challenge its consumers, who 'deserve a break today.' But this escape from the rigor of work proves illusory to the extent that the culture industry is grounded upon the same heteronomy and standardization of every other industry:

Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work....[M]echanization has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so powerfully determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself. The ostensible content is merely a faded foreground; what sinks in is the automatic succession of standardized operations.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas autonomous art's qualified and complicit exemption from exchange allows it to stand as an implicit rebuke

to commodification, the culture industry makes no apologies for its complete integration with the status quo:

Movies and radio no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the conservative culture critics who shared his horror of 'mass culture,' Adorno does not blame the victims; the culture industry is seen as deeply implicated in the deepest forces of modernity: capitalism and rationalization. The star-crossed relation between art and industrial culture--i.e. between truth and *demos*--can be traced through each of the three spheres we discussed in the last chapter.

Whereas the work of autonomous art is able to shield the non-identical from identitarian logic, and thus preserve both the memory of suffering and the promise of utopia, the culture industry is thoroughly colonized by administration. The fate of the non-identical in industrial culture is visible in the subjugation of the detail, which, wrenched from the force-field of aesthetic form, provides the perfect alibi for the liquidation of the individual.

The critique of commodification embodied in works of autonomous art--themselves commodities--depends upon their purposelessness. This moment of praxis is barred to the interchangeable products of the culture industry, since they are assigned a social purpose from the outset. In the



subordination of form to formula they directly embody and reinforce commodity fetishism and the crisis of value.

Finally, we have seen that autonomous art serves as one of the last bulwarks against the crisis of subjectivity we analyzed in the previous chapter. Adorno's deepest and most compelling grievance against the culture industry is the contribution it makes to the erosion of subjectivity and to an authoritarian personality structure. Adorno's critique of the culture industry's impact goes far beyond an assertion that industrial culture promotes passivity and conformity; in his analysis, *the audience* is as much a product of industrial culture as movies, radio shows, and advertising. As we will see, this is not accomplished without resistance; but, according to Adorno, it *is* more-or-less accomplished.

These claims, formulated as provocatively as possible in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, are meant to counter the claim--put forward by both defenders and conservative critics of "mass" culture--that the culture industry is giving people what they want. The culture industry derives its alibi of "popularity" from the standardization of consumers which it mimics in its own products:

Now any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual he is completely expendable and utterly insignificant, and this is just what he finds out when time deprives him of this similarity.<sup>18</sup>

The concept which flickers between the lines here is "labor power"; this interchangeability is the basis of a society of "classes" of individuals. The success of an industry which "aims at standardized reactions...[at] a system of response-mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society,"<sup>19</sup> depends upon this identity foisted upon the majority by the economy.

This is one of the points at which Adorno's analysis of the culture industry is most misunderstood; by occasional references to its customers as the culture industry's "helpless victims," we are inclined to see the audience as wholly passive and receptive, as if the culture industry were simply perpetrated upon a senseless and supine population. But this objection--that Adorno neglects the audience's capacity for resistance and reinterpretation--overlooks his arguments detailing the necessity of a process of *active appropriation* for the success of the culture industry.

Without careful attention to the 'psychoanalytic' arguments in "The Culture Industry...", "On Popular Music," and "Fetish Character in Music..." it appears as though the culture industry establishes its hegemony by fiat, or that the audience is so debased that it willingly gobbles up what the culture industry sets before it. But the consumption of the culture industry is not so simple.

One of the perennial problems faced by the culture industry is shoring up the regime of fashion across shifts

in taste which expose yesterday's enthusiasm to be just that. Consumers' scorn for the outdated, "corny" hits of the previous day exposes, according to Adorno, the ambivalence and spite repressed in the consumption of industrial culture. Precisely because consumers are not "helpless" victims, the incorporation of the standards and stereotypes of the culture industry amounts to an arduous process of self-overcoming: the culture industry does not simply "fool" or delude its victims, it *turns the subject's own instinctual energy against subjectivity*.

This self-overcoming is dictated by the unprecedented strength of the apparatus:

The ambivalence illustrated by the effect of corniness is due to the tremendous increase of the disproportion between the individual and the social power. An individual person is faced with an individual song which he is apparently free either to accept or reject. By the plugging and support given the song by powerful agencies, he is deprived of the freedom of rejection which he might still be capable of maintaining toward the individual song. To dislike the song is no longer the expression of objective taste but rather a rebellion against the wisdom of a public utility and a disagreement with the millions of people who are assumed to support what the agencies are giving them....

This of course does not imply absolute elimination of resistance. But it is driven into deeper and deeper strata of the psychological structure. Psychological energy must be directly<sup>20</sup> invested in order to overcome resistance.

Thus, according to Adorno, the culture industry wins its hegemony at the price of bad faith and *ressentiment*.

This is the truly grim dimension of the culture industry: if it were simply an ideological 'veil', one might cast it aside; but Adorno locates the roots of degraded, affirmative culture within the instinctual economy of consumers. The passive connotations of "consumption" fail to grasp the hazards and effort involved in this continually-renewed incorporation of the culture industry; the enthusiasm of the most energetic followers of a popular "craze" expose the mechanism upon which the culture industry's success rests:

This fury cannot be accounted for simply by the passive acceptance of the given. It is essential to ambivalence that the subject should not simply react passively. Complete passivity demands unambiguous acceptance. However, neither the material itself nor observation of the listeners supports the assumption of such unilateral acceptance. Simply relinquishing resistance is not sufficient for acceptance of the inescapable.

Enthusiasm for popular music requires wilful resolution by listeners, who must transform the external order to which they are subservient into an internal order. The endowment of musical commodities with libido energy is manipulated by the ego.<sup>21</sup>

This may not seem to accord with the theses of the "Culture Industry" essay, which emphasizes the passive, effort-less consumption of entertainment, and seems to attribute the hegemony of the culture industry simply to its inescapability--the victory of monopoly on the side of production and distribution predetermines consumption:

The stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more summarily it can deal with consumers' needs, producing them, controlling

them, disciplining them, and even withdrawing amusement: no limits are set to cultural progress of this kind.<sup>22</sup>

This emphasis on the domesticated and domesticating nature of industrial culture is the basis of Adorno's most provocative claims in "The Culture Industry...":

The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

One might be tempted to see the repression thesis as a later "discovery" of Adorno's, but "On Popular Music" and "The Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," which develops similar arguments around ambivalence and spite, were both written before "The Culture Industry...". One could speculate on the different intentions of these essays, but in any case the repression thesis is consistent with the basic thrust of "The Culture Industry..." and offers a more sophisticated account of the reception and internalization of industrial culture. Whereas "The Culture Industry..." is content to gesture at the parallels between industrial culture and the industrialization of the lives of its consumers, the other two essays link this argument to the analysis of the instinctual economy of the psyche, opening up the black box of heteronomous subjectivity.



The goal of the culture industry, according to Adorno, is to occupy the ideological horizon at least as scrupulously as late capitalism dominates the material landscape. Nothing could be as dysfunctional from the point of view of the culture industry as a capacity to imagine alternatives; fortunately the aesthetic logic of industrial culture goes far to minimize this hazard. Judgment and thought are not only disappointed by the products of the culture industry: they are actively discouraged. The distraction offered by industrial entertainment does not really amount to an "escape"; the product consumed not only bears the unmistakable marks of the mechanized work-process one hoped to leave behind, but more importantly, the possibility of unrestrained or unplanned pleasure is systematically foreclosed:

Pure amusement in its consequence, relaxed self-surrender to all kinds of associations and happy nonsense, is cut short by the amusement on the market: instead, it is interrupted by a surrogate overall meaning which the culture industry insists on giving to its products, and yet misuses<sup>24</sup> as a mere pretext for bringing in the stars.

This "overall meaning" discredits the notion of escape. The magic trick which is the culture industry's main responsibility is inculcating the lie that the status quo is the whole, that there is no "outside" and no beyond--but without ever bringing to consciousness the idea of *the whole*, which (precisely in its presumption of an outside) contains a dangerous footing for critical leverage. In this respect, positivism fits snugly with the culture industry:

The new ideology has as its object the world as such. It makes use of the worship of facts by no more than elevating a disagreeable existence into the world of facts in representing it meticulously. This transference makes existence itself a substitute for meaning and right. Whatever the camera reproduces is beautiful....

Continuing and continuing to join in are given as justification for the blind persistence of the system and even for its immutability. What repeats itself is healthy, like the natural or industrial cycle. The same babies grin eternally out of the magazines; the jazz machine will pound away forever.<sup>25</sup>

The repression thesis brings another dimension to this argument about the liquidation of alternatives. In some essays, Adorno argues that the consciousness of alternatives is not so much effaced as suppressed:

Not only do the listening subjects lose...the capacity for conscious perception of music, which was from time immemorial confined to a narrow group, but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception....[T]hey display the pinched hatred of those who really sense the other but exclude it in order to live in peace, and who therefore would like best to root out the nagging possibility.<sup>26</sup>

The implications of such a suppressed awareness that another type of music--and another type of society--are possible will be pursued in the last chapter.

### C. A "Politics Industry"

This liquidation of the consciousness of alternatives, with its legitimating power, suggests that a critique of the "politics industry" might run very much parallel to the

theses on the culture industry. This part of our analysis will necessarily be more speculative than what has gone before, since Adorno does no more than hint at the parallels between mass culture and mass politics.

If we are to see politics as an industry, we must meet the objection that politics does not produce identifiable commodities in the way that the culture industry does. What is "consumed" by citizens? Adorno's basic approach to the culture industry suggests that the significance of particular cultural commodities is being effaced in favor of commodification as a cumulative social process: use value is eclipsed by exchange value. In a way, we are sold not so much a particular unit of culture or satisfaction, but the ideology of "entertainment"; what we are being sold is the system itself. Like pop songs and movies, the moral of every election and every party congress is that the system works--or in any case that since it is the only one possible we must adjust to its imperfections.

If it is possible to trace the political consequences of commodification in aesthetics, we ought to be able to say something about the commodification of politics *per se*, even acknowledging that the political sphere is subject to rather different imperatives than the culture industry: Hollywood is not Washington, but they are both beholden in critical respects to Wall Street.

We can begin with the crux of Adorno's aesthetics. In no small part because it is mediated through the same combines, political discourse in contemporary capitalism is subject to the central complaint Adorno brings against industrial culture: heteronomy.

We will leave to the last chapter the problem of whether there could be an "autonomous" politics parallel to autonomous art. Even without knowing quite what Adorno has in mind when he alludes to a "true politics" (in the passage quoted at the outset of this chapter), it is not difficult to imagine how the basic features of contemporary politics disappoint the Adornian project of freedom. To the extent that the politics industry has merged with industrial culture to become a rather boring sector of entertainment, political life becomes a spectacle that, precisely in its tedium and manufactured irrelevance, wards off participation.

The politics industry too has an interest in a particular type of consumer, and works to eliminate the inefficiency of catering to the needs of its consumers by pre-forming them in accord with its own requirements. Here Adorno's analysis of the recognition and acceptance of popular songs can serve as an indicator of the internalization of the manufactured political horizon. The trick of the culture industry is to get consumers to clamor for the alternatives

they were going to get anyway, in a way which leaves as little foothold as possible for critical thought.

The success of the politics industry's effort to market its own legitimacy depends, like the culture industry, on its status as a monopoly: the marketplace of ideas is coordinated by a handful of distributors. Hence the necessity for hype which the politics industry shares with (or borrows from) the culture industry: the promotion of an ideology of free choice between meaningful alternatives, which obscures the imposition of a mass-produced commodity whose "variety" is as significant as the presence or absence of fins on a Cadillac. In a world where such trivial "diversity" is taken as given in every forum of "serious" and "respectable" political debate, legitimacy can approach the standard of automation which Adorno's analysis warns against.

If we pursue in this connection the psychoanalytic insights of "On Popular Music," we can theorize that industrial politics is not just passively ingested by the populace, but requires a certain amount of wilful renunciation, which is accompanied by a violent backlash against any Utopian suggestions which might expose the price paid by this self-overcoming.

Our intuitions concerning how Adorno views the intersection of art, culture, and politics, receive some verifi-



cation in his critique of consciously political or "committed" art.

While Adorno does not dismiss politically committed art out of hand, he is suspicious of conscious attempts to politicize art and make it an explicit vehicle of praxis. In subordinating autonomy to political "impact", committed art fails even to achieve the impact it strives for, and misunderstands profoundly the nature of the social praxis of art.

The fundamental mistake of committed or "tendentious" art in Adorno's eyes is a simplistic conception of the relations between art and society and between form and content. Besides overestimating the importance of the artist's intentions for the social truth content of works, art with a message confuses aesthetic praxis with a dubious attempt at political intervention. "Political" artists seek to intervene directly into the social meaning of their artworks by a more or less sophisticated infusion of a "message". But this involves a serious misconception of art's relationship to political consciousness. Adorno argues that the truly revolutionary 'impact' of art is subterranean and oblique:

The impact works of art have operates at the level of remembrance; impact has nothing to do with translating their latent praxis into manifest praxis, the growth of autonomy having gone too far to permit any kind of immediate correspondence....<sup>27</sup>

The significance and direction of the impact of a work of art have little to do with the subjective intentions of the artist, but depend rather on the cultural and historical situation which receives it. But even in the most favorable circumstances the social impact of an art work is not likely to propel people to the barricades, partly because the autonomy of art blunts the direct political intentions of an art work:

If art works have any social influence at all, it is not by haranguing, but by changing consciousness in ways that are ever so difficult to pin down. Any directly propagandistic effect evaporates quickly, perhaps because even works of this genre tend to be perceived as being ultimately irrational, with the result that the mechanism that is supposed to trigger praxis is interrupted by the intervention of the aesthetic principle.<sup>28</sup>

This accords with Adorno's evaluations of the works of specific artists, particularly of two of his favorite examples: Beckett and Brecht. Brecht serves on almost every occasion as Adorno's example of tendentious art. Adorno downplays the direct political significance of Brecht's work, while arguing that Brecht's effort to translate his political commitment into artistic practice marks a significant *artistic* development:

The sententious directness with which Brecht translated such stale gems of wisdom into dramatic gestures gave his work its uniqueness. His didactic approach prompted him to introduce dramatic innovations designed to oust the old theatre of intrigue and psychology. In his plays 'theses' are important not for what they say but for what they do....<sup>29</sup>

Beckett, on the other hand--very much like Kafka--exemplifies the relentless portrayal of the desiccation of reality, while maintaining its distance from that reality:

[Beckett's] stories, sardonically called 'novels', neither provide objective accounts of social reality nor, as is often falsely believed, represent a reduction of life to a basic human condition....Beckett draws the lesson from montage and documentation and other such attempts at discarding the illusion of meaning-constitutive subjectivity. Reality may be allowed to enter--it may even crowd out the poetic subject--and yet we get a sense that there is something wrong with that reality.<sup>30</sup>

Beckett's art is to Adorno a more potent indictment of society because it is able to "store up the experience" of the process by which "reality itself becomes lifeless".

What the comparison of Beckett and Brecht brings to the fore is the role of mediation in artistic production. Art that digests its social material and translates it into its own language--whether that be the next step beyond the tone row in music, or cubism in painting--represents for Adorno true praxis better than the attempt to impose politics on the artwork from 'outside'.

But this should not be taken to mean that Adorno expects the work of Kafka or Beckett to be more politically effective than Brecht or Sartre:

One decisive reason why art works, at least those that refuse to surrender to propaganda, are lacking in social impact is that they have to give up the use of those communicative means that would make them palatable to a larger public. If they do not, they become pawns in the all-encompassing system of communication.<sup>31</sup>

The "message" of art works is virtually doomed to be 'neutralized' or co-opted in its reception. This is one reason Adorno wants to distinguish the praxis embodied in artworks from the political prescriptions they wear. The success or failure of aesthetic praxis does not depend upon the immediate reception of particular works of art, nor on the intentions of the artist; thus a great artist with reactionary political convictions may nonetheless produce art that according to Adorno is truly radical, so long as it remains faithful to the aesthetic project. The reception of art works marks for Adorno a moment when the autonomous sphere of production is all but completely obscured by art as social fact; society's embrace of art works takes place 'outside' of the aesthetic realm:

Neutralization is the price art pays for its autonomy. Once art works are buried in the pantheon of cultural exhibits, their truth content deteriorates. In the administered world neutralization becomes universal.<sup>32</sup>

Suspicion of communication is a leitmotif of Adorno's thought. Rather like Nietzsche, he tends to view communication as a corruption of truth:

Direct communication to everyone is not a criterion of truth. We must resist the all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself, and to rate it higher, if possible--whereas at present each communicative step is falsifying truth and selling it out.<sup>33</sup>

This is not, however, because Adorno dismisses the herd as infinitely inferior to the intrepid philosopher, but because in modernity the media of communication are thoroughly dominated by the culture industry, which regulates in subtle and not-so-subtle ways the limits of credible and acceptable discourse:

culture now impresses the same stamp upon everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part.<sup>34</sup>

It need hardly be noted that this holds as true for *Face the Nation* as it does for *Rambo* or Whitney Houston.

This is not all there is to Adorno's critique of communicability. While it is not possible here to do him justice on this score, the central point at issue touches directly on the question of reception. Both the philosophy and the art that Adorno most admires demand an engaged, critical involvement; it cannot be passively assimilated or 'appreciated': it must be grappled with. This is behind Adorno's critique of the 'enjoyment' of art, and his claim that "What works of art really demand from us is knowledge or, better, a cognitive faculty of judging justly: they want us to become aware of what is true and what is false in them."<sup>35</sup>

Even aside from their "political" content in the broader sense, the major theses of the cultural industry can be read directly onto the political realm. The commodification



of political discourse accompanies a centralization and concentration of the means of communication, whose driving tendency is to remake its consumers according to its own specifications. Not only would challenging or unusual discourse risk unpopularity (failure in the market), but might disrupt consumers' unstable, repressed satisfaction with what is offered them. The most impressive trick of the politics industry is to turn the spite provoked by the broken promise of culture against subjectivity itself; no doubt this is audible in some of the rabid hostility to communism, which, even in its historical "perversion," on some level reminds us of hope we have given up.

#### D. Monopolies and Markets in the Culture Industry

Adorno's effort to link the political economy of cultural artifacts with their aesthetic content and political content is admirable and insightful, but flawed in some of its basic presuppositions. In a nutshell, Adorno's differentiation of autonomous art from the culture industry depends upon a series of questionable assumptions about markets and competition. What is needed is an attempt to take up the general direction of Adorno's social aesthetics on the basis of a more sophisticated approach to political economy.

The decisive difference between the high bourgeois era that nurtured "autonomous art" and the advent of the culture industry is premised on Pollock's description of "state capitalism." This term was meant, like the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to describe tendencies at work in both the Western "democracies" and the openly totalitarian regimes with which they were at war. Under state capitalism:

The market is deposed from its controlling function to coordinate production and distribution. This function has been taken over by a system of direct controls.... These controls are vested in the state which uses a combination of old and new devices, including a "pseudo-market," for regulating and expanding production and coordinating it with consumption.<sup>36</sup>

It is the existence of a more "competitive" stage of capitalism, which was premised upon a more or less clear separation of the state from the economy, which secures the strategic position of autonomous art:

Art as a separate sphere was always possible only in a bourgeois society. Even as a negation of that social purposiveness which is spreading through the market, its freedom remains essentially bound up with the premise of a commodity economy.... In so far as, until the eighteenth century, the buyer's patronage shielded the artist from the market, they [works of art] were dependent on the buyer and his objectives. The purposelessness of the great modern work of art depends on the anonymity of the market. Its demands pass through so many intermediaries that the artist is exempt from any definite requirements--though admittedly only to a certain degree....<sup>37</sup>

Again, we encounter the suspect appeal to a narrative of the Fall from more humane, promising times. It is far from clear that a nineteenth-century artist's dependence on exchange left him or her any freer to pursue immanent artistic development than someone producing with the demands of the culture industry in mind. The claim that the mediating role of the market operated in favor of aesthetic praxis merits skepticism; it certainly astonishes this student of Adorno to read that the anonymity of the market is the guarantor of art's autonomy.

In the absence of a close and comprehensive study of the conditions of production of the modernist masterpieces Adorno admired, suffice it to say that the necessity of surviving in the marketplace--which certainly never conformed to the neat diagrams of liberal economists, least of all in the sphere of culture--seems every bit as much a recipe for heteronomy as pleasing Samuel Goldwyn or the Warner brothers. Someone writing a symphony in the 1820s seems to work within constraints that are not radically different from those binding someone writing a pop song in the 1970s: the work must please one of a handful of possible patrons.

The decisive difference between art and the culture industry might be that whereas art is appropriated or bought by people whose interest is in realizing a profit on further exchange of the work as an appreciating commodity, the

culture industry commissions works with the explicit intention of re-selling them at a profit. To the extent that late capitalism centralizes artistic production in industries, we could speak of the "proletarianization" of art-workers; certainly this is a description with some applicability to commercial illustrators, composers, and writers.

But this does not seem to be the crux of Adorno's critique. He seems to argue that the monopolization of production and distribution converges with planning: that Hollywood is not radically different than a Socialist Ministry of Culture.

This casual invocation of a new phase of monopoly or "state capitalism" deserves closer scrutiny. The strength of Adorno's bifurcation of culture along the axis of autonomy/heteronomy lies in the obvious heteronomy of spheres like the Hollywood studio system and the popular music industry (and eventually television), where it is apparent that a handful of conglomerates controlled (and continue to control) the vast majority of the product which is actually "consumed." In these spheres--we might include the other two that Adorno addresses in the "Culture Industry" essay, architecture and publishing--aesthetic heteronomy follows plausibly from the direct, continual supervision of capital over the products it sponsors.

Is the thesis of "state capitalism" the best approach to describing the changes in the political economy of cul-

ture? What actual changes can be identified in the twentieth century mode of cultural production Adorno criticizes?

While production was centralized in a number of subsectors of the cultural economy (film, television), arguably the critical shift was in the centralization of distribution; Adorno points out that music at least was still produced in a kind of "handicraft" fashion.<sup>38</sup>

This industrial model of distribution means that a profit-oriented intermediary apparatus stands between producers and consumers. This monopoly (or at least oligopoly) obviously aims to realize a "return" on its "investments," but it is subject to additional constraints:

Culture monopolies are weak and dependent....  
They cannot afford to neglect their appeasement of  
the real holders of power....<sup>39</sup>

Art and commerce are not congruent, and not only because there is no guarantee that artistically worthy products would be profitable; as we have seen, industrial culture plays a crucial legitimating role, by accustoming its audience to look upon its renunciation of a real escape as harmless diversion.

Is there reason to challenge Adorno's claim that mass-produced culture makes up "a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part"? One could complain that the "Culture Industry" essay neglects the margins of popular culture which have not been integrated with industrial culture--e.g. that there are "independent" filmmakers, small



record labels etc. While Adorno's argument that the relationship between art and popular culture in the twentieth century is very different from that of the nineteenth is undeniably correct, it is difficult to sustain the sharp disjuncture Adorno seems to suppose between an earlier "competitive" era, and a modern monopolistic one. It may be a mistake to read into this a rigid periodization on Adorno's part. In some places at least, he clearly presumes that authentic, autonomous art has not yet perished altogether, so presumably some space persists which has not yet been integrated into the newly centralized economy.

But even if one could show that the giant cultural combines accounted for only a portion of the films, music and magazines consumed at any particular time, this would hardly invalidate Adorno's argument. Broadly speaking, Adorno's analysis of the aesthetics of industrial culture is likely to hold wherever we find a monopoly or quasi-monopoly at any stage of production or distribution of a particular class of cultural "goods." One reason we continue to be fascinated by the theses of "The Culture Industry..." is no doubt the correspondance we find between Horkheimer and Adorno's inflammatory charges and the shallowness and repetitiveness of contemporary culture.

In the context of "post-Fordist" production--de-centralized production aimed at continual adjustment to a bewilderingly fragmented series of market-segments--the

critique of industrial culture is arguably even more apt, since all this "flexible accumulation" takes place at the behest of an even tighter culture oligopoly than Adorno lived to see. When Time-Warner and Columbia-Sony account for a majority or near majority market-share in every subcategory of music and film *and* substantial chunks of television and publishing, it is difficult to argue that Adorno is not more relevant now than in the 1940s. Of course Adorno was not unaware himself of the apparent diversity of the cultural market:

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines of different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, ordering, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape....<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the products of the culture industry, whichever market-niche they are custom-made for, exhibit today exactly what Adorno decried decades ago: standardization, repetition, plugging, etc.

Beyond this, while Horkheimer and Adorno pointed then to the culture industry's dependence upon other industries, in the 1990s the culture industry has moved toward total integration with other industries, such that the same company that makes movies and records is likely to make stereo equipment and VCRs.

## E. The Death of the Political Subject

Ultimately, I want to hold on to Adorno's attempt to link the conditions of production of cultural goods, their aesthetic character, and their political character. I think his attempt to mark off a contemporary "monopoly" stage of capitalism from an earlier "competitive" stage is untenable, but this does not invalidate the crux of his argument: that the modern mass production of culture has had unprecedented aesthetic and political consequences.

The most provocative claim made by Adorno in this regard deserves to be taken very seriously: that the historical project of "the individual"--and at the same time the projects of freedom and justice--have been set back dramatically in our century. The dialectic of enlightenment threatens a dusk much darker than Minerva's owl could have anticipated.

The dearth of "politics" in Adorno can then be ascribed very directly to the death of the subject. This is not, to Adorno, some felicitous postmodern insight, but the historical defeat of both the liberal and Marxist project. For both the revolutionary subject and the liberal citizen are at the threshold of extinction, if we are to give Adorno's analysis credence. The liberal vision of self-sufficient and independent political subjects coming together to form

the public was invalidated in both theory and practice by the industrial-administrative state. Not long after, the revolutionary "identical subject-object of history" fell in the line-of-battle--or simply fell in line--with the realities of "state capitalism" in the East and West. To Adorno, National Socialism and the New Deal serve as the capstones of the same defeat.

While Adorno exaggerates the parallels between the two capitalist regimes, it is clear enough that he was not encouraged by what he saw in the United States. It is worth pointing out that the hegemony of behavioralism in postwar American political science seems to confirm Adorno's autopsy of the political subject: finally the political subject can be grasped by the same quantitative methods of administration, without recourse to metaphysical constructs such as justice and freedom.

That Adorno ascribes a species of praxis to autonomous works of art ought to alert us to the profoundly political bent of his thinking; art is praxis precisely because politics is not confined to parliaments and parties.

If there is something unsatisfying about Adorno's account of aesthetic praxis, it is not that he fails to offer a blueprint for revolution (hopefully we know better than to expect this of him), but rather that somehow poli-

tics--not just parliamentary politics, but any sort of practical intervention--does not seem politically relevant.

This seems to me to be the root of critics' complaints that Adorno turned away from political commitment. In his major works, which are not ostensibly about politics, but whose constant reference points are nonetheless domination and resistance, the most obvious forms of contention over these go almost unmentioned.

This is all the more vexing since Adorno indicates that politics *does* count:

[T]here is no guarantee anywhere that art will keep its objective promise. That is why every theory of art must also be critical of art. Even in radical art there is as much mendacity as there is illusory creation of possibilities and therefore non-creation, lack of real creation. Works of art take an advance on a praxis which has not yet begun.<sup>41</sup>

This suggests that freedom depends on more than just the subterranean influence of art and the clarity of critical theory. Why then is Adorno so reticent about 'a praxis which has not yet begun'?

The argument of this chapter suggests that this reticence is grounded in an assessment of the demise--or at least hopeless compromise--of a subjectivity which could engage in meaningful politics. This would call for a thorough re-thinking of the enterprise of political theory, and I explore the extent to which Adorno's work can contribute to such a project in the next chapter.



Before turning to that however, I would like to put to rest the notion that *Aesthetic Theory* somehow represents a 'strategic withdrawal' from politics and from praxis. The argument that Adorno turned away from politics in his later years to immerse himself in aesthetics not only neglects his intense lifelong involvement with art; it also relies on a narrow and shallow conception of what counts as politics. One would have to reduce politics to government and policy (or to explicit outbreaks of class struggle) to read *Aesthetic Theory* as a step away from politics.

It is a grievous mistake to dismiss Adorno as a disillusioned and cranky ex-Marxist. His "pessimism" was by no means idiosyncratic or unwarranted, and his analysis of the interlocking administration of capitalism and culture is even more trenchant and appropriate in our era of global mega-media.

Finally, though, there is a sense in which Adorno too easily dismisses the relevance of political conflicts that are still happening. In the last chapter, I raised some questions about Adorno's economic and psychological premises--questions that hint that perhaps subjectivity is not quite as infirm as Adorno argues, and that there might perhaps still be political 'action' worthy of attention. If these first two chapters have argued as stringently as possible for the existence of a political deficit in the

world, it is finally time to examine Adorno's own limitations and lacunae.

1. "Commitment," *New Left Review*, 87-8 (1974), p. 89.
2. Martin Jay, *Adorno*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 154. It is a little unfair to attach Jay's name to this, since he is patently aware that the aesthetic always occupied a central place in Adorno's thought, particularly in relation to politics, and that *Aesthetic Theory* is a thoroughly political book.
3. *Negative Dialectics*, (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 245.
4. *Aesthetic Theory*, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 7.
5. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 8.
6. "The Social Situation of Music," *Telos*, 35 (Spring 1978), p. 130.
7. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 114.
8. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 6.
9. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 10.
10. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 321.
11. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 323.
12. Adorno with G. Simpson, "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 27-28.
13. "On Popular Music," pp. 25-26.
14. "On Popular Music," p. 21.
15. "On Popular Music," p. 22.
16. Max Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 137.
17. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 121.
18. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 145-146.
19. "On Popular Music," pp. 21-22.
20. "On Popular Music," pp. 43-44.
21. "On Popular Music," p. 45.

22. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 144.
23. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 121.
24. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 142.
25. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 148.
26. "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listeners," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, (New York: Urizen, 1978), p. 286.
27. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 343.
28. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 344.
29. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 350.
30. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 45.
31. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 344.
32. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 325.
33. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 41.
34. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 120.
35. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 22.
36. F. Pollock, "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations," p. 201.
37. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 157.
38. See "On Popular Music," p. 23.
39. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 122-123.
40. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p 123.
41. *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 123-124.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PRACTICE OF THEORY

The appropriate relation between revolutionary theory and practice has always been one of the most hotly contested topics in Marxism. In the rush to criticize Adorno's work as "too theoretical," many critics have neglected his insightful and nuanced contribution to this precisely this debate. The "melancholy" tone of Adorno's work, the aporias to which he drives the reader again and again, are all intimately related to his attempt to grapple with the "theory and praxis" problem in a situation where both seem to have stalled.

This chapter will situate Adorno's subtle reworking of the theory-praxis problem in the context described by the previous two chapters (the commodified, "administered" world of late capitalism). We will be led, along the way, into a discussion of Adorno's rejection of the strategy of critique perfected during the Enlightenment.

A clear account of the political aspirations and strategies of Adorno's work will allow us to reassess the charge that Adorno's work falls short of its own expectations in this regard; if Adorno drives critical theory relentlessly into a dead end, we may still challenge the necessity of the detours he enforces.



### A. Theory as Praxis

Adorno offers (primarily in *Negative Dialectics*,) an account of theory and praxis that promises something more meaningful than the obvious blandishments about a 'dialectic' between the two. His attempt to maintain and even intensify the lived tension between theoretical and practical opposition to the status quo may be his most important contribution to Marxist theory.

Adorno's accomplishment was to bring the ritual invocation of 'dialectics' to life in a subtle and sophisticated discussion of theory-and-praxis. He is able to demonstrate that theory has a practical dimension at the same time that praxis is always infused with theory, all the while insisting that the boundary between the two cannot be wished away.

Yet ultimately Adorno's rearticulation of the theory/praxis dialectic disappoints, because praxis (and political intervention in general) remains uninterrogated. The opacity of praxis throws into suspicion the elaborate and sophisticated account Adorno develops of the contribution of theory.

No doubt with the examples of Korsch and Lukàcs (among others) in mind, Adorno was intransigent in his opposition to the notion that theory should subordinate itself to the demands of 'praxis' as interpreted by the Party. But lest we

begin to think otherwise, the relation between theory and praxis is not historically invariable, as Adorno reminds us in one of the most stunning, most vexing passages in critical theory:

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried.... Theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended on. A practice infinitely delayed is no longer the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation; it is mostly the pretext used by executive authorities to choke, as vain, whatever critical thoughts the practical change would require.<sup>1</sup>

Here, *in nuce*, is the position Adorno stakes out for theory, and for himself: keeper of the revolutionary flame in a non-revolutionary time, and heretic railing against both the devil and a corrupt mother Church. Adorno would have us believe that the miscarriage of the Soviet experiment and the defeat of socialism in the West force upon revolutionary praxis an indefinite period of hibernation.

What makes critical theory critical will occupy our attention for the remainder of this chapter. But first, we should take a closer look at the particular historical moment within which Adorno self-consciously situates this ringing defense of theory's independence.

The status of praxis, as Adorno conceives it, is the explicit backdrop for his discussion of the task of theory. It is striking that Adorno should open a book published in

1966--some thirty-plus years after the purported decisive turning point--with a defense of theory addressed to an orthodoxy no longer on the side of what 'practical change would require.'

The official enemy of the status quo is explicitly addressed in another critical passage, where communism is taken to task for its attempt to domesticate theory for its own purposes, not least because a politics that would bridle theory undermines praxis:

The call for the unity of theory and practice has irresistibly degraded theory to a servant's role, removing the very traits it should have brought to that unity. The visa stamp of practice which we demand of all theory became a censor's placet. Yet whereas theory succumbed in the vaunted mixture, practice became nonconceptual, a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of; it became the prey of power.

The liquidiation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice; the recovery of theory's independence lies in the interest of practice itself.<sup>2</sup>

'External' interference with theory harms not only theory, but practice itself. If the 'results' and boundaries of speculation cannot be guaranteed ahead of time, then whatever 'practical' use theory has for revolutionary struggle will only be manifest if it is allowed to follow its own internal dictates.

Adorno establishes the pressing need for theory, in the vacuum created when official Marxism has effectively disowned what he understands to be revolutionary in Marx (and

Hegel). This dismissal of theory effectively mirrors the capitalist West's attempt to brand theory as obsolete:

Today, with theory paralyzed and disparaged by the all-governing bustle, its mere existence, however impotent, bears witness against the bustle. This is why theory is legitimate and why it is hated; without it, there would be no changing the practice that constantly calls for change. Those who chide theory as anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful as thwarted. They thus endorse the world's course--defying which is the idea of theory alone....<sup>3</sup>

These two passages contain, in Adorno's typically compact, ingrown formulations, much of the relation of theory and practice which this chapter seeks to tease out. Theory inherits a lonely privilege of resistance from a world in which the West has abandoned even the rhetoric of the liberal Enlightenment, and the East has made 'Marxism' into a state religion. "What remains painful as thwarted," the "cast aside but not absorbed," finds a voice not only in the coded dispatches of autonomous art, but in the dogged pursuit of a theoretical vocation which does not shy away from its own contradictions and limitations.

Adorno's defence of the pursuit of theory never allows the reader to forget the limits of theory, nor the necessity for a praxis that is more than theoretical. Theory does not pull its truth content out of thin air, and its insights will not make themselves felt without a practical challenge to the status quo.

This puts theory in the uncomfortable position of having to carry on an endeavor that it knows it cannot consummate; at the same time, the present "uselessness" of critique can be seen as an opportunity:

Paradoxically, it is the desperate fact that the practice that would matter is barred which grants to thought a breathing spell it would be practically criminal not to utilize. Today, ironically, it profits thought that its concept must not be absolutized: as conduct, it remains a bit of practice, however hidden this practice may be from itself.<sup>4</sup>

Of course the notion of a 'breathing spell' comes unfortunately close to 'quietism,' even a reverse-Kautskyist faith that the revolution is historically fated to *not* happen.

In and of itself, the claim that theoretical work is a kind of praxis should not provoke much complaint from Marxists, given (among other things) the importance Marx attached to his time in the British Museum. But Adorno's emphasis on individual critique, which unmistakably comes at the expense of old-fashioned meditations on the conditions for collective resistance, has set off all the fireworks Adorno anticipates in the Preface to *Negative Dialectics*.

Adorno's argument for 'theory as praxis' has provoked a fierce response from Marxist critics especially, on the grounds that Adorno refuses to legitimate or even consider "real" political struggles in the context of praxis. Helmut Dubiel offers a particularly unqualified and unsubtle version of one popular interpretation of 'theory as praxis':

This option for a purely theoretical critique incapable of being joined to political action; this clear preference--given the alternative of political activism--for a self-sufficient critique, represents a self-hypothesization of theoretical work that, because it no longer has a political addressee, can now be only self-referential. If the texts of the 1940s still speak of a (para-)political praxis on the part of theory, it is only programmatically in the form of philosophical "discourse" or of the culture-critical "maxim" which merely reverberates around itself.<sup>5</sup>

It would be easy enough to follow Dubiel and assume that because Adorno had nothing of consequence to say about praxis (in the conventional Marxist sense), that his notion of theory-as-praxis must be hollow and self-serving.

But to do so would miss Adorno's compelling and relentlessly self-reflective account of intellectual life after the 'miscarriage' of revolution. This, despite the real shortcomings of Adorno's political analysis, would be a mistake.

### B. Individuality and Critique

Adorno re-articulates the Enlightenment's faith in reason for a modernity that has known not only Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, but also Auschwitz and Hiroshima. He situates very strong claims for the individual's ability to challenge the truth claims of the collective within a dialectical account of subjectivity that recognizes both the



limits of reason and the embedded and entangled construction of individuality.

Unfortunately, in the course of Adorno's construction of a theory of theoretical resistance, politics in the old fashioned sense slips quietly out of a side door. What Drucilla Cornell has called "the ethical message of negative dialectics"<sup>6</sup> leaves Adorno with a breathtakingly subtle and trenchant analysis of individual resistance that teeters on the brink of solipsism.

Adorno saw in the full flowering of the "totally administered society," the bad universality of the Hegelian system come to life; society composes itself of individuals whose social and political function is the mere instantiation of universality. But society, like the Hegelian system, necessarily fails to achieve the seamless, total integration to which it aspires, and this is the saving grace of critique. The process of individuation through which universality comes into its own has assumed a form which, Adorno argues, universality may ignore but cannot entirely annul:

the social process of production preserves in the basic exchange process [Tauschvorgang] the *principium individuationis*, private disposition....The individual survives himself. But in his residue which history has condemned lies nothing but that which will not sacrifice itself to false identity. The function of the individual is functionlessness....<sup>7</sup>

The dialectic of self-preservation awakens within individuals, at the same time that it adapts them to the abstract domination of the economy, a capacity which rebounds on the false universality of a society mediated by exchange. It is this "residue," which is the foothold of thought for Adorno, and the foothold of hope as well: "Even if it does not know it, the reason of the individual...is always potentially the reason of the species."<sup>8</sup> With this, Adorno reclaims for Marxism the revolutionary moment of the Enlightenment, by reading Hegel against the grain and recovering the motive power of particularity which Hegel buries in his rigged dialectic. But this "residue" of Reason which survives even the obsolescence of self-preservation, remains only potentially rational (and critical) until it comes to recognize itself as bound up in this dialectic of universality and particularity:

Experience and consistency enable the individual to see in the universal a truth which the universal as blindly prevailing power conceals from itself and from others. The reigning consensus put the universal in the right because of the mere form of universality....for the mind to perceive and to name that side of it is the first condition of resistance and a modest beginning of practice.<sup>9</sup>

Thought then becomes practice, precisely to the extent that it grasps the ways in which individuality--and true universality--are thwarted, and the constraints on practice in a regime that would do away with thought.

Certainly to keep critique alive in the "administered world" is no small accomplishment. In a society in which the general irrationality of prevailing practice has become blind to itself, maintaining the capacity to recognize that irrationality is all the more important.

After the 'miscarriage' of praxis, Adorno has to re-think two critical questions that had formerly been answered by referring to the proletariat's position at the fulcrum of industrial capitalism. Whereas earlier Marxists could take for granted the epistemological privilege of labor, and of its embodiment of a universal interest in liberation, Adorno has to account for the status of the 'critical' individual in both these senses: how can an individual have reliable knowledge of society, and how can it derive a critical standard by which to judge society?

Adorno grounds critique in the capacity to reflect upon the dialectical tensions between experience and reason, subject and object, and particular and universal.

Adorno is able to rehabilitate the notion of "experience" for critical theory by showing how experience is necessarily social. Through experience, the subject comes to know a material that is always already social, regardless of whether it is recognized as such; the object of experience always bears the marks of society.

In Adorno's argument, the damage inflicted by the administered world (on nature and on reason) is legible in experience, at least potentially. The total society is guaranteed to perpetuate at least one ineradicable reminder of negativity--the experience of suffering:

It is the somatic element's survival, in knowledge, as the unrest that makes knowledge move, the unassuaged unrest that reproduces itself in the advancement of knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

Negative dialectics is propelled, like Hegel's account of self-consciousness, by the subjective, felt experience of negativity. But Adorno refuses to look forward to a Hegelian supersession (and justification) of suffering in a reconciled and harmonious whole; the experience of suffering retains its critical potential:

Conscious unhappiness is not a delusion of the mind's vanity but...the only source of whatever hope the mind can have. The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering....The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.<sup>11</sup>

The analysis of the culture industry, and Adorno's comments on the transformation of ideology<sup>12</sup> may go a long way toward explaining how this experience of negativity is dampened or diverted without becoming a reflexive critique of prevailing social relations. But this leaves Adorno to explain how some people *do* come to 'convert' felt negativity into critique.

Here Adorno reverses Lukàcs' argument of *History and Class Consciousness*: a critical perspective on society is grounded not in a negative interest in the status quo, but in social privilege:

Only a mind which [the administered world] has not entirely molded can withstand it. Criticizing privilege becomes a privilege--the world's course is as dialectical as that.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, Adorno argues that a critical foothold is only accessible with some distance from practice, understood both as political praxis and as the organized "bustle" of late capitalism:

Only as exempt from the general practice is the individual capable of the thoughts that would be required for a practice leading to change.<sup>14</sup>

Far from sidestepping the privileged position of the theorist, Adorno intensifies the tensions and hazards of his account of opposition in a world that has classes but no class-consciousness:

Under social conditions...which prune and cripple the forces of mental productivity [geistigen Produktivkräfte]...it would be fictitious to assume all men might understand, or even perceive, all things....

If a stroke of undeserved luck has kept the mental composition of some individuals not quite adjusted to the prevailing norms--a stroke of luck they have often enough to pay for in their relations with their environment--it is up to these individuals to make the moral and, as it were, representative effort to say what most of those for whom they say it cannot see or, to do justice to reality, will not allow themselves to see.<sup>15</sup>

A passage like this makes great fodder for those who would dismiss Adorno as an old-fashioned "German mandarin."

Adorno himself anticipates this objection, and goes on to suggest:

As for the privileged character which rancor holds against it, truth will lose that character when men stop pleading the experiences they owe it to--when they let it enter instead into configurations and causal contexts that help to make it evident or to convict it of its failings. Elitist pride would be the last thing to befit the philosophical experience. He who has it must admit to himself how much...his experience has been contaminated by existence, and ultimately by the class relationship.<sup>16</sup>

His argument here parallels the relation of works of art to praxis in several critical respects. Recalling from the previous chapter the signal features of the politics of art: art 'pays for' its mere survival by its apparent irrelevance and luxury character; this aloofness is precisely what allows it to encode a perspective outlawed in the practical world; and finally, it points toward, but cannot bring into being itself, another sort of society.

Theory, just as much as art, is put in an odd position by this 'luxury' status. The intertwined themes of alienation and complicity--not just reason's own tendency to fall into its opposite (i.e. the dialectic of enlightenment), but the real complicity of reason with domination in social relations--pervade Adorno's work.

The division of mental from manual labor is an important but often overlooked theme in this regard. This ap-



pears not only as the real division of thought from manual labor in the economy (what we would nowadays call de-skilling), but as well in the general obsolescence of thought (as I recounted in chapter I). Thought is inextricably bound up with privilege and domination; in the quasi-anthropological sections of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, conceptuality and fixed property, thought and domination, are defined by a rather more intimate relation than the polar opposition assumed by *Aufklärern*:

With the end of a nomadic existence, the social order is created on the basis of fixed property. Mastery and labor are divided....The universality of ideas as developed by discursive logic, domination in the conceptual sphere, is raised up on the basis of domination in reality.<sup>17</sup>

In a class society, thought is identified with mastery, and theory becomes a privilege of those with 'free' time. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno reads Idealism as a response to the complicity of thought:

Ever since mental and physical labor were separated in the sign of the dominant mind, the sign of justified privilege, the separated mind has been obliged, with the exaggeration due to a bad conscience, to vindicate the very claim to dominate which it derives from the thesis that it is primary and original--and to make every effort to forget the source of its claim, lest the claim lapse.

Deep down, the mind feels that its stable dominance is no mental rule at all, that its ultimate *ratio* lies in the physical force at its disposal.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, Adorno was not to be moved by the reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach* that insisted theory could only

atone for its complicity by reversing this subordination, by subservience to praxis. Aside from the fact that the practical demands of class struggle are always a matter of interpretation, this kind of abstract negation of theory's service to oppression could not satisfy Adorno, who insisted that the division of mental and manual labor could not simply be wished away, or abolished by fiat: it is part and parcel of modernity.

This brings us back to the question of experience. To say that class-consciousness is stunted under late capitalism means that in an important sense, people are cut off from their own experience. The culture industry plays a critical role here, substituting what Adorno sees as a prefabricated pseudo-experience.

The model of critique that Adorno refines in *Negative Dialectics* depends upon a dialectic between theory and experience. Theory keeps experience from lapsing into *Lebensphilosophie*, as it "corrects the naive self-confidence of the mind without obliging it to sacrifice its spontaneity."<sup>19</sup> Experience, in turn, serves to remind thought of its non-identity with the object.

Experience can play a critical role in assisting thought's own self-correcting capacity because it is not simply a catalog of events which a subject has endured. Adorno argues that experience is a mode of knowledge which

is not burdened with the stringency and mediation that define dialectics. Experience approaches objectivity (including nature) in a way which is barred to dialectics: "An aspect of immersion in particularity, that extreme enhancement of dialectical immanence, must also be the freedom to step out of the object...."<sup>20</sup>

This 'free spirit' operates as a sort of outlaw thought, in tandem with a dialectics bound to identity which works upon the bad totality through immanent critique:

The immanently argumentative element is legitimate where the reality that has been integrated in a system is received in order to oppose it with its own strength. The free part of thought, on the other hand, represents the authority [die Instanz] which already knows about the emphatic untruth of that real-systematic context. Without this knowledge there would be no eruption; without adopting the power of the system, the outbreak would fail.<sup>21</sup>

Experience and dialectics both reach for an objectivity which the reified totality would deny. This defense of 'experience' armed with dialectics allows Adorno to reverse the connotations of 'subjective' and 'objective' by deftly showing how the injunction that thought be "objective" is often a cover for policing the bounds of acceptable thought, and that an openness to 'subjective' experience that yields to the object "without reservations" can attain an objectivity denied by the Spell.

In "Subject and Object" and throughout later works like *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno seeks to push Hegelian idealism

beyond the hollow transcendence it offered subjectivity at the expense of real subjects. Reclaiming the real "transcendental" potential of subjectivity, according to Adorno, would require grappling with the objectivity of the subject, and with the ideologies which console the subject with a story of the mind's omnipotence while mocking its real unfreedom.

The sovereign free subject of idealism neglects its own objectivity, and in its overestimation of its own power over the object actually consigns objectivity to the blind domination of the prevailing system. Thus the fate of the subject is bound up with breaking the dialectic of enlightenment: the spell that imprisons both Reason and Nature can only be broken if reason ministers to nature. Not least because the prevailing instrumental relation to nature recoils on our embodied, objective selves as the blind 'revenge' of Nature.

Breaking with the dialectic of enlightenment does not entail embracing a direct, immediate relation to nature. That would amount (in the terms of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) to a kind of atavistic variant on the domination of nature: this immediacy still masks a colonizing impulse. To assume that we can simply ignore what is 'more-than' natural in ourselves and commune 'directly' with Nature (as seems to be popular among 'New Age' enthusiasts) is to impose a vision of the natural on objectivity that is no

less questionable than the passage by Bacon that open *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In short, Mother Earth (or whatever) is just as much a projection of ourselves (and our wishes) as Nature-as-plunder.

Horkheimer and Adorno make it clear that the way out of the dialectic of enlightenment has to lead through reason, not around it. But it will not be the magisterial transcendental reason of Kant, which reincorporates the subject object split in the division of *phenomena* from *noumena*. Nor will it exhibit the cunning of a Hegelian reason which has already decided what it will find in the object. Rather, it would be a reason which keeps the promise Hegel makes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Scientific cognition...demands surrender to the life of the object, or, what amounts to the same thing, confronting and expressing its inner necessity."<sup>22</sup>

Adorno understands this 'inner necessity' rather differently than Hegel. Unlike Hegel's dialectic, in which objectivity serves only as a foil against which *Geist* must test its ever-maturing consciousness, Adorno's 'negative' dialectic renounces closure and harmony in favor of a "fearlessly passive" approach to the object. The construction of constellations is meant to break particularity out of the conceptual stockade of 'the particular' at the same time that it defuses reason's complicity with domination.

This has dramatic consequences for our relation to Nature. In the context of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the attempt to "use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual" amounts to a dialectical self-overcoming of Nature: if the dialectic of enlightenment signified reason's unwitting bondage to fear (and thus its reversion to myth and a 'natural' commitment to blind self-preservation), then a successful negative dialectics would transform the 'nature' of both subjectivity and objectivity. Adorno's work suggests not only a path beyond the subject's carnivorous (merely natural) relation to the object, but objectivity is at the same time brought out of its mute 'natural' silence (into some almost 'communicative' relation to reason).

Whereas Hegel's Nature remains sheer otherness even as the dialectic enfolds it in its larger spectacle (as if Hegel were doing Nature a favor, in incorporating his opposition), Adorno's dialectic recognizes the fear of nature as a natural obstacle to nature's own hope for reconciliation. Adorno overturns Idealism's demotion of nature to one side of the dialectic (the *outside*), in no small part by reminding the subject of its own materiality, of its intimate and inalienable particularity in Nature.

Adorno's validation of the critical leverage the particular can bring to bear on the universal represents an attempt to turn Western philosophy against the grain of its



history, on behalf of precisely what that history nearly always denigrated:

The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with the tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity--things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant....<sup>23</sup>

This is not simply an admonition to take an interest in the 'nonidentical' which slips through the net of our concepts; the ash-heap of 'mere contingency' is the philosophical expression of the historical fate of *actual* particulars, as Adorno's reading of Hegel reminds us. Hegel, of course, is the ultimate victor's philosopher: despite his assurances to the contrary, the outcome of the dialectic is never in doubt, and what cannot identify totally with the progress of the *Weltgeist*, is afforded by Hegel only the consolation it can wring out of the ambiguities of the magic verb *aufheben*. But Hegel only codifies and dramatizes one of the constant themes of philosophy; even iconoclasts like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are interested (in more subtle ways) in what falls by the wayside only for what it tells us about what marches on.

Adorno's attention to philosophical and historical detritus marks again the impression of Walter Benjamin's work on Adorno. Benjamin insisted in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that 'historical materialism' breaks decisively with the dominant "empathy with the victor,"<sup>24</sup> but

Marxism up until Benjamin empathizes exclusively with the *eventual* victors as much as any other philosophy of *resentiment*. Benjamin's reading of Klee's "Angelus Novus" as an allegory for history as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage...a storm blowing from Paradise"<sup>25</sup> is more than a little 'heterodox'.

This sensitivity to what "fell by the wayside--what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic"<sup>26</sup> plays a critical role in Adorno's attempt to short-circuit thought's complicity with positivity.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno suggests that a dialectical reason might even heal some of the wounds that rationality, seduced into the service of domination, has inflicted on the world:

Though doubtful as ever, a confidence that philosophy can make it after all--that the concept can transcend the concept...is one of philosophy's inalienable features and part of the naivete that ails it.... But whatever truth the concepts cover beyond their abstract range can have no other stage than what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard. The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts, without making it their equal.<sup>27</sup>

Adorno anticipates a knowledge not bound to the imperatives of the carnivore, as Peter Sloterdijk has aptly put it, a 'knowledge that would not be power.'<sup>28</sup> Adorno's hopes for

disrupting the dialectic of enlightenment rest upon a stringent (and unnatural) openness to otherness (on behalf of Nature):

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.<sup>29</sup>

Dialectics, in this sense, intends to disentangle reason from domination, to mark the path to a new relation to nature, and to ourselves. Adorno seeks a way to slip the dialectic of enlightenment, and bring reason out of its (natural) bondage to fear.

### C. An Ethic of Negation

But while Adorno's work establishes this self-critique of reason as an essential task of modern social theory, this model of critique seems to validate Marxists' complaints that Adorno was seduced away from materialism and praxis.

It is not simply that Adorno's work does not explicitly link itself with concrete political constellations; Adorno's 'political deficit' is not a simple omission. Much more radically, Adorno's work seems to close off political avenues taken for granted by Marxists and leftists. He systematically (if implicitly) disqualifies political interven-

tions until the 'praxis' he defends is hard pressed to justify its own persistence.

It is very hard to see how the kind of break with identity-thinking and with the domination of nature Adorno envisions *could* be a political project; there are very few instances of "we" in *Negative Dialectics*.

In the context of the preceding chapters, Adorno's "political deficit" looks less like a deficiency of Adorno than of the political. Adorno does not devote much attention to questions of political strategy or institutions because what he considers to be the "political" problems of his time are situated on a much deeper level, one which neither liberal nor Marxist political action can any longer address.

A Marxist politics presupposes some level of class consciousness and unity, even in the absence of a "revolutionary moment" when the overthrow of capital is a concrete possibility. But the bulk of Adorno's work is precisely an account of the short-circuiting of understanding and solidarity, of the recognition of the enemy and the will to resist.

Liberal politics also depends upon a subject with the capacity to recognize its interest and the initiative to act upon it, in a terrain contested by other (formally equal) subjects. With the mass-production of subjectivity, the

bourgeois citizen assumes, like the sovereign he replaced, a purely symbolic, commemorative role in the polity.

Thus Adorno's critical theory represents a radical departure from the Enlightenment model of political critique, which places its faith in the efficacy of truth and reason on the political plane. The central trope of enlightenment critique is *exposure*: the revelation of injustice, irrationality, and hypocrisy in the light of reason as a virtually self-sufficient critique.

The trope of exposure is still a powerful political motive, which persists in some measure in most organized movements of political resistance. While the relationship of the media to politics has turned out to be much more complicated than the first theorists of mass propaganda thought, it is hard to avoid thinking, "if people only *knew* what was going on...."

Both the liberal and revolutionary branches of enlightenment politics are beholden to illumination; Marx certainly meant the exposition of the mechanics of capital, shaken free of the ideological barnacles encrusting it, to inspire a will to act on newly-acquired truth.

While Adorno's colleagues in the Frankfurt School operated largely within this orbit of *Aufklärung*, whatever their doubts concerning instrumental reason or "one-dimensional" society, Adorno's work articulates a deep disruption between knowledge and action, theory and praxis.

This 'disruption' is hardly an invention of Adorno's; twentieth-century history seems to dispute the Enlightenment's faith in the political efficacy of reason; if not the first Great War, if not the Depression, if not Stalin's terror, if not the ascension of Hitler and Mussolini, then certainly the concentration camps and the atomic bomb force some kind of revision of the battle cry *sapere aude*. Adorno's contention that theory is a form of praxis, then, aims at a kind of illumination that could rehabilitate the project of *Aufklärung* in the cumulative shadow of these events.

A critique oriented around exposure no longer seem viable to Adorno, because political strategies of revelation aim at a catalytic reaction in a *public*; the outrageous is only politically effective if there are people who can be outraged, and whose outrage has some political repercussions. The argument of the last two chapters has made clear that the hole where the public ought to be in society has everything to do with the hole where "politics" ought to be in Adorno.

Essentially, Adorno argues (fairly consistently from the late '20s onward) that the front door to liberation, and in fact to positive political change of any significant kind, has been indefinitely slammed shut. The alternatives then become to abandon any concern for freedom and justice,



or to find another approach to the edifice of state capitalism.

Thus it is no surprise that the 'practical justification' of independent theorizing is addressed precisely to this problem of finding a backdoor or 'subterranean' approach to praxis. As with his account of 'aesthetic praxis,' in Adorno 'theoretical praxis' comes to be defined as a kind of politics-which-is-not-a-politics, as a response to a world where overt political intervention, even more than explicitly political art, finds itself systematically thwarted and disparaged.

In effect, Adorno looks toward a broader notion of praxis, one which can encompass the indirect and 'subterranean' impact of works of art and theory. Like the aesthetic, speculative theory is defended for developing a critique of the *status quo* that is all the more incisive for being indirect or subterranean.

We already rehearsed much of Adorno's suspicion of political engagement in the discussion in the previous chapter of his critique of 'commitment' in artistic production. In the realm of theory too, Adorno's conviction is that "Real partisanship... dwells deep down"; not in blind loyalty to the perceived interests of the proletariat, but (as we'll explore in a moment) in relentless critique of everything that stunts and deforms human life, and poisons

our relation to nature. Like a work of art, a work of theory that is able to give itself up to the demands of its material, Adorno argues, is intimately related to questions of justice and liberation.

What is critical about critical theory has as much to do with "form" as with content: as with aesthetic form, the project of critical theory is to dislodge particulars from the relations that suspend them in the present, to place them in new constellations that illuminate the possibility of a different world.

Adorno's own political project is in large measure to demonstrate, in persuasive dialectical detail, how thoroughly political theorizing itself is. This is Adorno's clearest link to the original impulse of the Enlightenment: that knowledge itself is ultimately intertwined with questions of freedom and justice.

The political project of thought as Adorno develops it, is essentially to keep faith with 'the cast aside,' to break open (in thought at least) the closure which the Spell would pawn off on us as 'the way things are,' and finally, to undermine the dialectic of enlightenment by continually bringing thought to bear on its own limitations.

Keeping faith with what identity has rolled over is not simply a matter of resisting the victors' devaluation of what it judges obsolete. Adorno charges philosophy with the difficult task of remembering suffering without justifying

it or aestheticizing it. Suffering itself discloses both the genesis and implicit mission of thought:

[Suffering] is the somatic element's survival, in knowledge, as the unrest that makes knowledge move...the one authentic dignity it [the mind] has received in its separation from the body. This dignity is the mind's negative reminder of its physical aspect; its capability of that aspect is the only source of whatever hope the mind can have....The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering<sup>30</sup> ought not to be, that things should be different.

The spell, the artificial naturalness of the *status quo*, aims first and foremost to short circuit the protest of suffering. Breaking the spell requires a resuscitation of experience, and of history--reminding the reader of the possibilities which are socially repressed by the imperatives of late capitalism:

What dissolves the fetish is the insight that things are not simply so and not otherwise, that they have come to be under certain circumstances....The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility--the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one.<sup>31</sup>

The spell denotes the farthest advance of the dialectic of enlightenment: the service rationality and thought have rendered to the perpetuation of irrational domination:

The spell seems to be cast upon all living things, and yet it is probably not....The animal species *homo* may have inherited it, but in the species it turned into something qualitatively different. And it did so precisely due to the reflective faculty that might break the spell and did enter into its service. By such self-perversion it reinforces the spell and makes it radical evil,

devoid of the innocence of mere being the way one is.<sup>32</sup>

Reason plays a critical role in the domination of nature, both directly as the conceptual Procrustean bed of identity, and indirectly in the form of technical knowledge. Still, contrary to critics who see Adorno as some kind of Nietzschean blasphemer against the Enlightenment,<sup>33</sup> Adorno argues that philosophy is revolutionary in its marrow:

Thought, as such, before all particular contents, is an act of negation, of resistance, to that which is forced upon it....The point which thinking aims at its material is not solely a spiritualized control of nature. While doing violence to the object of its synthesis, 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.<sup>34</sup>

The bulk of *Negative Dialectics* is occupied with the project of a dialectical thought which might grasp objectivity without breaking it, to make good on the task Adorno assigns philosophy at the end of *Minima Moralia*:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption....Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects--this alone is the task of thought.<sup>35</sup>

The 'material' of theory itself draws thought to dialectics, precisely because thought necessarily always fails its own sense of adequacy:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without a remainder....Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity....My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.<sup>36</sup>

The logic of identification cannot simply be rejected or reformed: "To think is to identify." To give voice to suffering and nonidentity, then, will require a reason sworn to serve objectivity, to continually feel for its own edges and contradictions.

This is precisely why, much like deconstruction, the "matters of true philosophical interest at this point" become the cast aside, the neglected and repressed. Unlike Derrida and other poststructuralists, Adorno insists that the goal remains uttering the unutterable:

Though doubtful as ever, a confidence that philosophy can make it after all--that the concept can transcend the concept...and can thus reach the nonconceptual--is one of philosophy's inalienable features and part of the naivete that ails it. Otherwise it must capitulate....But whatever truth the concepts cover beyond their abstract range can have no other stage than what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard. The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual, with concepts, without making it their equal.<sup>37</sup>

At this point we might return to the question raised at the beginning of this section: what does the kind of praxis



Adorno outlines have to do with the old-fashioned Marxist kind? His analyses of non-identity and the domination of nature have been seized upon by several critics, who attack Adorno for replacing a historically grounded materialist critique of capitalism with a quasi-metaphysical narrative of man's tragic confrontation with nature. Mining the pages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for passages which indicate to them that the equivalence embodied in exchange grew out of the prior, more general unfolding of identitarian logic, these critics see in it a decisive turning away from the program of early critical theory, into either a virtual relapse into Idealism, or a Nietzschean repudiation of Reason and the Enlightenment.

Hostile Marxist critics tend to see *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an departure from the Frankfurt School's ostensible commitment to historically grounded critical social theory--in other words, as an abandonment of Marxism. Helmut Dubiel offers the most explicit and emphatic version of these arguments:

[I]n the 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno depart from the Marxist theoretical tradition. Their theory no longer takes as its object the forms--particularly the capitalist forms--of social intercourse by which the human species reproduces itself in appropriating nature. Instead their concern is the world-historical drama of the active confrontation of the human species with nature.<sup>38</sup>

What is overlooked here is that the discussion of myth, magic ritual, and *mana* is continually juxtaposed with the



operations of the bourgeois economy. The very subtle, dense dialectical account of reason and nature that Horkheimer and Adorno construct in this essay is severely misread if one misses the links Adorno makes between the the Procrustean abstraction of conceptual thought and the exchange of commodities. The homology between identitarian logic and exchange is central to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the crux of both is the forcible imposition of commensurability upon heterogeneous, unique particulars. Philosophy and economy are both founded on domination.

The precise nature of this link between identity and exchange is not immediately clear; many passages dealing with this relation are couched in terms ambiguous enough to make it difficult to assign "priority" to one or the other; most often, exchange and identity-thinking are simply placed side-by-side in the paratactical fashion Adorno favored.

It would be surprising if it were otherwise; to explicitly take up the question of the "priority" of exchange or identity-thinking would foreground the kind of base/superstructure problems which Adorno continually tried to displace and suspend. Adorno had no interest in reducing identitarian logic to an epiphenomenon of exchange, which we could therefore afford to ignore (in the certainty that the victory of the proletariat would solve these sorts of secondary problems).

Oddly enough, in their eagerness to strip Adorno of his Marxist credentials, Dubiel and Connerton overlook passages where Horkheimer and Adorno do try to specify the relation between identity-thinking and exchange:

Even the deductive form of science reflects hierarchy and coercion....the whole logical order, dependency, connection, progression, and union of concepts is grounded in the corresponding conditions of social reality--that is, of the division of labor.<sup>39</sup>

It is hard to imagine what significance one could find in the quest to privilege exchange over identity, or *vice versa*, given Adorno's compelling insistence that the two are always already intertwined (and virtually two sides of the same impulse).

Arguably, Adorno's attempt to articulate the brutality of identification should be seen as a deepening of the materialist tradition. One of Adorno's central concerns is to rescue concrete living particulars from a 'materialism' that is rather too confident in its grip on objectivity.

Jürgen Habermas too wants to portray *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a theoretical regression or retreat from a substantial, historically grounded social theory. His *Theory of Communicative Action* develops two of the most common objections to "The Concept of Enlightenment": that the dialectic of myth and enlightenment recounts an ahistorical confrontation between "Man" and "Nature," and that

various forms of power and exploitation are reduced to a vague, amorphous conception of "domination."<sup>40</sup>

Habermas' critique is directed not so much at *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s deployment of exchange as its besmirchment of Reason. Habermas at this juncture dons the robes of the Responsible Adult lecturing the nihilistic Horkheimer and Adorno, who have clearly spent too much time with that troublemaker Nietzsche. According to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno conduct a kind of imploding critique of instrumental rationality, subjecting everything to the caustic bath of a totalizing theory of identity that must corrode even their own theoretical endeavor.<sup>41</sup>

This criticism requires a willful forgetting of Horkheimer and Adorno's explicit purpose in writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The point is...that the Enlightenment *must consider itself*, if men are not to be wholly betrayed. The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past.<sup>42</sup>

How is it that Horkheimer and Adorno fail to convince Habermas that their project is an immanent critique of Enlightenment? It seems to me that Habermas is so intent on rooting out any surviving theoretical progeny of the Nietzschean will-to-power that he utterly fails to grasp the ambition of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: to make good on a social critique that takes both the Nietzschean and Marxist challenges to Enlightenment seriously.

We have still to cope with the charge that Horkheimer and Adorno's critique is 'ahistorical.' What may irritate both Habermas and Marxist critics more than the alleged demotion of exchange to one interpretive principle among several<sup>43</sup> is the apparently casual way Horkheimer and Adorno deploy concepts like "bourgeois" and "Enlightenment" in ways which flout the historical specificity we usually attach to them. Baldly stated, Odysseus can't really be a prototypical bourgeois, can he?

The relatively literal reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an attempt to tell the world-historical story of domination, to narrate the age-old dialectic of myth and enlightenment, humanity and nature, certainly accounts for a large part of the impatience critics have for the Adorno's deployment of "domination." It seems to me that it is absolutely critical to recognize what Eva Geulen describes as the "untimeliness" of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>44</sup>

In effect, the attempt to map the critique of domination onto "history" waits in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a kind of booby-trap. Remembering what I suggested about the function of 'liberal capitalism' in Adorno's work, I would suggest that the anti-historical tropes of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are meant to describe the momentum of Enlightenment, of thought itself, and to highlight in the most dramatic terms its *interruption*. In this respect, *Dialectic*

of *Enlightenment* has as much in common with *History and Class Consciousness* as with *The Genealogy of Morals*: the problem it takes up is the intertwined structural failures of Western philosophy and society, and the practical problem of solving them.

At the same time, "The Concept of Enlightenment" has to be seen as Horkheimer and Adorno's attempt to contextualize the disaster of Fascism, to come to grips somehow with the 'disrupture' in history marked by Hitler, the war, and the camps.

The analyses of Odysseus, Juliette, and the culture industry are meant to remind us that winning the war is not the end of the struggle against barbarism, and that barbarism is not something utterly Other, but something harbored in the heart of human intelligence long before Nietzsche.

#### D. The Limits of Philosophical Praxis

I have argued that the political project legible in Adorno's work represents a continuation and a refinement of both the Marxist tradition and of the Enlightenment; certainly Adorno counterposes to this world the real possibility of a world free from the domination of nature and social domination (his refusal to describe it in positive terms notwithstanding).

Adorno's focus on individual resistance, on the *thoughts* of people who are not completely under the Spell, has often been seized upon by Marxist critics to show that he had abandoned any serious analysis of the conditions for transformative politics.<sup>45</sup> Adorno is almost uniformly suspicious of collectivities, and revolutionary action--indeed concerted action of any kind--finds no sympathetic mention in his work.

But the basis for Adorno's oft-repeated suggestion that "part of the social force of liberation may have withdrawn to the individual sphere"<sup>46</sup> is not his "deviation" from Marxism, but precisely the reverse: Adorno locates the last residue of hope in individual recognition because he expects collective opposition to capital to take the form that Marx predicted. The failure of the proletariat leaves a political vacuum that Adorno refuses to fill by finding another "revolutionary subject."

I think Adorno's unwillingness to follow Marcuse in looking for other subjects whose oppression entails an interest in radical change is best explained by this commitment to the classical theory of the proletariat as the class embodying a "universal" interest in liberation. Adorno begins his career at a point when the tide of militant socialism has visibly receded, leaving not new opportunities for resistance and opposition, but a refined and extended apparatus for domination. This is as true for the East,



where the proletariat supposedly triumphed, as for the West.<sup>47</sup>

The belief that twentieth-century capitalism has won a decisive defeat (for the foreseeable future) over its only credible opponent, coupled with Adorno's basic sociological insight into the "total" organization of social life, even reaching into the psyche, precluded any sympathy for collective action in the short-term. Again, the partial legitimization of the workers' movements in the West only validated Adorno's reading of a general pacification of the class that was supposed to make the revolution.

Self-consciously isolated from any organized opposition to capitalism, Adorno (particularly in his later works) develops a Marxian ethic for anti-Marxian times. This oppositional ethic is an attempt to think through the problem of living in a world where 'the whole is false' and where

there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.<sup>48</sup>

This can not be a search for revolutionary purity nor an otherworldly asceticism, since Adorno is hyperaware of the skeins of complicity that bind everyone in capitalist society to the status quo. 'Purity' is simply not an option:

That intellectuals are at once beneficiaries of a bad society, and yet those on whose socially use-

less 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 dependants: to become one more grown-up, or to remain a child.<sup>49</sup>

Adorno offers a trenchant and poignant analysis of the *meaning* of opposition in a world which does its best to efface and diminish such. The focus of this analysis is not on revival of class-based politics, or on anti-capitalist strategy, but on keeping faith with non-identity and negation in a totalizing web of identity and positivity.

This stance makes some sense if one believes, with Adorno, that the psychological basis for class-identity, and therefore for a meaningful politics, has been eroded beyond (foreseeable) repair. If the 'totally administered society' has indeed made politics practically 'obsolete' then a revival of old-style ideology critique is doomed. Under these conditions, the task of opposition might mean, as Adorno's work suggests, reviving not so much critique itself, but the *preconditions* of critique: i.e. attacking the calcified facade of a positivity with the insistence that things *could be otherwise*.

So Adorno pursues theoretical work, radical negation in thought, without any rational hope that dialectics alone

will have any demonstrable 'impact': theory can no more make a "revolution" than art works can.

Certainly, however much Adorno might have wanted to wring out of the notion that "Practice itself was an eminently theoretical concept,"<sup>50</sup> he always reminds the reader that theory alone is not sufficient. Like aesthetic praxis, critical theory seems to wait upon some (unspecified) movement to actualize the alternative it holds out.

But it is precisely the ineffable quality of this "other" praxis, which might intervene in the world in a way which is barred to aesthetic and philosophical praxis, that arouses such widespread, palpable disappointment with Adorno among readers who want to read him as a "political" writer.

This 'other' praxis is assumed to be dormant, and Adorno unfortunately says virtually nothing about the prospects of resuscitating it.

This is the most substantial criticism that can be made of Adorno's attempt to show the deep political implications of concepts: there are precious few political concepts that attract his interest. Indeed, we have reached the heart of Adorno's political deficit.

It is not simply that Adorno is at a loss for a conception of anti-capitalist praxis after the calamity of Fascism. The political failure of the proletariat, on which his whole conception of the meaning and mission of philosophizing after the 'miscarriage' of revolution depends, finds

astonishingly little examination. The reader of Adorno is presented, exactly as the infamous passage of *Negative Dialectics* would have it, with the "missed opportunity" as a *fait accompli*.

This reading of the political balance-of-forces throughout Adorno's life may be no less plausible than those of optimistic Marxists who saw in every third world rebellion the death-knell of Capital. Still, as I suggested in the previous chapter, some attempt to rescue political struggles from the disparaged realm of 'superstructure' (as Adorno did with his work on art and the culture industry) seems all the more urgent when solidarity and collective action are going out of style.

And of course however much history to this point has validated Adorno's 'pessimism,' politics did not die off with the citizen and the proletarian. The American Civil Rights movement, growing anti-colonial resistance and rebellion, and the international eruptions of the late 1960s<sup>51</sup> all evince a persistence of 'politics' that Adorno cannot really account for.

This would hardly be of any interest, if Adorno were just another Old Leftist who clung to dogma that were as ill-suited to the 'thirties as to the 'sixties. But Adorno develops, in forty years of looking backward at an irretrievable historical moment, an analysis of the deeper deformation wrought by capitalism that makes compelling

reading nearly thirty years after the 'New Social Movements' opened a new chapter in the history of 'liberation.'

Adorno's refusal to connect "praxis" with any post-war political currents is best seen as a most consistent "Marxist" response to mid-twentieth century events. What is frustrating about Adorno's work is that he seemed to have the tools to push Marxism beyond its own historical limitations in this respect. This is precisely what will occupy our attention in the next chapter.

1. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3.
2. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 143.
3. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 143; cf. *Minima Moralia*, p. 44.
4. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 245.
5. *Theory and Politics*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1985) p. 86.
6. See *The Philosophy of the Limit*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).
7. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 343 (translation altered).
8. *Hegel: Three Studies*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 44.
9. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 344.
10. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 203.
11. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 203.
12. See chs. II and I, respectively.
13. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 41.
14. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 343
15. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 41.
16. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 42.
17. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 14 [translation altered, see *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, p. 30].
18. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 177.
19. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 30-31.
20. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 28.
21. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 30.
22. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 32.
23. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 8.
24. *Illuminations*, pp. 256-257.
25. *Illuminations*, p. 257.



26. *Minima Moralia*, p. 151.
27. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 9-10.
28. *A Critique of Cynical Reason*, (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press: 1987), p. xxxv.
29. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 191.
30. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 203.
31. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 52.
32. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 345-346.
33. Perhaps most visibly: Habermas. See 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," trans. by T. Levin, *New German Critique*, no. 26 (Spring/Summer 1982), pp. 13-30.
34. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 19.
35. *Minima Moralia*, p. 247.
36. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 5.
37. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 9-10.
38. Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, trans. by B. Gregg, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 92-93. Cf. Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), ch. 4.
39. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 20; cf. p. 14.
40. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. by T. McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), vol. I, pp. 378-379.
41. See *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I, 383ff; and "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment."
42. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv.
43. See Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, p. 93.
44. Geulen, "A Matter of Tradition," *Telos*, no. 89 (Fall 1991), pp. 155-166. See especially pp. 159-160.
45. See e.g. Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, pp. 82ff;
46. *Minima Moralia*, p. 18.

47. I think this also helps to account for Adorno's pronounced disinterest in Third World revolutions, which were difficult to assimilate to classic Marxist formulations.

48. *Minima Moralia*, p. 25.

49. *Minima Moralia*, p. 133.

50. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 144.

51. Of these, only the last left any significant visible traces in Adorno's writings; Adorno was (in at least one famous incident) not allowed to ignore the student movement.

## CHAPTER IV

### DESIRE AND SOLIDARITY: RESUSCITATING POLITICS

The argument of the previous chapter suggests that commentators who emphasize Adorno's 'political deficit' tend to miss the significant political accomplishments of his lifework, and obscure his contribution (or potential contribution) to contemporary debates over the meaning/role of political theory.

Adorno's writing demonstrates in an exemplary fashion the inalienable political dimension, the inner partisanship, of every philosophy. His insistence on the centrality of the question of liberation, of doing philosophy from the standpoint of reconciliation, is all the more important in a time when nobody can say with any confidence what 'revolution' would look like, much less how we might get there.

As relentlessly and systematically as any other writer, Adorno fixes our attention on the dialectical tension between theory's disengagement from the 'practical' world and its engagement. Thought helps to forge both the fetters of the dialectic of enlightenment and, if there is to be one, the key.

Not the least of Adorno's accomplishments is his awareness of the limits of theory. At best, his work suggests

that political theory serves the interests of liberation best by devotion to its own internally defined problems (which, like aesthetic problems, are rooted in the contradictions of their society). Thus theory itself has a practical dimension, as a kind of critical analysis that opposes reaction and domination.

But theory cannot steer, much less replace the 'other' sort of praxis. Certainly a large part of the response to critics of Adorno's 'political deficit' has to be: what exactly do we expect from Adorno? Policy recommendations? Political strategy? A 'plan' for revolution? Do we really expect *Negative Dialectics* to do what 120 years of socialist praxis (with a much-advertised commitment to various strains of theory) hasn't succeeded in doing?

Still, if we are to see Adorno as one of the noblest heirs to the radical aims of the Enlightenment (as I've argued), we are liable to run aground precisely on the question of 'engagement.' We don't need Marx's injunction to change the world to feel some disappointment with the limits of Adorno's political analysis.

To return to the concise barrage from Gillian Rose I quoted earlier:

Adorno's neglect of social forms diminishes his ability to offer a compelling analysis of political organization and of relations of power....Throughout his work, power in society is paramount but elusive....

In place of a thorough analysis of the 'correlation of forces,' Adorno gives us an insightful and at least partially compelling account of the commodification of every aspect of social life under late capitalism, and an analysis of the erosion of the basic units of both Marxist and liberal politics.

The political conclusions that emerge from a reading of Adorno seem to verge on quietism, even resignation. Taken to its ultimate limit, his emphasis on the death of praxis would have us believe that no political contest of any significance *could* happen, that politics of any subspecies, whether in the Senate or in Selma, has no relevance to the deep institutionalized mechanisms of domination.

The critical question that emerges from the preceding three chapters is: how *necessary* is Adorno's unwillingness to grapple with explicitly political questions of anti-capitalist organization and strategy?

Adorno's attempt to skirt questions of politics is bound to disappoint us to the extent that the political horizon has not quite collapsed as completely as Adorno's account would have it. However plausible the argument for a sort of systematic effacement of politics (i.e. capitalism has proven astonishingly capable of containing political challenges), there is too much evidence that opposition has not finally receded to the pages and canvases of the modernist *avant-garde*.

This chapter will briefly recapitulate the ways in which political action becomes virtually inconceivable in the confines of Adorno's analysis, and go on to consider the central question of this dissertation: might there be an Adornian path out of Adorno's own political dead-end?

What I will suggest as an answer to this is no simple correction of Adorno's 'mistakes,' nor so much the filling of a 'hole' in his work, but something possibly even more arrogant: something along the lines of his critique of Hegel, which seizes upon the theoretical 'best intentions' of Hegel as a key to critique him from the 'inside.'

This immanent critique will draw on the previous three chapters to reconstruct the line of thinking that leads Adorno to such a steep devaluation of the sphere left for political action under late capitalism; at the same time, I will make good on the claims made earlier that Adorno's analysis does not always live up to its best theoretical intentions. This critique will suggest that politics may have more breathing space left to it than Adorno allowed, and it will allow us to make some modest suggestions about the most important considerations for the project of resuscitating the kind of oppositional subjectivity that Adorno's analysis seems to wait upon.

Ultimately, the constellation of interest, desire and agency that Adorno constructs needs to be rethought from the ground up; the scope of this project allows me only to



suggest some possible avenues for such a rethinking. The two key maneuvers here will be: First, to re-examine the role 'totality' plays in Adorno's work; our basic concern is with the status of notions like the 'totally administered society,' and the suffocating sense of enclosure that seems to warrant Adorno's neglect of political struggles.

Secondly, I will argue for the importance of the problem of intersubjectivity, and suggest that an analysis of the politics industry that resists the temptation to consign political activity to the superstructure might extend the insights of Adorno's work on the culture industry in fruitful ways.

#### A. A Message in a Bottle

Three main lines of analysis undergird Adorno's dismissal of politics: that politics has become thoroughly colonized by the logic of commodification; that society is integrated into a totally administered web of domination, and that the psychological friction generated by life under late capitalism is redirected in ways which support the *status quo*.

These three reasons correspond roughly to the schema I outlined in the first chapter: a meaningful political dimension to social life is undermined in contemporary

capitalism on the level of reason (the commodification of discourse), the economy (the integration and closure associated with state capitalism), and desire (the turning of subjectivity against itself).

The argument about the far-ranging repercussions of commodification is the most compelling part of Adorno's critique of late capitalism. It is not simply that nearly all communication in contemporary society is sponsored by some economic interest; the marginalizing, silencing effect of commercialized communication was certainly palpable even before Adorno. Content, as Adorno never lets us forget, is not immune to form.

The implications of this for political discourse are rather vaster than we can take up here, and are barely explored by Adorno. However, the commodification of discourse is the key to understanding the political project of Adorno's texts. The image Adorno offers of his critical theory as a 'message in a bottle' is more than just a casual metaphor--his central propaedeutic intention is to make the catastrophe of late capitalism real for the reader. But the message one pulls from bottles like *Negative Dialectics* is not to save the sender, but the receiver.

Thus, Adorno's critique of simple notions of communication, and of the demand for clarity and intelligibility, reflect a deeply *political* awareness of the need to break

through (or sneak around?) the conventions of language in a world made of, by and for the reproduction of capital.<sup>2</sup>

The commodification of discourse cannot be severed from the invocations of totality that recur throughout Adorno; we are repeatedly told we live in a 'totally integrated,' 'totally administered,' society, under the spell of 'total domination.' The political implications clearly run toward the kind of closure of the political realm that Marcuse elaborates in *One-Dimensional Man*. In Adorno's sociology, there are virtually no margins, and no 'outside.' Even the solitary thinkers with whom Adorno identifies whatever persists of the revolutionary moment can hardly be said to be 'on the margins of society,' given the web of complicity even critical individuals find themselves in. We are all on the inside, and the atmosphere is decidedly suffocating.

As I suggested in the first chapter, the notion of a "totally administered" society is grounded in the disappearance of mediation between the individual and society. The thesis of "state capitalism" suggests that the political-economic elite has brought to fruition a kind of negative image of socialism, in which the world has indeed become, as Lenin's memorable phrasing would have it, "one office and one factory."<sup>3</sup>

This sense of the totally administered society is buttressed by Adorno's hints that it may run up against an

internal limit, precisely by doing away with any mediation between universal and particular:

The universal that compresses the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument, is working against itself, for its substance is the life of the particular; without the particular, the universal declines to an abstract, separate, eradicable form.<sup>4</sup>

Within the individual subject, this 'compression' takes place via the subversion of the field of tension maintained by the ego; ego weakness, as we saw in chapter one, is a loss of mediation in within the subject.

Still, Adorno too easily neglects mediation in his own description of internal and external domination. He too easily plays off a lost, mediated 'liberal' capitalism against contemporary unmediated totalizing capitalism, without examining that mediation whose loss is so important to the force of his critique.

Indeed, in the construction of the entrepreneurial subject, one finds a fairly superficial discussion of the mediating institutions and practices Hegel summarized under the heading civil society, but no attempt to engage either Hegel or other robust theories of civil society. Nor does Adorno take an interest in any Marxist theories of politics meant to supersede Hegel and liberal theory more generally.

## B. Excursus: Hegel and Civil Society

Adorno can only dismiss the sphere of politics as thoroughly as he does if his account of the 'end of the individual' is compelling. What makes rational social action practically unthinkable under late capitalism is Adorno's narrative of the liquidation of autonomy in the passage from liberal capitalism to state capitalism. In the first chapter, I suggested that this narrative was deeply flawed; it is time to see what one can make of the insufficiencies of this critical thread in Adorno's sociology.

To recapitulate briefly: Adorno, building on Hegel's and Marx's account, describes capitalist civil society as a realm of potential freedom and equality. Individuals in a capitalist market operate in a way which prefigures a rational, free social life without being able to realize it within the confines of capitalism. The replacement of liberal, competitive capitalism by 'state capitalism' forecloses these glimmers of what a free society would be like.

This transition, which I've argued is decisive for Adorno's sociology of contemporary life (and especially his 'political deficit'), hinges on three critical moments, all of which involve the enclosure or 'integration' of social life into (what would present itself as) a seamless totality. Economic production based on an 'open' system of compe-

tition between distinct firms is replaced by vertically and horizontally integrated monopoly. The autonomy the liberal market fostered in formally free economic actors is replaced by obedience and conformity within a socially pre-manufactured role. Finally, the totality is guaranteed outside the workplace by an omnipresent and integrated culture industry, which itself embodies the transition from 'anarchic' cultural production to monopolistic, mass-produced culture.

I noted in the first chapter that the first of these three moments in Adorno's narrative is certainly open to challenge. The simplicity of this narrative already throws into doubt Adorno's claim for a qualitative break between nineteenth and twentieth century society. If the second moment--the liquidation of economic agency--were coherent and compelling, then it would be incumbent upon me to take this critique of Adorno's simple economic history much further.

For our purposes though, a re-writing of Pollock's 'state capitalism' thesis is not necessary. The sociological argument which this suspicious economic story is meant to guarantee unravels under close attention, and the re-writing of the relation of agency and subjectivity to economic conditions that I will propose is consistent with the modest observations of chapter one about the mixed nature of capitalism before *and* after Henry Ford. What I've called the entrepreneurial model of agency in Adorno would be



flawed, and would not warrant the political conclusions he seems to draw from it, even if the notion of a qualitative break between competitive and post-competitive capitalism could be substantiated.

The moment of incipient freedom and autonomy visible in the liberal market is attached by Adorno to the individual's ability (and of course *necessity*) to sell his or her labor power in a situation with some level of meaningful choice. This invites a number of obvious criticisms.

In privileging the classic *homo economicus*, Adorno not only begs the question of the subjectivity of men who do not happen to sell their labor power on the market before the triumph of monopolies, but also throws the status of women into question. Not the least of the flaws of the entrepreneurial model are the problematic gender implications of a narrative which comes uncomfortably close to reprising Hegel's paean to civil society from the *Philosophy of Right*, including the latter's explicit and adamant exclusion of women from true subjectivity.

Unlike Horkheimer's more ambitious version (which doubly compounds its gender trouble by explicit reference to Freud and fatherhood), Adorno's discussions of agency before and after state capitalism are not explicitly tied to gender difference. Adorno neither excludes nor includes women in his narrative of the 'end of the individual.' Still, as

feminist thinkers have long pointed out, such forgetfulness is hardly ever innocent.

One could conceivably object that, to the extent that (*pace* Hegel) some women did work for wages under the 'liberal' regime, the entrepreneurial model of agency need not be assimilated to a Hegelian disquisition on the passive, plant-like qualities of women. But whether or not one can read Adorno as 'gender-neutral' is not really the most important issue here. One of the fundamental problems with the entrepreneurial model of agency is its lack of attention to the specificity of the ways in which gender plays out in the economy--something about which Adorno simply has little to say.

Another of this model's fundamental problems is its narrow focus on a particular species of economic rationality. The focus on market-oriented rationality denies not only women a capacity for full-fledged subjectivity, but anyone whose activity is not essentially directed toward the market. Thus Hegel quite consistently calls attention to the civic limitations of people who work on the land:

the agricultural mode of subsistence remains one which owes comparatively little to reflection and independence of will, and this mode of life is in general such that this class has the substantial disposition of an ethical life which is immediate, resting on family relationship and trust.<sup>5</sup>

As noted far above, Adorno seems oblivious to the exclusionary implications of taking *homo economicus* as a

model for human rationality *per se*. Even though the critical intention behind his deployment of the entrepreneurial model of subjectivity is really only focussed on the comparison between liberal capitalism (which fostered it) and state capitalism (which discontinues it), this only begs the question of the status of those to whom this model was never meant to apply in the first place.

The theoretical intention behind the entrepreneurial theory of agency is one a renewed critical theory would do well to take up; but Adorno's effort to link what one might call 'structural' social imperatives (like the market) to the maintenance of a certain kind of subjectivity gives us far too incomplete an account of these structural imperatives.

A return to the comparison with Hegel is instructive on a number of points. Adorno's account of the market departs from Hegel's in decisive and revealing ways. What Adorno seems to borrow from the *Philosophy of Right* is the sense of civil society as a sphere that inculcates a certain level of rationality. Adorno identifies (along with Horkheimer) certain desirable traits with the liberal, competitive market they assume preceded 'state capitalism': rationality, autonomy, and conscience, even 'character' and 'soul.'

Like Hegel, this economic rationality is seen to nurture the germ of a more comprehensive, more adequate rationality, which ought to find its realization in a rational,

just society which transcends the anarchy and injustice into which a capitalist economy left to itself would degenerate.

For Hegel, both these moments are secured by mediation of particular needs and interests in the market:

The aim here is subjective particularity, but the universal asserts itself in the bearing which this satisfaction has on the needs of others and their free arbitrary wills.<sup>6</sup>

In civil society individuals encounter the universal, in the guise of the other people whose well-being is entwined with theirs. The Reason latent in particular interest makes its first appearance in the *Bildung* the market imposes on individuals:

Consequently, individuals can attain their ends only so far as they themselves determine their knowing, willing, and acting in a universal way and make themselves links in this chain of social connexions. In these circumstances, the interest of the Idea--an interest of which these members of civil society are as such unconscious--lies in the process whereby their singularity and their natural condition are raised...to formal freedom and formal universality of knowing and willing--the process whereby their particularity is educated up to subjectivity.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously we should be rather reluctant to assimilate Adorno to a model of political economy that celebrates the way in which people are made "links in this chain of social connexions." Already, there is a subtle difference of emphasis in the accounts of the link between economic interest and freedom. For Hegel, the first hint of freedom is latent in the *interdependence* of individuals (which they can not come

to fully recognize within the bounds of civil society); the entry into civil society acquaints men with the (abstract and still implicit) universal that will eventually blossom into the fully rational universal of the state. The education Hegel attributes to civil society stems from the way it brings men together.

Adorno challenges the harmony between the particular and the universal which Hegel's system guarantees. While Adorno recognizes the universalizing power of civil society, it can only be a bad universal, a delusion of harmony which reaches its apotheosis under the 'integrated' society of state capitalism. For Adorno, Hegel's assurance that the particulars and the universal fit smoothly within one dialectical whole subverts the truly progressive moment of civil society: the moment of an independent, oppositional individuality capable of taking up a critical stance toward the collective:

The individual feels free insofar as he has opposed himself to society and can do something--though incomparably less than he believes--against society and other individuals. His freedom is primarily that of a man pursuing his own ends, ends that are not directly and totally exhausted by social ends. In this sense, freedom coincides with the principle of individuation. A freedom of this type has broken loose from primitive society; within an increasingly rational one it has achieved a measure of reality.<sup>8</sup>

The fragility of this individuality, Adorno makes clear, lies (dialectically enough) in the way in which



liberal 'freedom' was forced on the individual by the workings of the capitalist economy:

The process of evolving individual independence is a function of the exchange society [*Tauschgesellschaft*]....The individual was free as an economically active bourgeois subject, free to the extent to which the economic system required him to be autonomous in order to function. His autonomy is thus potentially negated at the source. The freedom of which he boasted had a negative side, which Hegel was the first to notice; it was a mockery of true freedom, an expression of the contingency of every individual's social fate.<sup>9</sup>

Adorno's discussion of freedom does not really pursue Hegel's schema beyond civil society. In "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," he critiques Hegel's "idolization" of the state as a *deus ex machina*, a suspension of the dialectic necessary to save his system from the antagonisms Hegel himself had shown civil society incapable of mastering. Without mentioning Marx directly, Adorno argues that the apotheosis of the State which artificially caps the *Philosophy of Right* was the only way Hegel could avoid developing the implications of his own insights into class society into a radical critique of the not-terribly-rational reality of the capitalist state.<sup>10</sup>

This argument--that Hegel recoiled at the last possible moment from inventing Marxism--is about all we get from Adorno on the subject of the Hegelian state. The last few pages of my argument here suggest, however, that a deeper engagement with Hegel's state has important implications for the question of individuality and agency.



Adorno argues that Hegel appeals to the state "in desperation as a seat of authority beyond this play of [antagonistic] forces."<sup>11</sup> But the legitimacy of the state doesn't fall from the sky, nor is Adorno quite correct (it seems to me) to argue that the state is tacked onto the *Philosophy of Right* in a 'tour de force': the state is implicit from the very beginning of civil society, precisely in the material interdependence embodied in the market:

In the course of actual attainment of selfish ends...there is formed a system of complete interdependence, wherein the livelihood, happiness, and legal status of one man is interwoven with the livelihood, happiness, and rights of all....This system may be *prima facie* regarded as the external state, the state based on need, the state as the Understanding envisages it.<sup>12</sup>

Hegel's extravagant claims for the state hinge on its claim to be this implicit universality and interdependence made concrete and self-conscious. The state is meant to be the political community's self-conscious intervention in the self-destructive tendencies of civil society; it amounts, Hegel wants to claim, to a collective, conscious self-limitation of individual rights and interests, which is in the ultimate interest of those particular individuals at the same time it embodies the Idea of ethical life, of the "absolute unmoved end in itself."<sup>13</sup>

Hegel admits that one is not likely to find a self-conscious, seamless harmony between the state and its citizens, and he leaves no doubt where the resolution of any conflicts

ought to lie. Adorno's own critique of the fate of the concrete particular at the hands of the Hegel's universal ought to force a radical re-writing of the Hegelian theories of freedom and justice. Unfortunately, no such re-writing is forthcoming in Adorno.

Hegel's construction of the legitimacy of the state opens the door to a critical standard by which really existing states might be judged; the Enlightenment comes very close to spelling out its radical political implications in the *Philosophy of Right*, in the dialectical sustenance of the universal through particulars. It is not enough, really, for Adorno to point out that suspension of the dialectic at precisely this point, and draw the (apt) comparison between Hegel's disingenuous universal and really existing bad totality.

But this is only to restate the problem that we have been concerned with here from the outset: Adorno's conviction is that the facade of autonomous individuality on which a political theory of rational consensus (Habermas, for instance) hangs its aspirations simply will not support such weight.

We can close this excursus to Hegel, and bring this question to a head, by recalling Marx's response to the Hegelian ode to the state. If the state is not "the actuality of the ethical Idea," but rather primarily an instrument

of class domination, then the immediate project for Marx becomes the *Aufhebung* of both class and the state itself. This, Marx and Engels insist, is not to be left to the self-destructive tendencies within capitalism, but must be taken up as a collective, political project:

If the proletariat...is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class; if by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will...have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms, and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.<sup>14</sup>

As we saw in the last chapter, the very notion of a collective, political project finds little encouragement or attention in Adorno. Adorno shies away from questions of political organization, leaving one with the distinct impression that there is no such thing as a good collective. Is there a way to draw Adornian theory out of its own solipsism?

In a passage which virtually sums up my previous chapter's account of Adorno's politics, Adorno seems to nod in the direction of the (lapsed) ideal of the *Philosophy of Right*:

The methexis wrought between each individual and the universal by conscious thinking...transcends the contingency of the particular vis-a-vis the universal, the basis of both Hegel's and the collectivists' contempt for individuality. Experience and consistency enable the individual to see in the universal a truth which the universal as

blindly prevailing power conceals from itself and from others.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, Adorno never applies this dialectical account of a critical engagement with the universal to a discussion of lesser collectivities. Martin Jay makes the same point in *Marxism and Totality*:

Despite his stress on mediation, [Adorno] made little real attempt to investigate the concrete social forces and forms between such an individual and the totality. Micrological stress on the smallest detail went hand in hand with macrological emphasis on the largest whole. What Adorno lacked was any analysis of a possible intermediate level between the collective subject of the idealists and Hegelian Marxists, on the one hand, and the isolated, defensive individual of the bourgeois empiricists on the other.<sup>16</sup>

Jay lays this insufficiency at the door of Adorno's intense focus on non-identity, and no doubt the fear of being swallowed up in a collective, any collective, plays an important role in Adorno's recoil from concrete speculations on politics. Still, in the dialectical tension palpable in the passage on the truth a critical individual is able to "see in the universal," Adorno plants a seed for a theoretically-informed politics that points beyond simple consent, to a solidarity that is not identity--but allows it to sleep in what he takes to be the utterly fallow ground of the totally administered society.

### C. Rediscovering Politics

Adorno's political deficit may not be incurable after all. Greater attention to mediating institutions and practices, as well as a finer grasp of the antagonisms within even late, 'state' capitalism, might show not only that society is not as 'total' as it wants us to believe, but not quite as totalitarian as Adorno would have us believe. Politics, it might turn out, is not quite dead yet. Perhaps there are institutions and practices neglected by Adorno (and Hegel) which are more resilient and significant for resistance to domination than he could have imagined. Before we can elaborate on these intuitions, we need to return to the psychoanalytic narrative, which is perhaps for Adorno the capstone of the social dialectic of enlightenment: the Spell is not something which oppresses people from 'above' or 'outside,' but is rooted in precisely the psychological dynamic proper to an economic system that rationalizes its irrational obstruction of satisfaction and welfare.

The analysis of anti-Semitism in the last chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is especially pertinent here. Anti-Semitism, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, is not some localized, particular 'social problem,' or psychological 'dysfunction'; it is a crucial mechanism in late capitalism for turning the psychic friction generated by the system



back against the subject. Anti-Semitism not only directs the attention of the exploited away from exploitation,<sup>17</sup> but also serves as a channel for the aggression and violence that accrues to the powerless under late capitalism, a senseless "discharge" of the anger of "blinded men robbed of their subjectivity...set loose as subjects."<sup>18</sup>

In that sense anti-Semitism is totally irrational: it has no intelligible relation to its target, which might well have been something else: Gypsies, communists, gays, etc. At the same time, however, Adorno and Horkheimer insist there is something particular about the symbolic status of Jews that calls forth an especially virulent, especially implacable violence:

No matter what the Jews as such may be like, their image, as that of the defeated people, has the features to which totalitarian domination must be completely hostile: happiness without power, wages without work, a home without frontiers, a religion without myth. These characteristics are hated by the rulers because the ruled secretly long to possess them. The rulers are only safe as long as the people they rule turn their longed-for goals into hated forms of evil.<sup>19</sup>

The image of Jewish "happiness without power" evokes the prohibited sense of Utopia, and wounds the exploited by reminding them of what they have been forced to renounce.

We saw a very dialectical reinforcement of renunciation in the second chapter, in the discussion of ambivalence and spite. Here too, the emphasis was on the recoil of pent-up



aggression upon anything and anyone who would remind the dominated what they have been made to give up.<sup>20</sup>

In both anti-Semitic aggression and the smash hits of the culture industry, Adorno suggests that the constituents of totally administered societies retain some link to agency and rationality. Even when they seem to have been reduced to lockstep conformity, there are signs that the sacrifice of volition and autonomy wrung from them is not completely effaced.

These considerations lead Adorno in "On Popular Music" to argue that it would be a mistake to see the conformity of culture industry 'crazes'--which are "examples of much broader issues of mass psychology"<sup>21</sup>--as a passive falling into line or relinquishing resistance. On the contrary, Adorno argues:

They need their will, if only to down the all too conscious premonition that something is "phony" with their pleasure. This transformation of their will indicates that will is still alive and that under certain circumstances it may be strong enough to get rid of the superimposed influences which dog its every step.<sup>22</sup>

Even allowing that the proximity to consciousness of this wilful subordination to the culture industry leads to the paradox that "it is almost insuperably difficult to break through this thin veil,"<sup>23</sup> Adorno concludes on a surprisingly optimistic note. In *Negative Dialectics*, he offers the more familiar Adornian lament (in a similar context of wilful renunciation) that "The subjective con-

sciousness of men is socially too enfeebled to burst the invariants it is imprisoned in."<sup>24</sup> But in "On Popular Music," we hear a rarer motif:

Even the belief that people today react like insects [i.e. jitterbugs] and are degenerating into mere centers of socially conditioned reflexes, still belongs to the facade....To become a jitterbug or simply to "like" popular music, it does not by any means suffice to give oneself up and to fall in line passively. To become transformed into an insect, man needs that energy which might possibly achieve his transformation into a man.<sup>25</sup>

Adorno ends the essay at this point, and does not go on to consider (here or anywhere else) how one might seek to defuse the fury that meets any reminder of the utopian.

The analyses of anti-Semitism and of the consumption of culture both tend to reinforce the notion that resistance to domination is marginalized or turned away from its proper focus; the anti-Semite trains the rage and frustration wrought by late capitalist society against the Jews as prominent 'Others,' and the jitterbug vents the friction of self-sacrifice demanded by the culture industry on the antisocial 'highbrows' who balk at the aesthetic and social travesty everyone else has been compelled to embrace.

But the analysis of spite suggests another line of argument, which Adorno just barely gestures toward in "On Popular Music." That even the most conformist and 'integrated' subjects are not insensitive to reminders of what they have been forced to forego suggests that an important part

of a politics of critical theory would attend to this anamnesis of Utopia.

Adorno's frequent invocations of Utopia certainly are meant as precisely such reminders. His analysis of late capitalism as a closed, politically and socially domesticated society reduces this insight to a fairly harmless ritual. The argument that the costs of conforming cannot be completely effaced hints that the volatility of 'mass' enthusiasms--the potential for backlash--masks some consciousness of domination and fraud. At the same time, this spiteful consciousness remembers the promises that were made to it, and might yet be shown how they were broken.

But breaking the Spell, circumventing spite, can not be envisioned as a political project within the bounds of Adorno's theory, since the domain of politics is understood to be completely woven from the bad totality. Politics, as I suggested above, is left in the sphere of 'superstructure,' as long as the only conceivable collectives are bad ones.

How necessary is this dismissal of politics? To the extent that his suspicion of collective identity leaves Adorno so cold to politics that the defeated proletariat becomes a kind of excuse to ignore political conflicts happening around him, Adorno can not be easily made into a 'political theorist.'

While we need not take 'politics' in late capitalism at face value, we ought to challenge Adorno's willingness to decide beforehand that politics is no longer politically relevant, that apparent manifestations of resistance can't touch the real structure of domination. A determination to take up the question of politics after the miscarriage of revolution, can only do so by departing from Adorno when his conclusions fall short of the best theoretical intentions of his work.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will sketch what I think this involves, with the understanding that this can only constitute a kind of prospectus for another project entirely.

#### D. Renewing Critical Theory

On the basis of what I have written here, one can conclude that Adorno's political sociology is limited by (among other things) the shortcomings of the analysis of an integrated, pacified state capitalism. A renewal of critical theory would have to situate political conflicts within a much more adequate vision of the dynamic, antagonistic constellation of contemporary capitalism.

Pollock's theses on state capitalism--the displacement of markets by planning, the fusion of economic and political

elites --have a measure of truth, but obviously can not stand without a thorough re-writing. It is not possible here to do much more than gesture at the mountain of Marxist and non-Marxist work in this area; some common concerns, however, are impossible to ignore: the ever more complete internationalization of markets, the inadequacy of the classic Marxist account of class, the importance of government policy and of credit and finance, and the importance of intracapitalist relations.

Each of these things highlights the complex, crosscutting antagonisms and political pressures at work within capitalism. This complexity is both daunting and encouraging: it is certainly not the monolithic, integrated system that Pollock described. At the same time, it is some kind of 'system,' (if a system of interlocking systems) and there are no guarantees that the workings of its antagonisms are preparing the ground for a post-capitalist, non-exploitative system.

Still, this attempt to rearticulate the economic and political landscape of late capitalism will not force a revision of Adornian conclusions unless his account of the decline of the subject can be shown to be flawed in some relevant way.

Here again, Adorno's own accomplishments in this regard need to be extended and rearticulated. The question of subjectivity and politics could hardly be more relevant in a

time when politically organized hatred and 'barbarism' seem to be resurgent nearly everywhere.

The link Adorno attempts to draw between economic imperatives and individual rationality, character, and conscience--what I've called entrepreneurial agency--addresses only a very narrow range of subjects, and makes a poor standard for contemporary individuality, given its exclusion of subjects who are not in a position to sell their labor power in the market. Critical theory needs a thorough rethinking of the problem of subjectivity: a theory of agency, labor and desire that can speak to (among other things) the workings of structural imperatives of sexism and racism on subjectivity.

If Adornian social analysis needs more sociology, more economics, and more politics, his account of subjectivity likewise can be pushed beyond its limitations with 'more' psychology. There are two moments in Adorno that are critical to the problem of political consciousness, and yet relatively undeveloped: the unsettling force of desire, and the mode of subjectivity Adorno ascribes to aesthetic understanding.

By and large, Adorno tends to emphasize the ways in which subjects are bound to domination through their own desire. But there is more to desire than this; Horkheimer and Adorno hint at this in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

In every product of the culture industry, the permanent denial imposed by civilization is once again unmistakably demonstrated and inflicted upon



its victims. To offer and deprive them of something is one and the same.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of "the permanent denial imposed by civilization," in its echo of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, reminds us of the unsettling, relentlessly anti-institutional side of desire. If Adorno presents the totally administered society as a totality which is not quite as total as it claims, as a circle that appears to close but can't quite, then unfulfilled desire ought to be the most important marker of late capitalism's non-identity with itself.

To switch to the sort of classical metaphor Adorno favors, if our society is as arrogant, efficient and deadly as the Greeks' greatest hero, might desire not be its Achilles' heel?<sup>27</sup> There is some persistent ambivalence in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* over the relation of desire to the prevailing totality. On the one hand, they abhor the kind of mindless, unmediated pleasure the culture industry seems to offer; at the same time, they tend to insist that the culture industry really can't deliver: it promises escape from the drudgery of work, but in the end reinforces the heteronomous rhythm of production. Surely the reader is bound to trip over a sentence like:

Pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association.<sup>28</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno try to reconcile the culture industry and desire by emphasizing the extent to which the former manufactures its customers' needs to accord with its output. Still they admit that there is a limit to this strategy, since the culture industry can hardly admit what it is really selling:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.<sup>29</sup>

As long as it seems to offer pleasure and escape, the culture industry (and its liegeland, late capitalism) is playing with fire. Desire always comes back for more than it can get, and fascism and revolution both seem to take root in the gap between the socially preformed needs the culture industry caters to and the 'more' that persists in the memory of desire.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue in almost Foucauldian terms that the culture industry dampens the critical force of desire by continually reinforcing the illusion of its own totality and inescapability:

What is decisive today is...the necessity in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible....Not only does it make him believe that the deception it practices is satisfaction, but it goes further and implies that, whatever the state of affairs, he must put up with what is offered.<sup>30</sup>

Still, Adorno's comments on ambivalence and spite make clear that this gambit is never entirely successful.

Adorno's 'ascetic' distrust of pleasure (which I criticized earlier) is an important part of the awkward status of desire and pleasure in the dialectic of enlightenment. Adorno's stress on the unavoidably complicit nature of pleasure causes him to undervalue the negative force of desire. Here again, we might look back to Hegel, where *Begierde* is the motive force of dialectics: it is desire that set *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in motion, and desire as sheer negativity--as *Geist*'s felt non-identity with itself--is ultimately at one with critique.

Horkheimer and Adorno's emphasis on *fear* as the root of the dialectic of enlightenment displaces the role desire could play as the link between central Adornian concepts of nature, suffering and reason. A dialectical account of desire that remembered Hegel (without suspending the dialectic as he does with women) would have to work along two axes. Desire has not only a critical and an affirmative side, but a social dimension that has been overshadowed by its more obvious antisocial dimension.

The affirmative side of desire is bound up with what Adorno saw as its conciliatory nature (as we saw in chapter I). Desire seems to be always on the verge of capitulating; satisfaction, we usually imagine, is the end of desire (at least in the moment).

Even here though, it has to be noted that the relation of gratification to desire is far from linear and simple. The pleasure of gratification does not simply cancel or exhaust desire; certainly in what Jean Baudrillard calls 'societe de consommation,'<sup>31</sup> gratification is planned to call forth more desire. Contentment, a shortage of desire, would sabotage the whole more surely than any shortage of oil or coal.

This suggests a refinement of the culture industry thesis: the culture industry, as recent work in cultural studies (*Dialectic of Enlightenment's* bastard godchild) recognizes, constantly mobilizes our discontent in a field of commodities, in which our half-conscious fetishism takes most of its pleasure in the lusting after of things more than in their 'use.' In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno deploy a rather too simple understanding of desire and gratification, especially in the field of culture.

Adorno's backward-looking orientation allowed him to look down upon the culture industry from the beleaguered heights of classical *Bildung*, an option that is hardly conceivable anymore. Two generations of scholars have now grown up under a more mature, realized, and sophisticated culture industry, and the persistence of Adornian themes in works like Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* is modulated through the increasing recognition that there is no longer an 'outside' from which to condemn the culture industry. Even elitists and hip avant-gardists can hardly ignore the extent to which their

aesthetic judgements are just one more set of pigeonholes thoughtfully provided by the cultural combines. And even the hippest and most erudite, it seems to me, feel the erotic pull of consumption. Even political theorists go to the mall now.

All this seems only to confirm Adorno's suspicion that the cycle of desire and pleasure work primarily to interrupt thought and reflection. Still, thought can hardly be imagined to emerge from anything else than desire, as Hegel elegantly demonstrates. Desire appears very suddenly in the *Phenomenology*, early in the section on 'Self-Consciousness'; we labor through a thicket of convoluted meditations upon perception and self-perception to be ambushed by the conclusion, "...i.e. self-consciousness is *Desire* in general."<sup>32</sup> Desire commences the analysis of self-consciousness, and is a turning point in the ontogeny of Reason, because it draws the subject out of itself, making it conscious of its own nonidentity with itself, and ultimately of its dialectical dependence on other subjects. At every step in the analysis of self-consciousness, desire is the moment of negation that pushes the subject out of its complacency and drives it to renew its engagement with the world to discover the truth of itself.

Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well.<sup>33</sup>



Self-consciousness, discovers it needs a special kind of object to continue its education. Desire sets the master/slave dialectic in motion, and frustrated desire marks the irrationality of domination, and makes possible the extended meditation on freedom, reason, and nature that make up the rest of the *Phenomenology*.

Here we come upon the second axis necessary to any discussion of desire: its affinity to both anti-social and social ends. The failure of the master/slave dialectic marks the point in Hegel's narrative that may be the key to resuscitating a critical theory that can speak to politics. As we saw in our earlier discussion of the *Philosophy of Right*, one of Hegel's great accomplishments is to highlight the irrevocably social nature of subjectivity and rationality. We learn the same lesson early in the *Phenomenology*: self-consciousness is a social project, and reason and desire intertwine our lives, whether we like it or not, with those of other people. This insight tends to be crushed under the weight of the universal it comes to support, since Hegel, as Adorno put it so eloquently, was not so much interested in individuals as in individuality.

Still, here as in the Hegelian state, we have the germ of a compelling attempt to navigate the tension between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of subjectivity. Desire and reason both mark the point at which the I finds itself through



mediation with not-I; both find their highest satisfaction in relations with other people.

One of the central projects of the Enlightenment was to confirm exactly this congruence, to overcome the opposition between mind and body, between individual interest and the common good. When Freud (following Nietzsche's similar maneuvers a generation-and-a-half earlier) revitalized the time-honored narrative of the irreconcilable tension between desire and civilization, he revoked the focus on recognition and intersubjectivity which lay dormant in Hegel.

Freud's narrative of the internal dynamics of the ego promises more intersubjectivity than it delivers. Desire in Freud does bind subjects together--but not as subjects; Freud's naturalization of desire shifts attention away from recognition and intersubjectivity, toward the instrumental, amoral impact that subjects have on each other. His account of the child's relation to his parents is not about a real relationship between individuals, but a narrative of impersonal shadow-play going on *within* every little boy.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, in this regard, Adorno chose to follow Freud rather than Hegel, developing an account of the anti-social nature of pleasure without any of the Oedipal window-dressing. Several critics have taken Adorno to task for lacking an appreciation for intersubjectivity.<sup>35</sup> Connerton's critique is undermined by his reductive reading of the

dialectic of enlightenment, and leads him to argue that Adorno loses sight of "the notion of the self as *socially produced*."<sup>36</sup> Habermas criticizes Adorno for a 'philosophy of consciousness,' arguing that Adorno and Horkheimer conflate reason and 'instrumental reason.' Not only is this a misreading of Adorno, but it is very hard to see how Habermas' own theory of 'communicative ethics' includes any meaningful intersubjective dimension.<sup>37</sup>

Only Jessica Benjamin has really given this topic the attention it deserves, and even her attempt to move Adorno beyond his own limitations is hampered by the conflation of Adorno and Horkheimer I remarked upon earlier. Benjamin does, however locate the root of the problem in Adorno's indebtedness to Freud.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, anti-social desire warrants explicitly conservative political conclusions; in Adorno it serves more to warn us against any conflation of revolution with hedonism or utilitarianism. But it also forecloses on the most promising source of 'revolutionary' energy: the desire for Utopia is only intelligible in the context of *solidarity*.<sup>38</sup>

If there is anything that would arouse more suspicion in Adorno than pleasure and enthusiasm, it could only be collective enthusiasm and a feeling of 'identifying' with some larger community of people. Adorno is deeply suspicious of the notion of community because he doubts that meaningful

community could be founded on the prevailing sort of mass-produced, conformist subjectivity. Adorno would argue, I think, that there is no hope for community without individuality.

At the same time, Adorno is clearly wary of the coercive power of every collective. Certainly this has something to do with his interpretation of the avenues of 'solidarity' available to him throughout his life: he was not about to go the route of Lukàcs (or Brecht). The argumentation of *Negative Dialectics* is instructive here: arguments for the independence of theory and critiques of party discipline recur throughout the book paired with critiques of identity-thinking, and attempts to specify how negative dialectics might 'unseal the nonconceptual' with concepts.<sup>39</sup> Adorno's 'aloofness' from contemporary politics stems, I think, from a fear that any conceivable involvement with politics in this world necessarily compromises the kind of hard-won and endangered individuality he prized, and makes one subject to "the insatiable identity principle that perpetuates antagonism by suppressing contradiction."<sup>40</sup>

This may have been, in some sense, a reasonable political judgment during most of Adorno's lifetime: not one beyond challenge, but it was certainly not a ridiculous assessment, and looks much smarter with hindsight than falling in step with the Comintern. However, even granting the unsuitability of a critical solidarity with the major Marxist options,

Adorno's justified suspicion of the demands of party politics slides too easily into paranoia, and a kind of purism which would rather lacerate itself for its complicity in domination than explore affiliations that are not immediately present.

The point here is not to scold Adorno for a personal failure to find a good spot on a barricade, but rather, to question the ways in which his revulsion at the political options in his field of vision pushed his theory into near-solipsism. To recall the opening of chapter two: politics may have been driven into aesthetics, but its retreat was awfully hasty.

As I argued in the last chapter, the persistence of political struggles that do not register on Adorno's radar highlights his (in this case unfortunate) reliance on surprisingly orthodox Marxist categories. It is striking that Adorno fails to consider any form of collective resistance (any form of meaningful politics) outside of the classical Marxist one. His approaches to explicitly political questions begin and end with the conclusion that Communism is "the very relapse into barbarism which it was supposed to prevent."<sup>41</sup>

Coupled with the critique of the culture industry, which is meant to expose the claims of pluralist apologists in the West, this grants Adorno leave to ignore conflicts in the social realm, and abandon any concern with politics to the superstructure critical theory ought to have discredited.

## E. Recognition and Solidarity

However much it might seem otherwise at this juncture, we need not set Adorno beside Nietzsche as a brilliant anti-political philosopher. The question of intersubjectivity, and of a social dimension to desire allow us to push Adorno's analysis in a direction which might maintain the intransigent, dialectical critique of Adornian political theory, without walling it off from political engagement in the way that Adorno does.

The Hegelian emphasis on recognition, most especially in the account of its failure in the master/slave dialectic, lays out the criteria for real intersubjectivity. But not only that: Hegelian recognition opens the door to a critical theory of solidarity, which can shift the ground of liberal and Marxist thinking about politics, and at the same time assuage Adorno's fear of the collective.

Recognition in the Hegelian sense, when and if it is successful, defines mutuality in terms that Adorno himself intimates are the key to defusing the dialectic of enlightenment: a relationship that does not aim at the subsumption of the other, but needs to sustain the other in its alterity. While Adorno's writing evinces little hope in intersubjective relations, these are precisely the terms which he uses to discuss a reconciliation with nature:

Things congeal as fragments of that which was subjugated; to rescue it means to love things....

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.<sup>42</sup>

Substitute 'other people' for 'things,' and one has a summary of "solidarity" that is hard to improve upon.

This model of intersubjective relations is an exemplary basis, it seems to me, for rethinking democratic citizenship and solidarity. Understanding others as *other people*, as at the same time alike and not the same as oneself, is the very foundation of democratic theory and praxis.

Further, if we challenge the quarantine between reason and desire, between rationality and the emotions (as Hegelian theory aspires, unsuccessfully, and as Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault have made ever more the pressing task of social theory), this understanding of solidarity pushes democratic theory beyond the liberal schema of formal rights and responsibilities. Ultimately, the Hegelian logic of recognition is only the dressed-up-in-its-Sunday-clothes version of the logic of love.

To the extent that twentieth-century social theory has seen psychoanalytic and Nietzschean challenges to liberal rationalism, these have almost always been to cast doubt on the project of an enlightened politics. The Frankfurt School's work on fascism and anti-Semitism is a not insignificant case in point.



Perhaps the less mainstream inclinations of writers like Reich and Marcuse were on to something more promising. Recognition, understood as a basic emotional need for mutuality, grounded in our ineluctable connectedness, ought to allow us to push politics beyond mechanical theories of interest, and presage an *Aufhebung* of liberal rights-talk, grounding it in the living--but *yet to be realized*--solidarity of people in a particular society.

One could hardly imagine a better definition of the substance of a positive theory of democracy than solidarity, understood as an identification with community that sustains the self without subsuming it. It also happens to be, I would suggest, *the* project of a renewed critical theory, precisely because: you can't buy this kind of solidarity ready-made.

Community is more than a natural formation into which one is 'thrown'; it is a continual problem and project, whether or not it is consciously understood as such. For a politics determined to make good on the wild optimism of the Enlightenment, the form and content of solidarity are really the same; sustaining a political movement can be nothing else than sustaining democracy.

Liberal political theory's mechanical focus on interest, obscures the fact that politics changes people. Even Marxist notions of solidarity, which might hope at least for some strategic outbursts of enthusiasm, have largely neglected this.<sup>43</sup> Again, it is Hegel foremost among modern political

philosophers that highlights the *constitutive* dimension of political life:<sup>44</sup> if the universal that citizens come to consciously recognize in the life of the state ultimately buries them, we should not forget that it is this encounter with the universal that *makes* citizens, properly speaking.

This insight is critically important if we are to rescue Adornian critical theory from its affinity with solipsism. Adorno *ought* to have been interested in political conflicts around him, regardless of the 'unprecedented power of the apparatus,' for two reasons. The moment a group of people press their demands upon recalcitrant authorities, even limited, very conventional attempts at reform potentially expose subjects to precisely the sort of structural imperatives he identifies with liberal capitalism.

Beyond this, every political space, even gatherings of political parties, brushes up against an intimation of genuine solidarity, and threatens to cathect the social dimension of desire in ways which can not be foreseen beforehand.

In this respect, nothing could be more salutary for the cliques in power than the widespread conviction that politics is meaningless and hopeless, and only people desperate enough to have no choice but to hope against hope can pose any threat to their power.

There are a number of conceivable objections to this line of argument around solidarity and an insistence on the

constitutive dimension of politics; in the remaining pages, I will take up some response to the most significant and obvious ones.

One may suspect this privileging of community and solidarity of mirroring what has been one of the persistent shortcomings of social theory until very recently, and of radical social theory especially: its fixation on *one* encompassing community, which would contain and domesticate the petty, 'partial' differences that sully it.

It is no longer (if it ever were) tolerable to speak this way; we know too much now of the costs of suppressing and subordinating difference, and can look back on a long history of self-defeating attempts to put aside the concerns of women, or of blacks, etc. on behalf of the 'larger' interests of the collective.

What is needed now, is rather a theory of solidarity and collective action that can address the problems of articulation and coordination *between* collectives.<sup>45</sup> This project obviously faces a host of difficulties; there are two suggestions I would offer in this direction.

First, it *nearly* goes without saying, we need to appreciate and be able to speak to the ways in which ideal communities overlap concrete individuals in nearly infinitely complex ways. This kind of meta-identity politics is a topic that has benefited from an avalanche of attention in recent social theory:<sup>46</sup> there cannot be a theory of 'working class poli-

tics,' 'lesbian politics,' or 'Latino politics,' but only theories of the articulation of these around particular political questions in ways which can negotiate these kind of cross-cutting identifications.

Secondly, I think we should not forget the Hegelian mega-collective; if only as the negative universal hanging over the community. The world-historical genie that Hegel tried to stuff back into the bottle of the nation-state expresses our real interconnectedness, which is becoming ever more impossible to forget at the same time it seems less and less amenable to conscious intervention. This ultimately, I think, has to orient concrete political strategies within the 'partial' communities of race, class, sexuality, and gender--without, it should be apparent, attempting to dissolve or 'reconcile' these differences in the mega-community.

A possibly more damaging objection comes from the same arguments of Freud to which this argument was meant in some sense to respond. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (explicitly arguing against a link between love and socialism) dons the majestic robes of the Hobbesian hard-nosed Realist to remind us that a person's neighbor is:

not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy his aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who, in the face of all his

experience of life and of history<sup>47</sup>, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?

Amidst this florid sado-masochistic fantasy, there is a serious social and political argument, as old and honorable as any in the canon: that people are not inclined to cooperate, that a society that takes for granted any measure of goodwill not wrung out of its members by the ultimate promise of violence, cannot be imagined to perpetuate itself.

Freud updates this chestnut for post-Nietzschean modernity: we all have an inherent, ineradicable drive to aggression; we cannot escape or wish away our animalistic, Darwinian heritage.

It is not necessary (thankfully) to embroil a defense of solidarity in the sprawling controversy over human nature, competition, and aggression. It seems to me that we don't need to refute the argument that desire has an anti-social side, to argue that it also has a 'social' side, and that the project of a humane politics is self-evidently to cultivate institutional cathexes with the side of desire that ties people to one another in non-dominating ways.<sup>48</sup>

One might object that an emphasis on love and solidarity, taken even to the point of an endorsement of the transformative potential of mass enthusiasm, leads directly to what Adorno fears most: the dissolution of the individual into the newly validated "community."

But solidarity is not meant to connote the kind of experience that Freud ridicules as the "oceanic feeling" of oneness with humanity. It is precisely the conscious engagement with domination and suffering in the society one lives in, made real through concrete membership in various cross-cutting communities. It is an attentiveness to one's own complicity in domination as well as a recognition of the ways in which one's own fate is bound up with people whom one may have very little 'in common' with.

In political life, solidarity comes into maturity as the capacity to link the concrete political ends to a critique of the bad totality, *and* an openness to the unique pleasure of common work in the political sphere.

The very fact that no community is hermetically distinct, that we are all prisms of a number of identities, is the surest guarantor against a regress to 'mass politics.' Indeed, I think much of the theoretical and practical energy of a community is devoted, consciously or unconsciously, to understanding and negotiating its relation to the array of communities it overlaps.

The direst objection against all this will stand as the last one: that it depends upon exactly the kind of conscious, critical, 'robust' subjects that Adorno believes to be (nearly) extinct. This is an objection that we cannot dodge so easily.



I suppose my first inclination is to argue that one simply cannot assume that really existing subjects are beyond recall. This leaves one the equally unpalatable political options of a Zarathustran retreat to the mountains, or a kind of hyper-Leninist attempt to compete with late capitalism in the business of cultural and psychological manipulation.

If Adorno's critique is to mean anything to contemporary radicalism, one is left with the rather mundane Gramscian realization that the ultimate success of the project is not a topic for theoretical or practical consideration; if you'll excuse an extremely tiresome phrase (the kind Adorno loathed): one does what one can.

Mostly because there really isn't any choice in the matter; if Adorno's critique touches a person at all, then you are left with an amended version of Martin Luther King's ultimatum: one can be part of the problem *and* try to be part of the solution, or one can simply be part of the problem.

The argument for solidarity suggests an avenue, moreover, which will allow us to put aside these glum existential musings which are so ill-suited to political science. It seems to me that a renewal of the constitutive moment in politics is the focus for whatever optimism-of-the-spirit we might muster: political confrontation is educative like nothing else.

One of the keenest examples of this in contemporary American politics is middle class grass-roots conflicts with

polluters. No amount of political science is likely to push the white middle class out of its radical anti-taxism, casual racism, and 'social conservatism' in the way that a fight with Monsanto or Dow chemical over what is going into the water table. Where Michael Parenti and Noam Chomsky fail, an initially modest political initiative can demonstrate to people that the government is not *their* government, that capitalism does not apologize for putting profits before people, and that many things they always believed are simply not true.

But frustration and anger, even open hostility to the political system, are hardly in short supply, and hardly evince a very encouraging 'progressive' bent. If the left has anything on its agenda in the West, it has to be the cathexis of the legitimate anger and frustration of citizens across a wide variety of 'identities'<sup>49</sup> with the felt understanding that something entirely better is possible. How can the lust for Adorno's Utopia compete with the lust for commodities? How can solidarity compete with fear and the dialectic of enlightenment?

It seems to me that the answer to this question is *through* politics, not over or 'around.' If Adorno's Utopia glimmers anywhere in the real world, aside from Beckett and Schönberg, it flickers in the mundane solidarity people feel who are engaged in more or less transformative projects *right now*.

And this is the gigantic contribution of the anarchist, 'infantile' wing of communism: that democracy and real egalitarian community won't wait until after the revolution. My insistence on the importance of solidarity is addressed in no small part to radical theories that would privilege the inculcation of class consciousness, or 'correct' theory over what is sometimes dismissed as peripheral or 'superstructural' fixations. No social movement has any success unless it engages (enough) people on the level of desire; revolution is seductive, or it isn't a revolution.<sup>50</sup>

What I intend by solidarity is not an abstract capacity for identifying with others; it does not describe a diffuse warm fuzzy feeling for 'humankind,' or for 'the oppressed.' Rather, it is the felt and conscious attentiveness to fractious and precarious particular communities--not just a shared sense of responsibility for an organization's 'mental health,' but a collective thirst for utopia that is not cowed by the mistakes and oversimplifications of past movements (or its own).

Nobody describes the unlikeliness of a living egalitarianism more thoroughly or trenchantly than Adorno; but it is precisely here that one can experience, as in no other forum, wrestling with the problems of autonomy and solidarity, theory and praxis, negativity and Utopia, that widen the cracks in

the totally administered society and push back the shadow of the Spell.

1. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 141.
2. This is certainly a critical issue in any attempt to bring Adorno into contemporary 'critical theory'; a bit more plainly: this is the point of attack for an Adornian critique of Habermas. I can hardly begin to deal with the greatest living critical theorist within the confines of this project.
3. V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, (New York: International Publishers, 1932), p. 84.
4. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 346.
5. *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by T.M. Knox, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), paragraph 203, p. 131. Note that the inferior *geistige* status of farmers is literally put down to their closeness to nature: in this respect they are too much like women, in Hegel's view. One can't help but wonder about the status of other economic agents not really 'in the loop' of civil society, especially the parasitic *Junkers*. It is hard to imagine how Hegel could excuse the rentier classes from the criticisms he makes here.
6. *The Philosophy of Right*, paragraph 189, p. 126.
7. *The Philosophy of Right*, paragraph 187, pp. 124-125.
8. *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 261-262.
9. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 262 (translation altered).
10. *Hegel: Three Studies*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 28-30.
11. *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 29.
12. *Philosophy of Right*, paragraph 183, p. 123.
13. *Philosophy of Right*, paragraph 258, pp. 155-156.
14. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: International Publishers), p. 31.
15. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 344.
16. *Marxism and Totality*, (Berkeley: 1984), pp. 271-272.
17. See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 174-176.

18. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 171.
19. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 199. Actually, one could make a similar argument about Gypsies, gays, and communists: each seems to carry some reminder of the prohibited Utopia.
20. See especially "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, no. 9 (1944), pp. 44-48.
21. "On Popular Music," p. 47.
22. "On Popular Music," p. 47.
23. "On Popular Music," p. 47.
24. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 95.
25. "On Popular Music," pp. 47-48.
26. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 145.
27. And perhaps it is not simply coincidental that Achilles is brought down by the 'effeminate' Paris, whose unruly desire started the Trojan War.
28. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 137.
29. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 139.
30. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 141-142.
31. A selection from this important early book, along with one from the equally fascinating *Systeme de objets*, has been published in English in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
32. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), paragraph 167, p. 105.
33. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, paragraph 175, p. 109.
34. On psychoanalysis and intersubjectivity, see Jessica Benjamin's excellent book, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
35. See Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment*, pp. 75-77; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I, pp. 388ff.; J. Benjamin, "The End of Internalization," *Telos*,



no. 32 (Summer 1977), pp. 48ff.

36. *The Tragedy of Enlightenment*, p. 75.

37. In fact, I would argue that Adorno's texts presume a really intersubjective relationship with the reader, in a way to which Habermas' textbook-like contributions are evidently deaf.

38. Interestingly, solidarity appears in a handful of Adornian sentences, usually in the context of an attack on Communist-enforced conformity. See, e.g., *Minima Moralia*, p. 51, and a lovely sentence evoking "a solidarity that is transparent to itself and all the living" (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 204), which--like most of Adorno's close brushes with concepts that border on practical politics--hangs suspended in the text, with no elaboration.

39. See, e.g.: pp. 3-6, pp. 141-144, and pp. 203-207.

40. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 142.

41. *Negative Dialectics*, 205.

42. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 191.

43. One might argue that the theoreticians and politicians of Third World revolutions are a significant exception to this: certainly a public enthusiasm for the continuing project of revolution made Cuba much harder to dismiss as a thoroughly authoritarian regime. In the West, the major theoreticians with some affinity for the transformative power of politics would seem to be Luxemburg and Sorel.

44. My thinking about the constitutive power of political life was sparked by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' superb book *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought*, (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

45. This seems to be the intention, suffocated as it is by their jargon, of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Strategy*, (London: Verso, 1985). Even better than this interesting book is the recent work of Shane Phelan; see "Interpretation and Domination," *Polity*, (Fall 1993), and *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), esp. ch. 4.

46. See, for instance, Phelan, *Identity Politics*, William Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of*

*Political Paradox*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Adorno's contribution to the question of identity is probably the point of his greatest influence on contemporary social theory; in various ways, Phelan, Taussig, and Cornell all acknowledge the relevance of Adorno's negative dialectic.

47. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 69. Note again, the friendliest alternative Freud cites is an instrumental, purely external relationship.

48. In Freud, the only conceivable community is one bound together in aggression against some 'outside.' This argument is premised on the same intersubjective vacuum I described above: there can be no positive internal cohesion in a community since its members do not really relate to each other as subjects.

49. Obviously, I am not suggesting that a radical political strategy ought to (or could!) aspire to the allegiance of everyone or almost everyone. But rather: even people in the 'middle' might be convinced they have more to gain than to lose from change.

50. The sympathy of Marcuse and Bookchin for the libidinally-oriented moment of the 'counterculture' is worth a critical revival. The most relevant texts here would be Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), and Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

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