

Dossier: Reading Adorno

Why read Adorno: A lecture

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Adorno's critical theory is often belittled for its pessimism and rejected for its lack of practical application.¹ Indeed, instead of supporting the student rebellion of 1968, he called in the police to remove protesters from his Institute in 1969. However, as Johannes Agnoli emphasised at the time of his death, the Adorno who called the police 'was already his successor'.² Although his students were deeply dismayed by Adorno's decision, they claimed his critical theory as their own Marxist critique of capital and demanded its further development. They warned that the bourgeois public, including self-appointed successors, would appropriate Adorno as a cultural asset and 'elevate' his critical theory to a purely intellectual matter of only cultural significance.³ My interest in Adorno's work lies in how it deepens the critique of capitalist society with and beyond Marx. To that end, this commentary is divided in two overlapping steps. It starts with a brief overview of the significance of Adorno's thought. It then turns to negative dialectics as critique of society. The conclusion summarises that for Adorno, the struggle for self-preservation in capitalist society, what Marx called class struggle, is the non-conceptual content of the economic categories.

Why read Adorno?

Adorno's negative dialectic is synonymous with Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, that is, of the deciphering of capitalist relations of economic necessity as an illusory objectivity based on historically specific social relations and thus on something that does not belong to the concept of economic objectivity. Adorno argued that the concept of capitalist society is based on something

non-conceptual and that the identity of its objectivity owes itself to something that is non-identical to it. Concepts cannot grasp the objective character of capitalist society without leaving a remainder, which is their non-conceptual content, that is the historically specific social relations that assume the forms of seemingly natural, thing-like economic forces, transcendental social norms and natural political institutions. Their appearance as historically overdetermined forms, whether of a human nature or economic nature, does not disclose their social constitution; it is the task of a critical social theory to reveal their hidden secret in the historically specific social relations and in the social praxis of these relations. In the words of Marx, in capitalism, the actual, given social relations assume the form of a relationship between things and, therefore, the actual social relations disappear in their reified appearance as a relationship between economic things.⁴ Their disappearance in the thing-like relations that assume the form of real economic abstractions, entails their reappearance. The social individuals that comprise the actual social relations reappear in their disappearance as economic personifications or character-masks (Adorno after Marx) of their own social world. They 'are governed by the product of their own hands'.⁵ The reified world is not the world of reified things, as that which it is perceived, identified, and classified, analysed and evaluated. Rather, it is a world of reified social relations. Put simply, the movement of the economic things sends price signals to the individuals, which compel them to adjust to stay afloat. However, what compels them is their own social practice in the form of the economic object. Its nature, its necessities

and requirements are social in nature. That economic nature is a social nature. Like Marx, Adorno's critical theory resists the temptation to identify the reified social forms. Instead, it asks what is identified and what therefore appears in the identity of society as a real (economic) abstraction. Adorno does not think *about* society. He thinks *in* and *through* it to decipher what Marx calls 'the actual, given social relations' that assume the form of by themselves unfathomable economic forces.⁶



Adorno's negative dialectics deepens Marx's critique of political economy through its emphatic concept of society, which for him is based on the historical experience of suffering.⁷ According to his students, 'Adorno always emphasized how much the sensitivity that alone makes a proper analysis of capitalist society possible arises from pain and suffering'.⁸ Although Marx addresses human suffering, he does not elaborate on it in his conceptualisation of what Adorno calls the 'logic that holds sway in capitalist society'.⁹ For Adorno, the need to 'lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth' and it is the core of his critical theory.¹⁰ His critical theory argues that reified society is a social product and that its mysterious character finds its rational solution in the comprehension of human-social praxis. Marx refers to the critique of fetishism as decipherment of the social hieroglyphic, what Adorno refers to as 'ad hominem critique'. It holds that human social relations are not to be derived from the supposed identity of hypothesised structures or economic presuppositions. Ad hominem critique is about the decipherment of the social origin of the reified social forms and about the articulation of the social practices that imbue them with a seemingly independent will and natural force. Adorno's 'no' to identification as a method of positivist thought and as an abstract ma-

terialist naturalisation of the social forms does not deny their objective force. It rather wants to know what makes them so and what makes them so, he argues with Marx, is concealed within them – 'the actual, given relations of life [that] have become apotheosised', deified, reified, and naturalised, in the form of self-moving economic forces.¹¹ 'Society is essentially process';¹² it is the process of capital as self-valorising value. 'Behind this lies the entirety of class relations.'¹³ Capital as a process of self-valorisation of value comprises a class of free labourers who, as the human material for making more money out of money, make a living as surplus value producers. 'Only because the worker has nothing else but his labour-power does he accept these conditions'.¹⁴ What counts is the extraction of surplus value through the valorisation of their living labour. The satisfaction of human needs is a 'mere sideshow'.¹⁵ The whole process of valorisation 'is not something that takes place beyond the specific social conflicts and antagonisms, or in spite of them. It works through those antagonisms themselves ... Society remains class struggle'.¹⁶ For Adorno, the class struggle is about self-preservation, which for him represents the hidden secret of capitalist society as a process of real abstraction.

This brief outline of the significance of Adorno's thought may seem strange as he is widely regarded as an esoteric intellectual whose cultural pessimism, lacking any positivity, is characterised by an impenetrable use of language that merely serves to confirm his intellectual distance from the struggles of his time. Habermas, who became Adorno's celebrated successor, condemned the student revolt as left-fascism and considered Adorno's social theory as a departure from the promise of reason. In the context of the waning and disintegration of the student revolt and resulting sectarian discussions about political strategy during the 1970s and finally its later incorporation into the institutions of state and society in the early 1980s, he instead advocated a political philosophy and practice of communicative action to ensure the progress of reason in capitalist society. His political philosophy aimed at constructive social criticism in contrast to Adorno's negative dialectics, which was seen as completely impractical as a philosophy of reason and approach to social improvements. But as Helmut Reichelt and Chris O'Kane have shown, the endeavour to transform critical theory into a rational discourse on

the possibilities of social progress (after Habermas) also included attempts to reconstruct Adorno's critical theory according to the principles established by Habermas as cultural criticism and as a philosophy of reason.¹⁷ Contrary to Adorno's emphatic concept of society, Habermasian theory views social phenomena from a seemingly external standard of reason, which was to advance capitalist society towards positive freedom, substantive equality and distributive justice. As his students had already feared, Adorno's apparent successors turned him into a cultural icon whose negative dialectic, as Peter Gordon sees it, presents a sophisticated normative argument for the good society characterised by happiness and general human flourishing.¹⁸ Put simply: The work of the 'naysayer [Neinsager]' was stylised into a cultural document of capitalist civilisation.¹⁹

The task remains, as it was then, to critically study Adorno's work, not for its own sake and not to prevent his second death, but to decipher the reified forms of capital as the forms of 'actual, given social relations' and thus to insist on the possibility of human emancipation from unnecessary suffering.

What is the negative in negative dialectics?

Negative dialectics is critique of the progressive theories born of the Enlightenment. Their principal thinker was Hegel. His dialectics was a dialectics of synthesis and reconciliation, of the progressive movement of history towards the age of bourgeois civilisation. In its most simplified version, it provided the philosophical justification for a conception of history as a series of progressive steps and stages, such as those put forward by Smith's classical political economy. Adam Smith subscribed to a four stages theory of history, starting with the mode of production of hunters and culminating in the capitalist mode of production, which he referred to as commercial society. He viewed the latter as the end result of the unfolding logic of a natural human propensity to trade and barter, which enables an increasing division of labour based on increased labour productivity, paving the way for the arrival of commercial society at the end of history. The orthodox Marxist tradition, which conceived of the dialectics of nature and history as dialectical materialism, expanded on the dialectics of contradiction and synthesis

by arguing that capitalism is the transition to socialism. Adorno's critical theory rejects the idea that dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation. The figure of the 'negation of the negation', of the thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis, in which the social contradictions and antagonisms strive for the reconciliation of Man with her supposed nature at the end of history, is a legitimisation and justification of the existing social relations as either the culmination of history or as a necessary step towards a perfected humanity in socialism. Positive dialectics forgets what has been done, the maiming and killing, the cruelty and violence that line the path of history, and it justifies what has been forgotten as a necessary requirement for the achievement of a fully developed humanity. A counter to this tendency, *Negative Dialectics* seeks to 'free dialectics from such affirmative traits'.²⁰ It does not aim at reconciliation of the human being with her supposed nature through the progressive synthesis of social contradictions. History is not therein a locomotive of progress towards an abstractly conceived humanity in the future. Instead, negative dialectics aims at revealing the social practice for self-preservation as the hidden secret of bourgeois society. Indeed, class struggle is not a struggle in the service of the progress of history from one mode of production to another. It is about gaining access to the means of life. It is about overcoming hardship and averting suffering. The struggle against suffering might lead to struggle against the conditions that cause suffering; it might lead to new forms of repression and cruelty. In any case, history does not make history. History does not maim and kill. It does not exploit and dominate. Man does all this, and more. History is made by human beings pursuing their own ends in and through the society in which they live. Critical theory is not a system of thought. 'System is that of others, not what we think ... For us today, as ever, this means that Marxism is not a worldview and that it mediates everything but does not decide anything from above'.²¹ Any kind of thought, including negative dialectics, involves identification. However, in contrast to traditional social theory, whose aim it is to identify and define, classify and analyse the social phenomena to specify their historicity and explore their meaning from various social perspectives and viewpoints, negative dialectics asks what is identified in the structural identity of society, its laws of development and reified nature. It does not

analyse the social reification to determine the scope and scale, movement and power of its social objectivity, nor does it analyse the movement of economic quantities to ascertain the prospects of economic development and to denounce the unfairness of the distribution of wealth which leave the surplus value producers stuck in poverty admits an immense accumulation of wealth. It asks what is reified and what therefore appears in reification; it asks what is quantified and what therefore appears in the form of comparable and commensurable abstract quantities and economic numbers; and what happens to workers whose expended labour ‘does not reduce to numbers’:²² merely redundant human material, economic zeros and as such superfluous subjects.²³ The ‘reduction of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average working hours’ is ‘fundamentally akin to the principle of identification’.²⁴ It makes non-identical individuals and their expenditure of living labour commensurable and identical – in the form of quantifiable identities of the same, a quantity of money that is exchange for a greater quantity of money, mediated by the extraction of surplus value. ‘The worker is free insofar as he can move from one branch to another’.²⁵ Waged-based access to the means of subsistence depends on the profitability of their labour – unprofitable employers make workers redundant – and surplus-value, which is the basis of profit, is the difference between ‘time ... necessary for the production of labour-power and the time that the worker gives in labour’, or, as Marx put it, between necessary labour and surplus labour.²⁶ The law of value posits the necessity of money to beget more money. It is the universal principle of social reproduction in capitalist society. What does not reduce to monetary quantities is socially speaking worthless. Adorno conceives of negative dialectics as ‘the ontology of the wrong state of things’.²⁷ In capitalist society ‘contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity’²⁸ – what counts is the movement of abstract economic quantities because people ‘owe their life to what is being done to them’.²⁹ What counts above all else is the calculable identity of the products of labour as economic quantities that are exchangeable for money. It is the independent grammar and reified essence of the capitalist society and yet, ‘its shape is human’, however reified and naturalised capitalist society appears in the form of its economic objectification.³⁰ The mythological idea of fate is no less mythical when it is demythologized

‘into a secular “logic of things”’ that akin to an objectively unfolding system-logic structures the economic behaviours of the actual individuals by means of competing price signals.³¹



Image credit: Oliver Sutherland

Identity thinking posits the immediacy of reality as the foundation of social truth – the facts speak for themselves only their interpretation varies depending one’s standpoint. This is the essence of ideology understood as socially necessary illusion. In contrast, negative dialectics is the ‘consistent sense of non-identity’ within the identity of reified society.³² It unmasks its reified objectivity as illusory; yet its illusory objectivity is not untrue. It is real. In the reified world of capital, the true is a moment of the false. Truth exists as an existing untruth. Yet, it is true all the same. Adorno’s critical theory resembles a process of conceptual mole-like labour. Instead of thinking about reified society in order to identify its objective laws of development and determine the scope for intervention from various standpoints, it thinks *in* and *through* it, in order to decipher its social constitution, comprehend its necessities, and grasp what is active within it. Society in the form of the reified object is ‘the reified work of living human beings’.³³ Negative dialectics aims to think against the flow of the world. Its critical intension is to think in and through society to ‘destroy [its] immediacy, [which] means dissolving the appearance of naturalness [*Ansichsein*] through the critical process’. Marx, argues Adorno, ‘assigns to the reflective mind the task of dispelling this illusion of naturalness and, in contrast, of uncovering ... what lies concealed’.³⁴ What lies concealed in reified society are neither objective historical laws of develop-

ment nor natural economic laws of necessity, nor some abstractly conceived human nature. What is hidden in reified society are the given, actual social relations, which, according to Marx and Adorno, are characterised by the struggle for self-preservation. In this struggle, there are no certainties. Above all, there are no guarantees for a happy ending.

The violent history from which capitalist society emerged no longer appears in its constituted concept, in which it appears as a natural economic system. Its reified appearance is the reality-effect of a history of violence that is concealed by that very effect. Negative dialectics charges traditional social theory with erasing the violence of its emergence, which hides in plain sight in its constituted naturalness. Instead, it asserts that capitalism has become what it has been all along – a system of real abstractions and a life-world comprising acting individuals. Adorno's negative dialectics, just like Marx's critique of political economy, understand that the law-making violence of its historical emergence has transformed into the law-preserving violence of its established social concept. On the one hand, as argued by Sami Khatib in a different context, '[e]very mundane act of commodity exchange is a congealed reminder of the original violence of the so-called "primitive" or "*ursprüngliche*" ["original"] accumulation through which capitalism was historically implemented'.³⁵ On the other, society as a process of real abstraction 'compress[es] the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument'.³⁶ But without social individuals and their antagonistic practices of social reproduction, there would be nothing, neither exchange nor torture. The particular has no existence independent from the system that crushes it. Gaining such independent existence would mean its liberation from what makes it so particular.

Conclusion

For Adorno, and following Charlotte Baumann's reading, human suffering, the struggle for self-preservation in class society, is the non-conceptual premise and the hidden content of the capitalist economic categories.³⁷ While Marx's critique develops the conceptual logic of the laws of capital accumulation, from the perspective of living labour, this process presents itself as a permanent process of separation from the means of subsistence

– and thus as a constant struggle for self-preservation. Adorno's negative dialectic focuses attention on the conceptual logic of society as a relationship of wounded subjects. What is expressed in the freedom of an employment contract, is the freedom of labour from the means of subsistence. Freedom of contract 'exposed as the freedom to starve' demystifies the concept of freedom in capitalism.³⁸ Precisely because of their historically acquired freedom, the sellers of labour power are exposed to the lash of hunger, which prevents them 'from running away'.³⁹ The needy individual belongs to the concept of capital as does the struggle for access to basic material things. As a class, the free labourers are respectable only as surplus value producers, otherwise they are socially speaking redundant. It is their freedom that compels them to sell their labour power for the profit of another class of humans – and they must generate profit for the buyer of their labour power to secure their continued employment, which Marx, *pace* the demand of Habermasian critical theory for positive freedom, described as the freedom of labour in conditions of 'economic bondage'.⁴⁰

In order for Habermas's critical theory to gain credibility as a programme of communicative action, one has to have forgotten that the struggle to avert suffering belongs to the concept of capital. For Adorno (and Marx) this insight is key. As Max Horkheimer made clear, 'Marx correctly sought to do away with the conviction that there is some essence of being which pervades all epochs and societies and lends them their meaning. It was precisely this element of Hegelian philosophy that appeared to him to be an idealist delusion. Only human beings themselves – not the "essence" of humanity, but the real human beings in a definite historical moment – are the acting and suffering subjects of history'.⁴¹ The same can be said of Adorno.

Especially in bleak and miserable times, Adorno's critical theory is uncomfortable. It holds that history is not on the side of the poor and miserable. It does not strive for redemption in a coming future. It gives no promises. History does nothing. The norms of reason are the norms of the existing relations that cause so much unnecessary suffering. 'Only from within can one get out (June 1969)'.⁴²

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Notes

1. Thank you to Marie Louise Krogh for her careful reading and editorial suggestions.
2. Johannes Agnoli, 'Die Schnelligkeit des realen Prozesses, Vorläufige Skizze eines Versuchs über Adornos historisches Ende' ['The speed of the real process, Preliminary sketch of an essay on Adorno's historical end'], in *Die Linke nach Adorno* [*The Left after Adorno*], ed. Wilfried E. Schoeller (München: Kindler, 1969), 202.
3. Inge Hoffmann, Hans-Jürgen Krahel, Regina Schmidt, et al., 'Eine Erklärung seiner Frankfurter Schüler' ['A statement from his Frankfurt students'], in *Die Linke nach Adorno*, 203–207.
4. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), chapter 1, section 4 ('The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret'), especially the relevant passages on page 165, which are paraphrased here.
5. Marx, *Capital*, 772.
6. Marx, *Capital*, 494.
7. See Theodor W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 226–30.
8. Hoffmann, Krahel, Schmidt, et al., 'Eine Erklärung seiner Frankfurter Schüler', 203.
9. Theodor W Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research', in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann 1976), 80.
10. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17–18.
11. Marx, *Capital*, 494.
12. Theodor W Adorno, 'Society', in *Critical Theory and Society*, eds. Stephen E Bronner and Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 1989), 267.
13. Theodor W Adorno, 'Marx and the basic concepts of sociological theory, from a seminar transcript in the summer semester of 1962', in *Adorno and Marx*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O'Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 248.
14. Adorno, 'Marx and the basic concepts of sociological theory', 248.
15. Theodor W Adorno, *History and Freedom*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 51.
16. Adorno, 'Society', 267, 272.
17. Helmut Reichelt, 'Jürgen Habermas' Reconstruction of Historical Materialism', in *The Politics of Change*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Palgrave, 2000). Chris O'Kane, *A Critical Theory of Social Domination* (London: Bloomsbury, 2027).
18. Peter Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).
19. Hoffmann, Krahel, Schmidt, et al., 'Eine Erklärung seiner Frankfurter Schüler', 203.
20. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xix.
21. Theodor W Adorno, 'Graeculus (II), Notizen zu Philosophie und Gesellschaft 1943–1969', in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (München: edition t+k), 23.
22. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1986), 7.
23. Fabian Arzuaga, 'Socially necessary superfluity: Adorno and Marx on the crises of labor and the individual', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 45:7 (2019). Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
24. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.
25. Adorno, 'Marx and the basic concepts of sociological theory', 248.
26. Adorno, 'Marx and the basic concepts of sociological theory', 248; Marx, *Capital*, chapter 9.
27. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.
28. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.
29. Adorno, 'Society', 275.
30. Theodor W Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 28.
31. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 319.
32. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.
33. Adorno, 'Society', 274.
34. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 136, 137.
35. Sami Khatib, 'Society and Violence', in *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, vol. 2, eds. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld and Chris O'Kane (London: Sage, 2018), 608.
36. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 346.
37. Charlotte Baumann, 'Adorno, the New Reading of Marx, and Methodologies of Critique', in *Adorno and Marx*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O'Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
38. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 201.
39. Marx, *Capital*, 719. On social suffering in Marx and Adorno, see Claudia Leeb, 'Rebelling against suffering in capitalism', *Contemporary Political Theory* 17 (2018); Werner Bonefeld, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion: Wealth, Suffering, Negation* (London: Routledge, 2023).
40. Marx, *Capital*, 723.
41. Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1983), 138.
42. Adorno, 'Graeculus (II)', 23.