

# ADORNO ON POLITICS AFTER AUSCHWITZ



GARY A. MULLEN

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# Introduction

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Modern political thought began with fear. The fear of “death and wounds” in a lawless and violent state of nature was, in Thomas Hobbes’s famous formulation, the impetus that drives us into political life. Modern political theory proceeded from a subject in search of stability and certainty, wiping the slate clean in Cartesian fashion and constructing a new political order with the resources of unaided reason. The work of the Frankfurt School has offered, in various ways, a sustained criticism of this starting point for political thought. The social, historical and objective situation of the subject was the focus of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s work. It was Adorno especially who drew our attention to the preponderance of the object—the cultural and historical conditions out of which the subject is woven. Fear is not a given, it comes from somewhere, from historically and socially specific conditions, objects, relationships. Thinking through this historical specificity is the condition for the emancipation from fear. We are not driven to radical doubt by an abstract quest for certainty. The vivid images of Auschwitz, Srebrenica, Nyarubuye and the killing fields of Cambodia place in question the objective, cultural and political order that made them possible. They are particular events, but they maintain a haunting continuity with the objective patterns of history and culture, poised to provide resources and motives for perpetrators and justifications for bystanders. Adorno’s endeavor to view history from the standpoint of the particular, from the lives cut short by the march of history, is rarely recognized as a contribution to political thought. This book endeavors to elucidate Adorno’s contribution, not only to our understanding why and how genocide occurs, but also to our understanding of the complicity of modern ideas and institutions in the repetition of genocide.

In the eyes of his most famous student and critic, Jürgen Habermas, Adorno’s version of critical theory miscarried by broadening critical theory into a philosophy of history that encompasses the entire natural history of domination, including the domination of nature by human activity as well as the social and political domination of humans by one another.<sup>[1]</sup> Consequently, Adorno leaves us with an unachievable, abstract utopian ideal for reconciling the tensions both in society and between humanity and nature. Any historical action is implicated in the history of domination and violence, from which it cannot extract itself by revolutionary or emancipatory praxis. Hence, we may conclude that Adorno’s critical theory is little more than the quasi-religious lament of a disappointed Marxist, an apology for the theoretically charged resignation of left-wing intellectuals in the wake of the failures of Marxist practice. Adorno’s turn toward a philosophy of history is often criticized as proof positive that he has given up on the critical potential of reason and has sought shelter in an apolitical form of quasi-religious contemplation.<sup>[2]</sup> To defend Adorno against this criticism, which has long been the consensus among Habermasians, I focus on Adorno’s philosophy of history as a resource for reshaping the sensibility

that undergirds political judgment in the classical sense—that is, judgment about the needs and vulnerabilities inherent in the materiality of human life, and the question of how to live together in light of these needs and vulnerabilities. Without a serious treatment of the relationship between Adorno's primal history of the subject and political judgment, we will miss the relationship between his critical theory and political practice.

It is unsurprising that Adorno's use of eschatological themes in his philosophy of history has struck his critics as incongruous with the aims of critical theory. We often take Adorno one work, one aphorism or one page at a time. And the density of his writing invites, even demands, our narrowly focused attention. It is easy to miss what lies silent between the aphorisms and between Adorno's frequent leaps from one philosophical mountaintop to the next. Adorno has given us a reason for the silences that make his work necessarily fragmentary in style—and his work as a whole could be interpreted as an attempt to respond to that which philosophy has left us so ill-prepared to address—the irreducible horror of Auschwitz. What follows is an effort to offer such an interpretation. The eschatological tone of Adorno's critical theory is unintelligible unless it is understood in light of his intellectual confrontation with the Holocaust. The reality of irreducible evil in history calls for the criticism of history from a perspective that is not the product of history's immanent unfolding. After the Holocaust, it is no longer responsible to give meaning to history by appealing to some providential pattern, and, hence to view the Holocaust as one of the harsh learning experiences of the species. The only hope to which critical reason can lay claim is one that looks at history from the perspective of what history has cast out. Only a rationality that responds to the suffering of particulars, one that responds to the screams of children cremated alive at Auschwitz can claim to be a critical rationality and not merely the rationalization of the victors.<sup>[3]</sup>

The eschatological tone of Adorno's philosophy of history is often mistaken for a retreat from history and practice. Nothing could be further from Adorno's intent. Adorno uses eschatological motifs to fashion critical perspectives that contradict the dominant pattern of world history. Only perspectives fashioned from the remains of what history has discarded can resist the constellation of historical, cultural, and social forces that have made the last two centuries ripe for the horror of genocide. Adorno's hope is that reason can be responsive to human suffering without coming apart at the seams. But the language that can speak to the particularity of the suffering imbedded in history belongs in the traditionally "irrational" realms of religion, art, music, poetry and literature. Adorno's philosophy is an attempt to reweave the fabric of reason around a response to the particular in order to lend a voice to human suffering. In Adorno's philosophy, reason rescinds its invulnerability and necessity as it cultivates a subtle awareness of the complexity of human relations.

Adorno's focus on Auschwitz is an attempt to reestablish the critical function of reason that promises to respond to the suffering embedded in the details of social life. The eschatological dimension of his thought is interwoven with the reshaping of moral sensibility. In Adorno's case, it is a sensibility responsive to the age of



genocide. As he tells us in the closing chapter of *Negative Dialectics*, “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”<sup>[4]</sup> Adorno’s critical theory announces the need for a refashioning of sensibility in the aftermath of the manifest failure of modern ethical and political thought to move civilization away from the barbarity of genocide.

The new categorical imperative would be meaningless if there were no possible practices that might prevent the repetition of Auschwitz. The language in which suffering can be understood is one that undermines the veil of necessity behind which our institutions and practices hide their own questionability and contingency. The value of Adorno’s thought in this negation of the present has been understood and studied principally as cultural critique—the meticulous critique of the conditions of intelligibility, enjoyment, and selfhood offered by the culture industry. What is less well acknowledged is the way in which the critique of the present conditions of intelligibility offers intimations of possibility—of other possibilities for practice. His work on the primal history of the subject, studies in anti-Semitism, the structure of fascist propaganda, the critique of identity thinking, all offer indications of a possible world in which these attitudes and modes of thought are no longer dominant. These possibilities are not infinitely distant but lie within the reach of current practice. Propaganda can be decoded, educational institutions reformed, anti-democratic laws and needless wars protested and drained of popular support. In short, Adorno’s thought is both cultural critique and political critique—it allows us not only to think critically about what we are doing, it also offers us indications for how things can be done differently. The following chapters attempt to build a case for Adorno’s uniquely post-genocidal approach to political thought and practice

## **Chapter 1: Rationality and Remembrance**

This chapter offers a close reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to uncover the normative core of Adorno’s philosophy of history, which is inseparable from the theme of remembrance. A critical, materialist philosophy of history is shaped by the remembrance of the seemingly insignificant details that lie on the margins of the dominant historical pattern. This chapter elucidates how this theme of remembrance functions as the last remnant of emancipatory reason in modernity. This interpretation contests the Habermasian reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a “total critique” of Enlightenment that reduces all rationality to domination. A closer reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* demonstrates that Adorno’s project uncovers the normative dimension of the rational subject, whose capacity for critique lies in its endeavor to lend a voice to human suffering. Adorno’s negative dialectic abides with the individual lives destroyed by the general pattern of history and social organization, and thereby provides a critical perspective from which rational longing can be articulated.

## **Chapter 2: Morality and Materiality**

This chapter will treat Adorno's critique of modern moral philosophy in its Kantian and utilitarian forms, which sever the relationship between morality and compassion. The normative dimension of Adorno's critical theory, elucidated in chapter 1, is brought to bear upon his criticisms of modern and postmodern normative theory in an attempt to demonstrate the pitfalls of modern and postmodern approaches to value theory. To that end, this chapter discusses in detail Adorno's criticisms of Kant and Nietzsche, criticisms which help to situate Adorno's critical theory as both a critique of modernity and the extreme formulation of modernity found in Nietzsche. Adorno offers us a materialist normative discourse that is shaped by the response to human suffering. In this vein, his criticisms of Kant and Nietzsche center on their contributions to "bourgeois coldness," whether through the suppression of impulse (Kant) or through the self-creative cultivation of impulse that negates the ethic of compassion (Nietzsche).

### **Chapter 3: Mimesis and Political Violence**

In Adorno's work, morality, sociology, politics and epistemology are all intertwined. This is largely due to his view of epistemology as a mimetic response to the social and historical conditions in which we are caught up. Adorno's analysis of the mimetic nature of subjectivity reveals the fragility of modern institutions and the vulnerability of public life to propaganda and ideological distortion. Modernity has given us a sense of ourselves as agents (a subjectivity) forged by the tension between the pellucid Cartesian ego cogito and the impulses expelled from the terrain of the ego cogito. In the political realm, the hostile tension between the subject and its own impulses is externalized, projected onto those persons and groups that become ciphers for the repressed impulses that have been cut away from the subject. The explosion of this potential onto the stage of history in Nazi Germany was, for Adorno, the culminating failure of modern subjectivity that announced the need to formulate a different epistemological standpoint. The philosophical orientation of Adorno's dialectic, which draws from the concrete details of history to place philosophical ideas in question, is more profoundly political in its inspiration and significance than is recognized within Adorno scholarship. It also gives us reason to question any attempt to resurrect revolutionary violence as a strategy for emancipation.

### **Chapter 4: Identity and Genocide**

This chapter explores how Adorno's critique of epistemology crystallizes in his direct confrontation with the Holocaust. The perils of "identity thinking" and "instrumental rationality" can be seen in the genocidal potential of national identity formation as this process has unfolded in connection with the genocide in Rwanda. To that effect, this chapter offers a detailed discussion of the structure of "Hutu Power" propaganda using Adorno's work on *The Psychological Structure of Fascist Propaganda* as a lens. (Part of this chapter has already been published in

## **Chapter 5: Negative Dialectic and Democracy**

This chapter addresses the criticism leveled at Adorno from Post-Habermasian critical theory. While Habermas's reading of Adorno is narrow in several respects, correctly identifies the messianic current within critical theory, stretching from Marx through Benjamin, that informs Adorno's thought. This chapter assesses Habermas's premature dismissal of the practical and rational temper of the utopian and messianic dimensions of early critical theory. Habermas fails to offer a fair assessment of the practical implications of the critical philosophy of history that Adorno has adapted from Benjamin. This hasty dismissal indicates a flaw within post-Habermasian critical theory as well as the deliberative democratic theory informed by Habermas's theory of communicative action. Absent a critical philosophy of history, deliberative democratic theory is unable adequately to address the historical situation and limitation of its own norms of reciprocity, accountability and publicity. There is an implicit critical philosophy of history that sustains the norms of deliberative democratic theory insofar as those norms are critical and not ideological. A critical philosophy of history allows democratic norms to extend beyond the concerns of self-preservation and national interest that leave democracies impotent in the face of genocide.

## **Chapter 6: Violence and Utopia**

This chapter explores the relationship between Adorno's utopianism and the messianic philosophy of history he adapts from Walter Benjamin. Previous chapters have intimated Adorno's (and Benjamin's) recognition of the need for philosophy to reconsider its relationship to theology, more precisely, its relationship to the ideals and hopes to which theology gives voice. The influence of this messianic current within critical theory is continued in Slavoj Žižek, albeit in a direction opposed to that of Adorno. In this chapter I explore Adorno's use of theological themes, and the role that messianic hope plays in the rejuvenation of the critical potential of reason. My reading pays particularly close attention to the political nature of Adorno's redemption of philosophy and the role that his appropriation of theology plays in social criticism. The utopian dimension of Adorno's thought provides a norm for the critique of history while indicating the dangers of a philosophy of history that would allow the subject to be the agent of redemption in history. A political subjectivity that can avail itself of "divine," world-shaping violence is dangerously close to the political subject of genocide. Adorno's philosophy of history and the theory of political subjectivity that emerges from it is antithetical to a political subjectivity capable of emancipative acts of world-shaping violence that Žižek's critical theory has resurrected. The "weak messianic power" to create perspectives that "displace and estrange the world" allows the smallest detail of everyday life to reveal the limits of the world in all of its complexity and contingency. Adorno's political subject is not structured around

the exigency of political revolution or revolutionary violence. Against Adorno's utopianism of the smallest detail, Žižek attempts to resurrect a revolutionary subject that can act as the agent of a universal idea that irrupts into history through political violence and authoritarianism.

## **Chapter 7: Democracy as the Critique of Fascism**

Adorno has often, and not without good reason, been accused of having a "political deficit" in his critical theory. This chapter tests the limits of that claim by drawing our attention to Adorno's attempts at political intervention through his work on decoding propaganda and educational reform. His often tumultuous relationship with the student movement in Germany is assessed in light of the ways in which his theory informed his own political practice throughout his career.

## **Chapter 8: Genocide, Political Judgment, and the Prison Industrial Complex**

It can be argued that any unrelenting criticism of the concepts we use to justify institutions, social norms, ways of life and modes of power is bound to have political implications. Whether or not practices enjoy an undisturbed discourse of legitimacy or face radical critique has effects on what we do and how we do it. Adorno's work provides us with more than a blanket negation of present practice. A new mode of judgment weighted toward the particular allows us to use practical, legal concepts in a different way, one in which present practices can be placed in question on their own terms. In this chapter I draw on J.M. Bernstein's reading of Adorno's critique of identity thinking to assess the tendentially genocidal prison industrial complex in the United States. I address the ways in which the legal definition of genocide has been used to evade political responsibility in the face of genocide and how Adorno's critique of conceptualization offers a more politically viable way of thinking about and judging instances of genocide.

### NOTES

1. For a discussion of this criticism, see, Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 16-20. The various criticisms of Adorno will be addressed throughout and are given detailed attention in chapter 5.
2. This criticism comes mostly from Habermas's discussions of Adorno in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. See chapter 5 for a detailed treatment of Habermas's criticism of Adorno.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 361ff; *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 354.
4. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 365; *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, p. 358.

# Chapter 1

## Rationality and Remembrance

### INSTRUMENTAL REASON AND THE LOSSES OF HISTORY

What centrally concerned Adorno and the rest of the critical theorists was the ease with which modern ideas and institutions could become instruments of domination. Advances in science and technology engendered by the Enlightenment took place in the midst of social and political conditions that were increasingly oppressive. The promise of the Enlightenment, and the justification for severing ties with the Scholastic-Aristotelian tradition of reason, was that the new science would provide increasing control over the forces of nature and reduce the precariousness of human life. The Enlightenment promise held that there was a parallel between the advancement of science and the progress of human freedom. The facility with which science was turned against the cause of human freedom and to the detriment of the human condition is what concerned Adorno, Horkheimer and critical theorists generally.<sup>[1]</sup> Adorno dedicated his life to restoring the relationship between reason and human freedom. His work is both a testament to the fragility of the bond between reason and freedom, and an endeavor to repair reason so that it can again speak on behalf of human emancipation. Adorno's project is nothing less than the effort to recover the critical potential of reason—a potential which was lost through the formalization and abstraction of reason from the details and complex interactions of social life.

Formal reason, or what Adorno terms “instrumental reason” or the “identity principle,” severed rationality from the lives of embodied subjects who are prone to suffering, and whose very suffering announces the need for critique. Recovering the critical potential of reason requires relocating reason in its social context, in the context of human needs, longings, and hopes. Only by relocating reason in its material and social context and reconnecting it with the human condition that it promised to improve, can it renew its potential as a voice of criticism. This critical potential arises from the knowledge that reason is not pure, that it has a history in which opposing forms of understanding and shaping the world have been occluded or lost. This occlusion and loss is not simply that of concepts or ideas: it is the destruction of peoples, ways of life and possibilities for human expression and happiness. Critical reason is, then, motivated by the remembrance of suffering and lost possibilities. The ideas, values and ways of life that have been victorious in the march of history cannot be permitted to have the last word. Critical reason lives through a hope that transcends the march of history. “Without hope,” Adorno avers, “the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable.”<sup>[2]</sup> In the famous finale to *Minima Moralia*, Adorno expresses this hope in theological language:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from

the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is construction, mere technique. 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.<sup>[3]</sup>

Critical reason is motivated by eschatological hope, a hope for the mending of the wounds of history. Regaining the critical potential of reason requires that reason question its own history to see what has been banished and cut away from its concepts and categories. Adorno's critical theory endeavored to hold fast to "the last hope for thought" in "a gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern."<sup>[4]</sup> The Dialectic of Enlightenment is just such an attempt to interrogate the history of reason in the name of the hope for a better world that reason has left unsatisfied.

The link between critical reason and eschatological hope is evident in Adorno's treatment of the "primal history of the modern subject" in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* or *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in collaboration with his lifelong friend and colleague Max Horkheimer during his years of exile in the United States. While it has become one of the most seminal and scandalous works of critical theory, it was disseminated mostly through pirated versions until its republication in 1970.<sup>[5]</sup> The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* expresses the fundamental philosophical outlook from which Adorno never departed in his later works. The text has led a paradoxical existence and has been labeled as falling within every category along the political spectrum from neo-conservative to radically nihilistic; it has been rejected by orthodox Marxists, pragmatists and critical social theorists for its debilitating pessimism and its inability to formulate a theoretical foundation for political practice and social change. According to Jürgen Habermas and other contemporary critical theorists, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* marked the departure of Adorno and Horkheimer from sound social theory to the rarefied heights of the philosophy of history.<sup>[6]</sup>

## THE PRIMAL HISTORY OF THE SUBJECT AS A POLITICAL QUESTION

Adorno and Horkheimer's famous inquiry into the "primal origins of the modern subject" had an explicitly political motivation: unearthing the roots of the bourgeois coldness and bureaucratic rationality characteristic of the extermination industry of Nazi Germany. The meticulously ordered system of terror generated by the Nazis was more aided than thwarted by modern science and its epistemological foundations. The marriage of science and Nazi terror announced the urgent need to find what had been missed in the generation of modern thought and modern subjectivity. According to Adorno, the increased potential for political terror lay in the effort of the subject to overcome the vulnerability and ephemerality of both the untamed impulses of the subject and the phenomena of an alien and

unsubdued nature. The struggle to gain a secure place within the manifold of elemental forces is not by itself the origin of the evils of the modern world. The problem arises when the subject's project of self-preservation fails to cultivate an awareness of its own limits, of its origins in a struggle both within itself and against its natural surroundings and fellow human beings, that leave it always impure, open to self-questioning, always in tension with itself. It is precisely the eclipse of this awareness that has exploded the self-deceptive and destructive potentials of the modern subject.

The stated aim of the Dialectic of Enlightenment was "nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."<sup>[7]</sup> Unlike their earlier studies which focused principally on the obstacles to emancipation posed by capitalist society, Adorno and Horkheimer now turned their attention to the obstacles that reason itself posed to the possibilities for human emancipation.<sup>[8]</sup> There was a fundamental flaw in the modes of thinking that the Enlightenment had bequeathed to Europe, a flaw that opened up the horrific possibilities that had come to the fore in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. Why had modern science, with its promise of freedom from ignorance, tradition, and myth, proved unable to deter the political debacle of the first half of the twentieth century? Objective conditions during the World War II seemed to betray every promise of modernity—human freedom, autonomy, the amelioration of suffering, liberation from life under irrational authority.

An inquiry into the origins of the subject, would, Adorno believed, reveal the insidious flaw that had led modernity to such catastrophic destruction. The concept of enlightened thought itself contained "the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today."<sup>[9]</sup> What concerned Adorno was that the cultural space for critical thought, or what he referred to as the "theoretical understanding (theoretische Verständnisses), had evaporated.<sup>[10]</sup> The methodology of the specialized sciences requires adherence to the "given facts" without raising questions about the given facts; differently stated, scientific rationality in its positivist form, refuses to break from or to negate the "given facts" and familiar categories of thought. In this way, modern science—in the distorted ideological form that it has taken on in bourgeois society—has eliminated critical thought, which requires the questioning of the facts of social life from the perspective of the values central to human co-existence: justice, goodness, freedom.<sup>[11]</sup>

The subordination of humanity to the scientific laws governing "the facts," leaves humanity in the position of being carried about on the shoulders of fate—a fate meted out by scientific causality in lieu of mythical gods. Our attempts to become the masters and possessors of nature have been revisited upon us through our own creation of an even more oppressive "second nature," which manifests itself in a repressive social order and receives the sanction, not of the gods, but of the pellucid quantified givens of mathematical cognition.<sup>[12]</sup> Enlightened thought, Adorno avers, has left behind its critical element and become "a mere means in the service of an existing order."<sup>[13]</sup> Modern society finds itself under the heel of

anonymous "rational" forces whose limitations are even more inimical to freedom than the mythological forces they were meant to dispel. Hence, Adorno writes,

[T]he cause of enlightenment's relapse into mythology is to be sought not so much in the nationalist, pagan, or other modern mythologies concocted specifically to cause such a relapse as in the fear of truth which petrifies enlightenment itself.<sup>[14]</sup>

Enlightenment itself bears with it the mythological form from which it believed to have freed itself. What is behind this lapse of enlightenment into mythology? How could the enlightened world have permitted the resurgence of barbarity? Even more pressing is the question of how the most advanced products of modern science, and even the most extraordinary advances in human science, could become the instruments of barbarity.

## MYTH AND THE DOMINATION OF NATURE

The answer to the pressing question of why modernity and enlightenment have lapsed into barbarity is to be found in the dialectical relationship between myth and enlightenment. Enlightenment has its origins in myth, and myth itself is a form of enlightenment.<sup>[15]</sup> Along this journey of the primal subject from its early beginnings in myth to the resurgence of myth in enlightenment, we find reason losing contact with those needs, concrete yearnings, and deepest longings that bind reason to communal life and to the normative motivation of reason. The result of reason's separation from the needs of life is the continual confinement of reason to the imperatives of control, efficiency, and power in controlling phenomena, both with regard to physical phenomena in nature and human phenomena in society.

Myth initiates the separation of logos and manifold that is further refined in enlightenment.<sup>[16]</sup> The gods serve as a primitive conceptual framework for elemental powers. The elemental powers are thus placed into a category, under the dominion of an imagined divinity that can be swayed by human sacrifice and supplication.<sup>[17]</sup> The logic of sacrifice and that of modern reason bear the fundamental similarity that both are manifestations of the attempt of thought to exercise control over natural forces, and to impose a unity upon the manifold of experience. With this primal separation of logos and manifold, existence and appearance, we find, according to Adorno, the primal origins of the journey of the modern subject: a journey motivated by the attempt to gain domination over the elements and to free humanity from the sources of fear and anguish that threaten the enjoyment of life. We also find the primal origin of one of the central oppositions within the subject, an opposition that has become so deeply entrenched in western thought that it is taken to be the very hallmark of reason: the separation of form and content.<sup>[18]</sup>

The dynamic behind this separation and what makes it so insidious for the course of civilization can be seen through a careful treatment of how myth serves



as a moment of enlightenment, and of how enlightenment repeats the fundamental obstacles to human emancipation imposed by myth. From the perspective of enlightenment, the basis of myth is the “projection of subjective properties onto nature.”<sup>[19]</sup> We do not gain from reading Adorno some vision of what the primal unity of subject and object must have been like, nor do we find in his works any nostalgia for a lost primitive world in which subject and object were one. Indeed, Adorno offers us an account of the emergence of subjectivity or rational thought that is fundamentally contrary to the rationalist and idealist understanding of subjectivity. There are no structures of subjectivity prior to its interaction with objects or with a world.<sup>[20]</sup> This does not, as we shall see, leave Adorno in the position of offering a purely passive account of the subject. In its confrontation with objects and forces in the world, the subject has no pre-given modes of reaction. There does seem to be an index, intimation, or, one might say, weak telos embedded in all living things, and in nature itself: to overcome suffering.<sup>[21]</sup> This yearning is not merely subjective, that is, it is not a structure projected onto a mute nature by the syntheses of the subject. This yearning is a vital force present both within subject and object, and serves as the basis for the fundamental link between subject and object, thought and the world.

Adorno’s history of the subject indicates that the course of the subject’s development is far from necessary. It is not a history of the unfolding of the expectations of the subject; instead, it is a history of the objective constitution of the subject. The history of the subject has been a history of contingencies. At every step, it was possible for humanity to have understood its experience differently, to have encountered nature, both externally and within, differently. It was, and is, always possible to have a less rigid and narrow understanding of nature and its possibilities. Adorno’s account of the history of the subject indicates that freedom is not to be found in the progressive imposition of subjective necessity onto nature but, rather, in the recovery of contingency, of the objective possibilities cut away from the subject and from nature.

The narrowing of thought has its origins in the structure of myth and the practice of sacrifice. Like enlightenment, myth endeavors to provide some understanding of, and some controllable link with, the forces of nature. “All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes they dissolve away his power.”<sup>[22]</sup> Sacrifices and mythical frameworks attempt to establish and to affirm the regularity and repetition of the forces of nature. They are the primitive attempt to structure the world in accord with subjective expectation. A world that is patterned and repetitious provides security, and, to that extent, a feeling of command over the powers of nature: the predictable pattern of the seasons comes as a product of the sacrifices and supplications that have pleased the gods.

This security is purchased at the price of the spontaneity of the subject’s interpretation of the object: “Only those who subject themselves utterly pass muster with the gods. The awakening of the subject is bought with the recognition

of power as the principle of all relationships.”<sup>[23]</sup> Enlightenment prides itself, and even defines itself, as freedom from the limitations of myth and the irrational form of obedience that myth demanded. The figures of myth are unmasked as mere images of a frightened humanity. The unknown and unpredictable in nature inspires the fear that fuels the imagination behind myth. The enlightenment view of myth is that it is a projection of the subject: its source, and ultimately the source that unifies all things is generated by human labor (imagination). Thus, “the multiplicity of mythical figures can be reduced to a single common denominator, the subject.”<sup>[24]</sup>

But this, according to Adorno, is precisely the aim of enlightenment, to base knowledge upon the pellucid self-certainty of subjective representations: “For the Enlightenment, only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows.”<sup>[25]</sup> Natural phenomena are, under the gaze of the subject, understood as repetitions of quantified physical law. However, now it is not the sanction of God or the supplications to Zeus or Poseidon that ground the predictability of the cycles of modern physics, it is the subject itself that assures dominion over nature.

## MYTH AND DOMINATION

This increase in power over nature has its cost. There is a further similarity between myth and enlightenment regarding internal nature, or the nature within the subject. “Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power.”<sup>[26]</sup> In a different formulation, the mathematical tools that enabled humanity to control nature lose none of their capacity for domination when they are turned toward the self and others.

Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. Their “in-itself” becomes “for him.” In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.<sup>[27]</sup>

Thus, the subject becomes caught in the unifying domination that binds subject and object.<sup>[28]</sup> On the one hand, mastery is gained over external nature, and the subject becomes the ground of the bestowal of meaning, and the object (external nature) becomes the “accidental bearer” of significance marked by the activity of the subject.<sup>[29]</sup> It is crucial in the subject’s transformation into what is once the locus of domination and of being dominated. In its relation to nature the subject is limited and shaped by its relationship to the object. If this relationship is governed principally by domination, then the lens through which the subject views itself is also tainted by the logic of domination—we know only what we can make, only what we can predict and control. In short, the problem arises from the subject’s attempt to finalize and to stabilize its relation to nature, both within and without itself; the motive for this arises from the initially salutary impetus for self-

preservation. But the exaggeration of self-preservation leads to the paranoid desire for total control over nature. The result is the ossification of spontaneity both within nature and within the subject. The mark of the eclipse of spontaneity is repetition. In myth, repetition took the form of the retribution of the gods or fate; enlightenment evokes fate in another form, that of the repetition of physical laws. Adorno writes,

Mythology itself set in motion the endless process of enlightenment by which, with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that it is only a belief, until even the concept of mind, truth, and, indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animistic magic.<sup>[30]</sup>

What Adorno brings to our attention here is the principal crisis of enlightenment thought. Enlightenment has brought its ruthless criticism of myth, of anything, or of any claim that derives from contact with a power not derived from the signifying power of the subject, to the point where the source of meaning is uncovered as power, or mere domination. The only thing left in the wake of the Enlightenment criticism of myth is the dominating power of human will. But, as Adorno demonstrates, this itself bears all the hallmarks of myth: fate, necessity, repetition. Myth and enlightenment remain close relatives across millennia. What they share is their invocation of fatal necessity:

The principle of the fated necessity which caused the downfall of the mythical hero, and finally evolved as the logical conclusion from the oracular utterance, not only predominates, refined to the cogency of formal logic, in every rationalistic system of Western philosophy but also presides over the succession of systems which begins with the hierarchy of the gods and, in a permanent twilight of the idols, hands down a single identical content: wrath against those of insufficient righteousness. Just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology.<sup>[31]</sup>

This dialectic of myth and enlightenment seriously compromises the enlightenment promise to emancipate humanity from myth and arbitrary authority. The repetition imposed by enlightenment proves to be even more stifling to human hopes for emancipation, despite its rhetoric to the contrary:

[T]he more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself . . . the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible

experience.<sup>[32]</sup>

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The “principle of immanence” rules both the distortion of myth and enlightenment. The mythical subjection of elemental powers to rituals and sacrifices collapses the transcendent foreignness of nature to human will parallels the enlightenment reduction of all meaning to the activity of the subject, the source of all the categories and rules of what is knowable. In this way, both myth and enlightenment reduce “what is” to immanence: to the repetition of what has already occurred, or to what is in principle derivable from what has already occurred. It is the accomplishment of both myth and enlightenment that it “amputates the incommensurable.”<sup>[33]</sup> What both myth and enlightenment promote is the repetition of the present, and hence the suppression of what is unknown, unexpected, and spontaneous in nature, both within the subject and without. For repetition is an abstraction; what is repeated is never concretely the same. The emphasis upon abstraction, principally the abstraction of mathematical physics, increases the loss of the concrete, the individual, the unrepeatable qualities of the lives of individuals. The individual, then, suffers a similar fate as nature, when knowledge is limited by the paradigm of what is formally, abstractly repeatable:

Abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation. Under the leveling rule of abstraction, which makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry, for which abstraction prepared the way, the liberated finally themselves become the “herd” (Trupp), which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment.<sup>[34]</sup>

The nature that has been reduced by the subject into a repetition of physical laws is disenchanting, depersonalized; absent the ordering syntheses of the subject, nature is meaningless, it has no inherent structure or desires of its own. The nature within the subject must also undergo demythologization.

The subjective mind which disintegrates the spiritualization of nature masters spiritless nature only by imitating its rigidity, disintegrating itself as animistic. Imitation enters the service of power when even the human being becomes an anthropomorphism for human beings.<sup>[35]</sup>

Along with the death of nature as a bearer of meaning (i.e., along with the despiritualization of nature) nature within the subject—desires, impulses, feelings—becomes deadened. Adorno writes, “[T]he regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped,” for along with the separation of thought and sensation, the nuances of sensation must be repressed in the name of reason.<sup>[36]</sup>

This is especially true in the case of feelings that announce the present state of

affairs as intolerable. We lose the sensibility capable of articulating the concrete aspects of life not easily formalized or captured within the limits of abstract thought; this is the case not only at the level of conceptualization but within society as well. The subject, to paraphrase Thoreau, becomes the tool of its own tools, and it also becomes a tool vis-à-vis other subjects. The scope of experience that it is capable of thinking is narrowed in proportion to the formalization of its thought. The knowledge that tabooed what really concerned the object also tabooed the knowledge that concerns the deepest needs of the human person; what is most notably lost here is the expression within thought or action of genuine spontaneity and freedom. The manipulation of nature that promised to deliver humanity from its enslavement to nature has produced methods for manipulation and enslavement that far surpass the forces of nature in their effectiveness and terror.

Adorno's primal history of the subject explored the dark side of the enlightenment and introduced an ostensibly pessimistic account of the historical development of Western reason—a pessimism for which he has been so roundly criticized by other critical theorists. What such criticisms miss within Adorno's account of the development of civilization is the intimation of better possibilities that leave history open to a better future. Adorno saw in Homer's *Odyssey* an allegory for the unfolding of the Enlightenment subject. Each of Odysseus's confrontations with the powers that block his homecoming is overcome through the sacrifice of his crew and through more stringent repression of Odysseus's own nature. But there was always a promise in Odysseus's journeys that a real homecoming might be found through all of the sacrifices and renunciations; that the discipline was for something, linked to some fulfillment or good, and not an end in itself. The sense of "wholeness" Odysseus hopes to gain by coming home is a state wrested from the struggle with mythic forces. It does not signify surrender or acquiescence or being at home in the acceptance of myth. Odysseus's homecoming is the motivation for defiance of myth.

Homecoming can serve as such an ideal for Odysseus because the battle with mythical forces is not forgotten. Like Odysseus, the modern subject must escape from its own myth—the myth of subjective primacy. Enlightenment threatens to collapse within its own myth if it loses the element of remembrance, of what has been lost and can never be fully regained, but nonetheless gives the human journey hope—a hope that can be had only by "holding fast the past atrocity through memory."<sup>[37]</sup> David Held has offered a concise articulation of the hope of "homecoming" in Odysseus and reconciliation in Adorno: "The Odyssean homecoming might promise reconciliation between people and nature, and between people and one another, but it remains a promise—it awaits actualization."<sup>[38]</sup> And in Adorno's own words, "Through this remembrance of nature within the subject, a remembrance which contains the unrecognized truth of all culture, enlightenment is opposed in principle to power."<sup>[39]</sup>

## ODYSSEY AND REMEMBRANCE

Odysseus's homecoming—to the extent it is an enlightened homecoming—is possible only through the remembrance of the scars of history that are woven into the present. Only such remembrance can motivate, critique, and foster the awareness of the contingency of suffering and the hope for a truly human nature.<sup>[40]</sup> This strategy for mending the wounds of the subject is not able to satisfy the ideals of modern autonomy and self-grounding reason, as Habermas and others have indicated. It is at this point that Adorno's version of critical theory departed from the original promise of critical theory to formulate a theory of society capable of effecting social change. The vision provided by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seemed too bleak to offer theoretical support for revolutionary political action, either of the orthodox Marxist variety or that of the student movements during the 1960s.<sup>[41]</sup> But Adorno has made a compelling case for why a philosophy of history that places the modern subject and its redemptive promises in question is necessary for recovering the normative ground of social theory. The historical unfolding of rationality is not able, in its dominant instrumental form, to make amends with what it has excluded and crushed on the slaughter bench of history. There is more in this point than a lament over a lost past. In fact it is an error to understand Adorno as espousing a hope for the restoration of a lost purity or primal wholeness.

Adorno's refutation of the progressive view of history is not inspired by mere textual contradictions in the writings of the champions of progress. The occasion for the dark proclamations of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was the emergence of fascism, totalitarianism, and mass killing in the heart of the very civilization that carried the banner of progress and reason. It was the eruption of terror within civilization, an eruption which was not so much resisted by modern civilization as aided by its very structures, that provoked the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Events themselves called for a reevaluation of the notion that the "wounds of the spirit heal without leaving a scar"—that the itinerary of modern civilization had left barbarity in its past.<sup>[42]</sup> The analysis of Adorno places in question modernity's progressive self-conception, and along with this, the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of modern science, epistemology, morality, and politics. Within the formation of the subject lies the potential for domination to become an end in itself, for the subject to forget its limits, to forget its own objectivity and vulnerability. The eclipse of the empirical subject generates the coldness and abstractness of thought that pervades modern civilization and that opened channels for the ethical and political horror of genocide.

The event of genocide cannot be thought outside of its historical specificity. The struggle to formulate a definition of genocide—as if its formal conditions could be abstracted and captured within a legal category—is a futile extension of the way of thinking Adorno and Horkheimer thoroughly critiqued in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Sound political reasoning proceeds from a response to the remnants of lives caught within the constellation of nationalism, racism, imperialism, technology that have morphed into the most destructive political act to emerge in human history. Genocide is not a definition. It is a field of historical,

political possibilities that we think, not through the invulnerable clarity of legal definitions, but through the names (Auschwitz, Nyarubuye, Srebrenica) of the places where these possibilities materialized. Only through those names and the countless human stories they cut short can our theorizing about genocide begin to formulate a response to the horror. Reason mediated by these narratives, by the visceral response to the lives cut short and the stories that will never unfold, gestures toward overcoming the collapse of reason into mythology that Adorno inveighed against. In this encounter with its historical conditions, reason cannot resurrect a triumphal narrative of progress, but it might regain its contact with human lives and cultivate the humility appropriate for its own critique.

## NOTES

1. This is clearly evident in the introductory remarks of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “We have no doubt—and herein lies our petition principii—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking” (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002], p. xvi; *Gesammelte Schriften* III, p. 13). Here, of course, Horkheimer and Adorno refer to the critical potential of enlightened thought, and not the form of enlightenment thought that reverts to myth.
2. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 98; *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, p. 108.
3. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 247; *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, p. 281.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68; *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, p. 74.
5. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 255.
6. This criticism has its origin in Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 366–399.
7. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xiv; *Gesammelte Schriften* III, p. 11.
8. It has been widely debated which sections of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* should be attributed to Adorno and which to Horkheimer. A convincing case is made by Robert Hullot-Kentnor that the entire work is through and through a hybrid product of both authors (see Hullot-Kentnor, “Back to Adorno,” *Telos* 81 [Fall 1989], pp. 5–29). It has also been well noted that the basic theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains closer to the central theme of Adorno’s work than to that of Horkheimer, who was not sanguine about its later republication. With the understanding that the work is a hybrid for which both authors are due credit, for the purpose of brevity I hereafter cite the work to Adorno.
9. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi; *Gesammelte Schriften* III, p. 13.
10. *Ibid.*, p. xvi; *Gesammelte Schriften* III, p. 14.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. xvi–xvii; *Gesammelte Schriften* III, pp. 14–15.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. xv–xvi. Adorno has the following to say about the eclipse of critical thought within educational institutions: “To render their function entirely

superfluous appears, despite all the benevolent reforms, to be the ambition of the educational system. In the belief that without strict limitation to the observation of facts and the calculation of probabilities the cognitive mind would be overreceptive to charlatanism and superstition, that system is preparing arid ground for the greedy acceptance of charlatanism and superstition" (ibid.). The relationship between modern epistemology and social domination is thoroughly treated in *Against Epistemology*. "The power of logical absolutism over the psychological grounding of logic is borrowed from the objectivity of the social process which subjects individuals to compulsion while remaining opaque to them" (Theodor Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, trans. Willis Domingo [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982], p. 76). See also *Against Epistemology*, pp. 4, 9.

13. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 12.

14. Ibid., p. xvi; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 14.

15. Ibid., p. xviii; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 16.

16. Ibid., p. 5; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 24.

17. Ibid.

18. Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, pp. 11-12, 15.

19. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 4; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 22.

20. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum 1973), p. 183; *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, p.183. This is merely one example of the preponderance of the object, a theme that runs throughout Adorno's work.

21. "The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 203; *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, p. 203. And suffering is the common condition of dominated nature; it is the expression of the natural history of both subject and object: "The expression of history in things is nothing other than that of past torment" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 49; *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p. 55).

22. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 40; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 68.

23. Ibid., p. 5; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 25.

24. Ibid., p. 4; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, pp. 22-23.

25. Ibid., p. 4; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 23.

26. Ibid., p. 6; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 25.

27. Ibid., p. 6; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 25.

28. Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, pp. 15, 22.

29. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 27.

30. Ibid., p. 11; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 27.

31. Ibid., p. 8; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, pp. 27-28.

32. Ibid., p. 8; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 28.

33. Ibid., p. 9; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 29.

34. Ibid., p. 9; *Gesammelte Schriften III*, p. 28.



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