

CRITICAL THEORY
AND THE CHALLENGE
OF PRAXIS

Beyond Reification

EDITED BY
STEFANO
GIACCHETTI
LUDOVISI

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Beyond Reification

Edited by

STEFANO GIACCHETTI LUDOVISI
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi

On Marx's grave, in London, his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is recorded: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." After Marx, those philosophers who were not trying to change the world, those who were "only" trying to interpret it, were condemned by Marxists as "bourgeois," as implicitly defending the status quo. Critical Theory wanted to remain faithful to Marx's precept that the point is to change the world, but the drastic change that can be witnessed in our contemporary society has to do with the social actor that can bring forth such revolutionary plans. In other words, who is capable today of changing the world? According to a classical Marxist perspective, it is the objective situation of exploitation that determines the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. The proletariat, as the social class that has achieved an objective awareness of their situation of oppression, can become the true subject of a revolutionary change of our social structure. While this held true between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, after World War II and the disastrous experiences of Fascism and Nazism first, and then of the Stalinist turn of the Soviet model, this faith in a revolutionary social actor gradually disappeared. At the same time, the standardization of culture in capitalist societies transformed the consciousness of the exploited class into the most passive acceptance of consumerism and conservative political models. Horkheimer clearly summarizes this problem: "not even the situation of the proletariat in this society is a guarantee of correct consciousness."

While some members of the Frankfurt School (and in particular Marcuse) tried to find new actors capable of bringing forth the revolution, identifying revolutionary subjectivity in various grassroots movements such as environmentalism, feminism, student rebellions, etc., others (such as Adorno and Horkheimer) never envisioned a new social class able to fulfill such a task. In both cases, Critical Theory chose a more difficult path: the identification of the original reasons for the failure of the formation of a revolutionary group. In its search for the causes of our contemporary inability to form a self-conscious revolutionary class, Critical Theory questioned not only the economic structure of our society but, most importantly, the type of rationality which determines it.

It thus becomes clear how for critical theorists the solution for subverting the capitalistic order necessarily requires first a thoroughgoing critique of the structure of rationality. The point, as Marx admonished, is still to change the world, but this

goal will not be achieved without a change in our model of rationality occurring at the same time.

The rationality that is responsible for the domination of nature determined the three major disappointments of the twentieth century, which Critical Theory tried to address. The first disappointment was originated by the failure of the dream of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was supposed to free us from any dogmatism and make us step out of a “self-imposed immaturity,” as Kant formulated it in his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Critical reason was supposed to replace dogmatism in formulating autonomous and free judgments, but a model of instrumental rationality imposed itself on social formations, and the domination of nature became the main purpose of this rationality. The outcome of such a form of rationality became most evident with the rise of Fascism in the early twentieth century, and at that point the Enlightenment created the opposite effects of what it proposed. Freedom and autonomy were erased by authoritarian forms of social control.

The second disappointment addressed by the Frankfurt School was related to the affirmation of a “socialist” society in the Soviet Union. The Marxist project of creating a classless society was transformed into the authoritarian control of a bureaucratic class. With the Stalinist regime, any hope in the affirmation of a valid alternative to capitalism collapsed. Also in this case, freedom and autonomy were suffocated by authoritarianism.

The third disappointment, which has a more contemporary relevance, was determined by the experience in western democracies. The first impact of several members of the Frankfurt School exiled in the United States was traumatic. The “affluent” society still promised freedom, but beyond the glittering mask of a society based on the fanciest commodities a similar authoritarianism was hidden. Capitalism reduced human life to the same existence as lab-rats, trained to produce in order to consume in an endless cycle that repressed the possibility of any genuine self-affirmation. Freedom and autonomy in this case were presented as a concrete reality, but they could not be experienced by the acritical masses.

How was society finally supposed to escape the cumulative trauma of these successive blows? How was it possible to finally affirm freedom and autonomy in a radically different form of society? Critical Theory tried to give an answer to these questions, recognizing that there was no easy solution to them. The point was to maintain a Marxist framework for criticizing capitalism without falling into the dissolution of individuality in forced conformism. At the same time, the point was to determine the extent to which it was still possible to affirm critical thought with the advance of the culture industry. These problems still remain unsolved, and the globalization of certain standards of the domination of nature are leading us towards catastrophe, on both the personal and the environmental levels. Finding a valid alternative to the domination of nature implied in the model of rationality that guides our social formations is still the mandatory goal of Critical Theory. This book seeks to contribute to the contemporary debate on how to affirm alternative models, inspired by Critical Theory, to the “miserable reality” of today.

We are collecting here a series of chapters developed in the context of the International Critical Theory Conferences held at the John Felice Rome Center of Loyola University Chicago since 2010. The common theme of these contributions revolves around the crucial debate over the possibility of constructing a new political reality on the basis of the philosophical analysis of the early stages of the Frankfurt School. One of the main critiques of the Frankfurt School has in fact addressed the highly speculative aspects of Critical Theory. This criticism spans from the concentration on aesthetics of Adorno, to the metaphysical pessimism of Horkheimer and, in general, to the outdated political context of the theories of Benjamin and Marcuse. This book aims to show that this criticism is not well grounded. Critical Theory can be an invaluable tool not only for developing a critique of contemporary society, but also for originating alternative models of political praxis. The important aspect of Critical Theory is that it presents itself as incompatible with a fixed and dogmatic model of politics, and therefore the political perspectives that can be developed out of it can vary significantly: from the articulation of political models inspired by a new form of Marxism, to the more contemporary “dialogical” models centered on the politics of identity. The common theme remains the envisioning of new ways of contrasting alienation and reification from the perspective of contemporary forms of social organization.

The book is divided into thematic sections which address the contemporary political relevance of the works of Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas and Honneth. The first part (Chapters 2 to 6) addresses the contemporary debate over the convergence of the theory of Adorno with political praxis. This part supports both a new reading of Adorno’s work as open to a political transformation of capitalism and the project for a new form of Marxism which can be applied to contemporary society.

The second part (Chapters 7 to 13) addresses a new perspective on the idea of criticism as the basis for reconciling Critical Theory with normativity and a theory of rights and justice. This second part covers both the early stages of Critical Theory (in relation to nationalism and colonialism), as well as its more contemporary formulations.

The final part (Chapters 14 and 15) discusses the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Critical Theory. This relationship is analyzed through the contemporary use of traditional and new media.

I would like to thank, first and foremost, the contributors of this book, both for their work published in this volume, and for their consistent participation in the conferences in Rome. I would also like to thank Andrew Cutrofello, Hugh Miller, David Schweickart, Mark Bosco, Susana Cavallo and all the other faculty members at Loyola University Chicago who supported these conferences throughout the years. My thanks go also to Bahar Tahsili as well as to all my students who collaborated with me in Rome, Chicago and San Diego.

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Chapter 2

Adorno's Global Subject

Deborah Cook

In a well-known passage in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx complained that, as long as mere survival remains paramount for workers, the activities of eating, drinking, excreting, and reproducing will continue to be their “sole and ultimate ends.” Workers now feel themselves to be free only while engaging in these activities, while in their “human functions”—the activities that should allow them to develop their potential *qua* members of the species—they do not feel themselves to be “anything but an animal.”¹ For Marx, of course, it is the labor process under capitalism that has turned human functions into a mere means to the end of sustaining individual life.² Rather than affirming themselves as members of the species, workers spend their lives struggling to preserve their individual, biological existence over and against the existence of others in a Hobbesian war of each against all.

Following Marx, Adorno agrees that self-preservation remains the primary aim of individuals under monopoly conditions. In fact, he claims that the “present condition is destructive” precisely because it requires the “loss of identity for the sake of abstract identity, of naked self-preservation.”³ Focused exclusively on acquiring the means to feed, house, and clothe themselves, individuals self-destructively “balk at their real dependence on the species as well as at the collective aspect of all forms and contents of their consciousness.”⁴ Nevertheless, Adorno also speculates about how this situation might be changed when he argues that genuine progress requires the emergence of a global subject that will enable individuals to actualize the more universal dimension of their existence as members of the species. In this chapter, I shall elaborate on Adorno's claims about the global subject and species being while exploring some of their more problematic aspects.

1 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Mulligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 111. Marx also qualified this statement: “Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc. are also genuinely human functions. But abstractly taken, separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal functions.”

2 Ibid., 112.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Books, 1973), 279.

4 Ibid., 312.

Determinate Negation and Critique

To begin, it is important to note that Adorno denies that our current predicament—in which individuals focus exclusively on their own survival to the detriment of survival of the species—was historically necessary. In *Negative Dialectics*, he criticizes both Hegel and Marx for dismissing “all doubts about the inevitability of totality.”⁵ Here Adorno expresses the view that history is contingent, if only on heuristic grounds: “Only if things might have gone differently; if the totality is recognized as socially necessary semblance, as the hypostasis of the universal pressed out of individual human beings; if its claim to be absolute is broken—only then will a critical social consciousness retain its freedom to think that things might be different some day.”⁶ In “Progress,” however, Adorno states much more forthrightly that the parlous situation in which we find ourselves is “man-made, and therefore revocable.”⁷

But if he rejects Hegel’s and Marx’s teleological accounts of history, Adorno shares Marx’s view about what is needed to make radical social change possible. For Marx, as Moishe Postone notes, change must be rooted, not in the “abstract” negation of existing conditions but in their “determinate historical negation.”⁸ To wrest free of exchange relations and the equally subsumptive abstractions of identity-thinking, the specific forms of damage that these abstractions continue to inflict on human and nonhuman life must be negated. In the first instance, however, Adorno contends that this negation of the negative takes the form of critique. Critics must reflect on our compulsive domination of nature which, by keeping us in thrall to nature in the form of survival instincts, now threatens to destroy all life on this planet.

Calling determinate negation a methodological principle,⁹ Adorno also declares that it is “the only form in which metaphysical experience survives today.”¹⁰ Depicting life today as irrational, distorted, even hellish, Adorno negated damaged life in order to arrive at ideas about what a better life might look like. Although he placed a ban on positive images of utopia (*ND*, 207), this ban does not rule out any and all attempts to envisage something better. In fact, Elizabeth Pritchard rightly rejects influential readings of Adorno’s ban on images on the grounds that they often confuse it with negative theology. To be sure, determinate negation does not yield fully positive images of a better life, or a positive theology of what Adorno

5 Ibid., 321.

6 Ibid., 322.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 156.

8 Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 372.

9 Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 28.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 144.

sometimes called “redemption.” Yet Adorno also criticized those who appeal to “the ‘wholly other’ character of the absolute (negative theology).”¹¹ Indeed, Pritchard argues that Adorno refused to endorse a complete ban on images because such a ban would risk leaving the status quo unchallenged.¹² With determinate negation, Pritchard explains, Adorno revealed “the features of damaged life that preempt redemption” in order to “indicate something determinate about that redemption, without thereby presuming its immanent arrival.”¹³

Adorno makes this point in a discussion with Ernst Bloch (which Pritchard does not cite):

If the question of utopia is so complex, it is because we are forbidden to generate images of it. But this has another disturbing consequence: the more it becomes possible to talk only negatively about the things that should exist, the less one can imagine anything definite about them. But, even more disturbing, this prohibition on giving concrete expression to utopia tends to discredit and absorb the utopian consciousness on which the will that things should be different depends. [...] I am certainly not competent to say ... what is possible given the current status of humanity's productive powers, but I am certain that this can be said concretely, simply, and without arbitrariness. If it is not said, if this image does not appear—I almost want to say ‘in a tangible way’—then basically one does not know what the goal of the whole thing is, why whole structure has been set in motion.¹⁴

A ban on images of a better world would effectively stymie resistance against this one. Nevertheless, Adorno's negative dialectics does agree “with the theological ban on images” to the extent that it does not permit an entirely positive depiction of a reconciled state.¹⁵ Moreover, even as Adorno negates the negative aspects of life

11 Elizabeth A. Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot* meets Body in Adorno's Inverse Theology,” *Theodor W. Adorno*, Vol. I: *Philosophy, Ethics and Critical Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 193. In a note on page 205, Pritchard insists that the *Bilderverbot* should not be confused with negative theology's view of the divine as unknowable because the ban on images only forbids making and worshipping images. She also notes that Adorno described his own work as an *inverse*, not a negative, theology.

12 Ibid., 187.

13 Ibid., 193.

14 Ernst Bloch and Adorno, “*Etwas fehlt ... Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht*,” *Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie, Werkausgabe, Ergänzungsband* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985), 362ff. Quoted in Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno zur Einführung* (Hamburg, Junius Verlag, 1996) p.181n124. English translation: “Something's Missing: A Discussion with Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions in Utopian Longing,” *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1988), 12–13. The translation offered here is based largely on the German original.

15 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207.

under late capitalism to provide a glimpse of an improved state of affairs, he also acknowledges that there are difficulties with this procedure. Before considering his critique of existing conditions in which self-preservation runs wild and reason “regresses to nature,”¹⁶ I shall examine briefly his caveats regarding determinate negation, along with objections that have been levelled against it.

Transcendence, says Adorno, “feeds on nothing but the experiences we have in immanence.”¹⁷ Here Adorno endorses ideas of transcendence that are evoked by concepts derived from the negation of determinate aspects of damaged life. Yet he also admits that thinkers who attempt to “nail down transcendence can rightly be charged ... with ... a betrayal of transcendence.” Since it is impossible completely to transcend existing conditions, any attempt to provide fully positive images of redemption is illusory.¹⁸ Our ideas about the good life are rooted in damaged life, and they are also tainted by that negativity. The critique of damaged life may indicate what is right and better, but it does so only indirectly. Negating existing states of affairs, determinate negation discloses something equally negative: namely that what exists is not yet what it ought to be, and that what ought to be does not yet exist. In other words, the negation of the negation only yields more negativity.

To this, Fotini Vaki objects that Adorno retains only the “first dimension of Hegel’s determinate negation” when he sets “the object against its own internal tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies, manifesting thereby the object’s failure to fulfil its own concept.” Vaki alleges that Adorno rejects the second dimension, namely that determinate negation will lead to “more coherent and complete forms of life and consciousness.”¹⁹ Against these objections, however, I would argue that what Adorno rejects in Hegel is his view that determinate negation *necessarily* leads to more coherent and complete forms of life. In other words, he denies that the real will become rational of necessity, or that it will, in Vaki’s terms, inevitably lead to more coherent and complete forms of consciousness.

Vaki also questions how far Adorno can go “by relying only on the recognition of contradictions.”²⁰ She charges that Adorno’s normative standpoint “is only glimpsed indirectly in a completely unspecified way,” and that he never clarifies the conditions under which ideas derived from determinate negation would become “a concrete possibility.”²¹ Yet, Adorno readily concedes these points. Determinate negation neither offers a direct glimpse of improved conditions, nor promises that these conditions will be fulfilled. In a vivid metaphor Adorno explains that

16 Ibid., 289.

17 Bloch and Adorno, “*Etwas fehlt ... Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht*,” 398.

18 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, [p. no?]

19 Fotini Vaki, “Adorno *contra* Habermas and the Claims of Critical Theory as Immanent Critique,” *Historical Materialism* 13.4 (2005), 111.

20 Ibid., 114.

21 Ibid., 116.

critical thinkers must attempt to do “what the miner’s adage forbids: work their way through the darkness without a lamp, without possessing the positive through the higher concept of the negation of the negation, and immerse themselves in the darkness as deeply as they possibly can.”²²

To the charge that Adorno lacks a firm basis for his social criticism, Adorno could simply counter that no more secure standpoint for critique exists. We can only start from where we are: our ideas about improved conditions arise historically in our lived experiences of existing ones. Society’s rational potential discloses itself only to those who resist its irrationality: the good life can be glimpsed today only “in resistance to the forms of the bad life that have been seen through and critically dissected.” This negative prescription is the sole form of guidance that Adorno can provide.²³ Indeed, Adorno not only problematizes his own critique, he exacts humility from those who might otherwise claim to occupy a morally or intellectually superior standpoint. Even the most uncompromising critic is not authorized to put herself in the right because the concepts she wields are derived from, and sullied by, the very world she wants to change.²⁴

Since determinate negation targets specific conditions at particular points in time, it can do no more than evoke varying and historically conditioned ideas about a better—because more rational—society. Fashioning “entirely from felt contact” with the world, perspectives that “displace and estrange it,” Adorno’s critical social theory attempts to reveal the world to be “as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.” On the one hand, estrangement is “the simplest of things” because “consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. On the other hand, estrangement is very difficult to achieve because our ideas about the “opposite” of negativity are marred by “the same distortion and indigence” that we are trying to escape.”²⁵

The estranging critique of “consummate negativity” is often forged in the crucible of our painful experiences of damaged life. Pain and negativity are “the moving forces of dialectical thinking” because, through them, we have historically gleaned reality’s better potential.²⁶ Adorno’s colleague, Max Horkheimer, made a similar remark in *Eclipse of Reason*: “At all times, the good has shown the traces of the oppression in which it originated.”²⁷ And, as Herbert Marcuse explains, the emphatic concepts derived from determinate negation “conceptualize the stuff of

22 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 144.

23 Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 167–8.

24 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 352.

25 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247.

26 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

27 Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 177.

which the experienced world consists, and they conceptualize it with a view of its possibilities, in light of their actual limitation, suppression and denial.”²⁸

These claims about determinate negation help to explain why Adorno thinks that truth wrested from reality by negating it offers at least some grounds for hope. Even as he recognizes the limits to determinate negation as a methodological principle, Adorno also suggests that there are fragments of good in the world. Yet these appear only obliquely; they are glimpsed by those who resist (in thought, action, or both) injustice, unfreedom, intolerance, and oppression. Society’s rational potential manifests itself wherever individuals confront and contest the limits to their freedom, in their struggles against their status as mere cogs in the wheels of the economic machinery, or in their challenges to multifarious forms of state oppression.²⁹ With determinate negation, then, Adorno follows the lead of those who resist oppressive social and economic conditions under late capitalism—conditions that now threaten all living things.

Species Being

Adorno applies determinate negation to the current form of self-preservation under late capitalism in an attempt to emancipate the “concept of ends, to which reason rises for the sake of consistent self-preservation ... from the idol in the mirror.”³⁰ On the basis of his critique of self-preservation—which reveals that mere survival has become an end in itself rather than a means to a further end—Adorno argues that self-preservation will become rational only when it serves the end to which it has always been implicitly directed, namely the preservation of the species as a whole. In fact, he insists that the preservation of the species is “inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality.” It is not just the case that reason remains an organ of adaptation to the environing natural world, or that it has helped to ensure the survival of our species. For reason “*should* not be anything less than self-preservation, namely that of the species, upon which the survival of each individual literally depends.”³¹

Citing Max Weber, Adorno declares that, when it is emancipated from “the contingency of individually posed ends,” the “subject of *ratio*, pursuing its

28 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 215. See also, 222: “To the degree which consciousness is determined by the exigencies and interests of the established society, it is ‘unfree;’ to the degree to which the established society is irrational, consciousness becomes free for the higher historical rationality only in the struggle *against* the established society.”

29 The last two sentences appear in my “Response to Finlayson,” *Historical Materialism* 11.2 (2003), 192.

30 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 349.

31 Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” *Critical Models*, 272; emphasis mine.

self-preservation is itself an actual universal, society—in its full logic, humanity.”³² Indeed, it is important to stress that Adorno is not arguing, as Fredric Jameson claims, that the need for survival instincts should be “removed.”³³ Rather, he thinks that reason should retain, and even strengthen, its links with self-preservation because human behavior can be deemed rational only “in so far as it serves the principle that has been regarded ... as the truly fundamental principle of every existent being: *suum esse conservare*, self-preservation.”³⁴ To cite David Kaufmann: it is not self-preservation *per se*, but rather the “limited rationality of self-preservation ... that leads to the irrationality of a reason devoted entirely to means, to *how* things should be done rather than to *what* should be done.”³⁵

Expanding self-preservation to include the preservation of all humanity (and even, at one point, the preservation of all other species),³⁶ Adorno not only observes that the survival of individuals depends upon the survival of the species, he also suggests that individuals can flourish only if all other members of the species flourish as well. In other words, individuals will fully realize themselves as individuals only when everyone has the opportunity to actualize the more universal dimensions of their existence *qua* human. However, to avoid misunderstanding, it should also be noted that the phrase “species being” does not refer to a preexisting human essence that we have lost and might recover one day. As opposed to endorsing a prelapsarian view of a “pure” humanity, Adorno follows Hegel and Marx when he states that the notion of species being, *Gattungswesen*, is “a result, not an εἶδος.”³⁷ More specifically, “species being” refers to a species that has more fully developed its powers and potentialities—powers that have not yet manifested themselves owing to the ways in which our societies have been organized. In other words, “species being” points forward to a newly instantiated humanity.

Nick Dyer-Witheford emphasizes this point: what is at issue in Marx’s critique of estrangement is not our estrangement from a “normative, natural human condition,” but “who or what controls and limits the processes of ceaseless human self-development.”³⁸ And, for both Marx and Adorno, it is capitalism that controls

32 Ibid., 272.

33 Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 102.

34 Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 137.

35 David Kaufmann, “Correlations, Constellations, and the Truth: Adorno’s Ontology of Redemption,” *Theodor W. Adorno*, Vol. 1: *Philosophy, Ethics and Critical Theory*, ed. Gerard Delanty (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 175.

36 See *PMP*, 145, where Adorno expresses concern that, if self-preservation is directed to the preservation of the human species alone, we might simply continue to legitimate our blind domination of nature. Here Adorno praises Schopenhauer for insisting that other species be preserved as well: morality must include compassion towards all other animals, the end of their exploitation and maltreatment.

37 Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” *Critical Models*, 258.

38 Nick Dyer-Witheford, “Species-Being Resurgent,” *Constellations* 11.4 (2004), 477.

and limits these processes. Yet Adorno believes that it is already possible to orient productive forces towards the preservation of the species as a whole, while freeing individuals from the need to spend the greater part of their lives in dehumanizing, reifying, and alienating labor. In fact, he also alleges that individuals have outgrown the more limited form of self-preservation because they are “no longer confined by direct necessity to compulsive self-preservation, and ... no longer compelled to extend the principle of mastery over nature, both inner and outer nature, into the indefinite future.”³⁹

To be sure, self-preservation was “precarious and difficult for eons.” This is why “the power of its instrument, the ego drives, remains all but irresistible.” Today, however, technology “has virtually made self-preservation easy.” Our situation has become objectively irrational because our exertions as members of the labor force have been rendered “superfluous by the state of the productive forces.” The more “enhanced” these forces become, “the less will the perpetuation of life as an end in itself remain a matter of course.”⁴⁰ Although Adorno claims that change has always been possible,⁴¹ he thinks that the prospect of living lives that are no longer devoted primarily to the end of individual self-preservation is all the more realizable today because “the technical forces of production are at a stage that makes it possible to foresee the global dispensation from material labor, its reduction to a limiting value.”⁴²

Species Being and the Global Subject

In his lectures on history and freedom, Adorno insists that one of the central tasks of his critical theory is “to make transparent the dialectic of individual and species.”⁴³ At the same time, however, he issues a strong warning: if the preservation of the individual can now, in principle at least, be extended to embrace the species, the species must not be hypostatized. On the one hand, it is “part of the logic of the self-preservation of the individual that it should ... embrace ... the preservation of the species”⁴⁴ because the “transfer of self-preservation from the individual to the species is spiritually coagulated with the form of the *ratio*,” of reason. On

39 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 129.

40 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 349.

41 See Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–5*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge and Malden MA.: Polity Press, 2006), 67–8: “I should add, very speculatively and perhaps rashly, that this possibility of making a leap forward, of doing things differently, always existed, even in periods when productivity was far less developed.”

42 Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” *Critical Models*, 267.

43 Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 264. See also *Negative Dialectics*, 284: “theory should carry out the dialectics of individual and species.”

44 Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 44.

the other hand, Adorno is concerned that this transfer risks pitting the “general rationality” against “particular individuals.”⁴⁵ To embrace the preservation of the species is problematic because “there is an intrinsic temptation for this universal to emancipate itself from the individuals it comprises.”⁴⁶

To be sure, if reason were oriented towards the preservation of the species as a whole, it might eventually succeed in freeing itself “from the particularity of obdurate particular interest,” or from the contingency of particular ends. Yet, if it is oriented towards the species, reason may also “fail to free itself from the no less obdurate particular interest of the totality.” Kant himself recognized this problem when he noted that “the idea of species reason” contains, “by virtue of its universality, an element restricting the individual”—an element that could “turn into an injustice on the part of the universal towards the particular.” Here Adorno adds that neither philosophy, nor “the organization of the human race,” has solved the problem of relating the universal and the particular. “It is for this reason,” Adorno tells his students, “that I do not think I am exaggerating when I say it is a problem of the greatest possible gravity.”⁴⁷

With his critique of the antagonisms between the universal and the particular, however, Adorno seems to take away with one hand what he has given with the other: if the technical forces of production now make the emergence of species being a real possibility, Adorno questions the prospects for its emergence when he stresses the difficulties that accompany any attempt to avoid the blanket identification of the individual with the species, its complete subsumption under the “universal.” This problem is only compounded when Adorno states that there is no “idea of progress without the idea of humanity,” while endorsing Marx’s view that humanity does not yet exist. If we must appeal to humanity to make any progress that is worthy of the name, it is also the case that we do not yet know what humanity is.⁴⁸

The argument becomes even murkier when Adorno speculates that the progress that will bring humanity into being depends on the emergence of a global subject. For Adorno, this subject is a necessary condition for progress: “[e]verything else involving progress must crystallize around” a global subject because “humanity’s own global societal constitution threatens its life if a self-conscious global subject [*ein seiner selbst bewußtes Gesamtsjekt*] does not develop and intervene.”⁴⁹ In the face of the increasingly totalitarian expansion of capital, Adorno contends

45 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 318.

46 Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 44.

47 Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 44–5.

48 Adorno criticizes the notion of humanity in *PMP*, 169: “the term ‘humanity’ ... is one of the expressions that reify and hence falsify crucial issues merely by speaking of them. When the founders of the Humanist Union asked me to become a member, I replied that ‘I might be willing to join if your club had been called an inhuman union, but I could not join one that calls itself ‘humanist.’”

49 Adorno, “Progress,” *Critical Models*, 144.