Adorno on Late Modernity and Unfreedom: Reflections in a Global Era

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Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno is one of the most enigmatic members of the Frankfurt School associated with the movement of critical theory. The programmatic for the School distinction between 'traditional theory' and 'critical theory' was coined by Adorno's close associate and co-author, Max Horkheimer (1972). The School's institutional basis, the Institute of Social Research, was set up in 1923 in Frankfurt am Main by the son of an affluent grain merchant, Felix Weil, with the purpose of studying the contradictions of contemporary society from a Marxist standpoint. Not all members of the Institute were Marxists however, and its orientation was interdisciplinary, bringing together social theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, economics and empirical studies. Under the directorship of Horkheimer, from 1931 onwards, research at the Institute took a decisively philosophical outlook and enlisted figures such as Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm (Wiggershaus 1995, 24-105). After Adorno joined Horkheimer as a co-director, the two wrote a series of interventions the best known among which is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997 [1944]), a work produced in exile in America where the Institute for Social Research was temporarily relocated to avoid Nazi persecution. This article will outline Adorno's contribution to critical theory by paying attention to the problem of late modernity. In the course of analysis, it will attempt to address the following questions: Why should we read Adorno today? How do his ideas illuminate late modern society? Do they broaden our understanding of current global society?

Students of International Relations (IR) usually get acquainted with critical theory via the writings of Jürgen Habermas, a second-generation scholar from the Frankfurt School. While Habermas clearly represents the School's critical theoretical orientation, his formal connection with the Institute of Social Research had remained tenuous after Horkheimer rejected Habermas's habilitation project, later published as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]). Thus, the ideas of the first-generation thinkers from the Frankfurt School remain unfamiliar to IR students. Adorno's views are worth examining not only because of their scope, blending social theory, metaphysics, and aesthetics with a historical critique of late capitalism, but because of their peculiar philosophical sensibility. The ensuing exposition will focus on clarifying Adorno's critique of late modernity, and on explaining why he ended up diagnosing it as a problem of unfreedom.

A new metaphysics?

Adorno's writings are notoriously difficult to decipher. In the English-speaking world the problem has been compounded by underwhelming translations of his major works, including his masterpiece on metaphysics,*Negative Dialectics* (1973), appearing in the early 1970s shortly after Adorno's death. Recently his *Nachlass,* including copious lecture notes, has been published offering us fresh insights into his forbidding philosophical vocabulary. In what follows, a use has been made of *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society* (Adorno 2019) and *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (Adorno 2001). These lecture notes illuminate the puzzle of why Adorno, whom Iris Murdock described as a 'philosopher with a zest for metaphysics' (Adorno 1991, endorsement), rejected traditional metaphysics exemplified by Plato's Theory of Forms (Adorno 2001, 26-27) and by Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology' (Heidegger 1962 [1927], Part I; Adorno 1973, esp. 97-131). The problem with the first is that it posits a double world, a world of unchanging Forms and a world of contingent appearances, asserting the former's reality. Heidegger inappropriately assimilates the ontic (the existent) to the ontological (Being), and then renders

Being vacuous: 'The self-uncovering Being says nothing else but "Being"' (Adorno 1973, 114). Against this, Adorno searches for a new type of metaphysics that would reflect the conclusions of a theory of society, or the social practices constituting a particular society (Adorno 2019, 50), and would have a historical dimension. To understand his position, it is necessary to consider the basic ideas that have been formative for his thought.

Major influences on Adorno's thought

The most prominent influence is Hegel. This includes Hegel's account of reality as mediated by thought (Hegel 1969 [1812]), the dialectical development of institutional forms such as the family, civil society, and the state (Hegel 1967 [1821]), and the theory of historical reason (Hegel 1953 [1837]), as reason revealed in and through such progressively developing forms.

The second influence is Jewish mysticism. It is rooted in Adorno's own Jewish background as well as that of his friend, Walter Benjamin, who was briefly a member of the Institute of Social Research before committing suicide in September 1940 for fear of Nazi detention at the Spanish border. Hannah Arendt happened to travel through the same border check-point a few months later and managed to save and bring to Adorno Benjamin's final manuscripts including his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin 1968). In these theses, Benjamin articulates his hope for a messianic future, and his critique of historical progress which has ended up with the gas chambers (Benjamin 1968, 257-258, 260-264). The rise of Fascism and anti-Semitism is a problem that will continue to occupy Adorno as well as Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997 [1944], 168-208) and in the more empirically orientated *Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Philosophically this problem reveals that Hegel must have been wrong to claim that reason has a tendency for a dialectical self-correction and that society evolves into ever more progressive historical, political, and cultural forms. Adorno's metaphysics, then, retains Hegel's dialectics as a philosophical method but rejects Hegel's theory of historical development, historical reason, and the state.

The third influence on Adorno is Marx's early theory of alienated labour (Marx 1975). Adorno has never accepted a full-fledged Marxism and remained critical of Marx's scientism, theory of class struggle, and the vulgar suggestion of an economic base determining the superstructure: the sphere of culture, art and knowledge production. Indeed, one of Adorno's major contributions to social theory is his thesis that the distortions of late modernity are manifest and reproduced in the realm of the 'culture industry' (Adorno 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 120-167). This thesis, characteristically, belongs not to a theory of economics, as in Marx, but to a philosophical theory of society, as in Hegel.

Late modernity and unfreedom: towards a philosophical theory of society

In a Hegelian vein, the proposed theory assumes that society forms a 'totality' which has no outside. In*Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society,* Adorno remarks that the concept of society did not exist until the early eighteenth century, whereas that of the state began with the Stoics in ancient Greece (Adorno 2019, 39). At first this contrast between 'state' and 'society' may appear fanciful. But it should not be forgotten that, as a Frankfurt School theorist, Adorno has set himself the task of producing a critique of late capitalism—the world of social relations found in the developed world, or crudely 'the West', after WWII. Construed in this sense, 'society' emerged with the establishment of nascent market relations at the stage of early (industrial) capitalism (Adorno 2019, 24-25). Its structure is not static, as was the case in the Middle Ages. 'Society' in Adorno's usage stands for post-capitalist society marked by dynamics and social mobility expressed in changeable social roles and occupations, and by multiple antagonisms and contradictions—between groups, between group and individual, and between system-wide tasks and individual desires. It is not always easy or even possible to neatly sort out its good from its faulty elements. This type of society therefore can only be understood through an equally complex and contradictory dialectical methodsublimated into a *philosophical* theory of society (Adorno 2019, 81).

The present epoch of late modernity has a few core aspects, the most palpable among which is late capitalism. But, as Adorno is at pains to show, the contradictions within late capitalist society are not limited to or fuelled by a class struggle between labour and capital. One reason is that the working class has been co-opted—or 'integrated' in sociological terms—by the system due to the attainment of economic affluence (Adorno 2019,38) and the advent of

social security programmes and trade unions (Adorno 2019, 27-30). For Adorno, the current social system has the capacity for recruiting individuals for its own purposes which run counter to their true interests as human beings and producers of value. The result is the 'atomisation' of social relations among the workers, who no longer exhibit mutual solidarity but turn into competitors (Adorno 2019, 36-37). Marx's early theory of alienation is easily recognisable in this argument. But there are also key differences. Alienation for Marx is ultimately linked to value in the economist's sense of the term as related to scarcity and market exchange (Joseph 2003, 131). For Adorno, 'value' has a broader sense—it may include aesthetic value attached to the experience of a beautiful art object. In general, in late modernity the possibilities for the appreciation of value have been deflated because we, as individuals, have fewer and fewer options to choose from and to enact ourselves as free agents.

Adorno's diagnosis of late modernity is that it constitutes a condition of unfreedom. The leitmotiv of*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that freedom is threatened because of a certain trend of dehumanisation and regress, which paradoxically—or dialectically—is the unintended outcome of the progress initially associated with the Enlightenment. The main theme of *Dialectic* is 'the self-destructiveness of Enlightenment' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], xi). But what exactly is Enlightenment? What are its core aspects, and is there a possibility for redemption? Adorno and Horkheimer use the term 'Enlightenment' to designate a set of concepts. In one sense, it means the historical epoch of the European Enlightenment. In another, conceptual (non-historical) sense it stands for 'reason' or *ratio*, an idea going back to Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle held that reason guides us towards worthy ends, whereas the modern, post-Baconian conception of reason is purely instrumental: it deals with means being indifferent to the ends (Adorno 2019, 89-92, 102, 112-114). But instrumental reason was used to construct the gas chambers to speed up the liquidation of the German Jews. The institutional vehicle which sustains instrumental reason is modern science, commencing with Bacon's writings in the early seventeenth century. 'Enlightenment' in a third sense refers to this image of modern science.

The two further aspects of late modernity for Adorno are *scientism* and *rationalism*, which constitute the negative or corrosive aspects of Enlightenment. The first represents an exaggerated belief in technical rationality based on science as a value-free, quantification-based mode of inquiry. The second is the related belief that all societal problems can be resolved by the proper use of reason. Reason, once again, stands for instrumental reason devoid of ethical ends. This portrait of society is anticipated by Foucault (1995)—it involves the use of averages, percentages and statistical tendencies to classify, order and steer human conduct. Patients are not seen as concrete individuals but as medical 'cases', employees are 'human resources' and so on. This generates an abstract view of society, which gets reified into a thing standing over and against the individual, and inside which people no longer find room for concrete, living experience (Adorno 2019, 48-49).

In short, in late modernity reason has turned against itself. Enlightenment was supposed to deploy reason in order to free humanity from fear, superstition, and to ensure control over the blind forces of nature. But at the end reason has become instrumentalised to such an extent that it regresses into unreason and irrationality. In the twentieth century, the vilest manifestation of irrationality at the level of social systems is Fascism where the state begins to exterminate its own citizens. Similar is the gloomy record of violence and oppression in the Stalinist states. The point is that this kind of predatory social system descends from the Enlightenment's project of reason (O'Sullivan 1983).

The culture industry

And yet, for Adorno, Fascism is simultaneously a product of late capitalism which, together with scientism and rationalism, represents the third core aspect of late modernity. Late capitalism is monopoly capitalism coupled with an interventionist state, which regularly intervenes into the economy to ensure sufficient employment (Adorno 1987; 2019, 28-29). This prevents any economic immiseration of the proletariat, but the problem does not disappear—it reappears in the cultural sphere, where the phenomenon of intellectual immiseration takes on a new significance (Joseph 2003, 131). The market has engulfed the realm of culture and has turned it into an industry. The culture industry makes no pretence to be dealing in high art and openly admits to be selling cultural commodities intended for mass consumption—movies, radio and TV shows—which obey the same principles of market exchange like other commodities, namely product standardisation and substitutability. Films in a given genre have identical plots, actors look similar, and the morale of the stories is predictable. Even in one's free time, the individual is no longer free:

'Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 137). Leisure has become a non-free activity – it is controlled by the culture industry via the projection of false positivity (the hero defeats the villain), conformism, and above all, by the need to promote further consumption. Criticism of what is given must be avoided at all cost lest that it upsets the pre-established expectations of the mass consumer.

The culture industry brings in its trail the abdication of human autonomy and freedom. Because society forms a totality, there is no safe haven inside it for launching a critique of the prevailing order— critics are forced to work with the materials supplied by the integrated social system and the ubiquitous culture industry. If anything, few among the better educated and fortunate would have the luxury of reflection and independent thought; but these few would be individuals, perhaps intellectuals, not entire classes or groups. In this context, the intellectual's task is to pursue analysis that is philosophical and negative—this is the ethos of Adorno's negative dialectic. Negative dialectic seeks transcendence by rejecting the false immanence of that which is immediately given to consciousness (Adorno's non-identity principle, Adorno 1977, 4-5). Because it seeks transcendence, its purposes are metaphysical, and because it seeks to overcome what is merely given as 'false', its purposes are critical. Such critical metaphysics works to expose the prevailing order of reified social institutions as false by showing that, even though they pretend to be eternal and unchanging, in reality they are historically transient forms. What is transcendent, therefore, is the act of criticism itself, which for Adorno must involve reflexivity.

If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true –if it is to be true today, in any case – it must also be thinking against itself (Adorno 1973, 365).

Adorno's analysis is pessimistic and the late modernity he portrays, regressive. Relevant here is Adorno and Horkheimer's dictum that 'Myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology' (1977 [1944], xvi). It may be elucidated as follows (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1977 [1944], 10-29; Wiggershaus 1995, 328-336). The proposition 'myth is already Enlightenment' suggests that the first break-up with the stage of mythology, where myth embodies awe at the magical powers of nature, occurs with the arrival of thought (when thought and reflection displace emotion and mimesis as practised by the shaman). But when thought mutates into instrumental reason, as Max Weber predicted, it brings about the disenchantment of the world and the loss of the magical in nature. In the twentieth century, nature (including human nature) has been reduced to an object of domination controlled by scientific and technological means. In the perfectly administered world of today, science and instrumental reason have been turned into Gods that keep us in awe. This is the meaning of the second proposition 'Enlightenment reverts to mythology'.

Adorno, late modernity, and globalisation

How does Adorno's pessimistic account of late modernity speak to our present condition at the turn of the twenty-first century and in relation to global society? Even though Adorno did not draw such an analogy, his concept of late modernity has affinities with the notion of globalisation. For Anthony Giddens, modernity, understood as the 'stretching' of relations in time and space, has become globalised because 'worldwide social relations' have been intensified (Giddens 1990, 64). Following Immanuel Wallerstein, Giddens associates globalisation with a 'world capitalist economy' (Giddens 1990, 68), but as we have seen, Adorno (like other Frankfurt School members) did not think of late modernity in terms of processes restricted to the economy. For Adorno it is not the case that the economic system determines, as it were, what happens in the political system, be it nationally or globally. Rather, late modernity is a complex, contradictory—or dialectical—development inside which a monopoly-type capitalist economy has been coupled with powerful administrative apparatuses, which may be local or global, and whose capacity for steering is not restricted to the political sphere alone (voting, basic laws). The administered world of late modernity is insidious precisely because it serves to integrate society as a whole, including its cultural sphere which hitherto has been, but no longer seem to be, a site of resistance and freedom.

Adorno further alerts us to the threat that Fascism might reappear in novel historical forms. Fascism represents a social system marked by irrationality, scientism, theories of racial superiority, xenophobia, and narratives of national greatness. Former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright attributes neo-fascist traits to political leaders such as Donald Trump (US), Vladimir Putin (Russia), Recep Erdogan (Turkey), Viktor Orban (Hungary), Hugo Chavez

(Venezuela), and Kim Jong-un (North Korea) (Albright 2008). But we must be weary of passing verdicts centered on any particular nation or state leader since, if Adorno is right, all contemporary societies in late modernity contain fascist elements in one form or another. Adorno believes that the social critic must avoid complacency: critique must remain negative and be subject to further critique.

Last but not least, Adorno had an interest in the practice of university teaching (Adorno 2012), and hence the question should be posed whether academic freedom is still possible inside our administered world. Nowadays, and the trend is global, universities have become colonised by powerful administrators who pursue interests of their own—to wit, the further consolidation of administrative power—at variance with the interests of the teachers and students, and without being bound by ethical standards or direct accountability. The remuneration gap between top administrators and those who actually conduct the research and teaching is staggering. Lecturers are routinely appointed on short-term contracts and treated as expendable human resources, whose abundance is secured by the ever-increasing supply of fresh PhDs. Academics are pitted in a competition against each other for the only goods which have exchange value on the academic market—research grants and publications. The assessment of their achievements is based on leadership rather than scholarship, on quantitative Google indexes, on 'societal impact' as well as links with the media and industry. It seems that, with regard to *homo academicus,* Adorno's critique of late modernity, his pessimism, and his belief that despite everything we should not give up on seeking avenues for recovering freedom, are more apposite than ever.

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